Nic Peterson has been my friend for more than 35 years, and his work and my conversations with him have always comprised a kind of bottom line for theoretical engagement, shared (and sometimes conflicting) understandings of the everyday ways in which central Australian people relate to each other and their world.

Nic has been an intrepid scholar. I can hardly think of another scholar who has continued to engage actively in field research, in so many different places, over such a long career. He is widely known in the world as one of the most broadly knowledgeable scholars of Indigenous Australia and of hunter-gatherer society, and has been recognised as one of the few seeking a comparative framework for the understanding of contemporary indigeneity. This is why he was appropriately one of the three keynote speakers at the 1998 Hunting and Gathering Conference in Japan and why I turn to him for a reality check on work in the field. He was foundational in the establishment of frameworks for Aboriginal land rights in the 1970s and has continued significant work in this area through research, organising conferences and publication. As senior anthropologist on at least nine Aboriginal land claims, he has never rested on his laurels and has contributed hugely to the understanding of the variations in land tenure in Australia. Clearly, Nic has made major contributions over this whole time to organising a large range of work into coherent frameworks, starting with the *Tribes and Boundaries* book (Peterson 1976) and continuing to the present.\(^1\) He has a gift for rounding up work that others might never see and bringing it to light and placing it into significance. The book on *Aboriginal Territorial Organization*, with Jeremy Long (Long and Peterson 1986), was a major contribution to the field. The first book he edited on land rights in 1983 (Peterson and Langton 1983) was foundational and the more recent book on citizenship (Peterson and Sanders 1998) was significant in marking the turn in Indigenous Studies towards the framework of citizenship. Subsequently, the volume on *Customary Marine Tenure* (Peterson and Rigsby 1998)—a more applied piece of work—has taken on one of the major challenges in rethinking Indigenous land rights. Despite the obvious applied and policy value of his incredible contribution to research on various claims, this work also contributes

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1 Please refer to Appendix 2 for full references of Peterson’s publications.
to our basic understanding of Indigenous relationships to place and will surely stand as a fundamental source of future understanding. The scholarship is always impeccable and never overblown in its claims.

Although his reputation was first made in relationship to work on territoriality and land rights, Nic’s research and writing have extended far beyond these areas. I know that his knowledge of Aboriginal art and ritual is profound, although he has kept his word with respect to conventions of restriction. With Chris Pinney, he coedited a book (Pinney and Peterson 2003) on photography that has been lauded widely as a major contribution to visual anthropology (an area he has participated in by filmmaking and theorising); it received a particularly noteworthy review in The New York Times and is regarded as groundbreaking work. His interest in photography and material culture (I know from my own work how involved he has been in Aboriginal art) has also led him to develop Donald Thomson’s visual ethnography of Arnhem Land and to edit a volume that seems to have stimulated, as well as corresponded with, a rise of interest in the somewhat neglected Thomson. This is an extraordinary career of scholarship. Nic Peterson’s research record is deep, varied and widely respected. He has published and continues to publish—to very wide citation—numerous articles in the major peer-reviewed journals.

To point to one other area, his work on exchange has been especially productive. Nic and I have shared an interest in the organisation of personhood in Aboriginal communities, especially in the dialectic between relatedness and autonomy that constitutes interpersonal relationships. Nic coined the phrase ‘demand sharing’ to characterise in general theoretical terms the particular dynamics of exchange in Australia and among foragers more generally, drawing attention to the effects of the ethic of sharing not only on accumulation and development but on the structuring of kinship relationships themselves. For Nic, the implications of the domestic moral economy are a key to understanding some of the predicaments of development faced by Indigenous people, and his work in this area is now an important basis for debate among many scholars and policy makers.

Having said this, I feel that these many accomplishments still do not fully illuminate the man who has been my friend. His contribution to our field lies equally in the generosity with which he has treated younger scholars and his own (very numerous) students. I first met Nic in 1973, just after I had arrived in Australia. I had a grant, but no field site and, after a week in Sydney, it had become clear that I needed to talk with Nic Peterson. There was no requirement that he help me and yet he gave very freely of his time and attention. He was, everyone assured me, the only person who knew what was going on ‘out there’, and was just about to return from the Centre, where he had been consulting with Justice Woodward as part of the development of a model for Aboriginal land rights. I had read Nic’s paper on territorial organisation, ‘Totemism
yesterday’, and I imagined who the author of this scholarly paper might be—in some fashion, I suppose. I was not a little surprised to see how young he was, relieved to find him so direct and approachable, and then—as now—impressed with the range of classic anthropological works on his shelves and the beautiful boxes in which he kept his correspondence organised. While he informed me that Yirrkala and Millingimbi were already selected as fieldwork sites for two new PhD students at The Australian National University (Howard Morphy and Ian Keen), Nic put me in touch with Jim O’Connell—the archaeologist who had recently visited Papunya—and along with many other possible sites, Papunya went on to my list. In conversation with Nic, Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory suddenly became real and proximal.

Nic’s youthful appearance and British accent belie a rather hardy and fearless attitude. It was not until I had known him for a while that I came to learn of his appendicitis while doing fieldwork at Mirringatja—in the Arafura Swamp. There, no doubt toughened by semi-starvation in being one of the few anthropologists who tried to live off the land with consummate foragers, Nic had walked out of the swamp to find medical help and was picked up by a nursing sister on a motorbike. Now, this does sound a bit like a Monty Python story, but it tells us something about the rigours of fieldwork he was willing and able to face.

Let me fast forward to my arrival at Yayayi with a small caravan from the Institute of Aboriginal Studies, in July 1973. It was, the local boys informed me, Tjampitjinpa and Napangarti’s caravan from Yuendumu—the residence of Nic and Ros in the previous year. I seemed to be more than following in his footsteps.

I had many, intense opportunities to talk with Nic about research. After 10 months at Yayayi, I took a break and returned to Canberra, staying at Nic’s house in O’Connor. Quaintly heated and with a limited store of hot water for showers, it was a place of extraordinary generosity—of ideas, food and entertainment. I was filled with the detail and intensity of research and overwhelmed with information that flowed in conversation no doubt beyond endurance for others. I know—and I take this moment to apologise—that I must have talked their ears off. I hope it was entertaining enough to make up partly. In one of these conversations, Nic offered what became a key insight in my own approach to land tenure, suggesting that the older men who held the knowledge on which landownership was legitimated were more than capable of playing politics with this knowledge—holding back or elaborating details as they might maintain their leverage through claims of always knowing more. Perhaps I would have come to this in the end without the suggestion, but Nic’s extensive experience and political insight opened a path of thinking for me that was critical to explaining the element of choice and aggregation around place that I elaborated in my dissertation and later in articles and in my book. Perhaps, as well, he
channelled for me the critical awareness of his Warlpiri friends, because—as I came to understand—Nic always knew a great deal more than he ever claimed, and he shared it generously. I had the great good fortune to be working on the organisation of bands and landholding at just the time he was undertaking his own intensive survey and analysis of the materials available.

Similarly, Nic’s work on demand sharing has taken our discussions of the politics of sharing and giving into the world of comparative study, where it has been cited over and over.

Through the years, Nic’s generosity and hospitality have never wavered. In particular, I am indebted to him for his help and advice in my own work on the development of Aboriginal art and its market. I always thought he could have—and perhaps should have—written this from his own biography, since he had been part of and witness to all the attempts to develop Aboriginal art. He has been very modest about this, as always, and with the humorous insights that I could never use properly, has provided me with—again—a kind of reality check on what others said and told me.

Many things, however, remain cogently in my mind, especially when he talked to me about his understanding of Warlpiri ritual and his stories about Darby Tjampitjinpa—friend to many who visited Yuendumu. Always a cogent observer, in recounting these stories, Nic conveyed a pithy sense of the distinctive humanity and integrity of those he met. The most salient of these has always been the account of Darby at a time when people at Yuendumu had very little themselves (the photo on the cover of this volume shows Darby and Nic having this exact conversation, as filmed by Roger Sandall). Darby had seen a film of poverty in India and began to raise charity for them. ‘Poor buggars, they got no anything.’ And yet he gave.

We are all in Nic’s debt for his generosity and the profound insights he offers without demand for return.