

Aboriginal Business



Alliance-Making An Introduction

The second Australian Tribal-class destroyer warship, the HMAS *Warramunga*, was commissioned in 1942 and almost immediately saw duty supporting American troops in the New Guinea campaign.¹ With the Japanese at Australia's doorstep, there was no time to generate an official badge for the *Warramunga*. Early in 1943 Captain Dechaineux, recognizing the oversight, organized a competition on board. Petty Officer Hugh Anderson and Able Seaman Arthur Paul collaborated on a design and motto emphasizing the character of the *Warramunga*. A tall Aboriginal man wielding a boomerang encapsulated the seamen's fierceness, while the phrase "Courage in Difficulties" summarized the young nation's wartime attitude. The badge, however, had no official standing and was removed two years later. From 1946 to 1955 the ship once again sailed without a badge. Then, in 1956, Commander Purvis officially proposed, and had approved, a head-and-shoulder image of an Aboriginal man, this time wielding a spear with the caption "Hunt and Harass." For the next three years the *Warramunga* sailed under this badge and motto. The warship was finally decommissioned in 1959 and sold for scrap metal to the Japanese in 1963.

In 1987 a group of naval veterans who had served on the *Warramunga* during World War II successfully lobbied the chief of navy to ensure the original badge would be used should the vessel ever be recommissioned. It was. On May 23, 1998, the HMAS *Warramunga II* was launched with the original 1943 badge and motto. Several Warumungu men and women from Tennant Creek were present at the ceremony in Melbourne and performed

traditional dances prior to the ceremony. Two years later the HMAS *Warramunga II* commander Richard Menhinick and several of his crew came to Tennant Creek to meet the ship's namesake Aboriginal community and discuss plans to involve the community with "their" warship. Before the navy officials met with Warumungu elders and Central Land Council (CLC) staff, however, they met with the town council. News of the navy's breach of protocol—not first meeting with the Warumungu people for whom the ship was named—traveled quickly through town. Several Warumungu people—including the men and women waiting to meet with them—questioned the officers' sincerity and the navy's dedication to including Warumungu people in the process of officially commissioning the new warship. Midday on August 20, 2000, Commander Menhinick and two of his crewmen met with a group of Warumungu men and women at the CLC offices in Tennant Creek. After skillfully deflecting questions about etiquette (without denying the error), Menhinick opened the discussion to suggestions concerning how the Warumungu community could be involved with the new ship and its recommissioning ceremonies, scheduled for the following year.

After several meetings with different groupings of community members and lengthy conversations and negotiations, all the parties involved agreed that the misspelling of the *Warramunga* would remain, but proper acknowledgement (and spelling) of the Warumungu people would be prevalent on all media releases. Additionally, the ship's ensign staff would be carved locally out of mulga wood from Warumungu country, and paintings from local artist Mark Jungarrayi Graham would be used on the screens for the ship's upper deck. On March 31, 2001, sixteen Warumungu men and women joined Tennant Creek's mayor, other town residents, and Warumungu families in Melbourne for the official commissioning of the HMAS *Warramunga II*. Warumungu men and women each performed traditional dances, paintings from local artists were used as posters for the weekend's events, and Commander Menhinick declared, "The ship will then always be bound to the people and them to us." A "commissioning," he continued, "is much like a baptism, confirmation, or communion; it is simply summed up as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual self. It is the day the ship gains her soul" (2001:4–5). On this day the ship's soul was also part of "the struggle for the soul of Australia" (Reynolds 1994:19). This new chapter of Australia's national history must, out of necessity, actively and openly grapple with the form and function of newly built alliances as part of its Indigenous policies and the mainstay of Aboriginal lives—individually and collectively.

In Australia, after thirty-some years of "self-determination" policies for its Indigenous population (Rowse 1998b; Sanders 2002) and nearly two

decades of “reconciliation” (Gelder and Jacobs 1998; Tickner 2001), scenes like this one are much more than benign goodwill. They are a necessary part of the contemporary politics of indigeneity, where national representation, economic sustainability, cultural sincerity, and unexpected political alliances form the fabric of newly articulated Indigenous-settler relations. Scenes like this make clear the often anxious and seemingly incompatible local-national climate in which Aboriginal alliances are forged. In the shadows of an ever-present colonial past, Aboriginal performances—especially those in the national spotlight—remain awkward announcements of both an enduring place in the nation and an uneasy insertion into the white settler nation’s narration of its own past.

Recent movements for reconciliation, coupled with decades-long struggles for self-determination, frame partnerships between Aborigines and powerful institutions like the navy, where all parties involved attempt to rewrite the parameters for discussion and collaboration. Alliances like those between the Australian navy, the CLC, Warumungu groups, and the Tennant Creek Town Council are formed within debates calling for new ways of doing business, shaping communities, and imagining political connections. At the same time, these new forms of collaboration *make* meaningful obligations across social and physical distances as they strain to link different agendas. Collaborations claim people as part of emergent relations within unequal frameworks that can only partially rearrange these powerful structures and practices.

The events surrounding the commissioning of the HMAS *Warramunga II* take seriously the need for engaged and cooperative relations between the state, industry, and Aboriginal communities pursued out of respect for differing modes of obligated action and vision. Yet these partnerships are part of a limited set of choices and opportunities for Aboriginal people living in remote communities. The navy may have come to town with respectful and forward-thinking intentions, but they did so mostly on their terms. During the meetings with the navy, it was clear that Aboriginal conditions for acknowledging multiple kin groups and the divergent power structures within the community were priorities. Multiple meetings were held, officials met with men and women separately, and various family groups were consulted through more than one Aboriginal organization. The navy set out the limitations of their own position—they wanted to include the white town residents, they could not change the spelling of the warship at this late date, they wanted to engage with the Warumungu community in order to integrate some of their traditions into the navy’s own traditions. As the relationship between the town, Warumungu residents, and the navy took shape, the town council lobbied for a secure position of visibility, various Warumungu

groups made their wishes known, and the navy worked to produce a harmonious relationship with both. The navy made blunders on their trip to Tennant Creek, but they also showed how alliances are made in spite of, or even out of, these odd couplings.

This book is about alliances. It is an ethnographic snapshot of Warumungu engagements with a range of interlocutors, where tensions and compromises, hopes and fears, negotiations and trade-offs are central. The alliances formed between the Warumungu and others (state offices, local businesses, other Aboriginal groups, tourists, and so forth) grow out of their colonial history and a present political-economic situation in which their own choices must be read in conversation with national policy agendas, legal definitions of land and property, and social aspirations of a largely white middle-class Australian public. In the remote town of Tennant Creek—some five hundred kilometers north of Alice Springs in Australia's Northern Territory—Warumungu people live with other Aboriginal groups, white Australians whose great-grandparents “settled” the town, and newly arrived immigrants. They have lived through state-sponsored dispossession, assimilation, and self-determination and reconciliation policies as part of their day-to-day lives. While this trajectory seems to suggest a linear and possibly progressive set of policies and paradigms, the everyday implications of this varied set of national narratives and state agendas have produced an ambivalent Aboriginal domain in the town.

Although the Warumungu are the traditional owners of the country in and around present-day Tennant Creek, the history of white settlement and Aboriginal displacement has made this town—for better and worse—a site of ongoing interdependent community-making involving both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal constituencies. Warumungu country is precariously positioned at the intersection of multiple tracks and narratives. While Warumungu people point to the tracks of their ancestors as having shaped the landscape and their ongoing socio-territorial and political relations, the town of Tennant Creek is overlaid with the tracks of explorers, miners, missionaries, tourists, and the like, all tacitly or overtly shifting the terrain. It is on this unsettled ground, with its rough edges and crisscrossing tracks, that Warumungu people work to define alliances from the residues of colonialism and in the shadow of self-determination.

Warumungu residents of Tennant Creek have long been interpellated into the state's intertwined narratives of national unity and progress—both as failures and as beacons of hope. Late nineteenth-century policies saw the Warumungu people as a “dying race” to be secluded on reserves and left to

live out their last days as “full-blooded Aborigines.” Early twentieth-century shifts to assimilation envisioned the Warumungu as capable of adapting to white settler society. Then mid-twentieth-century calls for self-determination saw remote Aboriginal communities as the vanguard of a new hope, a different Aboriginal self-directed future. Here the Warumungu stood as the ideal—a remote, so still unified, Aboriginal community with enough “contact” to be able to lead themselves. These national imaginaries collided with local realities. At every stage of this town’s life, serious discussions concerning Aboriginal relations to territories and cultural traditions have merged with emergent national economies and identity politics. From the battle over the boundaries of the first Warumungu reserve (Nash 1984) to the eighteen-year land claims battle (Christen 2004; Edmunds 1995) and present-day struggles over the “dry” or “wet” status of the town (Wright 1997; ABC News Online 2007a), Aboriginal people in Tennant Creek have been at the center of the town’s social, political, and economic debates. Warumungu people have, out of necessity and to meet their own needs and desires, formed relationships with schoolteachers, missionaries, government officials, anthropologists, lawyers, and shop owners—as well as the institutions they represent—in order to create and define an Aboriginal presence in the town.

National discourses, policies, and legislation are significant aspects of everyday life for Warumungu people in Tennant Creek—yet they do not dictate or define Aboriginal lives. *Aboriginal Business* takes seriously the potential to reroute (but not totally remake) national and regional structures and institutions through locally forged but far-reaching collaborations. Here contemporary practices of *alliance-making* are the focus as they play out in town camps, board meetings, and mining offices; with tourists and politicians; and between close kin and distant family members. Warumungu alliances with transnational railroad companies, national mining groups, international tourists, and regional businesses are forged in spite of, and in part due to, colonial histories of engagement. These uneven and tense relations, however, have not predetermined a future of despair and loss for Warumungu communities as they actively seek to carve out a space within a nation that both condemns and celebrates them. Instead, it is precisely the history of alliances that marks Tennant Creek and its many constituencies (Aboriginal and otherwise) as a space of dialogue—where differently located groups have continually grappled with the limits of their own expectations of and for the town.

Understanding Warumungu alliances as *sets of negotiated interdependencies* works up against the urge to generalize Aboriginal interactions with state institutions, capitalist systems, regional industries, and extended kin groups. Throughout this book I track the daily, mundane, and necessarily

collaborative projects involved in Aboriginal business in order to make the work behind these connections clear. Highlighting the practical, day-to-day activities that produce alliances and maintain the structures of alliance-making helps keep the inherent contingencies and ambivalent products of Aboriginal business at the forefront. Focusing on the work of contingencies within collaboration makes clear the fragility of Aboriginal business and the always-awkward conditions for alliance-making. This focus also keeps at bay the compulsion to abdicate too much control to state policies, neoliberal structures, or global powers.

As Aboriginal people conceive of and mobilize new sets of allegiances, they must necessarily balance changing local circumstances, growing local and regional constituencies, and evolving national policy and legislation. The work of alliance-making moves between these sites and scales to effect change and demand continuity. *Aboriginal Business* focuses on this constantly in-motion process by asking how interdependent relations and practices remake the social and political landscape of this remote town. Writing about articulations of indigeneity internationally, Anna Tsing argues that “the conditions for collaboration have everything to do with the national contours of the discourse on ‘indigeneity’” (2007:54). Self-determination and reconciliation have been the most influential modes of imagining and defining Aboriginal interactions with the state, non-Aboriginal people and institutions, and the Australian public over the last thirty years. The present terrain on which Aboriginal business-planning and alliance-making take place must be located within these overlapping and hydra-like policy initiatives and national agendas as they meet local communities, regional politics, and Aboriginal initiatives. In what follows, I examine these changing policies, discourses, and practices at state, regional, and local levels in order to map the fields of interdependency and interaction that mutate within the sustained reinvention of Aboriginal politics. This multi-directional focus mirrors the necessary juggling acts involved in Aboriginal business matters that promote practical and partial solutions to the often daunting and long-standing issues confronting Aboriginal communities.

Determined Politics

The Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies conference, “The Power of Knowledge, Resonance of Tradition,” began on September 18, 2001. The conference brought academics, activists, community members, and performance groups to the campus of the Australian National University to discuss, debate, and evaluate the contemporary situation of Indigenous-settler relations in Australia. During one session con-

cerning the production and reception of Indigenous media, Philip Batty sat with John Macumba discussing their alliance of more than twenty years. In the late 1970s they produced the first Aboriginal radio-broadcast programming in Central Australia. Today their collaboration lives on through the work of the Central Australia Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) in Alice Springs.

As Batty and Macumba, a whitefella and a blackfella, discussed their early years in Alice Springs, they recounted a moment of creative and political fervor, when they and others worked continuously for a “new” Australia. A bit of nostalgia? Perhaps. Batty and Macumba’s look back highlights the shift in assumptions about self-determination’s success and its future as the primary Indigenous mandate. Their retrospective was prompted by the conservative Howard government’s insistence that Aboriginal group rights were an experiment that was no longer tenable for a government promoting unity and equality, as well as by academic and popular critiques of Aboriginal policies in the face of the continuing marginalization of Aboriginal people throughout the nation (Cowlshaw, Kowal, and Lea 2006; Sanders 2002; Sutton 2001). Was self-determination a “failure” or a work-in-progress? Was it a liberal-minded utopia or government-sanctioned apartheid? The rhetoric of the debates matched the frustration on all sides that, whatever it was imagined to be, self-determination had not been realized.

Surveying the accomplishments of the previous decades’ self-determination policies, Jon Altman suggests that the political landscape in Australia from 1971 to 1996 “saw a broadly progressive policy generate *some positive outcomes* in ‘closing the gaps’ between Indigenous and other Australians, at least according to official social indicators” (2004b:35, emphasis added).² There is no celebration here; even with the suggestion of “progressive policy,” it is clear that Indigenous people in Australia have not gotten a “fair go.” High unemployment rates, increasing rates of incarceration, low levels of educational achievement, and high levels of ill health all indicate that Aboriginal people continue to be disenfranchised within the nation—at least by the dominant set of social indicators. As Batty and Macumba reminisced about the early years of self-determination, it was clear that an equal mix of romanticism, idealism, and realism defined their memories, just as it had in the invocations of self-determination during the 1970s.

In 1972 Prime Minister Gough Whitlam sought to “restore to the Aboriginal people of Australia their lost power of self-determination in economic, social, and political affairs.” To that end, as Jon Altman notes, “Whitlam encouraged the widespread incorporation of Indigenous community organizations to deliver their own services” (Altman 2004b:36). In December 1972 the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) took over from

the Office of Aboriginal Affairs (OAA) with the mandate to operationalize the principles of self-determination. For the DAA, self-determination

is based on the recognition of the equal right of Aboriginal people along with other Australians to determine their own future within the Australian community. It explicitly acknowledges that Aborigines are a distinct cultural group as well as recognizing the worth of Aboriginal culture and the right of Aborigines to pursue lifestyles which are in accordance with that culture. Self-determination also seeks to improve the social and economic circumstances of Aborigines by encouraging them to take charge of their own affairs. (DAA 1988:228)

In this statement, the distinctiveness of Aboriginal culture defines the organizing principles of self-determination, while the improvement of social and economic circumstances anchors the policy goals. Even in this formal declaration, there is friction between Aboriginal aspirations to “pursue lifestyles” of their own choosing and departmental benchmarks concerned with measurable outcomes. This tension was, in fact, central to the notion of self-determination as it moved from a political ideal to a policy plan.

In tandem with the DAA, the newly formed Council for Aboriginal Affairs—including longtime Aboriginal supporters W. E. H. Stanner, Nugget Coombs, and Berry Dexter—argued for “Aboriginal communities to become autonomous.” Explicitly distancing themselves from “welfare policies” and “the backwardness of racism,” the council sought to solidify practices of self-determination around Aboriginal “communities” and “tradition” (Cowlshaw 1998:149–150). Similarly, the DAA encouraged the incorporation of Aboriginal organizations and facilitated local community organizing.

The Council for Aboriginal Affairs acted at the national level by explicitly rejecting previous assimilation policies; Aboriginal “communities,” through their own sets of governing principles, would determine their course and decide how to interact with non-Indigenous Australians and agencies. The council’s capital fund for Aboriginal enterprises and organizations aimed to provide the necessary resources for this institutional shift. As part of their agenda, the council also persuaded the government of the need for Indigenous councils and organizations to represent local communities. In 1976, the Commonwealth introduced the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act in order to empower local and regional associations to act collectively (Rowse 2002:181). The act provided the structural apparatus for the growth of Aboriginal organizations nationally. Longtime Aboriginal activist Michael Dodson suggests that these initiatives “were attempts to fundamentally restructure the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander peoples and governments” (1996:8). At the same time, the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) 1976 (ALRA) provided the legislative vehicle for territorial reclamation (see chapter 2). These two crucial acts defined the field of Aboriginal politics and policy for the next thirty years, merging self-determination, land rights, and Aboriginal-controlled organizations into a powerful resource and discursive bundle aimed at altering the Aboriginal domain and the national landscape.

Throughout the late 1970s Aboriginal organizations emerged in remote communities and in urban areas in an attempt to restructure Indigenous service delivery in a broad sense. Organizations from health centers to arts centers to land councils opened their doors to local community needs. Commonwealth, state, and territory monies funded these organizations; as such, they became part of the governmental bureaucratic structure prefigured by the DAA. As part of this arrangement, though, Indigenous organizations were able to alter some of the practices and policies previously held by government-led programs. Definitions of what counted as work shifted as organizations defined well-being through language and culture as well as health and housing. Leadership requirements and the qualifications of “bosses” morphed as local communities demanded a focus on Indigenous systems of accountability, in which kinship and small family groups displaced the notion of a top-down approach. Yet Indigenous people did not exclusively manage any of these organizations, and disagreements over management styles and financial accountability to the government remained constant (Cowlshaw 1998; Martin and Finlayson 1996; Rowse 1992). As a policy stand, self-determination captured the imaginations of politicians, activists, and Aboriginal people alike. In practice, it was harder to define what it would look like as these groups, out of necessity, had to work together.

Even if self-determination *could* eventually mean an autonomous Aboriginal sector, it would not start out as one. Decades of disadvantage and educational shortfalls left a void in these communities, which needed financial advice, managerial services, technical training, health care services, and basic business skills. Locally, field officers for the DAA worked with Aboriginal communities engaged in projects from building schools to managing health clinics. Internally, Aboriginal communities were once again asked to conflate their own organizational styles and procedures into governmental categories (Martin and Finlayson 1996:9–13). Ambivalence was the norm.

In the early 1980s, many non-Aboriginal academics and activists assumed that their part in collaborative projects would be short-lived. Land claims cases, Aboriginal organizations, and new Aboriginal development schemes would need some help, but then Aborigines would take over (Cowlshaw

1998; Myers 2002). Self-determination served as an apt roadmap for Indigenous politics in the 1970s and 1980s. Indigenous peoples around the world invoked the phrase in its legal and historical sense to align themselves with decolonization movements after World War II (Anaya 1996; Falk 1997; Warren 1998). Indigenous groups demanded recognition, restitution, and reterritorialization from the nations in which they lived and from the governments that had tried to displace them. New alliances among Indigenous people in the Pacific, Canada, and Australia formed as local groups fought for land rights, human rights, and racial equality (Friedman 2001; Niezen 2003; Tsing 2007).

Even with these new international allies, the realization of Aboriginal self-determination splintered within Australia. There was no national plan for implementation, and many states and territories were hostile to the idea of relinquishing real or imagined control to Aboriginal people. In 1978 the Northern Territory became self-governing, with the Commonwealth transferring most of its powers to the territory government (although the NT would remain financially dependent). With this newfound political capital, the Northern Territory government spent the better part of the 1980s and early 1990s working actively against Aboriginal land claims, assuming that Aboriginal self-determination and land control threatened their newfound and limited autonomy. The Country Liberal Party (CLP) government, unwilling to envision a workable allocation of Aboriginal territorial rights that would benefit the territory, waged a sustained campaign against land claims. Even with this animosity, within the territory Aboriginal organizations grew—largely from government funding—and land claims succeeded despite the constant roadblocks in their way. Nationally, however, the Hawke government—perhaps wanting to avoid the sparring already tearing at the Northern Territory—gave up its bid to produce national land-rights legislation in 1984.

Although a national land-rights agenda faltered, the idea for a reinvigorated national Indigenous body with both representative and executive functions gained momentum. The Hawke government proposed the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) act in 1988. The proposal was critiqued in parliament for lack of public accountability and transparency in financial control. Once again, the material representations of self-determination were critiqued and contained within dominant assumptions about Aborigines' public accountability. With more than ninety amendments added to the original bill, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989 was passed by parliament in November 1989. ATSIC functioned as an elected body organized around regional councils with advisory, advocacy, and service-delivery roles. With limited

national powers, a restricted budget, and tensions between local communities and the national body, ATSIC stood as a concrete manifestation of the ambivalence of self-determination and the constraints that limited almost all attempts at national Indigenous recognition and roles within government.

The push-and-pull among layers of governmental bureaucracy and competing national and regional politics produced a somewhat schizophrenic sense of self-determination. Did self-determination mean “going it alone?” Should Aboriginal communities be “self-sufficient?” Could Aboriginal “law” and “tradition” compete with and indeed replace Australian law? Could these “two laws” coexist? Could there be one “Aboriginal policy” for communities so geographically and historically diverse? These were—and continue to be—some of the challenges put to the polyvalent idea of self-determination (Cowlshaw 1998; Martin and Finlayson 1996; Rowse 1998b; Sanders 2002). Nearly thirty years since his initial fieldwork in Central Australia, Fred Myers remembered that time: “It was a hopeful moment, and my generation expected or imagined that ‘self-determination’ would provide a powerful answer to the malaise, illness and the despair of Aboriginal life” (2002:4). As the decades went on, it became clear that self-determination would not be a quick fix, nor would it mean the same thing to every Aboriginal community (Cowlshaw 1998, 2004b; Rowse 1998b). Self-determination has been as much an ideological attempt to frame an Indigenous presence in and engagement with the nation as it has been a practical implementation of specific services and programs. The slipperiness of self-determination’s path, as well as the seemingly solid social indicators that Indigenous disadvantage has continued despite its implementation, made the policy a central target for those who decried “special rights” for Indigenous Australians (Altman 2004b; Goot and Rowse 2007; Sanders 2002; Sutton 2001). In fact, criticism and controversy have become permanent parts of defining self-determination within the Australian public domain (Rowse 1992; Sanders 2002).

In 1973, just one year after Prime Minister Gough Whitlam announced the need for Aboriginal self-determination and the DAA took it on as its policy mission, the auditor general criticized the lack of a coherent accounting system within the funding body of the DAA. A year in and self-determination was already being restrained by economic accountability and skepticism that Aboriginal organizations could manage money properly (Rowse 1992:7). Over the next decade more stringent accounting policies were implemented, and the bureaucracy grew around economic benchmarks and social statistics. Although there is no doubt that the most recent John Howard conservative government, in power for a decade-plus, has been hostile to Aboriginal self-determination and even, as Will Sanders (2006b) argues, has sought to “defy” decolonization efforts nationally in spite of a

global movement, it serves us well to remember that self-determination was never a clearly articulated or generally accepted national goal.

During the 1970s and 1980s local, regional, and national policy makers, organizations, and service providers—both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—debated, defined, and ducked the questions and strategies of self-determination. At the same time a global and regional economic shift occurred whereby Australia sought to align itself economically with the Asia-Pacific region and ideologically with the United States. Global Indigenous decolonization movements came together in the 1970s just as global shifts in economic and political alignments spurred new forms of production and patterns of consumption (Clifford 2003; Ivison, Patton, and Sanders 2000; Sanders 2006b; Tsing 2005). By the 1990s Indigenous self-determination in Australia met a changing political-economic climate nationally and internationally, one that challenged many of the assumptions about group rights, territorial claims, and social justice on which Aboriginal politics in the 1960s had been built.

When John Howard took office in 1996, he attacked Aboriginal policies via a critique of “special rights” and a call for a unified Australian public. His campaign was part of a historical assault on Aboriginal initiatives from within the federal government bolstered by an emergent strain of neo-liberalism promoting individual rights as the linchpin for nationalism and economic growth. Even before he was elected prime minister, Howard had a clear record in parliament; he was against land rights, group rights, or any type of agenda he saw as against a unified Australia. After decades of Labor governments who had denounced colonial attitudes and the practices that displaced and marginalized Aboriginal people, Howard had no time for such historic vision. He was, in fact, openly intolerant to the visions afforded his opposition by their newfound historic hindsight (Beams 2004). His sights were set on the future. That meant, as his campaign slogan announced, an Australia “for all of us.” In 1998, after winning office for the second time, Howard made it clear that the previous generation’s Aboriginal “self-management experiment” had failed.³ Like his early twentieth-century predecessors, Howard saw Aboriginal people as a “problem” to be solved. Diagnosis. Hypothesis. Experiment. Repeat until successful.

Attempts at diagnosing success or failure discount the inherent ambiguity of self-determination as a policy framework, as well as the governmental interventions that have undermined Indigenous applications of self-determination models. As Jon Altman notes, “The failure of mainstream programs to effectively address the needs of Indigenous people means that Indigenous specific programs are expected to do more than they were designed for” (2004b:40). From its inception in the early 1970s, self-determination was

never structurally implemented to produce an autonomous Aboriginal domain apart from the nation. Aboriginal communities are *a part of* the nation. Rather than aiming to produce a separate and isolated domain, self-determination was attempting to change the way the government (at federal, state, territory, and local levels) engaged with and defined their relationships to Aboriginal people via newly formed groups and producing Aboriginal-organized and -managed spaces within both public and private spheres of Australian life.

Aboriginal organizations and self-government models built on idealist notions of autonomy, community, and subaltern power served a useful purpose. As an antidote to the aggressive assimilation and genocidal policies of previous governments, that idealism and romanticism was much needed. With hindsight scholars and activists acknowledge the limits of their imagined communities. We should not, however, dismiss the necessity of maintaining our sights on the more productive versions/visions of Aboriginal communities and political power emerging out of those histories. Suggestions that self-determination has failed do not account for the projects that have worked, the goals that have been met, and the policies that have provided some benefits. Facing the practical objectives of overcoming structural problems should not discount understanding self-determination as a work-in-progress—a set of changing goals based on the recognition of heterogeneous Aboriginal agendas and the necessity of providing resources for the enfranchisement of Aboriginal people, a goal that may never be fully realized but must always be striven for.

Practical Matters

Marcia Langton gave the keynote speech to open the “Power of Knowledge, Resonance of Tradition” conference in Canberra. Langton is a longtime Aboriginal activist. She knows the ambiguities of self-determination well. Like Batty and Macumba, Langton examined the previous decades’ Aboriginal-national relations. Her presentation that day chronicled the evolution of state policies, their shortcomings and failures. She encouraged academics in the audience to document the everyday effects of Aboriginal policy and emphasized that an “empirical record” was necessary to gauge their effects and future policy needs. Then Langton turned to the present Howard government’s insistence on “practical reconciliation” and its weaknesses when aligned with the previous administration’s focus on reconciliation based in social justice and legal reform. It had been just over ten years since former Prime Minister Paul Keating redefined the nation’s commitment to rectifying ongoing Indigenous marginalization:

We simply cannot sweep injustice aside. Even if our own conscience allowed us to, I am sure, that in due course, the world and the people of our region would not. There should be no mistake about this—our success in resolving these issues will have a significant bearing on our standing in the world. (Keating 1992)

Keating's candid statement on injustice within Australia was made even more powerful by his recognition that this was not an isolated national issue. If Australia wished to be a part of the international community—especially its emergent global financial markets—it needed to reconcile (Povinelli 2002). To focus attention on national reconciliation, the Keating government established the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. On June 5, 1991, the House of Representatives unanimously passed the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act, and on Monday, September 2, 1991, the bill became law. The act provided that,

as part of the reconciliation process, the Commonwealth will seek an ongoing national commitment from governments at all levels to cooperate and coordinate with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission as appropriate to address progressively Aboriginal disadvantage and aspirations in relation to land, housing, law and justice, cultural heritage, education, employment, health, infrastructure, economic development and any other relevant matters in the decade leading to the centenary of federation. (quoted in Tickner 2001:46)

The council's goals for the decade were both broad enough to satisfy all members of parliament and specific enough to mark the areas in which improvement was necessary. In December 1992 Prime Minister Keating defined the first step for non-Indigenous Australians on the path toward reconciliation:

The starting point might be to recognize that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians. It begins, I think, with the act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disease. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practiced discrimination and exclusion. (Keating 1992)

While Keating promoted a historical vision aimed at linking injustice to recognition and white Australia's place in Aboriginal disenfranchisement, the uncertainty of the term's subject and the government's failure to institute

the “social justice” phase of the legislation left unresolved the question of just how to reconcile and what that might mean (Goot and Rowse 2007:125; Tickner 2001). Reconciliation did not replace but rather was supposed to support already existing self-determination policies, and indeed many of the programmatic goals were identical. Like self-determination before it, reconciliation was a clear sign that the nation was confronting its colonial past, but just how to move into something like an Aboriginal future was far from transparent. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was itself fragmented over how to define and present reconciliation to the nation (Goot and Rowse 2007:140–150). Without this clarity the discursive field was open.

In court Aboriginal claimants challenged Australia’s settler claims, making reconciliation about territorial reclamation. And they succeeded. In the 1992 *Mabo* decision, the Australian High Court recognized that *native title did exist* prior to British occupation, thus rewriting the Australian history of settlement (Reynolds 1987; Rowse 1993a). What had long been defended as the settlement of unoccupied territory was now being reframed as the colonial appropriation of Indigenous territories. The *Mabo* decision did not suggest, however, a wholesale reversal of Australian land-title practices. Instead, the High Court argued that in *some* cases, native title might have been upheld through to the present (Russell 2005; Webber 2000). Jeremy Webber saw in *Mabo* the possibility for restructuring territorial and social relations within Australia:

Mabo is not about the recognition of two utterly separate spheres—one Indigenous, the other non-Indigenous—that can go forward in parallel. Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies have been thrown together and inevitably affect each other. Mabo is about the restructuring of that relationship, in which one hopes that there will be areas of significant autonomy and continuity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions, but in which relative autonomy will be combined with a measure of interaction and mutual influence. (2000:61)

Webber’s cautious optimism makes it clear that the vision of a post-*Mabo* Australia is a contentious balance between autonomy and interaction where Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations to land will be reframed and renegotiated. These changes would have to be instituted through legislation as well as informal agreements and alliances. In 1993, as a direct result of the *Mabo* victory, the Native Title Act became law “amid some of the most emotional scenes witnessed in Parliament” (Rintoul 2002:24). The divisiveness in parliament demonstrated the difficulty in framing reconciliation in concrete terms. Although reconciliation was overwhelmingly welcomed as a

national goal, attaching specific legislation to the notion highlighted the still-contentious climate for Indigenous rights (Goot and Rowse 2007).

In his first speech as prime minister, John Howard defined his stand on reconciliation:

I've stressed my desire for a long time, my desire to focus on things that unite Australians and not things that divide them...I want the reconciliation process to continue but on the basis that we are all Australian together, united under a common body of law... My view is that we are one nation. (quoted in Dodson 1996)

Unity was his goal. Howard demanded “practical” solutions: he wanted reconciliation to get back to basics. Framing his policy decisions around the national good, Howard moved quickly to distance himself from what he saw as the romantic connotations and creative juridical possibilities associated with reconciliation. He chided historians for producing a “black armband” version of Aboriginal history; he succeeded in pushing through amendments to the 1993 Native Title Act, giving more power to miners and pastoralists; and he refused to give credence to the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report that connected present-day Aboriginal injustices with past government policies of removing children and separating communities.⁴ Howard refused to apologize for the removal of Aboriginal children from their families just as “Sorry Days” throughout Australia gained popular support.⁵ For Howard, apologies and new histories were out of the state’s purview. Instead, his “practical reconciliation” replaced Aboriginal “community” needs with “individual” ones, making all Australian citizens his priority (Altman and Hunter 2003). Following that logic, Howard and his successive ministers for Indigenous affairs worked from his election in 1996 to dismantle ATSIC and replace it with a non-elected Aboriginal advisory board stripped of financial responsibility and a voice in government.

Addressing the National Reconciliation Planning Workshop in Canberra on May 30, 2005, Howard announced, “I am a realist and the work of reconciliation will be the work of generations.” Distancing himself from specific timetables or benchmarks for reconciliation, he focused instead on responsibilities:

Reconciliation is about rights as well as responsibilities... [I]n recognizing a new spirit of responsibility is needed on an individual basis by Indigenous communities and that passive welfare is a poison for Indigenous communities, as it is for the rest of the Australian community, I say in the name of the Government that we will reach out. (2005)

Howard reached far. By the end of the year, ATSIC was completely destroyed and the “mainstreaming” policy he began in 2004 was given weight, with increased “Shared Responsibility Agreements” (SRAs) and a “whole-of-government” approach to Indigenous affairs. Focusing “responsibility” on individuals and Indigenous communities, Howard was able to deflect one of the previous definitions of reconciliation as a reaffirmation of *governments’* responsibilities toward their Indigenous populations. According to Amanda Vanstone, then minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, mainstreaming was a new approach: “Under the new coordinated arrangements communities will deal with the Australian Government as a whole. It’s *our* job to make *our* money and *our* policy skills address *their* needs” (2005:5, emphasis added). Vanstone’s awkward rhetoric—“our” money and “their” needs—showed that the “shared” in shared responsibility was determined by the federal government’s choices. It was hard to find reconciliation in the new plan. Will Sanders echoes the disbelief of many advocates: “So great was the momentum of the previous fifty years, I thought, that the Howard government would just have to learn to live with Indigenous group-specific rights, such as native title and ATSIC, as well as with equal individual rights across social groups” (2006b:5).

Howard’s change in Aboriginal affairs was not so much an aberration of the last fifty years as it was a calculated challenge to the only-ever marginal success of self-determination policies and progressive Aboriginal politics. At the heart of his revision of reconciliation and the focus on mainstreaming was a division between “symbolic” and “practical” projects and policies. “We have to recognize,” Howard argued, “that if all we do is focus on symbols we will have failed. If we focus simply on areas where we may not agree then we will have failed. Recognition of symbols needs to go hand-in-hand with practical action” (2005).

Howard’s dichotomy, firmly entrenched, discounts any other way of viewing the cultural practices that were part of emergent Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations. No doubt the navy’s acknowledgment of Warumungu lives and traditions in the commissioning of the HMAS *Warramunga II* was “symbolic” and therefore of limited practical benefit to the Warumungu community, the navy, or the nation. Howard’s vision obscured the necessity of involving Aboriginal people in the process of reconciliation through their own practices and aspirations—as heterogeneous as they are. His attempt to define practical reconciliation with prescribed economic outcomes and social inclusion missed the fact that these goals were *not* in opposition. Taking seriously cultural performances as part of economic ventures and social programs would require Howard to acknowledge Aboriginal business as a viable part of the nation. He would have to redefine what responsibility

meant and reimagine Indigenous actors within the public sphere as different national citizens, an image Howard would never fully grasp.

During her speech at the conference, Langton questioned Howard's rhetoric of practicality. "Economic justice," she argued, "is the new frontier in Aboriginal and settler relations. It is more than what the present government means by 'practical reconciliation.' It involves imagining Aboriginal people *participating* in Australian economic life and, for their efforts, living as well as other Australians do for the same effort" (2001, emphasis added). A primary concern for Langton, as for Macumba and Batty, was building new connections that systematically linked Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal economic, social, cultural, and political spheres through engaged involvement. This approach would deny Howard's brand of practicality its discursive power. While Howard sought to push practical and symbolic acts of reconciliation to separate corners and to equate the term *practical* with "common-sense" approaches and "individual needs," Langton and others emphasized the necessity of seeking solutions that were practical in a broader sense—community-motivated, mutually beneficial, and reciprocally obligated.

Attempting to rewrite what reconciliation in practice might look like in this environment, Marcia Langton and Lisa Palmer suggested that "regardless of the legal and political recognition, or impediments to the recognition, of Indigenous rights, agreement making is an important process through which people build relationships and carry forward the public recognition of Indigenous rights" (2003:31). Agreement-making needs to be part of the "multi-pronged approach" to Indigenous policy and "everyday business" (2003:32). For Palmer and Langton this means fine-tuning the policies in place that allow for determined negotiations where all parties have something to gain. Official recognition is not as crucial as the momentum gained through agreements that enact a livable framework for recognition.

Howard's focus on practical reconciliation can be redirected and practicality recuperated by aligning the practical with the meaningful, creative, tense, and awkward alliances that make up the lives of Aboriginal people, the work of Aboriginal organizations, and the multi-directional focus of Aboriginal communities. When "the practical" is unhinged from its positivist moorings and unleashed from rigid conservative individualism, it can reflect the pragmatism of everyday decisions, negotiations, agreements, and debates that exist within uneven and tense power relations but are not completely predetermined by them. Howard's dichotomy between "symbolic" and "practical" enforced a division of social and economic agendas and goals. This separation can be mended by reorienting practicality around the work of Aboriginal communities, without divisions among social, eco-

conomic, cultural, and political motives or meanings. Practical alliances are part of Aboriginal business; they bring together kin groups from different territories to share knowledge, and they temporarily unite miners and Aboriginal communities as part of reaching mutually beneficial agreements. Resignifying what counts as practical means paying attention to and interrogating the daily alliances made and maintained by Aboriginal people, communities, and organizations.

Daily Alliances

Edith Nakkamarra's grandchildren are up early, showering for school, finding clean clothes to wear, and fighting over the last piece of toast for breakfast. Her eldest daughter, Rose, her son-in-law, and their youngest child sit on the porch eating porridge. Soon the bathroom is free and Nakkamarra gets ready for the day. At 7:30 A.M. the bus from the Papulu Apparr-Kari Language and Culture Centre pulls up near the chain-link fence skirting Nakkamarra's house. Rose and Edith hurry the children out the door and onto the bus with them. Circling back down Staunton Street and then onto Patterson Street, the bus stops at the primary school and then back to pick up a few more workers waiting at the Mobile station. By 8:00 A.M. the women are at Papulu Apparr-Kari, where they are employed along with several of their close kin.

Sitting around tables, various language-center employees diagram sentences in Warumungu, translate tapes, develop lessons for their classes at the high school, and chat about last week's footy (Australian-rules football) match—the Eagles lost. A long conversation ensues about the ages of the Elliot mob's team. Apparently two of the blokes were too young and were disqualified by the referees. L.G. shows up with a bag full of egg, cheese, and bacon sandwiches on white toast from the Central Station. The women move to the back porch. Some eat, others smoke. Past a steel pole is the men's table. Some of the men are eating too. From this spot one can easily see the Central Land Council (CLC) building.⁶ Then a telephone call: there's a ten o'clock meeting at CLC. By ten-thirty most people have made their way across the street. Time for "smoko"—the midmorning break for smokes and a "cuppa," which has developed into something akin to brunch: sandwiches, stacks of meat, sweet biscuits, fruit, coffee, tea. The meeting begins at eleven. Discussions today are about an upcoming mining exploration. The Giants Reef mining company and CLC have been working together for several years. Traditional owners are needed on the excursion to assure the mining company that there are no sacred sites in the area.⁷ Lists are compiled—who should come, who else needs to be contacted. Then one of the

CLC field officers asks three of the women about the upcoming Women's Law and Culture meeting to be held at Papunya.⁸ They all agree they should go to Five Mile (just north of town) at sunset to practice. By noon everyone is heading out. Most of the women at the language center are Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) workers, so their workday ends at noon.⁹

I agree to take Rose by the high school to drop off lunch money for her eldest daughter. Then Edith and I go to pick up Eileen Nappanangka, Kathleen Nappanangka, and Dora Nangali. We drive out to the telegraph station. The women want a photo of the spot where the policeman set up his canvas tent in the 1930s. We visited the same spot the previous week, recording the women's recollections about living near the telegraph station—and the overlapping sets of ancestral and settler tracks that they maneuvered among. An hour and a half passes and we complete our mission: photo taken. Back in town we stop at the Shell station—I buy the women meat pies, lemonade (Sprite), and some Log Cabin tobacco. We drop off Nangali at her house, where her daughter is waiting to take her to Congress (the local health clinic) to see the doctor. The other women want to go back into town. I drop them off in front of the Chicken shop, where two battered red benches and an awning make for a nice conversation area. I agree to pick Edith up at half-past-two for my language lesson.¹⁰

When I return, the women are all in the back room of the Goldfields Inn playing the pokies (slot machines). I learn of an altercation between two other family members and agree to take one of Eileen's granddaughters to Centrelink—the Northern Territory social-services office—so she can sign the necessary paperwork to receive government aid for her son. And Edith needs to check at the ANZ bank about her ABSTUDY money—government funds for courses she is taking at the Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD) in Alice Springs. We make it back to my house by three o'clock. Before we crack open the *Warumungu Learner's Guide*, we have a cup of coffee and some lemon cake. After an hour we stop the lesson. Back in the Toyota, I take Edith to her house, where several of her grandchildren begin their ritual of humbugging her for money. She doles out crisp bills to each of the waiting hands, and they promptly head off to spend the lot on Coke, lollies, and hot chips; some of the older ones will head to the "bush casinos" for card games late into the night.

I could continue. More driving, other meetings, news about a relative's death, grocery shopping at the Food Barn, more driving..., but instead I want to linger on this "day-in-the-life" itinerary. Place: remote Northern Territory town. Date: May 2002. Plotline: contemporary Aboriginal life. Edith Nakkamarra's day reminds me that there are many facets to Aboriginal

life; some could be characterized as traditional, others modern, some mundane, others perhaps political. Some of her actions may be deemed healthy and others as pathologies, some are a direct result of government intervention, others are tied to traditional practices, and some have emerged from the business of local organizations and international researchers. Even the banality of this daily log denies the plausibility of a single set of policies or practices that could encompass all Aboriginal “issues” or predict the pattern of Aboriginal relations.

Edith’s daily movements attach her to multiple Aboriginal organizations in town; regional funding bodies that maintain social services; national education and welfare programs; and the kin to whom she is also obliged. The organizations she works for and with are staffed by Aboriginal people (not all of whom are Warumungu) and papulanji (see preface), the bureaucrats she encounters are mostly papulanji, and her kin reflect the overlapping Aboriginal history in the region: Warumungu, Warlpiri, and Kaytetye. Her daily engagements affect the well-being of many people as well as the successful operations of Aboriginal projects and organizations. These matter-of-fact actions, their tenuous outcomes, and the ambivalent relationships they produce are the *practical politics of obligated alliances*—projects and partnerships defined by a dynamic sense of proper actions toward country, kin, and community resulting from interdependent networks of action.

Edith Nakkamarra’s rotating and overlapping connections to people, places, and organizations demonstrate the reach of her own networks and the alliances she has created and been cast into through decades of change in national, regional, and local “Aboriginal policies.” Nakkamarra’s daily collaborations with Aboriginal organizations, mining companies, out-of-town researchers, and her own extended kin group highlight the varied forms of obligations and activities through which Aboriginal business is realized and restricted. Nakkamarra—as with all ritually strong men and women—must perform her knowledge for it to be passed on to younger generations or shared with others in exchange for other forms of valued knowledge. Her work at the language center is compelled not only by her very real desire to maintain the Warumungu language and its associated country knowledge, but also by her extended family obligations. The wage she earns goes toward the rearing of several of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Her house in town shelters several of her children and rotating sets of relations who come in and out of town from outstations and other Aboriginal communities. Nakkamarra’s trips to Centrelink and multiple discussions with bureaucrats about her ABSTUDY money are part of creating an economically stable future for herself and being part of the community’s commitment to an engaged Aboriginal presence in town.

In the Toyota Troop Carrier, in the back offices of Papulu Apparr-Kari, playing the pokies, and visiting mining sites, Edith Nakkamarra's day challenges the failure of self-determination and the rigid notion of practical reconciliation. As she moves through the town, attends meetings, helps researchers, earns money, and goes to work, she is at once the agent and object of social change and political reform. She is neither an autonomous actor nor a cog in the machine. Her movement helps us see the work of Aboriginal organizations as they juggle the needs of multiple local constituencies, industries, and the legislation that governs their own agendas. The land council and the language center are held accountable to local Aboriginal families as well as to commonwealth and territory government offices. As they seek Nakkamarra's assistance and pay her wages, these organizations acknowledge both their responsibility toward individuals and mobs and their accountability to national agencies. Overlying Nakkamarra's own tracks are the well-worn tracks of the Toyotas that ferry people to and from meetings, pick people up for health-clinic visits, and deposit children at school. Part of the legacy of self-determination, these Aboriginal-owned (by organizations mainly, but also individuals) vehicles allow for the extension of landed connections between ancestors, people, and country as well as for emergent connections between railroad workers, mining companies, tourists, and Aboriginal organizations (Myers 1989; Stotz 1993). These alliances are not only human-to-human. They involve Toyotas and computers, whitefellas and multiple Aboriginal groups, country and ancestors as continually created networks extend and incorporate differing agendas.

Where self-determination focused on Aboriginal "communities" and Howard's "mainstreaming" focused on individuals, neither gets at the local sets of social relations that operate throughout Aboriginal Australia. Especially in remote communities, Aboriginal people continue to assert their connections to each other, the organizations they work for or maintain, and their territories through small groupings—made up of extended families variously connected—known as "mobs." The use of the term *mobs* in Aboriginal English goes a long way to subvert the more romantic connotations of *community*—as whole entities united in time and space—and to undo the rigid calibration of individuality—as disconnected from kin and country—to determine social relatedness. *Mob* implies an undercurrent of unruliness and mobility—a group whose makeup is at least partially refracted through present interests and strategic alliances and whose composition is situated in the day-to-day lives of intimately related groups (Sansom 1980; P. Sullivan 1988; Tonkinson 1974). The groupings form and mutate as individuals define their own sets of commitments to each other and to the many nodes within their extensive social networks (Anderson

1989; Merlan 1998; Myers 1982, 1986). Members of particular mobs are connected through intimate relations to kin and country. They share attachments to dreaming tracks and ancestral sites as well as to Aboriginal organizations and local agencies. Unlike the vague notion of the “Warumungu community” or the disconnected notion of “individuals,” *mobs* identifies the types of attachments people maintain out of long-standing traditions as well as the ones they choose out of more temporary social-political arrangements (and the connections between these two).

In Tennant Creek, people speak of themselves as part of country and family mobs, linked through ancestral dreamings and ritual knowledge, and simultaneously as part of more recent and changing mobs, linked through work, leisure activities, and long-term projects—the “Pink Palace mob” (the rotating group of women who work for Julalikari Arts and Crafts), the “Sporties mob” (those that frequent the Sporties Club), or the “Mulga mob” (those who live at Mulga camp, at the north end of town). It is not easy to untangle these patchworks of relation, nor is it necessary to divine the Warumungu constituencies who enter into and uphold overlapping sets of alliances through their belonging to multiple mobs. Aboriginal alliances recognize a shared sense of history, place, and family at the same time as they draw clear distinctions and make specific claims about their relation to those same histories, places, and families. Mobs frame a sense of belonging at a local level at the same time as they create the possibilities for new relations to be formed. Over the last decade or so, the Warumungu term *Wumpurrarni* has emerged as a general term for all Aboriginal people in Tennant Creek, as opposed to *papulanji*. This binary serves as a point of association for the multiple mobs as they define their overall relation to the white community through their shared racialized history and place in the town. It is out of this mob structure that histories of tense alliances have grown. Maintaining this mob mentality exposes alliance-making as part of the conditions of indigeneity in Australia, where tenuous and temporary connections and enduring and extensive networks parallel one another in the national-local landscape as Aboriginal people reach out and maneuver inward toward fulfilling a changing set of goals.

Indigenous Experience

As James Clifford asserts, “‘Indigenous experience’ is difficult to contain: the senses of belonging evoked by the phrase are integral to many, and diverse, localisms and nationalisms” (2007:197). In fact, much of the national anxiety in Australia results from the urge to contain Indigenous peoples and their experiences under oscillating banners of assimilation and autonomy,

neither of which can account for or make sense of Aboriginal alliances. Clifford argues that

we struggle for languages to represent the layered, faceted realities of the “Indigenous” today, without imposing reductive, backward-looking criteria of authenticity. What’s at stake in this representational struggle is an adequate realism in our ways of thinking comparatively about a range of old and emergent histories. (2007:214, his italics)

Clifford cautions against any historically reductive or teleological application of realism. Instead, he calls for “a non-reductive assessment of the historically possible, a political/prophetic realism” (2007:217). His focus on realism maintains the necessity of pragmatism without discounting the effectiveness of trenchant ideological positions—in fact, it is in the movement between these two that he sees the realities of Indigenous experiences. In this sense, Clifford joins many scholars in rethinking the conditions of indigeneity. Political theorists Duncan Ivison, Paul Patton, and Will Sanders (2000:11) suggest that the three most crucial issues with regard to indigeneity are sovereignty; identity and difference; and justice and democratic theory. Within this triad they articulate a range of practiced sovereignties (few of which are defined by succession from the nation-state); the ambivalence of identities linked only to territorial homelands; and the limits of a liberal, rights-based notion of justice. Like Clifford, they call for a “political theory open to new modes of cultural and political belonging” (2000:21).

As a politics of indigeneity moves out of the shadow of colonial power and is reimaged within overtly political and resolutely historical, yet not entirely oppressive institutions, practices, and discourses, the possibilities for collaboration extend. In fact, Roger Maaka and Augie Fleras argue, “Indigeneity as principle and practice is ultimately concerned with reshaping the structure of Indigenous peoples–state relations in the hope of crafting a legitimate political order where innovative patterns of belonging can be explored” (2000:93). Indian gaming in the northeast United States, Native sovereignty movements in Hawai’i, the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, the election of an Indigenous president in Bolivia, and First Nations mining agreements in Canada demonstrate the “new patterns of belonging” developed by contemporary Indigenous projects and politics with nation-states and overlapping global movements. None of these practices, linked as they are to both a generalized colonial logic and specific national histories, define indigeneity, although they all work toward disarming the causal links between indigeneity, cultural authenticity, rigid territorialism, and perpetual victim status. They all look to a different Indigenous future defined within

locally inconsistent and globally shifting patterns of consumption, production, and identification. Anna Tsing argues for the centrality of national frameworks within Indigenous politics: “Despite the importance of global connections, the nation continues to be the locus of political negotiation in most places. To make a political difference, Indigenous leaders must address the nation-state. They must use cultural and political frames that are comprehensible within the nation” (2007:39). Specificity matters.

While globalization debates have framed indigeneity as a counterweight to the celebratory claims of globalists, in settler nations, Indigenous politics must claim a place within the nation’s trajectory of Indigenous relations. Global frames such as sovereignty, land rights, and cultural-property debates have to be located within national histories of treaties (or lack thereof), racial politics, and economic marginalization, which can be very different as one moves from the Outback to Oklahoma. Maintaining the possibility of global links while at the same time forging workable partnerships nationally means Indigenous politics must grapple with situated settler claims and legal frameworks largely not of their own choosing. Sovereignty gains more traction in the United States because of its long history of treaties; in Australia, where treaties were never signed, sovereignty often clutters the discursive field as it struggles to find a historical anchor.¹¹ The necessity of forging global alliances should not distract from the nationally rooted politics of indigeneity.

For better *and* worse, self-determination and reconciliation have been the framing narratives of indigeneity in Australia over the last thirty years. These two discursive and policy regimes—nowhere uncontested or univocal—have been the launching points for critiques of and alignments among Aboriginal and state, local, and commercial actors. With the ongoing disadvantage in Aboriginal communities, there has been no end of blame and soul-searching over the appropriate pathway to and implementation of policies aimed at undoing the legacies of colonialism, paternalism, and assimilation. Critiquing Aboriginal policies and the support systems he sees as instilling a “politics of suffering,” Peter Sutton argues:

The contrast between progressivist public rhetoric about empowerment and self-determination and the raw evidence of a disastrous failure in major aspects of Australian Aboriginal affairs policy since the early 1970s is now frightening. Policy revision must go back to bedrock questions, with all bets off, if it is to respond meaningfully to this crisis. This means that everything, including the question of artificially perpetuating “outback ghettos” or other similar bureaucratically maintained institutions, the encouragement of corporatism as against the pursuit of

individual needs and aspirations, de facto laissez-faire policing policies with regard to Indigenous community problems of violence, petrol sniffing and drug abuse, even separate Indigenous service delivery, should all be on the table. (2001:126)

In a trenchant and passionate argument, Sutton claims that Aboriginal suffering is perpetuated not just by policy makers and external “post-conquest” forces, but also by Aboriginal “social and cultural factors” (2001:127). Focusing specifically on violence in remote areas, he argues that the ways in which children are socialized, violence as a form of retribution, demand-sharing, and the high stress on personal autonomy all perpetuate the disadvantage and suffering in Aboriginal communities (2001:140). He links these cultural practices to the policies of reconciliation and self-determination that he suggests provide a shield for the protection of “culture” and the (accepted) destruction of Aboriginal lives:

I recently almost drove into a young woman who staggered across the road, clearly in advanced pregnancy, and clutching a can of petrol to her face. It is one of many communities in a desperate condition, and where observations of this kind are not rare. Officially, it was a community enjoying “self-determination”. What “self-determination” was being enjoyed by that unborn child? While many of the very young in such places enjoy loving protective care, there are others who do not. (2001:141)

Clearly Sutton’s question is rhetorical. But this emotive narrative—young mother, unborn child, and a community in despair—is meant not just as a warning, but also as a declaration of failure. We are meant to see self-determination as a permissive system and set of policies that allow for “passive welfare” and illegal but culturally sanctioned violence and decay. We don’t hear about the other women and children who *are* cared for in Sutton’s story. They are there, but not there. The focus is on the grief, suffering, and the misery of Aboriginal lives.

Sutton’s critique ignited some controversy as it linked the disadvantage in Aboriginal communities both to academics’ unwillingness to reveal the “realities” of remote communities, where policies and legal structures are not implemented as they are elsewhere in Australia, and to the cultural practices of Aboriginal people that support and even encourage dysfunction. There is certainly enough blame to go around. Sutton calls for a radical rethink of policy as a way out of the politics of suffering created and intensified over the last thirty years. In her response to Sutton’s view, Gillian Cowlshaw critiques his “mechanistic view of culture” that “erases the sen-

sate, intelligent human beings who are experiencing and responding to their conditions of existence” and challenges his reliance on policy as a mechanism for change (2003:1). Cowlshaw’s response highlights the scenes left out of Sutton’s “homogeneously miserable and desperate communities” (2003:2). By injecting joy, hope, ambivalence, fear, and pain, Cowlshaw attempts both to undo Sutton’s emphasis on Aboriginal cultural failure and also to implicate the methods by which self-determination and reconciliation have (and have not) been implemented as significant factors contributing to the problems that Aboriginal communities are facing. She does not assume helpless, hopeless communities or a static cultural model. Refusing the failure frame allows one to bring into focus the ways in which people, institutions, laws, policies, and histories produce and maintain conditions of existence. This is not a battle between dystopian and utopian views, but a call for acknowledgment of the structural limits of appeals to failure and the necessity to “recognize the social responses to changing conditions” (Cowlshaw 2003:5). The short life of self-determination in the face of overwhelming antagonism and division within the nation should not be so easily cast aside.

Similarly, Faye Ginsburg and Fred Myers question politicians and academics whose assumptions about the failures of Aboriginal self-determination and the irreconcilability of state recognition and Aboriginal subjectivity erase much of the hard work of Aboriginal activism. “Where,” they ask,

in all this debate, are the people with whom we have been working over the last two decades—the painters, the musicians, the media-makers—in short, the cultural activists who are shaping, through their cultural labor, possibilities for Aboriginal futures outside the defining limits of law and policy? (2006:29)

I would add to Ginsburg and Myers’s list of Aboriginal actors these others: land-council field officers, language-center liaisons, and health-clinic workers. Cultural activists, in this broader sense, make up a field of labor where culture and economics meet in the dual nature of Aboriginal business, as ritual and wage-earning work, to define an expansive network of actors moving across a dynamic landscape. It is in this field of workers and institutions, government agencies and Aboriginal organizations that we may see the possibilities afforded by mutual incomprehension, or what Anna Tsing calls “zones of awkward engagement where words mean something different across a divide as people agree to speak” (2005:xi). Unintelligibility is not necessarily the sign of irreconcilable agendas or missed opportunities. In fact, Tsing sees these moments as defined by “friction,” the unstable and

dynamic process where “heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (2005:5). Friction and incomprehensibility can provide the impetus for political recognition and change as well as the roadmap for newly formed collaborations and connections while acknowledging the structures of power that remain. One does not need to assert or promote failure to make visible the inadequacy, breakdown, and deficiencies of some government policies and Aboriginal agendas. Outside of the language and politics of failure are the realities of constructing an Aboriginal future within and out of the unpredictable political and social terrain of a settler nation. *Aboriginal Business* focuses on the grip of everyday lives in a remote Australian town formed around obligated alliances and structured through unequal relations of power as part of the contemporary conditions of indigeneity. Each chapter explores the tensions and ambiguities that go along with defining and practicing self-determination and promoting reconciliation through coexisting claims and agendas.

The remaining chapters are divided into three sections. Each section begins with a short introduction that summarizes the chapter discussions and arguments and frames them within recent local-national political events. The sections themselves orient around specific themes—claims, practicality, and production—designed to tease out the changing contours of obligated alliances as a part of the everyday work of Aboriginal business.

Section 1, “Community Control,” examines how the emergence of Aboriginal organizations and the struggle for land rights defined Aboriginal control and autonomy through sets of obligated alliances. The chapters in this section are concerned with showing how Warumungu people and their representative organizations redefined the political, social, and territorial landscape of relationships in Tennant Creek.

Chapter 2, “Country Claims,” explores the changing field of Aboriginal territorial relations by unpacking the ways in which people and groups lay claim to country. This chapter looks at the relations between Warumungu people and their “country” as a set of alliances solidified in tradition but reworked through settler industries, inserted town boundaries, and the long-fought land claims process that depended on redefining country relations through legal nomenclature.

Chapter 3, “Managing Mobs,” examines the rise of Aboriginal organizations as they remap the town space and at the same time realign Aboriginal relations to country and kin through internal power struggles and in conversation with newly adopted bureaucratic structures. This chapter shows

the emergence of Aboriginal organizations not only as a material effect of self-determination policies, but also as a dynamic network through which alliances are negotiated among increasingly expansive groups.

Section 2, "Uneasy Alliances," focuses on two specific post-land claims collaborations in order to demonstrate the inseparability of "practical" and "symbolic" alliance-making. Both chapters within this section address the formation and negotiation of more-than-local partnerships as a way to examine the intra- and inter-group dynamics and histories that define and challenge the implementation of beneficial business ventures.

Chapter 4, "Constrained Collaborations," unpacks the post-land claims negotiations and agreements between the Central Land Council and Giants Reef Mining Company. Some of the harshest critics of Aboriginal land rights have been mining companies fearful of losing profits and control. Legal victories combined with a paradigm shift within the mining industry, however, promoted an atmosphere of agreement-making. This chapter looks at the history of mining in Tennant Creek and the post-Warumungu land claim victory that sought to unleash Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal joint ventures from the shackles of cultural and legal gridlock.

Chapter 5, "Practical Partnerships," explores how transnational deals are negotiated and put into practice through contracts and deeds, as well as cultural performances and "symbolic" gestures. This chapter examines the production of an intercontinental rail line as it cuts through town and opens up enduring racial, territorial, and economic tensions. Out of this history of displacement and suspicion, can a meaningful collaboration be forged among multiple sets of stakeholders? Moving between transnational funding sources, territorial ownership claims, and the historic vision of a "connected" Australian center, I explore the meaningful connections made through locomotive-naming ceremonies, Aboriginal stockman songs, and royalty payments as all parties involved attempt to define what counts as a successful partnership.

Section 3, "Proper Productions," takes up the theme of cultural production within the logic of tourist markets to examine the Warumungu notion of "properness" as the framework for building workable relations, extending Aboriginal power, and generating viable Aboriginal products. Both chapters in this section demonstrate how Warumungu systems of accountability work through acts of circulation to contain and maintain proper social relations and cultural products even as the audiences and actors extend to tourists and regional markets.

Chapter 6, "Negotiating Networks," focuses on the production and circulation of an international compact disc of traditional songs by a group of

Warumungu women. As the women debate the proper lineup of songs and the necessity of specific kin for their performance, the CD becomes a vehicle for preservation and innovation as well as negotiation and hostility. As a self-consciously commercial and archival product, the CD moves across social and property networks, redefining both.

Chapter 7, "Culture Work," examines the recent growth of Indigenous cultural tourism as a viable and sought-after strategy for cultural revival, economic sustainability, and national visibility. This chapter focuses on the co-production and planning of the Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Culture Centre in Tennant Creek as way to highlight the rearticulation of relations of respect between local groups and the interlocutors they engage. As a tourist venture and a community center, Nyinkka Nyunyu embodies the eclectic maneuvering of Aboriginal communities as they seek to redefine their own traditions for future generations and for public consumption.