

A history of Indigenous futures: accounting for Indigenous art and media

Faye Ginsburg and Fred Myers

Introduction

This essay addresses the burgeoning of interventions by Indigenous artists and filmmakers into Australia's narrative of its history, over the last two decades. We examine not only the significance of this work in changing the cultural landscape of the continent, but also the paradox of the persistence, growth, and increasing circulation of such work in Indigenous cultural production, despite the alarming political turn against gains made by Indigenous Australians over the last decade, not only by right-wing politicians but intellectuals as well. While this essay works within the boundaries of Australia's situation, as American anthropologists who have worked for many years with Indigenous Australians, we are alarmed at the attacks on indigenous people's claims that have leaked into anthropology more generally. Most problematic is the polemic launched by the anthropologist Adam Kuper against indigenous people's movements, a position that gained him extensive publicity on the BBC radio, and an extended forum on 'Anthropology in Public' in the pages of *Current Anthropology*.¹ This is the broader context for our writing.

These debates are not new, although they are shaped by current situations. In the late 1970s, some anthropologists took up a position critical of pure culturalist approaches that failed to recognise an emerging and transforming Indigenous politics. For example, Terence Turner took issue with the model that identified Indigenous futures only with cultural preservation, ossifying such life worlds into unchanging enclaves. Instead, he proposed a focus on Indigenous self-production; one should not substitute the past products of people's actions (their culture) with the values people themselves sought to bring into being under constantly changing conditions. This position — which he elaborated in his work with the Kayapo in Brazil — resonates in many locations, including what we would call debates over Aboriginal futures that have been foundational to Australia.² These have been continually transforming as Indigenous people in Australia have become progressively more self-conscious and insistent on authoring the narratives that objectify their place in their communities, in the nation, and on the world stage.

1. Kuper 2003.

2. Turner 1979, 2004.

A spectre haunts Australia

We want to begin with an 1838 anecdote from the early settlement period of Western Australia, 40 years after first contact, which provides a compelling example of the power of the imaginary imposed upon Australia's Indigenous people at that time.

Walking from Perth to Fremantle once, on descending an elevation into an open valley near the sea-beach, I beheld two lawyers apparently wrestling with a grass tree. As I approached, I perceived that they were trying to uproot and throw it down. This not being an action of *trover* but one of assault, and seeing the harmless tree exposed to the vengeance of the law, I was induced to inquire what offence it had committed? They informed me that, mistaking it for a native, it had more than once frightened them, and that they were determined it should never do so again. These redoubted champions of the oppressed and the oppressor, so bold amid courts and clients, were terrified at the very idea of meeting an Aborigine.³

Now, in 2006, it seems that — like that tree 168 years ago — a spectre haunts Australia's lawmakers and its Indigenous people. The prime minister persists in his refusal to offer an apology for the nation's history of government programs destructive to Aboriginal life. This lack of recognition permeates many governmental decisions, such as the May 2004 abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). The 21st century has been marked by politicians and pundits debating a return to policies once thought thoroughly discredited, a sentiment captured in the title of the edited book, *Waking up from Dreamtime: the illusions of Aboriginal self-determination*.⁴ Not surprisingly, this disturbing reversal of political sentiment has emanated largely from right-wing critics of the progressive stance toward Aboriginal development. They have rejected hard-won principles of Aboriginal autonomy articulated by Indigenous activists since the 1960s, ideas that offered hope and a foundation for an Indigenous future beyond the non-choices of total assimilation or a frozen traditionalism.

But it is not only dedicated right-wingers who have been asking questions. In 2002, the historian Keith Windschuttle published the first volume of a promised three, entitled *The fabrication of Aboriginal history: Van Diemen's Land*.⁵ Even some anthropologists, discouraged by the devastating conditions in remote communities (alcohol abuse, petrol-sniffing, violence and death), have asked how aspects of Aboriginal culture unwittingly might contribute to such conditions.⁶ The Indigenous intellectual Noel Pearson, one of the principal negotiators of Native Title legislation in the early 1990s and a member of the Cape York Land Council, has insisted that Aboriginal people must take greater responsibility for the fate of their own communities, breaking down a pattern of 'welfare dependency'.⁷ Taking a different approach, Elizabeth Povinelli is nonetheless discouraging in her critique of the limits of Australia's multicultural frameworks that, she argues, rule out the recognition of non-traditional Aboriginal subjects.⁸

3. Lyon 1838, cited in Healy 1979.

4. Jones 2001.

5. Windschuttle 2002.

6. For example Maddock 2001; Sutton 2001.

7. Pearson 2001.

8. Povinelli 2002.

While the current situation is indeed alarming, we are concerned that Indigenous Australia's 'resources of hope'⁹ are rendered marginal. Where, in all this debate are the people with whom we have been working over the last two decades — the painters, the musicians, the media-makers — in short the cultural activists who are shaping, through their cultural labour, possibilities for Aboriginal futures outside the defining limits of law and policy? Through their cultural production, the Indigenous artists and intellectuals whose work we study and support are creating — in a range of media from dot paintings to feature films — an Indigenous presence for themselves and as a force with which others must reckon.

Clearly, questions about Aboriginal futures are not new; they have characterised the framing of policy about Australia's Indigenous inhabitants almost from the point of contact. *Are there Aboriginal futures?* What can we learn from examining the history of the ways in which they have been imagined over the last 200 years in policy and popular culture, and their transformation during the last half century in the hands of Indigenous cultural activists? Policies are, of course, not simply bureaucratic formations but are given vitality as a social force through powerful and persuasive narratives — most effectively in popular media through which they circulate promiscuously, seducing the hearts, minds, and support of the Australian public for certain projects in which Indigenous people have been positioned as inevitably disappearing. Over time and with increasing self-consciousness, Indigenous cultural activists have sought to crack the distorted mirror that has been held up to them. Beginning in the 1960s, from all parts of Indigenous Australia, urban and remote, people began talking back in the idioms available to them, from traditional bark paintings, to political performances intended for local audiences, as well as national radio, television, and cinema. They have been raiding the colonial archive, using their own creative work to resignify these documents and images that once naturalised ethnocidal projects, while also recuperating Aboriginal history for Indigenous people and all Australians. In what follows, we examine the post post-colonial work of Indigenous people whose activities go beyond critique, developing a counter discursive Aboriginal imaginary that is crucial to their contemporary self-production and the creation of a 'cultural future'.¹⁰ These efforts have been attained with great difficulty, struggle, imagination and the mobilising of a myriad of cultural resources.

This essay follows a doubled *telos* — tracing both the changing nature of Australia's policy towards Indigenous people's presence, and the work of Aboriginal subjects as they have demanded the right to represent themselves both politically and culturally. In other words, we are tracking a history of Indigenous futures in Australia, over a period in which Indigenous people have slowly but surely been re-imagining what they might be.

Dispossession, death, protection: disappearance

As is well-known, for much of Australia's history, from 1788 until the 1930s, the cultures of Aboriginal people were seen by British settlers as valueless, primitive, inferior, lacking civilisation, and having no rights to land. Indeed, the legal doctrine the settlers

9. Williams 1983.

10. Michaels 1987.

imposed, of the continent as *terra nullius* (or empty land), attempted to erase the Indigenous presence from, and claims to, the continent despite other evidence to the contrary. As they were being killed or displaced along the moving frontier and seemed unable to be 'developed', evolutionist preoccupations of the 19th century endorsed the policy of displacing or missionising them for their own 'protection', making Aboriginal people wards of the state, requiring protection and administration, including oversight of their work, their wages, their marriages, their movements.

By the 20th century, it was clear that despite efforts at segregation, the mixed-descent population was growing. An extreme position of the assimilation policy – inaugurated in the late 1930s – imagined this social fact as part of the supposedly natural disappearance of the Aboriginal, even to the point of genetic absorption. In her documentary *Stolen Generations* made in 2000, Indigenous filmmaker Darlene Johnson – whose work we discuss in detail below – draws from mission and government archives made during the 1930s to persuade the Australian public of the value and inevitability of assimilation, and resignifies them in her film, replacing the original narration with the voices of those who had been taken from their families. Their stories create a new narrative; the archival films are no longer indexical of Aboriginal 'uplift', but rather of the violence of Australian racial policy. Films such as *Stolen Generations* represent these images as part of an effort to undermine irreversibly the naturalising power they once had, while also demonstrating that white Australia has a black history, as the longstanding slogan proclaims.

Johnson's film makes clear how Australia's racial ideology gained legitimacy among well-intentioned white citizens through the technologies of photography and film. These were used to create visible evidence for Australia's citizens of the imagined transformations being wrought by this supposed 'rescue'. At one point in Johnson's film, she shows a black and white newsreel segment entitled 'A dream come true: Native girls' fairy palace', in which three Aboriginal girls from northern Australia are seen living in a wealthy Melbourne home, a modern assimilated location for their imagined future. In this case, one can see how easily the erasure of Indigenous family relations and cultural life takes place. In a chilling and seamless repetition of the *terra nullius* doctrine, but in the idiom of kinship, Aboriginal mothers in particular are erased ('these girls have no mother' the narrator tells us) while white families are valorised. Material advantage is posited as unquestioningly able to displace the unnamed and implicitly denigrated Indigenous resources of kinship and cultural knowledge. Such narratives, which circulated widely in movie theaters and eventually on television, are the forms through which the assimilation policy became naturalised for a broad Australian public, moving from bureaucratic documents onto celluloid and into the popular imagination. The segment's title takes on considerable historical irony as we hear other first-person accounts of the nightmarish experiences of what in fact happened to many children who were taken away from their Aboriginal families through the 1960s. These accounts provide counter-evidence of how projects of assimilation and removal were actually experienced by Aboriginal people.

The memories and consequences of being taken are movingly recalled in Johnson's interview sequence with Bobby Randall, the well-known Aboriginal activist/musician. Randall's song chronicling his own removal from his mother on Pitjantjatjara lands, 'My brown skinned baby', became an anthem for Aboriginal families across Aus-

tralia who had suffered similar fates. In the film, we hear his voice as we watch archival footage of Aboriginal children in a mission being washed, dressed in western clothes, and lined up in formation. The film footage in which Indigenous subjectivity was erased, now becomes redolent with Randall's narrative of the experience of removal — its sights, its sounds, its emotional landscape, and above all his inconsolable longing for his mother.

Through this film, Darlene Johnson, like other Indigenous cultural activists working in a variety of media forms, is intervening in the apparatus through which Aboriginal people were made iconic only of a traditional past or a dystopic present, and thus constructed as people with no future other than assimilation. In this case, by resignifying the very media the government and others used to deny recognition to the meaning of Aboriginal alterity, she recuperates history from an Indigenous point of view, creating what Ginsburg calls 'screen memories'.¹¹ Through the successful efforts of activists to gain a place for Indigenous media locally and in prestigious national and international venues, the circulatory reach of this work has succeeded in complicating, productively, the place of Aboriginal subjects in Australia's national narrative.

Their work addresses three aspects of Australian policy that particularly undermined acknowledgment of Indigenous experience, culture and history: (1) the lack of recognition of Aboriginal land rights; (2) the limitation of Aboriginal civil rights; and (3) the practice of removing 'part-Aboriginal' children for their imagined improvement. By the 1960s, Indigenous activists began to challenge these policies in these three key areas. Indigenous differences from other cultural minorities, in terms of sovereignty and their historical relation to land, were dramatically enacted in protests whose resonance was greatly enhanced by the burgeoning mass media in Australia. By mid-century this was able to amplify and circulate these political performances far beyond local enactments.

Freedom Ride — civil rights

In 1965, Freedom Ride protests in Australia's more populated south-east were led by Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins, attracting sympathetic white student activists concerned with the deplorable conditions among a more 'assimilated' and dispossessed sector of the Aboriginal population. Drawing on the Civil Rights model from the US, university students joined forces with Aboriginal people to carry out Freedom Rides in rural New South Wales, where racism was longstanding and entrenched. The Freedom Riders — Student Action for Aborigines — sought to bring attention to segregation of public facilities, inadequate housing, and other forms of discrimination.

In 1992, Charles Perkins' daughter Rachel Perkins made a documentary celebrating the accomplishments of Australia's Freedom Riders, in particular her father, as part of a series called 'Blood Brothers', for the Indigenous Unit of Australia's 'alternative' national television station SBS (Special Broadcast Service). Her major concern was to restore, in popular form, the history of Aboriginal activism from this key period when Indigenous subjects gained citizenship, voting rights, and visibility as legitimate social actors with claims on the Australian state. This film documents a paradigmatic shift in the imagination of Aboriginal futures by civil rights activists — both Aboriginal and

11. Ginsburg 2003.

Euro-Australian — who made claims on the promise of equal rights implicit in assimilationist ideology. The idealism and modest bravery of the white and black activists whose memories shape the film brings a clear message from the past about what might be accomplished in the present.

Performativity: manifestations of Indigenous presence and uncontrollability

Concurrent with the Freedom Rides, in remote Australia, the Gove Land Rights case and the Gurindji labor walk off contributed to the transformation of national consciousness and policies built on the model of assimilation. Both protests drew on traditional Aboriginal forms of performativity in which ritualised embodied display stands as a form of evidentiary truth.

In the first of these protests in 1963, the Gove Land Rights case, the Yolngu people at Yirrkala in Northern Australia sent bark petitions to Parliament to protest the excision of more than 300 square kilometers of their land for bauxite mining on the Gove Peninsula. Based on clan designs that represented traditional title to sacred places passed through kin groups, the bark petitions were a brilliant transformation of the longstanding cultural idiom of bark paintings into an emblematic form of cultural self-objectification as political performance presented to the Australian federal government, a calculated and ultimately successful act to gain attention on the national stage. (The petition is on permanent display at Parliament House.)

The Supreme Court judgment on their case eventually ruled against them in 1971, maintaining that there was no title to land; Australian law continued to regard the continent as *terra nullius*. Yet, the intuitively valid claims of Yolngu people to a distinctive, ritually formulated relationship to these places, epitomised in the bark petition, created great sympathy throughout Australia for recognition of Indigenous rights to land, and created an Aboriginal culture and identity acceptable for national recognition: the 'traditionally oriented' Aboriginal with religious and spiritual links to the land — and far from White settlement.

The second foundational case of Indigenous activism in remote Australia was the walk-off by Gurindji-speaking Aboriginal people who went on strike against Vestey's pastoral company in the Northern Territory, where they had worked for over two generations. In 1967 they stopped work, protesting the inhuman living and working conditions on cattle stations. They shifted their camp to another part of the lease, called Wattie Creek, and demanded acknowledgment that this was their land, asking for an excision so they might develop their own economic enterprises and over which they should exercise religious control. Their demands went beyond the civil rights model of the Freedom Rides, as Australian cultural historian Tim Rowse points out.

Their walk off, the firmest rejection of assimilationist thinking that Aborigines had yet made, was covered sympathetically in the southern press. Actions such as those of the Gurindji were beginning to expose a problem. Could the demands for equality and for indigenous land rights be reconciled? The less Aborigines had been exposed to Europeans, the more likely they were to see their law as having priority over the customs and legal system introduced by Europeans.¹²

¹² Rowse 1987: 140.

In 1967, Aborigines gained rights as Australian citizens, an act catalysed by growing awareness of the 'Aboriginal problem', and in sympathy with the Gurindji, Yolngu and Freedom Ride protests.

There is an irony in that these protests drew on long-standing Indigenous performative idioms for asserting claims to traditional ownership (or sovereignty). While these were effective in gaining the sympathy of white Australians, the reliance on 'traditional culture' as a basis for legitimate claims had (excuse the pun) a boomerang effect. Many Indigenous people who cannot satisfactorily demonstrate what was called 'traditional attachment to the land' are doubly dispossessed by their apparent 'lack of Aboriginal culture'.

By 1972, under pressure from activists, the official policy of the preceding era began to shift from an emphasis on the modernising fantasy of 'assimilation' and the eradication of Aboriginal culture, towards one of land rights, and 'self-determination', including support for distinctive cultural practices, the program endorsed by the new Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam of the Australian Labor Party. Many Indigenous people and their supporters expected that the recognition of rights of ownership over ancestral lands would restore a basis for Aboriginal people to face the future from a strong foundation based in their own cultural identifications.

Indigenous activists realised the dangers inherent in Euro-Australian legal systems enshrining traditional culture as the basis for Aboriginal identity and claims to land and other resources. This position threatened to divide Indigenous people among themselves, much as earlier racialised policies had created invidious distinctions between what were called 'full blood' and 'mixed blood' people.

Tent Embassy – black power, sovereignty

The movement from 'civil rights', towards self-determination built new forms of Aboriginal self-consciousness, kindled by the heady success of the Freedom Rides, the sobering rejection of the Yolngu claim, and an awareness of the impact of the American Black Power movement. This became dramatically evident in 1972 in a claim for Indigenous sovereignty represented by the planting of a materially modest but symbolically powerful Tent Embassy in front of Parliament House in Canberra. The protesters there were aided once again by the mass media's unwitting alliance in expanding the reach of this initially haphazard political performance on the part of urban Aboriginal activists – many active in theatre and law. This new generation was creating their own representations of what contemporary Indigeneity might look like for themselves and for the Australian public. They rejected the power of the state to define them and their future, pushing against the limits of the multicultural model.

In 1992, Indigenous filmmaker and musician Frances Peters-Little made a film about the Tent Embassy, following the young activists' lives 20 years later, in part to celebrate the anniversary of this event. Contemporary lives were framed by archival footage from the early days of Australian television, in order to present this key piece of Aboriginal history to the public. Like other Indigenous media-makers, Frances Peters-Little sought to use the power of national television to locate, re-circulate, and resignify images of urban Aboriginal people organising on their own behalf. *Tent Embassy* was intended to rupture Australian national narratives that excluded evidence of Aboriginal subjects as participants in their own political projects. If traditional ownership was

objectified through ceremonies, dancing, and dot paintings for remote living people, for urban dwellers like Frances, their legacy was inscribed on celluloid and videotape.

Documentary offered a technology of truth through which Peters-Little and others claimed the place of Indigenous activists in creating and contesting the Australian imaginary. The Tent Embassy was part of Peters-Little's history. She came of age in the 1970s in the cultural and political excitement of Sydney's black cultural and political life. Why, she wondered, in 1992 was there no public acknowledgment in the media or school curricula of the 20th anniversary of the groundbreaking efforts of the Tent Embassy. It had not been a fleeting incident; the protesters had stayed on Parliament grounds for seven months in 1972, irreversibly transforming not only government policy toward Land Rights and Aboriginal self-determination, but also the public shape of an Indigenous presence, amplified by burgeoning television and radio.

Yet, when Peters-Little was in school, this event — so significant in her own history — was virtually invisible. Such 'cognitive dissonance' motivated her (and others) to search out the evidence of Australia's recent black history and provide it with a second life through their own work. Frances Peters-Little was able to do so in her capacity as a producer at the Indigenous Programs Unit of the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation). This unit was established as part of the demands of this later generation that Indigenous people have a greater voice and presence in national mass media, demands that peaked in 1988, during the Australian Bicentenary whose celebration Indigenous people vigorously protested. Demonstrators reminded Australia that they had not been 'discovered', renaming the day of Cook's arrival on antipodean soil 'Invasion Day'.

Self-determination

Throughout the 1970s, 'Aboriginal self-determination' was the watchword, suggesting that Indigenous people might imagine and determine their own futures; this involved the Aboriginalisation of institutions like the Arts Board of the Australian Council. However, by the 1980s, urban Indigenous people felt themselves denied legitimacy as Aboriginal, lacking what was taken from them by dispossession. As became clear in the process of adjudicating cases for the *Northern Territory Land Rights Act* (and later, in the 1990s the *Native Title Act*), the forms of recognition were still defined by government policy, making a cruel joke of legislation initially anticipated to acknowledge Indigenous autonomy. This is the heart, for example, of Povinelli's critique of Australian law and cultural policy¹³ and its denial of recognition to Indigenous people who were seen as lacking 'culture', 'language' and 'ritual', the attributes on which Australian policy based recognition of Aboriginality. Land Rights, as enacted, did not provide an organisational basis for a broad Aboriginality but rather reinscribed divisions between remote traditional people and urban dwellers, dividing people against each other based on external standards of authenticity.

The repair of this divide became a focus of subsequent political and cultural action, in particular through the strongest and most salient post-Land Rights formulation, articulated in what has come to be known as the Stolen Generations narrative.

13. Povinelli 2002.

Here, the resignifying of a crucial feature of Australia's assimilation policy — the removal of Indigenous children from their families — is the central theme. As discussed earlier, it was long known that Australian policies had removed mixed-race children from their Aboriginal mothers, placing them in institutions and sometimes out for adoption where they were often treated as household slaves. It was imagined that these individuals could be made into Australian citizens (albeit second class), but it was not recognised that this profound rupture of kinship and family life and its unacknowledged trauma might undermine children and their natal families alike for generations.

By the early 1990s, the fact and naming of the 'Stolen Generations' became iconic of the Aboriginal condition in Australia, motivating a 1995 inquiry that resulted in a report entitled *Bringing them home*¹⁴ which set forth a range of debates about responsibility, about the facts, and about the policies that had prevailed. It should be noted that the framework drew on an international vocabulary of reconciliation as an idiom for imagining how the body politic might acknowledge past wrongs and move forward productively into the future. In this articulation of Aboriginal identity occasioned by the inquiry, 'loss' became a central issue that gathered up the threads of a very broad Indigenous experience.

This is the circumstance that shaped the work of Darlene Johnson, the Indigenous filmmaker who made the film *Stolen Generations*. A light-skinned Aboriginal woman, she came of age in the mid 1990s, around the time when the *Bringing them home* report was being discussed and drafted. A student of the scholar and Aboriginal activist Marcia Langton and the filmmaker/photographer Tracy Moffatt, Johnson found that their work illuminated her own history, and she began to understand how she was part of a much larger process. Her first film, *Two Bob Mermaid*, made in 1996, is a short fictional work made for an initiative called 'Sand to Celluloid', meant to encourage emerging talent in Indigenous fiction filmmaking, and sponsored by the Indigenous Unit created in 1994 at the Australian Film Commission. *Two Bob Mermaid* drew on her mother's biography and the problem of Aboriginal people 'passing' as Whites, a 'choice' which required denying kinship with one's own darker-skinned relations. In the climactic scene of the film, the central character — a light skinned Aboriginal teenager who aspires to become a champion swimmer in a field where only whites were able to compete — faces that dilemma as it plays out during an inter-racial fracas at the segregated swimming pool in her town.

In *Stolen Generations*, Johnson takes the essential step of providing a framework for the public telling of stories of how Indigenous people came to be separated from their kin and culture, and the recurring consequences of that in their lives. As a narrative mnemonic device, Johnson brought people to sites associated with their natal families while making the film, encounters which we are privileged to witness. In circulating these stories through its screening, the documentary, like the *Bringing them home* report, is part of a broad process of cultural repair that begins with the acknowledgment by the Australian public of what happened.

¹⁴ National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families 1997.

It is clear that Indigenous people regard the removal policy and its effects as standing for the broader history of dispossession, non-recognition and racial oppression aimed directly at the heart of Aboriginal cultural transmission (of language, of custom, of religion) and at the heart of Indigenous sociality (kinship). The accounts collected from those who were adopted and removed are poignant testimonials of loss, of a sense of rejection and abandonment. Why, they wonder, did my mother give me up? Implicitly and explicitly, the pathologies described in contemporary communities are traced to their root in a narrative of violent disruption and dispossession.

Against the contemporary critics of Indigenous autonomy as a source of pathology, the Stolen Generations narrative provides a more complex genealogy, unpacking the evidence of the everyday impact of governmental policies that removed so many from their families, their cultures, their land, their languages, their histories. This loss, which the evidence so eloquently presents, is not seen as the result of Indigenous action but as having occurred in spite of their struggle. The differences among Indigenous people are understood as a consequence of policies. The question is how repair might take place.

Confessions of a head hunter was made in 2000, part of an ongoing initiative by the Indigenous Branch of the Australian Film Commission to train people in fiction film production mentioned earlier. In this antic but deadly serious film, director Sally Riley (the current head of the Indigenous Unit of the AFC) depicts the longed-for transformation of the colonial legacy through the story of a young man who had been adopted by a white family, and discovers his Aboriginal identity. Horrified by the wrongs committed against his ancestors by the colonisers of Australia, he sets off on a spree decapitating statues honoring colonial authorities, eventually transforming them into his own memorial depicting an Aboriginal mother and her children, recreating the family he never experienced.

Acrylic painting

Recent work on the acrylic painting movement traces another cultural intervention that has become significant in the formation of Aboriginal consciousness, a medium not only of Indigenous cultural expression and economy, but also of repairing the divide.¹⁵ Acrylic painting began in 1971 at Papunya as an assertion of Indigenous culture against the experience of assimilation at this settlement, a striking movement against the 'total institution' that critics had begun to see as the effect of settlement life.

This assertion of Indigenous presence through the redeployment of emblems of Indigenous identity and custodianship of their land continued the interventions that had begun with the 1960s (Gove) Yirrkala protests. Such acrylic painting had its roots in the desire for cultural respect and recognition; in showing their religious heritage, Indigenous people hoped they would convince the larger society of their ongoing cultural life and their claims to the land on which they lived. In this assertion of a continuing Indigenous presence, however, the circulation of acrylic paintings displayed not only cultural authority, but also sovereignty for the Aboriginal painters.

¹⁵ Myers 2002.

Acrylic painting gained practical support from sympathetic sectors of a changing Australian public service sector who could imagine Aboriginal culture as a basis for economic development and for a cultural pride they believed necessary for any development to occur. Yet, few of these advisers understood this as the painters did, as an exchange and display of valued sacred property, thereby constituting and objectifying relationships around which personhood could be defined and from which persons could project themselves.

Artistic recognition, in the form of increasing sales and commissions as well as exhibitions in venues of high cultural value in Australia and overseas, did allow this particular objectification of Indigenous culture to become a foundation for further action. The recognition of acrylic painting by the state, its incorporation into national collections was not simply a one-way appropriation. These exchanges conveyed value and political potential to the Indigenous project, and their objectifications have become loci of identification for a broader Aboriginal identity.

In September 1993, to take an important example, Michael Nelson Tjakamarra threatened to destroy the much publicised mosaic he had made in the symbolically charged forecourt of the Australian Parliament House. He was protesting against the change in the government's commitment to Aboriginal people during the 'Black Friday' impasse in the negotiations over legislation to implement native title. His design drew on the land-based mythological traditions of his country in central Australia, a Dreaming story that narrated the settlement of dispute between quarreling groups. He spoke before a group of 1000 demonstrators at Parliament House on 27 September 1993:

I am an artist, not a politician. I'm not used to standing up in front of everyone making speeches. I only speak for my paintings. And my paintings speak for me — and my culture. You don't seem to understand. You look at my work, all you see is the pretty painting, a pretty picture. That's why they asked me to come to Canberra and explain this forecourt mosaic. You the white people took this country from us. You must recognise Aboriginal people have our own culture, our Dreamtime, ceremonies, place where we held our corroborees for our Dreaming. It is what my paintings are about. My painting for the mosaic in the forecourt of Parliament House represent all the indigenous people in this land, the wider Australia. That's why I put all the different animals — represent to me all the peoples at this place. The circle in the middle is one of my Dreamings, a place back home. But it also stand for this place where all the Aboriginal people come and meet together, just like we do in our ceremony, to discuss and work together. White people must understand that this land is Aboriginal peoples' homeland, we are still here keeping the laws of the Dreaming. We want to keep our culture strongly for our children's children. We cannot do this without our land because it is our life, that Dreaming, story, the paintings, our culture, it is all tied to our land. This has all been changed. This is no longer a meeting place for Aboriginal people. The government of Australia are still not recognizing our people and our culture. It is abusing my painting and insulting my people. It make my people sad that government does not respect my paints or my people. I want to take my painting back to my people.¹⁶

16. Michael Nelson Tjakamarra quoted in Johnson 1997: 128.

Such action, in front of the nation's cameras and written media, shows how the paintings of traditional communities have come to take on a far larger cultural and political load as part of Indigenous cultural capital.

This was even clearer in 2000 at the 25 year retrospective exhibition of Papunya Tula painting — 'Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius' — at the Art Gallery of New South Wales as part of the millennial Olympic Arts Festival in Sydney. The Pintupi painters — once considered Australia's most primitive of Aboriginal groups, incapable of a cultural future — were now among those chosen to inaugurate the Olympic Games as part of Australia's presentation or marketing of itself to the world. The show was curated by Hetti Perkins, who might be called a 'post-Civil Rights' urban Indigenous cultural activist. The fact that she played so active a role in curating this show with a remote community is another kind of reversal of the historical and colonising separation of more remote, traditional people from their bicultural, urban-dwelling Indigenous compatriots. The Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the Art Gallery of NSW, Hetti's position represents an important stage and a significant place for art and cultural institutions. The significance of the exhibition was to be understood not as a capitulation to the state but another intervention in its narratives. This was unquestionably a new stage in the production of Indigenous cultural life, one that could draw on past and present. The space of the museum, once considered an arena of containment by the dominant, became a space of other possibilities, enabling different consolidations of cultural power, in this case the alliance of remote Indigenous painters, urban Indigenous curators, and supportive fellow-travellers, as well as other Aboriginal artists and activists.

There are many histories — Indigenous, personal, intercultural — that can be brought into visibility and renegotiated through the circulation and recognition of this art. Here we draw attention to what is fundamental about Aboriginal painting as an objectification, about its capacity to bring into association social actors across a wide spectrum. Unexpectedly, these paintings have operated in a way resonant of the effects of traditional ritual objects that — as Myers argues in his ethnography of Pintupi people¹⁷ — provide a framework for people to recognise their shared identity. But such projections do not take place in a field free of tension and struggle.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Indigenous acrylic painting was increasingly legitimated in value as 'art' in a series of purchases and exhibitions by state-run art galleries (museums) in Australia, by banks and commercial institutions and some internationally celebrated exhibitions. Yet, this work was haunted by an undertone of suspicion, fueled by a series of art scandals, focused on forgeries of Aboriginal art and on cases in which works were sold in the name of famous Aboriginal painters that had actually been done by their kin. The scandals had the effect of undermining the certainty that painting represented an authentic form of Aboriginal presence, suggesting corruption of cultural value through commoditisation.¹⁸

These were questions about Aboriginality and the politics that surrounded Indigenous people during the approach of the 2000 Olympics. Such questions are (and were

¹⁷. Myers 1986.

¹⁸. Myers 2002.



Michael Nelson Tjakamarra, with Charlie Perkins, Matilda House, women from the communities of Kintore and Mt Liebig and others, prepares to remove the center stone portion of the mosaic of his design at the forecourt of Parliament House, Canberra, 28 September 1993. Photograph from *The Australian*, photographer unknown

then) understood to question the worth of Indigenous cultural production and its capacity to co-exist in modernity. Marcia Langton, the activist and intellectual who had inspired Darlene Johnson, regarded this as an insulting challenge to the integrity of the older men who had made this work: 'If you stand in front of some of these paintings, it is surely not possible to walk out of the gallery with the low level apprehension of Aboriginal art that is now circulating in Australian popular media. It is surely not possible'.¹⁹

The Papunya Tula show was a cultural and political triumph, but in its very success there is a paradox. This national exhibition of Western Desert acrylic painting ultimately comes up against the problem of race in Australia. While Indigenous Australians are increasingly celebrated in contexts such as the Papunya Tula retrospective, the wider conditions for their lives remain poor, and are in danger of further immiseration. How are we to understand the existence of such spaces? Under the Howard government, why would they be tolerating and supporting such an exhibition? The government of John Howard has abolished since 1996, special programs to support Aboriginal participation in higher education, and in 2004 dismantled ATSIC, the central source of funding for Indigenous communities and projects. In other words, while there has been broad support for Aboriginal causes and cultural work, policies and public debate have been increasingly organised around a denial of Indigenous claims to self-determination and efforts to expose and redress historical injustice. Clearly, in the context of the Olympics especially, the marketing of a distinctive Australia abroad through its Aboriginal cultural forms remains a valuable strategy, even within a regime hostile to Indigenous rights. At the risk of extending our argument too far, we want to point out that this kind of tipping point – the worldwide indigenising of the curation if not control of this kind of material – has an effect. While the recognition of Indigenous representations has served the interests of the state in some ways, they make the state's efforts at cultural and political containment anxious and unstable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we return to the question that motivated this essay: why is it that Indigenous media and painting make up such a significant part of contemporary Indigenous public cultural practice – presenting alternative narratives to dominant Australian historiography – yet are not given more recognition as a vital dimension of Aboriginal self-production? The practitioners themselves say that storytelling and performativity are modes with which Aboriginal people are comfortable. They give voice and visibility to Aboriginal subjects whose lives might otherwise go unnoticed, and they are forms with broad circulatory reach, from remote communities to the Sydney Opera House, to the Cannes Film Festival.

The practice of 'dot painting' in acrylics borrows the frame of art in order to project iconic tokens of Indigenous value and identity, a form in which the confrontation with White Australia has been indirect, but the assertion of Indigenous presence and sovereignty is still vital. Indigenous media-makers cross between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds in resignifying colonial narratives and dramatising the phenomenological life world of Aboriginal Australians. The re-narration of already existing

¹⁹ Langton 2000.

images, working with the heightened but slippery indexicality of media such as film and photography, ruptures the images' attachment to regimes that effaced Aboriginal experience, exposing instead their histories as distorted artifacts, that show the impact of Australia's racial policies in 'whitening' Indigenous subjects.

The films considered here are important not only for their reinscription of the archive; they are themselves performative of a transformation in Australian public culture in which Indigenous people are talking back and gaining acknowledgment of their realities, from a range of subject positions that render evident the complexity and vitality of contemporary Indigenous lives. Given the conservative drift of Australian political culture and recent academic challenges to Indigenous claims, their work takes on increasing significance as interventions into efforts to pathologise Aboriginal culture in the interests of neoliberal agendas.

And what of the work that we do, as anthropologists? Here, we want to quote briefly from a recent piece by Bruno Latour in *Critical Inquiry*, a polemic he wrote calling for a constructive critical practice entitled 'Why has critique run out of steam?':

The critic is not the one who debunks but the one who assembles, not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of naïve believers, but the one who offers arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between anti-fetishism and positivism like Goya's drunk iconoclast but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care.²⁰

Those of us who work with and study cultural activism have the opportunity to amplify as well as analyse their work, drawing attention to the possibilities of their creations as part of ongoing emancipatory projects that are 'in need of great care', as Latour says, in the face of the current spectre that haunts Australia.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Frances Peters-Little for inviting us to be part of this special issue of *Aboriginal History*. This article is a modest revision of an earlier essay, 'A history of Aboriginal futures' published as part of a festschrift in honour of Terence Turner in *Critique of Anthropology*, Winter 2006.

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