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‘Auto’ Is Not Alone

We used to think that if we knew one, we knew two, because one and one are two.
We are finding that we must learn a great deal more about ‘and’.

Arthur Stanley Eddington

While I was living in Alpurrurulam I moved several times as my housing allocation was, like all others, dependent on the general fluctuations of the community and the availability of space. One of my lodgings was a two-bedroom flat, comprising half a duplex that had been converted from a prefabricated office which had once housed the council offices. This flat was located on what I often call ‘White Street’, as there was one street in the community, on the most northern boundary, on which all the workers from outside the community lived. This included residences for teachers, council workers and health officers. As of my visit in 2008 the street was also the residence of those persons who had arrived as part of the Australian Government’s ‘Intervention’. This street was the quietest place in town during the evening, because of its removed location and its occupants. In most of the community the evening and early night are the most social and exciting times to be about. People wander between ‘camps’ (houses), telling stories, playing cards and generally mingling. It is also a very loud time. Young men race up and down the streets showing off their cars. Dogs bark in response to the ruckus and music is played at full volume. It was a wonderfully social atmosphere.

On White Street things are different. Most residents of White Street, after having finished their day’s work at the council office, the school
or the workshop, return home to make dinner and watch TV or read a book. Once while I was living in this flat I was visited in the evening by a bright young local woman who was a friend of mine and an occasional translator and language teacher. I made us some coffee and we sat outside looking up at the sky, which in the remote desert is a sight only a truly poetic soul could reasonably attempt to depict in words. As we sat in the quiet of the evening, for my part in awe of the grandeur of the universe, she huddled closer to me and said she could not imagine how I could live here, as she herself would be too afraid. I asked her why she would be afraid to live in this part of town, which to me, while somewhat boring, also seemed eminently safe, and she responded that it was too quiet and she would feel lonely. She could not imagine sleeping alone in the quiet; she said she would be frightened and ‘kept awake by the silence’.

In Alpurrurulam, when one is alone one is thought to be unhappy. The opinion of most people is that one could not be content, or even complete, when one is not among others with whom one can share experiences. There were many times when I was living on White Street when I retreated to my house precisely to get some time alone only to have people come over for the express purpose of not leaving me alone. On some occasions the people who visited me did not want to visit; they had no particular desire to talk to me, they were simply concerned that I should not be left on my own. Sometimes it would be friends of mine who stopped by to see how I was. Other times it would be groups of young girls who would sit in front of my TV and talk to each other, more or less ignoring me, having been sent there by their mothers and grandmothers to keep me company.

The fact that people do not value time alone, and are very rarely by themselves, means that almost all memories will be shared to some degree. Sansom has pointed out, as was discussed in the last chapter, that in many intimate Aboriginal Australian communities it is accepted and expected that actions will be witnessed by others. This expectation does not mean passive acceptance of other people; rather, at least in Alpurrurulam, people intentionally and actively seek others with whom to share experiences in virtually every circumstance. In relation to memory this results in a rather simple equation: no alone time = no alone memories. The fact that Opal and others use the plural pronoun and an ‘I’/‘me’ that is always with others more often when reflecting on time spent in the community is almost certainly indicative of the fact that