



Key Informants on the History of Anthropology

We Are Not Alone: Anthropology in a World of Others

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The theme of this essay, as of my anthropological history, is 'Anthropology in a World of Others.' My beginning seems a long time ago, as far in the past of the present as the *Diary of a Country Priest* by George Bernanos seemed to me as a student in the Religion Department of a late-1960s rural Massachusetts liberal arts college. Canberra still had the look of a British colony. It was still the Australia of instant coffee, and not the 'flat white' or 'long black' of more recent, cosmopolitan days. Some of these memories remain visceral; I can never fly into Alice Springs and feel the crisp sunny days of a desert winter without a pang of the anxiety, of recognition and expectation, of my first fieldwork. In a similar fashion, I can no longer think about my career of research and writing without engaging with the (or should I say 'my') historical locations and the horizons that shaped my understandings of the Western Desert Aboriginal people I came to know in the early 1970s.



My research began at a significant time. It straddled an anthropological moment marked by disputes about kinship and descent theory and an Australian political period dominated by policies of directed assimilation subsequently eclipsed by the period of Aboriginal land rights and self-deter-

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mination. The latter were followed by an era of identity politics, struggles over the place of Indigenous people in Australian national identity, and finally debates about 'The Stolen Generations.' For Indigenous people in Australia, as elsewhere, the last few decades of the 20th century were a time of heady political assertion. Carrying out research during this time, what I learned 'then' – living with Western Desert ('Pintupi') people in conditions close to what Peter Sutton (1996) has called 'classical Aboriginal society' – 'now' partly occupies a status similar to Classics. What I describe in my dissertation (Myers 1976) and first monograph (Myers 1986a) is no longer possible as a subject of ethnographic research, and even no longer representative of social life as it is lived in the transformed circumstances of remote sedentarized communities. Certainly, my writings do speak to anthropological theory and concerns – insofar as they may illuminate questions of agency, individuality, and territorial organization – but for Indigenous people, they are becoming part of local histories and national imaginaries.

One has to wonder if the techniques and methods (genealogies, travel histories, mapping, kinship terminology) as well as the problems and theories with which those of my cohort began our research continue to have value or application, when as George Marcus (1998, 2005; Marcus & Fischer 1986) has written repeatedly, anthropology's dominant paradigm has been 'destabilized.' The dominant paradigm in sociocultural anthropology, as Marcus called it, was one based on intensive and long-term participant-observation fieldwork in remote communities, articulated with the four-field approach, providing knowledge of 'them' (over there, somewhere) to 'us,' here. The intended audience of much of this cultural production in the US was undergraduates engaged in liberal education.

This paradigm articulated a series of norms regulating anthropological practice – among them the regulative ideal of rapport: 'the powerful shorthand concept used to stand for the threshold level of relations with fieldwork subjects that is necessary for those subjects to act effectively as informants for anthropologists' (Marcus 1998:106).

The natural hegemony of this approach has now evaporated. As Marcus goes on to write, 'There are now signs of the displacement of this foundational commonplace of fieldwork, given the changing mise-en-scene in which anthropological research is now frequently being constituted' (1998:106). We have moved outward from community-based studies to multi-sited projects engaged with understanding how broader relationships constitute the 'local.' In keeping with this shift, Marcus has suggested, the figure of 'rapport'



might be replaced with that of 'complicity.' While obviously a provocative choice of terms, the latter concept indicates a more complex interface than that between 'us' and 'them.' My own sense of this change derives from the experience of working in Indigenous communities – in which anthropologists began to develop more collaborative relationships of knowledge production with our 'subjects' (see Myers 1986b). The simplicity of the us/them dyad – assumed in the flow of cultural translation from 'them' to 'us' – is no longer sustainable.

The story I want to tell here is part of the broad historical framework Marcus discerns, but it has a distinctive dimension in that anthropological and other mediations are part of the same field as their own subjects. Most readers will be familiar with James Clifford's (1988) famous discussion of Malinowski's fundamental exclusion of the colonial presence from the 'ethnographic present' of the Kiriwina of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski 1922) as well as with Fabian's (1983) critique of the illusions of temporal separation created by the trope of 'the ethnographic present.' My interest is to explore the coeval status I had with Aboriginal people and others in order to illuminate the sociocultural field in which 'the field' was located. This sociocultural field was a space of competing power and representation – both academic and political – that defined the circumstances of Indigenous social life. A significant scholarly context for my research was set partly by the publication of the volume *Man the Hunter* (Lee & De Vore 1968), with its discussions of 'bands' and 'territoriality' and its fundamentally evolutionist framework (see Myers 1988a). Coincidentally, Aboriginal 'land tenure' became a major concern of Anglo-American anthropology just at the time that Land Rights became an issue of national debate in Australia, following the setback of Justice Blackburn's (1971) decision¹ in the Gove Land Rights Case that found the Yolngu at Yirrkala did not 'own' the land in the terms of Australian Common Law.

Retrospectively, this historical horizon of my fieldwork now seems also to have been constituted substantially by the policy of 'Aboriginal self-determination.' The policy had effects not only on the relative power of researcher and subject, but also in establishing important questions for research itself.

Over time, the knowledge I have gathered about the Aboriginal people who were living in 1973 in a small breakaway community at Yayayi in Australia's Northern Territory has become a history for their children and grandchildren. My project has moved from anthropology to local history – a transition





that would seem to resonate with Matti Bunzl's (2004) recent 'presentist recuperation' of the classical Boasian ideal of fieldwork, which emphasizes cultural difference as the product of *historical specificity*.

There have been fundamental changes in the audiences anthropologists might anticipate for their accounts. Happily, my accounts are now likely to be read by people who identify themselves as 'Aboriginal' or 'Indigenous' and even, perhaps, as 'Pintupi.' The debates and concepts that emanate from within the discipline of anthropology may have – especially for Indigenous or Fourth World people – immediate political implications: Descriptions and analyses of Indigenous customs or practices (their openness or resistance to change, for example, in debates for which Strehlow [1947] was cited, or the economic dimensions of their relationship to land, as Williams [1986], Merlan [1998], and Povinelli [1993, 2002] have shown) might affect their suitability for recognition by powerful agents, such as the State (see Myers 1988b). These questions now vex anthropologists in Australia, whose adopted code of ethics – insisting on the importance of helping one's research subjects – could cast doubt, ironically, on the reliability of the evidence they might give as 'scientific' witnesses in a courtroom or hearing. And while it seemed vitally important for those of my generation of scholars to insist on the capacity of Aboriginal societies to change, showing that Aboriginal culture was living and creative, we were soon to find that legal frameworks for the recognition of Indigenous 'custom' could use this perspective to invalidate – as recently 'invented' – practices local people themselves regarded as legitimate and traditional. How, in these circumstances, might one hope to meld anthropology with Indigenous Studies, how to participate with the projects of Indigenous scholars, activists and leaders and their interest in the knowledge we have gained?

Having lived through this transition, I recognize myself in these discussions. Indeed, it is with these considerations in mind that I want to trace out some powerful connections between past and present in terms of the awkward and shifting relationships that have long prevailed in research and that have shaped the development of anthropological thinking about Fourth World people, including the delineation of where 'the field' of 'field research' might be.

Then: Tristes Tropiques

I grew up in the 1960s, an American, and went to a New England liberal arts college during the Vietnam War. This was an unsettled but exciting time,





still guided by a sense many young Americans had that we could make things different. I turned to anthropology because, as an undergraduate major in a secular Religion Department that focused on the ultimate nature of humanity, but with almost no experience myself, I was inspired by reading Claude Lévi-Strauss's beguiling *Tristes Tropiques* (1971 [1955]), Ernst Cassirer's (1953) *Philosophy of Symbolic Form*, and Karl Mannheim's (1936) sociology of knowledge. I was a first-generation college student, had never even traveled outside of the US, and didn't like adventure really; but I was captivated by the question of whether people could really be 'different,' fascinated by the different ways in which – apparently – people could see the world and themselves.

My original question was the very general one – later it seemed sophomorically romantic – of whether those of another culture were so different that it was impossible to comprehend their productions at all. This was the conundrum of Lévi-Strauss's epistemologically antiseptic encounter with the uncontacted Nambikwara Indians, but it didn't seem a heroic task to me. The question was one of human nature as much as epistemology: Was understanding – a sense of recognizing universal human dilemmas as suggested in Lévi-Strauss's structuralism – only apparent? Was it that only in the process of 'translation' itself, by Westerners, that their cultures came to seem more like ours? I knew that other anthropologists, preeminently Clifford Geertz (1973), abjured such French logical purity, and with notions based on hermeneutics attempted to account for the ethnographer's experience of being able to communicate with strangers. I applied to Bryn Mawr College on a whim, after graduating from college and escaping the draft, and they accepted me (as I learned later) 'as an experiment.'

I read widely as a graduate student – about Ojibwa people of the North American boreal forests, about Melanesians in New Britain. I flourished in the 'blue-stocking' atmosphere of Bryn Mawr, an important undergraduate college for women with a fairly obscure graduate program in anthropology; they tolerated none of the philosophical arguments or arrogance that had allowed me to skate through college. I was inspired by reading Edward Sapir and Paul Radin. Jane Goodale, Frederica de Laguna, A. Irving Hallowell, and Bill Davenport were the teachers who engaged me with the ethnographic project; the excitement of 'fieldwork' was always central. Jane had a gift for turning my immature and abstract musings into more concrete projects of research. But with the end of each of the first two years, I declared my intention to quit, frustrated by the dreariness of classes that never seemed (in my horizon) to go anywhere. For example, in my very first class the beginning



three weeks were spent on the animals, vegetation and clothing manufacture of the subarctic. Each time I proposed to leave, I was just ignored by Jane, who pointed out to me that I could do this or that and keep moving along. I went to do research with Aboriginal Australians, on Jane's advice; she thought I would get on well with Aboriginal people. Because I wanted to live with people who were as different as possible from those in my own culture, I found the contrast between a poor material culture and a rich religious culture enticing. W.E.H. Stanner's *On Aboriginal Religion* (1966) was a great influence on my choice.

I thought I had turned my back on the general questions of difference when I went into the field, exchanging them for more concrete and investigatable problems: territorial organization, personhood, kinship. That my research would involve Aboriginal relationships to place was sure, however, given the salience these had acquired in scholarly consideration of Aboriginal life (Birdsell 1970; Hiatt 1962; Meggitt 1962; Munn 1970; Stanner 1965). The changing context of understanding and of representing Aboriginal cultures brought the general issues to the foreground again, in unexpected ways.

Thus, it was, fresh from the US, at age twenty-five, I came to Australia in 1973 armed with a research project and a grant from the National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant to study 'The Self and Its Changing Behavioral Environment in Aboriginal Australia.' This was fundamentally to challenge the group-centered assumptions typical of studies and theories of Aboriginal social life. In a way, I was following up the insights of Jane Goodale's *Tiwi Wives* (1971), which had emphasized Tiwi creativity and individuality, in landownership, and indirectly I was influenced by the debates about nonunilineal descent groups in Melanesia. But I was also drawing on the person-centered formulation of Hallowell's famous (1955) essay 'Self and Its Behavioral Environment' and W.E.H. Stanner's (1960) portrait of 'Durmugam: a Nangiomeri,' about one of his main informants. I had never read another account of an individual Aboriginal Australian like this, a rich portrait of a person situated in the ethnographer's own time and not simply an abstract bearer of culture.

Cherchez le Terrain

In Australia, however, the study of Aboriginal life intersected the rather different network of 'Aboriginal affairs.' This network articulated with national and cultural politics that were unfamiliar to me and implicated me in ways for which I was wholly unprepared. Decades later, in my study of the



circulation of Western Desert Aboriginal painting, I was going to begin my book *Painting Culture* (Myers 2002), with the memory of this first encounter, but space limitations – often a substantial but unacknowledged factor in decisions that might otherwise be regarded as theoretical – prevented it. The 1973 account goes to the heart of Marcus's insight, describing the social relationships that define access to 'the field' and the 'identities' that shape participation. It also, and significantly, leaves some things unsaid.

I arrived in Australia in June 1973. Off the plane from San Francisco, through Pago Pago, I was met in Sydney by an anthropologist who was a friend of a friend. A few years older than I, an American expatriate, but as yet unfinished with his own Ph.D., he had offered to put me up in the house he shared in a Sydney suburb. At first this appeared quite similar to shares in the U.S., and my long haired, stoned host much like acquaintances there. Even so, the disorder and palpable enervation were too much for me, given the need I had to get myself situated and find a field site.

Fortunately, I had the option of staying with another friend, an archeologist, in the Balmain Victorian terrace house he shared with his then-partner. I arrived on the eve of a grand party for the distinguished cultural geographer, Harold Brookfield, also staying there. This meant a house full of visitors, an entire refrigerator full of Sydney beer (Toohey's), and a distinct sense of my alienation among strangers who speak English. At the end of the Vietnam War, the pavements near Sydney University were still marked 'U.S. Out of Vietnam.' To some, I was the representative of an imperialism against which they had mobilized themselves, or at least of a presence they resented.

My host, I learned, confident and powerful of voice, had been banned from television for uttering the Anglo-Saxon word for sexual intercourse in his arguments in favor of the controversial sex education *Little Red Book*. So soon after the defeat of the Liberal Party and the long (boring) reign of the Anglophilic, Menzies-dominated fraction, this was still too much for the Australian public. Proudly, my host was off the air but booming open and generous.

Another Australian anthropologist, now one of my dearest friends and a brilliant colleague, brought another attitude to bear. Recently in Central Australia for her Ph.D. research, she challenged my right to be there. 'What are you doing here? Why don't you study people in America?' Eventually, she became one of my surest guides through the strangely unfamiliar terrain of Australian life.

Lost in Sydney, I was passed on from its terrace houses and intellectual individualism to Peter Corris, then completing a Ph.D. in Pacific History but no doubt on his way to becoming better known as the author of the Cliff Hardy mysteries. In Canberra, I froze in the unheated brick houses that pretended we were in England, but received the guidance and friendship from Nic Peterson and others that





landed me in Central Australia. Canberra, seat of Australia's Federal Government, was British, American and Australian, and my comfort there with so many other expatriates – from Australia's other cities as well as overseas – provided a buffer that hid the invisible presence that was Australia's Whitlam class. I hardly understood it then, but this was the heart of a growing 'Aboriginal industry,' issuing forth from the rather newly formulated Federal responsibility for its Aboriginal people.

Tentative and more uncertain than polite, I was easy game in my circumspect formality and marked off as 'an American academic' – unless and until proven otherwise. Proven how? By accepting that Australia was not a paler, less developed version of America, Britain or whatever – but a place with its own strange rules, roles and history.

From this description, the reader will realize what did not enter in to the 'field' of my study as I circumscribed it in 1973 and wrote about it in the next several years. I was hardly unaware or unresponsive to the issues embedded in these relationships, but although my subject was 'the *changing* behavioral environment,' and I wrote quite a good deal about the relationships between Pintupi people and non-Aboriginal people (including 'the government'), these deeper conditions and my own relationships to them were relegated to background.

I had a grant, but no people. I didn't know where I might actually be allowed to carry out such research in Australia. In this respect, I suffered from two problems. The first was anthropological territoriality. Communities like Milingimbi, Yirrkala, and even Port Keats were, as the saying was, 'taken.' Anthropologists were already working there, planning to go there, or had been working there. Second, it was also a highly politicized moment. Many Aboriginal people had decided they didn't want anthropologists poking around in their communities and, with policy changes, these communities had the right to give or deny permission.

Not knowing where I might actually be allowed to carry out such research in Australia, I flew from Canberra and Sydney, where I had consulted with so many experienced anthropologists, to Darwin, capital of the Northern Territory, closer to remote Aboriginal life. I still had a list of places I might try to work. Finding one's feet in this kind of setting is an experience of being unimportant, but people were quite kind, and Ted Millikan gave me a desk at the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) office, from which to work. One evening, thanks to the presence of Jeremy Beckett from Sydney (an old friend of Nancy Munn) who took me in charge, I met the famous Gunwinggu bark painter Yirawala. More providentially, Anita Campbell – an old hand





in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and a friend to Jane Goodale during her fieldwork in the previous decade – told me that Pintupi people had very recently moved out of the settlement of Papunya to an 'outstation.' With this new movement, she thought that the superintendent Laurie Owens, who was a friend of hers (the Territory was nothing if not a personal network), would look favorably upon an anthropologist going there. Owens responded positively to her telegram, and off I went by bus. It took two days.

The long bus ride from Darwin brought me to Alice Springs, in Australia's Centre, then in its gloriously crisp winter. Aboriginal people visibly walked the streets and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs office on Todd Street provided me with a permit to visit the Aboriginal communities of Papunya and Yayayi. Unknown to me, this office was still abuzz with the changes of its transition from its operation as the 'Welfare Branch' and policies of directed assimilation to a different emphasis on 'Aboriginal self-determination' as the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. My permit still needed approval by the Aboriginal Village Council. I stayed in a bed and breakfast place on the south side of town, feeling my way through Australia's mores and customs, waiting for permission to do research, to live with Aboriginal people. Alice was not yet the tourist center it has become, and certainly not cosmopolitan. I avoided the pubs, uncertain of what would be appropriate in this rough and ready environment – the Stuart Arms, the Riverside. I ate at the very basic Tiki Cafeteria, where baked beans on toast still prevailed for breakfast, visited the Arunta Bookshop (whose owner had known T.G.H. Strehlow), bought spiral notebooks at the Territory Business Supplies, and got acquainted with DAA officials in their shorts and long white socks.

I rented a Holden in Alice Springs for the 160-mile drive to Papunya. Two Aboriginal men, previously stranded in town and a bit under the weather from drinking, joined me for the ride. They spoke little but occasionally seemed to be making sure I didn't lose the way. Arriving at Papunya late in the afternoon, I learned that many of the Pintupi I hoped to meet had just visited to buy food at the local canteen and were on their way back to Yayayi. 'Just follow those tracks,' I was told, as friendly people pointed to a mystifying myriad of paths more or less heading west. I drove off, rather uncertain and fearful of being lost or broken down in the 'desert.' I was entirely unprepared for any eventuality. In a few miles, I caught up with one of the trucks, a white Bedford, which stopped as I approached. Several boys jumped out and clambered into my car, and urged me to follow the truck. I did so for a few miles, but the truck pulled away as my vehicle coughed to a



halt. The boys got out, unsurprised I guess, and began to walk on the track, leaving me to wait anxiously with one boy who spoke English, Paul Bruno. After a half hour or perhaps an hour, an old yellow Landrover – World War II vintage – jogged up with a bunch of young men, who offered to get me started again. So, I got to Yayayi. I parked and wondered what to do.

Paul directed me over to a caravan where the wife of the resident linguist from the Bible-translating Summer Institute of Linguistics offered to give me a cup of tea while I waited for the return of the community adviser, Laurie Owens. Owens was going to introduce me to the 'Village Council' and ask for their permission, but he had gone driving with some of the men. As it turned out, however, within a few minutes, Paul came back and told me, 'The old men are ready to talk to you.' This wasn't what I had expected, since I didn't know how I would communicate, but I had no choice. Stomach churning, I joined the older men, perhaps six or seven of them, near an open fire, and I tried to explain that I wanted to live at Yayayi for a year or two, to learn their language and how they had lived in the bush, how they lived now. After only a few moments of discussion, one of the men said, 'You can stay. No worries.' I was delighted, enormously grateful. I knew it was a privilege to be there, and I recognized that they had power over me.

Now that I had permission, I still had to return to Alice Springs and get the equipment for a long stay. Within a few days of arriving back, passing through the 'European' area of Papunya (which was spatially segregated, with the Whites living in more substantial houses and the Aboriginal people in transitional houses or tents), I wrote in my journal about hearing the White workers – 'old hands' who did seem to 'like' Aborigines and to care about them – discuss what they referred to as the 'half-caste problem' and to question Gordon Bryant's new administration of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and the 'new-made Aboriginal experts' of the emerging era. In a time of transition in Aboriginal affairs, marked by the change in title and administrative location from the Welfare Branch to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, the local public servants were not entirely pleased with the end of paternalism, and they clearly intended me to be addressed as a 'European' by their remarks. They expressed their concern with the way money was 'thrown around' and the change toward a policy of 'Aboriginal self-determination' that meant superintendents could only give advice. 'The Yayayi council truck is used like a taxi,' my notes record one Papunya administrator as telling me in a critical tone, 'which neither Laurie Owens nor Shorty Bruno (the Council leader) likes, but the young men don't listen



to either.' For these men, settlement life was spinning out of control.

The situation at Yayayi was tense. Paul Bruno, the English-speaking boy whom I met on my first drive to Yayayi, told me that the radical Aboriginal activist Neville Perkins had visited Yayayi and that 'Laurie Owens doesn't help the Pintupi but that Neville does.' (Perkins had arrived with a truck being delivered from a government grant, which local people saw as his doing, but in fact he was delivering one supplied by DAA.) Neville and Laurie had an argument, Paul told me. He reiterated that Laurie 'doesn't do anything for the Pintupi but Neville does.'² The old men, according to Paul, were thinking of kicking Laurie out and putting Neville in as Community Adviser. I realized something political was going on, and I thought I could hear Neville's words echoed in Paul's. I felt very ill at ease, a possible target of activist anger as a White interloper and also someone who had received some help from the actual target of Perkins's accusations. It is some indication of the mixing of cultural worlds that my notes record the conversation with Paul swinging abruptly to talk about a classical anthropological topic – *kurtatjas* (magical revenge killers, the 'featherfeet' killers made famous in Spencer and Gillen [1899]) – intended, I believe, to warn me of the dangers of living alone in an Aboriginal community:

They sneak up in the dark and you can't see their footsteps. If you kill a *kurtatja* you must pick up a stone and break it in your teeth; your head opens and you won't die. Otherwise that man still might kill you. Old men can see a *kurtatja* approaching – they can see inside and they sing and he can't harm them... [Paul Bruno, author's journal, Saturday, July 28, 1973]

But who was I to Paul, a newly arriving White person from America? Perhaps he sought common ground or some assurance from a presumed Christian, like the missionaries he knew? Shortly after this, Paul began to talk about God 'who is coming very soon. He will say to the dead, 'You aren't dead, only sleeping. Wake up now!' God gives people a chance, and if they don't take it, he might punish them.' 'God made everything,' Paul said, 'me, you, the earth, the trees. He sees everything, even in the dark. Some of the old men tell me not to believe... but I do.' Possibly called to witness here, I was silent – neither a believer, nor a Christian. I didn't claim my Jewish heritage either, nor did I try to think much about the relationship of Yayayi people to the Lutheran Church. As a young man, I was far more comfortable, a few weeks later, when Jeffrey James Tjangala told me he agreed with the American Vietnam Veteran he had met a year earlier: 'the whole world is our church.'



Dangerous Words: Under Local Power

Yayayi was a fairly remote place, a windmill and tank providing water for about 300 Pintupi-speaking people who had moved in May as a breakaway 'outstation' from the larger government-operated settlement of Papunya. Not the first such attempt on the part of these western migrants to form their own distinct community, this move from Papunya occurred under the more favorable auspices of policy, as the Labor Government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam put into practice its emphasis on 'Aboriginal self-determination.' Those known as 'the Pintupi' had become visible to the Australian public earlier, through much publicized patrols to contact them 'in the bush' in the early 1960s (Long 1964a, 1964b) and some sensationalist accounts of exploration by the famous anthropologist Donald Thomson (1962, 1964), so their move to Yayayi in May was able to gain attention as activists pressured health officials to provide services at the new outstation. By 1973, there was some support for the movement of small populations away from the large government-administered settlements that had been created as centers of assimilation and sedentarization, but this was a break with the past, part of a new order of Aboriginal Affairs.

There was inevitably much talk around the community and among the local 'European'³ schoolteachers and administrators about why the Pintupi had moved out. A story had appeared in the *Northern Territory News*, published in Darwin. According to this account, the Pintupi had moved because they attributed their deaths to sorcery by their neighbors. The people from other language groups at Papunya – usually referred to as Arrernte, Anmatyerre, Warlpiri, and Luritja – were angered by this attribution, and the Pintupi apparently desired to repudiate the public account in order to salvage their social relations. A meeting was hastily set up in Yayayi to deal with the issue. Someone had spoken to this reporter, people at the meeting reasoned, telling a 'lie story.' *Who* had spoken to the reporter? Who was responsible for this? Who had the right to tell such a story? 'We gotta send him away,' they proclaimed. This account exposed their community to recriminations from Papunya. Had some White person, they wanted to know, circulated this story? I racked my brain trying to remember if I had spoken to anyone, and if I might be exposed and ejected.

The message was clear enough to me that one should embed oneself in the local community and have little to do with other Whites. Later, I realized more clearly how very careful Aboriginal people are themselves about representing other people's stories (see Myers 1986b), no doubt in recognition of



being accountable for how one's actions affected others. Fear is a powerful agent of learning. At Yayayi, there were no government agents or police, as there were at large settlements, and therefore no authorities who might defend one's right to speak freely. So I came to understand the implications of speaking on someone else's account, of having the right to represent, and the accountability of doing so. This was a lesson about the circulation of knowledge and the freedom of representation that I never forgot. I said nothing, fearing even to write down anything.

So, in the context of a change in Australian government policy towards one of encouraging 'Aboriginal self-determination,' local Aboriginal people – my research subjects – could decide the terms under which I conducted research in their communities. At Yayayi, although teenagers wore denim jackets decorated with the words 'Make Love, Not War,' the talk was of 'Black Power.' Neville Perkins had even threatened to have the well-liked missionary linguist Ken Hansen, for example, sent away. It was a 'new government,' people said, and Whites must 'help' Aborigines. I understood this obligation as a serious practical condition, and an ethical one that I, who came of age on the politicized North American campuses of the 1960's, accepted.

Social Science and the Politics of Representation

What has come to be known as the 'politics of representation' (Holquist 1982, Myers 1986b) was (and remains) constantly a question posed to those of us non-Indigenous people involved with Aboriginal Studies. The question was developed in the wake of Black Power movements, by Foucauldian and post-colonial critiques made by many Aboriginal people, as well as by our own students seeking to delineate an ethical path of what I will call 'knowledge production.'

When I was still training as a graduate student, the dominant discourse for the ways in which anthropologists guided their research was (as Marcus noted in 1998) still 'rapport.' One sought rapport with one's informants in order to establish relationships of trust from which ethnographically valid information could flow. This imagines, of course, a kind of relationship between researcher and subject. It also assumed a separation between the world of the subject and the professional world of anthropological writing, one that typically conceived of the anthropologist as the producer of knowledge. The work of methodology was to remove subjective bias from this. By the late 1960s, this was no longer really possible. The essentially political potential of



knowledge and social science research were issues widely circulated among anthropologists in an era that had seen the scandals of academic research in Southeast Asia leading to the destruction of local people and in which anthropologists attempted to distance themselves from colonial practices (see Hymes 1969). While the scandals of the use of anthropological knowledge against the subjects, unearthed by Wolf and Jorgensen (1970), caused an uproar, and led to a professional ethics aimed at protecting subjects, the form this should take locally – in what terms ethics might be practiced – remained utterly abstract. These abstractions, frequently prioritizing the researcher's centrality, ironically have the likelihood to perpetuate boundaries between 'us' and 'them' as well as to continue an ethnocentrism that undervalues local perspectives.

To explain this, I need to step back slightly and relate the moral significance of being a resident at Yayayi to that of broader political issues, to incorporate, as Pintupi people, did the local and world-system dimensions of my presence. Known to themselves as *Yarnangu* ('people') or *Wati Maru* ('black people') sometimes as *Pintupi* (using one name of their language), and by others as 'Aborigines,' the people I will refer to as 'Pintupi' are Fourth World peoples (Graburn 1976; Paine 1984). This analytic formulation refers to a particular structure of social life, of Indigenous people encompassed in dominant nation-states of a different culture. Their fundamental condition of being, as I see it, is that they – in many ways like the central figure of Frantz Fanon's (1968) famous *Black Skin, White Masks* – are people who must necessarily act through or in the face of dominant representations by others. The *Northern Territory News* experience shows how much this defines, as well, the awkward position of the anthropologist and his or her writing.

But let me turn back to the more quotidian dimensions of my life at Yayayi. After the difficulties of finding a place, I knew how much of a privilege it was to participate with Indigenous people in their lives, such a privilege that I knew I had to work continuously to maintain it – just as my fellow residents had constantly to reproduce or sustain *their* relations to others. Insofar as the newly elected Australian Labor Party's policy of supporting 'Aboriginal self-determination' gave some Aboriginal people the chance to live in small remote communities significantly under their own direction, I lived there in terms defined more by my hosts than had typically been true of researchers in the past. I was subject to local expectations of comportment, to the claims and concerns of my fellow residents, and their broad expectation – partly articulated in the context of the political struggle against White domination



and partly articulated through the continuing value of Indigenous norms – that I should ‘help’ Aboriginal people.

The power of this formulation, I eventually came to realize, was that it synthesized *local* cultural understandings with the growing Indigenous political activism more broadly afoot in Australia. What living in a remote community taught me, however, was the local resonance and expectations embedded in this formulation – and the basis for recognizing the forms of Indigenous political action past and present. With the passage of time and history that separates me from my fieldwork, I see that I did not understand very clearly my own historical location and the field of action in which I was located. Nor did I know how to relate myself to my position in a field of action I hardly recognized.

Empirical Findings, Theoretical Implications

The empirical discoveries of my dissertation research were (1) that Western Desert land tenure was better understood as organized through a non-unilineal rather than patrilineal framework of membership (emphasizing choice and multiple pathways to ‘ownership’ on the Melanesian model), (2) that ‘bands’ were better understood as changing and temporary aggregations of people from within a region and not as permanent groups, (3) that social action was organized through formations of social personhood defined in emotional rather than jural terms (see Myers 1976, 1979, 1982), and (4) that authority was legitimated through ‘looking after’ subordinates. In the late 1970s, I thought that the empirical demonstration of the multiple bases of landownership was an essential contribution in support of more adequate models of Aboriginal Land Rights legislation. At the same time, I intended the critique of the band model of hunter-gatherer sociality, emphasizing both a regional system articulated through processes of exchange and a system of social production, to speak against the narrow consideration of foragers as utterly determined by their environment. Rather, these people, I showed, had a culture that they actively produced and reproduced (Myers 1986a) and which could be imagined to structure its own future. In this framework, land was not just the ecological space of foraging theories but the very medium through which social relationships could be articulated.

The study of ‘landownership’ was inseparable from my life in the community. I came to regard the endpoint of analysis not as understanding ‘bands’ and ‘hunter-gatherers’ but as understanding a particular logic of sociality in which relationships to place and people were embedded. My analysis



was not simply identical with the cultural concepts through which Pintupi people articulated their world. Indeed, these concepts were imbricated in the practical experience of everyday life which emphasizes sustaining extensive dyadic relatedness among individuals. Eventually finding my way back to Lévi-Strauss (1962, 1966) and Mauss (1979, 1990), I argued (Myers 1988c, 1993) that this logic of sociality and personhood was organized in processes of exchange that produced (or 'nurtured') social persons who were identified and distinguished from each other in a broader system of social life that had a significant resemblance to what Lévi-Strauss had understood by totemism but which was built out of local concerns with the management of human autonomy through the life-cycle. Lévi-Strauss (and others) imagined that these 'structures' were mental frameworks of classification, and that their denial of history would lead to their collapse with contact. Sahlins's brilliant attempts (1981, 1985) to rescue structure and action were very appealing to me. My experience of Pintupi sociality was of practice, of people engaging others through a model of activity that incorporated them into the logic. So, for example, Pintupi understood their White 'bosses' on the model of indigenous authority as people who were obliged to 'look after' (*kanyininpa*) them. Coresidents were 'one countrymen' (literally, 'people from one camp') who had obligations to share with each other. To some readers, an account of this structure (or any structure) has an apparent closure to it, and this would seem to be the implication of critiques of 'Aboriginalism' – the focus on traditional Aboriginal culture – by scholars like Cowlishaw (1986). However, the extension of these constructs into everyday life and my very learning of them in practice offer a different view. The political relations that go into the production of these constructs make them more than simply artifacts of exoticism.

The Field of the 'Field': Precipitating the Local – 'Countryman'

People's struggle to sustain their shared identity, their kin-obligated relationships to others, in a field of competing demands was a pervasive part of my experience at Yayayi under the political regime of self-determination. Implicitly what the Yayayi people wanted of me was something more than the most obvious political claim of outsiders helping. Their expectations of my presence drew on their ideas about 'one countrymen' (*ngurra kutjungur-rara*), those who share a camp. This was a term that was fundamental to my analysis of territorial organization as well as to my understanding of my role. As a person 'from one camp,' I was expected to participate in exchange with



other residents, to recognize them as *walytja* ('relatives') – to feel compassion for them, to acknowledge their identity – that is, to 'help them.' Being a *walytja* (or a one countryman) was not simply a matter of genealogy; rather, it was an achievement – a relationship accomplished through extended coresidence and exchange over time. One could *become* a 'relative.'

In local terms, as a resident of Yayayi, it was expected that I should conduct myself appropriately for one who shares a camp, as a 'one countryman.' I came to understand further that being a 'relative' meant also being accountable to those others. Over time, I think I earned my identification as a 'one countryman,' although it must always be renewed by return; indeed, such an identity as someone's 'one countryman' is not unambiguous even for Pintupi social actors. My research on land tenure did turn out to have usefulness for Aborigines after the passage of the Land Rights Act in 1976, but it was the overall situation of Aborigines and anthropology in Australia, as I have outlined it, that led me to accept a contract for advocacy work on a land claim with the Central Land Council in 1981–83.

Shifting Boundaries and Not Knowing the Future

By 1973, there was a growing awareness in Aboriginal communities that the boundaries between Aboriginal and Euro-Australian cultures were less distinct. Only a short time before, a scandal had erupted at Warburton Range Mission – where many Western Desert people lived – when a teenage girl turned up at the community, back from school, with a copy of an anthropological study of Warburton people that had photographs of various components of men's secret initiation ceremonies.⁴ The girl was speared in punishment for the transgression, and the men apparently swore to punish the anthropologist. This was an event of which I was aware, but I found it was significant at Yayayi. One of my closest friends there, Jeffrey James Tjangala, explained that I could come to ceremonies but I could take no photographs or notes. These were limits I had to accept, and the ramifications of these changes abounded, registering the changing relationships between Aboriginal people and whites, between local knowledge and professional discourse.

On one visit to Alice Springs early in my fieldwork, I met an Arrernte man who was related to some of the people I knew at Yayayi. This man was very concerned and terribly frightened because – as he told me – he had recorded important men's ceremonial songs for the South Australian anthropologist Charles Mountford some years earlier. He believed these were about to be released on record, but he had no right to disseminate them. What would





happen to him when men held him responsible for this desecration? The penalty was supposed to be death. Could I help him stop the release? Although I was only 25 or 26 years old, with no status generally, to this man I represented something more, as a White man to whom he could speak. Did he think I knew Mountford, then? Was the threat a real one? I didn't know if Mountford was actually releasing a record or if this man's singing was on it. I couldn't think of remedies that I could apply, but I took him to the Aboriginal Legal Aid Service in Alice Springs in the hope they could bring about a solution that acknowledged the real threat of transgression.

Why did this man sing the songs for Mountford? Perhaps, he didn't imagine that the two worlds – of White and Black – would come together or that the knowledge circulating in the White sphere would become accountable to his compatriots. There had already been complaints about inappropriate exposure of designs and stories in the acrylic paintings beginning to emanate from Papunya, and more would come.⁵ The presence of multiple regimes of value was a central feature of life, creating opportunities for creativity and advantage as well as contradictions, conflict and threat.

When the small caravan that was my living quarters stood at the southern edge of the Pintupi community at Yayayi, the men who worked with the acrylic painting cooperative of Papunya Tula Artists used it for storing their completed paintings. To avoid damage from the elements until the art adviser arrived, men would deposit their paintings in my caravan. These paintings at the time included a range of ritual elements and designs, and the painters sought to keep them safe from rain and from inappropriate viewing by women and children. Yet, when asked, the painters were not concerned about the paintings being seen by women elsewhere. How could they send their paintings, representations of esoteric knowledge, where they might be seen by women? If they were shown in Darwin, they said, there would be no problem; the women there won't know what they are. What was 'secrecy,' then? I guessed that they imagined no harm could come in the local economy of knowledge.

One could understand this story as detailing the particular problem of a local tradition's circulation in modernity. But, it seems to me more plausible to recognize that the workings of Indigenous sociality were not intrinsically less fraught in situations defined by their own activities. If it can be problematic (or dangerous) to 'show' sacred designs in a painting for exhibition or sale, it can be and often is so in ritual. The questions of who might have the right, or the dominant rights, to 'show' a ceremony were often subject to





negotiation or challenge, as performances of shared identity. Indeed, I had learned this was built into the very structure of ownership of ceremonies and sacred sites. This has been the problem with establishing finite lists of 'traditional owners' in many cases under land rights legislation: people do not own them to the exclusion of others, but in company with them. Witnessing a man speared for visiting a distant site without consulting or waiting for his co-owners, I presumed that this was similar to the 'trouble' faced by another man at Yayayi for the painting of Dreaming stories which he owned with others. How would one go about getting their permission? Could one always be certain of having agreement? This situation defined exactly, in my experience, the diplomacy required to carry out any action, always susceptible to being judged as an intrusion on the rights or autonomy of another. People who regard their prerogatives as being transgressed are angry at being seen as 'not relatives,' as having their shared identity denied or neglected. I have come to understand this as a fundamental condition of action, as an objectification – a materialization of a person – that is exposed to judgment, response and moral evaluation by others, without the superarching authority that guarantees its acceptance.

Such considerations emerged, interestingly, in recent legal cases over cultural property issues in Arnhem Land – important because cultural property claims are attending precisely to the claims around the boundaries between



Euro-Australian and Indigenous protocols. In one case, for example, the North Australian bark painter Terry Yumbulul maintained that he was harmed by a usage of his Morning Star painting design that he had not authorized. (He had received much criticism from his community for allowing the painting to be reproduced on the Australian ten-dollar note.)

This was not a simple case of copyright. Although the judge decided that Yumbulul had in fact given authorization, at the same time he found that rights over the design did not involve claims of copyright residing in Yumbulul's creativity; nor did the judge recognize the customary rights of the clan to this design. 'Australia's copyright law,' he wrote, 'does not provide adequate recognition of Aboriginal community claims to regulate the reproduction and use of works which have essentially a community origin' (Yumbulul vs. Reserve Bank of Australia, 1991 IPR 490). The implication of cases like this is not just that a changing sociocultural environment wreaks havoc on traditional practice. Rather, the cases illustrate that there can be no final or assured ethical position: One acts with the expectation that others will be involved, in such a fashion as to limit the possible sense of exclusion. An ethics of listening – of constant attention to the possible claims of others, of recognition for their claims – is required.

Authenticity and the Traffic in Culture

I have written elsewhere (Myers 1991, 2002) about the 'shock' of seeing acrylic paintings exhibited in New York and how this led me to an interest in the circulation of culture. One can easily propose the mechanisms of such a study, but the study of the art world of Aboriginal acrylic paintings has not simply been an exercise of personal imagination. My concern followed from the fundamental condition that Indigenous people in Australia, as in other places, have been compelled to live through the representations of others. In this last part of my essay, I want to consider how the study of Aboriginal acrylic painting has influenced my orientation to this defining problem of Indigenous life.

In my view, 'art' has offered a medium through which they have been able to make themselves visible on their own terms, more or less, intervening in the representations circulating 'about' them. But while I have come to understand that their interventions cannot be understood apart from the historical materiality of painting and of 'art' (e.g., institutions and properties), these interventions also rely on local understandings of circulation, clarified



in my previous ethnography. If there is anything to realize from my account and from my experience, it is that anthropologists working with Indigenous people should be wary about substituting their/our judgments for local people's own political claims. To be an 'expert' is seductive; it also threatens both to transform the field in which Indigenous people and we live and also to impose an external logic on local understandings. Who, for example, would have accepted at face value Aboriginal expectations that such traditional practices – of giving, of making oneself known – would have any effect on the modern state? Who would have imagined that the Aboriginal sacred would succeed in making its presence felt at the heart of the Australian nation (see Gelder & Jacobs 1998)? And yet – through complex conjunctures of history and structure – they have. Thus, I want to explain why I have tried to tack away from the treatment of Aboriginal people as victims, as recipients of the actions of others, and towards the explication of their actions as they understand them. When they act within the frameworks of Western institutions and discourses, such as those of the arts, this has required taking local points of view seriously.

Central to my understanding of Pintupi cultural life was the idea that Pintupi constructed shared identity *not in abstraction*, but through concrete practices of exchange, co-participation through exchange – in ramifying levels of organization: from camp exchange of services, food to exchanges of knowledge and rights to the prerogatives associated with 'country' (a gloss for named places, sacred sites, etc.). In this framework, named places (sacred sites) were objectifications of shared identity, forms outside the self around which a variety of persons constituted themselves as related. These objectifications produced 'one countrymen' as those who shared rights in places that correspondingly must be understood as objectifications of shared identity. I had found that new places had come into being, new stories and linkages attached to them, in objectifying shared identity through the medium of place.

In the local framework, I could argue that acrylic paintings as art objects were such a form of objectification, opening out to those who receive them as something like 'gifts' around which levels of shared identity might be formulated. This is why the objects bear traces of these identities as they circulate. And this is why they might be considered appropriately subject to concerns about cultural property, despite being sold, and also why discussions about these properties are also partly negotiations of history and relationship.



These questions have long been at the heart of discussions of Western Desert acrylic painting. The so-called 'Western Desert art movement' had begun in 1971, only two years before I arrived to do research in one of its central communities. It began with the deployment of iconographic images used in ritual, body decoration, cave painting, and so on – an iconography related indexically to the sacred traditions of the ancestral Dreaming, which gave the Aboriginal cultural world its meaning and shape – into acrylic paintings on 2-dimensional particle-board or canvas. This 'Aboriginal art' acquired status as 'fine art' with a much-publicized show in 1988 at the Asia Society Gallery in New York, entitled 'Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia' (see Sutton 1988). At the time, there was a critical debate about the implications of this emergent form and the circulation of Indigenous culture through this new framework (Fry & Willis 1989; Benjamin 1990). Was the form and its circulation simply or largely a (Primitivist) appropriation of Indigenous culture, draining of its vitality and redirecting it to sustain Western preoccupations?⁶ Or was it an authentic form of Indigenous cultural expression?

The particular stakes of Aboriginal painting's circulation – whether it was just an epiphenomenon of Euro-Australian fantasies, desires, and tastes – was, for me, a pressing question to address, especially considering the repeated insistence of my painter friends that the paintings were, as they said, *tjukurr tjana* (from the Dreaming). Further, it became necessary to conceive of the engagement of critical discourses with their subject as more than the encounter between reified cultural categories (our category of 'art' and the Aboriginal category of 'The Dreaming'), but as forms of human activity that could be in dialogue.

In considering the circulation of the paintings, I had to develop a different point of departure – namely, one that did not posit the *stability* of ethno-aesthetic conventions. Indeed, wouldn't new forms in any tradition necessarily have to invent their audience? To start with this condition would require accepting objects as moving between and among participants who obviously do not share a framework of evaluation.

There were many implications of my change of attention. First, it involved recognizing the possible salience of 'art.' Indeed, I came to understand not only that the discourses of 'art' had become an important arena in which images and identities of Aboriginal people were produced, transformed and circulated, but also that this broader 'intercultural' field itself had a shape that should be studied. Second, the coexistence of different cultural understandings and judgments was central to this field. That is to say, it was a 'field'



of cultural production in which attempts to evaluate Aboriginal paintings were not simply or necessarily ethnocentric and needing to be refuted. Rather, art criticism and other forms of judgment had fundamentally to be engaged as cultural activities with their sources of power, but not necessarily as monolithic. Third, beyond castigating unresponsive Western critics for 'ethnocentrism,' insufficient attention had been given to understanding the processes at work in the larger, receiving society. Some of us began to take steps towards considering the appropriating tradition more problematically, either through examining critically the cultural baggage of Modernist categories in the art world or even with the goal of recognizing the potential of Aboriginal and other non-Western work to challenge the categories of the artworld within its own terms.

With the turn of these histories, I was implicated within the very field of my study. Deeply invested in the Indigenous community's activities, I was irritated by judgments about Indigenous cultural production that I regarded not only as uninformed but also, in a way, as trespassing on my terrain. But, to respond was also to trespass on the terrain of art critics, and to recognize that *our* perspectives and representations were fundamentally part of the phenomenon of acrylic painting. In this situation, however, my participation – drawing on my knowledge of Indigenous understandings of their painting – was possible in a distinct way, since the paintings were *meant* to circulate.

Thus, participation as an anthropologist in the terrain of art criticism allowed for a very different relationship to those who had been my subjects, a relationship of collaboration (or if one follows Marcus, 'complicity'). My knowledge of local culture and also of the categories of cosmopolitan art theory were significant. I have also found that my knowledge of the history of the painting movement and of the painters could be useful, even to Indigenous curators.

Such movements in personal trajectory do not happen in a simple fashion. In my case, my movement towards what French filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch called a 'shared anthropology' (Rouch 1995 [1973]) and a concern with 'culture-making' (Myers 1994) was deeply affected by the insights and anthropological work of my wife, Faye Ginsburg (1991, 1993), on media-making as a form of cultural activism. I was similarly directed by my friend Terry Turner's (1980) rejection of the politics of cultural survival and his emphasis on culture as a form of self-production. In this way, I have tried to struggle against what I think has been the mind-forged manacle of Indigenous studies – the captivity of 'tradition' through which Indigenous



cultural expression is judged against external standards of 'authenticity.' Culture is always in the making and re-making. Somehow, it is imagined by many, that the adoption of Western media or interventions in Western discourses are necessarily collapses of the 'alterity' that made Indigenous people anthropologically valuable. This would be, I think, a tragic stance for anthropologists. Not only does it betray the genuine struggles of Indigenous people to forge cultural futures, but it also ignores the complex and unknown logics that inform the emergent cultural forms they make and the human activity of making culture – and this should be the genuine object of anthropological study. For both Faye's work with Indigenous video makers and mine with acrylic painting, the significance of these new mediations lies as much in the materiality of their mediation as in their form (Ginsburg 1994). In this, I believe, the inspiration comes from recognizing the perspectives of cultural producers themselves, and the anthropologist may participate in the processes by which Indigenous cultural producers seek to engage with the world around them.

As I described in the first part of this essay, I learned from my earlier fieldwork that it was typically through exchanges of what Pintupi circumscribe in the notion of 'country' (*ngurra*) that objectifications of local identities – as different, autonomous, or similar, as 'we mob' – are produced and realized in indigenous contexts. I had written my first book with the goal of demonstrating the persistence of these frameworks in the contemporary outstations social fabric and their understanding of their relationship to the state. However, facing the circulation of acrylic paintings made me realize that the heritage of these practices and understandings is reorganized in relation to the new identities and contexts established through the intrusion of Euro-Australian settlement. In their circulation beyond their communities of production, acrylic paintings carry many of the local understandings I have delineated as they articulate new relationships of power and self-revelation.

In the early phase of acrylic painting's invention in Papunya and then Yayayi, many local painters understood themselves to have 'given' [*yungu*] something of distinctive value 'to Canberra' – to an entity they understood somewhat unclearly as 'the government.' This giving – which is, from the point of view of exchange, at once a declaration of one's own value and also an engagement with the recipient – represented the insertion of the paintings in an existing (but problematic) flow of goods, money, and services between (these) Aboriginal people and the state. The makers of the paintings understood themselves to be 'giving' their culture, and they believed that these



objectifications of their culture were in themselves moving to recipients, efficacious performances of an identity and rights that the viewer/recipient should recognize. This scenario of acrylic painting replicated that of the famous Yirrkala bark petition, sent to the Australian government in 1963 as evidence or proof of Yolngu identity with their land on the disputed Gove peninsula (see Morphy 1992; Williams 1986).

The circulation of acrylic paintings was not (and is not) contained easily within what I would now call a single 'regime of value.'⁷ They were neither simply commodities nor fully sacred objects. At its beginnings, in the context of Yayayi and Papunya, painting was initially inserted into the discourse and practices of 'work' – where the claims for compensation were connected to long-prevailing Aboriginal associations between ritual and 'business' as the activity that makes the world go round.⁸ This represented a weak articulation of what might be called a revelatory regime of value with a different political economy of 'work.' Eventually, painting became more fitted to other regimes of value organized around the concept of 'art' and 'commodity,' on the one hand, and 'identity' and the 'politics of indigeneity,' on the other. These shifts were not accidental, I have argued, but represent changing relationships and projects between the Australian State and segments of the Aboriginal population and Euro-Australian population.

There is a larger point of these details. That is, accepting as fundamental the local understanding of painting as involved in some kind of exchange, I could see the creative cultural and social activity of the art movement – in providing valued tokens of Indigenous value around which new identifications could take place. In this light, the supposed 'boundaries' between cultural traditions become utterly problematic – perhaps Western essentializations.

The world of global circulation, of cultural movement, might be less a matter of simple commodification and more one with a local look – an Indigenous exchange, capable of creatively building new subjects and networks of identity. Thus, my second monograph traced a cultural intervention that has become significant in the formation of Aboriginal consciousness. In the development of the acrylic painting movement, I think it is vital to recognize the ways in which it has become a medium for some form of connection between Euro-Australian and Indigenous Australian, but also a medium for repairing the historical divide between urban Aboriginal people and those from remote Australia.

I showed how acrylic painting began in 1971 at Papunya as an assertion of indigenous culture against the experience of assimilation at this settlement.



It gained support from sympathetic sectors of the Australian public service who were willing to see Aboriginal culture as a basis for economic development and for a cultural pride they believe necessary for any development to occur. In this assertion of a continuing Indigenous presence, however, the circulation of acrylic paintings displayed not only cultural authority, but also sovereignty.

Artistic *recognition*, in the form of increasing sales and commissions as well as developed through exhibitions in venues of high cultural value in Australia and overseas, allowed this particular objectification of Indigenous culture to become a foundation for further action. The recognition of acrylic painting by the state, its incorporation into national collections and into the forecourt of the new Australian Parliament House was not simply a one-way appropriation. In 1987, to take an important example, Michael Nelson Tjakamarra was able to protest the change in government policies by threatening to destroy the mosaic made from his much publicized design, drawing on his own mythological traditions, of a Dreaming story that narrated the settlement of dispute between quarreling groups. Such action, in front of the nation's cameras and written media, projected Aboriginal political consciousness – one not restricted to remote Aboriginal communities – even though Tjakamarra comes from such a community himself. Rather, the paintings of traditional communities have come to take on a far larger cultural and political load as part of Indigenous cultural capital. The meaning of circulation, restriction, and contestation remain part of the potential of these objects and their exchange. There are many histories – indigenous, personal, and intercultural – that can be brought into visibility and renegotiated through the circulation and recognition of this art.

Thus, I have drawn attention to what I think is fundamental about Aboriginal painting as an objectification, about its capacity to bring into association social actors across a wide spectrum. Unexpectedly to some of us, these paintings have operated in a way resonant of the effects of traditional ritual objects that – as I argued in my ethnography of Pintupi people – provide a framework for people to recognize their shared identity.

My point is that the circulation and presence of acrylic painting cannot necessarily be contained within the logic of commodification. The apotheosis of Aboriginal art has provided a space of dialogue, contestation, social alliance, and even a partial consolidation of an Aboriginal regime of value.



Whither Anthropology?

I am insisting, then, on anthropology's future drawing on a past that has emphasized ethnographic interest in local particularities – which allows for recognition of what is different in what appears to be familiar. That objects mediate social relationships – what I take to be a predominant Pintupi view of circulation – has merit in helping us understand what has transpired with their paintings. Equally, I have come increasingly to find a place for anthropology in its participatory (or shared) practice, an approach that accepts culture making – or cultural production – as the human phenomenon on which we should focus our attention.

When I returned to Australia in 2000 for a retrospective exhibition of Papunya Tula Artist masterpieces at the prestigious Art Gallery of New South Wales, I brought photographs with me from the 1970s, and I showed them to the men who had come to make a sand painting for the exhibition. We could reminisce about their deceased parents, and their friends. The knowledge I had about their families and their histories was now, for them, a basis of my continuing relationship and also a resource for their future. During the same exhibition, I was very struck by Indigenous scholar and activist Marcia Langton's response to implied criticism of the exhibition – as 'disrespectful' for the older men. Indigenous documentaries, such as Leah Purcell's (2002) 'Black Chicks Talking,' regularly counsel formerly unidentified 'Aboriginal' people to 'seek out those old people' – to make contact with these traditions and stories as a means to discover themselves.

Such acts of translation, almost anathema to the anthropologist whose descriptions specify so carefully the particular social and cultural context, seem to be the future of Aboriginal cultures, translations that break down or make porous the boundary of cultural difference. Yet, this is the emerging cultural world with which younger scholars are coming into contact. But further, this is the cultural world that Aboriginal people are making. This discursive space of 'Aboriginality' is very different from the way in which I in the 1970s witnessed the members of a different generation moiety approaching strangers with their spears in hand.

This space of Aboriginality should be the object of our study now. As Marx presciently said, people do not make history always in the times and places of their own choosing. The same may hold for making culture. It may not be made now so much in local communities, but through various media – art, video, music, radio – and institutions in which Indigenous people collaborate with others and in which the raw materials have histories





originating outside Indigenous cultural traditions. Even relationships to land are now multiply mediated, through institutions such as land councils. Such transformations do not signal the end of Indigenous life. What they suggest is that anthropologists should be interested in understanding the field(s) in which Aboriginal culture circulates now.

This sort of project, I believe, has a participatory component, a complicity that must be respected. The forms of contemporary culture-making have a complex relationship to previously existing boundaries, drawing together at times in varying networks constellations of people with shared interests – in art, in music, in film. The agency of these objects is collaborative.

For me, at least, delving into art history and the art market in the West did not lead away from classical anthropological issues and subjects, but to their reinvention. In one sense, my research has tried to show that cultural production continues to exist, and that, with careful attention, we may find a vibrant life of indigenous logics within the heart of the dominant forms. But I have come to realize that in documenting the emergence of new realities and sustaining the possibility of alternatives, we support their response to an assimilating logic that insistently tells them they must become the same. In the face of this, attention to projects of cultural creativity is a worthy direction. In this project, at least with the Indigenous people I have known, I believe it is possible to have a ‘shared anthropology’ – one in which we can contribute both to the anthropological project and those of our subjects. The prospective disappearance of Aboriginal people and/or their culture is the specter against which they have struggled for at least a century. That they have survived is their watchword, and continued visibility is central to their existence. In this sense, the continued creation of culture is an emancipatory project that anthropologists should recognize.

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Notes

1. *Milirrpum vs. Nabalco Pty Ltd* (1971) 17 FLR 141. See Williams 1986 for more discussion.
2. A nephew of the very well known Aboriginal activist and leader Charles Perkins, Neville Perkins had family origins in the Alice Springs area, but had grown up down South and was a student at the University of Sydney.





3. The category 'European' was used particularly by whites to refer to themselves, as distinct from 'Aboriginal' people, and in that sense its primary referent was white Australians. The local Aboriginal English referred to 'walypalas,' as distinct from 'blakpalas' and (sometimes) 'yellafellas' or 'half-castes.'
4. The book was R. Gould's (1969) *Yiwara: Foragers of the Australian Western Desert*.
5. For a discussion of these problems with the exposure of secret material in paintings, see Kimber 1981, 1985, 1995; Myers 2002).
6. I have discussed these questions and criticisms in depth elsewhere, both as they relate to Aboriginal art and their sources in the discussion of 'primitivism' (see Myers 1991, 1994, 2002).
7. This is a concept I borrowed from Appadurai (1986) and to some extent from Thomas (1991).
8. In much of Central Australia, 'business' is the English word used to refer to ritual, marking at once its importance as a comparative value and its significance as a kind of productive activity.

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Film

Black Chicks Talking. 2002. Director Brendan Fletcher and Leah Purcell. 52 minutes.