

# **UNDERSTANDING WHITE PRIVILEGE AND ITS LEGACY IN AUSTRALIA**

EXEGESIS: Understanding white privilege—various stations on a journey of  
discovery

MEMOIR: Searching for the glad tomorrow—  
Memoir of a non-Indigenous intercultural worker

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## Abstract

The particular focus of my research is to understand white privilege and its legacy, and as it relates to my early informal and formal experiences and lifetime of work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote, regional and urban Australian settings from 1981 to 2021. Consideration of a creative memoir of my working life as a white, middle-class Australian caused me to reflect on my own privileges and the relative disadvantage of the Indigenous Australians I worked with in the fields of adult education, community development, public administration and governance.

This study explores the complexities of intercultural work and contributes to the development of strategies to address systemic issues arising from unearned privileges in society, making particular use of terms and concepts articulated by American academic, Peggy McIntosh, in 1988. Using the analogy of a journey of discovery, inspired by Jackie Huggins, and McIntosh's 'invisible knapsack', this study 'unpacks' my backpack of white privilege in societal systems marked by white supremacy. It provides a lens for examining the implications for intercultural work, relationships and institutional change. It also provides insights into successful developmental approaches that I believe work well and that I have consistently adopted since first working in the field forty years ago—by always working *with* Indigenous peoples and adopting a range of approaches that are people-centred and participatory. In contemporary Australia, this study provides alternative strategies for intercultural workers to consider, adopt and adapt.

*Keywords: White privilege, white supremacy, adult education, andragogy, community development, people-centred participatory development, decolonization, intercultural workers, Northern Territory Open College of TAFE (NTOC), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), Office of Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations (ORAC), Office of Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC), Reconciliation Australia, Centrefarm Aboriginal Horticulture Limited.*

## List of publications (sample of poetry)

Regent Theatres, Empire Halls

<https://not-very-quiet.com/2020/03/30/regent-theatres-empire-halls/>

Culture Shock, published in *Inlandia* by K A Nelson (Recent Work Press, 2018)

The master key, published in the *Canberra Times*, 2020

The long view, published in *Inlandia* by K A Nelson (Recent Work Press, 2018)

At the single women's camp

<https://not-very-quiet.com/2019/03/13/at-the-single-women's-camp/>

Induction (intercultural field), published in *Inlandia* by K A Nelson (Recent Work Press, 2018)

Comfort, Christmas 2020

<https://oldwaterratpublishing.com/comfort-christmas-2020/>

Postcard from Bondi, 3 January 2021-07-15

<https://not-very-quiet.com/2021/03/14/postcard-from-bondi/>

## Style

This study—exegesis and creative product—is the result of practice-led research and direct experience, including forty years working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and a seven-year association with the peoples of Papua New Guinea (1974–81). In addition, I have kept a journal for the past thirty years, which has contributed to writing poetry based on joyful and difficult experiences. As such, objectivity and reflexivity, or critical reflection, have been central to my process.

This study is intended as a catalyst for change. It is intended for a broad audience. However, as the exegesis makes clear, non-Indigenous Australians face particular attitudinal and behavioural challenges if racism, white privilege and white supremacy are to be diminished in our society.

An understanding that ways of knowing, being and doing differ between cultures was brought home to me as a young adult and this understanding has deepened over time and continues to grow. A desire to connect with the people I worked with (and still work with) means I am continually learning. I sometimes walk a fine line, cross borders and return home to a ‘self’ that is changed by seminal engagements with other people and events.

There are many epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies in the world. It has been one of my many privileges to be exposed to more than the dominant, Western way of knowing, being and doing. Even as I write of being able to critique my own culture, I am aware that I still appreciate many aspects of it. This, and my values, ground me in a multicultural world.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols are important in my day-to-day work practices, but vary in importance depending on the location and the familiarity of my

relationships. My knowledge of protocols and their adoption has been incremental. They are measures of respect, a way to demonstrate that we, as individuals and as a nation, value First Nations people and their diverse cultures.

Throughout this study, the term ‘Indigenous’ is not intended as a mark of disrespect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but as a way of including all Indigenous peoples affected by colonisation. The emerging protocol of acknowledging individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by referring to their cultural and language group has been adopted in this study where possible.

The referencing style used in the exegesis follows the University of Canberra recommendations set out in the HDR Thesis Submission & Examination Guidelines. It also complies with the updated Australian Government *Style Manual*, published in September 2020.

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The friendship, generosity and guidance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over the past forty years is one impetus for undertaking this study. That, and the hope that my daughter will understand what motivated me to work in the intercultural field, underpins all the effort, all the words.

# Contents

Abstract	iii
Form B	v
Certificate of Authorship of Thesis	v
List of publications (sample of poetry)	vii
Style	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
<b>EXEGESIS Understanding white privilege— various stations on a journey of discovery</b>	1
Preface	3
Chapter 1: Understanding white privilege	7
Chapter 2: An exploration of Indigenous experiences and perspectives of racism and white privilege	15
Chapter 3: Early lessons in development in Papua New Guinea and at home	33
Chapter 4: Key stations in my journey of discovery	47
Chapter 5: Systemic issues: connections between white privilege, white supremacy, and the relative disadvantage of Indigenous Australians	61
Chapter 6: Conclusion	83
Appendix: Peggy McIntosh’s 46 unearned white privileges	95
Bibliography	97
<b>MEMOIR WITH POETRY Searching for the glad tomorrow— memoir of a non-Indigenous intercultural worker</b>	105
Prologue	107
Chapter 1: To Hooker Creek, Lajamanu (Warlpiri country)	111
Chapter 2: Persona non grata in Tennant Creek (1986–1988)	131
Chapter 3: Unsettled in Alice Springs (1989–1995)	151
Chapter 4: Glory and ignominy (1995–2002)	167
Chapter 5: Pearls and irregularities (2003–2010)	187
Chapter 6: Retirement and reinvention (2011–2020)	205
Epilogue	227
A sample of poems	233



## **EXEGESIS**

**Understanding white privilege—various stations on  
a journey of discovery**

## Preface

Understanding white privilege—its definition, history and relevance—matters for many reasons, particularly for people working in intercultural fields. As Indigenous peoples and people of colour continue to challenge racist attitudes and the behaviour of white people in Western societies, an increasing number of white people have begun interrogating and understanding these challenges, and how their privileges have implications for others. Some wish to dismantle them on a personal and institutional level while others simply want to understand their intercultural interactions with more sophistication and sensitivity.<sup>1</sup>

I am particularly interested in the challenge posed by Jackie Huggins in her preface to *Sister girl*:

The constant demands placed on Aboriginal people to be the educators is tiring. Surely it is time for non-Aboriginal people to begin their journey of discovery by themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Although my journey of discovery began well before Huggins wrote *Sister girl*, her challenge still resonates with me as a white person. A new generation of Indigenous scholars and commentators continue to confront white people in a similar manner in contemporary society.

White privilege is, of course, a concept that reaches in many directions, connected as it is to the evolution of Christianity, Western imperialism and colonisation, and the growth of modern capitalism and associated patriarchal structures—and to discourses on the fluidity of the concept of race. This study looks at the relevance and impact of white privilege in the 21<sup>st</sup> century within the context of my work history and ongoing practice as an intercultural

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<sup>1</sup> PS Rothenberg (ed), *White privilege: essential readings on the other side of racism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Worth Publishers, New York, 2005, p 1.

<sup>2</sup> J Huggins, *Sister girl: the writings of Aboriginal activist and historian Jackie Huggins*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1998, p x.

worker, first in Papua New Guinea in the 1970s and then with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, organisations and communities. In reflecting on the roots, nuances and continuing influence of white privilege, I look at its links to ideas of white supremacy as understood in the research of particular western academics—white people, Indigenous peoples and people of colour.

This study is a contribution to the development of strategies to address systemic issues arising from unearned privileges in society. In order to do this, my methodology involves the critical examination of relevant literature from Western societies, including the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars and commentators. Their work is of particular significance in providing a way of understanding and contextualising my own work history and journey.

Huggins’ advocacy for non-Aboriginal people to ‘begin their journey of discovery’ provides a counter to what Richard Dyer, in *White*, characterises as the assumption of privilege. He writes that white people almost never acknowledge that they are speaking as a white person, and that their authority is based on the assumption that they occupy the position of ‘natural human’.<sup>3</sup>

My experiences living and working in Papua New Guinea over a seven-year period in my twenties meant that I began to question many assumptions, including that white people were ‘natural’ humans or in any way superior to other people, relatively early in my life. These experiences caused me to critique the attitudes that belonged to my own culture and background growing up in a predominantly white rural community on Wiradjuri country in the 1950s and 1960s. In Papua New Guinea in the 1970s, I began to develop a political awareness that questioned conservative values. This awareness developed further over the

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<sup>3</sup> R Dyer, *White*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, p 97.

next four decades as a result of subsequent tertiary education, professional development activities and experiences in Indigenous communities and organisations. These experiences ‘grew me up’.

In contemplating the task of writing a memoir, my experiences came into sharp relief against what I might have overlooked. A former colleague in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) suggested the study of white privilege. Peggy McIntosh’s metaphor of a ‘knapsack of unearned privileges’ became an important lens for reflecting on my ‘journey of discovery’ and led to two realisations: my ‘backpack’, despite careful unpacking and re-packing over many years, has white privileges in its pockets; and there is no end to the journey of discovery.<sup>4</sup>

Listening to, reading and writing poetry has been important to me throughout my life, but reasserted its importance at university as yet another lens to view the world and react to it creatively. Reading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and poets became another way of learning about Indigenous experiences and perspectives. During the course of this study, Recent Work Press published my first collection, *Inlandia*, which included poems I had written from 1981 and more recently. Letters written to my parents and personal journals have also informed both the exegesis and memoir.

It is reasonable to assert that a combination of self-reflection, the difficult process of writing itself, and academic research informs this study and the creative memoir that accompanies it.

Having spent so much time being with, and listening to, Australia’s Indigenous peoples in a range of settings, and in critiquing my own culture—its history and how I

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<sup>4</sup> P McIntosh, in K Weekes (ed), *Privilege and prejudice: twenty years with the invisible knapsack*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2009

absorbed that culture through my education at school and university—and through interrogating my interactions in the field, I have come to understand there are many ways of knowing, being and doing that are as legitimate as those usually valued by Western societies. Furthermore, experience leads me to conclude that mutually beneficial outcomes are possible when Indigenous and non-Indigenous people work together in a spirit of reciprocity—although there are important provisos to this statement, which will be explored in this study.

## Chapter 1: Understanding white privilege

White privilege is a term I was not very familiar with until I decided to write a memoir about my working life, although my career had always been, and still is, integrally connected with Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I wondered about the implications of this omission, not just for the writing but for my continuing practice as an intercultural worker. That said, from an early age I understood many of the privileges I enjoyed as a result of my birth into a loving, extended family with adequate resources. As an expatriate in Papua New Guinea from my mid-twenties onward I knew I was white, part of a minority in that country.

The extent of this omission (investigating 'white privilege') was brought home to me by research indicating that white privilege is a fluid concept and has a long history. As stated above, its foundations are embedded in, for example, the evolution of Christianity in the West and the growth of modern capitalism and patriarchy. Relatively recent struggles against racism and inequality, often in postcolonial contexts, make it a potent contemporary issue. Additionally, it is an important concept enabling the work of scholars and commentators to interrogate the persistence of racism.

Some avenues into the exploration of white privilege include the examination of the work of significant Western scholars who have written on the topic in recent decades, along with the consideration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and experiences. The work of Peggy McIntosh, an American academic in the field of women's studies, is of particular significance. She renewed attention to the concept of white privilege in 1988 in an essay, 'White privilege and male privilege: a personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies'.

However, this important essay was not the first occasion on which the concept of white privilege was invoked. For example, in the USA in the 1930s, WEB Du Bois, an African-American academic, drew attention to the ‘psychological wage’ that enabled poor whites to feel superior to poor blacks as he examined what it meant to be white in America. Then, during the civil rights era, activists used the term ‘white-skin privilege’.<sup>5</sup> By the mid-1960s journalists, historians and people in many walks of American life were using this term, linking it directly to public discourse about the history of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, racism and race riots, discrimination (legal and social), oppression and a rise in activism.<sup>6</sup>

McIntosh’s essay was timely, coming as it did in an era of considerable social and political change—a time when Indigenous peoples’ struggles were being highlighted in international forums such as the United Nations. For example, the essay drew attention to the fact that while some men may acknowledge that women were disadvantaged in the wider curriculum, they were nevertheless reluctant to acknowledge they themselves were over-privileged, and that this was analogous to many white attitudes towards people of colour:

Denials, which amount to taboos, surround the subject of advantages which men gain from women’s disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully recognised, acknowledged, lessened, or ended.<sup>7</sup>

The idea that hierarchies in society were interlocking led McIntosh to the insight that the denial of male privilege also carried over to considerations of race. In identifying forty-six of her own privileges as a white woman, McIntosh saw herself ‘unpacking an invisible package of unearned assets’, that she could ‘cash in’ but to which she was meant to ‘remain oblivious’. She turned her gaze on herself:

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<sup>5</sup> J Rothman, ‘The origins of “privilege”’, *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2014, p 1.

<sup>6</sup> J Bennett, *White privilege: a history of the concept*, Master of Arts thesis, Georgia State University, 2012, pp 8–11.

<sup>7</sup> P McIntosh, in K Weekes (ed), *Privilege and prejudice*, p 7.

White privilege is like an invisible, weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.<sup>8</sup>

These privileges could be as simple as being able to go shopping alone without being followed or harassed, or involve more complex notions. For example, the seventh unearned white privilege is: ‘When I am told about our national heritage or about ‘civilization’, I am shown that people of my colour made it what it is.’<sup>9</sup>

McIntosh’s specific focus on white privilege is important. It links feminist concerns to the structures emanating from white supremacy—a political, economic and social system based on the assumption of superiority by white people.<sup>10</sup> It is important to emphasise this particular understanding of the term ‘white supremacy’ because it is sometimes confused with the rhetoric and activities of ultra-conservative, far-right groups such as neo-Nazis.

McIntosh’s essay helped generate a ‘paradigm shift’ during an era that was characterised by multiple explorations of ‘why acts of discrimination continued despite them being made illegal’—the examination of whiteness.<sup>11</sup> The forty-six privileges she identified are listed in Appendix I.

At about the same time as McIntosh was writing about white privilege, a young PhD student, Ruth Frankenberg, had begun interviewing white women as part of her research into the significance of race in their lives. As her study progressed, she realised there was a dimension of analysis of equal importance to the interviews—their documentation and the comprehension of how daily experience shaped white perceptions of the significance of race:

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<sup>8</sup> McIntosh, in K Weekes (ed), *Privilege and prejudice*, p 8.

<sup>9</sup> McIntosh, in K Weekes (ed), *Privilege and prejudice*, p 10.

<sup>10</sup> RJ DiAngelo, *White fragility: why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2018, p 28.

<sup>11</sup> J Bennett, *White privilege: a history of the concept*, Master of Arts thesis, Georgia State University, 2012, p 2.



... it became clear that, as much as white women are located in—and speak from—physical environments shaped by race, we are also located in, and perceive our environments by means of a set of discourses on race, culture, and society whose history spans this century and, beyond it, the broader sweep of Western expansion and colonialism<sup>12</sup>.

These discourses implicated white women in particular historical ideas, conceptual frameworks and structures. Being deeply embedded in Western thinking meant that white women, despite the disadvantages of patriarchy, were placed at the centre of power, never at the margins, of a global capitalist system that drew on Christianity and European customs and patterns of thought. This led Frankenberg to become concerned about how racism was viewed as an issue for people of colour rather than one that involved or implicated everyone, including white people:

White women can see antiracist work as an act of compassion for an ‘other’, an optional extra project but not one intimately and organically linked to their own lives. Racism can, in short, be conceived as something external to us rather than as a system that shapes our daily experiences and sense of self.<sup>13</sup>

The effect of race privilege and the dominance of whiteness resulted in the structural invisibility of white privilege, unevenly distributed, which is subsumed within the ‘normative’. However, Frankenberg’s focus on the social construction of whiteness, ‘assigns everyone a place in the relations of racism’.<sup>14</sup> The idea that ‘race’ is a socially constructed phenomenon that benefits one race and oppresses another, contributes to other ideas, particularly those identified by black feminists, who argued that the mainstream feminist

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<sup>12</sup> R Frankenberg, *White women, race matters: the social construction of whiteness*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p 2.

<sup>13</sup> Frankenberg, *White women, race matters*, p 6.

<sup>14</sup> Frankenberg, *White women, race matters*, p 6.

movement is predicated on racism and the exclusion of black women's concerns—an issue discussed later in this study. Frankenberg's conclusion that race is socially constructed also leads to another idea—that it can be deconstructed.

In an Australian context, where approximately 3.3 per cent of the population (or 798,400 people) is Indigenous<sup>15</sup>, attempts to deconstruct views about race, or advancing Indigenous issues more generally, is often overwhelmed by the white majority. 'Normativity' is not only prevalent in the dominant society but it is replicated in multiple ways—for example, through social, cultural and economic activities and institutions and the mass media. Yet deconstructing racism needs to become a concern for a significant proportion of Australian citizens for positive change to occur.

Just how difficult the deconstruction of racism is and the contribution hegemony plays in reproducing the dominant society's multiple oppressions, is the subject of *White* (2005) by Richard Dyer. Dyer, a gay white male academic, examined the question of why, in Western media, whites generally adopt the position of ordinariness—not as representatives of a particular race, but of the human race. At the time of writing, Dyer was Professor of Film Studies at the University of Warwick. The lens for his study was visual culture—the representation of black and white people in the context of Christianity, race relations and colonialism. Dyer highlights the privileges of white males in Western societies and the ways in which these privileges are replicated, flagging the need for further studies, particularly of 'masculinity'. He asserts that Western culture continues to be underpinned by Christian stories, symbols and structures that directly contribute to the viability of white privilege:

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<sup>15</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 3238.0.55.001 – *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians*, June 2016, updated 18/9/2018. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3238.0.55.001>

Many of the fundamentals of all levels of Western culture—the forms of parenting, especially motherhood, and sex, the value of suffering, guilt, the shock of post-Enlightenment materialism—come to us from Christianity, whether or not we know [it].<sup>16</sup>

He argues that the Bible, the cross, Christian sensibilities, calendars, rituals and associated iconography have contributed to the way we in the West view bodies, what we feel, and how we act. In particular, the Christian concepts of embodiment and incarnation, the duality of body and soul, lead to an eighteenth-century concept of race in which, unlike ‘black’ people, white people could not be reduced to ‘the corporeal’:

At some point, the embodied something else of whiteness took on a dynamic relation to the physical world, something caught by the ambiguous word ‘spirit’.<sup>17</sup>

Dyer contends that the justification for Imperialism, or ‘white enterprise’, rests on the organisational skills of whites to marshal non-whites in ‘material matters’, asserting that Christianity, race and imperialism/enterprise not only ‘provide the intellectual foundations for thinking and feeling about the white body, but also their forms and structures, the cultural register of whiteness.’<sup>18</sup>

Dyer’s arguments are supported by other studies, including Philip C Wander, Judith N Martin and Thomas K Nakayama who trace the roots of racial classification to the ‘*historical systemic structured* race-based superiority of whiteness’<sup>19</sup> (their emphasis) that continues to influence contemporary thinking.

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<sup>16</sup> Dyer, *White*, p 5.

<sup>17</sup> Dyer, *White*, p 5.

<sup>18</sup> Dyer, *White*, p 4.

<sup>19</sup> PC Wander, JN Martin and TK Nakayama in PS Rothenberg (ed), *White privilege: essential readings on the other side of racism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Worth Publishers, New York, 2005, p 30.

An African-American public intellectual, bell hooks, asserts that ‘imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal values’ inhabit educational systems, black and white. A woman of my generation, hooks was educated in a system of ‘institutionalized domination’ that subjugated other knowledges and precluded ‘liberating ideas’, including female self-determination, emphasising white power and privilege.<sup>20</sup> This discourse inheritance, or hegemony, is dominant in contemporary Western societies despite the counter-narratives of the last three decades from scholars in fields such as Women’s Studies, Black Studies and Whiteness Studies.

In general, many studies conducted in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries argue that male privilege persists because of the reluctance of men to address women’s disadvantage; and, similarly, white privilege is predicated on white society’s reluctance to address the disadvantage of Indigenous peoples and people of colour. By turning her gaze onto herself, McIntosh became a role model for self-reflection on gender and race-based inequities, which created a space for others to explore white privilege.

White privilege, therefore, is linked to racism, or as Rothenberg states, to deflect concerns that studying whiteness and white privilege could detract attention from racism, ‘white privilege is the other side of racism.’<sup>21</sup> Being aware of the history of white privilege and its many nuances enables a deeper understanding of racism and opens ways to interrogate white privilege on both an abstract and personal level. Recognising how structural racism and white privilege continues to oppress Indigenous peoples and people of colour in contemporary society, is a first step to focusing on a more equitable future. Related studies, such as DiAngelo’s *White fragility*, will be touched on later in this study. First, however, I

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<sup>20</sup> hooks, *Teaching community: a pedagogy of hope*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, p 2.

<sup>21</sup> Rothenberg, *White privilege*, p 1.

will explore Indigenous experiences and perspectives of racism and white privilege in Australia over recent decades.

## **Chapter 2: An exploration of Indigenous experiences and perspectives of racism and white privilege**

In this chapter I reflect on my own journey of discovery, initially on Warlpiri country, before moving to a discussion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' concerns including education, self-determination, land rights, reconciliation, academia, feminism, and the public sector. As outlined in Chapter 1, racism and white privilege are two sides of the same coin and, as McIntosh's essay highlights, racism has long been a powerful feature of Indigenous experience—while most white Australians remain unaware of the seriousness of the problems racism creates. In discussing such issues, I draw mainly on Indigenous experiences and perspectives from the 1970s onwards, including those of people of colour, to highlight critiques of Christianity, colonisation, imperialism and patriarchy. These critiques, especially of colonialism, intensified in the late twentieth century onwards and included the perspectives of non-Indigenous scholars interested in post-colonial theories and practices.

As an adult in the 1970s, I learned about the Freedom Ride, land rights activism, racism and related issues primarily through media coverage. Indigenous peoples' public struggles were extensive enough to raise the general community awareness of such issues, although this coverage did not always support Indigenous causes.

My direct exposure to Indigenous perspectives, however, only occurred in 1981 when Warlpiri people taught me about their worldview. As a result of my professional activities in adult education that year, which took me to Lajamanu, I developed a close working relationship with Mr Maurice Luther, the Lajamanu Council Chairman. A respected and skilled intercultural worker, he drew on capacities he had developed over many years while interacting with and observing white people. He was subjected to many deprivations and

physical abuse in his younger working life, which led him to adopt a leadership role in mediating black/white relations.

He states, ‘All this rough treatment was education for me. I saw it and I learned from it, the white man’s way!’<sup>22</sup> His stories highlight many of the oppressions experienced early in his life, including his forced removal from country and the personal impact this had on him and his family. As an initiated man he was deeply schooled in his Indigenous culture, including its spiritual beliefs and ceremonies. Early in our professional relationship, he made sure I was aware of why significant Indigenous protocols were important, such as why I could not go to the rubbish tip—men’s sacred objects were housed there so it was off limits to women. He shared his insights about differences between white and Aboriginal people and told me stories about Warlpiri history. This was my introduction to an Aboriginal worldview.

Similarly, one of the women I taught to drive in 1981, a ‘sister’ in Warlpiri culture, taught me my rights and obligations as part of her kinship group, quickly correcting me when I made mistakes. These interchanges were mutually beneficial—I received valuable lessons in a different way of knowing, being and doing that had important implications for my work as an adult educator. My Warlpiri sister gained her driver’s licence at a time when Indigenous women had limited access to driving lessons or a vehicle.

Maurice Luther and I developed a respectful and productive working relationship. He invited me to accompany him to meetings in Darwin to take notes, and to make presentations to the Lajamanu Council, sharing local knowledge and protocols in the process. These, and other more informal engagements, introduced me to the complex reciprocal rights and obligations that are such a significant part of Warlpiri culture.

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<sup>22</sup> M Luther, in *Stories from Lajamanu*, NT Department of Education, Curriculum & Assessment Branch, Darwin, 1984, p 12.

This exposure led me into further study and part-time work with urban Aboriginal people in Armidale, New South Wales, in the early 1980s. Listening to, and reading the work of Aboriginal people and well-known activists taught me about the great diversity of Indigenous communities and perspectives in Australia. These people were often blunt about their experiences, supporting the view that ‘Aboriginal spokesmen are pretty loud and clear’ in their criticisms, especially when education of the ‘whole society is based on indoctrination’.<sup>23</sup> The importance of education was a recurrent theme in these discussions, and this was not simply about the need for appropriate educational opportunities for Aboriginal peoples:

One thing that would be very valuable for blacks would be the introduction—into primary school, secondary school, pre-school right through to tertiary levels—of the study of black culture: courses with emphasis on the role of Aboriginal medicine, Aboriginal laws, Aboriginal property values, so that the white kid is taught to respect another culture. It is not so much because it is black culture, but because it is another culture: it is different, it gives him an alternative view. Such study can give him a positive view of this country: it will give him the ability to read this country in a true light.<sup>24</sup>

This view, often repeated by Indigenous colleagues, is a view I endorse, having missed out on such an education.

The idea of self-determination also featured prominently in the views of Aboriginal people in 1975:

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<sup>23</sup> K Gilbert in C Tatz and KR McConnochie and Armidale College of Advanced Education, *Black viewpoints: the Aboriginal experience*, Australia and New Zealand Book Co, Sydney, 1975, p 5.

<sup>24</sup> P Coe, in *Black viewpoints*, p 108.



What I can't understand is white society always say to us that this is what they think is best for us. I don't think it should be what white people think is best for us, but what the Aborigines think is best for themselves.<sup>25</sup>

While the concept of self-determination is contested and policies aimed at promoting it can be complex—it sometimes placed demands on Aboriginal people and groups who wished to retain ‘the integrity of the Aboriginal domain’<sup>26</sup>—nevertheless, self-determination has remained a constant theme in Indigenous issues. It was a key consideration in establishing credible new Aboriginal organisations in the mid to late twentieth century, such as legal and health services in New South Wales and the Northern Territory land councils. In turn, such organisations were closely involved in Indigenous self-determination, especially when such issues as ‘continuity and integrity of culture’ coupled with ‘collective practices’ were, however imperfectly, integrated into these organisations’ administrative structures and regulatory requirements.

Shirley Smith (known as Mum Shirl) documented the establishment of the Aboriginal Health Service in New South Wales on 20 July 1971. She gives Indigenous academic Gordon Briscoe the credit for beginning the conversation about the need for both an Aboriginal legal and health service and asking for her help to establish the latter. Acknowledging that they did not have Aboriginal lawyers and doctors, they discussed using outside experts. Smith points to the collaboration with significant whites who were helpers along the way, such as Professor Fred Hollows and Dr Ferry Grunseit. She adds that both men came from elsewhere and were ‘not Australians’<sup>27</sup> but she also gives credit to white Australians who did help. Smith singles

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<sup>25</sup> R Marshall, in *Black viewpoints*, p 54.

<sup>26</sup> T Rowse, *Remote possibilities: the Aboriginal domain and the administrative imagination*, North Australia Research Unit, Australian National University, Darwin 1992, p 34.

<sup>27</sup> S Smith, in *Black viewpoints*, p 40.

out one doctor in particular. ‘He’s a good doctor, take my word for it. If he wasn’t we’d get rid of him quick and lively.’<sup>28</sup> Smith maintains the experts in Aboriginal health are:

... the people who live and sleep and walk in filth and squalor, the people who didn’t have breakfast this morning, maybe no lunch, and there’s no written guarantee about tea or dinner.<sup>29</sup>

Smith laments the fact that governments failed to take such initiatives decades previously, when she was a child living in impoverished conditions.

Mid to late twentieth century scholarship about Indigenous issues occurred in parallel to a largely bipartisan approach by Federal governments broadly supporting the notion of self-determination between the early 1970s to the mid 1990s. This period saw the establishment of statutory bodies, community government councils, and literally thousands of Indigenous organisations in a variety of arenas.<sup>30</sup>

During the course of my work as an adult educator I was exposed to and involved in many of the pressing issues affecting Indigenous peoples. As a result of this exposure, I recognised the complexity of making policy in this area, and one of my abiding interests became the potential for ‘development’ in its many forms—including the strengthening of Indigenous corporations, their boards of directors and membership base.

Indigenous scholars and commentators, my contemporaries, were broadly concerned with issues such as Indigenous rights, social justice and reconciliation. I first heard the term ‘white privilege’ in conversation with Indigenous women working in the Aboriginal and

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<sup>28</sup> Smith, in *Black viewpoints*, p 43.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, in *Black viewpoints*, p 41.

<sup>30</sup> J Hunt, D Smith, S Garling and W Sanders (eds), Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, *Contested governance: culture, power and institutions in indigenous Australia*, Research Monograph, No. 29, Australian National University, 2008, p 28.

Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) policy office in the early 2000s. At that time, I worked in a team focused on Indigenous capacity development, including international development and sustainable development. We were investigating ‘bottom up’ and ‘strength-based’ approaches and how they could be adopted in aspects of ATSIC’s work (and that of governments). This project, determined by the ATSIC Board, was led by an Indigenous officer in the Senior Executive Service of ATSIC, and resulted in ATSIC and Oxfam Community Aid Abroad working together.

More recent scholars and commentators have explored the complexities and ramifications of racism and white privilege for intercultural workers. In 1996, the year the Coalition won government, nearly twenty Indigenous leaders came together with hundreds of others in Canberra to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* and the broader land rights struggle. Key papers presented by Aboriginal people at an associated conference were collected into the book, *Our land is our life*, edited by Galarrwuy Yunupingu, a Yolngu leader from Yirrkala. Gatjil Djerrkua, OAM, an Elder of the Wangurri clan of East Arnhem Land, made two points of particular significance to this study in the preface. First:

Australia as a nation must come to terms with its past, present and future and reconcile with its indigenous people. Indigenous and non-Indigenous people must work together for a just outcome.<sup>31</sup>

Second, he also noted that there had been a re-emergence of racism, referring to the 1996 election campaign and subsequent changes the new Coalition government made to ATSIC budgets, policies and programs, adding that such ‘movements’ in racism had been seen

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<sup>31</sup> G Djerrkua, in G Yunupingu (ed), *Our land is our life: land rights—past, present and future*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, 1997, p xi.

before. He pointed to the 1930s depression when ‘the underprivileged and disempowered have sought to blame racial minorities for their lot and have seen threats where none exists’.<sup>32</sup> His words emphasised that the reconciliation project is a collaborative one; its enemy is racism.

Patrick Dodson, known as the ‘father of reconciliation’ and now a Labor Senator, also contributed a paper. He said non-Indigenous people had to ‘lift their game. They can’t lie back on the beaches of this country and say, “I don’t know anything about it”...’ But he did not want to overemphasise feelings of guilt, suggesting, ‘There is guilt associated with those things (dispossession, atrocities, stolen generations) but it’s about the shame this nation has to face up to’.<sup>33</sup> This remains an important issue and is manifested in the three key elements in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.<sup>34</sup>

Non-Indigenous researchers also argued that the election of the Coalition government under John Howard in 1996 changed the political landscape, undermined the Council of Reconciliation’s ten-year national process, and led to deteriorating relationships between the Federal government and Indigenous Australians.<sup>35</sup>

[The Government] was highly selective in its response to the Council’s recommendations on sustaining the reconciliation process, promoting recognition of Indigenous rights, overcoming disadvantage, and fostering economic independence (CAR 2000).<sup>36</sup>

Despite critiques of the government’s approach, Prime Minister John Howard’s preference for ‘practical reconciliation’ rather than ‘self-determination’ prevailed.

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<sup>32</sup> Djerrkua, in *Our land is our life*, p xi.

<sup>33</sup> P Dodson, in *Our land is our life*, p 147.

<sup>34</sup> <https://ulurustatement.org>

<sup>35</sup> Sanders, in *Contested governance*, p 28.

<sup>36</sup> Sanders, in *Contested governance*, p 29.

In academia, Indigenous scholars turned their minds to the disparity between Western and Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing; white representations of Aboriginality; and the frustration and alienation of Indigenous students and scholars who were ‘forced to accept western, ethnocentric research methodology that is culturally remote’.<sup>37</sup> Dennis Foley provided several alternative Indigenous viewpoints on the matter including his own in his 2003 essay, ‘Indigenous Epistemology and Indigenous Standpoint Theory’. He called on tertiary institutions to consider alternatives to Western ethnocentric research methodology, arguing that Western scientific discourse tended to be Anglo-European, male-dominated, and legitimised by a racially superior view of what knowledge is and what it is for. He also drew on the work of other Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics who argued that every area of academia is affected by a ‘colonising discourse’, naming sociology in particular.<sup>38</sup> Like many Western discourses, it involves a broadly philosophical stance that informs methodology, ‘which in turn provides a context in the process that grounds its own logic and criteria’.<sup>39</sup>

This position echoes research outlined earlier in this study and is corroborated by a non-Indigenous academic, Raewen Connell. Writing in 2005, she argued that the formation of social sciences in the second half of the nineteenth century is ‘the high tide of European imperialism’:

... social science formed itself on ethnocentric assumptions that amounted to a gigantic lie—that modernity created itself within the North Atlantic world, independent of the rest of humanity.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> D Foley, ‘Indigenous epistemology and Indigenous Standpoint Theory’, *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2003.

<sup>38</sup> W Brady, ‘Indigenous control of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research’, *Aboriginal Studies Association Conference papers 1992*, pp 311–315.

<sup>39</sup> M Crotty and James Bennett Pty Ltd, *The foundations of social research: meaning and perspective in the research process*, Sage Publications, London, 1998.

<sup>40</sup> R Connell, *Southern theory: the global dynamics of knowledge in social science*, Allen & Unwin; Cambridge, United Kingdom : Polity Press, Crows Nest, NSW, 2007, p x.

Connell further asserted that, in general, the curriculum of colonial universities ‘was a stodgy amalgam of classics and technical training’.<sup>41</sup>

One Indigenous researcher Foley draws on, Lester-Irabinna Rigney, urged Indigenous peoples in Australia and the Pacific to ‘look to new anti-colonial epistemologies and methodologies to construct, rediscover and re-affirm their knowledge and cultures’.<sup>42</sup> This, he argued, points to a wider solution which aims to ‘emancipate, liberate and deconstruct’ Western hegemony—something many Indigenous academics have been addressing since this ‘call to arms’.<sup>43</sup>

Coinciding with Rigney’s paper, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori academic published *Decolonizing methodologies*, a significant text for Indigenous peoples, white researchers and intercultural workers in the struggle against colonialism, white privilege and racism:

The intellectual project of decolonizing has to set out ways to proceed through a colonizing world. It needs a radical compassion that reaches out, that seeks collaboration.<sup>44</sup>

This book is not ‘a method for revolution in a political sense’ but is designed to provoke, to galvanise and to transform. It is also ‘a catalyst for re-examining curricula’ to assist capacity building and community empowerment projects, to change society. Primarily, Smith hopes her text promotes and supports Indigenous communities in their ‘particular struggles’, but she also hopes it embeds a responsibility to change society ‘in both the non-indigenous and indigenous worlds’.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Connell, *Southern theory*, p 73.

<sup>42</sup> Foley, ‘Indigenous epistemology and Indigenous Standpoint Theory’, pp 44–52.

<sup>43</sup> Foley, ‘Indigenous epistemology and Indigenous Standpoint Theory’, pp 44–52.

<sup>44</sup> LT Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies: research and Indigenous peoples*, Zed Books, London, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, p xii.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies*, p xii.

Smith (an Indigenous woman) and hooks (an African-American woman) both speak to my experience in the field as an intercultural adult education practitioner, community development worker, public servant and consultant—and to my preference for collaboration where that is possible. They understand that working together has the potential for mutual learning and teaching between black and white people and the capacity to capitalise on multiple knowledge systems in praxis (‘a dialectical movement which goes from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to a new action’<sup>46</sup>). Smith writes from ‘the vantage point of the colonized’ and with reference to her research, which is ‘inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonization’. She claims that scientific research is ‘implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism’ which ‘remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples’.

Understanding the importance to Indigenous scholars of this vantage point is a salutary reminder that ‘research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise’. Something more is at stake, because all research ‘occurs in a set of political and social conditions’. Indigenous priorities, histories, problems, contexts and ways of communicating are not only able to be identified by research, but understanding these issues is also critical to resisting ‘new formations of colonization’.<sup>47</sup>

Many white researchers and intercultural workers with whom I worked in tandem took great care to negotiate and collaborate with Indigenous peoples, using as a guide for their actions, for example, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) ethical research guidelines, which were first developed in 2002. These guidelines

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<sup>46</sup> P Freire, *Cultural action for freedom*, [Cambridge] *Harvard Educational Review*, 1970, p 31.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies*, p 5.

emphasise the importance of embedding a process of ‘meaningful engagement and reciprocity between the researcher and the individuals and/or communities involved in the research’.<sup>48</sup>

Many researchers and intercultural workers have also used bottom-up, participatory processes, or development principles, which privilege the issues of self-determination and empowerment. Of the many definitions of community development, this is one that has significant implications for adult educators and intercultural workers:

Community development is about enabling Aboriginal people to have more control over their community’s affairs and their daily lives. It is part of a process by which communities can make their own decisions about their long term physical, social, economic and cultural objectives.<sup>49</sup>

This enabling and empowering idea, embraced by many white activists, researchers and intercultural workers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, underpinned the work they did *beside* and *with* Indigenous peoples. Assimilationist ideas of change for progress and improvement were not the norm for such workers; instead, understanding alternative worldviews was not only inherently valuable but was an intrinsic part of a process of ongoing two-way communication.

This process of communication and exchange included the rights and roles of women and in this respect Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s contribution is significant. Her text, *Talkin’ up to the white woman*, published in 2000, is a seminal critique of mainstream feminism in Australia. She writes from an Indigenous woman’s standpoint, one ‘imbued with meaning grounded in knowledge of different realities from those of white women’. She picks up on

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<sup>48</sup> AIATSIS, *Guidelines for ethical research in Australian Indigenous Studies*, last reviewed 22 August 2019, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/research/ethical-research/guidelines-ethical-research-australian-indigenous-studies>

<sup>49</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee into Aboriginal Affairs, *A chance for the future: training in skills for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island community management and development*, AGPS, Canberra, August 1989, p 4.



Frankenberg's concept of the social construction of race, celebrating the shared and common experience of all Indigenous women who have an inalienable connection to their country, and who have experienced a 'legacy of dispossession, racism and sexism'. Moreton-Robinson asserts her right to resist, and to replace 'disparaging images' with self-defined images and activism unique to Indigenous experience.<sup>50</sup>

Moreton-Robinson continues her exploration of 'resistance, recovery and revitalisation' in an essay in *Blacklines*. 'Resistances do not always lead to conflict or self-destruction,' she writes, 'rather, they are profoundly political acts', which contain a logic most white people cannot comprehend. This incomprehension occurs because white people want Indigenous people to perform their politics 'according to their ideas about what constitutes correct and proper political action':

... Indigenous resistances are often strategic interventions in the dialectics of a racialised hierarchy where whiteness is centred, constituting the norm and conferring dominance and privilege.<sup>51</sup>

In Moreton-Robinson's view, Indigenous peoples resist in multiple ways, as they have done since 1788. She argues that because Australian history is steeped in colonialism, it has been the white man's privilege to document resistances on their terms. Aboriginal perspectives were rarely recorded. She names historians Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan, and anthropologists Barry Morris, Gillian Cowlishaw and Andrew Lattas as exceptions—adding that the work of these white people is still 'produced through the filter of the white gaze'.<sup>52</sup>

One inference in this assertion is that white researchers are inherently deficient in their

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<sup>50</sup> A Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' up to the white woman, Indigenous women and feminism*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2000, p xvi.

<sup>51</sup> A Moreton-Robinson, in M Grossman (coordinating ed), *Blacklines: contemporary critical writing by Indigenous Australians*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2003, p 127.

<sup>52</sup> Moreton-Robinson, in *Blacklines*, p 128.

understanding of Indigenous issues because of their whiteness. While this may be true, researchers from all backgrounds are currently building on and interrogating a growing and progressively diverse scholarship in this field. The work of white researchers continues to be increasingly informed by that of their Indigenous peers.

Some Indigenous scholars and writers challenge ‘dominant regimes of knowledge’ and agitate to embed Indigenous knowledge in academic discourse. In doing so they ‘remind us of the denials, the absences, and the forgetting’ in contemporary representations that serve the interests of colonisers and white domination.<sup>53</sup> For example, Moreton-Robinson outlines several experiences in her academic life when white feminists fell short in their behaviour towards her and other Indigenous women:

Indigenous women involved (in those experiences), including myself, perceived their actions as those of white middle class women who were acting from a subject position of dominance ... a socially constructed position whereby one’s behaviour is significantly shaped by what is expected of that position rather than by conscious intention.<sup>54</sup>

These experiences led her to study the work of women of colour, African-American writers and lesbian feminists before concluding that their various critiques ‘facilitated a politics of difference within feminism’. She argues that these critiques ‘disrupted representations of the white middle-class woman as the universal woman’. She suggests that failing to interrogate difference is tantamount to accepting the status quo, in which whiteness and its privilege ‘remains the invisible omnipresent norm’. She contends that it is relatively easy for white women to ‘criticise’ systemic racism abstractly, without working on their own racism and

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<sup>53</sup> Moreton-Robinson, in *Blacklines*, p 129.

<sup>54</sup> Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ up to the white woman*, p xviii.

privilege.<sup>55</sup> Moreton-Robinson's viewpoints reinforce and extend the conclusions reached by white researchers such as McIntosh, Frankenberg and Dyer mentioned in the first section of this study.

Moreton-Robinson has been critiquing white feminism for many years using both Western theories of analysis and Indigenous Standpoint Theory, which is shaped by several preoccupations:

... an inalienable connection to land, a legacy of dispossession, racism and sexism; resisting and replacing disparaging images of ourselves with self-defined images; continuing our activism as mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters, grandmothers and community leaders ...

This does not, she asserts, deny the diversity of Indigenous women's experiences.<sup>56</sup>

Many other Indigenous writers highlight and resist the legacies of colonialism, Western academic discourses, and/or white definitions of Aboriginality and point to the need to undercut racism and/or white privilege. '[W]e must continuously subvert the hegemony over our own representations', writes Michael Dodson, 'and allow our visions to create the world of meaning in which we relate to ourselves, to each other, and to non-Indigenous people.'<sup>57</sup> This is largely because Indigenous voices and visions 'have been notably absent'<sup>58</sup> from public discourse in Australia. As Marcia Langton notes, 'Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists.'<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' up to the white woman*, p xxi.

<sup>56</sup> Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' up to the white woman*, p xvii.

<sup>57</sup> M Dodson, in *Blacklines*, p 33.

<sup>58</sup> Dodson, in *Blacklines*, p 28.

<sup>59</sup> M Langton, in *Blacklines*, p 119.

Despite a proliferation of Indigenous novels, poetry collections, films, television shows telling different stories, the fact remains that the majority of white Australians do not have the benefit of learning from sustained and reciprocal contact with Indigenous people, nor do they have access to Indigenous knowledge through the mainstream education system—although there are signs this is beginning to change. Some Indigenous languages have been reclaimed and are now being taught in schools (e.g. Wiradjiri in Parkes)<sup>60</sup> and Indigenous histories have been included in the school curriculum—although there has been resistance to such initiatives. A ‘Western Civilisation’ tertiary program promoted by conservatives and funded by the Ramsay Centre caused controversy recently for perceptions that it curtailed academic autonomy, tested university governance arrangements, and promoted a Western supremacist perspective.<sup>61</sup>

For many white people, the reconciliation movement is one avenue that provides an opportunity to engage with Indigenous peoples and issues. Reconciliation Australia (RA) continues the work of the former Council for Reconciliation mentioned earlier, in different ways. Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs), first developed in 2006, increase in number each year and RA’s online educational resources and governance initiatives are important contributions to greater mutual understanding. RAPs require committees made up of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to work together developing, monitoring and reporting on a RAP’s progress towards achieving set goals (and reconciliation) within an organisation or institution. For some Indigenous people, however, the concept of reconciliation is alien:

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<sup>60</sup> <https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/about/news/20/spotlight-on-wiradjuri-language-program-parkes-nsw> accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Inside Higher Ed website: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/04/18/tensions-grow-australia-over-courses-western-civilization> accessed 10 July 2020.

one might say ‘there can never be reconciliation without justice’<sup>62</sup> while another may assert reconciliation is the responsibility of white people.<sup>63</sup>

With the demise of ATSIC significant changes occurred. While some people (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) lamented its passing, others rejoiced, asserting it was a flawed model from its inception. Changes included the disbursement of Indigenous programs and staff across multiple government departments; the dismantling of the elected arm—commissioners and regional councillors; and the re-emergence of white decision-makers responsible for Indigenous portfolios in the Australian Public Service (APS).

With respect to this last change, Steven Larkin explores how employment in the APS may be understood through the theoretical frameworks of colour-blindness, silent and everyday racism and race cognisance.<sup>64</sup> His findings are from 2013 but his conclusions remain relevant. He argues ‘the social distance between Indigenous and white Australians similarly marks social relations within the APS’. Furthermore, white respondents in the study demonstrated ‘little knowledge and/or experience of Indigenous people’.<sup>65</sup> His research reinforces assertions that, typically, white Australians have little engagement with Indigenous Australians, and if they do, it is usually through work or sport.<sup>66</sup> To compound these problems, Larkin found that *not one* white respondent ‘referred to professional induction/orientation to the Indigenous portfolio as a form of credentialing, as a concern or a point of discussion’. He labelled this ‘an epistemology of ignorance’.<sup>67</sup>

If one compares this recent situation to the preparation of international development workers or the credentialed training of patrol officers and cadets going to work in Papua New

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<sup>62</sup> P Collis, personal comment to the author, 18.2.21

<sup>63</sup> W Appleby, personal comment to the author, 18.2.21

<sup>64</sup> S Larkin, *Race matters: Indigenous employment in the Australian Public Service*, PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2014, p ii.

<sup>65</sup> Larkin, *Race matters*, p ii.

<sup>66</sup> Larkin, *Race matters*, p 159.

<sup>67</sup> Larkin, *Race matters*, p 167.

Guinea between the 1940s and early 1970s, the lack of progress on preparing and educating intercultural workers in Indigenous Australia today is conspicuous.

In 1965 the Australian School of Pacific Administration (ASOPA), an Australian government tertiary institution at the time, distributed a recruitment film to high schools, promoting the training and careers available to young men in Papua New Guinea. This film outlined a reasonably comprehensive training program that included anthropology, economics, geography, law, history, government and other topics relevant to the languages and cultures of the country. The training was not only offered to potential recruits in the administration of Papua New Guinea, but was also made available for a time to patrol officers in the Northern Territory Native Welfare Branch.<sup>68</sup> Jeremy Long has documented how Independence in PNG and changes in policy and debates about the role of the NT patrol officers saw the program lapse in the early seventies, noting that ‘after 1975 many people undertaking work in Aboriginal communities had no training for the work’.<sup>69</sup> This lack of preparation for intercultural work in which complex problems often prevail, is explored in the next chapter of this study.

Overall, Indigenous perspectives on racism and white privilege have been crucial in advancing scholarship in this area, and in identifying ways in which Indigenous perspectives may be central to the development of programs that enable real and lasting Indigenous self-determination. Understanding Indigenous perspectives is a critical feature of the preparation of all intercultural workers, whatever their backgrounds. Someone born into white privilege cannot simply slough that privilege off, but through becoming familiar with Indigenous perspectives, including arguments about how white privilege functions, and learning to

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<sup>68</sup> J Long, *The go-betweens: patrol officers in Aboriginal affairs administration in the Northern Territory 1936–74*, North Australia Research Unit, Australian National University, 1992, p 162.

<sup>69</sup> Long, *The go-betweens*, p 166.

question assumptions and ways of viewing the world, they are able to begin to communicate with Indigenous people on their own terms, and understand Indigenous cultures at least to some extent through the eyes of people who belong to those cultures.

### Chapter 3: Early lessons in development in Papua New Guinea and at home

In this chapter I outline my early experiences in Papua New Guinea, which introduced me to important issues when working in the intercultural field. I also discuss some of the pitfalls in the aid/development sector as I interpreted them at the time. My subsequent training as an adult educator and later professional development provided a theoretical and practical foundation on which to build on these early experiences but the experiences themselves were crucial to my understanding of my reading and research. They not only complement the important theoretical and intellectual work I have mentioned in previous chapters but they are the bedrock on which my research rests. Broadly speaking, they confirm the need for perspectives that extend beyond those usually associated with white privilege and they also confirm the great and continuing complexity of intercultural programs and relationships.

Later in this study, I argue for a credentialed program for Australian intercultural workers in Indigenous affairs. However, I agree with Mark Moran that ‘University and training courses, and development tools and frameworks will however only ever be a part of the answer’.<sup>70</sup> Intercultural work, especially in remote communities, is complex, its problems often fairly intractable. The daily practice of intercultural workers (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) can be ambiguous and indeterminate—more about brokering than expert knowledge.<sup>71</sup> Frontline workers ‘will continue to deliver different results than intended policy outcomes, as it is local facts and people that ultimately matter more to them’—or, put another way, ‘on the ground, where it matters, practice ultimately triumphs over policy’.<sup>72</sup> In my experience, frontline workers face a barrage of issues requiring multiple discretionary decisions, which may be affected by an individual’s values, personality, allegiances and

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<sup>70</sup> M Moran, *Serious whitefella stuff*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2016, p 185.

<sup>71</sup> Moran, *Serious whitefella stuff*, p 188.

<sup>72</sup> Moran, *Serious whitefella stuff*, p 194.



mental or physical wellbeing. Such scenarios are often influenced by various contentious relationships, which sometimes result in entrenched and opposing factions in remote communities' relatively small populations. In responding to such situations, the importance of credentialed preparation and practical experience combined with stable and resilient personalities should not be underestimated.

In 1974, when I first embarked on development work, my explicit preparation to engage with people of another culture was almost non-existent. It was primarily my youthful enthusiasm for becoming involved with other people—as far as possible on their own terms—my interest in and aptitude for learning, and the guidance provided by others, that enabled me to acquire the requisite attitudes, knowledge and skills to undertake this work over time.

Toni Bauman, another non-Indigenous practitioner and scholar, has commented on her experience in Baymili and Katherine communities in the Northern Territory in 1979, which echoes mine: 'Armed with Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, she set out as an Aboriginal adult educator, becoming a helper/friend/community member who, outside working hours, 'led the same kind of life' as her Aboriginal friends. As a result, many of the non-Aboriginal community characterised her as a 'blackfella lover'. She acknowledges she was on a 'steep learning curve', one she neither documented nor analysed at the time.<sup>73</sup>

While I did not know of Freire's work until 1984, Bauman's lack of preparedness for her role and ability to learn on the job reflects my experience in Papua New Guinea in 1974 and again in Lajamanu in 1981. I documented my experiences in journals and letters home, spent time analysing differences in worldview and associated issues with my partner, colleagues and social group, and read widely.

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<sup>73</sup> T Bauman, 'Shifting sands: towards an anthropological praxis', *Oceania*, Vol. 71, Issue 3, Mar 2001, p 202.

Bauman attests to the importance of both Aboriginal and like-minded non-Aboriginal friends to her own development. Non-Aboriginal friends ‘aimed to subvert what seemed to be a tradition of separation of the races in Katherine’ and the friendship of Aboriginal people with whom she spent time on country, hunting, fishing or simply walking, as well as collecting bush materials for artworks, allowed her to develop her sense of a different worldview. In return, Aboriginal people called on her for help, utilising the greater material resources she had at her disposal. These kinds of experiences, and the reciprocal nature that underpinned them, were instrumental in developing intercultural relationships and her eventual effectiveness as a professional in the intercultural field over the following decades.<sup>74</sup>

By 1979 I was one of the many expatriates recruited or seconded to the Papua New Guinea Department of Education under a policy of mass education developed in the 1960s in the lead up to Papua New Guinean independence and self-government in 1975. In other words, expatriates were in Papua New Guinea, usually for a specific time and purpose, to educate students and train nationals to take over teaching roles and government responsibilities—or ‘to do ourselves out of a job’—an attitude to succession planning and people-centred capacity development that has influenced my intercultural work ever since.

Such an approach is an important part of development work generally, but it has not always been the norm. The 1950s ‘aid model’ of development was predicated on a notion of progress measured largely in terms of economic growth, the dominant policy orientation of capitalist governments and industry,<sup>75</sup> who:

... tried to apply its own conception of ‘development’ to the Third World, working through local elites and pretending that the benefits showered on these elites would

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<sup>74</sup> T Bauman, ‘Shifting sands: towards an anthropological praxis’, pp 202–225.

<sup>75</sup> A Kelly and P Westoby, *Participatory development practice: using traditional and contemporary frameworks*, Practical Action Publishing, Rugby, Warwickshire, UK, 2018, p 13.

trickle down to the less fortunate, especially through the wholesale application of Western-inspired and Western-supplied technology.

Susan George, writing in 1976, asserts that this model did not create ‘a single independent and viable economy in the entire Third World’.<sup>76</sup> In Papua New Guinea, ideas of what development was for and what it consisted of were often the subject of discussion in my social circle. In educational circles, development centred on training young people to take over the roles expatriate educators held, but in other domains, development work often consisted of outside contractors coming in to complete a project and leaving without having shared knowledge and skills with local people.

An alternative to the trickle down model of aid/development described by George, is one where development is viewed as ‘a *process* [my emphasis], in which people individually and collectively realise their potentials, and in doing so, become active protagonists’.<sup>77</sup> Capacity development of local people, together with sustainable projects, began to be valued along with measures of economic growth and Western concepts of ‘progress’ in the 1970s.

Succession planning and capacity development became key factors of success in the international development field as post-colonial and decolonizing theories and practices gained ground. Withdrawal with sustainable impact became an important mark of success in the international development field. Succession planning equated with ‘a demonstration of people’s individual and organisational capacity to act autonomously’; withdrawal related to

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<sup>76</sup> S George, *How the other half dies: the real reasons for world hunger*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex : Penguin Books, London, 1991, p 17.

<sup>77</sup> A Fowler, *Striking a balance: a guide to enhancing the effectiveness of non-governmental organisations in international development*, Earthscan Publications Ltd, London, 2000, p 9.

the appropriate timeframe for the Non Government Development Organisation (or facilitator/institution) to ‘strategically reduce its engagement and leave in the right way’.<sup>78</sup>

While I did not have the language of international development in my vocabulary at the time, this way of working with people was something I was conscious of as an informal and formal educator. I was employed by local boards on local wages, in support and teaching roles for my first three years in Papua New Guinea. These boards operated at all high schools and their functions included guiding and supporting expatriate school principals. In these roles, my partner, a talented teacher, guided my practice, but by listening to and watching other expatriate and local teachers, I assessed approaches to teaching and ways of interacting with students, forming a view of what a ‘good’ teacher was. I began to believe I could aspire to becoming one.

The need to have local involvement, through collaboration or partnership, in order to maximise potential for successful outcomes in the teaching/learning enterprise or in development projects, was an important early lesson when working in an intercultural context.

Learning from national staff, especially about alternative worldviews and ways of working, and interacting with students and/or parents were routine and essential lessons in our work. In our professional relationships in general, in conversations at work or in social situations, the sense of being involved collaboratively in a larger, shared project was at the heart of what we did. This approach enabled positive outcomes for students and teachers, and ensured that both nationals and expatriates were committed to the development of educational programs that combined our external expertise with local ways of knowing, being and doing. Mark Moran describes the important nexus between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ relationships in

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<sup>78</sup> Fowler, *Striking a balance*, p 105.

remote Indigenous communities and the need for ‘a deep understanding’ of their respective domains. He notes how surprising it is that so little attention has been given to this grounded practice in research or policy development.<sup>79</sup>

A case in point is the respectful and mutually beneficial working relationship between Noel Hayes (Aboriginal leader) and Karen Worth (non-Aboriginal worker) at the council in Alekarenge between 2006 and 2008, described by Alyson Wright in *Serious whitefella stuff*. They were a ‘formidable team’—her warm personality and lack of preconceptions and his insider knowledge meant their relationship evolved positively; it was based on trust; it engendered good community relationships and smooth council management.<sup>80</sup>

In Papua New Guinea, professional and social interactions with other expatriates and locals, many of them experts in fields such as agriculture and health, provided insights into the wider development field. However, by the time I left Papua New Guinea at the beginning of 1981, I realised that ‘development’ itself could be problematic. It was often underpinned, even if only unconsciously, by a development practitioner’s sense of Western or ‘white’ superiority, despite the fact that some projects failed. This made me question development activities driven by external experts with what frequently proved to be a fairly rigid Western mindset.

One such project in Papua New Guinea that failed to deliver a lasting improvement was funded by an international development institution and completed by outside consultants. It involved the replacement of pit toilets with what was considered to be more appropriate technology at our remote highlands school. The new toilet block, complete with flushing system, was attached to a series of holding pools built on a steep incline, designed to feed the

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<sup>79</sup> Moran, *Serious whitefella stuff*, pp 183–184.

<sup>80</sup> A Wright, in Moran, *Serious whitefella stuff*, p 105.

flushing apparatus. It worked well in the dry season immediately after installation, but in the wet season, after each heavy downpour, the flushing system failed. Rubble, driven by the force of the rain, blocked the pipes between each pool. This resulted in system failure and required teachers and students to climb the mountain and make repairs.

While studying for a Diploma of Teaching (Technical) at Sydney Teachers' College in the mid-seventies, the early lessons I had learnt in Papua New Guinea were brought more explicitly into my practice. Part of the training focused on racism, inequality and oppression as it was reflected in the daily press and in the 'situational learning' space in which I taught. As my class comprised people from thirteen different cultural backgrounds, the study of racism was timely and necessary. Perhaps most importantly, Malcolm Knowles' *The adult learner* had a significant impact on my subsequent practice.

Knowles differentiates between pedagogy—the art and science of teaching—and andragogy, which constituted a fairly radical approach to adult learning at the time, even if its foundations began much earlier. Its six core principles place the adult learner at the centre of any learning situation, and can be applied to individuals or groups anywhere, making it flexible and useful in intercultural contexts. Knowles himself had a broad conception of what adult education was—it had at least three meanings, one to describe the process, one that was technical (organised activities to achieve educational objectives) and one that combined both to produce a third meaning, which he saw as 'a movement or a field of social practice' that included community development as well as other areas of adult education. 'It seems clear that he intended for andragogy to be applicable to *all* adult learning environments.'<sup>81</sup> I took this, and his references to andragogy's links to Paulo Freire's work in Brazil, to mean andragogy had potential for use in the intercultural field.

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<sup>81</sup> MS Knowles, RA Swanson and EF Holton, *The adult learner: the definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*, Butterworth-Heinemann (Elsevier Inc), Burlington MA, 2011, p 143.

In their most basic form, the core principles of andragogy centre on the learners' need to know, their self-concept, prior experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and the motivation to learn.<sup>82</sup> Adapting these principles to 'varying conditions encountered in practice' is inherent in the approach.<sup>83</sup> The shift from being an instructor using presentation skills to convey largely predetermined knowledge, to the role of learning facilitator is fundamental because it involves the relinquishing of control. Rather than planning pre-ordained content and transmitting it, a facilitator becomes a process designer and manager, which necessitates relationship building and needs regular assessment and, where necessary, adjustments to the learning programs. It involves learners in planning, links them to resources, and encourages them to use their initiative.<sup>84</sup> This requires practice, skill and patience on the learning facilitator's part, particularly in an intercultural context.

The opportunity to apply the principles of andragogy in Australia with the guidance of a mentor was valuable. Regular sessions with her taught me how to improve my self-reflection, participate constructively in debriefing sessions, accept and give feedback, and innovate. I had the opportunity to implement and refine a 'situational learning' approach at Mt Hagan Technical College in the Papua New Guinea TAFE system in 1979. I found that Knowles' thoughts on how situational differences connects andragogy with 'the socio-cultural influences' of each learning situation, was applicable.<sup>85</sup> This program involving high school graduates contributed to high levels of learner engagement, satisfaction and success through direct measurement, feedback, and the employment of graduates in very different circumstances to that of NSW TAFE. These efforts resulted in me receiving a highly complimentary performance report by an external inspector.

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<sup>82</sup> Knowles, *The adult learner*, p 4.

<sup>83</sup> Knowles, *The adult learner*, p 241.

<sup>84</sup> Knowles, *The adult learner*, p 260.

<sup>85</sup> Knowles, *The adult learner*, p 151.

In the memoir accompanying this study, I explore the challenges, successes and lessons learnt when attempting to adapt these principles to an Indigenous context for the first time in Lajamanu, and how this informed my later practice in Tennant Creek and elsewhere. In Lajamanu, despite my remote supervisor's encouragement and support for relationship building and assessing adult education needs based on what the Warlpiri people wanted, the primary school principal there viewed my driving or walking around the community talking to people as 'passing the time of day' and as wasting time. This confirmed what Knowles observes in his text: 'The facilitator role may appear to be more casual, but actually requires increased attentiveness to what is happening in individual and groups of learners.'<sup>86</sup>

Over the years, many white colleagues have used the word 'epiphany' to describe how their initial experiences in Aboriginal communities changed their assumptions or the course of their lives. In Lajamanu in 1981, my own sense of epiphany was built on multiple and gradual realisations: while the main lessons learnt in Papua New Guinea were relevant, the operating environment and the expectations and assumptions of white personnel were significantly different. The existence of a markedly contested history compounded earlier critiques of my own culture, and the oppression and injustice inflicted on Indigenous Australians (and my perception of continuing intrusions) were significantly different to my experiences in Papua New Guinea.

The 'continuing intrusions' I refer to were exemplified by the large number of bureaucratic interactions between representatives of the Aboriginal council and government agencies when politicians or bureaucrats visited the settlement. Multiple policies affecting everyday life (and frequent change of policy) tested the capacities of key local people, including those with intercultural skills. Then, as now, an unstable policy environment,

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<sup>86</sup> Knowles, *The adult learner*, p 257.



together with ‘constant policy reform, legislative change, realignment of departmental portfolios and new incursions’<sup>87</sup> led to an ad hoc approach of ‘muddling through’ in practice, exacerbating existing problems and the ability to deal with them at the local level.

The tensions created by government policy based on a ‘one size fits all’ model, are inherently problematic. When government services and resources respond to the broad needs of a society and its perceived deficiencies the important work of capacity building is diminished. John P Kretzmann pointed out in the mid 1990s that such responses can never be enough to address ‘deteriorating conditions in lower income and working class neighbourhoods’ in the USA. In arguing for community builders to ‘return to basics’, Kretzmann urged them to instead map community assets (of individuals, citizens associations and local institutions), to ‘rediscover and mobilize the strengths, capacities, and assets within those communities’.<sup>88</sup> While the provision of outside resources must continue, Kretzmann condemned the fact that resources most often arrive ‘when a convincing story of emptiness and need has been told’. The Northern Territory adult education project in the late twentieth century was an attempt to build local capacity, but was undermined by a lack of understanding of this distinction between mapping needs and mapping assets, as well as political and other factors explored in this study, including the lack of preparedness of intercultural workers (or community builders).

For example, Warlpiri councillors, for whom English was a second language, often found it difficult to understand and respond to communications from government agencies written in formal English, and the danger of misunderstanding oral communications undermined council’s attempts at ‘self-determination’. In many cases, inadequate support for

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<sup>87</sup> Moran, *Serious whitefella stuff*, pp 186–187.

<sup>88</sup> JP Kretzmann, *Building communities from the inside out: a path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*, Shelterforce, Sept/Oct, 1995, p 8.

legal and compliance matters by the relevant government agency impaired the council's chances of engaging with issues effectively. In addition, an overlay of (sometimes unconscious) racism and inadequate preparation on the part of many white people who worked in the intercultural field at Lajamanu had the potential to disrupt or disempower the Warlpiri leadership. In the community-controlled store, for example, the Warlpiri board had to rely on the white manager's integrity and intercultural skills for reports on financial and management matters accurately. The manager's advice was crucial to the board understanding issues, minimising fraud and making strategic decisions. Anecdotes about managers defrauding community stores were still circulating in the early 2000s.

The neighbouring Gurindji people's attempt to run their own council and cattle business in complex circumstances, and get lasting control over their country, has been well documented in *A handful of sand* by Charlie Ward. Their quest for autonomy is set against the backdrop of Northern Territory government policies, resource allocation and racism designed to undermine self-determination; a justified mistrust by Gurindji leaders of the white people they had to rely on; and their struggle to maintain a 'dry' community<sup>89</sup>, aspects of their struggle I was aware of in 1981.

At a time of significant change—when I was deciding what I wanted to do and where I wanted to do it—the epiphanies I experienced at Lajamanu were fundamental to deciding that intercultural work at home in Australia was more important to me than similar work in 'third world countries'.

This was despite the fact that the tired stereotypes of 'missionaries, mercenaries, or misfits'<sup>90</sup> as applied to development workers, while overly simplistic, seemed somewhat

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<sup>89</sup> CR Ward, *A handful of sand: the Gurindji struggle, after the walk-off*, Monash University Publishing, Clayton, Victoria, 2016, pp 264–284.

<sup>90</sup> Moran, *Serious whitefella stuff*, p 187.

applicable to many of the whites in Lajamanu in 1981. As Carty notes decades later, ‘The stories are true. Aboriginal communities are populated by some of the strangest outsiders Australia has to offer.’<sup>91</sup> He labels them as gatekeepers, powerbrokers or self-professed experts ready to tell you ‘what is wrong with the Aboriginal people in your community’, but also comments that they can also be ‘extraordinary, generous and well-intentioned’. He advises first-time researchers arriving into a community to take care not to align themselves to people before knowing them (and the community politics) well.

Successful intercultural work in complex circumstances requires preparation, a particular set of personal attributes, an ability to form and maintain relationships, and commitment over the long term, among other skillsets. University training exists for people interested in the international development field, but as Moran points out, ‘to work in the frontline in an Australian Indigenous community, a frontline worker is not expected to have dedicated professional training’:

... no one (working in Indigenous communities) is expected to work over the long term with a place and its people through intermittent but lengthy postings, or that an effort must be made to learn the Indigenous language or languages of that place.<sup>92</sup>

Writing about Arnhem Land in the early 1980s, Richard Trudgen corroborates this by documenting the poor communication and loss of control by locals at Ramingining community. ‘As long-term staff, with their different degrees of skill in speaking Yolgnu Matha, left the community and were replaced by staff with no language skills, no long-term

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<sup>91</sup> J Carty, ‘A guide to conducting research in isolated Indigenous communities’, Research School of Humanities, The Australian National University, 2007, p 20.

<sup>92</sup> Moran, *Serious whitefella stuff*, p xi.

commitment and no sense of local history', the capacity of locals to make themselves understood and to control developments in the community was diminished.<sup>93</sup>

However, not all white people working in the Indigenous domain were unskilled. Investigating 'the working relationships that have emerged between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people involved in the project of Aboriginal self-determination', Batty draws on the studies of other academics to describe the 'non-Aboriginal administrative class' working in Indigenous corporations:

It includes, for example, committed political activists, dedicated professionals, cynical 'old-hands' who have worked in Aboriginal affairs all their lives, and less desirable individuals who regularly engage in corrupt practices, sometimes in cahoots with their Aboriginal employers.<sup>94</sup>

Batty's study substantiates George's findings that local elites may contribute to corruption and anti-development activities, adding to the complexity of frontline work. He also provides insight into the underpinnings of the state's role in promoting and supporting 'self-determination' and the positive role of white 'political activists'. These white people were able to develop key relationships with Aboriginal leaders in the establishment of organisations such as the Central Land Council, the Pitjantjatjara Council, and the Institute for Aboriginal Development.<sup>95</sup> Such intercultural partnerships could be 'precarious' in comparison to the tenure of white public servants. These (usually) young, educated and highly

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<sup>93</sup> R Trudgen, *Why warriors lie down and die*, Why Warriors, Nhulunbuy, Australia, 2000, p 54.

<sup>94</sup> P Batty, 'Private politics, public strategies: white advisers and their Aboriginal subjects', *Oceania*, Vol. 75, Issue 3, Mar/Jun 2005, p 216.

<sup>95</sup> Batty, 'Private politics, public strategies', p 209.

motivated white people were generally employed by the Aboriginal organisations on the understanding that they would work themselves out of a job over time.<sup>96</sup>

In summary then, my early lessons from Papua New Guinea and my seminal experiences at Lajamanu, along with the insights of educators and theorists, led me to make key decisions about what I wanted to study and where I wanted to work. In reflecting on my early studies in adult education and an informal and formal critique of the aid/international development field, it is clear that Knowles' distinctions between pedagogy and andragogy, and my preference for the latter, became a springboard for my later interest in community development. From Freire and George in the 1980s to Kelly and Westoby, and Fowler in the early 2000s, to Moran more recently, there are consistent threads or stations in my journey, which have been enhanced by direct experience and the generosity of mentors, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. A passion for learning and working with people is one thread; a sense of solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' struggles for justice is another. Underpinning these threads is my own quest to find the best way possible to be useful in that struggle, continually improving and refining my practice. My experiences, studies and my reading provided important insights into, and guidance about, *how* I wanted to work and with whom.

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<sup>96</sup> Batty, 'Private politics, public strategies', p 217.

## Chapter 4: Key stations in my journey of discovery

Early studies I undertook in adult education centred on Malcolm Knowles' theories, and were further informed by studying Paulo Freire at university in the context of a 'third-world education' unit in the early 1980s. Additionally, I was mentored by Alan Randell and Anthony Kelly, both of whom developed my capacity to apply theory to practice. Since then, Susan George, Alan Fowler, Anthony Kelly and Mark Moran,<sup>97</sup> theorists in international and people-centred development, have critiqued and expanded key ideas that inform my understanding of the field.

In this chapter, I outline and explore important aspects of the work of Knowles and Freire and relate them to my experiences in the field. This enables me to scrutinise important ideas in the light of experience and it is a way of testing their relevance to the events narrated in my accompanying memoir. Most often these experiences depended on close collaborations with like-minded people on projects that were considered innovative.

For example, within the ATSIC Policy Office in the early 2000s the Community and Economic Development team attempted to demonstrate how participatory development could enhance government service delivery. The work this team undertook, which to a considerable extent was a practical application of Freire's theories, has relevance for the 2020 new agreement between all governments, the Australian Local Government Association and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations. This agreement updates the Closing the Gap targets, and touts a new approach to overcoming entrenched inequality in full and genuine partnership. The four priority reforms offer a platform for

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<sup>97</sup> These theorists will be discussed later in this and other chapters.

participatory development processes to flourish, if such processes are systematically adopted, together with government service delivery.<sup>98</sup>

This type of work also took place in Central Australian communities in the late 1980s. Alan Randell, a well-known Australian educator who had the benefit of learning directly from Freire in Papua New Guinea in the early 1970s became my mentor. Randell, a colleague in the Northern Territory Open College of TAFE (NTOC), was responsible for introducing me to the idea of community development based on an intrinsic ‘grass roots’ or ‘bottom up’ approach. This approach appealed to me because it emphasised, as Freire states, that ‘there is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process’.<sup>99</sup> Freire’s assertion accorded with my own experience and it was also supported by other university texts. An example is *The white tribe of South Africa* by David Harrison, which outlines how the Afrikaner Broederbond, as it rose from obscurity to power, introduced the separate and discriminatory educational systems for blacks and whites integral to Apartheid.

Freire coined the term ‘conscientization’, for a way of working *with not for* oppressed individuals or whole peoples in their struggle for liberation and access to education.<sup>100</sup> He saw this as a *process*, an awakening of critical consciousness, and a search for self-affirmation, through adult literacy. This process demanded an authentic relationship between learner and educator as ‘equally knowing subjects’ and involved dialogue and critical reflection on the process of reading and writing itself.<sup>101</sup> It is a praxis that engages both learners and educator with a ‘knowable object’ (for example a photograph, sketch or map) directly relevant to their

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<sup>98</sup> Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap Report 2020*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2020, July 2020.

<sup>99</sup> P Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Penguin Books, New York, 1985, p 13.

<sup>100</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, p 26.

<sup>101</sup> Freire, *Cultural action for freedom*, [Cambridge] *Harvard Educational Review*, 1970, p 31.

existence: ‘Rather than receive information about this or that fact, together they analyse aspects of their own existential experience represented in the codification.’<sup>102</sup>

Randell advocated for practical workshopping techniques appropriate to working *with* large groups of Indigenous people, which he had used and refined in Papua New Guinea and Australia, and which drew on his engagement with Freire and his ideas. A number of these workshops enabled large groups of Aboriginal adults to reflect on aspects of policy affecting their lives and to provide feedback to government. In other workshops, community history, current circumstances and aspirational futures were explored over several days with the goal of developing ‘bottom up’ community plans able to be supported by government agencies in a coordinated manner, a goal of the Aboriginal Economic Development Policy, 1987.

While it is not the purpose of this study to engage in an extended discourse on the various ways the idea of ‘development’ has been understood, it is nevertheless worth noting that the fields of international and community development are contested fields worthy of their own separate studies. My involvement with community development was relatively focused and limited. I participated as a ‘practitioner engaged within a community to “catalyse” changes in various social, economic and political conditions, as deemed by that community’.<sup>103</sup> Another way of characterising my work is as a facilitator who enabled ‘participation of the community in a process or project’.<sup>104</sup> As mentioned, such involvement reflects many of the priorities outlined in Freire’s work, both in its methods and because it was aligned closely to the immediate and specific needs of the communities I worked in.

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<sup>102</sup> Freire, *Cultural action for freedom*, p 33.

<sup>103</sup> E Blakely, 'Toward a science of community development' in E Blakely (ed) *Community Development Research*, Human Sciences Press, New York, 1979, as cited in DC Mulenga, 'Participator research for radical community development', *Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education*, Journal, Vol. 34, No. 3, November 1994, pp 253–261.

<sup>104</sup> DC Mulenga, 'Participator research for radical community development', *Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education*, Vol. 34, No. 3, November 94, pp 253–261.



In ATASIC, a decade later, I was drawn back to reading aid/international development theorists—particularly Susan George, who critiqued the field from the perspective of world hunger and the third-world debt crisis. Looking at aid/international development in the 1970s, George argued that malnutrition as much as famine was predicated on ‘deeply-rooted patterns of injustice and exploitation, home-grown or imported’ that impeded the poor from feeding themselves.<sup>105</sup> Western conceptions of development imposed ‘a new kind of dependency’ which benefited the already-rich and shaped exploited societies to ‘meet its commercial and political needs’.<sup>106</sup>

By the late twentieth century, many other theorists had joined in the critique of Western-style development in the third world. Alan Fowler, for example, argued that ‘development could not be externally directed but required local ownership’ and introduced the concept of ‘sustainable impact’. He questioned earlier definitions of poverty (focused on nutrition) as being insufficient.<sup>107</sup> While his work centred on non-government organisations (NGOs), it was of interest to me, a public servant, as potentially providing a two-way mechanism for ATASIC’s exploration of development: first, to strengthen Indigenous organisations and second, to improve how government engaged with them generally. Fowler explained sustainable impact as ‘a dynamic system of linking ecology, economy and society’ with the means to operate at many levels at once, ‘from local to global and back to local’.<sup>108</sup>

In real terms this meant NGOs had to build three essential components into their operations with people in households, groups and communities for ‘human change’: improved well-being, capacity development and empowerment. In addition, organisational capacity and resilience depended on their ability to read the political and social environments accurately

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<sup>105</sup> George, *How the other half dies*, p 16.

<sup>106</sup> George, *How the other half dies*, p 17.

<sup>107</sup> Fowler, *Striking a balance*, p 3.

<sup>108</sup> Fowler, *The virtuous spiral*, p 16.

and raise the critical awareness of those involved. ‘Often this calls for a Freirian type of critical social analysis as a necessary component of capacity building.’<sup>109</sup> Fowler saw powerlessness in society as an additional dimension to the understanding of poverty and its reduction as ‘a process through which people progressively gain control over commodities’. The ‘rough sequence’ of this process involved aspects of survival (food/shelter etc.); well-being (health/literacy etc.) and empowerment (‘in the psychological sense of self-esteem and status, and in the political sense, of exerting influence over decisions which affect their lives’).<sup>110</sup>

It was, however, Anthony Kelly who provided the most guidance to our team’s work in ATSIC, the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC), and in my practice today. His book brings together in one place a way of framing the theoretical and practical work we did in the early 2000s as well as the work of many others theorists in the field of people-centred or participatory development. The ‘processes’ involved are similar to those I learnt from Randell—they emphasise a way of working with people ‘designed to begin where the people are wherever that may be, working with what they have, no matter how big or small, and honouring their ideas that shape the possible pathways in change’.<sup>111</sup> Kelly also provides critical distinctions between service delivery and participatory development, gives structure to practice through a range of frameworks, details methodologies, and provides guidance about self-reflection techniques. I still revisit these fundamentals before, during and after fieldwork with the two Aboriginal organisations I continue to work with.

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<sup>109</sup> Fowler, *The virtuous spiral*, p 18.

<sup>110</sup> Fowler, *Striking a balance*, p 4.

<sup>111</sup> Kelly and Westoby, *Participatory development practice*, p 18.

It is worthwhile highlighting one of Kelly’s tables, used in his work with ATSIC staff, and replicated in his and Westoby’s text, for the distinguishing features of service delivery and participatory development work.

**Table 1.1 Distinguishing service delivery and participatory development<sup>112</sup>**

<b>Point of distinction</b>	<b>Participatory work</b>	<b>Service work</b>
<b>Relationship</b>	Mutual	Role-based
<b>Authority base</b>	Bottom-up	Top-down
<b>Democratic style</b>	Inclusive	Representative
<b>Engagement</b>	Working with	Working for
<b>Value base</b>	Equality-driven	Eligibility-driven
<b>Outcome focus</b>	Process goals	Programme goals
<b>Universality</b>	Exploratory	Replicable

One orientation is not meant to be better than the other, nor mutually exclusive, but the distinctions between service and participation emphasise the many differences between the two orientations.<sup>113</sup> For too long governments have prioritised the provision of ‘services to’ communities rather than the developmental processes of ‘working with’ people ‘to explore and to find their own solutions’.<sup>114</sup> The high turnover of government officials, whether on the frontline, or working in centralised policy and program areas in Indigenous affairs

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<sup>112</sup> Kelly and Westoby, *Participatory development practice*, p 16.

<sup>113</sup> Kelly and Westoby, *Participatory development practice*, p 16.

<sup>114</sup> Kelly and Westoby, *Participatory development practice*, p 6.

exacerbates this problem, creates instability and undermines relationships of trust between government and communities ‘to a perfunctory and mechanistic ritual’.<sup>115</sup>

My involvement in community and participatory development were important stations in my journey of discovery, especially because I learnt by ‘doing’ and reflecting on complex situations in a period before the notion of white privilege was widely available to white intercultural workers. (However, even then, Indigenous colleagues in ATSIC (1995–2002) pointed out the differences between us—they could not escape racism or ‘leave the field’ whereas I could: ‘We go home and still live it. You can go home and forget about it.’ Being white and being privileged enabled me to ‘feel at home in the world’ and ‘to escape the penalties or dangers which others suffer’.<sup>116</sup>)

In particular, as my interest in and knowledge of ‘development’ was expanded through Alan Randell’s and Anthony Kelly’s mentorship, I began to understand the collaborative nature of successful community and participatory development. An early example is the way in which community development took place during my three years in Tennant Creek (1986–1988). This included significant collaborative projects with Indigenous people and organisations using approaches highlighted in adult education and community development theory.

For instance, working together, Julalikari Council, an Aboriginal organisation, and the Northern Territory Open College of TAFE (NTOC), a government agency, set up a lifeskills/literacy program for Aboriginal women in a centre of their own in one of the town camps. There, they could undertake activities important to them while being supported by both the Council and NTOC. Even before we understood all of the distinguishing features of

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<sup>115</sup> Kelly and Westoby, *Participatory development practice*, p 7.

<sup>116</sup> McIntosh, in *Privilege and prejudice*, p 13.

service work and participatory development listed in Table 1.1 above, we worked innovatively using our understanding of community development and Freirian theories. From our positions of leadership within our organisations (Julalikari Council and NTOC) we were able to deliver services and support various ‘bottom up’ initiatives, which developed people’s capacities. As well as this project, two other innovative projects helped Julalikari Council to deliver services to Aboriginal people on country and in town. An NTOC-sponsored pre-fabrication building project coupled with permaculture workshops supported Julalikari’s staff to provide basic housing and gardening techniques for outstation residents. These gardening techniques reduced dust, minimised respiratory disease, and required minimal labour and resources. In a homemakers program NTOC staff and external consultants taught Aboriginal women to make videos, which helped Julalikari’s town-camp families transition from basic housing to residences in Tennant Creek itself.

Building on the Aboriginal Economic Development Policy (1987), a 1989 Report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs (HORSCAA) became integral to my work that year and subsequently. *A chance for the future: training in skills for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island community management and development* informed the approach of an NTOC team that delivered community development workshops in Central Australian communities. Our purpose was to assist in the development of community-based plans incorporating economic, cultural and social aspirations. We aimed to mobilise locally controlled governance and focus in a coordinated fashion the resources of governments on the goals articulated in these community-based plans. These communities were diverse with different geographical situations and historical experiences, significant cultural differences and varying socio-economic circumstances. The report identified them

variously as ‘major urban centres, country towns, town camps, cattle stations, Aboriginal townships and homelands centres’.<sup>117</sup>

Of the forty-nine recommendations in the HORSCAA report, a number were especially relevant to our work in Central Australian remote communities. The need for a cooperative approach to develop community plans that included education and training needs was crucial, as was the imperative for governments to commit agencies to provide coordinated and long-term recurrent and capital funding for implementation programs. Also important was the requirement for TAFE to develop and expand appropriate access and general skills courses for adult Aboriginal people and to try to staff such courses with Aboriginal educators. Other priorities were to identify training needs and coordinate adult education; to develop the capacities and skills of non-Aboriginal personnel contracted to do the work (i.e. prepare them to undertake the work); and to emphasise community self-management and community consultation.

This last recommendation linked to another HORSCAA report the following year, *Our future, our selves*, which focused on community control, management and resources. While some recommendations in the 1989 report were adopted, the majority of those related to our work were not. The organisation I worked for at the time—NTOC—had a short life of eight years. The work of facilitating community development plans became politicised. Influential individuals viewed these workshops as being outside NTOC’s core business of traditional adult education and training activities, despite the fact the workshops were funded by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. This possibly contributed to NTOC’s demise in 1994. This contributed, too, to the cancellation of Aboriginal adult educator training in the Northern Territory and diminished the opportunity to build capacity to mobilise self-

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<sup>117</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee into Aboriginal Affairs, *A chance for the future: training in skills for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island community management and development*, AGPS, Canberra, August 1989, pp 3–4.

determination through this planning process. Had these workshops continued and been supported by service providers, I believe their popularity with community members, attested to by attendance records, would have increased; peoples' understanding of local governance arrangements, planning and the resources required to implement them would have been consolidated; and self-determination would have been enhanced.

In 1995 I became the Regional Manager of the Queanbeyan Regional Office of ATSIIC, a position I held for three years. One of my first suggestions, that field staff adopt a more developmental approach to their work with regional organisations, was rejected. As directed by head office and outlined in field officers' duty statements, their interactions with community organisations were focused on grant compliance. Even so, developmental approaches were initiated. Strategic and operational plans for the Queanbeyan Regional Council and office staff were developed, and a contractor, hired to undertake capacity development activities with Aboriginal tourism organisations in the region, enabled programs of support that saw many of them win state tourism awards for the first time.

When I worked in ATSIIC's head office from 1999–2003, there was an opportunity to undertake research in the development field with like-minded colleagues and consultants. I became involved in activities associated with a Memorandum of Understanding between ATSIIC and Oxfam Community Aid Abroad (OCAA). This brought me into contact with Anthony Kelly, then working for OCAA, and Geoffrey Richardson, who headed up ATSIIC's Community and Economic Development team. Richardson was an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leader in ATSIIC's Senior Executive Service, who had transferred from Queensland to lead the Commission's development agenda. Aspects of the struggle that ensued within ATSIIC's broader policy areas over ideas, approaches, language and implications for policy and program reform, forms part of the memoir associated with this study.

For example, the manager and staff responsible for implementing Community Participation Agreements (CPA), a top-down government initiative, wanted to use the research into participatory development to shore up arguments for their initiative, even though CPAs were the antithesis of people-centred, participatory development. It took a workshop led by a visiting evaluation expert in Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) methodology, Tom Dewar, to convince those responsible for CPAs that they were not a development initiative and could not be publicised as such.

However, at the heart of ATSIK's exploration of developmental approaches that would complement its existing service delivery functions, there was a genuine interest in capacity development and participatory development processes. Kelly's explanation of the differences between 'top down' and 'bottom up' processes, and the need for both, was a first step in many ATSIK staff becoming more aware that service delivery alone does not redress poverty.

Although the failure of service delivery to address the fundamental issues of poverty has been understood for some time, the changes in public policy to address that failure have been to increase competition, to tighten regulatory standards of service delivery, and to target the 'client group' more and more prescriptively.<sup>118</sup>

Kelly introduced staff to the work of people such as Gandhi and Frantz Fanon and emphasised the need for development workers to have a practice framework that underpins the way they 'position the self' in the work. Four such practice frameworks, including Fanon's decolonising practice framework, were used to assist in explaining the 'implicate method': the methodological preparation of ourselves as development workers.<sup>119</sup> These

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<sup>118</sup> Kelly and Westoby, *Participatory development practice*, p 13.

<sup>119</sup> Kelly and Westoby, *Participatory development practice*, pp 30–47.



practice frameworks offered a comprehensive overview of five levels of participatory development, which covered project work with small groups, organisations and networks of support:

Within each level the activities are purposeful, systematic, and interconnected. If workers leave out too many steps, inevitably the work loses its personal, participatory and inclusive character and its potency as a developmental tool.<sup>120</sup>

Kelly detailed the processes involved in micro method (building relationships), mezza method (strengthening groups), macro method (establishing organisations), and meta method (making local, social and global linkages). Under the Memorandum of Understanding between ATSIC and OCAA we had agreement to implement four projects, two of which were completed before ATSIC was disbanded. Alerting field staff to the difference between service delivery and development work (top down and bottom up) and the processes involved in both, meant staff had the opportunity to reflect on their role as public servants. Many decided they would prefer development work.

One positive outcome of this exploration of development in ATSIC contributed to the reform of the training area of Office of Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations (ORAC) now known as the Office of Registrar of Indigenous Organisations (ORIC) between 2004 and 2008. The Registrar, Laura Beacroft, had embraced the methodology espoused by OCAA and Kelly and saw its relevance to ORAC's work with organisations as complementary to its compliance and regulatory functions. When changes in ATSIC structures and personnel resulted in my position there becoming tenuous, the Registrar gave effect to my transfer to ORAC. My role, which was to lead the reform of the training function by bringing a developmental focus to the work, blended adult education and participatory development

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<sup>120</sup> Kelly and Westoby, *Participatory development practice*, p 25.

theory and practice, making my last five years of public service employment particularly satisfying.

These explorations of development processes have carried over into post-retirement employment and consultancies. Working collaboratively with two Aboriginal organisations in the NT, we draw on the wisdom of ‘old hands’ and the latest research and energy of younger academics and practitioners to bring customary and corporate governance concerns together. With Traditional Owners, we have embedded developmental processes into the creation of a large canvas map of country with a companion ‘big book’ that records how the map was made. Both map and big book have multiple uses in governance, cultural maintenance, intra- and intercultural education, and as the basis for making decisions about Aboriginal land use for economic development.

In the foreword to Mark Moran’s *Serious whitefella stuff*, Noel Pearson draws attention to the lack of application of modern international development theory in the Indigenous domain. He recommends Moran’s book for examining development in the context of Indigenous Australia and asserts, ‘the corpus of learning about the practice of Indigenous Development in Australia is far too small’. He concludes, ‘there is little systematic effort to ensure that we are building this corpus and applying the lessons learnt through practice to the overarching policy approaches or to provide input into the political debate’.<sup>121</sup>

Moran looks at the complexities involved in being a frontline worker in an increasingly complex environment where public opinion and the roles of government policy and policy makers may result in a diminution of the capacity to address issues in grounded practice. Using five community case studies, Moran explores how people operate in this ‘highly complex and politicised field’ where complicated relationships and instability are the

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<sup>121</sup> N Pearson in Moran, *Serious whitefella stuff*, p x.

norm. It is an environment I am familiar with, and one I examine more closely in the next chapter.

In summary, while a development ‘lens’, incorporating decolonising practice frameworks, has proven to be an effective tool in my professional life, it is the combination of development perspectives with a study of white privilege that opens the door to deeper understanding. When joined, these perspectives contribute to greater awareness of the prevalence and implications of oppression and deepen the theoretical and practical repertoire in my ‘backpack’.

White privilege and white supremacy is not yet well understood in the wider Australian community and, consequently, deserves closer study. Without a broad understanding of my privileges as a white person, I could not have worked anywhere near as effectively in my professional life. These understandings continue to evolve and a study of white privilege today involves an examination of developments in the concept of ‘whiteness’ and associated studies since McIntosh published her initial essay in 1988.

## Chapter 5: Systemic issues: connections between white privilege, white supremacy, and the relative disadvantage of Indigenous Australians

This chapter considers white privilege at a more general level than previous chapters and discusses ways in which institutional and societal racism contribute to the relative disadvantage of Indigenous people in contemporary Australia. In doing so, it draws on Peggy McIntosh's later study, *White people facing race: uncovering the myths that keep racism in place*, which revisits aspects of white privilege but focuses more specifically on issues connected to ideas of white supremacy. These ideas provide a useful perspective on a sample of governmental reports on the relative disadvantage of Indigenous peoples.

This chapter also examines a case study that implicates media commentators in perpetuating racism in Australian sport and links this to other examples of press commentary on Indigenous issues. Finally, I consider the usefulness of two studies by contemporary theorists—Melissa Sweet and Mark Moran—in explicating the role of the attitudes of media and governments towards Indigenous peoples. Such examinations highlight the connections between the idea of white supremacy and the ongoing, seemingly intractable nature of Indigenous disadvantage.

Writing in 2009, twenty years after her seminal essay, 'White privilege and male privilege: a personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies', McIntosh revisits white privilege and extends her discussion to elaborate on the idea of white supremacy, expressing views that reinforce DiAngelo's description of white supremacy as 'a political, economic and social system of domination based on the assumption of superiority by white people'.<sup>122</sup> Understanding McIntosh's identification of the operation

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<sup>122</sup> R DiAngelo, *White fragility*, p 28.

of key myths that perpetuate inequality provides an opportunity to develop strategies for systemic change.

McIntosh asserts that notions of white privilege and white supremacy persist because, despite counter-evidence, they are underpinned and perpetuated by what we are taught and how we are raised. The first myth she identifies, and probably the most important, is the myth of meritocracy. It has ‘a great silencing force’ as it fails to acknowledge society’s systems of oppression or privilege. This myth assumes that ‘the individual is the only unit of society’ and that individual accomplishments are wanted, worked for, earned and deserved. This idea takes little account of the arbitrary nature of the circumstances into which people are born and which make life ‘more, or less, difficult’,<sup>123</sup> nor does it recognise the assistance provided by parents, mentors, or the disparities in access to other resources or networks.

The second myth refers to Richard Dyer’s claims outlined in Chapter 1. McIntosh labels it the myth of manifest destiny, an influential idea deriving from the beliefs entertained by a significant number of Christians, and including ‘the idea that white people were intended by God to take the lands of Indigenous people and others’—an idea sometimes associated with the notion of progress.

Under this myth, whites do not have to allow into their moral or ethical awareness the fact that we live on land taken from those who were here before us, and whose cultures and physical existences white people attempted to destroy.<sup>124</sup>

The third myth also echoes earlier discussion—the myth of white racelessness—which underpins the belief that white people are normal, ‘racially unmarked’ and able to ‘set the

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<sup>123</sup> P McIntosh, *White people facing race: uncovering the myths that keep racism in place*, The Saint Paul Foundation, Minnesota, US, 2009, p 2.

<sup>124</sup> McIntosh, *White people facing race*, p 3.

standard for what it is to be human'. It is associated with the myth of moral elevation, also called 'internalized superiority'.<sup>125</sup>

Although I was not conscious of retaining any sense of the superiority of my white culture after seven years in Papua New Guinea, any such assumptions would have been further eroded by each of my engagements with the Warlpiri, Waramungu, Kaytetye, Arrernte and Ngunnawal peoples. As I learnt more about the holistic nature of land, law, ceremony, kinship and language, my respect for the sustainable systems involved in Aboriginal governance deepened. This has continued throughout my professional life and in my current work with two Northern Territory Aboriginal corporations (2011–2021), a commitment to a facilitation style that embraces difference and capitalises on both customary and corporate governance systems prevails as part of my practice.

This approach to facilitation reflects my view that such work is not a case of 'black or white', 'either/or' but 'and' when working with Indigenous peoples. It is a style that also recognises the need to adapt to changing circumstances—one that Warlpiri people themselves promote, using the concept of 'ngurra-kurlu' which has many meanings related to 'home' and 'a common sense of belonging'. It also connects to 'purami, the path to follow to develop a contemporary and vibrant Warlpiri culture living alongside the mainstream'.<sup>126</sup> The authors describe this as a template and a way of working with Warlpiri people, with multiple benefits. It is helpful in the 'two-way' governance work we facilitate in Northern Territory with Warlpiri and other Central Australian language groups.<sup>127</sup>

The fourth of McIntosh's myths is the myth of monoculture, the idea that there is 'one big American culture' (or one Australian culture, for that matter), which all people

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<sup>125</sup> McIntosh, *White people facing race*, p 3.

<sup>126</sup> Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu (Stephen Jampijinpa Patrick), M Holmes, A Box (Lance), *Ngurra-kurlu: A way of working with Warlpiri People*, Desert Knowledge CRC Report No. 41, Alice Springs, NT, 2008, p 6.

<sup>127</sup> Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu, *Ngurra-kurlu*, pp 1–4.

experience in much the same way. This myth rests on the assumption that those being assimilated into a different, often colonising, culture have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Such an idea is buttressed by the final myth that McIntosh identifies as the myth of white moral elevation, a subconscious belief that ‘only a very unusual person of color ... can be trusted with power’.<sup>128</sup>

McIntosh asserts that this ‘cluster of myths’ creates the ‘psychological underpinnings of white refusal to face racism’ and is responsible for creating ‘resistance in the hearts and minds of white people to facing race’.<sup>129</sup> She explores the ways this plays out in K–12 education, university systems and the media, issues that have already been considered in studies by hooks, Moreton-Robinson, Dyer and others. In schooling, curriculum content ‘discourages students from seeing beyond individuals to the power systems already in place in the worlds we are born into’; in colleges and universities ‘knowledge is seen as a white person’s realm still, and as largely a male realm’; and public media mirrors and increases ‘resistance to facing race’ by avoiding serious discussion or investigation of systems of power centred on privilege, patriarchy and heterosexism.

In Australia we are subject to a similar cluster of myths and resultant oppressions. In the Australian education system, despite Indigenous Studies being included in the curriculum, some of the reasons why students may still leave school without a robust understanding of the Australian frontier wars, forced labour or blackbirding was recently canvassed in the *The Sydney Morning Herald*. These include insufficient teacher training, teacher discomfort about confronting content, limited teaching hours and the need to find a balance between prescribing what teachers must teach while allowing them a reasonable level of autonomy. The article includes statements by University of Sydney academic,

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<sup>128</sup> McIntosh, *White people facing race*, p 3.

<sup>129</sup> McIntosh, *White people facing race*, p 3.

Lynette Riley, a Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi woman, who says, ‘of 160 people training to be teachers, only a handful have a really good idea of Aboriginal studies’. For instance, many of those trainees assert that Australia did not experience a history of slavery, despite compelling evidence to the contrary.<sup>130</sup>

While material relating to Indigenous peoples has been included in the K–12 curriculum nationally, a dependence on white teachers whose general education still lacks a depth of knowledge about Indigenous issues perpetuates many stereotypes. It has also produced a Prime Minister who asserted in 2020 that Australia, unlike the USA, did not experience slavery, and while he later backtracked from this position, he did not want to go into the detail of ‘the history wars’.<sup>131</sup>

McIntosh observes that resistance to facing race in organisations and institutions is similar to the resistance of individuals. They are afraid that ‘they will lose power, prestige, profit, security, pride, reputation, freedom and the ability to do whatever they want’. She acknowledges that diversity and globalisation may have resulted in improvements, but most effort has been based on ‘self interest’ and an eye to ‘the bottom line’.<sup>132</sup> McIntosh argues for ‘pluralising’ our minds by giving up the myths and assumptions she outlines and adopting more accurate frameworks. She suggests that, ‘[p]rocesses of group discussion, that honor the stories of each person in the group are the best way I know’.<sup>133</sup> This sounds straightforward, but resistance, a lack of interest, and the complexities underpinning ‘white privilege’ make it difficult to achieve in practice.

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<sup>130</sup> N Chrysanthos, ‘Courses leave pupils with poor knowledge of Indigenous peoples’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 June 2020, p 9.

<sup>131</sup> K Murphy, ‘Scott Morrison sorry for “no slavery in Australia claim” comments and acknowledges “hideous practices”’, *The Guardian*, 12 June 2020, 14.49 AEST online.

<sup>132</sup> McIntosh, *White people facing race*, p 5.

<sup>133</sup> McIntosh, *White people facing race*, p 6.



It is worthwhile keeping in mind the myths McIntosh identifies, and the assumptions underpinning them, when exploring the relative disadvantage of Indigenous Australians. These myths may help explain many of the policies developed and implemented by successive governments since colonisation in order to ‘govern’ Indigenous Australians.

For example, there are multiple government reports on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues which highlight the relative disadvantage of Indigenous peoples compared to other Australians—produced by the Australian National Audit Office, the Productivity Commission, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, to name a few. Government strategies to deal with the Indigenous ‘problem’ sometimes outnumber the agencies reporting on Indigenous issues—‘whole of government’ responses, the Council of Australia Government (COAG) Trials, Stronger Futures, the Red Tape Reduction initiative, the Aboriginal Advancement Strategy, and Closing the Gap are examples.

In 2005 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner’s report urged Australian governments to commit to equality for Indigenous people, particularly in the areas of health and life expectancy. The COAG agreed to do so in 2007. In 2008 the Federal government introduced the ‘Closing the Gap’ framework, which outlined targets to reduce inequality in life expectancy, children’s mortality, education and employment. Every Prime Minister since then has delivered an annual *Closing the Gap* report highlighting outcomes in a range of priority areas called ‘building blocks’. These include early childhood, schooling, health, economic participation, healthy homes, safe communities, governance and leadership. Some improvements have been made, but many areas are unlikely to meet the set targets by the due date.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> *Closing the Gap report 2020*, <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/overview>

Each year, the Australian Human Rights Commission, through the office of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, responds to the report. It notes that in 2020 only two of the seven targets are on track, but more importantly, the policy agenda underpinning the strategy has fallen well short of the mark. The Commissioner calls for a ‘culturally centred’ view of health and wellbeing ‘anchored in Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing’. Similar calls for this approach were made in 1989, in the first National Aboriginal Health Strategy, and every year since.<sup>135</sup>

Over-representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system has been the subject of many investigations, especially in the wake of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADC). Research commissioned by ATSIC five years after that report was tabled in 1991, evaluated the implementation of the RCIADC recommendations. It found governments had failed to implement specific recommendations citing this as ‘*a massive lost opportunity*’, while in the area of law and order a ‘stronger emphasis on more punitive approaches’ had been initiated.<sup>136</sup> Regular reports undertaken by the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) since then demonstrate worsening statistics, despite the fact that the majority of Indigenous people never commit a criminal offence:

In 2016, around 20 in every 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were incarcerated. Over-representation is both a persistent and growing problem—

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration rates increased 41% between 2006

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<sup>135</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, *Close the Gap 2020*, Lowitja Institute for the Close the Gap Steering Committee, March 2020. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/close-gap-2020>

<sup>136</sup> C Cunneen and D McDonald, *Keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people out of custody: an evaluation of the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission in [ie. Into] Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, Office of Public Affairs, ATSIC, Canberra, 1997, p 7.

and 2016, and the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous imprisonment rates over that decade widened.<sup>137</sup>

The ALRC acknowledges that the wider historical, social and economic context contributes to this ‘national disgrace’ but ‘confines its scope to recommendations relating to the incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults’.<sup>138</sup> The Social Justice Commissioner’s 2000 report does, however, elaborate on these historical factors:

Since contact in 1788, the perspectives of the colonisers have prevailed over, and in some instances actively excluded, those of first nations peoples in Australian society. The result has been that the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people has been grounded in the values, beliefs and cultural assumptions of the settler society. These assumptions have manifested through laws, policies, practices and institutions based on the perceived cultural superiority of non-Indigenous structures.<sup>139</sup>

The Commissioner summarised historical reasons for Indigenous disadvantage: dispossession, exclusion from mainstream services (and recent inclusion), past and inter-generational poverty, and a range of demographic issues, adding that adherence to a ‘racist doctrine of *terra nullius* ... was premised on the cultural superiority of Europeans’.<sup>140</sup>

Although the High Court’s *Mabo vs Queensland (2)* decision favoured the Merriam people and rejected the lie of *terra nullius*, former Justice of the High Court, Sir Harry

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<sup>137</sup> Australian Law Reform Commission, Executive summary, *Pathways to Justice—Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*, Final Report No. 133, 2017. <https://www.alrc.gov.au/publication/pathways-to-justice-inquiry-into-the-incarceration-rate-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-alrc-report-133/executive-summary-15/disproportionate-incarceration-rate/>

<sup>138</sup> ALRC, *Pathways to Justice*.

<sup>139</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 2000*, Australian Human Rights Commission, 2000 p 9. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/social-justice-report-10>

<sup>140</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 2000*, p 10.

Gibbs, described the decision as one of the most controversial, one that gave ‘rise to such a diversity of responses ranging from euphoria to deep anxiety’.<sup>141</sup>

When the report from the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, *Bringing them home*, was published in 1997, the full extent of the impact of government laws, policies and practices from colonisation to modern times became apparent in the personal stories of abuse and denigration of the individuals who made submissions. The report concluded, ‘between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970’. The fact that these practices occurred in my lifetime is particularly chilling, but worse is the report’s finding that ‘not one Indigenous family has escaped the effects of forcible removal’.<sup>142</sup> These ‘effects’ are detailed in three chapters of the report headed *Consequences of removal* which continue to ripple through the Indigenous community today. The prevalence of inter-generational trauma resulting in alcohol abuse, violence, mental health issues and parenting issues attest to the ongoing nature of such consequences.

In 1996 I encouraged ATSIC staff and regional councillors to participate in the Federal elections. To my surprise the majority of Indigenous staff were not enrolled, and could not be encouraged to enrol and to vote. They explained that long-held memories of stories handed down about regimes controlling their lives, especially those related to stolen children, forced removal from country and highly regulated mission life, carried over to a

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<sup>141</sup> H Gibbs, ‘Foreword’ in MA Stephenson and Suri Ratnapala (eds), *Mabo, A judicial revolution: the Aboriginal land rights decision and its impact on Australian law*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Qld, 1993, p xiii.

<sup>142</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, M Dodson and R Wilson, *Bringing them home: report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1997, p 37.

contemporary fear that being on the electoral roll would somehow provide the government with an opportunity to revisit such practices.

These few examples not only highlight the relative disadvantage of Indigenous Australians compared to other Australians, but they outline the historical factors that contribute to it. McIntosh's cluster of myths provides a lens through which to view the past and the persistence of Indigenous peoples' relative disadvantage. If white people could 'pluralise their minds', as McIntosh suggests, it would allow room for more counter-narratives opposing the stereotyping of Indigenous Australians. Such narratives might contribute to a more nuanced approach by politicians and bureaucrats to effect the changes they outline in *Closing the Gap* targets and those desired by Indigenous peoples for greater control of their lives and their future. This may enable adoption of more inclusive, bottom-up and developmental processes on the part of Australian governments, aimed at facilitating and enabling Indigenous communities and individuals to take real control of their lives and their future.

For white people in positions of authority in governments and their bureaucracies, one new initiative would be to have serious and sustained exposure to training programs that explore the complex ideas and pitfalls associated with the concepts of white privilege and white supremacy—and how these concepts are expressed daily in people's attitudes and actions. Such programs might include regular recalls to hone knowledge and skills. This is not as far-fetched as it may sound. A recent episode of the ABC television program, *Compass*, showed how women associated with Waminda South Coast Aboriginal Health and Welfare Aboriginal Corporation were providing training of this kind.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'Confronting white privilege', *Compass*, 14 June 2020.

If McIntosh's theoretical position enables us to look at Indigenous disadvantage through the lens of white supremacy, other academics and practitioners with similar concerns about oppression and inequality provide supporting evidence of the role of government in creating or exacerbating such issues.

For example, Melissa Sweet argues that historical factors such as colonialism, the theory of social evolution, the eugenics movement, and 'whiteness' in the health care system have been linked to scientific racism, said to be 'the use of scientific or so-called scientific methods and discourses to portray some groups as inferior and to justify their oppression'.<sup>144</sup> This has led to a preference for 'deficit framing', which has been:

convenient for governments in keeping the spotlight firmly on the perceived deficiencies of communities rather than on the failings of governments and their preoccupations with their own political and bureaucratic interests.<sup>145</sup>

Pathologising Indigenous peoples in this way has had the paradoxical effect of intrusive surveillance and intervention in their lives and communities, *as well as* neglect, resulting in harm to their health, and to their cultural, spiritual, social and emotional wellbeing.<sup>146</sup>

Countering this 'deficit framing' is difficult for government bodies. Typically, as theorists such as McIntosh and Sweet suggest, and as my experience confirms, personnel are embedded in hierarchical structures and rewarded for using 'top down' practices in a service delivery regime in which 'one size fits all'. Political imperatives and directives often mobilise bureaucratic action; frank and fearless advice provided by bureaucrats can be

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<sup>144</sup> M Sweet, *Acknowledgement: a social journalism research project relating to the history of lock hospitals, lazarets and other forms of medical incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*, Doctor of Philosophy in Communication, University of Canberra, 2017, p 50.

<sup>145</sup> Sweet, *Acknowledgement*, p 52.

<sup>146</sup> Sweet, *Acknowledgement*, p 53.

dismissed in favour of political expediency. Bipartisanship is not unknown but is relatively rare in Indigenous affairs.

However, there are fine exceptions to the career-oriented bureaucrat. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leader, Geoffrey Richardson, has had a long-term commitment to sustainable developmental frameworks and strategies that build on ‘assets’ or the existing capacities and agency of people, organisations and communities.

Before the ATSIC 2000 Restructure, which established ATSIC’s National Policy Office and mobilised an organisational development strategy, Richardson had been building the case for a developmental approach in ATSIC. He had collated the information from several scholarly reviews, beginning with the 1993 review of Community and Regional Planning (Jacqueline Wolfe) and a follow-up Community Development Planning and Aboriginal Community Control review (David Lea). He initiated the review of the Indigenous Communities of Doomadgee and Palm Island, using the combined skills of OCAA’s Anthony Kelly and Colin Dillon,<sup>147</sup> both of whom worked closely with residents of those communities to explore and gain agreement to a development process addressing entrenched issues. This work became known as *The Dillon report*, a foundational document in the newly established Community & Economic Development Team in the National Policy Office of ATSIC, the team I joined after completing work on the ATSIC 2000 Restructure.

From there, another Oxfam development worker, Arjuna Parakrama, provided an external perspective on the types of developmental issues, challenges and possible responses to implementing a development approach in communities. At the ATSIC Board’s

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<sup>147</sup> C Dillon, *Review of the Indigenous Communities of Doomadgee and Palm Island: final report*, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Canberra, May 2000.

direction, the Community & Economic Development team initiated several developmental activities of significance. A Memorandum of Understanding between ATSIC and OCAA agreed on and budgeted for four major joint activities.<sup>148</sup> This team also coordinated ATSIC's response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HORSCATSIA) Inquiry into Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities,<sup>149</sup> an intensive process involving two briefings of the Committee, several briefings for individual Commissioners, and the research and writing of the ATSIC submission, a two-year exercise.

In these and other team initiatives, despite the direction of the Board of Commissioners, and sign off by the ATSIC CEO, our team operated in a sometimes volatile environment. A small number of key personnel viewed development activities as irrelevant, even though our activities were based on research that included decades of lessons learnt, referenced contemporary international development theorists,<sup>150</sup> and took into account the Harvard Project.<sup>151</sup> One senior officer temporarily in charge of our work area impeded the progress of the HORSCATSIA submission by holding onto it for some time, then repeatedly requesting minor amendments. This delayed sign off by the CEO and resulted in ATSIC's submission being one of the last to be sent to the Inquiry before the deadline.

By 2004 key people in this team had been relocated elsewhere within ATSIC, transferred to other agencies or had their contracts terminated, so the stewardship of the

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<sup>148</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice report 2003*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2003, p 82.

[https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/social\\_justice/sj\\_report/sjreport03/pdf/sjrep03\\_final.pdf](https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/social_justice/sj_report/sjreport03/pdf/sjrep03_final.pdf)  
Agreement, treaties and negotiated settlements projects, *Memorandum of Understanding Between Oxfam Community Aid Abroad and ATSIC/ATSIS*, Indigenous Studies Program, University of Melbourne, 2003.

<https://www.atns.net.au/agreement.asp?SubcategoryID=125&EntityID=4362>

<sup>149</sup> HORSCATSIA Inquiry into Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities, *ATSIC Submission* No. 66, August 2003.

<sup>150</sup> HORSCATSIA Inquiry into Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities, *ATSIC Submission* No. 66, p 8 and p 15.

<https://www.aph.gov.au/binaries/house/committee/atsia/indigenouscommunities/subs/sub066.pdf>

<sup>151</sup> The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. <https://hpaied.org/about>



development agenda stalled, then finally petered out. Richardson continued to promote sustainable development to the departmental secretaries he worked with beyond ATSIIC, and still does so today to governments and their officials, and NGOs through his consultancy, the First Nations Development Service.

Mark Moran provides a fascinating perspective on such circumstances—a counter-narrative with some similarities to Sweet’s perspectives on why Indigenous disadvantage persists. He turns his gaze on the performance of those responsible for making policies, and for designing and delivering services. Using case studies in five Indigenous communities, he concludes, ‘Indigenous affairs is a labyrinth of policies and programs’ that include wide consensus on ‘desired outcomes’ but little understanding on ‘how to achieve them’. This aspect of operation is in ‘great disarray’ across the spectrum of government agencies, Indigenous organisations, non-government organisations and private corporations. This is largely due to ‘success and failure’ being determined ‘against the overarching policy, which obscures the effect of actual projects, and what they may actually do locally’. The situation is exacerbated by other factors, including ‘little evaluation or knowledge exchange of the effectiveness of different approaches, or practice tools and frameworks’.<sup>152</sup>

This lack of comprehension about ‘actual interactions and realpolitik of local practice; of what actually works or doesn’t work in practice’ is, in part, compensated by the ‘extraordinary relationships’ between people working on the frontline, but exacerbated by policymakers who, Moran contends, are, on the whole, ‘blissfully detached from this grounded practice’. Moran’s scrutiny of policy making and policymakers highlights insights drawn from the different community case studies. He identifies four traits in Indigenous affairs policy that compound problems and generate programs that have unintended

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<sup>152</sup> Moran, *Serious whitefella stuff*, p 177.

consequences: policy purges, swings, mimics and contradicts.<sup>153</sup> Policy will be ‘reformed’ when policymakers deem it not to be working. In the process they ‘dismiss past practice as failed or irrational because it does not align with their latest policy solution’. He describes policy as operating on a pendulum ‘with a certain rhythmic recurrence, overreaching to tipping points, before changing again’. By applying a ‘one size fits all’ policy approach to remote Indigenous communities, policymakers discount differences in histories, cultures and preparedness.

The overlap and duplication of programs driven by ‘policy intent’ contradict each other and have ‘perverse effects’ that include an array of bewildering expectations regarding behaviour and social norms.

Successive invention, mimicking, criticism and purging of policy initiatives by a comparatively small number of external experts and politicians, removed from local interaction, implies the existence of higher knowledge.<sup>154</sup>

Moran’s findings accord with my experience as a development practitioner in remote, regional and urban areas and as a policymaker in ATSIC’s head office. As outlined above, a number of staff aspired to contribute to developing policy that complemented ‘top down’ service delivery with a ‘bottom up’ long-term developmental process, a struggle that ceased when ATSIC (and its successor, ATSISS) was disbanded.

On the ground, one unintended consequence of policy/program complexity is to diminish local capacity to engage effectively, an issue touched on earlier, explored by Moran, and detailed in my accompanying memoir. Moran’s main point that policymaking and policy makers frequently contribute to the relative disadvantage of Indigenous peoples

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<sup>153</sup> Moran, *Serious whitefella stuff*, pp 178–179.

<sup>154</sup> Moran, *Serious whitefella stuff*, pp 178–181.

is exemplified by my work experience in the Northern Territory since 2011. The two Aboriginal corporations I work with have gone through several crises as a result of shifting government policy and program reforms, including interruptions to funding, accommodating new accountability regimes, and repeated changes in the government personnel dealing with them. This has impeded work plans and lowered morale, but the work has continued—some staff and consultants worked for over a year pro bono when funding dried up. These Aboriginal corporations have, at times, also borne the brunt of a hostile press, which published negative stories about their operations based on hearsay and without contacting the corporation for comment.<sup>155</sup> One local paper quoted staff out of context. For example, the *Alice Spring News* posted photos of a commercial watermelon farm at Alekarenge, but wrote, ‘Centrefarm doesn’t answer questions but it appears it has yet to produce its first fruit or vegetable grown by Aboriginal landowners’.<sup>156</sup> This news article mixed book review, historical horticultural anecdotes with present-day aspirations for Aboriginal land use for economic purposes.

While Richard Dyer has explored white privilege and white supremacy in his discussion of visual media, the press has a pivotal role in perpetuating hegemonic structures and can exacerbate or diminish racism by the perspectives they provide on Indigenous people, communities and issues.

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<sup>155</sup> G Morrison, ‘Is Red Centre horticulture Failing?’, *The Chronicle*, Toowoomba, Queensland, 25 July, 2017, 8.31 am. <https://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/is-red-centre-horticulture-failing/3204461/>

<sup>156</sup> E Chlanda, ‘Man in a hurry, surrounded by people who were not’, *Alice Springs News*, 7 March 2018. <https://alicespringsnews.com.au/2018/03/07/man-in-a-hurry-surrounded-by-people-who-were-not/>

As mentioned previously, work and sport are two arenas in which non-Indigenous Australians often interact with the 3.3 per cent (or 798,400)<sup>157</sup> Indigenous Australians, as a result of Reconciliation Action Plans or as a sporting team member or spectator.

A case study in one of those arenas—sport—explores racism, white privilege and white supremacy and the role of the media in perpetuating the myths McIntosh identifies in her 2009 essays. Like the theory of scientific racism articulated earlier by Sweet, an exploration of the ‘distortions in logic’ to justify the behaviour of Australian Football League (AFL) crowds towards Adam Goodes is the subject of an examination by Stella Coram and Christopher Hallinan. Goodes, a gifted AFL player and an ambassador for an anti-racism campaign, *Racism. It stops with me*, took a public stand against racial vilification in 2013, which resulted in various kinds of sustained hostility until he retired at the end of the 2015 season. This saga played out in the media and has been the subject of a documentary, *The final quarter*, and a film, *The Australian dream*. It was a catalyst for a national conversation about race and racism in Australia, which to some extent mirrored the kinds of responses the Mabo decision received (i.e. responses ranged from one extreme to another).

Coram and Hallinan’s study explores ‘misrepresentation of race and racism in the context of neoliberal denial of racism in Australia’ by examining the denigration of Goodes. They argue that the sustained booing of Goodes by AFL crowds was ‘unprecedented’ in intensity and volume and represented ‘a covert reworking of the racial vilification of Indigenous athletes’, pointing to deeper politics of racial inequality. Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and whiteness studies they explore the ‘ontology of racisms in the

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<sup>157</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 3238.0.55.001 – *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians*, June 2016, updated 18 September 2018, accessed 28 July 2020.  
<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3238.0.55.001>

AFL’ arguing that a ‘critical ontology’ and ‘an epistemology that puts the experience of blacks at the centre of analysis’ assists in elucidating the booing of Goodes and the ‘multiple forms of racism’ overlooked by the wider white community.<sup>158</sup>

Spectators, the AFL management, and particular sporting commentators rationalised and defended booing Goodes as being unconnected to race but to the man, part of the game, apolitical, meaningless and without consequence. In addition, Goodes was seen as a ‘sook’ by some for not taking the booing like a man and a ‘bully’ for calling out a thirteen-year-old girl for racial vilification.

The study concludes that the defence of the booing ignores Australia’s history of systematic discrimination towards Indigenous people, who ‘must carry the burden of having to be exemplary athletes and put up with abuse at the same time’.<sup>159</sup> It suggests:

Racial nor cultural difference is tolerable to the dominant culture unless they are without politics ... beyond celebration, Indigenous athletes are obliged to accept conditions of inequality to compete.<sup>160</sup>

Racialised thinking in Australia is so ‘embedded in everyday discourse’ it has become ‘normalised’ and ‘seemingly permits “white-streamed” Australia to pass itself off as colour-blind’ thus having implications for anti-racism and diversity work, ‘especially at the grassroots level’.<sup>161</sup>

In this case, sporting and other media commentators played a role in forming and/or polarising public opinion. While Coram and Hallinan did not analyse that role, other

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<sup>158</sup> S Coram and C Hallinan, ‘Critical race theory and the orthodoxy of race neutrality: Examining the denigration of Adam Goodes’, *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, No. 1, 2017, p 106.

<sup>159</sup> Coram and Hallinan, ‘Critical race theory and the orthodoxy of race neutrality’, p 107.

<sup>160</sup> Coram and Hallinan, ‘Critical race theory and the orthodoxy of race neutrality’, p 109.

<sup>161</sup> Coram and Hallinan, ‘Critical race theory and the orthodoxy of race neutrality’, p 110.

researchers in a variety of contexts confirm that the mainstream media generally speaks to a white audience and adopts a white standpoint, which produce negative discourses about Aboriginal behaviours and issues repeated over time.

A study commissioned by Aboriginal Affairs NSW in 2017 interrogates news media reporting of key political moments or events over a forty-five-year period in relation to Aboriginal agreement making and self-determination. This analysis, ranging from the Larrakia Petition (1972) to the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017), identifies four key narratives that emerged to explain how media discourse narratives align with different governments' policy areas. They identify these narratives as white mastery, irreconciliation, subordination and sovereignty/nationhood, which embed white privilege and white supremacy using forms of assimilation, procrastination on policy shift and change, and practical reconciliation. Only one (the last) recognises an Aboriginal polity with rights to aspirations of self-governance and self-determination, but the majority of reporting is not framed within this narrative.<sup>162</sup>

Many other studies present evidence of similar findings in other arenas. Kerry McCallum, Lisa Waller and others have been analysing Indigenous and non-Indigenous media content and activity in relation to policy, theory and practice for well over a decade. In one study, Waller found that media influence was a significant factor in the decision to dismantle the bilingual program in the Northern Territory<sup>163</sup> despite the lack of scholarly support for such a move. Sweet's thesis links journalism and the medical incarceration of people in lock hospitals and lazarets in colonial and post-colonial contexts to assert, among

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<sup>162</sup> Thomas, A and A Jakubowicz and H Norman, *Does the Media Fail Aboriginal Political Aspirations: 45 years of news media reporting of key political moments*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, ACT, 2019, pp 235–237.

<sup>163</sup> LJ Waller, 'Bilingual Education and the Language of News', *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 32:4, Taylor & Francis, London, 2012, pp 459–472.

other things, that mainstream journalism is about privilege and power.<sup>164</sup> She draws on her journalistic practice in one masthead (1994–1998) to observe that a market logic operates in mainstream news media: ‘stories that appealed to the newspaper’s wealthy readership, and thus upmarket advertisers’ were more likely to be accepted and printed.

It is little wonder that Indigenous peoples and organisations prioritise media and press initiatives that privilege their peoples’ voices and stories. When ATSIC existed, it had its own communications unit. Positive news stories were published in the *ATSIC News* and widely distributed throughout its national network. This unit also coordinated the Commission’s media releases to the mainstream press, ensured mainstream press-clippings were distributed in head office each day, and trained Indigenous people in all aspects of the unit’s operation—many of whom now operate their own media outlets or act as anchors on NITV shows.

ATSIC continued to support the former Department of Aboriginal Affairs initiative, Broadcasting in Remote Aboriginal Communities (BRACS). In its short life NTOC centres ensured communities capitalised on the BRACS infrastructure by training people out bush to make videos, broadcast them in their communities, and share them with others. The *Koori Mail*, *National Indigenous Times*, *Land Rights News*, CAAMA, *Imparja*, NITV, and PAW Media and Communications are important Indigenous media and press enterprises. The distinctions between how Indigenous issues are reported in the mainstream press and in these initiatives is stark, and while some media commentators and scholars may critique them, they remain important counter-narratives to the often negative mainstream depictions of Indigenous societies and issues.

These examples highlight complex, interrelated issues associated with white privilege and white supremacy in government, institutions and the media. Among other things, they

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<sup>164</sup> Sweet, *Acknowledgement*, p xxxi.

demonstrate how racism and unconscious bias in reporting results in a focus on ‘deficits’ and fails to capture the ‘assets’ and ‘agency’ of those who are disadvantaged by systems emanating from historical oppression. While Sweet and Moran identify some of the problems Australian governments have in terms of a preference for ‘deficit framing’ and short-term, contradictory policy ‘reforms’, Coram and Hallinan highlight broader issues of racism in sport and the press. However, McIntosh also offers hope. ‘We are all arbitrarily placed in systems’ but need not be bound by them. If we (white people) open ourselves to ‘facing race, without blame, shame or guilt’ resistance can be replaced by ‘a profound new understanding that sustains rather than destroys the psyche and the social fabric’.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> McIntosh, *White people facing race*, p 6.





## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study was originally inspired by my relative ignorance of the topic. I knew very little about academic studies of white privilege and white supremacy, even though I am white and privileged and have been aware of racism at an individual and institutional level since at least the 1970s. Despite the fact that I had worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, organisations and communities for several decades, I had not interrogated studies into white privilege or white supremacy. The literature review raised questions, including: what enabled me to function in the intercultural field?

As the research progressed I gained a deeper understanding of white privilege and white supremacy as outlined by McIntosh in 1988 and 2009. This new awareness is one more station in a lifelong process of learning, and it matters for many reasons. Social justice and self-determination remain elusive goals; racism is still prevalent in our society; some inequalities and disadvantages are worse than they were forty years ago. It matters personally because I am still working in the intercultural field, still committed to my own and others' lifelong learning, and to being the best intercultural worker I can be. This may sound overly ambitious, but it simply reflects a belief that Jackie Huggins is right to urge non-Indigenous people to begin their own journeys of discovery.

In my journey of discovery Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples said that many of the most positive learning experiences for them have been achieved when intercultural teams have worked together in mutual respect and support using people-centred or participatory development processes. It is these processes—if systematically adopted by government over the long term (twenty to thirty years) along the lines described by theorists in this study—that will make a significant difference.

My reading of the new Agreement to close the gap, however, is that there is nothing new in the aspirations, the four priority reforms, or the stated approach except an explicit acknowledgement that institutional racism exists in governments and informs their programs and must be addressed. A study of white privilege and white supremacy is, therefore, an essential component of a new approach for all parties to the Agreement.

An early critique of the new Agreement questions whether ‘racism will be fixed by pushing Indigenous peoples into mainstream institutions, boards and identified leadership positions’.<sup>166</sup> This doesn’t address the diversity found in Indigenous communities or the particular needs of Indigenous organisations. Other critics are concerned that the Agreement will undermine the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the need for wider ‘structural reform to give Indigenous Australians some power over the decisions that are made about us’.<sup>167</sup> There are some critics who caution against the inherent ‘power imbalance at the heart of the relationships in the Agreement’. And although self-determination is on the agenda, Chelsea Bond notes that Indigenous sovereignty, while never ceded, is not mentioned.<sup>168</sup>

By being open to other worldviews, listening to and learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and others, successful ways of working *with* people of other cultures can be found. I have sought work in the intercultural field because it is necessary, interesting, challenging and more enjoyable than working in a monoculture. In 1981 I made a conscious decision to place my labour where I thought it could make a difference, however small. The work has had the added benefit of enabling me to look more critically at my culture, its societal systems, my upbringing and my education.

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<sup>166</sup> C Bond, ‘The “new” Closing the Gap is about buzzwords, not genuine change for Indigenous Australia’, *The Conversation*, 31 July 20 4.23 pm AEST.

<sup>167</sup> R Harris, ‘Indigenous leaders say new targets to end disadvantage have “no mandate”’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 August 2020, 6.03 pm AEST.

<sup>168</sup> Bond, ‘The “new” Closing the Gap is about buzzwords’, 31 July 20 4.23 pm AEST.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century intercultural workers of my generation often learnt to work with marginalised people by becoming adult and community educators. We learnt through credentialed adult education and training programs, largely not available now except in the diminished form of Certificate IV training and assessment. We also learnt from the work of other practitioners such as Paulo Freire. In my case, an early engagement with the aid and development sectors provided other theories, practices and critiques, which contributed to my thinking more deeply about social justice, development practice and associated matters. Anti-racism advocates and activists also informed my knowledge of unconscious bias and hegemony as they campaigned for greater equality. More importantly, intercultural workers like me learnt from marginalised people themselves.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century many inequalities are increasing. Robyn DiAngelo provides an insight into where power and control is located in the United States by providing a breakdown of the people in control in 2016–2017. Across a range of political, social and cultural sectors it is predominantly white men who make decisions and ‘who have very few authentic cross-racial relationships’. White men represent one racial group who are ‘in a position to disseminate and protect its own self-image, worldview, and interest across the entire society’.<sup>169</sup>

Reni Eddo-Lodge explores racism and inequality in the United Kingdom. In doing so she details their history of slavery and provides detailed information to support her assertion that personal prejudice and a collective effort of bias underpins inequality in the United Kingdom: ‘Structural racism is dozens, or hundreds, or thousands of people with the same

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<sup>169</sup> DiAngelo, *White fragility*, p 31.

biases joining together to make up one organisation and acting accordingly.’<sup>170</sup> White privilege is:

the dull, grinding complacency of whites who insist they aren’t actively racist and refuse to confront their own complicity in its continuing existence.<sup>171</sup>

Eddo-Lodge confirms that fear is the basis of white privilege and white supremacy, and claims it has many guises: immigration and multiculturalism (the fear of the ‘slippery slope towards the destruction of Western civilization’) and demographic predictions that by 2066 black and coloured people will outnumber white people in the United Kingdom. These unfounded fears, she writes, are nothing new:

For a long time now, far-right political groups have hijacked the anti-colonial struggles of native people in America and Australia to create a story of the embattled indigenous white British, under siege from immigration.<sup>172</sup>

The press, which ‘positions itself as the British journalism,’ is 96% white.<sup>173</sup> These findings have correlations in the Australian context.

Despite the fact that the numbers of Indigenous professionals and academics have increased and become more prominent and vocal in the last several decades, major challenges remain, requiring greater numbers of people to work together to effect positive change in Australia. Often geographic circumstances contribute to differences in the levels and nature of people’s disadvantage, but this study argues that the way we build our own and other peoples’ capacities—the ‘processes’ involved—is central to why ‘things’ have not significantly

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<sup>170</sup> R Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m no longer talking to white people about race*, Bloomsbury Circus, London and New York, 2017, p 64.

<sup>171</sup> Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m no longer talking to white people about race*, p 87.

<sup>172</sup> Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m no longer talking to white people about race*, p 120.

<sup>173</sup> Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m no longer talking to white people about race*, p 129.

changed for the better. A focus on ‘deficits’ continues to detract from a ‘strength-based’ or ‘agency’ approach.

While this study emphasises the need for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to work together, I indicated in the introduction that there are provisos to this statement. Sometimes white people simply need to get out of the way. There are large numbers of Indigenous people working in mainstream and Indigenous organisations and peak bodies whose example of strength and agency is self-evident. These organisations include health and legal services throughout Australia, Indigenous peak bodies such as the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), and organisations with location-specific influence like the Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation and the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women’s Council, to name a few. Leaders in these organisations are spokespersons and advocates for large groups of Indigenous people.

While Indigenous organisations are employers of choice for many Indigenous workers, they continue to recruit non-Indigenous people where their expertise is required and where a cultural fit is evident. There is a broad and diverse leadership in Indigenous communities across all sectors, and among emerging scholars and professionals, whose voices articulate ideas for potential reforms and whose commitment has not waned despite the many setbacks they have experienced. In light of this, white people do not need to speak on their behalf.

As a contribution to knowledge, the methodologies highlighted in this study have been integral to my identification of issues and processes that develop capacity in intercultural working environments. The processes are as relevant today as they were last century, even as they are being refined by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and practitioners this

century. Central to many of the challenges facing us as a nation are questions about how best to address the racism and white privilege of individuals, and the white supremacy within our political and social systems. In order to achieve greater social justice we need to find ways to deconstruct ‘race’, making substantial inroads into entrenched prejudice.

Meanwhile, the tools at our disposal have multiplied. Decolonising methodologies and practice frameworks have particular relevance for intercultural workers, who may adopt, adapt or refine them. Anti-racism, white privilege/white supremacy workshops and resources are more common than they used to be. Documentaries, books, the arts and relevant scholarship are more readily available than ever before. Reflexive practices are available to inform the way we operate. However, as McIntosh and others have noted, controversy, struggle, resistance and backlash based on fear and hegemony continue to impede efforts to change the status quo.

For those involved in intercultural work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the constant challenge is to circumvent the way our own unconscious racism and biases continue to impact on the very people and systems we seek to help or change, often alienating Indigenous peoples. But who is not an intercultural worker today? Based on Larkin’s study, I suggest that everyone employed in a government bureaucracy is an intercultural worker whether they know it or not. For them, in particular, interrogating McIntosh’s 46 privileges may be a good place to begin a journey of discovery. For aspiring intercultural and development workers, the study of white privilege has parallels to the implicate method outlined in Kelly and Westoby—it requires self-reflection, which is:

an ability to cultivate balanced insight into who we are, what we bring to the practice, where we have come from, what our dreams are, and what this all means for our ongoing practice.<sup>174</sup>

The implicate method helps development workers ‘see and hold onto the truths—the stories, passions, motivations, capacities, strengths, limitations, and weaknesses’—that they bring to the work in order to ‘connect with the stories of those with whom we work and live’. It is a deliberate process that development workers undertake to name and order the elements that shape what they do and who they are; and a continuing process that is able to contribute to the professional and personal growth of those who employ it and those they interact with.<sup>175</sup>

Knowing their ‘truths’ also helps development workers act appropriately in challenging situations where elites operate and other, sometimes oppositional, agendas exist.

My reflections on difficult encounters experienced in my intercultural interactions continue to inform my learning and remind me that the journey is often bumpy. Recently I shared concerns about an intercultural encounter I had with an Indigenous person with a trusted colleague. Without alienating me, she was able to remind me of my white-Anglo privilege, and inappropriate use of rank. Her insights enabled me reconsider the encounter from the perspective of the other person and develop strategies that may enable me to maintain the relationship.

In this study the importance of dialogue as a tool to interrogate racism and white privilege has been central to understanding what is in my ‘invisible backpack’ and points to further work required to navigate intercultural interactions. Two scholars are particularly helpful in this regard. Robyn DiAngelo and bell hooks both describe the attitudes, skills and

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<sup>174</sup> Kelly and Westoby, *Participatory development practice*, p 33.

<sup>175</sup> Kelly and Westoby, *Participatory development practice*, p 32.



circumstances inherent in making dialogue more effective. It is a ‘mutual enterprise’, and one that requires:

a commitment to complex analysis and the letting go of wanting everything to be simple. Segregation simplifies: integration requires that we come to terms with multiple ways of knowing, of interaction.<sup>176</sup>

There are many white people who want people of colour to do all the work, but the white people who ask for direction, who want to discuss the journey towards social justice and ‘move from a place of ignorance toward greater knowledge’ are allies.

As bell hooks asserts, it is important to remember that anyone, including black or white teachers, can have white supremacist thinking. ‘Black teachers with internalised racial self-hatred are no better mentors for black students than are white racists.’<sup>177</sup>

The dialogue between hooks and Ron Scapp is reproduced in full in hooks’ book, *Teaching community: a pedagogy of hope*. For Scapp, a white, heterosexual male and tenured professor, the ethical imperative is to ‘disrupt and challenge the simple acts of privilege’ through reading, listening to and speaking with people of colour, among others. By documenting their dialogue based on a relationship (ten years old at time of publication), we are able to bear witness to ‘real community, real love, and what we do to keep it real’.<sup>178</sup> They discuss trust, fear, assumptions, values, courage, comradeship and openness. Scapp confesses that when he began his own journey, no matter how gently or accurately an accusation of white privilege was made, he initially felt embarrassed, ashamed and often angry. ‘But then I have cultivated the ability to pause and critically consider my actions, to reflect.’

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<sup>176</sup> hooks, *Teaching community: a pedagogy of hope*, p 78.

<sup>177</sup> hooks, *Teaching community: a pedagogy of hope*, p 79.

<sup>178</sup> hooks, *Teaching community: a pedagogy of hope*, p 106.

Scapp believes intercultural solidarity is made possible when critical consideration becomes more important than making mistakes, or thinking that white people will ever ‘rid ourselves of the fear of being racist dominators’.<sup>179</sup> In acts of solidarity, hooks and Scapp have been able to challenge unjust hierarchy and participate in anti-racist activism. Even though they have experienced awkwardness, embarrassment and rejection, both attest to the transformational nature of their journey.

DiAngelo offers more examples of dialogue and its importance in intercultural interaction. She reminds us that a one-off ‘cultural competency training’ program, often the norm for white people in the workplace, is entirely inadequate—as outlined by examples in this study. If and when an educational program does directly address racism and the privileging of whites, common white responses include anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation and cognitive dissonance (all of which reinforce the pressure on facilitators to avoid directly addressing such issues).<sup>180</sup> These emotions and actions constitute ‘white fragility’ or ‘racial stress’, triggered by ‘a range of defensive responses including discomfort and anxiety, born of superiority and entitlement’. White fragility is not a weakness per se. In fact, it is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage.<sup>181</sup>

White fragility has become integral to modern whiteness studies, and like other associated concepts it has its detractors. In a 2020 essay, Alison Whittaker explores her own contemporary problems with non-Indigenous people around their white fragility using words like ‘boring’ to describe ‘its minute self-flagellation’, which ‘once again centres the white self’. She wonders if non-Indigenous people ever think of how colonialism is woven into our

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<sup>179</sup> hooks, *Teaching community: a pedagogy of hope*, p 112.

<sup>180</sup> DiAngelo, <https://www.robindiangelo.com/publications/>

<sup>181</sup> DiAngelo, *White fragility*, p 2.

social, economic and legal structures and how it has contributed to her being made an ‘Indigene’, concluding that white fragility is now ‘the lingo du jour of racism workshops’.<sup>182</sup> While this may be so, DiAngelo’s suggestions about how ‘to dialogue’ in positive ways are helpful to white intercultural workers and white people exploring racism and white privilege.

My research lead me to many other whiteness concepts and topics, including white guilt, white stigma, white saviour complex, microaggression, toxic masculinity and intersectionality—a term coined by legal academic, Kimberlé Crenshaw,<sup>183</sup> which focused on how race and gender act to discriminate against African Americans and women of colour in court proceedings. All these topics are avenues of further exploration beyond the scope of this study.

My thoughts about guilt accord with Sarah Maddison’s Aboriginal mentor: ‘Don’t be guilty, daught, just be really, really, angry.’<sup>184</sup> At times in the early 1980s I was angry at historical and modern injustices. This recalibrated into a sense of solidarity and action with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over the next four decades.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices point to solutions to entrenched white privilege and white supremacy, which are echoed by scholars in other Western societies. More often than not, my journey has been typified by rich exchanges with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who have been generous, honest, kind, and fun to be with. Various, they have asked us (whites) to include their histories of Australia in all levels of schooling and higher education; to support reconciliation; to support the Uluru Statement from the Heart. These are important and relatively modest requests.

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<sup>182</sup> A Whittaker, ‘So white. So what?’, *Meanjin Quarterly*, Vol. 79, Issue 1, Autumn 2020, pp 50–61.

<sup>183</sup> <https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality-more-two-decades-later>

<sup>184</sup> S Maddison, *Beyond white guilt: the real challenge for black-white relations in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2011, p 100.

This study also highlights aspects of our society where racism and white privilege diminishes us, and impacts unfairly on Indigenous peoples. People who are employed in remote communities, in all aspects of law enforcement, at all levels of public service (including education and health) and in the media have come into sharp focus. In inductions and recalls, mandatory and repeated exposure to how white privilege influences our attitudes and behaviour should become essential learning. Eddo-Lodge reminds us that the work we need to do will take time. ‘You can’t skip to the resolution, without having the difficult, messy conversation first. We’re still in the hard bit.’<sup>185</sup> She provides approximately twenty recommendations interested white people can take up to contribute to greater justice for all.

There have been many fellow travellers in my journey, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who have contributed significantly to major and minor projects along the way. Many of the white people I know and respect have been working in the arena over the long term and continue to make a contribution to important areas of intercultural understanding and social justice. For instance, the Literacy for Life Foundation is a unique collaboration, which addresses Indigenous adult literacy using Indigenist methodologies; UPK 6 is in its thirty-first year delivering critical health and wellbeing messages through music in Indigenous languages; and art centres across the nation continue to contribute to the contemporary national and international art scene. In *Hotsprings* Daena Murray pays tribute to Northern Territory artists (Indigenous and non-Indigenous), art organisations, gallery entrepreneurs and others involved in the Aboriginal art industry. Some of those ‘others’ include the white adult educators and art coordinators employed by NTOC, who worked in the field from the 1970s onwards helping to establish community-based art organisations like Keringke Arts, Hermannsburg Potters and Maningrida Arts & Culture. These important collaborations or ‘open-ended mutual engagements’ between Aboriginal artists who ‘know the land’ and other

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<sup>185</sup> Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m no longer talking to white people about race*, p 213.

Australians who ‘search for meaning in the remote areas of the Northern Territory’ is a way for Aboriginal people to share their culture without compromising it and for non-Indigenous people to find an ‘unconscious belonging’ that becomes the norm.<sup>186</sup>

The voices in this study, apart from my own, belong to people of colour like hooks and Eddo-Lodge; to Indigenous people like Mum Shirl, Foley, Moreton-Robinson, Smith; and to white people like McIntosh, Frankenberg, Dyer and DiAngelo—and to many more people of various heritages in the development field. This study began with Jackie Huggins’ challenge to white people to begin their own journeys of discovery. It ends by acknowledging that to counteract white privilege and white supremacy we must all systematically interrogate our own privileges.

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<sup>186</sup> D Murray, *Hotsprings: the Northern Territory and contemporary Australian artists*, Macmillan Art Publishing, Melbourne, 2012, p 311.

## Appendix: Peggy McIntosh's 46 unearned white privileges

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
7. When I am told about our national heritage or about 'civilization,' I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.
11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another woman's voice in a group in which she is the only member of her race.
12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
16. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms, my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race.
17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.
18. I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
22. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
23. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behaviour without being seen as a cultural outsider.

24. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to ‘the person in charge,’ I will be facing a person of my race.
25. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.
26. I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children’s magazines featuring people of my race.
27. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
28. I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine.
29. I can be pretty sure that if I argue for the promotion of a person of another race, or a program centering on race, this is not likely to cost me heavily within my present setting, even if my colleagues disagree with me.
30. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn’t a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have.
31. I can choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices.
32. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.
33. I am not made acutely aware that my shape, hearing, or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race.
34. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
35. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.
36. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
37. I can be pretty sure of finding people who would be willing to talk with me and advise me about my next steps, professionally.
38. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative, or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.
39. I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race.
40. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
41. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
42. I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.
43. If I have low credibility as a leader, I can be sure that my race is not the problem.
44. I can easily find academic courses and institutions which give attention only to people of my race.
45. I can expect figurative language and imagery in all the arts to testify to experiences of my race.
46. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in ‘flesh’ color and have them more or less match my skin.

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## **MEMOIR WITH POETRY**

**Searching for the glad tomorrow—memoir of a non-Indigenous  
intercultural worker**



‘The glad tomorrow’ is the last line of a poem called *A Song of Hope* written by Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) in 1960. Her work first inspired me in the early 1980s as an undergraduate student at the University of New England. In 2020 poets and poetry lovers in Canberra celebrated the centenary of Oodgeroo’s birth. I read ten of my favourite poems that evening, along with two other poets.

If you read this poem you will see that we have not yet arrived at ‘The glad tomorrow’. I believe we are getting closer, but the search continues.

Not everything in this memoir is exactly as it occurred, but everything is told in the spirit of truth about what happened.

For my daughter, Noni Jean Nelson

In memory of my mother, Ethel Jean Nelson (nee Sibley), 1927–2016

## Prologue

I was born in Mudgee, New South Wales, and grew up there in the 1950s and 1960s. At eighteen, I thought it was a boring, conservative backwater and couldn't wait to leave. Any 'diversity' of people and experience came from my large extended family—close relatives on the land and a town-based nuclear family with a lot of uncles, aunts and cousins. Their personalities and preferences were, I thought, loving but ordinary, even mundane. Cousins visiting from the city and friends new to town brought with them stories of other people and places more exotic than my hometown.

Like most of my contemporaries, I was largely ignorant of the existence of Aboriginal people and the issues they faced until my teenage years, knowing nothing more than that 'Mudgee' supposedly meant 'nest in the hills' in an old Aboriginal language. However, as a teenager one summer, I encountered racism from 'whites' toward the Aboriginal people who were itinerant workers picking tomatoes near Mudgee's Cudgegong River. I won't detail these experiences here, but they brought to my attention the disadvantage of 'black' people and the fact of 'white' prejudice.

I left home to live in Newcastle with friends, and later travelled to New Zealand on a working holiday where I met and mixed with people very different from those I had grown up with, including Maoris. These encounters brought home to me my powerful interest in 'other' people and cultures, partly, I subsequently realised, as a repudiation of the limitations of my upbringing—no matter how relatively happy it had been. I wanted to understand more of life than my extended family in Mudgee had offered.

In my late teens and early twenties, Papua New Guinea had been in the news because of the question of whether it should become independent of Australia (which was achieved on

16 September 1975). I became fascinated with the country—both its difference from Australia and, as far as I understood it, its diverse culture—and dreamt of working there. This dream was fulfilled in 1974 when my partner, Jules, won a position with the Commonwealth Teaching Service. We landed at a boarding school—Kwikila High School—enthusiastic but relatively ignorant. I engaged with the students in a range of extracurricular activities, while my partner ran the science department. I was twenty-four.

The work in Papua New Guinea was rewarding and we stayed. In our third year there, my partner was transferred to Laiagam High School in the Enga Province. This was very different to Kwikila High School. Laiagam was a new school made of bush materials, one of the remotest in the country. As there was no female teacher, I was asked to teach domestic science to thirteen girls. My partner helped me write lesson plans responding to the curriculum but we also improvised a great deal. Classes were conducted at our home using three treadle sewing machines, camp stoves and produce from the local market.

I worked beside my partner again a few years later at another remote school in the Ambum Valley of the Enga Province—Anditale High School—but not before going back to ‘school’ myself. Between 1977–78 I returned to Sydney to train as an adult educator (secretarial studies). I went back and forth to Papua New Guinea during semester breaks. In 1979 the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) administration in New South Wales arranged my secondment to Papua New Guinea’s Mt Hagen Technical College and I spent that year working with young high school graduates from all over the highlands, some of whom had been my students in Laiagam. All the students graduated and found employment in a wide variety of government departments, corporate bodies and local organisations, filling positions expatriates had once occupied.

At the end of that year my TAFE secondment became problematic—a break in at my house rattled me and alternative accommodation couldn't be found on campus. As a result, my partner encouraged me to apply for a position at his school in the Ambum Valley and, surprisingly, the Education Department agreed to a transfer. I assumed that in the years following Independence in 1975 remote schools in the highlands were harder to staff than those in Papua New Guinea's urban and coastal centres.

Our last year in Papua New Guinea, in 1980, brought us into increased contact with international aid and development organisations and their consultants, along with expatriates involved in projects designed to 'develop the nation'. The best of them capitalised on local knowledge and built the capacity of local people. One project in particular—at our school—opened our eyes to the pitfalls involved in infrastructure projects that outsiders design and implement without these important elements. The wet season found teachers and students traipsing up the mountainside after heavy rain to unblock a series of pools that fed the flushing systems of the newly installed toilet blocks. This project was designed to improve on pit toilets, which had worked perfectly well. The new blocks were built in the dry season and the consultants were long gone when the wet season, and its attendant problems, arrived.

I developed a habit of reading about aid programs and international and community development in Papua New Guinea. However, this set me up for a series of shocks when I returned to Australia to work as an adult educator in a remote Aboriginal settlement—an experience that sent me on a different path to the one I thought I was going to take. It is the different path that is the focus of the following memoir—about a working life that began in Lajamanu in 1981 and which travels over forty years. It chronicles and reflects on what I learnt as a white, middle class woman as I worked in in the fields of adult education, community development, public administration and governance in a variety of communities.



## Chapter 1: To Hooker Creek, Lajamanu (Warlpiri country)

In the back bar of a Katherine hotel my partner, Jules, introduces me to his new friends. They include the owners/drivers of the transport company that take supplies to surrounding communities; contractors of various persuasions; ringers from cattle stations; and other ‘schoolies’—teachers from remote areas and from Katherine. In the bar, these people mix with labourers, tourists and Aboriginal people, who are allowed to drink in the back bar but are not encouraged to go into the lounge. Almost everyone appears to have one thing in common—the wish to consume a good deal of alcohol. Eventually, the back bar of that hotel will come to represent my vision of hell.

We leave Katherine late the next morning, loaded up with eskies full of food, boxes of dry goods, materials for the house and garden, and equipment that will make camping out bush a comfortable experience—binoculars, reference books, a double swag. Lajamanu is a seven-hour drive west of Katherine, with one pit stop along the way—the Top Springs Roadhouse.

As the dual carriage highway gives way to a single lane of bitumen, the horizon surrounds us. This low, scrubby country, covered in termite mounds changes colour intermittently. Sometimes the mounds disappear then return bigger and shaped differently. Occasionally Jules has to move the car over to accommodate a road train coming the other way. It isn’t an unpleasant or boring drive, as Jules identifies landmarks, plants and birds.

I have just left a teaching position in Papua New Guinea. The astonishing beauty of the Ambum Valley is still alive in me as I talk with Jules about the new headmaster and teachers, my sadness at parting from students and members of the Board of Governors, two of whom send greetings. We mull over the details of the trip I took with Julie-ann before leaving

Papua New Guinea—three days on the Sepik River in a dugout canoe, which is where she caught cerebral malaria. My oldest friend is very sick in a Sydney hospital.

They were mostly wonderful experiences, but I am conscious that even after several years in Papua New Guinea, it is not my home. I'm pleased to be back in Australia, starting a new adventure with my partner. Our relationship has been rocky, but I feel optimistic about the future. The decision not to apply for a liquor licence at Hooker Creek is part of that optimism. We won't be drinking. Like many Aboriginal groups at other settlements, Warlpiri people have decided they do not want alcohol in their place.

We pull into Top Springs. It doubles as a roadhouse and a ramshackle government works depot. There is a T-junction here, a road heading south. The broken signage gives no clue as to the distance or the destination. Jules fills the vehicle with diesel while I head inside. Behind the bar, a weathered, older woman smokes a cigarette in silence. The décor is Territorian Nouveau—an array of half-empty bottles, buffalo horns, cardboard coasters and currency from elsewhere plastered on an ancient mirror, and a girlie calendar.

I order two beers and ask for directions to the bathroom. The three other patrons stare at me and the barmaid nods her head toward a side door. She still hasn't spoken. Coming back, I finally stare back at the drinkers, giving them a bit of their own treatment. Some of their history and predilections are written in their clothing and on their bodies: navy work singlets, stubby shorts, bulbous noses, swollen ankles and beer guts. The one nearest to me turns and asks if I'd like a fuck. I pay for the beers and leave without a word while the laughter behind me subsides.

Back on the road, I tell Jules what happened. Apparently, the patrons had nothing to say to him when he paid the barmaid for the diesel. He is tall, muscular and bearded. I tell

him we can add another word to the usual trope of missionary, mercenary and misfit—  
misogynist.

The bitumen ribbon turns red and the sun sets. Graders have carved huge gutters off the gravel road into the bush, designed to take the run-off from the road after rain. Jules says last month the vehicle floated on this stretch of road for several metres. Saplings have already sprung up where the grader's blade has done its work. The thought that nature can reclaim the gutters and the road comforts me, but the further we drive, the more my sense of home diminishes. The country becomes a gaping mouth, swallowing me whole. I could easily lose my way, or my life, in this place. A deep respect for the desert settles in my bones.

We arrive well after dark. Jules points out key sites in our headlights: the new police station on the edge of the settlement, the council building, the Baptist enclave, the school and the high water tank ... these few buildings form the centre of the community. We pass the clinic and drive-in, which doubles as an Australian Rules football field—and, at last, we enter a driveway that is ours. The house is plain besser block, rectangular. We unpack a dusty load.

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Before Jules died in 2018, I rang him at his home in Montana to ask how he became the deputy headmaster at Hooker Creek that year. Why had we ended up there? Why wasn't he in charge? The school offered primary school education with a small post-primary component, a poor substitute for secondary education. Jules had been an effective headmaster at two high schools in Papua New Guinea. Was this posting a demotion?

Back in the late seventies and early eighties, many expatriates who had worked in Papua New Guinea returned to Australia and found jobs in the Northern Territory Government administration leading up to and after Papua New Guinea's Independence in



1975. They were known as the Moresby Mafia. One ‘Don’ occupied a position at the top of the hierarchy of the Department of Education. He knew Jules and had appointed him deputy headmaster with the expectation that the current headmaster would not last the distance. Jules would take over when the inevitable breakdown or walk off occurred. It didn’t happen, and because it didn’t happen, a series of disappointments and difficulties arose for Jules, which in turn led to disappointments and difficulties for me, and also between us.

I was appointed as the adult educator. Administrative arrangements for adult educators at the time were complicated. We had a TAFE boss located in a regional centre, but we also had to work in cooperation with the headmaster of the school in each community. It was made clear that while my boss was based in Katherine and I reported to him, I had to maintain a respectful relationship with the headmaster of the local school. I was not under his direction, but the headmaster was the acknowledged educational leader in the community.

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Next morning, my surroundings look alien. In a letter to my parents I describe it as a flat, dry, dirty-looking place covered in red dust with not much vegetation. While I am relatively happy with our living arrangements, I spend the first week scrubbing walls and floors, cleaning out cupboards and helping Jules build a garden. And although he had prepared me for the shock of seeing how most Warlpiri live in the camps, I feel ashamed at the disparity between my living conditions and those of the Warlpiri people. Some reside in houses, but most people live in humpies made of corrugated iron or bough shelters.

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The headmaster appears to be in his early forties, a similar age to Jules. He is trim, clean-shaven and well-dressed—a real role model. His manner is often intense. One minute

he has incredible energy, the next he is down, seeking reassurance. In his view there is much to do at the school, and it often needs to be done immediately. The gym equipment in his lounge room attests to his commitment to maintaining a healthy body and mind while he ‘cleans up’ the school.

He is forthright about difficulties he has had in the past. Alcoholism and gambling led to a breakdown—he needed a change of scene and asked to be posted to Hooker Creek, also known as Lajamanu. I find his extroverted chit-chat about such issues disconcerting, but he hasn’t applied for a liquor licence and there is no temptation to gamble here. Or so I think. One evening I see the headmaster playing cards with a large group of Warlpiri men and women. He sees me and shouts, ‘trying to figure this game out is going to take some time’.

My TAFE boss visits Lajamanu to provide direction and support. At the request of the field officer from the Department of Community Development, he sets me up in the council office—to help the local staff complete last year’s group certificates and as a way for me to get to know the Warlpiri councillors and staff and be of assistance. This is aimed at giving me a focus while I develop relationships and respond to Warlpiri adult education and training needs. My boss is going to organise a trainer-driver vehicle to be sent out on the next truck; I could start asking if people would like to learn how to drive.

I am advised to introduce myself to all the service providers and as many adults as I reasonably can; take my time; see if there is anything I can do to help the Warlpiri workforce. However, the number of Aboriginal people involved in the workforce is small. This is in stark contrast to Papua New Guinea where localisation was the main objective of expatriate activities. We were expected to train the locals to take over our jobs.

No sooner has my boss departed on the long trip back to Katherine than the headmaster asks if I will set up his office and filing system. I suppose this is one way to assist

*him*, but I wonder how it helps me do my real job. Naturally, I do as he asks and with good humour. It is the first of many little administrative and financial management tasks I undertake to keep the peace.

Jules and I begin a round of social engagements to meet the 30 whites in residence at Lajamanu. Warlpiri people are not invited to these social occasions—another contrast to Papua New Guinea. We meet teachers in their first year of teaching; the policemen, their wives and children; the clinic nurses; an outstation manager and his wife; the store manager and his wife; and the cattle manager. The cattle manager is married but his wife doesn't socialise. And I presume the Baptist pastor and his wife are too busy providing fellowship to Warlpiri people to socialise with the white residents. Perhaps they, like the Warlpiri, have never received an invitation. We learn that they have been in Lajamanu for many years. One observer says, 'and they know all the Warlpiri mob, or most of them', with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. Their long standing in Lajamanu shows in their enclave. Compared to the rest of the place, it looks like a small Garden of Eden, but it has a high, sturdy fence around it. It inspires us to keep gardening.

Over several weeks, at a variety of dinners and barbeques, Jules and I take stock of Lajamanu's non-Aboriginal community. We assume they also take stock of us. We hear a range of opinions and gossip about the other 'whitefellas', confident assessments of Warlpiri culture and people and grumblings about living conditions. We keep our own counsel, but over time we are drawn to a few individuals. Jules likes one of the policemen; I like one of the clinic nurses; we both enjoy the company of a couple of the teachers.

It doesn't take long for the headmaster and Jules to lock horns. Jules is methodical and takes his time; the headmaster is impetuous. Sometimes a respectful difference of opinion early in the day leads to an aggressive move on the volleyball court in social games after

school. A snide comment slips from the headmaster's lips followed by an unconvincing laugh—his pretence at a joke. At times his behaviour seems erratic. He is seen wandering around after dark; his lights are on until the early hours of the morning. As for me, I slump into a melancholic mood that Jules says is culture shock. Sometimes we pack up the vehicle and go bush on the weekend.

The headmaster's behaviour toward me becomes more proprietorial. There are more secretarial requests, followed by observations that the educational community perceives me as a time waster; my face-to-face class time is low compared to theirs. I am seen, he says, walking around all day in a random manner, while his teachers have full class loads and extracurricular activities after hours. My explanation that I am following my boss's advice to get to know people and assess their education and training needs falls on deaf ears. I produce a timesheet showing times and activities at the council, time spent meeting people and documenting conversations, time taken setting up the adult education centre, and time at the school helping him. He is mollified, but not for long.

Meanwhile, I am getting to know councillors and staff. The Warlpiri have had control of the council for some years, an example of a self-determination policy. The more I work with the councillors and staff, the more I support the concept of self-determination, which seems similar to Papua New Guinea's localisation policy. The administration of the council is problematic. Relatively low literacy and numeracy, cross-cultural communication problems, and staffing shortages contribute. The group certificates have not been kept up to date because the competent Aboriginal office manager left for a better-paying job elsewhere and the bookkeeper, although very capable, only works part-time. The cleaner does her job efficiently and regularly.

Maurice Luther, the Council Clerk, shows me incoming correspondence and asks me to interpret particular words or phrases. The bureaucrats who write the letters make no concession to Warlpiri people having English as their second or third language. Archaic words like ‘heretofore’ pepper the text. I have to read some letters twice to get the gist. I write to the departmental contact and suggest their staff use plain English.

The council employs a housing manager, a man I have not met at any social occasion so far. His greatest achievement appears to be the erection of ten uninhabitable tin sheds during his eighteen-month tenure. Before long I see an invoice for expensive curtains for his residence.

There are a lot of empty or dilapidated structures in the community. I wonder why they are abandoned rather than repaired. The shopkeeper says Warlpiri people might have died in them. When that happens everyone moves out for a period of mourning. The outstation manager blames previous building managers who came to the community thinking they knew what type of housing Warlpiri families wanted or needed—he suggests that each abandoned style of housing represents a failed housing manager’s regime.

Nothing is straightforward here.

The headmaster has a proposition for me. He sweetens it by saying, if successful, it will save the sanity of the cattle manager and benefit Warlpiri people. He explains that the cattle manager is worried about his wife, who won’t leave the house. Lajamanu can’t afford to lose the cattle manager. There is a brucellosis problem to sort out and Warlpiri men like working with him at the cattle yards.

‘Will you call on the cattle manager’s wife and see if she is interested in an adult education activity—china painting, cooking, typing, whatever else’ ... his voice trails off. He

is false-pleading with me now, almost on his knees. If I can work out what she wants to do, he will do the rest. I complain bitterly to Jules that it isn't my job to keep white women happy by providing hobby classes; and that this is one more example of the headmaster's delusions, another power play. He sympathises but cannot help.

I call on the cattle manager's wife, hoping I can report back that my visit has been a fruitless exercise. It is a sad experience. She is still in her dressing gown mid-morning, there are dirty dishes piled on the sink and the house is generally unkempt. She invites me to sit on a kitchen chair.

Over a cup of tea, we talk about her background. She hates being in Lajamanu doing nothing. He doesn't help. He goads her about being slack. He drinks too much and she doesn't want to visit other people with him. I suspect she is on medication, but she could be suffering culture shock like me, or marital unhappiness. When I ask about interests, she ums and ahs but finally says she has a long-held wish to learn china painting. The penny drops that the headmaster already knows something of this.

The headmaster is delighted. Coincidentally, one of his staff has expertise in china painting. He prevails on four young female teachers to make up a class of five, while I fill in the paperwork to employ his staff member as a part-time instructor. To add insult to injury, the instructor's fee and cost of materials will come out of my meagre TAFE budget. I submit a complaint to my boss in Katherine via the council office's mailbag so that the headmaster is not tempted to open or hold back my mail—and as I do so, I recognise a degree of paranoia in this thought.

The Council's group certificates are coming along nicely and I am beginning to make myself useful to Maurice and the Warlpiri staff at the council; the clinic nurse has asked me to work with the Warlpiri health workers to see if I can help them understand the twenty-four-

hour clock so they can fill out their timesheets properly. I have also lined up a few women to learn to drive when the promised vehicle arrives.

The adult education centre is located next door to the house Jules and I live in, and a short walk to the clinic. The centre has been renovated to include a covered outdoor area, which is very useful for china painting. There isn't much furniture, and no teaching materials or utensils in the kitchen, so I begin a process of bartering, scrounging and stealing—activities I became very good at in Papua New Guinea. At this point Jules tells me I'm not allowed to go to the tip—it's off limits to women. At first I think he's joking.

I scoff and complain about women's liberation not yet reaching this desert outpost. Later Maurice tells me that women are not allowed at the tip because it's a men's business place; sacred objects are kept there. Women have their own women's business place. Intrigued, I begin to read *Desert People* by MJ Meggitt, an anthropologist who has worked with the Warlpiri. The book is about twenty years old, but it helps correct some of my misconceptions. Reading Meggitt and the other reference books in our bookcase starts the long process of learning about desert topography and its bounty; the Warlpiri name for plants and their uses; history of the community; and more about Warlpiri ethnocentrism. Meggitt writes that the Warlpiri think there are two kinds of blackfellows: 'we who are the Walbiri and those unfortunate people who are not'.

Warlpiri people are shy when asked direct questions, especially about cultural matters. I learn not to ask or press them for information. I do not understand some behaviour, especially if it involves Warlpiri law and violence. We hear about grog runners, both Warlpiri and their non-Aboriginal counterparts, who enjoy outwitting the cops by meeting outside the community at night. Stories about the wild behaviour that occurs after the men get drunk, stories of domestic violence, car accidents and death filter in. One such death sends the

community into a period of sorry business, or mourning rituals. We hear that the driver of the vehicle is speared in the leg.

There comes a point, though, when I decide not to believe any white man or woman when it comes to observations about Warlpiri culture, law or ceremonies. Meggitt's book has credibility and a respectful attitude, but I become unsure about the veracity of some of what he writes in today's world. And, there are plentiful stories about non-Aboriginal people misbehaving or committing fraud.

According to the store manager, one of his predecessors stole a lot of money from the store. Rumours that he set himself up in a Gold Coast condominium have come back through the store manager's network, but charges have not been laid. Jules brings home stories about the sexual impropriety of white contractors. Plumbing contractors feature in some of these narratives—the men who are responsible for the raw sewage bubbling up in a backyard close to ours. On investigation, the pipes between the house and the cesspit have never been connected.

My complaints about development workers in Papua New Guinea seem trivial compared to the stories I hear about white people working in Lajamanu—not to mention what I witness. Development work does not occur here. Why isn't there a permanent officer from the Department of Community Development on site?

I had heard of culture shock when I was in Papua New Guinea but it hadn't affected me there. In case Jules is right and I have it now, I take steps to eliminate it. I write 'think positive' on the little blackboard outside our front door. Underneath I write, 'leave work outside'. I keep a tidy house, make my own yoghurt, work in our garden and set up a writing space in one of the spare bedrooms.



The learner-driver vehicle arrives and I start giving driving lessons. On one occasion, I confess to a young woman learning to drive that I do not want a skin name. From Meggitt I have learnt that having one involves avoiding certain people, but I need to work across the whole community without fear or favour. When I tell her this, she laughs.

‘You already got a skin name!’

‘Really? How come?’

‘Everyone got one.’

‘What’s mine?’

‘You Napangarti,’ she says with certainty.

‘But how did I get that skin name?’ I am confused.

‘You my sister. I’m Napangarti. You Napangarti.’

This exchange begins my direct education in Warlpiri culture. Napangarti goes on to explain kinship obligations, and the nature of reciprocity while I teach her the road rules and how to drive. I stop reading Meggitt and start listening to my ‘sister’, who introduces me to her family.

Maurice asks for help with reports from the Department of Community Development and other government agencies. In the process of helping, he talks about his experiences, the history of Lajamanu’s establishment and his country. Maurice invites me to go to Darwin with him and the Council President to take notes at meetings. We fly up on a chartered aeroplane. On the way, Maurice shares his strategy for success in negotiations. ‘Ask for double what you want,’ he says, ‘that way you might get what you need.’

His strategy succeeds. He and the Council President drive home in a new four-wheel drive vehicle; I fly back on the mail plane with a notebook full of meeting outcomes. I like working with Maurice and the council.

My satisfaction is short-lived. Another exchange with the headmaster about perceptions involves him criticising the garaging of the adult education vehicle at our house. Warlpiri men tell him I'll get a big head, keeping the car overnight. He's looking at me intently as he relays this information, waiting for an adverse reaction. I keep a straight face. He continues with his remedy for my big head: he thinks it would be better if I dropped the vehicle off at his place at the end of the day, and only use it when I have a lesson.

There is no point arguing with him. By now his antics involve Jules and me as one and the same entity. He knows scoring points over me will also be points scored over Jules. I send another complaint letter via the council mailbag to TAFE, Katherine.

The inconvenience involved in garaging the vehicle in the headmaster's yard is minimal but having to receive or hand over the key before and after driving lessons is inconvenient and silly. I don't know exactly what my boss from Katherine says to the headmaster when he visits Lajamanu again but, whatever it is, a compromise is reached. The vehicle will be garaged overnight at the headmaster's house. I will retain the key for convenience and simply pick the car up each morning for use throughout the day.

Before long, the sessions with the health workers provide opportunities for friendly conversation when our work for the day has finished. The twenty-four-hour clock presents a real difficulty for the health workers and a challenge for me. I try everything I can think of to help them get it, without success. I use pictures and sensory teaching aids, and make a mock-up clock with day and night clearly distinguished. It seems perverse. I approach the clinic

nurse to see if the health workers can use watches or a clock and simply add ‘am’ or ‘pm’ after the time. She’ll have to ask the Department of Health.

The health workers and I enjoy a laugh at the expense of the twenty-four-hour clock and the Department of Health. Gradually, they start to share stories about their lives and their country, problems they experience at work, and they also talk about good places to visit on weekends. Literacy and numeracy becomes a two-way exchange as they teach me a few Warlpiri words. I am a *kardiya*, a white person; they are *yapa*, an Aboriginal person or Warlpiri. Picture and word charts go up on the walls in English and Warlpiri.

Jules, too, has developed good relationships with the teaching assistants and some of the parents. People begin calling in at our house for a cup of tea and a chat, to borrow tools or have a look at our expanding garden. We talk about gardening, hunting, country, family, cultural matters and the history of the place. They talk of parents coming to Hooker Creek on the back of a truck, walking home to Yuendumu and being brought back again. It’s a very long walk—many hundreds of kilometres. Some say they were forced, but others say they came willingly.

Some people talk of rough treatment and hardship in the early days. Others talk of learning new skills, of building the community up. Many stories undercut my perceptions about them living rough and about camp life being awful. Various people tell me they like living in humpies, sleeping with their dogs, cooking on a fire in the open. Houses are good for keeping their belongings safe or to sleep in when the weather is bad. But the *yapa* teaching assistants want houses, ‘like all the *kardiya* teachers’. When there is trouble in the camp, people like to go bush, just as we do.

Camping trips help revitalise us after a tough week. Jules is a keen bird watcher and enjoys teaching me the names and habits of birds. But when he starts testing me, I feel

slightly resentful and annoyed. I'm not his student. I call a zebra finch a tiger finch on purpose. Zebra finches become my favourite bird. These small, delicate creatures make faint chirping sounds that seem such a contrast to their harsh habitat in the Tanami Desert.

Jules lets people know he is interested in plants and animals. A baby emu arrives and is housed in the laundry for a time; a thorny lizard finds a new home in a terrarium Jules borrows from the school; a blue tongue lizard is delivered in a box. I prefer observing birds and animals in their natural habitat—it's not as messy either. One of the policemen breeds corellas in his backyard. They look very sad to me, even though the cage is large and elaborate.

The pleasure of our weekends out bush is diminished by the time it takes to unpack and prepare for another busy week. Unpacking another dusty load is the last thing I want to do when there is another meal to cook and washing to be done before Monday morning. One Sunday afternoon we return to find cattle have knocked down our fence and trampled our garden. I curse the cattle, the cattle manager and his wife. Jules wishes we had a liquor licence and a bottle of rum.

Not long after this incident, Jules hears about the Wave Hill Cricket Club, where there is a bar and good food on sale at a place called Frank's Bar & Grill. It sounds like fun, a way to let off steam. One Friday afternoon we throw our swag into the back of the vehicle and head off to this new destination about one hundred kilometres away.

Frank's Bar & Grill is in full swing when we arrive, but a game of cricket isn't planned. There is serious drinking, gossiping and laughter. It's a makeshift bar and the barman, Frank, is a friendly raconteur who gets along with everyone. He and his wife are wonderful hosts who ensure patrons are well fed and watered. Under the influence of alcohol and the cover of darkness, the surroundings look better than they did when we first arrived.

The fence has been cobbled together with angle iron, fencing wire and hessian—a concession to the privacy of members. An above ground fishpond made of stone has been cleaned and filled with fresh bore water. Frank invites members to throw their swags down in the safety of the grounds. We become members.

Over the weekend, one funny story after another unfolds at the bar while members cool off in the pool fully clothed or stripped down to their underwear when the unrelenting heat or intoxication get the better of them. Above all, bonhomie is the order of the day at Frank's Bar & Grill.

One story centres on more white corruption. It involves the old barmaid at Top Springs, recently deceased, and a local policeman who investigated her death. Frank tells us her name was Ma Hawkes. Another drinker yells out, 'you mean old leather-tits'. Frank points to the decorative centrepiece of the bar—a Northern Territory policeman's hat—and proceeds to tell a story he has down pat. Other patrons add embellishments. The exact amount of money the cop found under Ma Hawkes' mattress is up for debate, but it is in the thousands. There is consensus about where the cop buried the money—the police station yard—but not the name of the dog that dug it up, or how things played out after that. By the time Frank gets to charges laid, the court case and the sentence, no one cares what happened to the money. The laughter subsides and people wander off to their swags.

In the last two months of the school year, we become regulars at Frank's Bar & Grill. Jules likes the company of the members and the way his tensions with the headmaster dissipate for a couple of days. As Jules' enthusiasm for these weekends increases, mine wanes. One Sunday morning I wake to see most of the male patrons already awake, but I feel an unusual stillness in the air. Some sit at the bar with their first cans of beer for the day, others sit cross-legged in their swags smoking or drinking tea. No-one is talking. They're all

looking in one direction. I follow their gaze to see a young woman, still asleep, spreadeagled and completely naked. The men are simply enjoying the view. I get up, walk over to her swag, and cover her with the sheet. One man drinking at the bar, spits; others turn away; another says, 'killjoy'.

My employment, despite good inspection reports, is tenuous. The department will not make me permanent until I complete my teaching diploma. I have one subject to go. The headmaster continues to make life difficult and the department announces he will be back the following year.

Jules and I disagree about visiting Frank's Bar & Grill. I start to see the place as the reason for our failing relationship and my unhappiness. I apply to enrol in three different university courses and am accepted by two, deciding to take up a Bachelor of Arts at the University of New England in Armidale. Jules is reluctant to come with me and soon decides not to.

Saying goodbye to my Warlpiri friends and colleagues after an intense year seems harder for me than for them. The turnover of white staff here is high. I am just one more in a long line. Even so, they have welcomed me, taught me, and helped me see the desert as a fascinating place.

Jules and I arrange to meet up with the policeman and his wife in Katherine before we go on Christmas holidays. After the men go to the hotel with their drinking mates, the policeman's wife settles her children into bed and we sit in the swimming pool with a glass of wine and talk for hours. Her long story is about a deteriorating relationship between the policemen and how it gradually infected the relationship between wives and children; how it impacted on neighbourliness and the professionalism of the police presence in Lajamanu and

how it made the people involved miserable. Sober and cool, I listen to her tale and she listens to mine. We are both surprised we knew nothing of the other's troubles.

The following year Jules and I visit them at a new posting. They are much happier but we are not. At university, the world has opened up. Like most mature aged students, I do well. Surprisingly, I'm getting high distinctions and distinctions in all my subjects. I have also found part-time work tutoring staff at a local Aboriginal organisation through the Commonwealth Employment Service. The staff tell me how racism plays out in towns like Armidale, how their history differs from the Warlpiri, how inequality and oppression continues to impact on them.

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How do you fall out of love? Throughout his life, Jules continued to believe that the end of our relationship was due to 'the student outgrowing the teacher'. I disagreed. I believe it happened in increments over a decade or more. In our second year together, I was hurt when he told someone that he continued to wear his wedding ring (we were unmarried) to remind him never to marry again. He forgot my birthday. He told me a story about making his ex-wife save up for a washing machine out of the housekeeping money—he bought one second-hand and lied to her about the cost so he could pocket the change. He wouldn't give up smoking after I did. He started chewing tobacco. He drank too much, too often. He didn't want children with me. He made a will and left me everything in the southern hemisphere, but sent large sums of money to a bank in Montana. He didn't believe the dingo took the baby.

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Jules spent three years at Lajamanu before returning to Montana. He was elected Powell County Superintendent of Schools in 1994, a position that supported teachers and

gave him the opportunity to do what he loved most—interact with teachers and students. He held this position until his death in 2018. A few months before he died he was inducted into the National Rural Education Association Hall of Fame in recognition of his contribution to education.





## Chapter 2: *Persona non grata* in Tennant Creek (1986–1988)

I had not planned to move to Tennant Creek in 1986. Instead, I had returned to my parents' home in Mudgee, broke, after a working holiday in Italy. However, an adult educator position came up at Mutitjulu, the Aboriginal community near Uluru. I applied for the job and won it.

It seemed an exciting opportunity to work with Aboriginal people again, building on what I'd learnt at Lajamanu. At the same time I did not want to make the same mistakes or experience the same difficulties. My future boss thought he was adding sweeteners to the deal when he told me I could work in Mutitjulu during the day and return to my comfortable staff accommodation in nearby Yulara after work. This would offer respite from the pressures of community life, he said, and I could eat in the five-star hotels at the resort if I wanted to—as a paying customer, of course—one of the many perks of the appointment. I could have a foot in both worlds.

I wondered if someone in Mutitjulu would teach me Pitjantjatjara.

My future boss also assured me that regular interaction with him would be the norm—there would be no local headmaster I had to please. And this time the TAFE Division would send me to Darwin for a fully paid, proper induction before taking up the appointment.

In the soupy wet season of Darwin, the TAFE inspector from my Mount Hagen days came to the induction to say hello. Would I come to a meeting with the head of the TAFE Division? He had a proposition for me. The proposition turned out to be an opportunity to head up TAFE activities in Tennant Creek. Initially, I was not keen on the idea and said so. They explained that there were moves afoot to reinvigorate adult education and training through the establishment of a Territory-wide college with TAFE centres in the major towns. Tennant Creek would be one of the regional centres of the Northern Territory Open College

of TAFE (NTOC) and I would be the first Regional Coordinator. These centres would serve adults in towns and outlying Aboriginal communities where adult educators were placed. Meeting the needs of the Aboriginal adults living in those communities would be paramount.

In many places, Aboriginal assistant adult educators worked side by side with the non-Aboriginal adult educator. These Aboriginal people were enrolled in an innovative course run by Batchelor College, as it was known then, in partnership with Deakin University. The long-term aim—to have accredited Aboriginal adult educators operating in as many communities as possible—was a real possibility with the new NTOC network in place.

When all the benefits involved in the Tennant Creek posting were laid out, the political imperative emerged—Tennant Creek was home to the Chief Minister, Ian Tuxworth. He was keen to see this new venture work well in his hometown and his Country Liberal Party take full credit.

Although there was an adult educator already in Tennant Creek, he was near retirement. Besides, an interim governing committee made up of influential business people had lobbied the Chief Minister for someone more dynamic.

My resistance to taking the position crumbled after two or three meetings filled with assurances of support. Unsurprisingly, a phone call to my new boss in Alice Springs found him supportive of the appointment. He promised ‘every assistance’. The Alice Springs TAFE would also support the Tennant Creek venture by sending their lecturers up the Stuart Highway to run tourism and hospitality courses, or anything else the towns people wanted that could not be organised locally.

After the induction, which concentrated more on departmental administrative issues than useful information about Aboriginal cultures, I flew to Alice Springs and met with the

man who had appointed me to Mutitjulu. He would accompany me to Tennant Creek together with the head of the Alice Springs College of TAFE. They would introduce me to my staff, the local governing committee, and the Superintendent of Education in charge of schools in the Barkly.

We had plenty to talk about on the 500-kilometre drive north. As I watched the beautiful MacDonnell Ranges disappear behind me, I felt some regret. The country flattened out and the road straightened, roughly following the first telegraph line's northern route. We passed Aileron before stopping at Ti Tree to meet the adult educator there. We subsequently passed Barrow Creek and the pub located near the turn off to Ali Curung—one of the communities in my region where there was an adult education presence.

At the time, the pub at Wycliffe Well had a terrible reputation for its dubious credit arrangements with Ali Curung drinkers on welfare payments. We didn't stop there, either. We still had 150 kilometres to go. On to Wauchope, past the Devil's Marbles, until finally the Stuart Highway transformed into Paterson Street, an impressive stretch of main road divided by a grassy median strip complete with flowering trees—a good first impression.

In 1986 Tennant Creek had a fairly static population of about 3,000 people, a third of whom were Aboriginal. A long, hard-fought and contentious land claim was in progress at the time generating strong opinions. Non-Aboriginal history included early exploration in the 1860s, followed by the cattle industry and the establishment of the telegraph station. The discovery of gold in the 1930s brought another wave of people to Warumungu country.

Until I arrived in Tennant Creek, I didn't know the incumbent adult educator, who was now part of my staff, was unhappy with the new arrangements, nor was I aware of his close friendship with the local Department of Education Superintendent. The TAFE Division head and my colleagues had only spoken about the Chief Minister's wishes and the

enthusiasm of the local TAFE governing committee—the movers and shakers of the same political persuasion as Mr Tuxworth—and how happy they were that I had been appointed.

We arrived at the Superintendent's office mid-afternoon. Introductions over, I offered my hand to the Superintendent. He ignored it. Instead, he began a surprising tirade.

'Don't think I'm going to take this lying down! I don't like the way this has been done and I don't like the prospects of success under the circumstances. You put this ... this *woman* ... in charge of the person who's been doing the job for years and expect success? I tell you I won't stand for it!'

I excused myself and left the gentlemen to sort it out. Fair enough—I was *persona non grata* as far as the Superintendent was concerned and knew I was on my own when my colleagues left town. Over dinner that night, my companions tried to reassure me that the Superintendent knew the score.

The incumbent adult educator was another matter. His professional rank, the same as mine, made it difficult for both of us, despite agreed duty statements. However, I hoped that with good communication and well-defined boundaries, we would achieve a reasonable working relationship.

The Safari Lodge Motel, my home until more permanent accommodation could be found, was located opposite the popular Dolly Pot Inn. It was an unusual establishment—it combined fine dining with busy squash courts. On my first night alone, I made my way across the street to the Dolly Pot for dinner, pausing on the corner to reflect on this turn of events in my life. It was 42 degrees Celsius at seven o'clock at night. I looked up at the streetlight, noting the insects circling the light as if they were drugged, when something crawled over my

sandalled foot. I looked down to see cockroaches crawling out of a small hole in the middle of the slab. I swore and moved quickly away.

‘What have I got myself into this time?’ I wondered, hurrying on to a nice dinner and glass of wine.

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It is mid-morning, Monday, 25 June 2018. My mobile rings. It’s my friend Jacquie Bethel with sad news.

‘Pearl passed away last Wednesday. They’re bringing her home. The funeral is Friday at 1 o’clock.’

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I had met Jacquie in Canberra and worked with her in three different places over a number of years. Once I found out she was from Tennant Creek, we connected through people we knew in common and stories about the town. We connected too, because Pearl and Jacquie are sisters, Aboriginal way.

Pearl Cross was one of the first people I met in Tennant Creek in 1986, one of the two permanent staff members on my team, the assistant adult educator. She was already halfway through her studies in the Batchelor/Deakin diploma when we met. She was a tall, good-looking woman who was part of a large Aboriginal family. She had a calm presence and a confident manner. A local, she had married a non-Aboriginal bloke but had grown up as part of Jacquie’s family.

Pearl once told me she didn’t know her father until she was about twelve years old. When she found out who he was, she waited for him outside the Memorial Club and

introduced herself. Then she asked him for financial support, a regular payment of cash to help buy food and clothes for her and the rest of the family. He gave her the money. This practice continued until Pearl started earning her own living. This took guts, I thought, and showed Pearl had a refined sense of justice, and a daughter's entitlement.

Pearl took the responsibilities in her duty statement seriously, took her time to do everything well, with dignity and pride. She was also down-to-earth. I took an instant liking to Pearl and she later became a good friend as well as a colleague.

Pearl was accredited to teach people to drive. Unlike Lajamanu, control of the driver education vehicle rested with me as the TAFE centre boss. I devolved that responsibility to Pearl. She had several learners on the books and a list of people's names on a waiting list. She had also learnt how to use a video camera at one of Batchelor College's residentials.

Apart from her personal attributes and professional skills, Pearl knew everyone in town, which helped me navigate small-town dynamics. She became an integral part of our small team—a tight knit little group that quickly expanded from two to five full-time staff. A number of part-timers—schoolteachers, artists or tradesmen—taught night or weekend classes in art, computers, mechanics, yoga, building maintenance, cooking ... anything people were interested in.

We didn't know it then but Pearl, like some of her relatives, had a defective gene that causes early dementia. It has no cure or treatment. Her symptoms developed after she and her young family moved away from Tennant Creek in the early nineties. Before she died, Pearl had been institutionalised for approximately twenty years. Her marriage, her capacity to mother her three girls, and her blossoming career all suffered.

I couldn't go to the funeral. I sent a tribute instead.

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The inauspicious start to my three years in Tennant Creek resulted in a challenging few months. In time, the other adult educator was transferred to a position within the Department of Education, a move we both eagerly agreed to and was facilitated by the Superintendent, in agreement with the TAFE Division.

Meanwhile, I busied myself recruiting staff, managing renovations and organising a program of adult education and training while becoming better acquainted with the wider community. As well as general coordination, I was required to oversee the upgrade of unused buildings allocated to TAFE that were part of an existing primary school campus. A formal opening by the Chief Minister was planned. I also taught English as a Second Language to migrant women.

The opening was a success. TAFE executives arrived from Darwin and Alice Springs to witness the Chief Minister draw the curtain on a brass plaque. Tennant Creek residents mingled with guests and enjoyed the free demonstrations and refreshments. Pearl videoed the event and the local newspapers were generous in their coverage. Enrolments went up.

Feedback I received indicated that most non-Aboriginal people in town and the governing committee I reported to were pleased with the new TAFE arrangements. I turned my attention to the Warumungu community using Pearl's inside knowledge to explore how TAFE could assist them. I visited the CEO of every Aboriginal organisation in town, to introduce myself, tell them about the Open College and see how we might help them. Responses differed. One CEO was openly hostile, others were suspicious or non-committal. One took up the offer, tentatively.



I understood self-determination included the establishment of Aboriginal-controlled organisations run by Aboriginal leaders who would recruit and train Aboriginal staff, but I felt strongly that government agencies should actively support them and provide pathways into further education and training.

John Havnen, the CEO of Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation, began sending some of his Aboriginal workers to a pre-fabrication building program at the Open College. That worked well, so when John wanted more of his workers trained, we moved the whole operation to the Julalikari site. TAFE staff provided the instruction while John, in conjunction with Julalikari's workers, turned the project into a viable enterprise that fabricated and erected shelters and toilets on outstations throughout the Barkly Region. After this success, John and I continued to explore how we might collaborate for the benefit of Julalikari's members living within Tennant Creek and its seven town camps. By 1988 Julalikari and Open College staff had a good working relationship. When a vacancy on the governing committee occurred, I recommended John fill it. The other members agreed.

Pearl suggested that video skills training would be popular. This led to us hiring practitioners from the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS), something my colleague in the Alice Springs office had already done in remote communities in Central Australia.

The Federal government had developed a Broadcasting in Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS), so training in radio and video became important. We set up a soundproof room using empty egg cartons, carpet and blankets in order to make programs. We bought or hired video cameras, tripods and an editing suite.

Once there was a cohort of Aboriginal women with basic video skills, John suggested we tailor a program for Julalikari homemakers. They would script and shoot videos using

Aboriginal people in front of and behind the camera, with the aim of helping Julalikari's town camp residents move into mainstream housing in town. Similarly, we contracted a permaculture expert to come to Tennant Creek to run a variety of workshops and work with Aboriginal people from outstations. Low maintenance gardens, which provided food and shade, also reduced the amount of dust that blew into outstation houses, an obvious health benefit.

Some of these activities were funded out of the TAFE budget, but others were funded by successful submissions for funding through the agencies of Territory or Federal governments. The more successful these submissions were, the more I had to write. Before long, I was instructed to include a 26% TAFE administration fee in submissions, to cover the time spent on writing, organising, and managing activities. I could see the logic in this but having to write increasingly complex submissions not only detracted from my capacity to react in a timely manner to requests, but the interdepartmental 'fee for service' was, at least in part, a cost shifting exercise that made my work more difficult and less enjoyable.

At the time, Commonwealth policies promoting self-determination were popular. Inquiries, reports and policies promoted collaboration between government agencies to increase cost-effectiveness and to increase the benefit of programs to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Many different service providers and bureaucrats visited communities more or less at random—as they still do today—arriving with different priorities and agendas. The same few Elders or Indigenous people in key positions would be called upon to engage with them repeatedly in English, their second or third language, and at times that suited the visitors—a growing point of pressure for local people who had their own priorities. This diminished the time for consensus decision-making and stretched the capacity of these few individuals. The only occasion this regime was subverted, that I witnessed, was at Kintore in the late 1980s when the local council discussed this problem with my colleague, Alan

Randell. They decided to change this disorganised approach by requesting that all visitors give two weeks notice of their visit, outlining any requests as part of the process. This gave them time to consider the issues, come to a consensus and provide quality responses.

In 1987 Open College staff attended the local launch of the Hawke Government's Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) in the grounds of Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation. As usual, Pearl was on hand to video Minister Gerry Hand's speech. He spoke about the significance of the policy and referred to the important work of the Miller committee, whose review of Aboriginal employment and training two years earlier led to the development of the policy. He also mentioned the policy's links to self-determination and community development. The Minister was well received by the large audience chiefly made up of Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal bureaucrats working in the sector.

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The Open College in the Barkly region had an adult education presence in Ali Curung, Elliott, Lake Nash and Borroloola. I liked getting into a vehicle and heading out of town to visit staff in these communities and towns. It was a welcome respite from the hectic pace of an urban centre—a time to relax, think and plan.

In Borroloola, a Yanyuwa leader, Thelma Douglas, was the assistant adult educator. She welcomed me and introduced me to her people and her country. The work she did with young women embedded cultural practices while developing the skills required to work in one of the many businesses and government services in Borroloola. I spent many evenings with Thelma and the older women in her family talking about problems or listening to stories. Sometimes it was personal. They once asked me if I had a husband. I said no, but told them I had my eye on a nice man in Tennant Creek. To help me, they busied themselves making a

cassette tape of Yanyuwa love songs. They were confident that if I played the tape regularly, the man would come to me. It worked!

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At Elliott, the adult educator was a dynamic, young non-Aboriginal man, Kerry Gardiner. He focused literacy and numeracy activities around music, hunting and men's business. I enjoyed staying overnight and hearing about his exploits with the men. A local band emerged from these activities and for a time *The Tableland Drifters* were popular at concerts and gigs throughout the Barkly.

I might have complained that there was blood on the truck when it came back to base from Elliott, but the hunting trips—because the cultural spin offs for the men and their families were positive, often led to other, more formal education and training.

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Ali Curung was only 150 kilometres south of Tennant Creek whereas Borroloola was 700 kilometres to north-east. Lana Rankin, the Assistant Adult Educator at Ali Curung, ran a women's centre, often on her own. Two adult educators came and went between 1986 and 1988, but Lana was a constant presence in Ali Curung. Lana, Pearl, Thelma, and many other Aboriginal people across the Territory, studied together at Batchelor College and completed their diploma in adult education and training.

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Overnight stays in remote communities were always interesting. If I didn't stay with the adult educator, a welcoming teacher usually stepped in as host. Visitors' centres were non-existent in the Barkly region. On most occasions, my host was keen to talk about a wide range

of issues. Trouble at the school, local politics, fraught relationships or gossip about other whitefellas living in the community would bubble out over dinner with an intensity I recognised, having once been the community resident with similar problems. I listened and nodded sympathetically or offered options for action.

On one occasion my host, a teacher, was in real trouble. As I helped prepare dinner and set the table, I was startled to find her kitchen cupboards full of empty moselle cartons, dozens of them, neatly stacked and hidden from view. At times like these, the scene out bush gets complex. You have to take people as you find them, but sometimes you need to intervene. After seeing the empty wine cartons, I asked how she was coping and whether she would like to tell me what was happening. By then, a new Superintendent of Education was in charge of the region, a wise woman with a sense of fair play. I encouraged the teacher to share her problems with the Superintendent.

This resulted in a good outcome for the teacher, the school and the community, and better than some other outcomes I have seen—a headmaster who was allowed to stay thirteen ineffective years; a bureaucrat whose first action was to build a fence around his office and residence; a mentally ill person who committed suicide after several problematic bush postings.

As someone responsible for staff performance and welfare, I managed difficult situations. Sometimes the solution involved a short break to reset a person's equilibrium. At others it meant telling someone they needed professional help—a tricky thing to do, but it could be the impetus they needed. Sometimes a forced transfer, or recommending a change of profession, or sustained performance management might help minimise intercultural complexities that occasionally grow out of proportion in small communities.

A few people in the Department of Education believed problematic primary school teachers could become proficient adult educators without any specific aptitude or training. Fighting rear-guard actions against such transfers in the broader Open College was not unknown.

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There have been times when I have ‘cut and run’ from a difficult situation out bush, particularly in circumstances where I have been lobbied to take sides in family disputes. I have sought the services of counsellors after witnessing violent events in town or out bush or experienced difficult interactions within my own family. These occur across all racial groups and locations.

However, deciding on a course of action in intercultural situations can be complex. Sometimes the best thing to do is keep your own counsel and see how things play out, particularly if you don’t fully understand the history of the problem or the dynamics involved in what might seem like a petty rivalry. Patience and tolerance is required. Information may emerge which makes sense of interactions that initially seem irrational. In such situations, I have often had to question my own cultural biases.

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In late 1987 John Havnen identified an empty building at Ngalpa Ngalpa town camp, suitable for a women’s program. This building was known as the Pink Palace, named for the colour of the outside walls. It was originally built as a hostel for the wives and children of workers of Banka Banka Station by a non-Aboriginal woman called Mary Ward, who had once owned the property. She was well known for her progressive support of Aboriginal people who lived and worked with her. When Mary eventually sold the property, she also

purchased several houses within Tennant Creek for some of her long-term employees. The hostel had provided accommodation for them when they returned to Tennant Creek to visit family, during layoff over the wet season and ceremonial business. In 1987 it was part of the town camp at the northern end of town.

We had the idea that senior Warumungu women would work side by side with younger women on projects centred on life skills, health or other areas of interest to them. Perhaps the younger ones might end up enrolling in a mainstream TAFE course. I hired Dawn Josephson to coordinate the program. Dawn and I had met when I visited Thelma Douglas in Borroloola. She had wanted to show me her country and Robinson River was part of the tour. Dawn's husband, Gerry McCarthy, taught in the one-teacher school there and had a fine reputation as an outstation teacher. I saw first-hand what they had achieved together at that small, well-attended school.

Dawn had a good relationship with many of the senior women in town and a positive attitude that I knew would encourage them to join in and stay the course. Her brief was to engage in discussion with the women to set up their own learning centre. They could choose activities and Dawn aimed to incorporate literacy and numeracy into those activities wherever possible, using culturally appropriate learning materials and techniques. The target group were town camp women for whom English was a second, third or fourth language.

For most of the women, this would be the first time they had participated in any formal or informal western education program. Dawn believed that these new educational relationships had to be built on mutual trust and no one disagreed with her. John was supportive of any activities centred on life skills, which prepared people for living in western style homes. Was this self-determination in action? We focused on community development processes that had worked for my colleague, Alan Randell, the adult educator at Kintore.

Within a few weeks the women had painted the inside of the building and submitted a request for resources to support a nutritional program, which the Open College found and supplied. Julalikari provided a bus to pick the women up and drop them home at the end of the day. Dawn recalls that picking up the women in the mornings remained a particularly vivid memory long after the program was finished.

‘I would drive the bus to the bush camps to pick the women up. First the camp dogs would crawl out from under sheets of galvanised iron, then the women would emerge, dishevelled. They would gather around the only water source in the camp—a solitary tap attached to a star picket—have a wash and get on the bus.’

The women took to the venture at the Pink Palace with enthusiasm, and Dawn excelled as a facilitator. They developed budgets, bought ingredients, cooked meals, and took pride in their learning centre. Some women learnt to read and write, drive a car or use a video camera. Law, culture and Warumungu language were integral to the program. They asked for people to come in to talk about specific topics centred on health and wellbeing—nutrition, care of babies and children—often involving local staff from Aboriginal-controlled organisations, and sometimes from mainstream government services.

Another activity developed around the outside the building. A group of Aboriginal people, mostly men learning horticulture, planted a garden. It wasn’t long before garden produce found its way into the women’s learning centre, or to the Saturday street markets outside the Superbarn.

The program started as an experiment, a mixture of adult education theory and practice and community development principles, many of them derived from Paulo Freire’s account of teaching literacy and numeracy in Brazil. My colleague, Alan Randell, had met Freire in Papua New Guinea and since then had incorporated such approaches into his



practice there, in Queensland, at Kintore and in workshops run by the Open College in Alice Springs. He shared his insights with me and other Open College personnel.

I had met Alan at the induction in Darwin before he took up his posting as adult educator at Kintore, a remote community near the Western Australian border. He talked about techniques that had proven successful in Papua New Guinea and with urban Aboriginal people in Australia. The workshops Alan ran for remote Aboriginal people enabled them to digest the government policies affecting them and provide feedback to bureaucrats and politicians in Canberra.

At the heart of these activities was a belief that people, when given the chance to understand a policy and provide feedback, had plenty to say. Given the opportunity to determine their own learning, in their own way, in a place they controlled and felt safe in, with people they trusted, they responded positively and stayed engaged. Finding a *process* to achieve this involved educators and adults working collaboratively and respectfully with each other.

During these years I saw good things happen when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people collaborated, like John and I did, or like Dawn and the women did, on projects of interest to them. I also had the opportunity to travel to Kintore and see Alan work with Aboriginal adults there, particularly the Aboriginal elders and elected councillors. I also saw the rise and success of Aboriginal-controlled organisations, which capitalised on successful initiatives in other Australian states.

At the end of my three-year term as the first Regional Coordinator of the Northern Territory Open College in Tennant Creek, two important celebrations took place. The first, a graduation ceremony for the women at the Pink Palace, began as a discussion with the women. They were keen, but where to hold it and what form it might take needed a longer

conversation. The women had never been inside the Dolly Pot Inn. The owner liked the idea and gave us a few ideas for a menu. Dawn continued discussions with the women and they decided on a celebratory lunch in the outdoor area of the Dolly Pot, a relatively private space where the awards could be presented without the general public looking on.

That year, 1988, Australia's Bicentennial celebrations took place. The Last Great Cattle Drive had made headlines nationally and had involved many people from down south, Tennant Creek and surrounding cattle stations, but I like to think our ceremony at the Dolly Pot surpassed it. To see the women walk through the doors of the Dolly Pot Inn for the first time and celebrate what they had achieved at the Pink Palace was a joyful experience. The women were courageous and proud to receive acknowledgement for their hard work and achievements.

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Another celebration involved the graduation of the first cohort of pre-vocational students, an ambitious partnership between the high school and the Open College. Fifteen and sixteen-year-old students came to our campus for a full program of accredited activities chosen from a specially designed curriculum. The partnership had surveyed potential participants and developed a learning program designed to address their interests and ensure they were work-ready at the same time. The students, disadvantaged by a range of factors, appreciated being treated like adults. Again, adult education techniques and community development principles were incorporated into the program.

Participants developed good relationships with the coordinator, Camis Smith, an Aboriginal man originally from Roebourne in Western Australia. Camis reminded me of Pearl in many ways. He was calm, personable and smart. He was well respected by other instructors and facilitators and developed a collegiate atmosphere in his team.

The participants reported that the program was much better than being at school. No more ‘front of the room expert’ pedagogy or discipline, but plenty of Malcolm Knowles’ andragogy as outlined in his text, *The Adult Learner*. We treated the students like adults and they responded in kind. They could smoke on campus when they were off duty, but we encouraged them to attend health programs that included sessions on quitting.

Their graduation coincided with my farewell. There were bouquets and speeches for me and prizes and awards for students. On behalf of the TAFE, I presented every pre-vocational participant with Sally Morgan’s book, *My Place*. Like many other Australians, I had read the book when it was published and thought it was a significant autobiography. The pre-vocational students, not enthusiastic readers, might relate to the story for multiple reasons—many of them had Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage; it was a story about injustice, oppressive policies and practices; ambiguity and resilience. It was a good story, easy to read, appropriate for young people whose identities had been impacted by the forced removal of family members, small town racism and ongoing oppressions. Or so I believed.

Some time after this, I had cause to reflect on my actions and my relationship with the book as a white, middle class woman. As critiques of *My Place* and Sally Morgan came to light, I squirmed, questioning my own capacity to interrogate white conservatism, ignorance or bias. Some critics argued that the book’s popularity with a largely white readership was attributable to the way it glossed over the problematic nature of white responsibility for Aboriginal disadvantage; some contrasted mainstream feminist support against the politics of oppression.

Critiques from Indigenous academics questioned why this story of a late-discovered Aboriginal identity had become so popular when stories by Indigenous authors who had

always identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander had not reached the same white audience. It was a question worth considering.

Claims that the book's inclusion in the school curriculum was inappropriate or that the financial benefits and the celebrity gained by the author were out of proportion, seemed more questionable. What had Morgan done for the wider Aboriginal community, they asked?

I puzzled over this commentary. Had I simply read *My Place* from a white-Anglo woman's perspective? Were my perceptions of the book limited by my relative lack of knowledge of feminist, Marxist or other critical theories? Was *My Place* really as relevant to the young pre-vocational students as I thought it was? I did not know the answers.

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Activating a succession plan and sharing community development approaches at a workshop were my last tasks. Camis Smith had excelled in the leadership and management of the pre-vocational program and won the job of regional coordinator. I prepared a detailed handover and involved him in planning the workshop. Alan Randall facilitated the workshop, which involved all regional staff and several visitors from Darwin and Alice Springs who wanted to learn from Alan.

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I've been back to Tennant Creek a few times. Dawn still lives there with her husband, Gerry McCarthy. He has been the local Labor member for Barkly for many years but retired in 2020. As for John Havnen, he resigned from Julalikari and moved to Katherine shortly after I transferred to Alice Springs. Before I left, he knocked on my door at home—a first. He'd dropped by to say goodbye and thank me for my good work. I thanked him, too. He made good work possible.

Jacquie Bethel returned home almost eight years ago. She set up the Tennant Creek Mob Aboriginal Corporation with a group of Warumungu leaders and elders. Together they have undertaken a variety of significant projects. More recently The Mob have been contracted to deliver services to Aboriginal youth using the developmental processes we explored together in ATSIC. Jacquie says she swears by them.

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Why have successive governments diminished adult education training, TAFE, and Indigenous programs in adult education? Why is the ‘F’ function—*further*—in TAFE consistently seen as unimportant? The accreditation required to become a facilitator/trainer is a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. It is not adequate for the specialised work of cross-cultural frontline workers.

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By 1988 I had met a man in Tennant Creek I liked, one who liked me. As a result I thought twice about leaving at the end of that year, but the professional opportunity to work with Alan was too good to miss and I transferred to Alice Springs. Our relationship continued for another year, with visits back and forth and long phone calls. It culminated in a pregnancy towards the end of 1989 on a visit to Tennant Creek, making it my daughter’s dreaming place. Naturally, we have a special connection to Warumungu country as a result. And credit where credit is due—those Yanyuwa love songs from Borroloola worked.

### **Chapter 3: Unsettled in Alice Springs (1989–1995)**

Someone in the Department of Education or the TAFE Division must think my workload in NTOC's Alice Springs office is too light. I have two extra responsibilities—the English for Migrants Program and the gaol school. Fortunately, the woman in charge of the migrant program is self-sufficient and very experienced. A monthly meeting and a regular report are the only actions I need to diarise.

The gaol school requires more attention. I have to manage staff, visit the gaol, monitor numbers and outcomes and report to the Department of Corrections and TAFE Division. I wonder why the Alice Springs College of TAFE does not have these responsibilities. However, when I discover that most of the inmates are Aboriginal people from communities in Central Australia, I see the sense in NTOC delivering the program in the gaol. In some cases, perhaps we can continue with their education again once they're released.

The Open College's operation in Central Australia is completely different to that of the Barkly. We do not have to cater to the town's general population for one thing—the Alice Springs College of TAFE, the Institute for Aboriginal Development and other training bodies do that. There is a strong presence of Aboriginal-controlled organisations, too, with links to Indigenous training providers.

Our operation specifically supports Aboriginal education and training delivered by adult educators and Aboriginal assistant adult educators working at Amoonguna, Ti Tree, Hermannsburg, Yuendumu, Kintore and Willowra. Additionally, we employ a small number of instructors on a part-time basis to run video or arts programs in other communities. We also manage a Mobile Aboriginal Learning Unit (MALU), which looks like a fancy road train. The unit comes with a fully equipped manual arts workshop, a smaller space for

women's domestic science activities and a compact living area for the husband and wife team in charge. We can't meet all the requests for the MALU's services.

A popular livestock and station skills program also comes under NTOC management. A charismatic and experienced former stockman, Bill Meecham, runs the program. He has the expertise to respond to specific requests from communities, outstations or pastoral companies in any aspect of stock work involving an Aboriginal workforce.

Bill ran a program for the NTOC in the Barkly on a cattle station near Tennant Creek, so I know him pretty well. He is down to earth, highly skilled and personable. He looks the part, too, in his Akubra, cowboy shirt, bone R. M. Williams hipster jeans, leather belt and high-heeled boots. Bill has a vocabulary that comes straight out of a stock camp and an unlimited number of humorous stories. And he is a gentleman. I have never heard Bill curse—which doesn't mean he doesn't do it—but he's in his sixties and old school, like my father, and behaves politely around women.

The infrastructure required to run Bill's program consists of a truck, a caravan or 'silver bullet'—for accommodation and storage—and a trailer for stock camp paraphernalia like swags, cooking utensils and bulk dry ingredients to supplement meat killed on site for participants' consumption. It is surprising to learn that Bill uses his own horses and equipment. He prefers animals he knows because it minimises risk. His saddles and bridles are in top condition.

Before programs start, Bill takes a few days to set up the camp, moving the gear onto the site in a steady well-organised way.

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The NTOC headquarters are located in the town's industrial area. We share the site with another tenant, renting one permanent building with a large car park. We also keep a demountable office there and have a couple of vehicles for field visits. This meets our basic needs. Altogether, I am responsible for approximately twenty staff, millions of dollars worth of vehicles and equipment and a budget that covers our operation when added to various successful submissions for funding. My predecessor was successful in writing submissions for funding and working collaboratively with other agencies in creative ways.

The program that drew me to Alice Springs—the community development workshops—has to be delayed while other demands of the operation are implemented and addressed. An unexpected directive from the Department of Education for our finances to be audited is one such demand. My role, to support a departmental auditor, occupies me intensively for a few weeks, which I choose to view in a positive light.

Alan Randell and I begin working with Sam Miles from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA), to plan the community development workshops for the year. We will undertake a series of workshops funded by DAA in two Aboriginal settlements—Santa Teresa and Willowra—where the Open College and DAA have contacts on the ground and support from local people.

Sam and I drive to Santa Teresa to visit Keringke Arts Centre and to lay the groundwork for the first community development workshop. The Open College employs Cait Wait as Keringke Arts Centre's coordinator/artist. DAA has provided capital works funding to build the centre.

The centre has the hum of a vibrant arts enterprise when we arrive. Cait and several local women are engaged in their art practice and enjoy showing us around. They plan to expand their operations and sell to the tourist market. Cait is training a small number of



women in administration so they can take over the management of the centre. This approach sits well with my views about developmental models that include non-Aboriginal workers initiating long-term succession plans involving locals. Cait and I become friends as well as colleagues.

Keringke Arts and the community development workshops are initiatives generated under the Federal Government's Aboriginal Employment Development Program (AEDP). The program encourages collaboration between agencies delivering services on the ground. The link between training and employment that the AEDP encourages is straightforward in the arts enterprise, but it isn't so clear where the workshops are concerned. Even so, we believe that workshop participants will learn about planning and forward thinking, qualities integral to any leadership position. Many potential participants are elected members of community-based organisations and local government councils responsible for planning activities. Local government councils might employ non-Indigenous workers, but they are still guided by Aboriginal elected officials who provide strategic direction. And the workshops are clearly linked to self-determination, the over-arching government policy of the day.

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It is a short, ninety-kilometre drive from Alice Springs to Santa Teresa— time enough for Sam to tell me a bit about its history. Home to a number of Eastern Arrernte families, Santa Teresa was established in the late 1940s as a Catholic mission to care for Aboriginal people displaced by mining at Arltunga.

Across Australia, as white exploration, pastoralism and mining interests displaced Aboriginal people from their country, white administrations forced disparate groups to live together in settlements on other people's country. This often created problems for those

displaced, for the traditional owners and managers, and for the white administrators. The legacy of such arrangements could include long-standing enmity between groups, which sometimes contributed to social problems, although this was not always the case. The Gurindji, for example, have accommodated the Warlpiri on Gurindji country at Lajamanu. Both groups have a history of interacting constructively and taking responsibility for cultural obligations such as caring for country and carrying out joint ceremonial activities.

The Catholic Church stands out as one of the first buildings you see in Santa Teresa. It has an impressive facade with white columns and arches—a stark contrast to the other buildings in the community. There is a school, council office, clinic and groups of houses, many of them in disrepair.

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Sam waves to people he knows and points out a camp where DAA had funded a permaculture project some years before. Most of the houses have windbreaks with creepers growing over them that protect outdoor seating areas from dust. Some have garden mounds—vegetable gardens—made from old rubber tyres and dirt. I am pleased to see this, and tell Sam about the permaculture workshops we had organised for outstations in the Barkly. It certainly looks as if permaculture can take hold in arid conditions and serve a useful purpose.

Back at Keringke Arts Centre we have a cup of tea and chat to Cait and the other artists about the upcoming workshop. The women have connections with Santa Teresa families and some of their male family members have already attended one of Alan's workshops at Hamilton Downs. I have a sense that we are on the front foot. We visit the school and the Catholic priest and by the time we drive back to town, we have flagged possible workshop dates, identified potential participants, garnered interest in catering, and set a date to come back and meet with key people.

On our return to Alice Springs Alan, Sam and I work on a budget for the workshops and meet with key agency personnel to seek their support and attendance. Alan calls a meeting to discuss the workshopping process. He explains that there'll be about thirty people in the hall, set up beforehand with six or seven tables, each seating five or six people. Participants will self-select their seating arrangements.

'I'll begin by discussing the agenda, to confirm or amend what has already been negotiated with key people. What follows is series of small group discussions on key issues or questions, after which each group reports back to the whole group. They'll use butchers paper to draw pictures or write summaries of small group discussions. The support team's job is to help small groups with materials, encourage everyone to participate, prompt people if they're stuck, and keep the urn filled and turned on.'

One of the support team asks why we don't allocate seating along gender lines. Alan tells him that enabling people to self-select seating accommodates cultural and family ties and addresses avoidance relationships.

'After each small group exercise—about half an hour each—one person or perhaps two from each of the small groups report back to the whole group. This way everyone in the hall gets to hear the other groups' stories. It also builds confidence to speak up.'

'We'll break for lunch each day, but tea, coffee and healthy snacks will be available all day. I will keep the agenda moving, clarify and summarise small group work and get people thinking about how to prioritise ideas and actions as we go along.'

Alan stops to look at his notes.

‘This process continues right up to lunchtime on the third day. By then the walls should be covered in small group drawings and discussion summaries. We should also have a good draft plan that has refined people’s input and thinking’.

I ask how this workshop differs from the ones Alan has run at Hamilton Downs.

‘At Hamilton Downs we had people from a lot of different places coming together to talk about one issue. The purpose of the last workshop was to give feedback to the Federal government about how the work for the dole program was going. What did people like about it? What could be improved? This year, the workshops are community-specific and all about local people being involved in a process that formulates a community development plan.’

I could see the agenda would be critical. Follow-up workshops would monitor and update the plan. Alan handed out a draft agenda.

‘We can’t assume everyone in Santa Teresa came from Arltunga. The Catholic Church encouraged many families to come to the mission. We have to bring out the different histories so everyone can hear how diverse it is and honour every story.’

In session two the large group will discuss ‘what is good about living in Santa Teresa’. Session three will focus on ‘problems today’ and, after prioritising the problems, small groups will be asked to discuss ideas to overcome the prioritised problems.

I could see the facilitator’s role was a balancing act. Alan would be thinking on his feet in big group sessions where feedback and discussion needed analysis and synthesis.

By the end of day two, Alan hoped that priorities would be agreed and a draft action plan would emerge. On the morning of day three, the plan would be further developed in small groups along the lines of what, who where and when.

Alan's final advice to the team was to encourage participants to talk in their first language while they worked on issues in their small groups. I thought we might need paid translators.

Agency representatives would join us for lunch on the third day and attend in the afternoon. A few people with good cross-cultural communication skills would, with Alan's help, unpack the plan and invite visitors to contribute. For example, if the development of an Aboriginal-controlled health service was one of the priorities in the plan, the Territory and Federal departments responsible for Aboriginal health would be invited to speak about how they could contribute to its implementation, maximising cooperation between agencies.

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The workshop was a success. A broad plan was developed, people spoke to the plan on the third day when agency representatives attended and, better still, participants seemed pleased to be part of the process.

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Sometimes, if you're lucky, you come across a policy, a strategy, or a process that you know has the potential to make a difference. It might start by reading a book. You might intuit and experiment. Alternatively, you witness a successful event, or observe others engaging enthusiastically, but something about the way the 'thing' is embraced, convinces you of its efficacy. Participating in the first Santa Teresa community development workshop was like that for me—it was another form of epiphany.

We had experimented with community development theory and practice in Tennant Creek, but now I was actually learning how to plan and utilise a process based on that theory, emulating a facilitator who knew what he was doing. What was most impressive about Alan's

facilitation style was the way he acknowledged disagreement but gained consensus. Participants responded to this positively and it wasn't a one-off—it happened at each workshop. To hear participants speak up in workshops and then talk positively about the workshop afterwards convinced me of the significance of the *process*.

Good facilitation is a gift or an art. It takes a special skill to maintain the energy in the room and keep the process on track while accommodating all the input from participants in a fair and equitable manner. To come out the other end of the process with a plan everyone supports is a testament to the facilitator's skill and the commitment of participants. I wondered if I would ever be able to do it well.

I didn't have to wait long to find out. After completing the Santa Teresa report for DAA and acquitting the funding, we began planning a second workshop at Santa Teresa to monitor the plan. Then we started to plan the first workshop at Willowra—a plan for their council. I came to believe the rule of thumb for any project is to spend eighty per cent of your time planning and twenty per cent on implementation and follow up.

Despite having a workshop template, planning the Willowra workshop demonstrated that one size does not fit all situations. Each community is different. The population at Willowra was mainly Lander River Warlpiri who lived a more traditional way of life on their own country.

We made two or three visits to the community to meet with key people, negotiate the workshop agenda, the process and its location. This resulted in a decision to run two workshops side by side—one for the women and one for the men so that cultural protocols covering the interaction between men and women, family obligations and avoidance relationships could be addressed.

To share each group's ideas, it was agreed we would hire a public address system—loud speakers and microphones—for use by the men and the women when they needed to report back, thus accommodating their ideas and incorporating their priorities into a joint plan.

Alan and the Aboriginal assistant adult educator would facilitate the men's group. A highly skilled Warlpiri woman would help me facilitate the women's group. Sam and other staff would be on hand to help with materials and make sure the equipment worked. The workshop took a little longer than the previous one and experienced a few unplanned turns, but the Willowra Council still ended up with a good community development plan.

I completed the report and developed a plain English big book of the plan for the Willowra Council that included photographs from the workshop and a list of participants. Big books, used to teach English in primary schools, have their uses with adults—many like looking at the photographs and reading plain text.

After acquitting the funding, we received the first hint of trouble. Word drifted back that a few government agency representatives present on the final day of the workshop had spread the word that Willowra Council's plan was a wish list and not something to be taken seriously. More worrying was the intense questions put to me by a member of my governing committee, who was also a member of the Country Liberal Party. Why was the Open College involved in the workshops? Weren't they the province of councils and community advisers? Wouldn't my time be better spent organising vocational or literacy classes out bush? Did head office support our involvement?

I took these concerns to John Boveington, the Principal of the NTOC. However, he had troubles of his own. His superior had a large colour photograph of an open-mouthed crocodile behind her desk and a management style to match. We decided to write and

distribute a paper demonstrating the linkages and benefits the workshops created for Open College clients.

The paper identified high engagement and participation rates along with links between workshop participation, good governance in Aboriginal organisations, improved literacy and opportunities for employment. In addition we provided evidence that the workshops were a cost-effective professional development activity. It cost much less per head to attend a workshop than a government-sponsored conference. More importantly, the plans were developed locally, by consensus and were ‘owned’ by those involved. They had more chance of succeeding than plans developed by outside consultants who came in, assessed a situation, and developed a plan without widely negotiating with local people.

We ran information sessions for CEOs and other key decision makers in government agencies. Some were directly responsible for the Federal government’s directive to coordinate services to Aboriginal communities. We outlined the successes so far, the specific benefits to agencies and communities, and our long-term plans to run regular workshops in communities each year. These would monitor and build on each community’s development plan, adjusting priorities as they were achieved and adding new ones as they emerged.

Our information sessions did not stop individual field officers from disparaging the plans and the process we had adopted. Some Territory agency staff seemed more interested in turf wars with their Federal agency counterparts. I found it hard to understand why field officers did not support the plans and the process, especially as DAA funded the workshops. But there were moves afoot for big changes in Indigenous affairs, with the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). Perhaps these changes simply unnerved field staff in both jurisdictions.

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These professional concerns diminished when I discovered I was pregnant. Quite apart from the initial surprise, the ramifications of being a first time mother at thirty-nine—an ‘elderly *primigravida*’—were hammered home in the first trimester. An amniocentesis procedure showed that the foetus was healthy, but a later scan showed I had a condition known as placenta previa. There are grades of placenta previa, and I had one of the worst, in which the placenta completely covered the birth canal. My obstetrician told me it was not likely to move up the wall of the womb as the pregnancy progressed. A caesarean birth was imminent.

The shock of the pregnancy was greater for the father of the child than for me. After he decided our relationship was over, I accessed TAFE’s maternity leave entitlement and travelled south for the birth, leaving the role to an interested and capable successor. In Newcastle I would have the support of friends and family before and after a caesarean delivery.

When my Newcastle obstetrician told me the placenta *had* moved and the birth canal was clear, I began to panic. I had not done any research into what a normal birth would require of me. I had assisted three other women to deliver their babies. In PNG I had seen a woman’s perineum split open. In another case, a friend had bitten me on the shoulder in the throes of her contractions. And a different friend had lost a baby at full-term, a stillbirth.

My support person, Anne King, took charge. She enrolled us in antenatal classes with nuns at the Mater Hospital, which I thought was ironic. On arrival, the nun urged us to be careful of the concertina door. ‘It’s very stiff’, she said. Anne and I began to giggle.

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Noni Jean Nelson was born on 6 May 1990 at 4.48 pm. Slow to start, my labour was induced and my birthing plan was thrown out. An intense four-hour labour ensued.

Five days later, I buckled Noni into the baby capsule in Anne's car. At that moment, a terrible fear and a dark uncertainty descended. Could I cope? Would I be a good mother? Would the absence of her father be significant? These questions circled. I became convinced I had done a terrible thing to this child. As funny as it may sound now, I decided to establish a trust fund for her future therapy.

Three months later, after a short stay with my parents, my youngest brother, Peter, and I left Mudgee for the long drive to Adelaide. Once there, he helped me put the car on the Ghan and flew home. Noni and I bedded down in a sleeper for the overnight trip back to Alice Springs where I found a supportive community of new mums and dads and soon settled into a routine.

By the time my maternity leave finished, I had found a new job at the Alice Springs College of TAFE establishing a study support centre for Aboriginal students, the Akaltje Centre. I bought a house and thought we were settled.

The Federal Government's Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP) funded this position for two years on the understanding the Alice Springs College of TAFE would establish it as a permanent position at the end of that period. However, this did not happen and I was deemed excess to requirements. The Department of Education found a temporary position for me, acting as the Director of the Education Centre, a resource unit for teachers out bush. It was a very enjoyable year, but the incumbent returned and I was offered a voluntary redundancy. I was horrified.

Meanwhile, the Northern Territory Open College of TAFE was decommissioned, adding to my sense of despair. The Alice Springs College of TAFE would take over its local responsibilities, but this change didn't accommodate excess staff—in fact, staffing needs were to be rationalised even further.

My accountant reframed the redundancy offer as an opportunity to pay off my house and have money to spare. She reassured me that at forty-four years of age, I wouldn't have any trouble finding work that would provide for Noni.

I blamed the Country Liberal Party for the demise of the Open College. Talk of a silver circle emerged, a group rumoured to be composed of business people and government staff affiliated with the party's politicians and staffers who undermined initiatives in Aboriginal communities. A couple of my left-wing friends approached me to join the Labor Party and stand for pre-selection as a candidate in the 1994 Legislative Assembly election. The idea had appeal, despite the fact that Labor had never won a seat in Alice Springs. It was one way to channel my negative energy into positive action—a chance to take issue with the current Northern Territory government and local aficionados in the silver circle—if, indeed, it existed.

I took my redundancy and ran for Labor in the seat of Greatorex. And this, in turn, became another salutary lesson in losing, mitigated by membership in another elite group—the long list of failed Labor candidates in Alice Springs in the history of Northern Territory self-government.

Noni was about to start pre-school, and there were potential short-term employment contracts coming up. Pre-school in Alice Springs involved half days—six months of morning sessions followed by six months of afternoons. I applied for two contracts that enabled me to work with Noni's pre-school regime—a review of a training program at the Centre of

Appropriate Technology and a Train-the-trainer program for Tangentyere Council run by the Institute for Aboriginal Development. Appointed to both of them, I found time to join a writing group and anticipated the opportunity to enjoy being a parent at a more leisurely pace.

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It soon became apparent that part-time working hours extended beyond those allocated. I spent extra time on administration, planning and meeting with staff associated with each project. The fact that there was no paid leave entitlement, no superannuation and no employment security meant that I started to look for more permanent work closer to my New South Wales home.

We loved living in Alice Springs with its strong social group and support network, but my father was unwell and I wanted Noni to have more interaction with my family. Furthermore, now that the Country Liberal Party was back in power and I was publicly identified as a Labor supporter, government job prospects were poor.

One of my friends had worked for the former Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC). He suggested that I should apply for a Regional Manager's job with ATSIC and offered to help with the application. There were three possible jobs available and I applied for two of them. When word came that I had an interview for both, my friend coached me on what the panel would look for, the questions and issues they might broach and the distinctive features of each region involved.

I did well at the first interview but didn't win the job. I had a telephone interview for the second one—Regional Manager, Queanbeyan Regional Office—close to Canberra and, shortly afterwards, I was advised that the panel wanted a face-to-face interview. I bought a new outfit, found a babysitter for Noni, and headed to Sydney to meet Geoff Scott, the New

South Wales State Manager of ATSIC, and Stan Grant, the Regional Chairperson of ATSIC's Queanbeyan Regional Council. I got the job, rented out our house, and booked airline tickets to fly to Canberra.

## Chapter 4: Glory and ignominy (1995–2002)

A difficult meeting at Bateman's Bay is my first task. The relevant field officer advises that she can't attend. Stan Grant, the Chairperson, can't come with me either—he's at another less volatile meeting further north. I drive down alone and meet with the angry group who have missed out on funding for a major youth project further south.

Noni is in pre-school and I'll be back in time to pick her up from after-school care, but there's a back-up plan if I'm late. Part of my Alice Springs mothers' club continues to operate here—VG is studying law at the Australian National University and lives close by.

The angry people know I'm new to the job and I am not the decision maker, but they want to let me know the decision stinks. Although I've read the file, I ask the leaders to tell me about the project from the beginning. The ATSIC CEO has turned the project down on the basis that their business case is flawed. Two hours later, I promise to call into the property that was to be purchased for the youth project.

In the following weeks Stan takes me on a road trip around the region. He introduces me to people in organisations from Eden in the south to Nowra in the north and across to the Southern Highlands, Goulburn and Yass. When he's not briefing me between destinations, his extensive collection of country and western music fills the space inside the vehicle. Otherwise he shares stories about growing up, working hard, moving around and raising his family. I share mine about growing up in Mudgee. We have something in common. He is Wiradjiri; I was born on Wiradjiri country.

Stan understands the political implications of talking about regional issues as a Wiradjiri outsider on other people's country. I'm aware of being a non-Aboriginal decision-

maker in Indigenous affairs. By the end of the trip, we have met with a few of the people from the Bateman's Bay meeting at the property they want to buy. I can see it needs major repairs that were not in the budget. Stan promises to make representations to the CEO. I make no promises.

During the trip we eat curried oyster soup at the partly built keeping place at Jigamy Farm. We also visit three former missions whose leaders complain about white councils' rules and lack of services—apparently one council refuses to undertake garbage collections. We tour a medical and legal service, visit Umbarra Cultural Centre and hear about the significance of Gulaga and Barranguba (Mount Dromedary and Montague Island) and other Yuin sacred sites. We visit an aged care facility and listen respectfully to an Aboriginal man sing about his mother's menstrual blood. We meet significant Aboriginal families and individuals all along the coast from Eden to Nowra and some of the non-Aboriginal decision makers who make life difficult for them. There is news that an Aboriginal student has passed the Higher School Certificate—the first time from that community.

Back in Queanbeyan Stan continues my induction. He takes me to meet people in local organisations and to Canberra where Boomanulla Oval, Winnunga Nimmityjar Medical Service and Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation, operate well on tight budgets. There is a significant Indigenous population in Canberra—as many as the rest of the region put together. Many people have come from elsewhere in Australia to work in ATSIC's head office, other public sector or non-government organisations.

The Queanbeyan regional councillors come from all over the region. One councillor, a Torres Strait Islander woman living in Canberra, tells me about particular Torres Strait Islander issues as they are experienced on the mainland. I learn there are about 26,000 Torres Strait Islanders scattered across the country.

At the first three-day ATSIC state management team meeting in Sydney I get to know the new state manager, Phil Donnelly; NSW regional managers from Bourke, Lismore, Tamworth and Wagga Wagga; and a team of support staff from state office. These people, my fellow public servants, form the administrative arm of ATSIC. I spend much of the meeting listening to proceedings and writing down unfamiliar acronyms. I'm slowly getting a sense of the workload and the *modus operandi* of my colleagues.

The regional manager from Lismore looks worried and, unlike other regional managers, he has a large number of files sitting in front of him. On the final day of the meeting, he places a large crystal on top of the files, something I've noticed him handling each day of the meeting. The state manager calls the meeting to order and turns to our Lismore colleague. Addressing him, he says, 'May I remind you, Mr Kaye, a magic crystal isn't going to help you with your unacquitted grants'.

As the room erupts with laughter, I make a note to follow up the unacquitted grants in my office. Each regional office has to submit a monthly report on a range of key performance indicators, and this is one of them. Simply put, an unacquitted grant is bad news—the organisation is non-compliant or the office has not done its job.

Not long afterwards, ATSIC's elected arm—the politicians—meet at Narooma, bringing together the state chairpersons, zone commissioners and regional managers to prioritise state issues to take back to the board. Steve Gordon from Brewarrina is my zone commissioner. He's a big man of few words. When I mention my brother has worked in Brewarrina it leads to a story about Essie Coffey, the famous 'Bush Queen'. Steve says she once chased him through the scrub firing shots over his head. He doesn't say why.

One or two other regional offices have a regional council plan, which the meeting endorses. I check if our council has one. It doesn't.



I've booked Noni into a Narooma child-care facility, and as soon as I'm free, I rush to pick her up. We plan to take our time going home, go whale watching on the weekend and stay overnight in Bateman's Bay. Phil has asked me to look at possible sites for a new regional office, as there is talk of moving it from Queanbeyan to the coast.

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My relationships with both the administrative and elected arms of ATSIC start well, but Phil cautions me—difficulties can occur between them. Some regional councillors are feisty political activists or people who might play the system. He points me to a protocol that identifies the steps involved in resolving conflict and says this document and the Australian Public Service code of conduct and values may prove useful.

Another ATSIC document, *A Guide to Decision Making, a Commentary on the Legal Requirements*, prepared by the Corporate Law Section in head office, is one to keep handy in my briefcase. I underline several main points in red. I become familiar with the *Administrative Decisions (Judicial Review) Act 1977*, the *Administrative Appeals Tribunal Act 1975* and the *Ombudsman Act 1976* along with other relevant government legislation. Such documents, together with ATSIC's delegations, become my bedtime reading. I learn to document my reasons for decisions in very precise terms. Over the next three years, this practice saves me from unfavourable findings when my decisions are subjected to appeals from constituents.

For the first three months I focus on getting to know the staff and the region. I'm responsible for sixteen staff, approximately \$10 million in grants and loans, and an administrative budget that covers regional office operations, including five z-cars leased from the Commonwealth's fleet. Their use comes with another set of rules. The chairperson and I

both home garage a z-car under strict conditions; the remainder are for use by field officers on work-related trips.

Half the members of staff are Aboriginal people who are mostly related to one another. This exceeds the target that is recommended by head office for each regional office. There is a healthy gender balance.

Not long after I arrive, head office notifies me of a complaint against one of the Aboriginal staff. She has used the fax machine to send a sexist cartoon to a staff member in another office, which has been intercepted by the manager. Human resources advise me to read her the riot act. I caution her, emphasising the proper use of Commonwealth equipment.

Soon after, the staff member comes to me with a complaint that I have behaved in a racist manner. I thank her and apologise, adding that I appreciate the way she has drawn my attention to the issue. I ask her to let me know if I make other mistakes or if she has suggestions for improvements. She makes further comments and soon, of all the staff, I begin to trust this woman the most. We have a number of ‘robust’ conversations, become friends and remain in contact long after our working lives together conclude.

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Before long, a field officer shows me a written directive from head office highlighting that staff must adopt a compliance focus for organisations receiving grants and loans. I have previously encouraged them to take a more developmental approach with our clients, so I mull over this directive and decide on alternative action. In line with my delegations, I hire a consultant to help several tourism organisations in the region to plan ahead and build the capacity of their staff.

The council and staff have never undertaken team building activities, unlike some of the best functioning regional offices and councils. One of the councillors, Merv Penrith, offers to take us on a tour of Gulaga Mountain to explain its significance. Each member of staff is given a totem and daubed with clay, helping them connect with the experience. It is a significant and enriching cultural activity that improves cohesion in the office.

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After the team building activity, some staff members still approach me to resolve relationship issues with others. Drawing on my experience of parental and workplace counselling, I share the persecutor–rescuer–victim triangle with interested staff. The language and practice of positive confrontation shifts the responsibility for good relationships to individual staff members.

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My first regional council meeting is the annual budget meeting, to be held in Goulburn. I have only been in the job a few months but several things occur to me. Regional council support staff simply record meetings and ensure minutes are accurate, but they do not provide any data to help inform council decisions. And council decisions sometimes appear fairly incomprehensible. During a break on the second day I ring Phil for counsel.

‘Hi, Phil. I’m in Goulburn at a regional council meeting. Do you have a minute?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘I’m concerned about council decisions. It seems ...’ Phil says the line is bad. I start again.

‘I was just saying, the councillors are making some really odd decisions ...’ Phil’s interrupts me again.

‘I still can’t hear you, Kerrie.’

‘Phil, I’m very concerned ...’

‘You’re fading in and out ...’ and then the penny drops. Phil *can* hear me. I can’t help what comes out of my mouth next.

‘You bastard!’

He laughs. It sets the tenor of our relationship over the next three years and is an important lesson. The buck stops with me, get on with it. It’s not that Phil doesn’t want to discuss problems with me, but I need to analyse problems, come up with solutions and use my delegations. Back in the office, I make sure all staff use their delegations, too. I see an opportunity—instead of worrying about an under-performing staff member I coach the relevant team leader to manage the officer more actively.

After analysing council decisions, I conclude that if councillors had greater access to relevant data about the region they would make more informed decisions. My staff and I gather information about regional housing, health and legal issues, and historical funding allocations, which I collate into a report provided to councillors before each council meeting.

This doesn’t always address the political nature of some decisions, but it does have a positive impact overall. Occasionally, I ask the minute taker to record that the council decision does not reflect the regional manager’s advice and leave it at that.

The regional council acts on a suggestion to develop a regional strategic plan. I then engage a consultant to facilitate the development of an operational plan with all staff. This

seems to contribute to greater cohesion between staff and between staff and regional councillors.

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Phil plans regular state management team meetings at locations that showcase well-run Indigenous organisations or important aspects of Indigenous history. These meetings also become important for sharing problems and hearing how others deal with them. I begin to settle into, and enjoy, my role.

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Behind the scenes, five-year old Noni slowly settles into her new life. For the first two weeks in Canberra she cries every night, pining for her friends and her home in Alice Springs. However, there seems to be a songline between Alice Springs and Canberra that becomes my lifeline. A small number of friends have relocated to Canberra, all living within a few kilometres of where we live. We arrange play dates on weekends and I ensure that I engage in various Noni-focussed activities.

Just before Christmas, we return from a visit to a farm where Noni has ridden a Shetland pony. She leans forward in her booster seat to say, ‘you know what, mummy? I think I could get to like living in Canberra’.

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There is a steel grill protecting the reception desk. I ask if it can be removed, but staff members report that a man once jumped the counter to throttle a staff member—the young receptionist wants the grill to stay. Abusive telephone calls from unhappy constituents to field

staff are fairly common. I ask them to transfer these calls to me, listen to complaints, and remind the more extreme callers that they can be reported and phones cut off.

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On 11 March 1996 John Howard becomes Prime Minister. ‘Look out’, I warn staff, ‘we’re in for a rough ride’. Before long Howard’s conservative government instigates severe budget cuts to ATSIC, which forces the Board of Commissioners to make hard decisions. They filter down to the regional level, cutting social and cultural program funding. The ramifications of this are dire—several organisations will have to close. Telling these organisations the bad news is difficult, as most of them employ Aboriginal staff and provide services that act as pathways into education, training and work. Others focus on cultural maintenance and language revitalisation, important functions in a region where so much has already been lost.

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The next government intervention appears to be based on an assumption that ATSIC-funded organisations are inept or corrupt. There is a nationwide special audit to identify organisations in breach of grant conditions. It doesn’t matter that we hold information on breaches in each regional office by way of monthly reports. The cost of the external consultant is to come out of ATSIC’s funding and some of our staff taken off line to help the consultancy firm undertake the audit.

We are jubilant when government expectations are undercut by the findings. Only five per cent of organisations nationwide are not fit and proper bodies to receive government funding. Compared to regular news of fraud and corruption in non-Indigenous corporations, we are not doing too badly.

In our office, most organisations are compliant (rating a green flag), a small number need to supply further reports to be compliant (amber flag), and a very small number, already identified as problematic, receive a red flag.

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I am permitted to spend \$800 of ATSIC 's discretionary funds on a Rover Thomas screen print for my refurbished office, which becomes an 'attractive item' on ATSIC's books. It's called *The Universe* and reminds me of my humble status in the big scheme of things. None of my staff particularly likes the print because it is a modernist work.

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Stan informs me he will resign as Chairperson to pursue a dream. He wants to reclaim the Wiradjiri language, help develop a dictionary and see it taught in schools on his country. His acting replacement, Carol Dalton, has close associations with the cultural centre in Nowra. She has a fine approach to the job and a lovely manner. Matilda House, politically active in the Canberra and Queanbeyan area follows Carol in the role. I like working with Carol and Matilda—they keep me on my toes.

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Another government intervention arises from an external audit of Aboriginal Legal Services (ALSs), which raises more accountability concerns. It recommends they be subsumed into Legal Aid Services. The ATSIC leadership recoils from this idea for good reason—it would be problematic for both services (already underfunded) and even more problematic for Indigenous clients generally, so many of whom do not access mainstream services for a variety reasons.

Laura Beacroft, a young lawyer looking for a change after completing maternity leave, rings Phil Donnelly on the off-chance the NSW state office will do something to help guide ALSs to adapt and update in order to meet modern community needs. She has worked for Legal Aid and alongside ALSs in courtrooms and on projects to benefit Indigenous peoples in Queensland and the NT, as well as co-authoring a very useful textbook.

Phil invites her to his office for a discussion and asks what can be done in six months. She suggests a NSW pilot involving a series of workshops for all the legal services' CEOs, principal solicitors and regional chairpersons to explore the components of a quality service. Reforms will naturally follow, she suggests.

Phil offers Laura a job and she accepts a pay cut to be involved. Trevor Christian, the Wiradjiri CEO of the Sydney ALS is closely involved, as well as various strong Aboriginal women such as Sonja Stewart (Yuin); Pam Greer (Barkindji Ngiyampaa); Julie Perkins (Gumbaynggirr); and Barbara Causon (Wiradjiri) to ensure the workshops also look at quality issues from a culturally appropriate and whole-of-community perspective.

Minister John Herron gives ATSIC a twelve-month reprieve.

The Queanbeyan region has a legal service in Nowra, which means its CEO, principal solicitor and our new regional chairperson, Ossie Stewart, become involved in the state's pilot workshops. Laura briefs the Queanbeyan Regional Council.

The approach is excellent—it uses an inclusive, bottom-up process, which engages all the key people working with the state's legal team in a systematic way, using the Total Quality Management tool. It has a customer focus. The workshops sift through all relevant data, including the overall state budgets for ALSs, which is found to be deficient. Funds flow in to compensate, benefitting the services and enabling a survey to be undertaken of



Indigenous people currently in custody. This throws up particular issues for women and children and points the finger at some ALSs regarding sub-standard representation, or, in a few cases, lack of representation for some clients.

Neither the CEO nor the principal solicitor of the Nowra ALS fully cooperate in workshops or adopt all of its recommendations, particularly in relation to a decision to tender out for the provision of legal services in order to address the quality issues identified by the workshop participants. The CEO is also a regional councillor and contrary to most others involved in the reforms, he is negative about them in our council meetings. The chairperson and I support the reforms and these differences are minuted, leading to confronting interactions outside meetings.

Suspected irregularities in how the ALS grant is used to buy and sell vehicles in and around Nowra, and whether this creates profits for individuals triggers a formal investigation by the legal team's auditor. She's only there half a day when she confirms serious irregularities. Feeling under threat, she rings Laura, who rings the regional chairperson. Ossie drives to the ALS and picks up the unharmed auditor.

I receive a phone call from a Big Man in the Commission, warning me off making life difficult for the CEO of the Nowra ALS. I reach for the protocols and call Phil. He calls Steve Gordon, who rings the Big Man and apparently sets him straight. This doesn't stop the CEO of our ALS continuing to make life difficult for the regional chairperson and me in council meetings or lodging a complaint about me to the head office legal branch. His complaint is investigated and mediation between the CEO and me is recommended. After a worrying few days I reject mediation. It's not about *that*. All I've done is my job, following due process and proper decision-making.

Things come to a head one weekend. Phil and I attend an emergency ALS board meeting to outline the contentious issues. If the board is willing to address the issues and adopt the reforms—tender out for a quality service in line with other NSW ALSs—it will avoid closure. We lay out all the reasons why this would benefit their clients in the region, but the vote is unanimous—they support the CEO. The legal service is subsequently defunded and closed by the ATSIC delegate and the service is transferred to the Sydney ALS.

This decision weighs heavily on me for many reasons. Even though resources will be provided to the Sydney ALS for services in our region, clients will feel the loss of a local ALS. It is hard to witness what I perceive as Aboriginal people disenfranchising their own mob.

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My good name is being besmirched up and down the south coast. I hear on good authority that the former CEO of the now defunct ALS in the region is the source. In the end I pay for legal advice from an expert defamation lawyer. He sends the former CEO a cease and desist letter on my behalf. Things settle down, although not for the regional chairperson—but that is his story to tell.

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Most regional managers across Australia have a three-year term. This policy provides opportunities to replace non-Indigenous managers in these significant leadership positions. Exceptions include Aboriginal regional managers who live and work on their own country. The two I know are excellent regional managers and I support this policy. Given how difficult my relationship has become with the former CEO of the ALS, I alert Phil to my wish to transfer to head office. My term is almost up in any case. I could transfer to another regional

office, but my priority is to seek stability, including for Noni. I express a preference for a job in Canberra's head office of ATSIC. Phil begins to look for an Indigenous person to act in my position before it is formally advertised. He contacts HR to see if there is a suitable transfer for me as a permanent employee of the Australian Public Service.

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As important as high-level meetings with the Minister and the ATSIC Chairperson are, meetings about the Wallaga Lake community's sewage facilities, the construction of the keeping place at Jigamy Farm and general business raised in regular regional council meetings are the norm. At the 1998 New South Wales tourism awards, several Indigenous organisations from the region take home trophies for the first time.

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At a meeting in Goulburn, Wiradjiri people tell me they come from Rylstone, near Mudgee. They visit their country every year in secret, performing the necessary caring for country rituals. I marvel at this information. The need for secrecy isn't surprising, given what I've learnt from various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about their versions of Australian history.

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The state management team meets over dinner to farewell me. Phil tells the assembled guests I am the first regional manager to last the distance at Queanbeyan and I've done well—unacquitted grants are not a problem in our region. He adds, in a private conversation, that I am 'tough'—a compliment.

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*The Universe* by Rover Thomas comes with me to head office, transferred as an attractive item and part of ATSIC's art collection.

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The move to head office is a shock. I'm used to making decisions, exercising delegations, interacting with constituents and managing a busy regional office. Here, most letters, reports and board papers go up the line three times and come back down with minor amendments to text before a recommendation is signed off and action taken. Or so it seems to me.

Before I find a natural home in a program area that suits my experience, I have a few false starts. My first transfer, to Human Resources Management, is not very interesting—fortnightly salaries and financial reckoning. The branch manager encourages me to apply for a place on the prestigious Senior Women in Management program (SWIM) that provides participants the opportunity to be rotated around a number of three-or-four month placements in other agencies. It's designed to boost the knowledge and skills of the participant, an affirmative action initiative for women in the APS, and as a way to bring new knowledge back into their home agency.

I win a position on the SWIM program. Rover Thomas's *The Universe* is transferred to state office. Phil likes the screen print and has agreed to hang it in his office, promising to transfer it back when I return to ATSIC.

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As part of the SWIM program, I rotate through the Australian Public Service Commission, AusAID (Papua New Guinea program) and the Senate where I'm part of small team supporting the Committee inquiring into Indigenous Education. In AusAID, I see

discrepancies in how Australia deals with development overseas and Indigenous issues at home. It's almost as if there's a deliberate, systemic bias against Indigenous Australians.

Back in the late 1980s a friend managed a development program for the Northern Territory government and its partner, AusAID. The project involved upgrading Indonesian vocational high schools to become technical high schools. My friend showed me a detailed five-year plan for the project. It required successful recruits from Australia to attend a three-month Bahasa Indonesian course at an Adelaide University. Year-by-year plans, budgets and desired outcomes included Indonesians taking over from the Australian recruits. The final action represented on the flow chart was an exit strategy.

I wondered why we didn't take this thoughtful and coordinated approach in Australian Aboriginal communities. If workers were committed to one place for a sustained period, learnt the local Indigenous language and were highly trained—imitating the Indonesian plan—things would be very much better.

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ATSIC's NSW pilot reforming the ALSs is successful and, as a result, ATSIC retains the legal services function. Laura Beacroft transfers to head office in Canberra to work with the legal branch rolling out the reforms across Australia. One of the best outcomes, she says, apart from ATSIC retaining ALSs, is the establishment of a Family Violence Prevention legal service, a result of the survey of Indigenous women in custody as well as of the ALS reforms themselves.

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When the SWIM program ends, I return to ATSIC and work in a small team assisting the CEO with the ATSIC 2000 Restructure. This restructure installs Geoff Scott as acting

CEO, establishes a policy office and implements a recruitment drive to find people to head up newly created work areas. This results in several Indigenous officers becoming members of the Senior Executive Service. Up until now, most Indigenous officers have been employed at lower levels in the APS.

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The Board of Commissioners decides to explore a development approach in ATSIC. The administrative arm transfers Geoff Richardson from Queensland state office to Canberra to head up the new Community and Economic Development Branch. Geoff is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander man who has collated reviews, reports and other data on the failure of service delivery to make a significant difference to the lives of Indigenous people, their organisations and their communities.

He has heard of the Northern Territory Open College of TAFE's community development workshops through a report written by Jacquie Wolfe, a Canadian academic. Wolfe examined community plans and the planning processes initiated and paid for by ATSIC by a range of external consultants. She found them deficient in important ways. Wolfe's work was one more report to add to Geoff's growing list of relevant background documents.

I ask Geoff if he will have me in his team and he initiates a transfer. I ring Phil and ask him to transfer Rover Thomas's *The Universe* back to head office. I finally have my own office where I am able to hang the screen print.

Geoff's research underpins an informal relationship with Oxfam Community Aid Abroad (OCAA). Anthony Kelly, an OCAA development worker with decades of overseas experience is invited into the team. He explains the difference between service delivery and

participatory development for our team and then for other key people in the ATSIC leadership group. He is a charismatic man who puts forward the case for combining service delivery *and* development approaches and identifies the elements, and differences, in both approaches.

There is a budget to send Anthony to regional offices to run similar sessions and to ascertain support for programs with a greater development focus. Once the feedback from staff in these offices is collated and presented to the board and management, the board approves a formal Memorandum of Understanding with OCAA. There will be four projects funded over two and three years: the trial of an accredited program in development work for selected staff in three regional offices; an advocacy program for the elected arm; a study tour of a development program overseas; and a pilot in one Aboriginal community where a development worker will be placed and supported.

The work begins and runs parallel to a House of Representative Inquiry into Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities. The task of developing ATSIC's response falls on Geoff's branch and our small team. We take to this task with gusto, undertaking research into a range of developmental approaches used across the world and in Australian aid and development organisations. We read widely and liaise with the relevant Commissioners to focus ATSIC's response.

This takes place against a backdrop of internal disruptions and external pressures. A new CEO who has worked closely with the then Minister, Mal Brough, is appointed and he tells us his approach is 'break or break through'. He wants grants and loans replaced by competitive tendering. In my view this move is anti-developmental. How can Indigenous organisations compete against bigger, mainstream organisations? Self-determination will unravel even more than the Howard government's policies have dictated to date.

Our branch has its own problems. Geoff Richardson is transferred out of the branch to work on a new initiative focused on improving government service delivery. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has identified six Indigenous communities in which to trial a whole-of-government approach to service delivery. Each community is linked to a departmental secretary with the aim of ensuring the services of all other agencies in their particular site are coordinated. While this initiative has potential to improve service delivery, at least in some instances, it does not incorporate ATSIC's development agenda.

Meanwhile, the policy office as a whole is in chaos, with branches being dismantled and senior Indigenous staff made redundant. A review of ATSIC is initiated. In our branch, a number of people act in Geoff's position, until they run out of Indigenous candidates. When I'm asked to act in the position, a proviso comes with the offer—I must not liaise with Geoff on anything related to the branch. I refuse, saying it's a ridiculous proviso. Despite this, I get the gig.

For nine long months I act in this Senior Executive Service position, which comes with a bigger salary, a z-car and longer hours. It results in a \$3,000 bonus for me after a 4/5 rating on my performance. When the position is advertised, I apply, but I am not interviewed. An outsider with a PhD and a reference from someone important gets the job. He has no experience in Indigenous affairs. The new CEO wants academics in head office to bring rigour to ATSIC. Many people with field experience are sidelined.

The new branch head, like some other staff in head office, seems to think development is a 1960s movement promoted by sandal-wearing hippies. Our briefings raise more questions than answers for him and he starts sending me emails at 3 am seeking information by 9 am and makes other unrealistic demands. After grappling with him on these and other issues for weeks, I seek counselling and lodge a formal complaint to HR.



The new branch head is moved sideways and another branch head is appointed. The new man is Indigenous.

I sense that I am viewed as a troublemaker.

How will I save myself? Another Oxfam consultant once told me there are only three things you can do when you're faced with a bad situation at work—you can fix it, fight it, or you can fuck off. Having tried the first two, I decide on the third.

## Chapter 5: Pearls and irregularities (2003–2010)

A former colleague, Laura Beacroft—with tongue in cheek—says she invented The Debrief. As is well known, debriefing can be a good way to sort out a problem. You simply talk to someone about your problems or concerns who listens without judgement or comment. With luck, you find your own solutions. Laura readily agrees to meet me at a Woden Plaza café and listens to my woes.

She now heads up the Office of Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations (ORAC), a statutory body. It's a ministerial appointment for a five-year term and a body I've had an unsatisfactory interaction with in the past. When I was in the Queanbeyan job, I sought ORAC's help to train and mentor the directors and members of organisations incorporated under ORAC legislation—*The Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976*. ORAC has a similar function to that of the Australian Securities Investment Commission (ASIC).

There has been a lot of debate about the pros and cons of establishing the legislation that encouraged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups to incorporate. Back in the 1970s, establishing Indigenous organisations seemed to be one way to activate the policy of self-determination. Whatever the past arguments, the fact is that by the early 2000s there are approximately 3,000 organisations incorporated under ORAC's legislation. A significant proportion of them are located in remote Australia.

The officer I spoke to in ORAC back in 1996 smiled wanly, as if to suggest my request for training assistance was extraordinarily stupid.

'We don't have the resources for that function,' the man said, 'we merely regulate'.

‘Am I to understand that in the twenty years this office has been operating, you have never offered Indigenous organisations any training at all?’

‘Afraid so.’

I was stunned. In that case, it was surprising that the Liberal-National Coalition government’s special audit had not found more organisations in breach of agreements and regulations.

Indigenous directors had to learn on the run.

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Laura listens to me patiently. Then she explains the changes she is making in ORAC, especially in good governance training. She has a consultant on board who has designed a three-day introductory workshop, a pathway and pre-requisite to studying a Certificate IV in Business (Governance) if participants are interested. Furthermore, the certificate course is based on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander package, designed *for* Indigenous directors and members of Indigenous organisations *by* Indigenous people involved in these organisations.

Was this the program ATSIC commissioned and paid \$5 million to develop? Laura confirms it is the *Managing in Two Worlds* package. I had come across the package in head office and knew its history. It had taken many years and a lot of people in Indigenous organisations around Australia to meet and contribute their knowledge to its development. And now, Laura informs me, the relevant TAFE accreditation body has based the Certificate IV in Business (Governance) on the *Managing in Two Worlds* package. This is a huge step forward in a few short years. The package’s transfer to ORAC seems like a gift.

Laura, with the caution of a good lawyer, offers me a three-month trial in ORAC's new training section. It has only two staff members in it—an Indigenous man returning to Queensland 'shortly' and me.

The trial goes well and Laura enacts my transfer from ATSIC to ORAC. Once again I seek permission from ATSIC to transfer *The Universe* by Rover Thomas to ORAC.

I am relieved to be out of a workplace that had become fraught with difficulty but sad to leave the development agenda. I am quietly excited by the prospect of returning to my professional roots—adult education and training. I am also pleased because Laura has engaged the services of Anthony Kelly to explore how a participatory development approach might benefit ORAC. Laura says compliance is absolutely necessary—corporations have to operate in line with the legislation and their own rules—but we have a responsibility to help Indigenous directors and members to understand what incorporation means. Directors must make decisions in line with good governance principles and the law.

Although rather punch-drunk when I arrive in ORAC, I soon realise how fortunate I am. My working life becomes serene compared to my experiences at ATSIC, but has its own challenges. At home I find *The Adult Learner* by Malcolm Knowles, compile all the papers connected to ATSIC's submission to the Inquiry into Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities, and collate my notes from Anthony Kelly's past sessions in ATSIC. My professional life seems to have settled wonderfully well just as Noni heads into puberty and I enter the throes of menopause.

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Laura gives me a few riding instructions—I am to revolutionise the training function without unsettling other staff and I am to go slowly, steadily, taking everyone with me—as if

they had thought of the changes themselves. She recommends attending one of ORAC's three-day introductory governance workshops, as I will be responsible for its administration, content and delivery.

'It's all about quality', she adds, 'Indigenous directors deserve the same quality training as non-Indigenous directors'.

I read the file, review the workshop outline and look forward to attending the workshop with an Aboriginal staff member. The system the consultant has put in place is a good one. She has engaged a community agent who liaises with all workshop participants about travel, accommodation and participation, relieving the pressure on the facilitator and ORAC. One feature of attendance involves applicants completing a participation agreement. This is a requirement and outlines what ORAC staff, consultant and agent will deliver and what the participant agrees to do during the workshop.

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Day one of the workshop—morning tea—the consultant pulls me aside and whispers in my ear, '*you* have a problem'. Apparently, that big man from outback Queensland, the chap eating croissants, did not participate in the icebreaker and has not been participating since.

'Fix it', she adds, 'and fix it quickly.'

Oh, bugger, just what I need on my first engagement in the field—a drama. I pour a cup of tea and approach the participant in a friendly manner, asking if he has a problem with the program. He says he had his doubts about coming and it doesn't look as if the program can teach him anything he doesn't already know. Can he tell me a bit more? He says the icebreaker was bloody stupid and treated everyone like fools.

The icebreaker gave everyone a list of activities with a tick box beside each one. Participants had to find someone who had experienced the activity (eg find someone who had bacon and eggs for breakfast) tick the box, and finish in the allocated timeframe. I could see his point. Participants learned nothing substantial about each other undertaking this exercise. I urge him to give the program a go.

‘I promise it will get better’, I add, ‘and your feedback about the program will help us improve it.’

I cross my fingers and the workshop resumes, but at the lunch break the consultant tells me that the same man’s non-participation is still a problem. I approach the participant again. He says he still hasn’t seen anything in the program to make him change his mind.

‘I’m sorry about that, but your non-participation is affecting other people in the room.’ I lower my voice to a whisper. ‘Don’t forget, you’ve signed a participation agreement. You agreed to participate, so please give that some thought over lunch. As I see it, you have two options: stay and participate or return home.’

I’m nervous about articulating this last option, but if the consultant is serious about stopping the workshop, I need to act. He looks unimpressed.

‘I’m sorry’, I add, ‘but, it’s my job to make sure the workshop runs smoothly.’

Towards the end of the lunch break, I overhear him telling his group that I am sending him home. I interrupt to correct his account. He has options I tell them—he can *choose* to stay and participate or go home if he doesn’t want to.

‘He’ll only be sent home if chooses not to participate.’

This gets on his nerves. ‘Send me home. See if I care!’

I ask him to accompany me to see the community agent, and leave him with her to organise the travel back to his community.

The workshop resumes. I am surprised but pleased to see him participating in the next activity. The community agent reports that as the arrangements were being made, the participant told her to cancel them. The rest of the workshop runs smoothly. The consultant is happy, but I'm not comfortable about having pulled rank.

Being on team provides an opportunity to assess the activities the consultant has devised and see if there are ways to tweak the program or improve it. It's a terrific introduction to good governance principles, but it needs a better icebreaker and a focussed activity on conflict resolution. I make a note to review the participant feedback and see what it says.

I explain my role at the team debrief and provide feedback about the icebreaker, but the consultant seems unsure about the feedback. Later, I ask what the Aboriginal staff member on the team thought about the exercise. He says the icebreaker is weak. I ask him if he would like to come up with something more interesting.

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Laura organises a strategic planning and team building exercise using another consultant who uses a tool I haven't seen before, one I like for its capacity to take account of all participants' ideas, prioritise them and get consensus. The tool is called *Talking Paper* and was devised by Julia Wolfson, based in Canberra. Her son sells the resources required for the tool—pre-made circles, rectangles, hexagons and other shapes on little pads of different coloured paper. The only other equipment required is a poster-size post-it note pad with adhesive backing and a long-lasting, re-positioning glue, which you rub all over the front of

the post-it poster. This enables a facilitator to move the shapes around, group like ideas together and to prioritise recurring ideas.

I arrange to meet Julia Wolfson when she returns from work overseas. She facilitates planning and team building for the leadership of marginalised communities and organisations in various countries, helping them become more inclusive and encouraging broader participation. She also believes that the people who receive the services of governments and organisations are the best ones to improve them. After we meet, I'm convinced Julia will be able to help me.

Julia comes to ORAC to meet Laura and we hire Julia to outline the rationale behind *Talking Paper* as a way to advocate for improved governance training to Indigenous directors and members. The first team to learn how to use the tool is the one responsible for incorporation and support, the team that currently uses a thirty-slide PowerPoint presentation full of complex information about incorporation law.

Slow, incremental changes take place. The Aboriginal staff member who accompanied me on the first governance workshop comes up with a good idea for an icebreaker. It's an activity called *Who's Your Mob?* Individuals introduce themselves to others in the room by announcing their name, where they're from, and who their mob is—language group, country, family. Shy people, he reckons, can use talking paper to write or draw and display their introduction. It works.

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ORAC faces some challenges if it is to remain relevant and avoid being subsumed into the Australian Securities Investment Commission (ASIC) or a government department. Someone in the bureaucracy comes up with a suggestion to move ORAC into the Treasury



portfolio and several visitors from Treasury arrive to consider this suggestion. A presentation about working conditions out bush highlights the challenges facing Indigenous corporations. The presentation slides include photographs of ORAC's Regulator in the cockpit of a small plane landing in a remote Aboriginal community and a four-wheel drive vehicle stuck in a flooded river. That is the last ORAC hears about a move to Treasury.

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ORAC's legislation is to be updated in line with contemporary corporate law and to include a new user-friendly rule book. This will contain more culturally appropriate features and use plain English. Working towards the new *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006* is a long, intense process led by the Registrar and assisted by Toni Matulick, another lawyer on staff. This significant change also requires a communication strategy and appropriate publications. Janet Millar is brought on as the communications specialist.

As the new legislation unfolds, ORAC becomes ORIC—the Office of Registrar for Indigenous Corporations—but only after agonising over the only other possible name and acronym—the Office of Registrar for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporations, or ORATSIC.

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Laura initiates two professional development activities to assist ORIC staff and ultimately, its clients. The first is the Company Directors Course, presented by the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD). This gives staff a comprehensive overview of the contemporary legal environment and governance issues all directors need to know and adhere to in an Australian setting. It provides a useful springboard into ORIC's new legislation and

more targeted information for training purposes. Staff members who complete the course successfully become accredited members of the AICD.

The second activity is not as complex but is important for staff from a training perspective. It is a one-day seminar on the effective use of PowerPoint. Like many other people, I have tuned out of numerous PowerPoint presentations during my working life. What I learnt during the seminar proved very useful—including limiting your slides to ten or fewer and minimising the number of words on each slide. (And perhaps I should note that speechwriter and author, Don Watson, gave the best PowerPoint presentation I have ever seen. He had about thirty slides illustrating everything he hated about PowerPoint presentations and how they are misused. It was hilarious.)

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Over two or three years the training team expands, the workshop program is finely honed and, following a tender process for all ORIC services, we have a team of consultants on a panel who can deliver training and act as our community agents. Our reach expands and our statistics improve. The best feedback justifying the program comes from an Aboriginal woman in her sixties after a workshop: ‘Imagine how good we would be today if we’d had this training thirty years ago.’

Our thoughts turn to remote directors and members and their training and development needs. English is a second or third language for most of these people. With Laura’s blessing, I contact the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Women's Council (NPYWC) coordinator to suggest a collaborative activity, outlining options for how we could proceed. The coordinator, Vicki Gillick (or VG), is one of my old Alice Springs mothers’ club members, a former journalist, turned lawyer.

We ask whether the NPYWC would agree to send one of their directors to a regional workshop and provide initial feedback on content and delivery. We suggest that we could follow this up by engaging with their board of directors to develop a program suited to remote areas then trial it with them and the younger women coming up. VG consults her board and identifies a director who is willing to fly to a Queensland workshop.

At the end of the workshop's first day I ask the visiting director about her response to the program.

'I got a terrible headache', she says.

By the end of the third day she reckons 'it would be good for us to help you mob'.

A collaborative process begins. Over a six-month period the existing program is significantly modified for use with remote directors and members. The NPYWC directors, a skilled curriculum adviser, Deborah Durnan (who is one of our panel of consultants), and ORIC staff meet twice in Alice Springs before a new six-day program is finalised and trialled over two three-day sessions—first with senior directors and members then with other senior women and younger women. On both occasions, the program is further refined through direct feedback, post-workshop surveys and the training team's reflections.

The remote program is relatively expensive. We learn that working with people for whom English is a second language takes double the time, double the money and requires highly skilled cross-cultural facilitators. Our panel of consultants includes Indigenous and non-Indigenous people with the appropriate skills.

ORIC has the resources to trial the remote program again, this time in the East Kimberly—something of a hot spot for ORIC because it has appointed an administrator to run an important organisation teetering on insolvency. The East Kimberly is also a COAG Trial

Site. There are clear benefits to be gained from enhancing good governance in organisations involved in that trial.

A small team travels to Balgo, Mulan, Bililuna and Ringer Soak to ascertain the level of interest in the training program. We pay for and brief local interpreters to help with the meetings.

On this trip, in 2005, we meet Kim Mahood, a regular visitor to Mulan. She has a long association with Walmajarri families who worked on her parents' former cattle station, Tanami Downs, years ago. I have read and enjoyed her memoir, *Craft for a Dry Lake*, and know she is also a fine visual artist.

The first night we're in Mulan, Kim unrolls a huge, irregular canvas map of Paruku (Lake Gregory) painted to scale from satellite images she has projected onto the blank canvas. She explains how it has resulted from a two-way learning exercise involving whitefella science and local traditional knowledge. Jim Bowler, a scientist with a long work history in Mulan and at Mungo, and other whitefellas have camped out with traditional owners and their families around the lake for two weeks. They have identified sacred sites and animal habitats and told stories about the lake and its flora, which Kim has painted onto the map.

The map also identifies sites where visitors are welcome and where they should not go; families who are responsible for parts of the lake and the surrounding country; and sorry places where events occurred in the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal history of the area. It is a bloody and violent history.

One of the non-Aboriginal people involved had photography and video expertise. She has recorded Jim Bowler talking about his scientific knowledge of the area and the traditional

owners telling their stories of place in language. There are plans to use this material in the future and translate it for use by children in the school.

Many of Mulan's young men and women accompany the Elders and whitefellas on the camp. They hear the stories, learn how to use the equipment, and to paint on canvas. It's a great way for younger members of the community to learn new skills.

I have another epiphany—this map is about customary governance—Aboriginal law. Could mapping be a springboard into learning about corporate governance? Could it be a way to stimulate people's interest in what is usually a very dry subject?

I ask Kim to come and see me when she gets back to Canberra.

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*The Money Story* is a project designed to help remote directors and members understand the 'big picture'—how governments generate taxes, how taxes are allocated and used by the commonwealth, state and local governments; the budget cycle; and how this relates to organisations seeking to use taxpayer funds for projects. Our focus on this topic results from questions raised by local people we speak to in meetings in the East Kimberley.

Deborah Durnan, the consultant on ORIC's training panel who helped with the NPYWC collaboration, is asked if she will help design a short program that illustrates the money story. She and her partner, Dr Bob Boughton, develop a two-day workshop program in consultation with ORIC, to be trialled in Mulan. I ask Kim Mahood to become our community agent—the person on the ground promoting the workshop, getting people in the room, and organising the catering—the problem solver.

In the meantime, and with Mulan people's agreement, ORIC develops a big book of the Paruku mapping project, using photographs taken during the trip. Kim supplies the text and Janet Millar's team translates it into plain English. The big book tells the story of the development of the map, presents some of its highlights and identifies everyone involved. It includes photographs of the map's celebratory launch at the Balgo Cultural Centre, in which children dressed in traditional and disco gear, celebrating 'two-ways'. In other words, the map and the big book celebrate two-way learning and collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people for mutual benefit.

Even seasoned operators out bush have their limitations. Kim doesn't hold back telling me hers. She will never work as ORIC's community agent again—she's had to use all her 'credit' with local people, even those she's related to. She has had to give away her shoes to convince someone to attend the workshop. The handles on her motor vehicle doors have been broken during negotiations and she has to climb in and out the driver's side window. She's frazzled, not by the local environment, but by the demands of her government contract.

Her debrief occurs on a trip to Paruku. As she unpacks the trials and tribulations of being our community agent, I listen sympathetically at first, but I can't help laughing—and she laughs too.

In the late afternoon, Kim kills the engine and we sit and watch the brolgas prance elegantly in the shallows of the lake's shoreline. However, the quiet begins to dissipate—an unrecognisable sound in the distance gradually comes closer. It eventually becomes a concerted screeching—a large flock of corellas flying in to nest for the night. They settle.

Kim says 'wait' and a few minutes pass, then another flock of bigger, louder birds fly into the same trees. All hell breaks loose as the first flock is displaced by the second flock's raucous takeover.

‘It’s like this every day at this time’, Kim says with a grin.

‘Beautiful. I’ve never experienced anything like it. But what are you trying to tell me?’

‘I’d prefer to be a corella in that tree each night, rather than do what you do for a living. As for being a community agent—never again!’

We laugh, sit for a while longer in the peace the lake offers after this evening ritual, then return to Mulan, where Kim’s attempt to keep workshop participants coming each day resumes.

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*The Money Story* is reasonably successful. Attendance diminishes each day but it is a small community and people have other commitments, health issues, and sorry business to attend to—an unexpected death affects a large number of people. For participants, two days in their small community is a big commitment. It is also risky for ORIC in terms of value for money and return on investment. We already know that taking people out of their communities to attend training works for the regional program. Remote programs will need to do the same.

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We draw twenty people from the four East Kimberley settlements into a workshop held at Turkey Creek (Warman). A Catholic institution offers participants accommodation and meals and there is a training room on site. Attendance each day is consistently high because external disruptions and distractions are reduced. It works well and several

participants go on to complete the Certificate IV in Business (Governance) delivered in Kununurra.

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Every Camelot ends. The five years I spent at ORIC were a little like a Camelot. The leadership team and the staff—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and non-Indigenous—were committed, talented team players. Difficulties were short-lived.

When Laura's term ends I realise my time is up too. Micro-management does not agree with me. Give me a set of delegations and a job to complete and I'll bring together a good team to do it. Squeeze me into a box labelled *cardigan brigade* and I wither and die.

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With a little help from my friends and the blessing of the departmental secretary, I organise a twelve-month secondment to Reconciliation Australia (RA). In the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) team I will encourage government departments and agencies to engage with the RAP program.

In 2009 corporations, private enterprise, non-government agencies and schools have developed a RAP but federal, state and local governments have not.

Once I am familiar with the RAP program, I list all Federal Government departments and prioritise those with extensive responsibilities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues. I follow up with an exploratory meeting with their leadership teams to encourage participation in the program. If that works, and it usually does, we help them set up a committee and get started.



The RAP template focuses on relationships, respect and opportunities. A RAP committee, comprised of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, guides the RAP's development, implementation and annual report, which is submitted to Reconciliation Australia. This report details achievements and sets out new goals. Incremental, positive change and good publicity comes with the development of a RAP—something government agencies are just as keen to have as corporate bodies.

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In 2010 I resign from the Australian Public Service, take a one-year contract with RA and start to think about retirement. Mum reckons I'll live longer and be happier if I retire at sixty.

This is exactly what my mother has done. The week after she retires, she takes up painting lessons, surprising us all. No one in our family suspects she had a life-long desire to become an artist, or that she has a latent talent. Mum had, from 1960 to 1987, sold shoes. She managed the footwear department in Jas Loneragan Pty Ltd, Flints Shoes and Mathers Shoes stores in Mudgee.

For the decade before my father dies, he makes the frames for mum's oil paintings. Her work fills my parents' lounge room, become gifts to family members and friends, and sometimes one of her paintings is offered as a prize in a local raffle.

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I've been keeping a journal, attending poetry workshops and writing poetry since Noni was born in 1990. Before then, I wrote to my parents every week from wherever I happened to be. In my teenage years, I wrote doggerel about funny events or fights with friends.

‘Here’s your retirement project’. Mum says, handing me a box of my old letters. ‘Now go and write that book!’

Before I can start writing a book, my poem, ‘Chorus of Crows’ wins the *Overland’s* Judith Wright Poetry Prize for New and Emerging Poets. With the prize money I buy a computer, a fountain pen and a ticket to New Zealand for a holiday with friends.

Noni is self-reliant and busy studying an arts/law degree at the University of Canberra. Responsibilities lift from my shoulders like a Canberra fog on a fine winter’s morning. I see the landscape ahead clearly—a writing life.

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‘I’ve been waiting a long time for you to retire.’ It’s Sam Miles on the phone, my old DAA colleague from the late 1980s. He’s still living in Alice Springs and works for an organisation called Centrefarm Aboriginal Horticulture Limited.

‘We’d like you to come to Alice Springs and meet the Centrefarm team. We have an exciting project we’d like to share with you. Come and help us get it off the ground’.

I board a plane to Alice Springs. While I’m flying over the vast expanse of Central Australia at 30,000 feet, I daydream about the possibility of combining a writing life with a *partial* retirement.



## Chapter 6: Retirement and reinvention (2011–2020)

Andrew Spencer Japaljarri's painting, *Thinking about young people or thinking about the future*, is spread out on the ground in front of us—the Centrefarm team. Vin Lange, CEO and businessman; Lindy Andren, Strategy & Policy Officer and anthropologist; Sam Miles, Agricultural Extension Officer, strategist and old friend; Greg McAdam, Arrernte lawman and Engagement Officer; Craig San Roque, consultant and clinical psychologist; and me, consultant and adult educator—are seated in the backyard of Centrefarm's office in Alice Springs.

Introductions over, Vin suggests that Craig takes us through the painting's story—it's foundational and will remind us of the underlying conditions on country, our agreed process and the practical work we are about to embark on with Alekarenge Horticulture Pty Ltd (AHPL), an Aboriginal corporation in Alekarenge, 350 kilometres north, just off the Stuart Highway.

Craig tells us Japaljarri has given him permission to use the painting and to tell its story.

'Japaljarri and his family came to stay with us for a while. This was about the time he had finished up working at the Healthy Aboriginal Lifestyle Team and before he joined the community police, somewhere in the early nineties.

'I asked him if he had a painting in mind. What was he thinking about young people? What would their future hold? Japaljarri sat with these questions for a few days with a pencil and paper, sketching out some ideas. After a while, he told me he had a painting in mind.

‘We sourced a discarded blind from the rubbish tip, because we couldn’t afford a canvas as big as Japaljarri envisaged. He started to paint a map of the Central Australian region’s cultural and social situation, a story that would get people thinking and start a discussion. It’s been used hundreds of times all over Central Australia in the past twenty-odd years with youth groups, adults, directors and members; it’s been used with kardiya (whitefellas) and yapa (Aboriginal people or countrymen) in communities and in towns, and it’s still being used.

‘The painting represents Japaljarri’s vision, his thinking about mental health. It’s about listening and thinking clearly—that’s the most important bit.’ Craig repeats the last sentence, adding, ‘No muddled thinking.’

He asks us to look closely at the painting.

‘In this map you can see the six regions set out in these circles, representing the different language groups. These lines across the painting are Jukurrpa lines. See the animal tracks? These are mainly men’s stories—emu and kangaroo. The tracks go north, south, east and west.’ Craig stops talking for a minute, to let the information sink in, then draws our attention to the three main sections of the painting.

‘This first section, Iriti, Jukurrpa—or the law from olden times—has four main circles around another central circle bound to it. This is cultural law before white people came. It’s a strong system—emu, goanna—held together by country or ngura; waltja or family; Jukurrpa, which is part of the whole system; and the centre—taking care of family, country and Jukurrpa with a healthy spirit, known as kurunpa.’

I had seen similar representations of cultural law in Lajamanu in 1981 and since, in books and on paintings. Another map came to mind—the Paruku map Kim painted with traditional owners in 2005.

‘Now look in the middle of the painting. This section represents the present, all of us together, white and Aboriginal people. Same problems—petrol sniffing, alcohol—there are too many people in their graves, lying down sick. People are sitting around culturally, drinking. Drinking has replaced culture, so has gunja and cards.

‘Japaljarri’s worry—*our* worry—is that there is a big whirl wind, a yellow dust swirling all around, blinding us all. We have dust in our eyes and we can’t see clearly.’

I look more closely at the painting. Japaljarri has made it pretty clear the present is a mess. He has painted coffins and crosses in among the cultural circles, overlaid with an ugly yellow pigment—the dust.

No one speaks. We’re waiting for Craig to tell us about Japaljarri’s third section—the future.

‘In the next section—looking to the future—the past is still present in Aboriginal law. You can see there are the same elements but notice that in Japaljarri’s representation nothing is connected.’ Craig points to the gaps. ‘See how there are no links, no lines joining? Look back at the first section of the painting—everything is joined. Now Japaljarri is saying *I’m looking at the future but can’t see what connects us*. He’s pointing out that in the past everything was connected but now all the links between Aboriginal culture and *kardiya* haven’t been made or are breaking away.’

Some of the semi-circle shapes representing people in the second and third section are painted with brown and white pigment. Japaljarri is definitely talking about Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people, together.

‘Notice how there are five, not four circles now?’ Craig asks, and we nod. ‘Japaljarri has included kardiya, white law—their health—in the painting. He’s saying, *I do know it’s falling apart, but I want to get the dust out of my eyes and see the future clearly*. His point is that the pattern is strong even though the middle is confused and devastated.

‘In the future, the fifth element—whitefellas—won’t go away. Japaljarri’s question is, *how can we manage the future in the company of whitefellas?*’

I ask myself, ‘How can I be a kardiya who connects, communicates and works well with yapa? How do I help settle the dust?’

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In the meeting room, the team briefs me on the project. Words, graphs, drawings appear on the electronic whiteboard. Centrefarm has a management agreement with AHPL, which has been allocated a parcel of land from the Warrabri Land Trust by the Traditional Owners under section 19 of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976* via the Central Land Council (CLC) for economic development. Centrefarm and AHPL has, so far, focused on building bores to support a commercial operator who has leased part of the land to grow watermelons. The commercial operator’s lease will soon generate income for AHPL from the rental of land and water use.

Under the management agreement eighty per cent of AHPL’s income goes back into the company and twenty per cent comes under the control of AHPL directors. Good governance training is needed so directors and members understand their roles and

responsibilities and develop sound policies, especially in relation to the use of the twenty per cent of income they will control.

‘That’s where you come in, Kerrie. With your background in corporate governance training, we’d like you to work with the directors and members of AHPL on these issues. You’re familiar with the community, and you’re familiar with ORIC legislation and corporations law.’ Vin has a confidence in his voice I don’t feel.

After two years out of ORIC, I’m nervous about the currency of my knowledge, and say so, but Sam says it won’t take long to get up to speed. Vin reassures me that the team works collaboratively—we will learn from each other as we go. Greg will accompany me to all workshops after preparing the ground.

But first, the directors and members will come to Alice Springs. Centrefarm has approached the liaison officer of the local campus of the Charles Darwin University (CDU), which has taken over the old Alice Springs TAFE buildings and grounds where I once worked. CDU will deliver a certificate course in governance tailored to AHPL, using me as the lecturer in the initial introductory workshop.

In addition, Sam has approached Owen Cole, who heads up the management of the Aboriginal owned and operated Yeperenye shopping centre. He will run an information session for AHPL directors and members. This involves taking them to Yeperenye to meet with Owen, who will talk about the landlord/tenant business model and other issues related to running a successful Aboriginal business and how the landlord/tenant approach applies to AHPL.



‘This will be good background for you, too, Kerrie’, Sam says, ‘because we are all about *economic* development these days, not *community* development.’

I wonder what Sam is getting at. Surely economic development involves community development methodologies? He emphasises that what we are doing is about AHPL, the company, not the whole community of Alekareng. I get the distinction. I make a note to share Anthony Kelly’s people-centred participatory development methodologies with Sam and the other Centrefarm staff at some stage.

Vin invites Greg to tell me what he’s been doing at Alekareng.

‘After months of talking and planning, I’ve arranged for about fifteen of the directors and members to come to Alice for three days next week. I’ve been driving up to Alekareng regularly, talking to people, getting relationships established and finding out what the directors and members know about Centrefarm, AHPL and the two organisations that sit underneath it.’

‘Sorry, what two organisations?’ I’m confused.

‘The ones Vin mentioned earlier. AHPL directors are drawn from two ORIC incorporated organisations—one for traditional owners and one for residents. As you’d probably remember, Alekareng is on Kaytetye country, but there are other countrymen, and women, from other places living there, and they have been for a long time. They have a vested interest in the community and their families will be involved in any training and employment that comes out of this initiative.’

Vin explains that the directors of AHPL are drawn from both ORIC corporations—two men and two women from each one, eight directors altogether. This is a good number and I like the gender balance.

Greg continues his story.

‘About a year ago, I decided to do a survey to find out what people knew about Centrefarm, AHPL, the land allocation and the commercial operation. It was a bit of an eye-opener for all of us to find out community members and most of the directors and members didn’t know anything much at all. Since then, I’ve been working with them, slowly building up their knowledge and developing the relationships to create interest in learning more about running AHPL.

‘The Commonwealth allocated several demountable buildings to AHPL after another project fell through, so I camp there when I go up for three or four days at a time. It has a huge training room with a commercial kitchen on a piece of AHPL land outside the community that doesn’t come with any baggage—by that I mean everyone, all the Alekarengé families, feel comfortable in the space—not like the community where there are issues around where certain people can go.

‘Another bonus is that we have a good headmaster at the school, who has established a school garden project at our training centre, so kids are getting their heads around growing things. Oh, and there’s a caretaker on site who is a bit of a Mr Fixit, so the place is looked after—gas cylinders are replaced when they need to be and so on’.

There were questions and explanations, and meetings with individual team members, but at the end of the week I was keen to be part of the project. Perhaps I would meet people I had known years ago. I was ready to play my part in the first workshop at the CDU campus.

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The first hurdle is my lack of qualifications. To be employed as a lecturer at CDU, the minimum qualification required is a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. My Diploma of Teaching (Technical), Bachelor of Arts degree, and recent accreditation from the AICD (in their graduate and masterclass programs) do not count, according to the campus manager. Perhaps he could make an exception if I demonstrate recent training experience. I update my resume and send it to him. After three days, he determines I can be employed temporarily as an entry-level lecturer at the lowest level of pay.

This, and the fact that the plaque above the Aboriginal studies centre—the Akaltye Centre—is new and proclaims it was opened in 1994, does not endear me to the CDU campus manager. I remind him that Mr Max Stuart, the Arrernte Elder, opened the centre in 1992; the Institute for Aboriginal Development had helped choose the name; and that I had been the coordinator who had organised it, back in the day when I was a fully qualified TAFE lecturer.

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The Alekarenge directors and members arrive late, and hurriedly settle into the accommodation. The rules are three pages long, in English. People are hungry and the campus kitchen is closed, but there are sandwiches and soft drinks available and vouchers for other meals while they are here.

The workshop and visit to Yeperenye is a success. My notes record that participation and attendance was excellent; teamwork, planning and coordination was good; relevance, order and pitch of the content was appropriate; the gender balance in the group added to the quality of the discussions; and participant feedback was positive. Also noted was the need for contingency plans in case of delays; improved communication between the bus driver and the training team; the need to recognise participants are ESL learners; and that CDU's

administration of Abstudy, enrolment forms, and student accommodation rules need to be revised.

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The CDU arrangements with Centrefarm to deliver the certificate program in governance collapse some months later, due to staffing issues and other matters. For the next four years Greg and I regularly drive the 350 kilometres to Alekarenge and back facilitating three-day workshops with the directors and members of AHPL.

Centrefarm would brief me a couple of weeks before I flew to Alice Springs. This way I had time to develop several experiential activities around a theme or a topic as a starting point for a discussion with Greg the day I arrived in Alice Springs. On day two, Greg and I would confirm the workshop plan, processes and activities, then brief the Centrefarm team, checking that we had covered everything and making any adjustments the team suggested.

Final preparations included the purchase of any items I needed for the activities. Greg would order meat for about fifteen people to cater for meals over the three days. Our final task, to call in at a supermarket and do the supplementary Big Shop, occurred early on the morning of our departure.

My old saying, ‘eighty per cent preparation; twenty per cent delivery’ became our mantra.

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A commitment to two-way governance training meant that each workshop usually began with the directors and members leading an informal discussion prompted by a conversation or question. They might introduce us to some aspect of customary governance.

This could take many forms—a story, for example, or a drawing or an explanation of skin group relationships—especially the relationships of those in the room. This highlighted avoidance relationships we had to consider. It sometimes led to more light-hearted banter about who was right skin for me as a possible husband or who was my poison-cousin, a person in the room I should avoid directly communicating with.

Throughout the three days, if an opportunity arose for directors or members to explain or discuss an equivalent governance word or concept in customary law, they took the floor. Dog dreaming, important for Alekarenge, would come up, as did bush medicine. Importantly, they told stories about white staff from various agencies who took no notice of, or contravened, customary law.

The 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) or ‘Intervention’ had seen an influx of bureaucrats in Alekarenge. It was one of the prescribed communities and, as such, was subject to the Intervention’s wide-ranging and contentious ‘reforms’. There had been several changes to key personnel since then, which maximised opportunities for mistakes, poor decisions and substandard services. On one occasion, documents detailing the operation of a local justice committee came to hand. The directors and members remembered this group as a well-functioning community body made redundant by the Intervention’s new arrangements. Their stories became parables for best practice in intercultural communication and decision making, passed on in reports to our funding bodies.

At the end of each workshop, the walls of the training centre would be covered in charts, drawings and lists of words in English, Kaytetye, Warlpiri, Alyawarr or Warumungu. *Talking paper* post-it notes, maps or pictures representing some aspect of customary or corporate law might appear. A timeline of the history of farming in Alekarenge once materialised, covering forty years of stories about a farm and piggery, communal kitchen, a

trip to Israel to visit a kibbutz (so that the TOs could better understand how a collective operates), and the establishment of the commercial operator.

At the end of day three, while Greg drove people home, I took photographs of everything on the walls in the order it was put up. These formed the basis of big books and were accompanied by text in plain English, which were used to remind everyone what we had done in the workshop next time we met. For people who may have missed a session or an entire workshop, the big books became introductions to the topic.

The only customary governance tool missing from the wall was a map of Kaytetye country along the lines of the Walmajarri people's map of Paruku.

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Throughout these years, approximately fifteen people attended workshops regularly. Their feedback helped improve and shape subsequent workshops. Back in the office, Greg and I would develop a chart of each day's sessions and when this was ready, we would give a presentation to the staff. This summarised and reinforced lessons learnt from the workshop and prepared staff for future meetings with AHPL directors and members. Their role, to reinforce what had been learnt, completed a circular activity, imitating action research methodology.

These sessions also helped focus a report to the funding bodies, usually government agencies looking for outcomes. Their focus on quantitative outcomes, such as employment statistics, rather than the qualitative ones we achieved, contributed to Centrefarm's funding drying up.

Greg and I became friends on those trips to and from Alekarenge. On the drive up we would start talking about the program and contingency plans, but gradually the talk would turn to footy, our families, our personal interests and our histories.

Greg represented the Northern Territory in the Under 16 Schoolboys state carnival in 1976. He joined the league squad at 15, which meant a regime of training three nights a week and Sundays, as well as a Saturday match. He went to Adelaide to play in the South Australian Under 21s and stayed with North Adelaide Football Club for five years, living with his cousin-brother Elliot McAdam.

Greg had stories about racism, discipline, failure, success, loss and reward which made me laugh and cry. His parents made sure he and all his siblings played sport, had jobs to do at home and learnt to hunt kangaroos. He went back to Alice Springs in 1984 for a break and saw how some of his mob was living. He didn't like what he saw. Many people didn't have significant opportunities for advancing their professional and personal lives. Some people lived in the creek bed and had the kind of troubles Japaljarri depicted in his painting.

In 1985 Greg was drafted to St Kilda Football Club but a knee injury finished his career after only ten games. He was the first of his family to play in the top league. Two other brothers followed. After his football career ended, his working life centred on helping his mob.

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I'm not a football fan—there, my secret is out! But I understand the power of football in Aboriginal communities and its potential for good. We often included activities in our workshops centred on the game, which appealed to both men and women.

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At one Alekareng workshop, Craig tells the story of Japaljarri's painting to the directors and members of AHPL after work has finished for the day. The AHPL directors and members are tired and keen to go home, but they want to see what is going to happen with the painting. It has been lying on the floor for most of the afternoon.

Everyone makes a fresh cup of tea and brings their chair into a circle around the painting. As Craig tells the story, the directors and members speak in language, while questioning Craig in English. These discussions are taken into their homes and brought back into future workshops as ideas to shape policies and renew a commitment to economic development.

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After this session, Vin offers to take the team to the Wauchope roadhouse for dinner instead of eating leftovers at the training centre. Over our meal, Craig reads the draft of a long, dramatic poem he has written on a recent trip to Delphi, an ancient Greek sacred site associated with foreseeing the future. He says the poem arrived as a whole work over two nights and three days there. It is a fascinating reinvention of the Greek myth about Demeter/Persephone, which he's named *Persephone's Dog* or the *Kore Story*. Craig says it is, in fact, an old cultural story rather like an Australian Aboriginal Jukurrpa, which tells us how agriculture came to be developed in Mediterranean Europe some 10,000 years ago, after the ice ages subsided, along with accounts of seasonal death, loss, grief and the return of hope. Craig also connects it to AHPL's horticulture project and the dog story. Everyone around the table is quietly hooked.

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A couple of years after this dinner, a thought-provoking performance takes place. Craig has rewritten his poem as a performance piece set in two acts, either side of a Mediterranean picnic. The event involves a huge cast of friends and interested people and is played out at an old quarry site on the side of the range at Ilparpa, just south of Alice Springs. In the *Griffith Review 52*—an issue of the journal that reimagines Australia’s future—Kieran Finnane, a local journalist and friend, has written eloquently about this event and its relationship to the work of Centrefarm and AHPL directors and members.

The performance lightly explores two mythological stories in a modern-day context—Persephone and her dog, and the Alekarenge dog story. Like Japaljarri, Craig isn’t didactic. He likes to pose questions within the performance. What is our relationship to the Aboriginal people of this place? What is our relationship to Arrernte country and law? Can Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people make the mental shifts in ideas and practices necessary to work together on country, or work in agricultural co-development?

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Some years earlier, Craig explored another myth—that of Dionysus in *The Sugarman Project* with Japaljarri and other local Aboriginal people. That project centred on a question Japaljarri put to Craig. Was there a European story that might help Aboriginal people think about and manage alcohol and intoxication more deeply?

Given that the maintenance of Indigenous cultural law depends upon and is rooted in Jukurrpa stories and ceremonies, exploring such questions and feeling our way; working out how to communicate better; doing our best to learn and doing what we can to connect with other people’s stories—all of this seems to me a wonderful way to focus one’s working life.

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In 2013, after an application and interview, I take up the offer of an eighteen-month contract with Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE). Apart from a sense of completion—starting in one Warlpiri community in 1981 and finishing in another in 2014—I can take leave without pay to continue facilitating workshops for Centrefarm and AHPL.

The BIITE job involves coordinating activities at the brand-new Wirlyajarrayi Learning Centre at Willowra, a Lander River Warlpiri community 350 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs, the site of the Open College community development workshop I helped facilitate back in 1989.

Leaders in the community had lobbied the Warlpiri Education & Training Trust for monies earned from mining royalties to build the centre. The Commonwealth provided funds for the coordinator's salary. The value local people place on adult education and training is one drawcard; the fact that I will be working closely with a local governing committee is another. They will set the rules and support me in the role.

In the first eight months, regular and harmonious meetings contribute to a well-run centre. However, the death of significant leaders and other issues lead to problems between committee members. This in turn interrupts the flow and functioning of the meetings.

I hire and train local staff, taking advice from the committee. Four or five regulars work on a part-time basis, which suits them. One problem centres on the manual administration of their fortnightly pay. If the forms aren't ready and faxed in on time, people aren't paid. This is one of many archaic administrative processes that frustrate me.

BIITE expects coordinators to enrol students and teach to a set curriculum. They also expect me to enrol and complete a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment to bring my formal qualifications in line with those required.

The best learning activities and the most popular seem to be informal—implemented when outside trainers and volunteers come to Willowra and deliver a short program for a set period of time. Some of these people are friends who stay with me for two weeks, or a month or more.

My daughter's friend, Robin Burton, comes for a month. Each working day he attends the centre and sits with the young men in front of computers, sharing his knowledge and responding to requests. He is often on the back foot fixing broken devices.

A friend from Papua New Guinea days, Angela Sharp, arrives with all the materials and equipment to make a quilt, which she has bought and paid for in Melbourne. She sits in the learning centre and works with a group of women who come each day.

Cait Wait, a friend from the late 1980s—the first Keringke Arts Centre coordinator—is employed by BIITE as a part-time art teacher. She visits twice to deliver a formal program, staying with me on both occasions.

The coordinator's job is big—too big for one person. I like having visiting volunteers and encourage BIITE to formalise insurance/indemnity arrangements for them so they will be covered if accidents occur. This does not eventuate and becomes one more recommendation on a long list when I complete my exit interview.

The centre hums when volunteers and others come and contribute. It provides support and gives me time to perform administrative requirements, write reports, deal with multiple issues with buildings and infrastructure, attend governing committee meetings and help with

inquiries from locals. I delay opening the centre till 10 am and close at 4pm, but still don't have enough time for all the tasks in my job description.

The job isn't any easier than the one at Lajamanu in 1981, but the issues are different. I have an experienced and supportive boss in Alice Springs (another former member of my mothers' club) and do not have to kow-tow to the local primary school principal. Communication and technology have improved dramatically, despite the fact that there is no local mobile coverage. I have internet connectivity most of the time, and my accommodation is new and comfortable. And a government vehicle comes with the job.

However, as well as being burdensome, BIITE's administrative requirements are often out of step with the reality of community life. Local family rivalries sometimes undermine the operation of the learning centre, despite the rules that aim to ensure a professional environment. The shop still charges high prices for staple foods that are only delivered once a fortnight. And, the same issues I experienced living and working with non-Aboriginal people in Lajamanu, still bubble away beneath the surface in Willowra.

One of the kardiya nurses lectures me on community development principles when I turn up at her house after hours seeking help for a sick man. I am told people will never learn to help themselves if I run after them. I don't bother debating with her about this but I do ask that the sick person is attended to.

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At the beginning of 2014, an Elder I feel close to dies under tragic circumstances near the learning centre. I witness his death, close the centre and go home feeling distraught. Later that afternoon, a message comes from his sisters inviting me to pay my last respects. I walk to

the clinic where the Elder is already in a body bag in the back of the coroner's vehicle. We gather around him, touch him, say goodbye, and cry together as the vehicle drives off.

Two weeks later I develop shingles. After days of severe headaches, the blisters gradually appear on my forehead down to the tip of my nose. The clinic nurse says I will have to wait for the doctor to fly in before I can obtain the anti-virals. That is another three days. I take some Panadol, ring my boss and drive to Alice Springs hospital. I am too late for the anti-virals to have a positive effect and spend the next week in the Double Tree Hilton Hotel receiving room service and friendly messages, then I fly home to Canberra where my daughter nurses me for three months while I recover.

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In 2014, when Centrefarm loses its funding and other submissions for funding are unsuccessful, Greg has to find other paid work. Vin, Lindy and Sam work without pay for fifteen months. Craig and I work pro bono. Somehow Centrefarm manages to keep operating. However, their records are packed up into a container and placed at the back of Centrecorp's office. Two of Centrecorp's offices at the back of the building are allocated to Centrefarm staff.

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On one of our trips to Alekarenge, Greg and I talk about Kim Mahood's work with the Walmajarri people at Mulan, the map and the big book. We support undertaking a similar process with Kaytetye traditional owners. With permission, I take the *Mapping Mulan* big book to Alice Springs and show it to the Centrefarm team. Their enthusiasm is piqued just as the money dries up.

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In September 2016 the leadership teams of the Northern and Central Land Councils come together to talk about developing an economic development strategy on Aboriginal land. Centrefarm's staff have developed a model for discussion. It is my job to facilitate this meeting, one of the most difficult jobs I've had despite the extensive planning involved in the lead up to the workshop. However, at the end of what feels like a two-day struggle, and with strong leadership from David Ross and Joe Morrison, agreement is reached on a way forward.

The land councils' leadership directs Centrefarm staff to consult with key Aboriginal directors and people in communities across the Territory to see if there is support for the draft strategy. It's a short-term project with a long-term plan sitting beneath it, and there is funding for the consultations.

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The economic development strategy consultations focus Centrefarm's energy for most of 2017 and by late in 2018 the strategy has widespread support. Funding has been found for the strategic thinking and planning stages of the economic development strategy, which will allow for six commercial scale pilot farming projects in the future. All goes according to plan and the first two pilots are approved and funded.

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The first step involves mapping country with traditional owners to ensure Aboriginal custodianship and knowledge of country is embedded and their wishes adhered to in any future commercial negotiations. Their agreement to any commercial operation must be achieved through free, prior and informed consent, the ramifications of which are huge. What does free, prior informed consent actually mean in an intercultural setting? The Centrefarm team has been actively trialling ways to ensure traditional owners' decisions are based on this

concept since the company's inception. And yes, there is a painting that explores this question. Craig San Roque and Lindy Andren painted it many years ago with the help of Aboriginal people.

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In 2017 another Arrernte man, Joe Clarke, has the position of Centrefarm's Business Strategy Manager. He has helped with the strategy consultations and he liaises with the Kaytetye and Alyawarr traditional owners along with Alekarenge residents about dates and travel arrangements, a substantial part of the preparation for our two weeks together making a map at the Alekarenge training centre.

In April 2019 Kim Mahood, her dog, Pirate and I drive to Alice Springs in Kim's vehicle, which is specially designed and fully equipped with camping gear, tools and spares. In Alice Springs, we meet with the team, make lists and carry out our tasks. Kim buys a long polypipe with screw caps, a large canvas with eyelets and rolls it into the polypipe. She ties this to an overhead frame on her vehicle beside our swags.

Once we arrive in Alekarenge, Kim gets to work measuring up and drilling nails into the wall to hold the map upright. We prime the canvas on the floor and hang it on the wall. Kim unpacks her computer and projector so she can project a satellite image of the country to be mapped onto the canvas. Once she has outlines of the excision, existing farm, roads, community and other boundaries on the canvas, she's ready to begin the mapping process with traditional owners.

My job is to document the process, draft a map-making train-the-trainer program and develop a tool kit that supports it. Kim and I are both in our sixties—if all the pilots go ahead, younger people will be needed to facilitate this important work. And if the trials are

successful, scaling up map-making with traditional owners will become necessary. This is my latest succession plan.

Centrefarm plans to digitise the maps and overlay information about landforms, water sources, fire management and other relevant issues to be used in decision making about economic development. Vin keeps everything moving along, Sam works on strategy and plans, and Joe is the force behind a community garden in Alekarenge involving school students and their parents. A new fellow, Brody Smith, is part of Centrefarm's emerging brains trust—a researcher who has a Master of Environment (Sustainable Food Systems).

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Valuing customary governance is central to this kind of map-making, but making maps matters for other reasons. The map is the first and most important tool in a two-way governance toolkit, an educational aid that traditional owners can use with young people for cultural maintenance and revival or with non-Indigenous commercial operators—an intercultural learning aid and documentary resource based on customary governance. It helps traditional owners make decisions based on free, prior and informed consent. They will own the map. They will decide where it will be housed, how it will be used and by whom.

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The *process* is the fun part of map-making, despite the heat and the bush fly plague. Everyone likes to get out on country and making the map involves day trips and picnics, storytelling, locating special sites, taking photographs and videos, collecting plants and tracking all sorts of creatures. On return to camp after such an outing, information is collated and discussed. Kim begins the process of translating this information onto the map pictorially and in language with the help of people who are artists and translators. I pitch in.



The beauty of a map is that it tells a story and communicates place-based knowledge. It can be updated at any time. The beauty of the big book is that it complements the map by recording the process employed in making the map and can be used to inspire and teach others. The traditional owners involved in making the map ask us to delay the celebration until the big book is finalised and printed.

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The Covid-19 pandemic postpones all our plans. Celebrations of the map and big book and our plan for map-making and training at the second trial site in April 2020 is delayed for twelve months.

## Epilogue

The pandemic created a hard edge to the distance between me and family, friends and colleagues. My daughter, Noni, lives in New York. The law firm she works for asked staff to work from home soon after the pandemic erupted, and I was grateful. As we touched base every few days, Noni assured me that she had adopted all preventative measures and remained healthy and hearty.

But I wondered when I would see her again. A trip to celebrate her thirtieth birthday had to be abandoned. She booked a flight to return home for Christmas in 2020 and we both latched onto this prospect as another way to maintain a positive outlook.

The pandemic also presented opportunities—time to write, reflect and connect with my poetry group on Zoom. I became better acquainted with my garden and the neighbourhood birds, and walked Canberra's bush trails on O'Connor Ridge and Black Mountain with a friend. I completed my exegesis, rewrote my memoir several times, and when the pandemic eased I dealt with a range of health issues.

Between 2016 and 2020 I wrote or revised over 150 poems and I have attached a sample related to my memoir at the end of this epilogue. My mum, Ethel, who had had a stroke in 2013, was hospitalised again in November 2016. Noni and I had taken several trips with Eth after my father died in 1997 and we were close. We were with her when she died a gentle death on 30 November 2016, seven months short of her ninetieth birthday.

Eth and Noni had been in the audience at my first poetry reading at Canberra's Manning Clark House. Eth liked the fact that I was writing poetry, but it was the book—novel

or memoir—she really wanted to read. She also wanted me to write her eulogy before she died so she could read that, too, but I couldn't bring myself to test fate in that way.

Recent Work Press published my first collection of poetry, *Inlandia*, in 2018. Responding creatively to complex material, intercultural experiences and difficult life circumstances has been my way of working through issues and coming to terms with complexity, absurdity and injustice.

When I reflect on my working life, the memory of Rover Thomas's screen print, *The Universe*, still helps put things in perspective. I am only a flyspeck in his universe. But the screen print has other messages similar to those in Japaljarri's painting—both artists want to share their knowledge, teach non-Indigenous people another way of being and thinking about the Indigenous worldview and bring us into it. It is this generosity of spirit that astounds and comforts me. This is reinforced whenever Indigenous people share their lives and their stories with me in good faith and with good humour, despite their hardships and some terrible experiences related to oppression, racism and the legacy of colonialism.

*The Universe*, together with ATSIC's entire art collection, was removed from the ATSIC and ORAC office walls by order of the CEO when Commission Chairman, Geoff Clark, threatened to use it to fund a legal action. I felt the loss of the print deeply. For several months no one knew where the collection had been taken, if it would stay together or what institution might inherit it. As a non-Indigenous public servant, I believed the artworks helped connect us to the people we served. And I don't mean the politicians.

Years later, I saw *The Universe* again at an exhibition at the National Archives of Australia and later at the National Museum of Australia, the institution that eventually inherited the collection.

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Surprisingly, Noni made it home for Christmas in 2020. Once here, she changed her return flight several times, extending her stay to three months. Our mother–daughter interaction was delightful and challenging—she had to work New York hours and I had to work on my memoir.

Noni’s Christmas gift to me was a copy of *The Universe*. It looks somewhat different to the one ATSIIC owned. Its provenance says it was stolen, thrown in a river, retrieved and found its way onto the market, another absurdity that adds to the story. Even as a flawed example of the original work it still magically pulls me into the artist’s world.

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Reflecting on my working life, I feel blessed to have shared it with talented and committed people—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—in what often now seems like a different era to the one that has emerged since the new millennium. My hope is that people are becoming more understanding of difference and more aware of how white privilege, racism, misogyny, oppression and inequality diminish us all.

Many of my friends have enjoyed a long and deep connection with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Some were involved with one group, one community or one project over a long period of time. Some have contributed to one area of Indigenous policy or endeavour, particularly in the arts. In my working life I have travelled throughout Australia meeting and working with many different people, organisations and communities but Canberra (Ngunnawal/Ngambri country) has been home for twenty-five years. Why don’t I feel at home here? Perhaps my disquiet reflects how power plays out in ‘the Canberra bubble’.

I can't help lamenting the cyclical nature of some issues or how the best initiatives outlined in earlier chapters of this memoir were thwarted by a change of government, or a change in policy or personnel. Sometimes one or two individuals had undue influence on a good plan or undermined a promising long-term initiative that had potential to address complex problems.

When I arrived in Lajamanu in 1981 I knew very little about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Since then, I have been determined to make up for my deficient early education by learning about the country of my birth from their perspective. That process continues and is extraordinarily enriching. I hope that, in turn, I have contributed to enriching the lives of the people I have worked and travelled with. I had not studied topics like white privilege, white guilt, white stigma and white fragility in those busy days. I was fixated on development—community, people-centred, participatory and sustainable development using decolonising methodologies and frameworks as best I could.

The two-way governance work with Centrefarm continues, but when I can't do this work out bush anymore, even for short stints, I dream about learning Wiradjiri and going home to Mudgee (Moothi) to continue my education—find out what my ancestors did to survive and how they came to settle on land that the Wiradjiri people occupied and cared for before we arrived.

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Greg McAdam and I caught up recently. We talked about his 'grannies', or grandchildren, his travels to see family in the East Kimberley and his plan for an exhibition of his paintings. Our talk turned to the work we did together, how positive our working relationship was, and why. He said something about the way we worked together that came so

close to a simple philosophy, it is worthwhile repeating—‘I’m not above you, I’m not below you. I’m beside you.’

In a world where extreme views vie to dominate, where oppressive systems connected to ideas of white privilege are perpetuated, wouldn’t this be a good philosophy for living and working together while we search for what Aboriginal poet, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, called ‘the glad tomorrow’?



## A sample of poems

### Regent Theatres, Empire Halls

Our generation imitated what we saw  
at matinees on Saturdays. In backyards  
we dressed up like cowboys, Indians,  
pretended to be every hero John Wayne  
played, donned feather headdresses to star  
as Crazy Horse or Pokohontas in battles  
fought at Little Bighorn. We smoked  
peace pipes, used groundsheets to make  
tepees, built forts, conflated histories.  
We knew of tribes called Cherokee,  
Comanche, Sioux, and Navajo. Ignorant  
of Australia's recent past, we had never  
heard of Koori or Wiradjiri, but *Abo*,  
had currency in our schoolyard.

In country towns in New South Wales  
the Greeks ran cafes, the Poles made shoes,  
the Germans rose to be more successful  
than the landed gentry. Their children  
went to school with us 'real Australians'.  
A dark-skinned kid called Chocko said  
he came from Pakistan. The Blackman  
sisters reckoned they descended from  
Kings and Queens in Tonga. Together  
we learnt English history, paired up  
and danced in Empire Halls. Puberty,  
a referendum and land rights demon-  
strations saw Chocko and the Blackman  
girls remake history, build an Embassy.

<https://not-very-quiet.com/?s=Regent+Theatres%2C+Empire+Halls>



## Culture shock

God?  
There isn't one.  
The Dreaming is a blur.  
Anthropologists? No help at all.

I've become cellmate  
to a reptile.  
In his terrarium  
I climb walls

of glass, slide back, slide back, back slide ...

I eat insects tweezered in. Professor Jeckle teases me—  
bends over my cage, lets down his beard like Rapunzel in drag,  
jerks back  
when I reach up ...

I'm not permitted, I'm not allowed. I can't see through.

Warlpiri maps  
Greek to me  
make nonsense of my compass

in my second childhood  
my nappy chafes and  
there's no mother to change me

\*  
in this  
circus tent  
i have no tricks  
or fancy dress the one  
trapeze hangs by a thread and  
besides i have no head for widths

i cannot sleep

outside  
dim stars  
sweat ...

the milky way seems to be the only road map out of here  
but I can't read it ...

*Warlpiri, Aboriginal language group in the Northern Territory of Australia*  
From *Inlandia*, K A Nelson

## Yanyuwa love songs

Beneath the stars in bush at Borroloola  
women sing the man to me—songs as ancient  
as the land, a gentle tempo, a language  
I don't understand.

My grandmother, Yanyuwa way, tapes the women  
singing. When it ends she hands the tape to me.  
*Take this with you.*  
*Play it.*  
*He will come.*

He came.

He went.

Those women sang  
my daughter into the world  
on their melodies.

Unpublished

### **The master key**

There are 200 people in this community.  
I'm the one with the master key—  
the newest building,  
the staff houses.

When I walk from the office to the Hilux,  
the keys around my neck  
rattle on my chest  
like medals.

In the past I have criticised the men—  
those old white men—in charge,  
who told the locals  
to call them 'masta'.

Now I feel like one of them.

Published in the *Canberra Times*, 2020

## The long view

If I were home in Canberra today, I'd be sitting in my local café sipping lattes, reading the weekend papers. Instead, I'm living in the desert: four hours from a decent coffee or weekend news; two from a roadhouse where a dodgy bar and greasy spoon co-exist, like I do here, quite comfortably, despite two laws in play, a different lingo and multiple requests to help translate demanding and persistent letters from our government, or a certain company chasing overdue instalments or compound interest on hired white goods long since broken.

Meanwhile, the herbal tea is cooling, breakfast is over, the watered garden's looking pert. What I love to do on Saturdays and Sundays is take in the long view south through slim venetians that slice the desert landscape horizontally. If I look west I see nasturtiums curling closer to the closed glass doors. Their blooms are like miniature suns, kinder than the one above. The peewee will arrive mid morning to make the same old love to his image in the side mirror of my 4 x 4 parked outside in semi shade. I'll clean his shit off later, when it's cool.

Right now this weekend idyll is shattered by the sound of donkeys rutting in the run-down shelter of a nearby donga; the poetry of camp dogs barking in the distance; the roar of a mob at war outside the store, sorting out a recent problem or some age-old gripe still unresolved and festering. It seems to me the crows have assembled on the sagging fence line near the school to egg them on. Obscenities in a desert tongue drift to my place. The poor nasturtiums seem to cringe.

Some whitefellas here say the reasons for the fighting are long forgotten, that people fight for love of fighting. That's not my view. Decisions over land some decades past; how last week's royalties were divvied up; the local power

broker's influence on town committees and the relative affluence of that family plays a part. Though troublemakers *do* love trouble. It's really much the same where I come from. Some people, no matter where they live, like to pour accelerant on flames and watch things burn. This might not be home to me but a familiar sounding siren reminds me of my home.

The cops will impound improvised weapons, lock someone up,  
or negotiate a simmering peace, which may or may not prevail.  
As the temperature climbs to 48 degrees, I'll turn the air-con up  
to high, put a CD on, look towards that long view south,  
without any hankering for my distant city home.

From *Inlandia*

### **At the single women's camp**

Molly, Bidy, Addie, Bess and May don't care  
about the grey beards sprouting from their chins.  
They couldn't give a wild fig about their matted  
hair, old scars, husbands, lovers, the living or the dead.

They burn wood, hotwire seeds for necklaces,  
mark time, paint dots on canvases. They're laughing  
at the antics of the dogs or one more whitefella  
who comes with questions or other kinds of wanting.

In their small circle behind this fence, they've finished  
mothering. They're silent now and wise. Their only wish,  
a decent feed, a lift to country when things are ripe—  
wild passionfruit, bush tomatoes, ininti seeds.

Let the young ones hunt echidna and goanna.

After all their gathering, these women are content to sit,  
sip tea, eat what we've packed in eskies or a box. They've  
stopped bleeding, crying, caring, wanting anything . . .  
except trips to country, ceremony.

Look!

Molly, Bidy, Addie, Bess and May are painted up!  
The ochre patterns on their bodies map their country.  
See how they gently stamp their feet and sway?

Listen!

They're singing up hills and soaks and dreaming  
sites with bare breasted dignity, knowing limbs,  
ochre lines and circles—the language of the land.  
Each woman's body is their country and a songline  
they are passing on to younger women, kin.

### **Induction (intercultural field)**

(*Apologies to Craig Storti, 'The Art of Crossing Cultures', 1989*)

Don't go overseas to feel at home. Don't think of *them* as 'foreign'. Remember, you came for difference, adventure, risk, experience, or should have, *Expatriate!* Remember too, what Lord Byron said—*travel makes us feel as if we exist.*

The bunker mentality is a little death. Taking refuge in the foreign *colony's* sub-culture, that exclusive club—its gin & tonic set—is a python that will squeeze out every breath. Don't become a cultural malcontent if disappointment makes its presence felt.

The real strangers might be your own kind: faultfinders, thirsty mono-cultural drinkers, who need superiority in every sip. Blunder on, even though you may be affronted or cause effrontery . . . be *all thumbs*, just have a go at cracking codes, walking in mismatched, ill-fitting shoes, or in bare feet.

The joke's on you so laugh a lot, mostly at yourself. Be content with your cultural identikit. You'll need your fellow countrymen and women, books and music, meat and three veg—any well-worn reality check—for balance and perspective.

Sometimes.

Make sure you leave a trail of crumbs or stones that you can follow home. Learn to go without, make do. To *function* is a virtue, like learning. Don't expect to triumph as you map new country. Learn its legends and its rules, its longitudes and latitudes. Lifelines, safety nets, inflated tyre tubes might include a good night's snooze, a daily dose of barley greens, writing letters home or skype-ing if you have the internet.

Stay well clear of zealots, those who love the un-holy dollar (or its local equivalent) and misogynists. Eat well. Learn the lingo—it is, by far, the best way in to understanding almost everything. Adjust, but not too much. Sometimes the greatest compliment is not to budge on right or wrong. As for *going native*, don't be that kind of *schmuck*. A full transition is impossible and not your mission—it is nearly always viewed with suspicion by compatriots and hosts alike. It's best to meet half way, your other half.

From *Inlandia*

## Metamorphosis

In this desert  
crow fouls my drying clothes, my patio  
steals wild passionfruit before it ripens  
spoils the air with *caw caw caw*

I curse you, crow—  
little shitter, thief  
tormentor

A Warlpiri elder tells me  
*Your totem, crow*  
My silent protest—*no, no, no!*

Now I must *protect* crow  
*love* crow, must *become* crow—  
its garbage tip mentality, soaring  
appetite, its dogged quest to be hated

A Napangardi I know says  
*Sis, you lucky to have crow—*  
*I'm emu. Not glamorous, like crow*

As glamorous as a running sore  
yesterday's road kill  
maggoty meat

Crow speaks—*you think I'm rubbish*  
*but you don't see my sequined*  
*evening dress, my feathered stole*

*If you stayed longer than a season*  
*I would not feast on your carcass—*  
*I'd turn your silly head*

I am crow—  
*the classic little black dress is my everyday*  
*my eyes are not yellow cake or coal, but diamonds*  
*I sing brassy psalms for my young*

Unpublished



## Comfort, Christmas 2020

Wanting comfort from home to take back  
to a Manhattan winter, my daughter  
chooses a black and white dot painting.

‘What’s the story?’ she asks.

*You’ve picked a good one. The artist is kin—  
a sister-in-law, elder and cultural leader  
who knows all the stories, songs and dances.*

*When Nampitjinpa dotted the canvas with a stick.  
I watched her hum and sing the story  
as she worked—she told me how the women*

*gathered seeds, ground them on stone, cooked  
damper on coals. The cake fed her family.  
It’s a fertility story as old as time. See the damage*

*on that edge? I don’t know if it’s black tea  
or dog’s piss, but the red dirt on the borders?  
That’s her Warlpiri country, where we sat together.*

My daughter turns the painting over.  
There, Nampitjinpa’s English name is written,  
with these words:

BUSH SEED USED TO MAKE DAMPER  
ROADS TO COLLECT THEM

and her birth date, a few years after mine.

*She had trouble at the time—a granddaughter  
had run away from boarding school; a brother,  
stuck in Mt Isa, broke. I paid more than she asked*

*so she could travel along those roads. These days  
bush seed battles it out with buffel grass and broken  
glass. The painting is a celebration and lament.*

She runs her fingers across the gritty edges  
of the painting. I’ll hang it above the kitchen table,  
think of you and Nampitjinpa when I bake bread.’

<https://oldwaterratpublishing.com/comfort-christmas-2020/>

### **Postcard from Bondi, 3 January 2021**

Apartment blocks around here are named *Avoca*,  
*St Albans*, *Cranbrook*; businesses called *Big John's*  
*Grill*, *Sasha's Hair*, and *Kevin's Barbershop* do a slow  
trade. *Pasha's Indian Restaurant* is closed for good,  
its windows curtained in last year's tabloids.

In a nearby side street, a hoarder's front yard attracts  
flies, pigeons and feral cats. Ancient paths are masked  
by concrete, sandstone steps and guardrails; middens  
cloaked in bitumen. The view from our holiday house  
is superb. We can see the curved beach, storms coming  
in from every direction.

<https://not-very-quiet.com/2021/03/14/postcard-from-bondi/>