Sustainable selves: Recognition and role modelling

The ideas of acceptance and limits of acceptance capture the interviewees’ dispositions towards what was appealing and/or awkward in the everyday invitation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants to represent others in the corridors of power. In the shifts between trusteeship and substitution, the interviewees were frustrated by colleagues’ obliviousness to the effects of policy change on their communities. On the other hand, they could be disappointed by collegiate over-compensation and naive requests for their superficial or last-minute involvement. An ambivalent invitation is not easily answered.

Is it just too hard for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants to contribute meaningfully to the work of public service departments?

In the protocol of hospitality, there is a response that is not acceptance and not decline. An unacceptable invitation may be deferred or put off until the answer is clear. In the space thus created, the unacceptable invitation may be reframed to make it more sustainable to the self. ‘Sorry not to get back to you sooner but we can’t make your party tonight. Come for dinner at our place next week?’ preserves social protocol by making a counteroffer, avoiding the original invitation without awkwardness. If the invitation is made on an incorrect or outdated assumption about the invitee’s identity and can’t simply
RELUCTANT REPRESENTATIVES

be ignored, it must be reframed. ‘I have a new partner/I’ve changed my name/I’ve had a serious illness. [I am not who I was to you.] Come around [my ground] and we’ll catch up.’ This metaphor has a theoretical underpinning in Iris Marion Young’s famous ‘deferral’ of the dilemmas of group representation in public institutions, on the basis that it was less contentious and more politically inclusive to allow that perspectives derived from ‘socially specific and politically relevant’ experiences have their own legitimacy and need no other authorisation (Young 1997: 365–7).

Generally, the interviewees in this study wanted more than the opportunity to contribute their perspectives to the public service. They did want this, and they believed in the legitimacy of their contributions, but they did not want the voices of their people who were absent from the public service to be lost in the noise. Their ‘deferral’ was a counteroffer for their people to be heard, and to be taken into account.

Reframing acts on, and ideally improves, the terms of recognition. This is important, because as we have seen, self-identification can be experienced as misrecognition. Identifying one’s race acknowledges the preceding generations who have suffered Australia’s colonial past, but it also demands that a choice be made between limited options. They do not even form a logical set—Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or non-Indigenous? If you can’t tick the box for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander as your primary identity and you’re not both, are you necessarily the alternative: non-Indigenous? For some, self-identification was Hobson’s choice—take it or leave it, declare membership of Indigenous policy’s problem population or disavow your race. We saw the tensions of social recognition when the interviewees discussed their dilemmas with self-identification in Chapter Three. The eminent political philosopher, Charles Taylor, tells us that by singling out some people for inclusion and not others, ‘the supposedly fair and difference-blind society’ can be ‘in a subtle and unconscious way, itself highly discriminatory’ (Taylor 1992: 43).

As Taylor so eloquently describes the problem experienced by those prepared to swim the administrative depths as self-identifying senior Aboriginal public servants: ‘only the minority or suppressed cultures are being forced to take alien form’ (Taylor 1992: 43).
In response to a question about the extent to which they saw themselves representing Aboriginal people in their job, around half the total group of 76 interviewees described themselves as role models. The interviewees described themselves as role models to local youth, family, remote communities, lower-ranking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and Aboriginal community workers. The role modelling self-account was pervasive, although those who described themselves this way were divided as to whether they thought of role modelling as representation. Some said role modelling was the way in which they chose to represent others; others who called themselves role models were less comfortable claiming representation. The differences on this question were partly semantic and partly due to disquiet with the idea of representing at all. Interestingly, the interviewees’ ambivalence mirrored an ambivalence in political theory on the relationship between role modelling and representation, as we will see in the final chapter. Regardless of their views on representation, role modelling moved those interviewees who spoke of it from a passive position as the recipients of an unacceptable invitation to a position of greater self-agency. History was beyond their control, but as role models they could at least improve the terms of recognition.

A word about the impact of the Northern Territory Intervention. There can be no doubt that the Northern Territory Intervention heightened the sensitivity of Aboriginal public servants to demeaning depictions of their communities. These images were everywhere in 2007. Politicians building a sense of emergency fed on the public outcry. As one analyst later described this time, the implication was that ‘Aboriginal communities are themselves the problem’ (Manderson 2008: 249, italics in original). Indigenous leader Marcia Langton summed up the situation with the observation that ‘the crisis in Aboriginal society is now a public spectacle, played out in a vast “reality show” through the media, parliaments, public service and the Aboriginal world’ (Langton 2008).

It is possible that the Intervention’s demeaning imagery of remote Aboriginal communities focused some interviewees on image-making to a greater extent than might have been the case without the unfolding drama. Some interviewees did discuss the ways in which the Intervention’s powerful representations of dysfunctionality was affecting their image as public servants, but it is unlikely the Intervention generated the high incidence of the role modelling
self-account in this research. Representations of remote Aboriginal dysfunctionality were not new in themselves, and aside from the fact that most interviewees resisted the Intervention’s approach, many of the events they recounted predated it. Role modelling was their account, and it reflected longer term issues than the 2007 whirlwind.

Despite the Intervention’s whipped up panic, most interviewees held onto nuanced personal stances they had refined and nurtured through practice. Few were fully invested in the rushed package of emergency measures they watched overrun the fragile local services they had been helping to make work from the bottom up. But to try and temper the Intervention narrative was seen as condoning child abuse. The interviewees were only too aware of profound disadvantage and social disturbance in their communities, but they were suspicious of the methods and promises of political newcomers who would leave fresh damage in their wake. Despite these misgivings, few denied hoping that newfound political attention would help alleviate suffering in their communities.

Some interviewees who were working in Northern Territory Government departments in 2007 were vocal in their support for the local employees of community schools and health clinics whose image was being shattered in the tabloids. Many presented themselves as guardians of these voiceless and defenceless hardworking local employees against the representations of dire social emergency. Some were advising the Northern Territory Government. Some were working in service delivery organisations. Some were helping mobilise new services, at the same time as trying to defend the worthy elements in services that were suddenly being ceased. Some were finding grim satisfaction at seeing their own previously ignored advice about under-serviced Aboriginal communities vindicated in the tabloids. Without exception, the interviewees shared abiding concern for the good people they knew in communities, knowing that some were grateful for the Intervention. Some interviewees were even prepared to examine their own responsibility for poor community outcomes. But as seasoned public servants they were generally sceptical, and saw the Intervention as a transient, if exploitable, peak of policy attention in a larger history of government neglect.
Because the Intervention closely followed the dismantling of the regional representative structures of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 2005, some interviewees might have been left feeling that their internal representative voices in the administration of Australian Indigenous affairs were as good as any. But the interviewees were certainly reframing their invitation to participate in the government of the Northern Territory when they described themselves as role models. Through their accounts, senior or non-senior, self-identifying or not, we will see that role modelling was not only a way to represent Aboriginal people to government but also, for some, a way to represent government to Aboriginal people. Examining these two representational directions—Aboriginal people to government and government to Aboriginal people—we shall see that for those who subscribed to it, role modelling improved the terms of recognition and sustained a more workable sense of self.

We shall also see that role modelling was highly instrumentalist for those who were prepared to draw on their position in government to speak to—even, stand up to—errant community members.

Representing Aboriginal people to government: Improving the terms of recognition

Louis, a non-senior interviewee in Alice Springs, spoke of ‘the visual judgement of people’. Louis was resigned to feeling overlooked as a mixed race descendant of the original owners of his town. ‘If they’re looking for an Indigenous person,’ he said of senior colleagues, ‘they won’t actually look for me, they’ll actually look for a black face.’

It was a recurring theme of the interviews that regardless of whether or how they self-identified, Aboriginal employees felt exposed and misrecognised by judgements about the phenotypic characteristics of their race. One interviewee wore a uniform, but it was not this he thought that non-Aboriginal colleagues noticed first. ‘They see your features straight away’, this interviewee explained. He could tell by how ‘some of them talk to you’. Another interviewee commented that ‘the presence of an Aboriginal person makes other people be careful
what they say’. Intuiting that they were seen as Aboriginal people first and public servants second, many interviewees concluded that their contributions were filtered through visual judgement.

Deborah discussed how unspoken judgements about her being a ‘black woman’ diminished her sense of contribution. She could tell how she was perceived by ‘gut feeling’:

I can walk into a meeting and I’m a manager, but they don’t see that.

But she did recall a telling piece of evidence:

I’ve been in some meetings where … a white man … will go, and they’ll give him hell; and I’ll go and because I’m a black woman, they just agree with everything I say.

This was when Deborah observed that no matter what she said, the sky was always grey. Deborah felt misrecognised by invitations for the look and feel of Aboriginal involvement without the content. Deborah operated according to a different personal standard, when she differentiated ‘doers’ like herself, who were prepared to work with Aboriginal people, from the ‘rule-makers’ or ‘talkers’ who were the ‘gammon people … getting Aboriginal people together on the policy thing’. In Aboriginal English, ‘gammon’ means ‘pretend’ or ‘false’. For Deborah, what was misrecognised was a professional standard that was equally critical of Aboriginal colleagues and non-Aboriginal colleagues. Aboriginal people were not virtuous, Deborah said, as they could just as easily be drawn into meaningless ‘talking’ as anyone. Deborah disparaged obsequious racial respect, and also any Aboriginal colleagues who went along with it. Deborah did not garner Aboriginal opinion for the sake of it, nor offer herself as a substitute for consultation with absent communities. She applied fine judgements in her daily work, battling the saccharine responses of colleagues who, ‘because I’m a black woman … just agree’.

Those whose features could not be ‘seen straight away’ also encountered visual judgement about the phenotypic characteristics of race. If Aboriginal public servants did not ‘look Aboriginal’ but wanted to speak and could speak and felt they should, some thought that what they said was not recognised anyway. Nine senior public servants spoke of ‘not looking Aboriginal’. Intriguingly, this cohort overlapped significantly with the group of nine that was less directly
involved in Aboriginal-specific programs. Not looking Aboriginal seemed to give some Aboriginal public servants access to wider career choices—even if they wanted to specialise in Aboriginal areas.

Wanda had identified as Aboriginal in her research-focused department but she was not recognised as such by colleagues. Here, she provides rare proof of the subtle visual process at play in her workplace:

I was at a senior meeting about five years ago now and [the Chief Executive] came in and basically gave us the big drum about recruiting and mentoring Aboriginal people and he basically said, ‘Well look around the table, we don’t have any Aboriginal people sitting here’. And I’m goin’, ‘Okay, obviously he doesn’t read his stats’.

Wanda described herself as white. Her mother had been the last full speaker of an Aboriginal language in her home state, but Wanda said, ‘most white people don’t know’. The assumption made by her boss was familiar and understandable to Wanda, but she had found it distressing nonetheless. Self-identification had been ‘very complex’ in her family. Her mother had not told Wanda until very late about her own early life in an Aboriginal camp in a segregated town, nor of her language. ‘They’ve been flogging it out of us for 50 years’, her mother had explained to Wanda. Wanda had not corrected her boss because she thought her colleagues would interpret this as a bid for special treatment:

If you do stake your claim, they see that as then here comes the race flag: ‘Poor blackfellas, we’re gonna have to look after her because she claims it’ … So I left it.

To secure a role in which she could better serve the interests of Aboriginal employees, Wanda was about to establish her own Aboriginal employment agency and had already resigned from the public service.

Ron, an executive in another department, was raised in a southern city. His mother had been institutionalised as a child, but his family had not been forced to disavow its racial origins. Not only did Ron self-identify, he had openly declared his Aboriginality to staff and colleagues. Despite his willingness to contribute vast experience and a commitment that he attributed to his Aboriginality, he observed that he was often passed over when comments on Aboriginal issues were being sought. Ron reflected:
It’s quite hard being a fair skinned Indigenous person in a place where you’re not from … I find it very hard to be taken seriously as an Indigenous person.

Ron felt refused. The invitation to contribute to the public service seemed to exclude Ron and the eight other senior public servants who spoke of ‘not looking Aboriginal’. Each made observations of this nature, and each attributed their subtle exclusion to their unclear racial status. Some had conducted private tests to confirm their observation. The research data supported it. Visual judgement was at play independently of the private act of self-identification, at least in their eyes.

The ‘visual judgement of people’ introduced by Louis was a social fact for the interviewees, and while they found it understandable, it was also unacceptable. This was not how they wanted to be recognised. Those whose phenotypic characteristics distinguished them as Aboriginal people did not like to have their representation assumed. Those whose Aboriginality was less recognisable were sometimes more keen to represent others than was subtly allowed them. To be courted and not heard properly was as much of an impost as it was to be overlooked and not heard at all. Whichever way interviewees experienced the effects of visual judgement, they looked for a more instrumental and efficacious stance.

Regardless of the observable characteristics of Aboriginality, interviewees often reported the difficulty of building careers that were independent of Aboriginal policies and programs. Most interviewees made reference to this issue. Recall that Jean’s move into a generalist role and her non-self-identification had been intentional representational strategies. Jean regarded herself as a role model by having reduced her institutional obligations to other Aboriginal people, along with the associated typecasting. This was how she wanted to represent Aboriginal people to government—by fighting to ‘have that role seen as not based on anything to do with being Indigenous’ because ‘that speaks volumes to other people’. She represented Aboriginal people by modelling competency, and thus upgrading their image.
True merits: Grounded, local, Aboriginal Territorian

The interviewees expressed faith in the merit principle, but they did not always see it working. Stuart had been an executive in the field of Aboriginal employment in the 1980s. In 2007, he ran a successful local business, employing and training Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff as his personal mission. Stuart had been diagnosed with a terminal illness at the time of the interview. With the permission of Stuart’s family, who told me this later and asked that his name be revealed, Stuart’s eloquent plea for the recognition of Aboriginal skills is reproduced here:

Few people want to get anywhere just [because they’re Aboriginal] and are regarded less than the real thing … This ‘less than’ issue is big, because if you’re Aboriginal are you ‘less than’? I think you’re ‘more than’.

The ‘real thing’, ‘less than’ or ‘more than’: comparative measures were on Stuart’s mind. Many stories were littered with the language of competitive hierarchy—winning positions, higher duties and professional development opportunities. Interviewees were resistant to the inference that they themselves were in need of special representation. Aboriginal senior public servants saw themselves as highly ethical. They were sharp observers of the fairness of decisions. But many entering seniority expressed an enduring anxiety about the reasons for their employment through comments like, ‘Hoping that I did win it on merit rather than being Indigenous’, and wondering if peers thought, ‘Has this person been recruited because they are Aboriginal or do they have the goods?’ Regardless of rank, interviewees tended to frame their goods as more delivery- than policy-related. While acknowledging that policy was not their strong point, some found policy skills overrated.

A deep and recurring theme of the interviews was that these senior public servants were finding the public service generally oblivious to their true merits. Distilled down from all the anecdotal evidence and reflective self-accounting, the image of the truly meritorious Aboriginal public servant was one who was grounded, local and Aboriginal Territorian.
Merit 1: Grounded

Marcia spoke of policy ‘hitting’ the ground. She described the ground as the place where policy is ‘implemented’ and people are ‘affected’. Sophie had a good feel for ‘what goes on’ through her ‘networks on the ground’, referring to her connections with Aboriginal organisations. Sally was ‘grounded in her culture’. Sarah wanted to empower people ‘on the ground’, by which she meant ‘in the bush’. She contrasted ‘the ground’ with ‘government departments’ that had ‘their values’ and ‘their views’ on what should be done for Aboriginal communities:

It’s not about that [the values and views of departments], it’s about how do the people on the ground access that?

For Leila, ‘the ground’ was the community in general. She spoke of a senior executive who would ‘really need her comments’ because he wanted ‘the view from the ground, from the community’. Kel’s ‘ground’ was the place where the community saw him as responsible for policy decisions—the regional office where he worked remotely from Darwin.

‘The ground’ was a very common idiom. The word was mentioned at least once by nearly half the senior interviewees, irrespective of their job and their place of origin. If ‘the ground’ had a vernacular meaning, it was the distinction between the concrete specificity of places where Aboriginal people lived and the disembodied policy words directed towards the improvement of their lives. We see this in Lucy’s contrast between policy work and where the ‘outcomes’ were:

You’re writing things and you’re having the meetings with other groups, which I guess is for outcomes for Aboriginal people on the ground.

The meaning of ‘ground’ shifted with context, but it was always associated with the absent policy subject and juxtaposed with what seemed to some interviewees to be superfluous, rhetorical, not evident and groundless policy. ‘The ground’ was the point of differentiation between Aboriginal contributions and the contributions of others. Julia said she knew ‘exactly what’s needed’.

The interviewees saw themselves as the all-important and underestimated deliverers of government programs. Interviewees often claimed that in working through the people and the politics to make Aboriginal communities reachable and serviceable, Aboriginal
public servants had skills and capacities that non-Aboriginal public servants did not. Being grounded gave Aboriginal public servants the unique ability to implement the programs of government.

To be grounded came from connection with Aboriginal lives—preferably, local connection in the Northern Territory.

**Merit 2: Local**

You did not have to have come from the Northern Territory to recognise the value of localness and work respectfully with locals. You could be locality-oriented. But interviewees who had not come from the Northern Territory, even if they had married into the local Aboriginal community, spoke of a lack of standing compared with those who were locally born. Furthermore, interviewees with local parentage pointed to something obligatory and fundamentally authenticating about having Northern Territory origins, even if they had been born and raised interstate and were still tracing local connections.

Three locally born interviewees who had become public voices in Australian Indigenous affairs had more demanding views of localness. Hanna suggested that Indigenous public sector employment ‘ought to be targeted to Territory Aboriginal people’. She specified further, that priority should be given to those working in ‘Aboriginal-specific areas’. Hanna’s argument was that ‘Territory Aboriginal people’ had ‘knowledge of Aboriginal issues in the Territory’ that ‘those people that come from interstate’ did not have. Jade was more inclusive of non-locals, preferring to see Aboriginal public servants ‘either from that area [in which they worked] or those that are trained to work within that area. Aboriginal people in other countries—that’s okay.’ Simon’s theory was more demanding still:

> The government has a responsibility for delivery of its programs, to have the best person to deliver the program or to become the public service for that region, the designated area that requires servicing.

> ‘That’s fine’, Simon said. ‘They can become public servants, as long as they’re local people.’

These were proposals for geographic representation by Aboriginal people in the public service. Each actively promoted the idea that Aboriginal public sector staff should be local to the Northern Territory. While Hanna’s view was that local people should be supported to
do local work if they came from the Territory, Simon and Jade were stronger on more localised geographic representation. Simon took the selection criteria, ‘understanding contemporary Aboriginal society’ and ‘communicating with Aboriginal people’, very seriously. He had found it hard to ‘get a response’ to questions designed to elicit these criteria from job applicants ‘when they don’t belong to the group’.

In defending specific and localised understandings against an abstract pan-Indigeneity, these interviewees might have been expounding Iris Marion Young’s theory of ‘situated knowledges’. Or were they Dovi’s ‘unjust excluders’, whom good representatives should keep at arm’s length? Aboriginal identity is a situated identity that draws on connection to country and language. When we understand this, we can see that although Hanna, Simon and Jade’s assertions of the primacy of localism were exclusionary, they were not necessarily unjust.

If you did not have local connections in the Northern Territory, you could still contribute situated knowledge as an Aboriginal Territorian.

**Merit 3: Aboriginal Territorian**

We have seen that the interviewees who saw themselves as representing Aboriginal Territorians identified a spectrum of meaning for this identity. Simon was chief proponent of the view that to be Aboriginal Territorian was to come from an identifiable place in the Northern Territory. Others allowed that Aboriginal Territorians might include members of the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander constituency who came from other parts of Australia.

Nineteen of 76, or 25 per cent of the total interviewee group, had places of origin outside the Northern Territory (although five had been locally born and raised). These 19 interstate interviewees, as we shall call them, were more likely to have finished school and tertiary education than locals. All but one (18) had been senior in the Northern Territory Public Service and more than half (11) were senior public servants in 2007.

The interstate interviewees were less likely to leave the public service than locals, but they often felt like outsiders and navigated local relationships with care. Georgia, who came from a southern state, explained:
This just, you’re not, this isn’t your place.

This was said without rancour or question. Georgia said she had felt like an outsider for the entire 22 years she had been employed by the Northern Territory Public Service. In her reckoning, she had worked productively with local Aboriginal groups while employed at senior levels over this time. Paradoxically, it was Georgia’s acceptance of her outsider status that seemed to give her the credibility and relationships to do grounded work.

On the other hand, Margie, who was a relative newcomer, was confident that although she had ‘only gone out to a couple of communities’, she would be able to understand the needs of ‘Aboriginal Territorians’ when shown around by a local person. Margie was struggling with her role and finding it ‘hard to get a sponsor’, as she put it. Her assumption of inclusion had not endeared her to local residents. When Margie said, ‘Anything I’m doing here is on behalf of Aboriginal Territorians’, she seemed to be excluding herself from that category.

Those from interstate were keen to produce evidence of connection through long residence or local marriage. All Trevor knew of his ancestry was that he was born in the Northern Territory. The urban Aboriginal family who raised him had come from elsewhere. Trevor’s ‘working class, urban background’ had given him ‘no amazing insight into Aboriginal culture’, although he thought the ‘competitive advantage’ of his birthplace ‘sort of cut through’ the questions: ‘Who is this bloke? Who is this bureaucrat? What does he want?’ Rose, married to a prominent local Aboriginal person, believed she had missed out on a job to a local applicant from ‘a remote background’ because she was seen as an ‘urban Aboriginal person’. She did not even entertain the possibility that she had missed out because her traditional connections were elsewhere, because she saw herself as a local through her marriage to a local person. Likewise, recall that Ron and Wanda felt sidelined for their less recognisable Aboriginality, not for their interstate origins. But the nuances of long-term residence and marriage were lost in the limited choices of self-identification.

Observing the interviewees from interstate straddling identities, outsiders by birth and insiders by race, the term Aboriginal Territorian emerged as a loosely inclusive identity. At its core were those who could name a Northern Territory origin. At its periphery were those
whose connections were more attenuated. The rules of membership were not clear or agreed upon. It hardly mattered. A member of the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander constituency who was anywhere on the spectrum of the identity ‘Aboriginal Territorian’ could role model the skills and capacities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the Northern Territory Government in a general sense.

But there were some kinds of role modelling only locals could do. Only local Aboriginal public servants could show government that some descendants of the Northern Territory’s original inhabitants were now willing participants in the wider social world, and only locals could draw on the authority of public employment to speak to their people.

**Representing government to Aboriginal people: Speaking to others**

To see yourself as a role model is to imagine that others hold you in their esteem. When role models offered positive representations of Aboriginal people to government, they imagined that the government would esteem Aboriginal people more highly.

Here we will explore the relationship between differently situated Aboriginal people: between professional public servants who overtly represented government, and their less privileged communities.

**Self-discipline: ‘What kind’s this woman?’**

Mary explained that Aboriginal audiences expected Aboriginal employees to exercise public sobriety and behavioural self-discipline when they were in senior positions:

> A lot of our mob, we want to be seen as a good role model—like you can’t be out drunk and misbehaving otherwise [they will say], ‘What kind’s this woman? She’s supposed to be there representing us and … look at her behaviour!’ With blackfellas, because people really look at you, you know, because there is only so many people in key positions that are having an influence … you really are being watched a lot … if you stuff up, well everyone is going to hear about it. So it’s that sort of a thing, a close network.
Mary did not work alone. She was the member of a group. This was the ‘close network’ of her extended family, community, peers and colleagues in Aboriginal affairs. Her representations were on display.

Mary’s career spanned representative roles in the Indigenous sector and the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments. To explain role modelling, Mary detailed the hazards of ‘demand sharing’ in Aboriginal relationships. In traditional Aboriginal society, demand sharing redistributes material goods by transfers among kin (Peterson 1993). To make a demand is to confirm a relationship, as Austin-Broos discussed more recently in her ethnography of a desert community’s encounter with the welfare economy and the idea of work (Austin-Broos 2003: 128). Mary described having experienced this demand as a public servant using the metaphor of ‘my auntie’s car’:

> It’s like, ‘Oh yeah, you broke my auntie’s car’, you know, a long time ago. You’d better look after it or the people will, you know, then people will just carry on about that for years and years.

‘You get blamed for a lot of things’, Mary said, referring to problems in government service delivery. We saw the same with Kel, who felt ‘rubbished’ by his community. Note the indirectness of the passive voice in these descriptions of relationships with other Aboriginal people: to ‘get blamed’ or to be ‘rubbished’. Unlike in their workplace, there was little personal agency here, just the felt consequence of being in a group that embraced its members in that way.

To think of yourself as a role model was to expose yourself to blame. In Aboriginal kin relationships, this blame could be indirect and oblique. As urban people, many interviewees were immersed in complex kin relationships that placed subtle demands and expectations upon them. Mary did not speak of being better than others, but she spoke of being expected to pitch herself that way within her group. Role modelling was a phenomenon of Aboriginal relationships—albeit that it was empowered by officialdom. Mary had ways to measure the esteem in which she was held by keeping close to her networks.

Others were less sure. For example, Ben’s engagement with the Aboriginal community was tentative. He had only recently returned to the Territory after years away. Less well known, he could not so easily be blamed, but Ben still called himself a role model to others by
having had a truncated secondary education. Ben worked in a major infrastructure department. He too used the passive voice when he explained that role modelling was to ‘be looked up to’:

I would like to think that as an Aboriginal person you may be a role model or be looked up to. Maybe people would come to you, to me eventually for advice or for direction, you know, but I don’t think I represent Aboriginal people. No. I think I can show the way, be a role model … This is all possible and if you want to get up the top I think the opportunity is there. And as I said, I had one year of high school.

‘To represent people they’d have to ask you to’, Ben added, espousing the delegate theory of representation. Ben saw himself as a role model, but not as representing others. In Ben’s view, if others saw him as a role model for getting to a senior position with only one year of high school, this did not give him permission to speak for them. Ben left it to his beholders, in this case the more junior Aboriginal staff in his department, to respond to his success however they saw fit. Although he was not closely connected to the local Aboriginal community, Ben’s achievement of public service seniority with a vastly incomplete education gave him the chance to assist others.

Randall was ‘looking after’ activities on Aboriginal land by encouraging traditional owners to take up economically viable behaviours and activities. Randall spoke of ‘representing the Northern Territory Government and plus like even my own people, my people’. He went on to explain, ‘They see me working and they like what I do for a living’. Randall was gratified that a community member on the street had recently said to him of his work: ‘That’s good.’ Randall likened himself to ‘a role model to younger people that’s trying to have a go’. As he explained:

Indigenous people see an Indigenous man coming from the Northern Territory Government coming to help. They sort of accepted me in there, coming into their land and showing them what to do … that’s a really good feeling. I suppose I’ve been around town, that I’ve been working with the Northern Territory Government and some people know me really well … that I’ve got a bit of Indigenous blood in me.

Thus, Randall professed himself a broad-ranging representative of government and his people.
Randall introduced a more substantive purpose to his role modelling when he explained that he was a role model by ‘Indigenous people seeing an Indigenous man’ from the government who was ‘showing them [Indigenous people] what to do’. While acknowledging his racial heritage, Randall did not cast himself as Aboriginal. Randall is the second of the three interviewees who did not self-identify. He set out his position in these terms:

In the old days, the old full blood man said that the yellow fella was a mongrel … You know when one of the big old TOs [traditional owners], the black man, said that the half-caste man is a mongrel breed bastard … I’ve got a white father and black mother; I reckon it’s pretty clear. You can go either way. With that Aboriginal side, if you’re a man you follow your father’s way.

Randall was expressing a patrilineal principle of Aboriginal descent, although he had inherited ‘that Aboriginal side’ through his mother. Randall also disqualified himself because ‘I sort of haven’t been brought up on the community or in the camp’. Yet, working in an Aboriginal-specific program, a skilling program for Aboriginal people living on their traditional country, Randall described a profound commitment to ‘our clients out there’:

It’s just not the four men and the six ladies that you deal with when you’re having a meeting, it’s the whole clan, so you’re looking at thousands of people that you’re giving to, to the elders that are taking the advice and what’s behind them old people is their tribe and then the kids coming up … if you get them thinking now, this is what your country needs and this is the best scenario or way to go about it to make it viable and having an income for your people and getting that information out there, that’s a bonus … I’m going to hear a tear drop in a minute.

Randall’s aside about the tear drop was all the more theatrical for its near-inaudibility. His muttered self-deprecation was only discernible later, playing his recording at high volume. Through it, Randall caricatured those who wore their heart on their sleeve.

Randall’s personal policy not to self-identify was not due to qualms about working in the Aboriginal interest or being known as Indigenous. He saw himself representing Aboriginal people to government and government to Aboriginal people. He was a role model in both
ways. Randall elected not to self-identify because, in the judgement he imagined his own role models would make about him, he hadn’t earned the identity.

**Notes of didacticism: ‘How the government operates’**

Notes of didacticism crept into the meaning of role model as differently positioned interviewees told how they had taken opportunities to exhibit and explain self-discipline to their people. Carol represented Aboriginal people in her work by ‘trying to teach people things’. Simon, too, ‘wherever you’re working and your mob is proud of you’, said that they—‘mainly family’—often told him ‘you need to be this, you need to do that’. In return, he said, ‘You get an opportunity virtually to explain to them how the government operates’.

In the relationship between Aboriginal public servants and their clients in the Aboriginal community, role modelling could be moralising. But role modelling was not just about the government’s benevolent hand meting out lessons to the citizenry. Partly governmental in its bid for social order and partly designed for wider audiences, the role modelling espoused by the interviewees was Aboriginal business. Some role models were comfortable exuding knowingness and seeming better off than other Aboriginal people. These interviewees were deeply embedded in Aboriginal relationships. Confident of their kin relationships and sure of being heard within their community, these individuals did not shrink from being seen as ‘better than’. They strutted their positional authority with pride, without pandering to political correctness. When viewed in the context of Aboriginal relationships, the role modelling described in some accounts was the expression and realisation of a familial right to comment.

Some interviewees took role modelling to another level when they drew on their government authority to correct problematic behaviours. They did this through jobs involving correcting governing. Those who worked in corrective governing roles did not all characterise themselves as role models, but nevertheless discussed doing work that acted directly and explicitly on the deportments of others in their community.
In these jobs, interviewees were speaking to other Aboriginal people—
their policy or program subjects—as Aboriginal people in government.
When they role modelled the socially desirable deportments of self-
discipline, they were government in the Foucauldian sense of the
‘theories, proposals, strategies and technologies’ for guiding conduct;
or famously, the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Rose 1999: 3; Foucault 1988; see
also Foucault 1991). Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’
goes beyond the institutions and strategies of government to take in the
governing ‘know-how’ and historical process of bureaucratisation—
the broader rationality of government (Foucault 1991: 102–3).
As Nikolas Rose explained, Foucault’s governmentality ‘embraces
the ways in which one might be urged and educated to bridle one’s
own passions, to control one’s own instincts, to govern oneself’
(Rose 1999: 3). However much role modelling suited the government’s
‘normalisation’ program, what was important to the interviewees
was the representation of small ‘g’ government within Aboriginal
relationships.

Corrective governing: ‘We were senior Aboriginal
people in our town’

I wouldn’t come to your country drunk. How dare you come into
my office drunk?

So Deborah recounted her spontaneous admonishment of an
Aboriginal man who had entered her office under the influence of
alcohol. The inebriated man had first wandered off the street into
another section of her department. Deborah surmised that ‘fear of not
being seen to be politically correct’ had motivated non-Aboriginal
colleagues in that other section to send him to her. Deborah was
renowned for her directness with Aboriginal people who sought
to abuse the resources of the office, a shop front on the main street
of the town.

Thus some interviewees used their positional authority to go beyond
speaking for others as trustees, or as others as substitutes, to speak to
other Aboriginal people to reprimand antisocial behaviours. When she
did so, Deborah drew a parallel between this man’s ‘country’ and her
‘office’. This was more than just witty story-telling, although it was
indeed that. Deborah’s equation of ‘country’ and ‘office’ suggests pride
in her positional authority. It also suggests protectiveness towards
those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who were ‘good’ citizens by maintaining traditional lives while earning livelihoods. Deborah was prepared not just to stand for and stand up for, but to stand up to Aboriginal people when antisocial behaviour threatened her carefully built program. The drunk’s behaviour trampled on the right of her staff to work for their people in peace. Deborah came from interstate, so her country was elsewhere. Her office was her domain in a way in which the town was not, although she had settled in the Northern Territory many years earlier.

Corrective governing took many forms. Six senior and three non-senior interviewees had been involved in a project we will call the Social Discipline Project. The Social Discipline Project involved locally recruited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in governmental efforts to manage the antisocial behaviours of swelling numbers of Aboriginal itinerants in Northern Territory towns. All who had been involved in the Social Discipline Project referred to it when asked what they found hardest about working for the government. They were invited to reflect on what they had found difficult and why they had worked in it nonetheless. These questions drew out some interesting aspects of role modelling.

The Social Discipline Project was ‘something that we didn’t want’, said Sophie. But Sophie had persuaded herself to participate in it, because, she explained, the project was ‘an opportunity to provide intervention services to a group of people who didn’t know how to access them’. Within government, she explained further, the project aimed to encourage ‘agencies who had primary responsibility to take those primary responsibilities’. But working on the project had placed a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants in the public spotlight. Sometimes, these public servants were in the line of fire of disgruntled local Aboriginal organisations, local businesses and community groups. As Lucy described it, the Social Discipline Project was:

Targeted towards the remote community people that were coming into town … and got stuck here—well’d encourage them to go back home or do something more productive with their lives.

A former manager of the project, Lucy, had left the project ‘because of the social issues that we were confronted with all the time’.
Other past employees of the Social Discipline Project had been more willing to embrace the role modelling opportunity it presented, though their involvement had challenged them. Sandy, who had also managed the project for a time, said that it ‘tested us tremendously’:

You get tested to every aspect of your moral fibre from both sides of the agenda, both the black and the white … I’d get NGOs [non-government organisations] beating up on my staff verbally … You found yourself walking this line on behalf of the NT Government. ‘Who made the decision?’ I said well this is the decision; it was made by the government. ‘Who specifically?’ They wanted names and numbers and the time the decision was made … That was really hard but—good—at the same time, because it really tested me as an individual, tested what I was about.

For Sandy, the ‘hard stuff’ had been acknowledging antisocial behaviour by community members:

That’s the hard stuff that some Aboriginal people don’t acknowledge that there is bad behaviour there in the streets … those were the moral issues and the tough issues that we had to sort of come to grips with and deal with and face head on.

Explaining why she had taken on the Social Discipline Project, Sandy downplayed her Aboriginality and emphasised her empathy:

I’d like to think it’s because I’m a caring person. Maybe it was a little bit easier because I’d got the networks and you have that empathy and understanding and you’re prepared to work in that environment …

I don’t want to sound as though, yeah, because I was Aboriginal, I made it work. I don’t know if I did. But I’m just letting you know that I think my heart was in the right place.

Entreating acceptable behaviours from Aboriginal townspeople had made Sandy examine her relationship with the Aboriginal community more generally:

At times I would go home, look at myself and think, ‘Am I betraying Aboriginal people by being like this and saying these things, that it [antisocial behaviour] is not acceptable?’

Sandy had faced the possibility she could be viewed by her family and community as siding with racist ill-feeling, but she saw herself as standing up for women’s rights:
You’d get up and have to talk about antisocial behaviour and how wrong it is and not condoning Aboriginal men bashing women in public … I don’t condone that. Any sort of violence against women is terrible.

Indeed, Sandy saw herself as standing up for human rights when she said that such violence was ‘not acceptable at a human level’.

Sandy was a long-serving public servant with traditional connections to places near the town. Her own people were subjects of the project. For Sandy, being on view as a government representative was a small price to pay for a sense of efficacy in dealing with these tough problems. Role modelling had substantive content, as Sandy deliberately stood up for the humane treatment of Aboriginal women and children by facing confronting issues even when doing so was bristling and uncomfortable.

Edith, another self-described role model in the Social Discipline Project, had resolved the discomfort she felt at calling out the behaviour of relatives and townspeople by taking the responsibilities of public service seniority very seriously:

I started to get uncomfortable but we were really, we were senior Indigenous people in our town and if we didn’t stand up and … do something about it or educate the uneducated about it, what’s the point?

Edith’s ‘educating the uneducated’ meant explaining the reasons for Aboriginal itinerancy to local businesses, the police and other town-based services. Edith represented government to Aboriginal people through her stance on antisocial behaviour, and she represented Aboriginal people to government when she explained their behaviour.

Edith’s kind of role modelling was highly instrumental. In her view, corrective governing was her responsibility as a public servant and her entitlement, recalling her earlier words, as a local Aboriginal person with the connections and the capacity to help.

Recall that one of Dovi’s criteria for good descriptive representatives is that they have relationships of mutual recognition with dispossessed subgroups. In this part of her argument, Dovi drew on Cohen’s critique of the ‘ethnic model of inclusion’ or ‘advanced marginalization’, as Cohen called the ‘uses of power and privilege within oppressed
communities’ (Cohen 1997: 574–5, italics in original). In advanced marginalisation, some group members ‘police’ others in the interests of their own inclusion, and thus abuse their privilege in the representative relationship. ‘As groups vie for the label as legitimate, normal, and citizen’, Cohen told us, ‘they confront the requirement that they regulate and control the public behavior and image of all group members’ (Cohen 1997: 575–6). In other words, the relationship between representatives and dispossessed subgroups needs to be robust enough to mitigate the risk of abuse.

Was Edith’s relationship with her community robust enough to mitigate the theorists’ charge of abuse? We need to understand her better.

Entitlement and connection: ‘It’s my home town’

Edith did not come from a family of itinerants. She was local to the town, and she had very extensive, multi-linguistic connections. A ‘coloured mob’ descendant, Edith was proud that her grandfather ‘came to Australia and married an Indigenous woman and then fought, all his life, for the rights of coloured kids’. Speaking up for racial justice was her calling. Edith had felt ‘entitled to contribute at a senior level in the town that we grew up in’. She was adamant that being a local person with the requisite administrative experience entitled her to a permanent appointment to the public service. Edith had worked on the Social Discipline Project on extended temporary contracts. Although she had made her desire for permanency known, her position had never been secure:

I was going home at night saying, ‘… They’re entrusting me to go out and do all this stuff … but they’re not rewarding me by giving me security of tenure.’

‘This is what I needed’, Edith said. ‘[Security of tenure] would have made me do it even better.’
Edith’s connections had enabled her to moderate between transient populations and the wider community. In return, she had sought a particular kind of recognition from the government: to fulfil her destiny as a racial descendant of the town environs, by becoming a senior public servant as of right. After all, this was her ‘home town’:

It’s my home town and this is the structure that’s going to be there for my kids when they come up. I want them to pick up Hansard and see their mother’s name in it. I want them to see that their mother contributed to these things, just like I see in my grandfather, who got locked up for a bottle of beer because his father was white and his mother was black. So the history goes on and we’ve got a vested interest in all of this …

Edith was firm and eloquent: ‘I believe that I should be and my kids, we should be the ones [in the public service].’

Edith was speaking of her right to take on the responsibilities of government, and to model that responsibility to her community. Through Edith, we see that role modelling could enact a political conscience. Edith did not see herself as abusing community relationships, but as defending and strengthening them. Role models like Edith wanted to tackle the Northern Territory’s deep historical problems because they had been affected by them and emerged relatively unscathed. This role model made demands of the public service in her place of origin. This role model brought her privileged social position to bear on the fates of less advantaged members of her community. Here was the path to honour and achievement. This was her political action.

Recall Sally’s comment, ‘We can be flashy too if we want’. Sally went on to say, ‘We can achieve really, really well but still be grounded in our culture.’ As they argued their relevance to absent families and communities, some interviewees were proud to be ‘flash’—like, but not too like, those they represented.

**A regionalised representative bureaucracy**

A truly representative bureaucracy might strive to maximise situated knowledge by positioning locals close to their communities. It was an intriguing finding of this research that Aboriginal public servants were working as closely as possible to their region of origin. A regionalised
representative bureaucracy was already in place. This was without any organised striving or acknowledgement by the Northern Territory Government, as the aim of matching Indigenous employment rates to local demographics was announced later in 2007.

Table 4 shows how a (descriptive) representative bureaucracy had already been regionalised in the Northern Territory. The table sets out the relationship between the interviewees’ work locations and regions of origin. This is best demonstrated by looking at the entire cohort of 76 interviewees, because the small number of senior public servants interviewed in Central Australia (6) obscures the relationship. The framed area of Table 4 shows that of 57 interviewees who came from the Northern Territory (40 from the Top End and 17 from Central Australia), 50 were working in their region of origin (37 in the Top End and 13 in Central Australia, the darker shaded boxes). Only seven (4 in the Top End and 3 in Central Australia, the lighter shaded boxes) came from the other region.

Table 4: A regionalised representative bureaucracy: Northern Territory Public Service (NTPS) work location by region of origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region of Origin</th>
<th>Top End</th>
<th>Central Australia</th>
<th>Outside NT</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Last NTPS work location</td>
<td>76 interviewees (53 senior)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin/ Katherine/ Nhulunbuy</td>
<td>37 (27)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
<td>17 (16)</td>
<td>58 (47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Springs/ Tennant Creek</td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
<td>13 (3)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>18 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40 (28)</td>
<td>17 (7)</td>
<td>19 (18)</td>
<td>76 (53)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s research.

We have seen that the interviewees who came from Darwin and Alice Springs often worked in those towns. Interestingly, most interviewees of mixed Larrakia/Arrernte descent had worked in both towns at some stage in their careers. But those whose places of origin were in surrounding remote areas also worked in those towns—we may assume—because of the lack of senior positions in their places of origin. To add to the picture of regional fealty, the higher availability
of senior positions in Darwin had not generally enticed Central Australian Aboriginal public servants north, but had opened the field to recruits from outside the Northern Territory.

Aboriginal public servants who came from the Northern Territory were embracing the problems of their region of origin in their work, even if that embrace was disembodied or attenuated. As it was not always possible for Aboriginal public servants to work locally, those who came from the Northern Territory worked as locally as possible by staying in their region of origin.

This important finding suggests that the relationship between Aboriginal senior public servants and those they represented included some sense of loose accountability to their communities of origin. Indeed, through their shared history and continued proximity to those they represented, the relationship must have included mutual recognition.

The exception proves the rule: The Top Ender in Alice Springs

There was one Alice Springs–based senior public servant from the Top End (see Table 4). This was Jerome. Although he did not call himself an Aboriginal Territorian, his mix of remote, urban, local and interstate associations is suggestive of that archetypal pan-identity.

Jerome was born in Darwin after his grandmother and great-grandmother were taken to the Kahlin Compound from a Top End remote community. After an interstate education arranged by Jerome’s non-Aboriginal father, Jerome returned and rose through the ranks of a Northern Territory department. In Alice Springs in 2007, Jerome had responsibility for a set of mainly Aboriginal clients and was presiding over their rehabilitation and return to communities in a corrective governing program. His goal was to convey a positive image of his clients to other Aboriginal people and to the town. On arriving to take up his posting, Jerome had announced his Aboriginality and had encouraged other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to do the same. Jerome said that he was:

Probably looked upon as something like a bit of a role model, to get me to where I am at the moment.
Jerome had wanted to show those below him in the hierarchy that it was possible for Aboriginal people to ‘beat the system’. He had started out as one of two local Aboriginal recruits in Darwin. In that role, he described himself as ‘looking after your countrymen Aboriginal way’. If he found it difficult to continue doing this when he moved to Alice Springs, he did not say so. He said he was constantly explaining his origins to Aboriginal locals who could not place him among kin. He was employing local Aboriginal staff. Local Aboriginal people, he believed, ‘know the problems in those communities, and … they’ve got more of an idea how to fix it’. Jerome said he represented them ‘in how I moved my way up through the ranks’. Jerome wore the mantle of Aboriginal senior official with unassuming pride. He never once returned an email; his secretary managed our research relationship, then and later, but his interview was memorably warm and engaging. His minders had his trust and he had theirs as they opened his institution to this study.

Jerome was one of the 11 senior executive-level interviewees employed by the Northern Territory Public Service in 2007. Seven were from the Northern Territory. Six had major responsibility for services in their region of origin. One worked in her home town. None presented his or her race as a substitute for the relevant public service capability. Their normative theories were individualised and related to their different work responsibilities, but each defended groundedness, localness and being Aboriginal Territorian as the qualities Aboriginal senior public servants should have. Not all of them worked in disciplinary roles like Jerome, but each, like Jerome, drew on Aboriginal connections to be authoritative as public servants.

If the exception proves the rule, what does Jerome’s exceptional willingness to take on a disciplinary role in another region tell us? Jerome has given us an alternative social imaginary: competent, empathic and determined Aboriginal officialdom in the government, not only of Aboriginal Territorians, but of non-Indigenous people too.

The present–absent relationship

Wherever role models were positioned on the continuum between communities and government, their role modelling came through the interviews as a kind of argument, or claim. The claim being made
was that Aboriginal public servants were not merely the symbols of functional, self-disciplined Aboriginality and not necessarily liked or popular, but socially and politically effective.

Role modelling is a complex idea. Through role modelling, the interviewees could convey something not just symbolic but substantive to their government and to other Aboriginal people. The self-styled role models among the interviewees modelled comportments and behaviours, learned from their forebears, and derived—if we go back far enough—from the educational efforts of the Northern Territory Administration. Noting that the audience for representation may not only take in the represented but a ‘third party’ as well, Pitkin described ‘symbolic representation’ as ‘standing for’ others ‘in the mind of the governed’ (Pitkin 1967: 104–6). For some interviewees, the third party might have included non-Indigenous audiences. Nick Theobald and Donald Haider-Markel found that citizens’ attitudes were highly sensitive to the racial background of police officers (Theobald & Haider-Markel 2009: 410). ‘Symbolic representation’, observed these researchers, ‘works cognitively on the audience of those who belong to a group that is to be represented’ (Theobald & Haider-Markel 2009: 410).

Mansbridge (1999) argued that descriptive representation should not only convey ‘social meaning’ to the disadvantaged, but also impose ‘substantive consequences’ on the advantaged. In the interviews for this research, role models conveyed social meaning to the disadvantaged when they exhorted them to more functional behaviours. On top of this, role models imposed substantive consequences on the advantaged. This occurred when the role models’ portrayals of socially and politically effective Aboriginal people confronted longstanding public service views about the Northern Territory’s problem populations. The government needed these public servants. In fulfilling that need, role models took the opportunity to generate a different possibility for their people—an alternative ‘social imaginary’, to draw on Charles Taylor’s evocative term (Taylor 2004). Role models posited a social imaginary in which Aboriginal people are not mere policy subjects or the passive recipients of welfare. In the social imaginary that inspired them to be role models, the Northern Territory’s disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population had choices and capacities.
The problem in the relationship between the present and the absent is this: because those present have invariably transcended their original disadvantage, the absent have no sanction over any representing done by those present. But in the politics of presence, recalling Phillips (1995: 25), members of historically disadvantaged groups who cannot participate in public institutions feel better when they see other members positioned there.

*Do* the absent gain self-esteem from the success of elite members? *Do* they feel better, and is feeling better enough of a benefit? The study did not set out to test this question, but some interviewees who were former public servants, lower ranking or working in remoter locations, volunteered relevant views. In short: the success of elite members did not make them feel better, and feeling better was not what they were looking for. Some Central Australian interviewees aimed stinging rebukes at their more senior counterparts in Darwin. They too had to take public stances towards antisocial behaviour in their town—only they were much closer to the ground, and they had less support from their departments. The Central Australian interviewees painted a distinct social world, two days’ drive south from the capital. They may have been located at the periphery of the Northern Territory Government, but they were at the front line of corrective governing (see also Ganter 2011). And they felt forgotten. They did not seem to gain self-esteem from the success of their more privileged counterparts in the Top End.

As the Central Australian interviewees narrated their conflicts with head office, it became clear that they too saw themselves as role models. Indeed, in their self-assessment, they made better role models than those they observed in the north.

**Those ‘untouchables’ and their ‘high-level writing’: Views from the periphery**

Gabby had spent her childhood in a town camp in a desert town. Her mother was ‘always down the street, she was literally belly up’. She had left Gabby and her siblings to bring up other babies, ‘kids raising kids’ as Gabby put it. Gabby remembered ‘doing all my times tables in a house full of drunks’. She hadn’t finished Year 12,
but ‘the teachers didn’t really mind because you’re an Aboriginal’. In Gabby’s reckoning, her childhood experiences gave her insights she did not see in those at senior levels of the public service:

Indigenous people, through no fault of their own, that are at those levels, well they have never had an Indigenous lifestyle, so they can’t relate to the Indigenous person walking down that street … They’re like the untouchables, and then they’re put in there and they’re making policies that—[we] may as well not even have them there as far as representation [goes]—it might as well be a non-Indigenous person …

To make it to the upper levels was the converse of having lived an ‘Indigenous lifestyle’. By Gabby’s measure, this meant having had personal experience of grinding disadvantage. Of course, Gabby’s suspicion of Aboriginal senior public servants had been fanned by her desert town’s historic distrust of the priorities of Darwin. Top End Aboriginal people residing in the more populous northern electorates were seen to reap benefits not available to desert people. Gabby called them ‘untouchables’, which I understood to mean beyond criticism, and from that, less accountable. Gabby saw herself as a better kind of role model by being more grounded in her place:

That’s what I’d like people to think—‘Well, if she can do it’, because I’ve just normal schooling like everyone else, ‘We can do it too’ … My thing is whole of picture, and that’s what I mentor kids on.

For Gabby, being a public servant was all about role modelling: ‘It’s about the way you behave.’

Louis described having been ‘handed around’, as a child, among unfamiliar Aboriginal groups:

I came from a very bad background. There was a lot of violence, there was a lot of alcohol, there was a lot of sexual and mental abuse.

Louis had lived on the streets of a southern city before returning to a Northern Territory desert town to find his family. They had turned out to be alcoholics living in a dry creek bed. So intense was his need to know his family that Louis had joined them there for a while. Then he cleaned up his life and joined the public service. Now running his own local business, he concluded:
So—and now I work with ... people who’ve got a violent history I understand where the violence comes from. If I work with people who’ve got no education, I’m a person with no education. So I can empathise really well and I think that this got me to where I am.

Despite the shocking circumstances of his earlier life, Louis described his fall from grace in the public service as more shattering than anything he had experienced. Louis had been encouraged and supported to complete a qualification, but taking up the opportunity had initiated the problems that had broken his career. Louis had questioned the authority of his Darwin-based senior Aboriginal manager to give advice about remote issues, asking if this manager had travelled in remote areas. The manager had come from interstate. ‘We had people writing policy in Darwin that had never worked on the ground’, Louis explained. His sense of injustice at what he saw as inauthentic, disconnected Aboriginal representation was stark and revealing of the standard he set for himself.

Two people who preferred to be interviewed together, Lois and Nolan, spoke candidly of mounting proud challenges to government from their outback desert town. Lois was still in the public service. Nolan had left to pursue an activist career. Lois said that Nolan had been an ‘outcast’ when he was in the public service because he ‘always shot from the hip’. But Lois was outspoken too, as she described having insisted that superiors ‘tell it straight’ to her Aboriginal clients. Lois and Nolan contrasted their representations with those of a more compromised senior Aboriginal colleague who ‘… wouldn’t be there if he/she didn’t know how to say, “Yes sir, how high do you want me to jump?”’

Carly’s family had settled in Central Australia. Her mother had been taken from a Top End remote community. Checking whether she could be ‘honest’ with me, she commented of her department that it’s ‘their way or the highway’. This was an apt metaphor, as Carly went on to describe how Aboriginal people in her region perceived Darwin-based public servants at the north end of the Stuart Highway:

We all say, ‘The Top End mob’. We see that Top End mob are more exposed to information than the Centre. The Centre from probably other side of Katherine down, Central people … we take a bit more time. I don’t know whether it’s because of law and culture or just because of the exposure to information, exposure to the bigger picture stuff … [but] you hear that now and again, just in conversation, ‘Oh, them mob get more than us.’
Thus, Carly contemplated whether the uneven resource distributions she had observed between Top End and Central Australian communities came from Aboriginal rivalries.

With a similar perspective, Gerry, a man of stature in local politics, described Aboriginal senior public servants in Darwin benefiting Top End communities by their greater ability to participate in government structures that favoured the more populous northern electorates:

I still live in the hope that the Northern Territory Government actually listens to the aspirations of people south of Katherine [three hours’ drive south of Darwin] and actually don’t just continue to consider just because the numbers are all in Darwin and the northern suburbs that’s who they need to cater for … and that includes the public service.

A feeling of missing out typically characterises the relationship between those at the centre and periphery of government. But Gerry and Carly’s critiques were important. From positions both inside and outside the public service, they saw their public service as neither trustworthy nor impartial, and not made any more so by the presence of Aboriginal senior public servants. Their departments felt to them to be places in which Aboriginal rivalries could be transformed into bureaucratic power. But hear Carly’s wistful, hesitantly confidential tone as she revealed her desire to unlearn how to ‘write like I talk’ so she could do ‘high-level writing’:

I wanna learn about all that sort of stuff too. I write like I talk and I think I need to—I don’t wanna be—you know, that high-level writing: I probably wanna tap into that at some stage …

Seniority invoked complex yearnings, especially when it seemed unattainable.

While these non-senior interviewees critiqued their senior counterparts, they still aspired to have what their senior counterparts had. There was authenticity in proximity to clients, but there was respectability—professionalism, influence and external reward—in distance. As representatives, those in the desert, and perhaps those in any regional office, sought to locate themselves somewhere on a continuum where they could be role models, but not too flash.
Vicarious authorities and accountabilities: ‘Eyes are watching’

Even though, according to the interviewees, most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants self-identify, Jean and Randall’s accounts effectively untie that private act from any assumption that it is a necessary condition of the representative relationship. Recall Jean’s stance on competence (representing Aboriginal people to government) and Randall’s scenario for a viable livelihood for clients living on their country (representing government to Aboriginal people). Neither self-identified, yet both took their relationship with the Aboriginal community extremely seriously, crafting their accountability to other Aboriginal people carefully and self-critically.

The third interviewee who did not self-identify was Leena. She said she could not take the pressure. Although also from a local family in a remote region, Leena found it neither ‘comfortable’ nor ‘safe’ to ‘tick anything anymore’. She told her story in elided, ill-fitting pieces. Leena had supported and recommended a community’s employment and training proposal. Her office had not acted on her recommendation. She spoke of ‘community pressures’ inside and outside the public service. Her loyalties were split between ‘the strategy on the one side’ and ‘Aboriginal people on the other’. ‘Eyes are watching’, she said:

This is what you carry with you, you carry it with you from the time that you’re born, you know your values, your world view and I also think that the community actually reminds you of it too … negatively, positively they remind me of it. You know, eyes are watching.

Leena felt her responsibility to other Aboriginal people all too keenly. She had felt them watching, and had ceased self-identifying out of a sense of accountability to the Aboriginal community that was so strong she could not reconcile it with being a public servant in an Aboriginal servicing role. Refusing to self-identify had been a private act. By changing her career path altogether, Leena had effectively made her representative identity fade away. Leena acknowledged that her withdrawal had been made possible by the fact that she was not widely recognised as Aboriginal. This meant that she was not the subject of visual judgement, and the absence of this element had effectively freed her from any representational role. She had broken
out of her Aboriginal-specific career and at the same time, placed her relationships with Aboriginal colleagues and community out of reach of interference from the public service.

Leena’s bitterness about her need to do this was palpable, as she satirised her previous department’s interest in the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees:

Oh right, Aboriginal people, important viewpoint.

Leena told of dislocated, ever-present authorities and accountabilities that she respected, but needed to resist. She had taken the option of vanishing into thin air, for the purposes of the Indigenous statistic, to find a role where neither the public service nor her community could find her.

Mary, whose deep traditional connections spanned northern Australia, was more comfortable straddling community relationships. She too spoke of vicarious authorities in her advice that Aboriginal public servants ‘respect elders, even though they might not be your elders—because they’re someone’s elders’. Marcia too explained that no matter what you look like, if you are known in the Aboriginal community as someone’s descendant, that makes you Aboriginal to other Aboriginal people.

Some interviewees pointed to more direct and demanding authorities and accountabilities. Recall Sally saying she was ‘hard on her people’. She had to answer to the community:

They don’t consider me as Indigenous in some areas … because I’ve got an education, I’m white-skinned … and I don’t live on an Aboriginal community anymore, I live in a house.

Sally recalled justifying her relevance to detractors with the argument that she had been ‘brought up around Aboriginal people, by an Aboriginal woman’. For Sally, it was a necessary condition of authenticity as a public servant that someone had ‘grown up Aboriginal’, even if this criterion was not quite sufficient for everyone. Some, like Gabby, insisted that senior officials should also have experienced disadvantage.
Ted said, ‘A lot of people look to me that way’, when asked if he saw himself as representing other Aboriginal people in his work:

Most of the old people, I ask, talk to them about their options. That’s outside of work. They ring me at home … I’m there for Indigenous [service deliverers] 24/7, 365 days a year.

Agnes, too, was comfortable being available on demand to her local community while on short-term employment with a cultural institution to develop a project in a Top End town. Agnes’s honest explication of working with and for her ‘family’ reflects the open connectivity made possible by the nature of this project, in which she held a non-senior role:

… my aunties, they’ve known us since we were small. They had no problem with me and if there are problems, like ‘Get Agnes, get Agnes’, I [would say]: ‘Come on Aunty, I had enough of that!’ [laughing] … I think my knowledge and my experience and that gave me a better look-in for the project they’ve got here … I meet with the [local language group] people next week. I don’t do anything without consultation with my family.

Most interviewees were more circumspect about their accountability to the represented. ‘People may not even realise’, said Peter, the interviewee who ‘carried’ Aboriginal interests, the interests of youth in his region. He had framed his metaphor carefully:

How do you put it? I think I carry—and people may not even realise—but I feel that I’m carrying their interests, you know—for those kids to get a better education and have more options in their lives in the future. I really strive for that.

Old people, kids, family, ‘the remotes’—interviewees conjured many imaginings of their absent, which as we have seen ranged from the specific to the generic Indigenous. Their diverse and scattered connections, always imagined, never forgotten, legitimised their presence, in the absence of direct evidence of the views and opinions of the represented. ‘How’s it helping the oldfella or the youngfella sitting under the tree or on the beach?’ Jay asked himself all the time. Pending a plausible answer, he kept up the pace of community visits, working hard to get confirmation that his presence in government was helping.
Perhaps it was to compensate for the lack of direct checks and balances in their relations with absent Aboriginal constituents that the interviewees closely watched each other’s performance. ‘We are hard on one another,’ said Simon, ‘but that’s just us’. Aboriginal senior public servants measured themselves against each other. Remember that Simon spoke of the public service/Indigenous sector orbit as facilitating Aboriginal representative accountability. When Simon spoke of ‘people out there and people on the inside’, he said that he meant some kind of ‘cultural’ accountability:

I just see it from a cultural perspective that you’ve got to have that balance.

Simon’s account suggests that Aboriginal officials watched each other’s performance as the differently positioned caretakers, inside and outside government, of some mutually understood absent constituency.

Speaking of forthcoming negotiations between his organisation and the government, another interviewee, Nick, expanded on this theme of watching each other’s performance inside and outside the government. Nick was requesting the attendance of a particular Aboriginal senior public servant who had ‘cultural connection’ to his region. When asked to elaborate on what this person was expected to do, Nick explained:

I want X in the room, simply because X has a cultural connection [here]. We fully understand X’s position … It would still be an advantage … so I’ve asked X to be involved in our negotiation … just to have that senior bureaucratic representation.

What did Nick mean by ‘senior bureaucratic representation’? Representation of whom, by whom, through what means and why? We could fill in the missing words: senior bureaucratic representation of local interests by someone who shared those interests, through taking care of those interests to the extent possible—because without that close-in effort, those interests might be forgotten.

It was similar for any bureaucrat with deep knowledge and commitment to a portfolio. The Aboriginal senior public servants who gave the interviews for this research had no formal constituency in, authorisation from or accountability to any other group than their employer. Nevertheless, they were members of the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, their loose authority
to act in the interests of that population was up for all to see, and their accountability to that population was keenly felt. They acted within the rules, but their sense of accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could often be greater than their sense of accountability to government.

Is representation a choice?

Can an Aboriginal senior public servant choose not to represent others? Recall that Harry was the only purely descriptive representative out of the 50 senior interviewees who self-identified. We now know that three senior interviewees did not want to be descriptive representatives at all. We also know that two of them, Jean and Randall, chose active/substantive modes of representation anyway. Only Leena refused to do any kind of representation in the Northern Territory Public Service. But we have seen that this was only possible because her Indigeneity was not widely known. So now we can answer the question. An Aboriginal senior public servant can choose not to represent others, both descriptively and substantively—as long as his or her Indigeneity is completely private. At one out of 53 senior interviewees, this was rare.

If representation is a choice, it is a choice from which it is difficult to extricate oneself. We are now in a position to understand the reluctance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bureaucrats to represent their people. They are reluctant because they know they have to do it anyway.

A political claim: Fit to govern

Frustrated, offended and sometimes rejected as representatives of their people, the senior public servants in this study drew on a social imaginary to refashion the ambivalent invitation to represent the Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory bureaucracy. In this imaginary, they were competent, indeed exemplary, Aboriginal Territorians, who did not ever forget their people and did not ever forget their past. They worked for a more socially inclusive future. Role modelling sustained this work, and sustained the self. Role modelling offered an alternative to the descriptive symbolism of ‘bums on seats’ that seemed to satisfy government, by giving effect to a relationship of political substance.
To be a role model is an inter-subjective process. But to call oneself a role model, all one has to do is imagine the esteem of others—in the case of the interviewees, youth, the unemployed, the residents of remoter communities. When the absent matter and they cannot be asked, their views must be imagined. It makes sense to imagine their esteem, because doing so builds self-esteem. To have been excluded from voting at some point in a population’s history, Mansbridge argued, conveys the message: ‘Persons with these characteristics do not rule.’ Descriptive representatives convey the opposite: ‘fitness to rule’ (Mansbridge 1999: 648–50). Here, Mansbridge drew on Cole’s finding from a study comparing the experiences of black and white elected officials in America. Cole found that among the ways in which black officials could ‘make a difference’ were linking with black citizens, role modelling to black youth, reversing stereotypes of white superiority and demonstrating their fitness to rule (Cole 1976: 221–3). Mansbridge concluded that descriptive representatives brought ‘de facto legitimacy’ to a polity, even if those they represented occupied that polity painfully (Mansbridge 1999: 650–2). If Mansbridge was right, we may see the role models in this research as fulfilling a lifetime opportunity to demonstrate that Aboriginal people are ready for the responsibilities of government.

Role modelling was a relationship. Was it a representative relationship? Some called it that. Role modelling looked and sounded like representation, and it echoed representation’s dilemmas. Was it good representation? It was the best representation under the circumstances—the representation that it was possible for 76 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants to achieve with the opportunity they had. And they did what representatives do. They argued for, and to the greatest extent possible with, their beleaguered communities, even if the pressure of circumstances demanded that they sometimes had to construct their communities imaginatively. If the quality of their representation can be measured by their sensitivity to Aboriginal relationships, it was good quality representation. Role models were making a substantive proposal when they claimed for themselves and for others: Aboriginal people are fit to govern. This role modelling was not merely symbolic representation, but raw politics.