

Preface

This volume brings together an innovative set of readings of complex interactions between Australian Aboriginal people and colonisers. It has its origins in 2003 when Mark Hannah, then a doctoral student in the Centre for Cross Cultural Research at The Australian National University, invited a group of early career scholars to meet in Canberra. They brought their diverse social science and humanities backgrounds to the uncovering of creative Indigenous responses to the colonial encounter in Australia, and fresh ways of writing about these. Their studies were focused in diverse parts of Australia and on different time periods, but shared a common interest in developing critical re-assessments of Australian colonial and anti-colonial histories. Their meeting encouraged face-to-face exchanges that could short-circuit the isolation often experienced by cross-disciplinary, original scholars. It also emphasised writerly aspects of creative thinking, promoting the portrayal of character, alternative prose styles and inventive narrative forms. The authors' responses to these invitations have flavoured the commissioned papers presented here. The critical and creative drives which inform them shines out in their writing. They are exciting and sometimes surprising in the angles they take, and the cross-overs of genre or subject that they offer.

The underlying theme that has informed the collection, and given the book its title, is that of 'transgression'. This owes its force and tone to Michel Foucault's account of the necessary dynamic that exists between transgression and limit. He points out that transgressions and limits exist and can be identified only because of each other. We know what constitutes the limit, not by tracing or re-stating the boundaries, but by crossing over them. Transgression 'forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes'.¹

Perhaps [transgression] is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity; the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity.²

Elizabeth Povinelli (2006) frames these concerns in terms of the interplay between individual freedom and social constraint:

Insistently driving into the thicket of social life's material and discursive conditions, [Foucault] sought not a new collective bargaining agreement to extend rights to new communities and identities, but to interrogate the limits of each and every such bargain. How do we make things that

are in reality, though not a part of knowledge, *actual*? ... Why am I governed *like this* rather than like that, here and now?³

By exploring the mechanisms by which limits are set and maintained, unexamined cultural assumptions and dominant ideas are illuminated. We see the expectations and the structures that inform and support them revealed, often as they unravel. Such illuminations and revelations are at the core of these papers: in the relationship of a contemporary historian to an eighteenth century French ethnographic observer (Konishi); in the longings expressed in people's explorations of variant indigeneities (Mulcock); in the politics of the establishment of the Tent Embassy (Lothian); in Indigenous leadership in various forms (Parry, Foley); in the creation of iconic representations of Aboriginal identity (Barnes); in rethinking legal aspects of land tenure and the working relationships of the northern pastoral industry (Anthony); in tracing the patterns of missionary attitudes to Aboriginal male sexuality (Mitchell); in the emotional freight of religious conversion (Bowles); in an emphasis on romance as a dynamic of identity (Trevillian); and in Indigenous ceremonial life played out within the structures of a built environment (Edmunds).

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Ingereth Macfarlane
Canberra, September 2007

References

- Foucault, M 1977, 'A Preface to Transgression' in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
- Povinelli, EA 2006, *The Empire of Love: toward a theory of intimacy, genealogy and carnality*, Duke University Press, London.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Foucault 1977: 28.
² Foucault 1977: 35.
³ Povinelli 2006: 158.