Merely being dark-skinned is enough to raise questions like ‘Where are you from?’ or ‘Do you identify?’—as a public servant of Indian origin cheerily informed me when I was mistakenly led to him as a potential interviewee. This person had evidently added to someone’s perception of a public service representative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, even though he was not one. Conversely, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander public servant can be perceived to stand for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people without any action or acknowledgement on his or her part. But it is only when considered from the perspective of others that descriptive representation is passive. From the perspective of those who do it, descriptive representation is not passive. If someone self-identifies, even though that act is private, he or she has participated actively in their representation. Given the interviewees’ general belief that most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants self-identify, most must bring personal agency into the earliest moment in the construction of their representative identity within the public service.

This important observation calls into question the passive/active distinction in the theory of representative bureaucracy. Bureaucratic representatives are always active agents, in one way or another—never really ‘just bums on seats’, despite the preoccupation with numbers in Indigenous employment policies.
As more-or-less active agents in their public service destiny, from where do bureaucratic representatives draw their authority? The sources of their authority are less obvious than those of electoral representatives, for whom candidate-selection and voters make it very clear, or those of official government representatives instructed by their minister or department. Having an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity is one source of authority for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander public servant. Remember we are interested in representing that is informal, extempore and unsanctioned; this representation draws on a loose sense of authority and engenders a loose sense of accountability. The ambivalent invitation of Indigenous public sector employment programs makes the public service a rich site to study informal representation. How does one accept an invitation when it is unclear how that acceptance will be valued? An ambivalent invitation might provoke an ambivalent response. After self-identifying, an individual might draw on his or her identity in other ways. To accept the invitation is to enact a representative identity through ordinary moments in the working day, and embark on a course with no definitive end point. Acceptance may be conditional, circumstantial and momentary.

Self-identification is not passive, but it is a weak form of representation on its own—a toe in the water, a gesture towards, but not the full realisation of a representative role. To realise a representative role is to draw on one's identity more purposefully. Acceptance is like taking a swim in the sea. The procedure is unremarkable but by the end, you are changed. First, the invitee tests the water by self-identifying—it's just a tick in the box. If the invitee draws on that identity by speaking for others, he or she plunges in. The experience may be bracing or lukewarm. As quickly as the body finds out, it adjusts to new knowledge. Full immersion is not for everybody. But those who stroke buoyantly into the depths will be choosing from a repertoire of styles that merge so well with their work practice that they will in effect, with barely a ripple, have accepted the invitation to represent others.
A toe in the water: Depicting likeness

If I was talking to another Aboriginal person I would say my grandfather is [a language name], he was born on [a particular] mission and my grandmother was born in [another location] and taken to [a different] mission … But if I was talking to somebody that wasn’t of Aboriginal descent, I’d say I was born in [a capital city] but raised in [another state] and then spent from high school onwards in the Northern Territory.

Rose was speaking of the adjustments she made when explaining her identity in the social world. On recruitment to the public service, the first opportunity for interviewees to reveal their presence as the member of an Indigenous category was to tick the non-compulsory box in MyHR, the web-based personnel management system. The next opportunity was in annual reviews. This was how public servants indicated if they were Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, or ‘non-Indigenous’. Ticking one of the first three options generated their inclusion in the Indigenous employment statistics.

Of the 53 interviewees from senior levels in the public service, 50 had self-identified as a matter of personal policy for the duration of their employment. This chapter is mainly about these 50 self-identifying senior interviewees. Among them, 47 had identified as Aboriginal, two had identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and one had identified as Torres Strait Islander. Thirty-one of the 50 self-identifying senior interviewees were in the public service in 2007.

Why self-identify? ‘Because it’s who I am’ was a common reply: ‘I am Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander/both.’ Acknowledging their racial identity was the primary reason. Many nominated as a secondary reason to help build the quantity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, by confirming their presence in government.

Acknowledging race: ‘We’re never black enough’

Naming the place or language from which you are descended, if you know it, is a common part of communicating an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity. All but two of the 50 self-identifying senior interviewees knew and named their place and language of origin.
This also speaks of your family history, because the movements in that history will have framed your identity. Interviewees traced their families’ movements from their places of origin with clarity: they put names, times and historical contexts to the movements of their ancestors and the policies, intermarriages and employment opportunities that had built their identities. As for Rose, identities were not fixed but contextual and adjustable.

Table 3 distinguishes the 50 self-identifying senior interviewees by two criteria they presented as important: whether they were local to the Northern Territory in the sense of having an ancestral association with a Northern Territory place or linguistic group, and whether they or their antecedents had been removed or fostered as children. The interviewees tended not to apply the urban/remote distinction to themselves, even though they often applied it to their policy and program subjects. The urban/remote distinction is used in the table to highlight an important finding: although most interviewees were now the residents of urban centres, many of them had originated in the kinds of remote places where their policy and program subjects still lived.

Table 3: Experience of fostering/child removal by place of origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences of fostering and/or child removal</th>
<th>Place of origin</th>
<th>50 self-identifying senior interviewees</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Northern Territory (local)</td>
<td>Outside the NT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban centre</td>
<td>Regional/remote community</td>
<td>Urban centre</td>
<td>Regional/remote community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not fostered</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fostered—self</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fostered—family</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins not known</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s research.

Thirty-two of the 50 self-identifying senior interviewees were Northern Territory locals. More than two-thirds (22) were the descendants of linguistic groups from remote communities or regional towns. These interviewees were descended from the Dogaman and Jawoyn people of the Katherine area, the Tiwi, Gurindji, Mudbura, Malak Malak,
Wadjygin, Kungarakany and other language groups to the north, south, east and west of Darwin, and the Anmatjere, Luritja, Western Arrernte, Warlipi and Warumungu language groups from the desert. These Northern Territory locals also had secondary connections across north Australia stretching from Torres Strait to Broome in Western Australia. Kahlin Compound and later the Retta Dixon Home in Darwin, The Bungalow in Alice Springs and the Croker Island Methodist Mission featured prominently at various points in their family histories, where many interviewees’ grandparents or parents had been taken from remote communities or regional towns. Just under one-third (10) were descendants of the original inhabitants of the urban centres of Darwin and Alice Springs. Nine were descendants of Darwin’s ‘coloured mob’ as the practice of polyethnic intermarriage had led Darwin’s local language group, the Larrakia, and its extended families to call themselves in the 1950s and 1960s. These were part of strong urban-based networks. One of the 50 belonged to the Arrernte language group of the town of Alice Springs.

The other 18 were from outside the Territory: seven from Queensland, six from New South Wales and five from Western Australia. Unlike those of Northern Territory origins, those who came from elsewhere were evenly split across the urban/remote divides of their jurisdictions. None of these 18 interviewees had personally been fostered out of their families, but five had weathered the dislocations of such fostering in earlier generations. Only two of the 18 felt they lacked what one called the ‘cultural aspects’ of Indigeneity. The other 16 expressed a strong sense of attachment to their places of origin.

Whether interviewees came from the Northern Territory or elsewhere, most called on current experience of the connection with a place of origin that is characteristic of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity. Their stories of origin highlighted multiple identities. Nobody spoke of being just Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or even just both. Personal histories, ancestries and places were all-important details in their accounts. Most interviewees wished for the opportunity to communicate their origins more precisely than the website allowed: ‘I usually say Aboriginal and South Sea Islander, but they don’t have the space’, said Peggy. ‘We’re a mixture of Indigenous and European and the Asian side with their pearl divers and the fishermen’, said Edith of how family members described their identity. Historian Regina Ganter has documented stories showing
that ‘the north is full of people who still remember its polyethnic past, for whom being coloured is the fabric of identity’ (Ganter et al. 2006: 244) and who come to ‘private, intimate’ solutions for self-identification (2006: 241). The same can be said of many of the Top End participants, particularly the Larrakia who had endless stories about the coloured families in old Darwin.

Wanda had ticked the box for Aboriginality, although she said this was not her usual practice. She usually ticked ‘no’, hoping for the chance to nuance this bland statement of a complex past. ‘If it says: “Are you Aboriginal?” I tend to go, “No,”’ Wanda said. ‘But if it says, “Are you of descent?” I tick the box.’

Julia commented wryly that the identifier question did not allow her to refer both to her Indigenous descent and her ‘white side’. As she asked rhetorically in her interview:

> Why can’t you say I’m half white? Or I’m white? … My father is a white Australian. Yeah but what makes you that other part of you?

‘On the other hand,’ Julia said in a later conversation, ‘we’re never black enough.’

Not only did the process of self-identification collapse multiple origins into the categories Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, it then aggregated these categories into the generic identifier ‘Indigeneity’. The statistical reporting was interested in Indigeneity alone, which some interviewees felt glossed truer depicters of their identity.

**Building quantity**

Deborah self-identified so ‘we’re counted’. This was her antidote to the wiping out effects of colonial history. ‘To show we’re still here’, she said. Another interviewee argued that ticking the box marked out the good intentions of Aboriginal Australians towards the government. Other interviewees identified to create a stronger voice for Aboriginal people and Aboriginal policy problems. Judy ticked the box as her ‘contribution to Indigenous issues’, which she saw as helping create ‘a strong Indigenous collective voice in government’.
Carol had added herself to the Indigenous employment statistic because, she said, ‘it translates into money’, referring vaguely to population-based Australian Government funding distributions. Graeme explained: ‘I’m in an area where I’m relying on that data. I mean, if anything’s going to change or shift, we need baseline data to do it with.’ These interviewees relied on Indigenous employee statistics in their work. Others working in Indigenous recruitment and workforce development self-identified for similar reasons. Self-identifying bolstered arguments for the distribution of resources within the public service, which very senior public servants were well-positioned to prosecute.

Sophie was referring to the Commonwealth Grants Commission formula for allocating public money to the States and Territories when she explained:

> Blackfellas are worth more money in revenue to the Territory than non-Aboriginal people.

Indigenous people draw a greater per capita income into the Northern Territory than non-Indigenous people. This calculation draws on information in the Australian Census. Sophie ‘never had a second doubt that you fill that in. You say something.’ Sophie’s role in social policy had given her an intimate understanding of the potency of the Northern Territory’s Indigenous statistic as a fiscal argument.

In these accounts, to self-identify was to enlarge the Indigenous statistics. Self-identifying enhanced the arguments of these senior public servants for improved social and economic programs for Aboriginal people. These interviewees drew actively on the Indigenous statistics they had helped create when they argued for resource distributions favouring Aboriginal interests. For many, this higher purpose eclipsed their objections to the generic Indigenous identifier.

**Plunging in: Drawing on identity**

Testing the water begins the process of acclimatising. Now there may be a forward plunge. How are the currents, the saltiness and floating seaweed? Work settings, opportunities and relationships combined to shape the progressive enactment of more substantive representation among the interviewees.
All who self-identified serviced the Northern Territory Aboriginal population in some way. Of the 50 self-identifying senior interviewees under discussion here, 40 were working in jobs specifically targeting Aboriginal policies and programs in 2007. Of the remaining 10, nine had managerial or executive responsibility for Aboriginal policies and programs as part of a wider role or had worked in an Aboriginal-specific job in the past. The only interviewee among the 50 who had not worked in an Aboriginal-specific area planned to do so, and had taken on a voluntary role representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff interests.

Potent settings

The interviewees described hundreds of past and present public service jobs, but sifting through their talk drew out just four major work roles among the 50 self-identifying senior interviewees. These were building the Aboriginal presence, coordinating Aboriginal policy, facilitating partnerships with Aboriginal people and correcting Aboriginal behaviours that were seen as dysfunctional. Whether the interviewees who worked in these areas were most often in the field or deskbound, they were all engaged in intensive efforts to secure Aboriginal participation in the Northern Territory Government’s social and economic vision.

The largest group of 16, or nearly one-third of the self-identifying senior cohort, had all worked on Indigenous employment policies; building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence in government by advising on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruitment or supporting workforce development in health, education or other areas of service delivery. Few interviewees had not become involved in supporting Indigenous employment at some stage, but building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence in government departments had been the mainstay of these 16 interviewees’ careers.

The second largest group of 14 interviewees had largely formed their careers in policy coordination and advice, building their knowledge of social and economic policy and working across government or inter-governmentally. These were the more senior roles, in which some interviewees spoke of feeling strong personal accountability for the government’s performance locally and nationally.
In the next group, 10 interviewees mediated relations between the Northern Territory Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens by facilitating partnerships, governance arrangements and communications. These 10 interviewees drew on their connections to negotiate arrangements of various kinds between the government and Aboriginal communities.

Correcting Aboriginal behaviours was the fourth most populated field of work among the 50 self-identifying senior public servants. Under this theme, seven interviewees were primarily focused on bringing the most disaffected Aboriginal people into rehabilitative programs, whether that was in education, health, urban development, drug- or violence-related or prisoner services. These experienced operatives worked with local community organisations to bring Aboriginal constituents to the point of receiving services. Some were persuading others in government of the need for particular kinds of rehabilitative services and oversaw their delivery. Correcting Aboriginal behaviours—or corrective governing, as we shall later call it—was more significant in the larger group of 76 interviewees, given that a senior interviewee who did not self-identify, a number of non-senior interviewees and most of the Central Australian interviewees worked in this field.

The remainder of those who worked in Aboriginal-specific roles were involved in the direct delivery of health or education services or worked in cultural guidance as rangers or interpreters. I interviewed only a few of the many hundreds of teachers and assistant teachers, health workers, police aides and interpreters who lived and worked in remote communities, as these jobs tended to be non-senior.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the major work themes identified by the 50 self-identifying senior interviewees, including the one senior self-identifying interviewee who was not working in an Aboriginal-specific role.
We will return to these themes in the discussions that follow.

Moments of representation: ‘Sort of had to speak up’

Within these settings, Aboriginal senior public servants worked in relative isolation from each other. Those who were in the public service at the time of their interview were spread thinly across a dozen or so departments. A few worked together but many worked singly, mere specks in a vast sea in which a majority of non-Indigenous people were likewise representing their departments, divisions and branches as public servants do, marking out and targeting the unemployed, the disadvantaged, the remote-dwelling, the disengaged and/or unhealthy and/or uneducated.
The scarcity of Aboriginal people in public service divisions and branches intensified the opportunity for those present to do some kind of representing.

Lucy’s public service career was nearly as long as self-government. In the following passages, Lucy describes the difference that ‘being Aboriginal’ made in her job encouraging her people to comply with programs supporting economic productivity. Lucy confirmed the importance of understanding her work role when she began by observing:

People are restricted by their mandate for what they sort of do. Everything outside that might not be within scope.

Later in her interview, Lucy recalled occasions when she had advised non-Aboriginal colleagues on the conduct of dialogue with Aboriginal groups:

… when I’ve sort of had to sort of speak up and say well look, as an Aboriginal person you know this is what you need … to approach a certain group. So it’s knowing protocols and all of that sort of stuff that we’ve had, well you know, to be representative of.

If you were employed to do a job on the basis of your knowledge and connections as an Aboriginal person, it would not be considered unreasonable in the public service to draw on those credentials to offer advice on a matter pertaining to other Aboriginal people. This is especially so when your department has shown an interest in Aboriginal issues and has perhaps mentored you. But you would not have to ‘speak up as an Aboriginal person.’ Here is a moment of administrative discretion—Lucy’s discretion. To speak, in these circumstances, ‘might not be within scope’ because public servants get their ‘mandate’ from the programs under which they are employed. Programs rarely spell out how to conduct dialogue with Aboriginal people and if they do, the rules of conduct would not cover all circumstances. Lucy was there, present and available. How should she respond? ‘Sort of’ suggests her hesitancy to speak up, ‘had to’ her sense of feeling duty-bound to do so. ‘Had to sort of speak up’ expresses well the kind of representation with which we are concerned, not the official representation that is prescribed by a job description but the unofficial, discretionary, partial, subjective kind.
Behind Lucy’s sense of duty was all the weight of her kin-based, place-oriented and historically specific Aboriginality (she was working in her home town) and her identified presence in the public service. Perhaps she hesitated out of consideration of the ethics of public service. She may have asked herself if she was crossing a line by initiating this advice. Most likely, Lucy was hesitating over how ‘speaking up’ would commit her. She spoke, but perhaps wished herself free of the implicit expectation, brought on by her Aboriginal identity, that she do so. Perhaps it was her consciousness of an opportunity for some form of agency in the larger historic politics of Aboriginal affairs that lay behind her decision to speak, in spite of her diffidence.

Of the 50 self-identifying senior interviewees, it was only Harry who did not seek to represent Aboriginal interests in an active sense. Harry’s responsibility was to convey Aboriginal cultural information, and he saw it as an asset that ‘our family can’t establish any real ties’ to the Northern Territory region from which they knew they came. Harry could usefully ‘distance’ himself from his program clients, he said, in a way that ‘real ties’ would make difficult. Harry had made an asset of his lack of ‘real ties’, describing himself as self-identifying ‘to do my bit’. Although it worried him that a ‘white bureaucracy’ was in charge of his program, a sense of propriety made him reticent. As he did not speak of any instances in which he would or could make substantive representations, he has the status of being the only purely descriptive representative among those who self-identified. The other 49 drew substantively on their identity. This placed them in a much more committed position than the purely descriptive representative of political theory. To the extent that they drew on their identity, these 49 had moved towards accepting the invitation to contribute to the public service as Aboriginal people. They had accepted that their Aboriginality was inescapable when the subject matter was Aboriginal people. And their subject matter was nearly always Aboriginal people.

Subject matter Aboriginal people: Empathy, knowledge and connection

Interviewees explained that it was difficult not to draw on their experiences as Aboriginal people in the performance of tasks that affected other Aboriginal people. To perform such tasks seemed
to mobilise their Aboriginality in ways that seemed to be endemic to that identity, with some individual variations. The stories of three experienced senior public servants, Sarah, Sophie and Marcia, convey this point. These interviewees drew respectively on empathy for, knowledge of and connections to Aboriginal people in their work. Empathy, knowledge and connection characterised many other interviewees’ accounts; but Sarah, Sophie and Marcia exemplified a particular quality of acceptance. These women were tolerant of the bureaucracy, but not uncritically so. Nevertheless, their critiques did not hold them back from contributing their identities to the public service.

**Empathy**

As a child, Sarah had experienced the profound loss of her family and identity. Born ‘out bush’ and ‘sent, taken, I don’t know’ to a school just outside a regional town, she explained with great intensity the dilemmas of her legacy:

> Yes, I’ve got an education; yes, I have travelled; yes, I’ve been able to get employment but the flip side of that is I have lost my language, I have lost my culture, I have lost my family, I have lost my mother … my own identity.

In middle age, Sarah was still ‘learning the different ifs and whats’ of her second language, English. In her lifetime of acculturation, she had made contact with her family and country and was confident of locating bush ‘tucker’ in her birthplace and mother’s country.

Sarah’s job was to communicate issues of importance to Aboriginal people that were part of a Northern Territory governance agenda. Her responsibility was:

> To make sure that people in bush areas really understand, so when they do get a choice to decide … they’ve been well informed and they really understand the consequences.

Sarah evoked empathy as the basis of her contribution to government when she said:

> Put yourself for five minutes in their shoes and experience what they experience on a daily basis—then you can understand, then you can argue.
Was it to ameliorate the toughness in her life that Sarah had made it her mission to ‘make sure’ that bush-dwelling Aboriginal people were more visible and included in processes of government? Conversing on the smokers’ balcony of the plush building, her humble desk bordered by partitioning plastered with posters designed for bush communities, Sarah described herself as a ‘messenger between both worlds’:

I suppose I’m a bit of a messenger between both worlds to try and get people to understand which way, what Aboriginal people are really thinking.

Sarah’s self-characterisation was reminiscent of the earlier days when Aboriginal locals were the ‘eyes and ears’ of self-government. But now, more confident of her benefit to her workplace, Sarah was prepared to be more direct in her advice, to lock horns with colleagues—the ‘people’ in the quotation below—over their assumptions about Aboriginal people. Here, Sarah outlines her position on Aboriginal communication:

Too often, people think because there’s a group of Aboriginal people sittin’ there nodding their head, they understand. That’s not what they say. ’We hear you’, that’s what they say. At the initial meeting, it’s always, ’Yuwa. Yeah, we hear.’ They need time to be able to discuss what they heard. Too often people take the nodding of their heads on their first meeting as if they fully understand it. Which it isn’t.

Sarah was doing more than relaying messages. She was instructing colleagues on the conduct of dialogue with her people.

The American philosopher, Nancy Sherman, wrote an intriguing essay on the empathic imagination in which she concluded that ‘it may just be that it is only when we concretely imagine … others as rational agents alongside ourselves that we are really disposed to take seriously their claim’ (Sherman 1998: 114). Sarah drew on her empathy for those she perceived as left out in the cold, as she had been, from the decisions that affected their lives. Sarah was putting the case that bush-dwelling Aboriginal people, people whose rationality she could still imagine and took very seriously, were entitled to full information.
Sophie, a social policy executive, was born in a Top End regional town to a local Aboriginal mother and non-Aboriginal father. With her parents in low-paid jobs, Sophie had accepted a church scholarship to boarding school. Like some other interviewees, Sophie had risen to greater professional heights than her many siblings. She described herself as having come from a ‘family of workers’. As for other interviewees whose families still resided in remoter places, relatives from out of town frequently stayed at her house. ‘Like a bus load maybe sometimes’, she good-humouredly explained.

Sophie negotiated with external organisations, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, from her social policy ‘backroom’ role. She described herself as having:

… a good feel for what goes on, on the ground. I have enough networks on the ground, so that the advice I give is balanced with a view—several views, as well as the government’s objective.

Sophie saw herself as bringing the views of Aboriginal people—her own views as an Aboriginal person, and the views of others—into policy. She suggested that she was able to be phlegmatic, though, when her advice did not prevail over other priorities:

When you don’t see that being implemented or taken up by government you think, ‘Oh, I didn’t achieve much there’, but I think [my main achievement is] pursuing the line. I have a view that I’m achieving something by doing that, because you’re constantly giving the line on something, even if it’s rejected; you still give it because you think that it’s a better line to give.

Understanding that other interests can prevail in the opinion-laden world of bureaucratic argument, Sophie judged herself on her consistency and the extent to which she drew on the views of other Aboriginal people. She asked herself often:

Am I thinking adequately and laterally enough in order to improve the living standards, improve the social and economic outcomes for Indigenous Territorians? That is what really worries me.

For Sophie, the benefit of her presence was: ‘to influence by way of conversation, by way of knowledge’. In saying this, Sophie was espousing Phillips’ (1995) theory of the politics of presence, that to
populate institutions with people from certain groups would influence those institutions through a kind of osmosis. Sophie shows us in her interview that she chooses her moments wisely, allowing us a richer understanding of her personal agency in that osmosis.

Sophie saw herself as a vessel for social improvement:

It’s a bit about being used and I don’t mind being used in that way, if it’s the right way to use it.

‘It’ was the colour of her skin. Sophie pinched the skin on her arm as she spoke these words in her corporate office, her secretary fielding visitors outside her semi-glass walls. Colleagues were waiting. Sophie allowed them to gain credit from her success and allowed her presence to authenticate the government to other Aboriginal people. Sophie was committed to a representative role on the condition that she was taken seriously and that her Aboriginality was used in the ‘right way’. At Sophie’s invitation, we met again in a more private setting. Concerned that she may have appeared too sanguine in her original interview, Sophie was concerned to place on the record:

It’s a choice thing that the NTPS [Northern Territory Public Service] is not culturally intolerable for me.

Sophie did not want me to downplay the tensions her Aboriginality brought to her work. It was not that she found the public service adequately embracing of cultural difference, she explained, but that she chose not to allow that lack of embrace to hinder her work.

Connection

Marcia ‘looked after’ the Aboriginal cadets and apprentices, building Aboriginal people’s presence in a large service-oriented department:

I’ve always worked in employment and training in all my career right through, to make sure people have an opportunity for their career in the government … [and] make sure people have the information so they can make an informed decision about what situations they get into sitting in their workplace, especially when strife hits.
Thus Marcia explained her advocacy for more junior recruits. In her own assessment, she had good networks within Aboriginal organisations and throughout the public service. Marcia’s job involved ‘a fair few calls from managers just asking for advice outside of the normal’. As she put this: ‘They’ll ask advice about issues they are having with Aboriginal staff. “Is this what’s happening?”’, “What do you think we should be doing?”’, or “Am I on the right track?”’

Senior Aboriginal public servants were often asked to intercede on behalf of Aboriginal employees who had problems meeting the expectations of supervisors. Some resented that expectation by their department, whereas Marcia clearly welcomed the opportunity to troubleshoot staffing issues ‘outside of the normal’. Marcia was unusually tolerant of the phenomenon that ‘anything to do with Aboriginal’ came her way:

Our area is the first point of contact for a lot of people outside … I don’t know why, but they see Aboriginal against our name, our section, and anything to do with Aboriginal … they’ll come to us as the first point of contact and then we’ll disseminate who they should be contacting.

Marcia volunteered the idea of her ‘Indigenousness’ to explain why she was so sought after by others, although she preferred to call herself Aboriginal. She saw value in ‘having an Aboriginal point of view, an understanding, being available’. Like Sophie, Marcia espoused the politics of presence. Again like Sophie, she revealed that her presence was purposeful. Marcia had much to say about the public service managers, largely non-Aboriginal, with whom she worked. She described some as ‘really good people in terms of showing you the ropes about office politics’, but others:

You can pick ’em straight away, those ones that don’t want to shift from where they sit.

Marcia identified managers as immovable ‘when they don’t make things happen’. She expanded:

… when they don’t ask for certain advice or genuinely wanna do something. You can tell straight away, you know. There are some managers … they will say things with all the right words, but they don’t follow up and you can see the lack of action behind it all.
Marcia had no intention of allowing those managers to dissuade her from her career:

There’s times when I think, ‘Oh, yeah, there’s lot of words and rhetoric and there’s no real meaning or intent behind some of these [managers’] words’, and you can walk out like that. But it doesn’t achieve anything because they come and go.

She planned to outlast the intransigent managers: ‘That’s been my plan, is you focus on the ones that actually genuinely want to do things.’

How should we understand Marcia’s mission? As she described herself: ‘I’m not a traditional Aboriginal person, although I’ve got family who do that, they live traditional, or live out bush.’ Marcia had been adopted young, after being neglected by alcohol-affected family members in a Top End remote community. She described herself as ‘very lucky they [her adoptive family] came along’. Otherwise, she said, ‘my life might’ve been totally different’. Marcia had transcended the socioeconomic disadvantage of her family of birth. ‘I choose to live this way’, she said with quiet seriousness about her urban lifestyle, ‘I like where I live. It’s less stressful.’ In casting the social landscapes of remote/urban communities as traditional/non-traditional, Marcia was describing her personal experience of a huge cultural divide. Aboriginal people are needed in departments, Marcia said:

... for policy to kind of work right through ... to be getting feedback from those guys on the ground level working it, to those guys who are managing and making the changes to strategies and policies ... to the executive who is supposed to be pushing it right across.

‘It’s a start’, Marcia said about just being present in the public service: ‘If you’re not there, then you got no basis to do anything.’ So Marcia commended the presence of Aboriginal people, the Northern Territory’s non-transient population, within the public service. By shoring up their presence and supporting them to sit out the managers who did not support Aboriginal people, Marcia was nurturing a channel for the kinds of connections and relationships that formed her own identity. ‘Working in any department’, she said, ‘it’s your Aboriginality comes forward.’
Deeper: Pinning down the absent

Representation has been described as ‘a kind of political assistance’ (Dovi 2006: 1) or ‘mediation’ (Williams 1998). Marcia and interviewees like her were representing in this sense when they assisted people who struggled to relate to government. The interviewees often said they worked for or on behalf of Aboriginal people—that their work as public servants was not ‘about us’, but about others.

Contextualised inquiry was needed to explore instances of representation through their workplace accounts. In answer to the direct question, ‘Do you feel that you represent other Aboriginal people in your job?’ only just over half the interviewees (28 of 50) responded in the positive. That nearly half responded in the negative suggests an uncomfortable association with representative advocacy or its less heroic underside, tokenism. The negative replies effectively circumvented any implication that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander public servant acted inappropriately or was under external control. When interviewees spoke of relaying messages between the government and communities, they made it clear that they did not see themselves as under the complete control of either party, as they had to exercise considerable discretion at both ends. Some spoke of relaying messages on behalf of communities as a particular ‘hat’ they might wear transparently, as part of their work, but they emphatically did not see themselves as the delegates of communities.

Whether or not they were prepared to describe themselves as representatives, inviting interviewees to nominate the beneficiaries of their presence in the public service drew out highly nuanced answers about the ways in which some represented various intersecting categories of the absent: remote Aboriginal employees, proximate/distant communities, Aboriginal Territorians and ‘all Territorians’.

Remote Aboriginal employees: ‘I take their viewpoints up’

A number of interviewees identified other Aboriginal employees as the beneficiaries of their work. These other employees were often situated elsewhere in the hierarchy, although some were directly supervised by an interviewee. Most often, the interviewees described
themselves as supporting the remote community workers who were directly servicing the residents of remote Aboriginal communities—Aboriginal health workers, language interpreters, teaching assistants.

The manager of a field service with a widely scattered community-based workforce, Deborah identified the subjects of her representations as the field staff in her supervisory care, the community-based workforce and at times more generically as ‘Indigenous Territorians’. Here Deborah discusses how she represented the viewpoints of her community-based workforce:

Because I take their viewpoints up … I certainly do [represent] and when I’m arguing and fighting for something for the service, it is on behalf of Aboriginal people in that role.

Describing herself as a ‘front line person’, Deborah reported having been counselled for protecting the viewpoints of her community-based workforce at the expense of other clients. In the case she was discussing, the clients were the agencies who contracted her services. She presented herself as an experienced and able defender of the service and its workers. That she had been entrusted with managerial responsibility suggests that she was known in public service terms to be good at her job. Feeling undervalued by superiors, Deborah explained that she kept at her job because of her identity. ‘Because I’m Aboriginal’, she said. ‘It’s the only thing. I can see the good that the service is doing.’ Deborah had been told that superiors saw her as lacking objectivity towards the service for which she was responsible, and that this perceived lack of objectivity had jeopardised a proposed upgrade of her position. In Deborah’s view, the government did not understand the extent and complexity of what made the service work. In this respect, Deborah was like a street-level bureaucrat, even though her management role meant she was not solely front line. She felt connected to clients, disconnected from the policy talk and not trusted for the grounded work it had taken to build the service:

A lot of times we can’t articulate what we want to say. And writing: I prefer to sit down and talk to a group of people than try and write a letter to them … That thing, I think holds us back in our careers … The other thing is it’s like a lack of trust of Indigenous staff, that if we’re going somewhere … it didn’t matter if we were working our butts off, it’s a ‘jaunt’.
Deborah had fully embraced the idea of representing her staff, but felt inadequate defending their needs in policy and preparing letters on behalf of the government. Deborah’s self-styled ‘arguing and fighting’ might be attributed to the sense that her contributions to the service were being undervalued. Arguing and fighting ensured she was heard.

Carol understood herself to be representing other Aboriginal staff by ‘running a job agency’, by which she meant informally notifying her extensive network of Aboriginal employees informally of internal vacancies. Carol worked to build Aboriginal people's presence in her department, even though that was not in her formal job description.

Wanda was cautious about her representative claim:

> I probably represent their [Aboriginal people’s] interests. I wouldn’t go so far as to say that I represent them, but I’m sort of mindful of any evolving issues and I tend to let those people [Aboriginal field-based staff] know.

Thus, Wanda took care to explain that she saw herself as representing the ‘interests’ of remote Aboriginal employees, but not ‘them’. Wanda felt strongly about the interests of Aboriginal field-based staff. She worked in environmental management, but she had just resigned, she said, because departmental priorities were constraining opportunities for local recruits.

**Proximate and distant communities: ‘It gives them a voice’**

Kel was a public servant in the town where he was born and grew up. He had been educated in a southern city—his choice, he said. He had returned to work in Aboriginal organisations in his home town until, he said, ‘blackfella politics’ pushed him out. Kel managed an all-Aboriginal team in a government project aimed at securing the compliance of organisations and individuals in a service. Kel was one of few Aboriginal senior public servants who came from the town. He aimed ‘to try and create pathways to get others through the system’, to achieve ‘a voice in [his work] at the higher level’. He identified the beneficiaries of his work as ‘local Aboriginal people’, a category he qualified as follows:
RELUCTANT REPRESENTATIVES

… which is mainly my family and friends, and then the remote community population who see me when I go out there, an Indigenous person with connections, kinships and strong connections to country and also to families in remote [communities].

He went on to explain:

It gives them a voice and a level of understanding now. When I speak to them … I sit out there and talk their language, I don't use the old government jargon.

Kel described himself as ‘a link between the community and the agency’ but ‘even more so like a voice for them’. Kel saw himself as representing ‘the Indigenous men’ in particular:

I represent the Indigenous men, the elders in the community—I’ll just give you an example—in their decision making, I can go and sit down with them in the community. I can say, ‘This is what the government’s policy is’ … I talk through it, and then they tell me what they think of it but they tell me how they’d tell me; and I feed that back to my department. So I am representing my senior men, which are fathers and grandfathers, but also I’m representing young men who haven’t got education.

Kel did this, he said:

By being part of that group and male, to be there for them to question me, but also to give them information about policies.

Kel’s account of representing specific subgroups was atypical. Mostly, interviewees described who they represented in ways that conformed more closely to public service norms; but Kel and his team had been encouraged by a manager, whom he described as having been unusually supportive, to have their ‘fingers on the pulse’ of the local community.

Leila had also spent her long public service career communicating with the residents of remote Aboriginal communities, primarily women in recent years. She had worked in many departments to build a solid reputation over decades in the public service and with communities. Leila had stood out for her preparedness to self-identify publicly, decades earlier:
I used to get a lot of criticism from the Aboriginal community because they said—whatever the government did and you were there, they felt that you should have changed the government’s mind. I said, ‘Yeah, but we’re developing policies to change their mind in how to deal with it.’

When I asked Leila what difference it had made that she self-identified in the early 1980s, she said that ‘they all knew’, in government, and ‘outside they knew’, too, as she had been asked to promote the benefits of a public service career to other Aboriginal people. Here is how Leila described answering a group of Aboriginal students who asked her how hard it was to self-identify as a senior public servant:

It’s hard, but if you *always know in your own mind* that *everything* you do is to benefit your own group and your own people, [this] is the thing that’s always pushing you: to make sure you’re part of that process.

Leila asked:

Because if nobody is there, who is going to be part of that process?

Leila’s career had been propelled by the desire to benefit the Northern Territory Aboriginal community. She did this by looking out for those for whom she felt a particular responsibility, even, as we have seen, when they criticised her. As she recounted the way she had explained this to her people:

So no matter what we do and no matter what the government did, we’ll be always there pushing. You mightn’t see the changes but later on down the track you might ... If nobody is there, it will never change. We’ll still be the under, downtrodden people you know, but you have to be part of this process to be able to get above it.

‘That’s what I always told them’, Leila concluded.

Kel and Leila had experienced different tensions in the representation of their communities. Kel described the tensions of proximity to his place of origin as being ‘disowned’ by both ‘mobs’, his department and community:

People like us, we get sort of like put out of place ... we’re not owned by this mob [his department], we’re not owned by that mob [the Aboriginal community], we get disowned.
RELUCTANT REPRESENTATIVES

Kel felt he was the ‘odd one out’ as the ‘only Indigenous one’ in his senior management team. He would not draw on his identity as a ‘pass to get to the next level’, but the community did not reward his restraint:

You’re always called ‘half-caste’ … what I’m saying is, if things don’t happen quickly on the ground … we’ll get blamed by the community, for our Aboriginality.

He gave an example:

People think that we in this department … are driving [a particular decision]. Firstly they’ll see you as a public servant and then … I mean we get rubbished by our own families!

Kel was referring to a Commonwealth Government decision under the Northern Territory Intervention to make welfare payments conditional on participation in a government program. Facilitating a workshop between Aboriginal people and government to secure greater access to services in his town had exposed him to scapegoating by some of his extended family, similarly to the scapegoating of non-Aboriginal bureaucrats by Aboriginal community members to avoid blaming local leaders for ‘unsatisfactory outcomes’ that anthropologist Sarah Holcombe has described (Holcombe 2005: 224, 228). Although the analogy cannot be taken too far, feminist Anne Summers described similar terrain for ‘femocrats’ in senior public service positions in the 1980s, who felt distrusted by both the public service and their peers in the women’s movement (Summers 1986).

Leila experienced different tensions working at a greater distance from her place of origin. She was explicit that as a long-term Northern Territory public servant, she drew her authority to generalise about communities from her continuing specific relationship with her community of origin. Leila recalled advising a colleague against the incautious amalgamation of Aboriginal local governing bodies into regional councils:

This is wrong. You haven’t really given the communities an opportunity to look at this properly.

Describing this conversation with her colleague, Leila sourced her authority to speak to her traditional association with country:
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It’s part of my country and so … you could see the highs and lows, you could see the problems … they’d ring me up: ‘Leila, can you come and see us while you’re there?’

Likewise, Leila drew on government knowledge to help her community come to terms with government decisions. In this case, she reported advising her community:

Government has done this now so you can’t get out of it, but let’s try and work out a best way …

Summing up the ways in which she represented other Aboriginal people in her job, Leila saw herself as a ‘community person first and foremost’. This did not mean she represented any particular community, as she saw herself working with ‘most of the Territory’:

I think because, I suppose, of the network and the way I’ve worked over 30-odd years, with communities. I feel part of those communities.

The limit on ‘most’ was the small number of communities she had never visited. Leila had had a long career in which she had represented ‘those communities she had visited’ by ‘being Aboriginal and part of a group’. She had straddled her responsibilities comfortably by being transparent and diplomatic with non-Aboriginal colleagues. As Leila put this:

They’d say, ‘Well, Leila, is that your view?’ … If it was my view, I’d state it but if it was the view of a group you know, a community or a group of people, I’d say, ‘Well, this is what’s come out of the community’.

Leila was clear and firm: ‘So that’s the way I’ve always worked.’

Distance had spared Leila the direct daily conflict that Kel was experiencing at the time of his interview, but that did not lessen other tensions for Leila. Her location in central headquarters meant proximity to advisers with whom she did not always agree. Here, Leila describes how she worked through those tensions:

There were times when I didn’t agree with them … Sometimes I’d get really angry and I’d just stay in my office and I’d think … I’m putting in too much energy into anger. Let’s look at the best way I can deal with this … I talked myself through it and then worked out the best approach I could take. Instead of arguing with them, with the government … I went back and thought about how I was
going to do this without making it obvious to them that I was really in disagreement with them and even if the community said, ‘Well, we don’t like that Leila’, I’d say, ‘Why didn’t you like it?’ and we’d talk about that.

Distance from or proximity to their communities notwithstanding, Leila and Kel performed their public service duties on behalf of and with a sense of accountability towards their communities without ever, from their accounts, contravening public service ethics. Both interviewees had accepted the invitation to be representative, but their acceptance was not unconditional. These interviewees had earned their employer’s respect—and in their eyes the respect of their communities—through long service, diplomacy and the effective navigation of the interests of their communities.

Aboriginal Territorians: ‘What they tell me, I relay back’

Simon must have been referring to an older, paper-based system of self-identification when he claimed:

I just put a square in and I ticked it and I said I’m an Aboriginal Territorian.

Simon’s assertion of the pan-Territorian Aboriginal identity, ‘Aboriginal Territorian’, was based on a specific entitlement, which he expressed legalistically:

I’ve got traditional entitlements to parcels of land in the Northern Territory.

These parcels of land were situated in the two linguistic regions of his paternal grandparents. Simon was scathing of the generic Indigenous brand, recounting his well-rehearsed position as follows:

Don’t refer to me as being Indigenous unless you know where I’m from.

For Simon, one could only be Indigenous to a locale. The public service self-identification options were too lumpish and inelegant for a specific and complex local identity and unacceptable to someone who was not ‘non-Indigenous’ but Aboriginal through a known language and place.
Simon’s job was to communicate with many Aboriginal communities on behalf of the government. When asked how he handled the breadth of that role, Simon explained:

I’ll take something, read it out, tell them where you’re working, what you’re doing, you need to talk to these people … Yeah, go and talk to them. But what they tell me, I relay back …

Simon did not want to interpret—‘put my own spin’ on—what other Aboriginal people told him or engage in banal comparison by claiming, ‘Oh, this person’s similar to that person or this community’s similar to that community.’ Simon’s personal policy of not speaking on behalf of any other Aboriginal Territorian made it possible for him to declare: ‘I’m an Aboriginal Territorian.’

Spike was equally unwilling to speak on behalf of any other Aboriginal Territorian, although he was less circumspect. Spike believed himself to ‘speak on behalf of Aboriginal people, Indigenous people’, he said, because:

When I’m asked a question … the person who asked that question is asking me my opinion, which gives him a broad opinion of what Aboriginal people think.

Spike’s Northern Territory connections were extensive, if more diffuse than Simon’s. He had been brought up in a ‘western type world’, he said of his urban upbringing in Darwin. On the subject of feeling expected to represent other people in his work, Spike replied:

There is an expectation, but I can only speak for me. I can’t speak for [my] mob … I wouldn’t speak for Larrakia [the local language group], I’ll speak for me.

Like Simon but for different reasons, Spike could speak on behalf of Aboriginal people in general, but not for his ‘mob’.

Both Simon and Spike preferred to fall back on a more general authority than to speak for their language group. Simon was even unwilling to contribute his personal opinion about a community visit, preferring to relay local views as a kind of emissary than be seen to interpret, generalise or compare. But many other interviewees similarly referred to a general, rather than specific, authority. Those who did so, whether or not they specified the identity ‘Aboriginal Territorian’, seemed
to distance them from demands by individuals—demands made in the name of kinship or local association—while preserving their accounts of representation.

All Territorians: ‘Building bridges’

‘I’ll be honest and straight up’, said one interviewee:

I would like to think my relationship with the Territory Government at the moment is … building bridges in regards to better education, better health for all Territorians.

From this person’s account, he was hoping to commend policy approaches that resolved emergent contradictions in Aboriginal lives. He illustrated his point by describing himself as ‘more of a refugee’ in the urban town where he worked. Because he owned property in the town, his community of origin would not allocate him a house; yet, the town was not his ‘country or language’. His career in Aboriginal affairs, spanning various representative roles, had dislocated him. He thought it important that senior officials like him were able to return to their communities.

A number of interviewees said they worked to benefit all Territorians and not only Aboriginal Territorians, one of them reasoning that the wider Northern Territory public benefited when Aboriginal communities were well represented in policy. But identifying a sense of responsibility to this wider Northern Territory public was only ever in addition to, never instead of, Aboriginal subjects. For most, Aboriginal people were their Northern Territory public.

Trusteeship

By now, Aboriginal public servants have plunged into and are immersed in a representative role. Empathic, knowledgeable and connected, the interviewees produced nuanced analyses of their relationship to the represented. There was both connection and distance in this relationship. Connection validated the relationship, whereas distance was needed to make it representation. The interviewees’ positioning as public servants not only gave them the chance to bring their
communities into government, but to define, describe and talk about those communities in discretionary ways. Kel described Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees as ‘statespersons’ with a dual role:

We’re not only seen as statespersons for government, we’re also seen as statespersons for our people.

Along with this duality went a sense of being betwixt and between which Kel described as ‘getting disowned’.

In the political theory, the unresolved tension between needs and wants has been one of the deep dilemmas of political representation. The needs/wants dilemma is the source of the distinction between the trustee and delegate styles of representation (see also Dovi 2006). Representatives who draw on their own judgement are exercising a form of trusteeship for the perceived needs of others (‘statespersons for government’), whereas representatives who follow constituent preferences are doing what their constituents want them to do (‘statespersons for our people’). The problem is that what people want is not always what other people think is good for them. Who should decide, and how does the decider know?

Put simply, trustees make independent decisions about others’ needs and interests, whereas delegates act on instructions. When interviewees pointed to areas of discretion in the content and delivery of their advice to government, they invoked the trustee representative style. In their study of a representative bureaucracy in America, Karnig and McClain found that minority bureaucrats had a ‘trustee relationship to minority communities’ in the sense that they ‘personally felt a responsibility to make a difference by their presence’ (1988: 143–4, italics in original). Peter must have done so, as he said he ‘carried’ the interests of Aboriginal people who could not be present in the bureaucracy. The represented cannot be ‘really [be] present literally or fully in fact’, theorised Pitkin (1967: 153)—but there was a catch. For a relationship to be one of representation, those being represented must have some kind of agency in the relationship. Guardianship is not representation, because a guardian protects rather than includes. The interviewees generally spoke of those they represented as having capacity and agency—they were not incapable, just absent. Some interviewees spoke as if they held trusteeship for the unmet interests of their communities of origin.
When Rehfeld made the observation referred to in Chapter One that the needs/wants, or the trustee/delegate, dilemma was present in any decision-making, he introduced some other distinctions as well. He pointed out that a trustee could aim for the good of the whole group or part of it, could rely on internal judgement or that of a third party, and could respond to disapproval or sanction to a greater or lesser extent (Rehfeld 2009: 215). The same could apply to a delegate—but we are only interested in trustees here. Our trustees invoked traces of these distinctions about aims (for example Kel, when he spoke for Indigenous men) and sources (see Sophie’s reliance on evidence in the next section); and we will see later that their position on responsiveness depended on their proximity and connection to communities of origin. But Kel’s eloquently described and felt distinction between statespersons for government and ‘our people’—his sense of abandonment—was resonant of the trustee/delegate dilemma.

We have heard some interviewees speak of taking up the case of those they represented. In these cases, they were like representative agents. Sarah suggested this characterisation when she connected her empathy and understanding with her right to argue, a shift that political theorist Nadia Urbinati likens to advocacy or defence (Urbinati 2000). Sarah’s was not advocacy in the sense of radicalism. It is within the bounds of public service ethics and indeed expected of a public servant to defend a portfolio interest or policy recommendation under challenge. In fact, all public servants working in Australian Indigenous affairs might be characterised as representative agents when they defend the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians as a portfolio responsibility.

To reiterate: the interviewees did not speak of themselves in the formal principal–agent sense. There was no unitary principal among their absent constituencies, rather a diversity of communities with whom their relationship was differentiated and complex. The interviewees were not instructed by any other authority than their work supervisors, nor formally accountable to any other entity than their employer. The interviewees were their own agents. They were autonomous individuals with a belief in their capacity to bring about real-world outcomes with intellect and discretion, people who chose when and how to agree or argue. But they did tussle with their
Aboriginal authorities. Although they felt more or less authorised by community connections, they were constantly checking those connections.

The styles of representation brought out in the interviews were flexible and not fixed dispositions. They were responsive to the job at hand. Sarah represented Aboriginal people, she said, by ensuring their access to the same information as the ‘wider community’:

... through my ensuring that what we ever get out or develop [for bush communities] is the same information that the wider community gets, so by me being here.

Sarah saw herself as making a difference to the information the government made available to Aboriginal communities. Through these lines, Sarah spoke as trustee and defender; perhaps also the self-appointed guardian of absent communities, albeit that this last characterisation was theoretically out of bounds. But Marcia, also deeply connected and committed, had another view.

I can’t say that, that’s just not right. There’s too many of us, it’s too diverse, you know, and our good people out there that represent different groups of Aboriginal mob, different staff or professional areas of Indigenous people that know, experts, then they should be saying things on behalf of their mob.

Marcia was adamant that she did not represent others.

Why did some interviewees discount the idea of representing? Marcia drew a sharp line between the representational capacities of the Indigenous sector and the public service. She did not see herself as representing her people because she saw that as the role of Aboriginal organisations. As a public servant, she felt she had no mandate. Yet, as a public servant Marcia saw her beneficiaries as ‘Indigenous people first off’. Nominating herself to make available ‘an Aboriginal point of view, an understanding’, Marcia both stood for and stood up for her people. Marcia satisfied the political theory’s definition of a representative in both the passive/descriptive and active/substantive senses. She did not see herself as such because she was reluctant to supplant her colleagues in grassroots representative organisations, who had a clearer authority to speak on behalf of ‘their mob’. But drawing on the theory, Marcia’s sustained defence of Aboriginal people was a highly diligent form of self-authorised trusteeship.
Sophie spoke of portraying and relaying views that she knew she shared with other Aboriginal people or that were founded on ‘evidence’, rather than representing:

I don’t profess to represent other Aboriginal people, I profess to be able to portray and relay views and desires and needs that other Aboriginal people have, either through my knowledge and experience or my personal networks, all based on pure evidence that is so startling and stark in front of you, you can’t not portray that.

Sophie distinguished carefully between speaking on behalf of other Aboriginal people and expressing views that she held and knew others shared:

I don’t speak on behalf of any Aboriginal person or group but I’m more than happy to be able to express the views that I know other Aboriginal people share.

Sophie was representing herself when putting forward her own perspective: she was merely present and being herself, not speaking for anyone else. But she was representing others when she put forward views that she knew other Aboriginal people (who were not there) shared. When she stated her reliance on ‘pure evidence’, Sophie attributed her actions to the indicators of Aboriginal disadvantage rather than her identity. When she drew on ‘knowledge and experience or my personal networks’, she edged closer to a more active kind of representation. All executives have knowledge and experience and personal networks, but Sophie’s knowledge, experience and networks acquired a particular potency in the representational politics of Aboriginal affairs. Sophie had accepted representative bureaucracy’s invitation, but like Marcia she was careful not to speak unduly for others.

Sarah, Marcia and Sophie drew on their empathy, knowledge and connections to speak for others, navigating their way carefully through decisions about the costs, benefits and timing of speaking. Those who specifically identified beneficiaries did the same. They took up their viewpoints, gave them a voice, relayed their messages and built bridges to the wider constituent community of all Territorians.

And so 49 of the 50 self-identifying senior public servants stood for Aboriginal people in the descriptive sense by self-identifying, and took representing further by standing up for them, or drawing on their own identity to speak for others. Their representations of, for
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and on behalf of absent Aboriginal people were invited by the general calls of representative bureaucracy and the conditions of their work. Trusteeship was the most acceptable strategy for Aboriginal public servants. The kind of representation they could most readily accept was that which allowed them to make autonomous judgements about the capacity of other Aboriginal people to represent themselves.

But let’s look more closely at the hesitation that was expressed by some of the interviewees—most starkly by Lucy, Marcia and Sophie. Their hesitation suggests a double-edged problem. Assuming their community’s authority to speak was not only problematic for them as public servants, but as Aboriginal people.

Political theorists have laid out the circumstances that justify speaking for others. Recall Alcoff’s argument that the speaker is always situated somewhere in the social complex. Through speech and writing, he or she inevitably participates in the construction of ‘others’ (Alcoff 1995: 100–1). In speaking for or about others who are not present to speak for themselves, the speaker is ‘participating in the construction of their subject positions’ (as absent/excluded) and thereby representing them (Alcoff 1995). Alcoff suggested that it is only remiss to speak for others when the speaker has not paused to interrogate two issues: firstly, the situational advantage of speaking and secondly, whether absent ‘subalterns’ could speak for themselves. If after consideration the representative deems that the absent cannot be present and may be advantaged by being spoken for, Alcoff found it justified. Likewise, the postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak was critical of the ‘intellectual retreat’ when a representative who has the chance to speak ‘essentialises’ the disadvantaged by insisting on their direct voice—as though that gesture would negate their deeper exclusion (Spivak 1988).

Speaking for others was never straightforward.

Speaking for and speaking as: Trusteeship vs substitution

Hanna had previously worked in advocacy roles outside the public service, and had left the public service again at the time of her interview. Reflecting on her time in a senior policy role, she said that she saw her role as ‘creating the space’ for ‘other voices to be heard’.
Hanna was emphatic on this point: her version of trusteeship reserved Aboriginal people’s place at the table, without her presuming to speak for them. As Hanna recalled her position on representation:

I certainly wasn’t … ever presuming that what I had to say was being said for and on behalf of other people. That’s not my role or place and I’m very clear about this too: it’s very much about creating the space for those other voices to be heard.

So Hanna created space for other voices.

Sally saw things differently. For Sally, it was a sign of moral courage to step into the space of other voices and explain these absent voices. She acknowledged doing this at every opportunity she could, in her job mediating social justice issues between the Aboriginal community and government:

I find myself as an ambassador for Aboriginal people, whether I’m at work or out in the street. I feel that I have to explain. If someone takes a bland view or a view that’s one-sided or something, I feel it necessary that I explain to them, well hang on a minute, this is why we’re like this. I do, I see myself as an ambassador, personally and professionally for Aboriginal people, to promote their interests and also to develop an understanding.

Sally shared a standing joke with colleagues about being the ‘token black’:

I mean that’s *part* of the reason that they employed me here … and that’s what I played on at the interview, the fact that I am Indigenous, I have extensive networks in [this area of] services and they don’t have any Indigenous staff here and … the majority of the service users are Aboriginal people … We’ve got a little joke here … when we have a meeting they’ll say, ‘Oh we’ll ask Sally to come in and tell us about this.’ I say, ‘Oh, you want the token black do you?’

Sally’s mother was a politically active Aboriginal woman from a local region and her father was a white man. She maintained her ties through both, but she would not accede to her father’s request to call herself ‘part-Aboriginal’:

It was my uncles and aunties that looked after me … It was my grandfathers that took me out doing things, hunting and all sorts of things, and that’s why I identify with that.
Describing herself as ‘grounded in her culture’, Sally defended her people’s ability to be ‘flashy too if we want’. She said she was ‘hard on her people’ because she took them ‘seriously’. She sometimes found herself in disagreement with Aboriginal colleagues:

As an Aboriginal person working with Indigenous issues, working with government … I feel like I have to follow everyone else and if I don’t, I become unpopular or I’m a traitor … I’ve been viewed like that. Even in this department, I’ve heard them whispering, ‘I don’t think you should speak to Sally, she doesn’t actually agree with that sort of stuff’ … I just want to see our people and our kids happy and healthy, going to school and doing the cultural stuff but also being able to cope over here because ultimately, that’s where we’re going to have to be.

Critical when departments ‘do everything for’ Aboriginal people, Sally’s view was that:

They [departments] don’t give any value to what Aboriginal people’s own skills are, what their knowledge is or what they’re capable of thinking about.

Where Hanna created space for other voices, Sally stepped in and spoke.

Hanna was politically careful, reserved and critical, whereas Sally’s confident portrayal of the motives of others suggests her more enthusiastic adoption of the right to speak. Both of these interviewees made autonomous judgements about their role, thus fulfilling political theory’s notion of trusteeship—but whereas Hanna used her judgement not to step into the space she felt the absent should occupy, Sally used her judgement another way and drew on her inner convictions to step into that space, speaking as absent Aboriginal people, as though taking their place.

We could interpret Hanna’s reluctance to speak for others as abdicating a situational responsibility. But there is more to know about her constraints, and we will pick up her story in the next chapter. Other interviewees did subscribe to the idea of speaking for others, as we have seen, by taking up their viewpoints, giving them a voice and relaying their concerns. Most were more cautious than Sally. Most relied on external evidence and their knowledge of communities rather than so wholeheartedly on inner conviction. In her
ambassadorial mode, Sally’s references were internal, a representative style for which theorist Jane Mansbridge has suggested the metaphor of the gyroscope (Mansbridge 2003: 526). Having established her credentials, Sally sought no other permission to speak.

We have begun to explore a distinction between speaking for and speaking as the absent. In the terms of political theory, this is the distinction between trusteeship, which is to stand up for others by speaking for them if necessary; and substitution, which is to stand in for others and assume their voice. This is a fine distinction. The stances of trusteeship (speaking for, creating space) and substitution (speaking as, stepping in) can coexist in the same sentence—for example, ‘Let’s invest in a process of consultation [trusteeship], as the existing policy/program is already having adverse impacts for Aboriginal people in the region [substitution]’. But the distinction between trusteeship and substitution is important, and those who accepted the representative invitation had to navigate it whenever they made autonomous judgements about the capacity of the absent to speak for themselves.

Behind the representative role lay significant tensions for those public servants who accepted it. Trusteeship could be experienced as personal failure, if they could not find evidence that it had protected the beneficiaries from harm. What if they exercised the wrong discretion and inadvertently brought harm to people they meant to help? Substitution was no solution. Substituting yourself for absent ‘remotes’, where but for fortune you would be, only enhanced the sense of inauthenticity with which your peers would happily brand you. Sally didn’t seem to mind this, but we shall see that many other interviewees minded it very much.

Swimming the currents, a self-identifying Aboriginal senior public servant could be swept into murky depths.