



**Social Contexts, Personal Shame: An analysis of Aboriginal
Engagement with juvenile justice in Port Augusta, South
Australia.**

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To the best of my knowledge and belief, this work is original, except as I have acknowledged in the text, and has not been submitted, either in part or in whole, for any degree at this or any other university.

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*Suddenly everything seemed to fall logically into place; like an hour or so before when Corbitt had been sitting beneath the bridge with his brothers and it had been so tempting to just let go and get drunk. He was only a kid, after all. A child. A **black** child. Nothing much was expected of him. And now this wise, respected white man had said that he was free to live his whole life that way. It would be so easy!*

Maybe that was why it didn't feel right.

*Corbitt saw that Mr. Rudd was watching him closely, but there was only kindness in the man's blue eyes. Another old joke drifted through Corbitt's mind; about a black man at the Pearly Gates telling Saint Peter that the happiest time of his life had been when he'd gotten his civil rights and gone to be baptized in a beautiful, all-white church...how all the whitefolks had been smiling, and the preacher had looked so **kind** as he'd dunked his head under the water. **But, y'know, saint Pete, I be damned if I member ANYTHING after that!** (Jess Mowry, Six out Seven, Vintage Press 1994: 72).*

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SYNOPSIS

This thesis is based on eighteen months field-work undertaken in the South Australian country town of Port Augusta in 1986 and 1987. In this work I examine the social engagement of Aboriginal children and their families who live in this town with the agents of the legal and welfare bureaucracies of the State. My analysis is predicated upon an examination of social agency in human interaction, and how such agency is determined by, and can be a determinant of, the structural relations between the dominant Australian society and Aboriginal people. I explicate the concept of shame among Aboriginal people living in Port Augusta, and I show how shame sets both the style, and the cultural meanings, of social activity between Aboriginal people, and between them and the agents of the legal and welfare bureaucracies with whom they are frequently expected to engage. However, Aboriginal cultural meanings as they are expressed through shame are inevitably misrecognised (Bourdieu 1990) by these agents. I demonstrate, that a consequence of this misrecognition is the development and reinforcement of cultural and racist stereotypes on behalf of welfare and legal agents which legitimate for them the maintenance of Aboriginal people within the ambit of the gaze of the Welfare State.

Yet, I put the case strongly that Aboriginal people are not merely *victims* of the domination of the legal and welfare apparatus of the State. Nor are they the passive subjects of the interference of welfare and legal agents in their lives. Rather, as Aboriginal children and their families interact with members of the dominant Port Augusta society, most particularly with legal and welfare agents, they develop and initiate strategic tactics of resistance, manipulation and opposition to such social incursions.

Nevertheless, the strategies Aboriginal people use in their interactions with legal and welfare agents gain their very potency from the dominant society. In their attempts to gain some control over welfare and legal involvement in their children's lives Aboriginal people in Port Augusta have developed innovative youth programs. I analyse one of these youth programs in some depth in this thesis. I highlight how the development of this youth program necessitated the incorporation of an Aboriginal juvenile criminal identity, which was generated by the agents of the dominant legal and welfare systems, into Aboriginal understandings. As I show, in their very attempts to take away some of the control welfare and legal agents had over Aboriginal children, particularly those of the Davenport reserve and Bungala housing estate, Aboriginal bureaucrats who lived in the town mimicked (Taussig 1987, 1993) and transformed the concerns of the dominant other as they reinforced an Aboriginal cultural alterity.

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