TRADITIONS FOR HEALTH

Studies in Aboriginal Reconstruction
TRADITIONS FOR HEALTH
'To confer meaning on one's life is to take risks with one's culture'

Jeremy Waldron 1995, p.109
TRADITIONS FOR HEALTH

Studies in Aboriginal Reconstruction

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## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Alcoholics Anonymous</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<td>ADFA</td>
<td>Alcohol and Drug Foundation, Australia</td>
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<td>CAAAPU</td>
<td>Central Australian Aboriginal Alcohol Programs Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAAC</td>
<td>Central Australian Aboriginal Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAAMA</td>
<td>Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>CARPA</td>
<td>Central Australian Rural Practitioners Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDEP</td>
<td>Community Development Employment Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CES</td>
<td>Commonwealth Employment Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAA</td>
<td>Department of Aboriginal Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>DCS</td>
<td>Department of Community Services (WA)</td>
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<td>GAP</td>
<td>Grog Action Plan</td>
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<td>HALT</td>
<td>Healthy Aboriginal Life Team</td>
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<tr>
<td>HREOC</td>
<td>Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>IAD</td>
<td>Institute for Aboriginal Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>LRC</td>
<td>[Australian] Law Reform Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAHS</td>
<td>National Aboriginal Health Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIDDM</td>
<td>non-insulin dependent diabetes mellitus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCIADIC</td>
<td>Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STDs</td>
<td>sexually transmitted diseases</td>
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<tr>
<td>UPK</td>
<td>Uwankara Palyanyku Kanyintjaku</td>
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Preface

I wrote these papers while employed in the ‘Central Australia Unit’ of the Menzies School of Health Research, from October 1989 to December 1994, as a ‘medical anthropologist’. For a number of reasons I have always felt very uncomfortable with that professional identity, but at least the expectations which it generated forced me to work out what I thought was the relevance of a knowledge of ‘Aboriginal culture’ to current efforts to improve the health of Aboriginal people in central Australia. This book is the result.

The most embarrassing expectation of my ‘medical anthropology’ was that I would be able to put forward generalising models of the cultural logic of Aboriginal behaviour; informed by such models, health professionals would be better able to influence the behaviours of Aboriginal people.

Two things worried me about that expectation.

First, a certain professional insecurity. I did not think that I arrived in the job with the capacity to put forward such models; nor did I have any confidence that I could conduct the ethnographic research that might give rise to such models. Lacking any Aboriginal language, I saw myself as poorly
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equipped to conduct the kind of ethnographic research which I admire for its cultural penetration; and most of the extant ethnographic literature on Australian Aborigines is not directed to explaining the behaviours which health and welfare service providers find troubling or puzzling.

Second, I had a sense of the political inappropriateness of the question. Supporting Aboriginal control over health and other needed services, I was aware that ‘expert’ representations of how Aboriginal people think and behave, and of what they need or desire, could compete with and even displace Aboriginal self-representations.

Like any contemporary reader of anthropology I was aware of the recent critiques of that discipline’s historical association with colonialism and of its corresponding epistemic politics – its claims to being an authoritative tradition of investigation, capable of describing the customs of ‘other’ peoples. My twofold sense of embarrassment at being labelled a ‘medical anthropologist’ gave further point to my reading of these critiques.

One critical theme which I had already begun to find appealing was that ‘other’ cultures should not be described as if they are functionally self-sufficient and wholly integrated by normative consensus. Rather, central Australian Aboriginal people should be accounted for as people with an ongoing colonial history of which I (and the health/welfare apparatus within which I worked) was part; and Aboriginal people were differentiated in their ways of acting and reacting in such historical circumstances. Anthropology has too often been, in Nicholas Thomas’s words, ‘a discourse of alterity that magnifies the distance between “others” and “ourselves” while suppressing mutual entanglement and the perspectival and political fracturing of the cultures of both observers and observed’ (Thomas 1991, 309).

But if I were to accept this suggestion – to see Aboriginal people as dealing with the historic structures of colonialism, rather than as merely acting out the timeless logic of their Aboriginality – on what historically contingent features of the colonial encounter was I to focus? As it happened, the ‘structure’ which repeatedly loomed into view was the affirmation of Aboriginality itself. I was in a position to observe and to comment on interventions which
were based, rhetorically and strategically, on contemporary constructions of Aboriginality, put forward by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Running through my studies at the Menzies School, therefore, was the question: how is 'Aboriginal culture' constructed as a knowable and governable object in the health and welfare apparatuses of contemporary colonialism?

Among those now working with Aboriginal people on their health/welfare problems there is a common sense of distance from an earlier generation of assimilationist 'welfare' policy and practice. There is now a widespread desire to affirm Aboriginal culture. While working at the Menzies School I became uneasy, and then curious, about this affirmative tendency. In the rhetoric of this post-assimilationist politics I detected a lack of historical consciousness, that is, a tendency to deny that, whether we approved or not, the 'assimilation' era had been, in practice, constructive as well as destructive.

CONSTRUCTIVE OF WHAT?

It is the argument of this book, set out in a theoretical way in Part One, that the legacy of assimilation in central Australia includes the emergence of new forms or levels of social organisation among Aboriginal people. The three forms which strike me as particularly important are 'the individual', the 'family/household' and the 'community'. I refer to these three forms of social organisation as 'social technologies', a term which I get from those writers who are developing an aspect of the work of Michel Foucault – his work on 'governmentality' (Gordon 1987, 1991). To anticipate the argument a little, I want the reader of this book to adopt the view that central Australia has been and continues to be the site of a major social experiment. The experiment has its precedent in the history of 'western' societies since the industrial revolution, in particular the development of systems of 'public health'. In such nations as Britain, the United States and Australia the emergence of healthier populations can be understood (not exclusively, as there are other ways to tell that story) as the emergence of three levels of social power:

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• the communal or municipal level, which took responsibility for collective hygiene, for security of food and water and (more recently) for training in risk-avoiding behaviours (such as road safety measures and 'lifestyle' education);
• the level of the household and nucleated family, which concerned itself with domestic hygiene, with physical maintenance of houses as items of 'health hardware', with nutrition and with training in risk-avoiding behaviours (teaching children to wash hands, explaining 'safe sex' to teenagers);
• the level of the individual, that is, training people to make a causal connection between their own behaviour and their physical destiny. This 'individualism' includes giving people a sense of personal efficacy, of beauty, eroticism, of good and bad manners – through all of which individuals monitor their physical and mental well-being.

I emphasise that this is only one way to conceptualise the process which has given rise to the 'modernity' which most readers of this book experience. But it is a useful framework because it provides a way to think about the contemporary Aboriginal experiments which are illuminated in this collection of studies.

Phrases such as 'social technology' and 'experiment' will make some readers uneasy because of their evident association with the much criticised colonial ambition of 'social engineering'. 'Assimilation' policy is now held to be the most disreputable and aggressive instance of 'social engineering'. Am I lapsing back into 'assimilationist' thinking?

I do not think so. The problem with 'social engineering' is (or was) not the ambition to transform, in itself. Rather it was the fact that the mandate to 'socially engineer' Aboriginal people cast them in a passive role and implied that non-Aboriginal people knew very well what they were doing. Historical experience bids us put both these misconceptions aside. Since the 1970s, when 'assimilation' began to give way to 'self-determination' in the development and trial of new social technologies, it has been less and less the case that non-Aboriginal people are the over-confident experimenters and Aboriginal people merely the
hapless objects of experiment. To the extent that Aboriginal people have been given (and have taken) the power to run their own clinical and public health programs, they too are engaging in the experimental development of new social technologies. They may have had to insist on the ‘Aboriginality’ of their endeavours in order to win that empowerment, but such claims of fidelity to ‘Aboriginal ways’ need not become the pious axioms of subsequent social and historical analysis of their actions. My stance in this book is to welcome the notions of experiment, to salute the historical emergence and trial of new social technologies, and to distance myself from (without dismissing) the rhetorics of ‘Aboriginality’. Let me recall my practical introduction to the difficulties of affirming ‘Aboriginality’ in current health/welfare practice.

In 1991 David Scrimgeour and I interviewed health service personnel across central Australia to find out what they thought was hindering control of sexually transmitted diseases. Among those interviewed we found a fascinating variety of constructions of what ‘Aboriginal culture’ would or would not allow in the way of survey screening and clinical dialogue. One of our conclusions was that service deliverers were sometimes being inhibited by their sincere respect for what they variously put forward as Aboriginal sensitivities about showing the body and answering questions about sexual history. In too many cases, their professional folklore of Aboriginal norms left no room for the hypotheses: that Aboriginal culture is dynamic enough to accommodate new institutions such as clinics, that Aboriginal people can be quite pragmatic, and that among Aboriginal people there are different views as to what is proper or permissible in various situations. We did not conclude that cultural knowledge is irrelevant to the sensitive and effective delivery of services, but we came away from our interviews sceptical that any one model or code of Aboriginal propriety could be formulated to guide health service personnel. Better that those delivering services adopt a stance of cautious experimentation and leave themselves open to advice (and even direction) from Aboriginal health workers and other local ‘experts’.
All such expertise is local, contingent and fallible. It would be a mistake, albeit a politically comfortable one, to accept this discovery as illustrating the fallibility only of non-Aboriginal constructions of Aboriginality. Both Aborigines and non-Aborigines have made ventures into cross-cultural modelling. Indeed, the government policies of 'Aboriginal self-determination' solicit, continuously and successfully, Aboriginal efforts to give accounts of 'the Aboriginal way' of tackling this or that identified problem. But there is considerable cultural variety among central Australian people who identify as 'Aboriginal people'; and available notions of 'the Aboriginal way' are frequently the product of joint Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal effort. There is no need to bemoan this, and it is futile to try to separate the 'real' notions of Aboriginality from 'inauthentic' encrustations.

Marcia Langton has pointed to what she calls the dialogical construction (and continuing reconstruction) of 'Aboriginality'. She suggests that 'Aboriginality' arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience such as a white person watching a programme about Aboriginal people on television or reading a book (Langton 1994, 98).

She outlines the possibility of constructions which are generated when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage in actual dialogue, be it at a supermarket checkout or in a film co-production. In these exchanges, the individuals involved will test imagined models of the other to find some satisfactory way of comprehending the other. It is in these dialogues... that working models of 'Aboriginality' are constructed as ways of seeing Aboriginal people, but both the Aboriginal subject and the non-Aboriginal subject are participating (Langton 1994, 100).

These words describe the best possible setting for postcolonial health/welfare practice. Among the conditions which must obtain if that setting is to be realised, Aboriginal people must be given resources to develop their own services and interventions in which non-Aboriginal personnel — colleagues and employees — will be parties to the dialogue.
PREFACE

SOURCES OF THESE STUDIES

The studies which follow vary in their language because they vary in the occasions which produced them. I have not tried to achieve stylistic uniformity.

Part One 'Introduction' consists of one chapter, 'Traditions and social technologies', elaborating the remarks I have just made; it was written in 1995, especially for this collection. I received useful comments on an earlier version from audiences in the Anthropology Department of the University of Western Australia and Murdoch University's Centre for Research in Culture and Communication.

Part Two 'The central Australian Aboriginal family as a site of welfare intervention' takes up a crucial question in welfare colonial theory and practice: how can the state deliver human services which are congruent with, rather than destructive of, the most valued features of Aboriginal social organisation? Chapter Two 'Assimilation and beyond' is a revised version of a paper given to the Central Australian Rural Practitioners Association (CARPA) Conference of November 1989 (Rowse 1990). It is based on a larger piece of research (Rowse 1989) and lacks the detailed archival referencing available in that thesis. Chapter Three 'Values, tactics and HALT' is a revised version of 'Chapter One: the HALT theory' from the Menzies School of Health Research HALT: An Evaluation (Menzies School of Health Research 1991).

When I wrote this chapter, my thinking owed much to the two colleagues, Suzy Bryce and David Scrimgeour, who shared the researching and the writing of the overall report. I also owe a debt to Maggie Brady (Brady 1992a) whose work was available to us as a not-yet-to-be-cited typescript.

In February 1992 I finished a report called 'Perspectives on the cultures of Aboriginal people in Central Australia', based partly on thirteen weeks of fieldwork in Bushtown, a remote town with a predominantly Aboriginal population. The report has been circulated as a typescript, and appears here in revised form as the two chapters (four and five) comprising Part Three, 'HIV/AIDS and self-determination'. To thank by name those who extended me their hospitality and cooperation would be to give away the
true name of Bushtown. However, I can acknowledge a debt to Francoise Dussart, for references and for conversation. The field research was approved by the Alice Springs Institutional Ethics Committee.

The two studies making up Part Four 'Producing sober individuals' are based on my association with the Central Australian Aboriginal Alcohol Programs Unit (CAAAPU). In 1991 CAAAPU invited the Menzies School of Health Research to evaluate the implementation of its three year (1992–4) 'Grog Action Plan'. A number of people worked on that project. In particular I would like to mention David Scrimgeour and Kerrie Miller. The salary of Kerrie Miller (and some short-term predecessors in her position) was paid by a grant from the Medical Advisory Committee of the Australian Associated Brewers. Our evaluation research was approved by the Alice Springs Institutional Ethics Committee; it also required the cooperation of CAAAPU's staff and clients. Chapter Six 'Ethnography and the individual' has been published before (Rowse 1993) and is reproduced with permission of the Editor of the Drug and Alcohol Review. Chapter Seven 'CAAAPU and Aboriginal identity', co-authored with Kerrie Miller, is made up of slightly edited excerpts from Miller and Rowse (1995).

Part Five 'Customary Law and Aboriginal self-policing' is made up of two studies. 'Social control and self-determination' (Chapter Eight) was written in 1995 for this volume. I thank Nanette Rogers and Peter D'Abbs for their help. The illustrative account of 'Bushtown's Wardens' (Chapter Nine) is based on an unpublished study completed in 1992. The Bushtown field research was authorised by the Alice Springs Institutional Ethics Committee.

The Conclusion was written in 1995 for this volume.

This book would not have been possible without support from a number of sources since the late 1980s: Sydney University, particularly the Anthropology Department's Carlyle Greenwell Bequest; The Menzies School of Health Research; and the Australian Research Council. I would like to thank Debbie Rose for her thoughtful comments on an early draft of the Preface and Introduction. NARU's three referees - Lee Sackett, Maggie Brady
and Sherry Saggers – and publications and library staff (Anna Davis, Nicola Hanssen, Sally Bailey and Ann Webb) were also essential to my turning a fragmented typescript into a book. I thank Komla Tsey for late but very useful editorial advice.
PART ONE

Introduction
1

Traditions and social technologies

When Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people speak of mobilising the resources of Aboriginal traditions to deal with problems, I make sense of what they are saying by calling on a 'constructivist' theory of custom and tradition.

The value of understanding custom and tradition as historically dynamic and contested is demonstrated in some recent papers by Pat O'Malley about a petrol sniffing prevention program among the Ngaanyatjarra people of the western desert. O'Malley reviewed a scheme devised collaboratively between officials of the Western Australian Department of Community Services (DCS) and the Ngaanyatjarra Council – the Marlba project, in which 'mentors' who were kin to petrol sniffers were appointed to look after and supervise them.

'Tradition' was selectively valorised by the scheme, O'Malley argues. For example, according to some Ngaanyatjara, some of the actions of petrol sniffers would once have been dealt with 'by spearing, clubbing, banishment or even death'.

Although not all Ngaanyatjarra people believe that this 'traditional' response should be used against sniffers, many people commented that 'in the old days' there would have been no problem with such
young people. The sense was clear that, even if a few had to suffer and even die, other young people would quickly learn the lesson and the problem would disappear (O'Malley 1994, 138).

However, DCS officers could not approve such violent sanctions. Their view of ‘tradition’ was that its nurturant, rather than its punitive, elements had to be brought to the fore: ‘in the eyes of some DCS workers, the violent reactions were not “traditional” responses of a “legal form”, but rather were the irrational outburst of irate men (and sometimes, women) ... DCS ... is setting itself as the arbiter of another people’s traditions’ (O'Malley 1994, 138).

According to O’Malley this selective appropriation of ‘tradition’ enjoyed some support among the Ngaanyatjarra. The DCS model of Ngaanyatjarra culture inclined its officers to favour consultation with older men. Nonetheless, not all older men supported the Marlba strategy. Some favoured criminal sanctions; others thought the problem of petrol sniffing was being exaggerated. O’Malley uses the phrase ‘relevant tradition’ to refer to a version of tradition negotiated between DCS officers and those Ngaanyatjarra who supported the Marlba program.

In his observations of the varying constructions of ‘tradition’, O’Malley is not critically comparing the ‘relevant tradition’ with something more ‘authentic’. His analysis is not an expose of something artificial and imposed, ‘for the Ngaanyatjarra are not naive or the officials narrowly calculating’. Rather, O’Malley’s intention is to show the inescapable contingency and negotiability of ‘tradition’. When ‘tradition’ is valorised in the course of implementing policies of indigenous self-determination, the referents of ‘Aboriginal’ are likely to be matters for (sometimes troubled) interactions among an array of interested parties.

It follows that a practical and reasonable step is to sensitize those researching and practising in this and comparable fields, to the complex dilemmas confronting even the most sincere attempts to assist indigenous people with self-management of drug problems. That, essentially, is what this paper has been about (O’Malley 1994, 140-1).
TRADITIONS AND SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES

And that is what this book is about. The rest of this chapter is an attempt to set out a theoretical basis for understanding the dynamic and contested nature of Aboriginal traditions.

DETACHMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

Contemporary writers in anthropology and history have developed an analytic interest in the constructed nature of 'tradition' and 'identity'. 'Constructed' is a word to be treated with care. It is not a matter of exposing as 'artificial' this or that version of 'custom' or 'tradition': judgments of authenticity or artificiality (in the sense of inauthenticity) are better assumed to be impossible and/or irrelevant. Rather it is the conditions, processes and consequences of such construction which have become major analytic themes. As Tonkinson has put it: 'When people contest definitions of the past and the nature and content of customary practices, the “truth value” of such claims is largely irrelevant to the observer: what matters is whose views prevail, and why, and to what effect' (Tonkinson 1993, 599). A number of the essays in this book touch on the contemporary construction, by indigenous and non-indigenous people, of what is thought to be traditionally 'Aboriginal', in order to bring 'Aboriginal tradition' into a relationship of mutual support with a current innovation in policing, alcohol treatment, petrol sniffing prevention or sexual regulation.

It can be uncomfortable to detach oneself analytically from the process of constructing Aboriginality: those with whom one is working are likely fervently to believe in their representations of what they are doing as 'the Aboriginal way'. Government subsidies may be at stake in maintaining such representations, as will be colleagues' deeply felt senses of identity and of common purpose in difficult enterprises. Not for such activists the academic privilege of deconstructing what has been so ardently constructed as 'custom'.

To this discomfort there could be at least two responses by those who are committed to the degree of detachment on which this book is based.
First, we can acknowledge the sheer productivity and necessity of the re-invention of tradition. Tonkinson again:

In societies such as Australia and North America, encapsulated indigenous minorities must present their claims to rights and resources largely in terms of 'traditional' validatory criteria, such as kin group affiliation, land tenure principles, religion and language. The fact that the nation-state demands evidence of 'tradition' has important consequences: it not only confers upon customary beliefs and behaviours a special legal status, but the very framing of legislation requiring such 'proofs' stimulates a continuing process of remembering, reconceptualisation, retention and dissemination of 'traditional' knowledge among the indigenous claimants – which of course has major ramifications for identity and political action (Tonkinson 1993, 603).

And, second, we can find relief in a certain agnosticism about 'tradition' when indigenous versions of tradition are in contention with one another. Rather than be embarrassed at not being able to champion or advocate – as a matter of principle – every indigenous representation, it is better to assume from the start that culture is 'complex and open-ended ... an arena of negotiation and contention' (Linnekin 1992, 259).

In accepting that it is inevitable that 'Aboriginality' is an open and contested category, and in making that category's openness one of my theoretical starting points, I take a position which many Aboriginal people will decline to take, indeed, which they may be unable to take. Aboriginal people are under pressure to assert their Aboriginality in the face of authoritative forms of knowledge which misrepresent Aboriginal wishes and needs, or even fail to attempt any representation of them at all. Elizabeth Povinelli has recently published a sensitive study of this colonised predicament as it affects the women of the Cox Peninsula (outside Darwin) who wish to give an account of themselves as bearers of a living Aboriginal tradition. Povinelli (1993, 126–9) argues that their self-representations are best understood as responses to specific and diverse invitations and pressures from non-Aboriginal people (researchers, tourists, government officials). The terms in which they are induced to give such accounts require them to situate themselves in relation
to 'tradition'. Povinelli shows these men and women to be in subtle dispute with the assumptions behind some of these provocations of identity. Cox Peninsula people seek 'to turn what was it like to what is it like to be an Aboriginal person in Australia?'. She reports their commenting 'caustically' 'when whites expect them to tell stories about times and peoples they never met and do not and cannot know' (Povinelli 1993, 126, 127). Cox Peninsula people are determined to 'evoke a past without presenting themselves as a corrupt part of the present' (Povinelli 1993, 126). I am aware that I write about the negotiability of 'Aboriginality' from a safer and more privileged position than Aboriginal people - that of a non-indigenous academic.

EMERGING SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES

The contemporary incitement of Aboriginal identity is, in part, a reaction against a period of Australian history when indigenous Australians were being asked, and often compelled, to put their Aboriginality behind them, to distance it as no more than colourful 'heritage' and to eschew it insofar as it handicapped a person's emergence into modernity and common citizenship. Those whose 'Aboriginality' is now respected and solicited are faced with a new pressure: to situate their 'culture' among the many new features of their way of life - their use of motor vehicles, rifles, houses, plastic buckets, bank accounts etc and their entitlement to welfare payments and superannuation. These are new technologies and new social arrangements; they are here to stay because Aboriginal people like them and will defend their entitlement to them. Because they are both technologies and social arrangements, I call them 'social technologies'. I agree with Bruno Latour (who would call them 'assemblages', see Latour 1993) that it is a mistake to try to disentangle the mutual embeddedness of technologies and social forms.

It is easy to think of other examples of social technologies which have been introduced to Aboriginal people of central Australia: the clinic, the school, the communal dining room (which was soon eclipsed by another social technology, the cash-based retail canteen), the stock camp, the CES interview, the art market.
Aboriginal people already had their own social technologies: man-making ceremonies, hunting bands of fluctuating sizes (according to ecological pressure), the exchange of marriage partners between families, boundaries between countries, speech taboos on widows, ritual performances, and so on.

In the above examples, it seems easy to label some social technologies as 'non-Aboriginal' and others as 'Aboriginal'. However, it is characteristic of the colonial encounter, as I understand it, that such labels become more and more suspect. If Aboriginal people make repeated use of an introduced social technology, does it not make sense to see that technology as being 'Aboriginal' as well as 'non-Aboriginal'? Listening to old Aboriginal men reminisce about their time in the cattle industry it becomes difficult to keep thinking of the stock camp as being a non-Aboriginal social technology; it became Aboriginal as well. In communities in which many Aboriginal people see themselves as Christian, is the church not an Aboriginal place, rather than just an implanted non-Aboriginal place visited by Aborigines?

Maggie Brady has pointed out that Aboriginal 'self-management' may include the adoption of practices whose cultural provenance - Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal? - is so unclear as to make the issue impossible to determine and futile to ponder. She instances the wish expressed by some western desert people for increased parental and judicial involvement in controlling petrol sniffing, even their calls for the punishment of parents of petrol-sniffers. She finds it 'ironic that while concerned white liberals and Aboriginal activists call for the police to temper the level of their interactions with Aborigines, some communities in remote areas are complaining that the police do not intervene more often, and urge that their powers be extended rather than curtailed' (Brady 1992b, 130). Accordingly, she avoids the terminology 'Aboriginal'/non-Aboriginal' when referring to the problem of finding an effective mix of measures for managing petrol sniffing, preferring to write, for example, of the 'serious disjunction between formal and informal sanctions' (1992b, 135).

It is rarely, if ever, useful to apply tests of cultural authenticity to social technologies. For such tests to be applicable, it would be necessary to have clear and settled views of what is 'Aboriginal'
and what is not. The approach to ‘Aboriginality’, ‘custom’ and ‘tradition’ which I have outlined above treats such clear and settled views as momentary artefacts of the political process, not as the firm bases of social/historical analysis. It may be advantageous for those in the heat of politics to claim ‘that is/isn’t an Aboriginal way to do things’, but such claims are the cultural facts which I wish to study; they are not the unproblematic truths from which a study may proceed.

EXPERIMENTS IN GOVERNANCE

If we think of Aboriginal life in central Australia as a mixture of many new and old things and ways of behaving, what does ‘self-determination’ mean? Are there any criteria by which we can assess the degree to which a set of social arrangements is determined by Aboriginal people themselves?

In posing that question, the word ‘determine’ might, at first, seem to be the crucial and problematic term, the term that points to issues of the distribution of power, or rather of its redistribution from non-Aboriginal to Aboriginal authority. Let me make an alternative suggestion: that the most interesting term in ‘self-determination’ is ‘self’. It is this difficult word ‘self’ which justifies our thinking of ‘self-determination’ as a new project of governance. Who or what are the ‘selves’ to which the phrase ‘self-determination’ refers? I will argue that ‘self-determination’ is a phase in the development of government in Australia in which governments (national, State/Territory and municipal) attempt to call into being, and/or to reinforce, three kinds of indigenous ‘self’: the individual, the family/household, and the community.

The colonial encounter has given rise to pressures for and against the formation of new individualities, households and communities. These pressures are not necessarily the objects of deliberated reflection and program experiment; rather they also include secular trends, part and parcel of wider processes of colonial transformation, such as the transition from rations-based to cash-based welfare, and the adoption of new technologies (such as houses and motor vehicles) by Aboriginal people.
Whether deliberated or not, these processes have produced a new social field which must be governed by some combination of indigenous and non-indigenous efforts. Referring to the ways in which those who govern must have some sort of picture of those whom they govern, Colin Gordon recommends the rather ungainly term 'problematizations'. 'Problematizations' are 'the ways in which human beings conceive and address their own selves and the different aspects of their individual and collective being as problems' (Gordon 1987, 297). The task of government – involving Cabinet ministers, senior bureaucrats, State officials, town clerks, the office holders in Aboriginal councils and associations – cannot be understood without paying close attention to the categories by which such people conceptualize and render accessible to purposeful action the 'realities' which the governing process enacts. Such categories name 'objects of governing', writes Gordon.

Gordon could have added that 'objects of governing' may also be 'subjects of governing'. No less than this is implicit in his wording 'address their own selves and the different aspects of their individual and collective being'. When an Aboriginal council engages in the governing of its 'community' it is both the subject of government (in the sense that it originates policies and makes certain things happen) and the object of government (in the sense that when other organisations, such as government departments, wish to relate to that community in some way, such as determining its power supply budget, they will deal with the council, or expect criticism if they do not). An object is an entity which has to be taken into account.

I will soon illustrate the proposition that in the contemporary processes of 'self-determination', the salient subjects and objects of governing are the 'community', the 'family'/household' and the 'individual'. Before doing so, a little more theoretical argument is necessary. What makes up these three entities, and what is their relationship with 'Aboriginal culture'?

Gordon writes that 'objects of governing have particular material and conceptual pre-conditions, which depend for their existence and their operability on specific knowledges, techniques, expertises' (Gordon 1987, 298). What are the 'material
and conceptual preconditions of the three categories whose salience I have suggested? They are, in an important but not exclusive sense, things which the state has made up. One writer has said that all government is 'an articulatory practice which constitutes and organizes social relations through the use of constitutive categories' (Watts 1993/4, 121). To translate that into the central Australian context, we may say that Australian governments deal with the Aboriginal people of central Australia: as if they were individuals (accountable as individuals in processes of law, and enjoying entitlements as individuals in social security schemes); as if they were households (in that governments provide dwellings of a certain shape, size and spatial relationship with other, similar dwellings, and charge on a household basis for such essential services as energy and water); and as if they were communities (in legislating for the formation of 'community government councils' which take some responsibility, in government programs, for aggregations of physical equipment, such as energy systems and ablution blocks). In other words, it is not just the ways that governments talk and write that each of these entities is conjured up – they are also made to happen through things which governments do. To put it in the usual academic theoretical terms, these 'objects (which are also subjects) of government' are constituted both discursively and non-discursively.

Let me conclude this section with some disclaimers. It is important not to overstate the ease with which governments constitute this or that. Governments are subject to many kinds of failure, and the social fields which they attempt to constitute include forces whose directions and strength may be difficult to anticipate and influence – including other actions of government (Malpas and Wickham 1995). Notwithstanding the implications of Gordon's phrase 'knowledges, techniques, expertises', we should not assume that government is effective in its own terms; that is always a matter for empirical inquiry and analytic judgment.

Nor should the theory be taken to imply moral or ethical judgments. If I can show the implication of Aboriginal people in strategies of government, I am not implying that they are dupes; if I refer to the difficulty of constituting certain forms of social
organisation among Aboriginal people, I am not necessarily celebrating ‘resistance’. Nor am I identifying ‘government’ with non-Aboriginal people, and ‘the governed’ with Aboriginal people. My interest is in the constitutive categories of the contemporary process of governing. I do not suppose that because the state deals with Aboriginal people in these terms – community, household, individual – social relationships among Aboriginal people are also to be described and accounted for entirely in these terms, as if government were totally successful in remoulding people’s lives. Alternatively, I discourage the expectation that what the state does can be accounted entirely as an imposition, alien to those upon whom it is imposed because Aboriginal peoples’ social relationships cannot be conceived in terms of individuals, households and communities. I suggest that we treat with great scepticism any analysis of the colonial encounter which presumes either the constitutive sovereignty of government or the unceasing, universal resistance of Aborigines to government. In the remainder of this introduction I will try to illustrate the assertion that, in remote Aboriginal communities at least, the sites ‘individual’, ‘family/household’ and ‘community’ are inescapably salient and ceaselessly problematic ‘subjects and objects of government’ for Aboriginal people and those (Aborigines and non-Aborigines) who seek to service and govern them.

INDIVIDUAL

To suggest that the colonial encounter in northern and central Australia is an interaction of different ways of valuing individuals and of experiencing one’s individuality is to enter into one of the more difficult themes of social theory. Bryan Turner has pointed to the paradoxical perspective on ‘individualism’ to be found in the classical sociological tradition. This tradition’s major figures saw individualism as

the direct consequence of competition, markets and capitalist relations as they had evolved in the European context during the seventeenth century. The classical sociological tradition also saw individualism as corrosive of the social structure and culture in Western systems. The
paradox is that within the classical perspective capitalism produces individualism as a necessary and compatible ideology of private property, but individualism was also thought to be corrosive of communal and social ties, having effects which were regarded to be deleterious at both individual and social levels (Turner 1988, 48).

I do not wish to lament the demise of communalism and the rise of individualism. Rather, I prefer to point to the changing nature and conditions of individuation.

Anthony Giddens has proposed a theory of modernity in which the modern processes which yield a 'self-identity' are characterised by the diminishing significance of locality and kinship and the greater importance of media of mass communication, large-scale systems of political authority, the extension of wage-labour relations and the rise of administrative systems based on expert knowledges (Giddens 1991). This would seem to characterise the context to which central Australian Aboriginal people have been adapting since they were colonised in the late nineteenth century. Critics of Giddens have pointed out that theories of modernity and individuality which remain at high levels of generality cannot portray relations of power – across lines of class, gender, age, region and ethnic group – which give rise to differentiated opportunities for the emergence of modern, reflexive individuality. A theory of modern individuality, the critics say, requires an 'account of the mediation of experience through the differentiated contexts in which such processes [of individuated experience] become lived, or indeed of local expressions and collective forms of resistance' (Hay, O'Brien and Penna 1993/4, 74). This is a fair warning to anyone seeking to trace the rise of new forms of individualism among Aboriginal people. In what follows I wish to emphasise that there is no single instance or determinant of an emerging tendency to modern forms of individuality among Aboriginal people. I hope my examples are heterogeneous enough to make that point.

Writers on Aboriginal society and culture have varied in emphasis when discussing the relationship (and possibly tension) between 'individualism' and 'communal and social ties'. The textbook The World of the First Australians (Berndt and Berndt 1981, second edition) has a relatively long index entry 'individual
initiative or variation, scope for'. Apart from conceding that Aboriginal people appreciated differences in personality, attached some importance to physical appearance, allowed personal totems (in some regions), and gave scope for individuals' embellishments in the expression of commonly owned stories and images, their emphasis is largely on the limitations to individualism.

Independence – individual independence – was played down, or undervalued, because group cooperation was an economic necessity; and speculation and experiment could go only so far, because the status quo depended on common expectations in belief and in action (Berndt and Berndt 1981, 519–20).

However, they also wrote in their chapter on ‘maintenance of order’ that ‘traditional custom is a powerful factor, but personal decision within that framework is often an overriding influence which cuts across other personal decisions, other interests’ (1981, 361).

Their best effort to suggest how such individualism might be systematically accommodated to a general climate of ‘group cooperation’ is their discussion of marriage and sexual morality. They generalise that ‘there is (was), more or less, in all tribes some opportunity for both men and women to find, outside marriage, sexual partners on a transient-mundane, or transient-ritual, or romantic basis’ (1981, 89). What gave that opportunity, they remark, is that not all sexual liaisons were loaded with the political burden which marriage has carried in Aboriginal society – the creation of obligations between groups.

Any form of marriage imposes, on the husband at least, obligations and responsibilities in relation to his wife’s immediate kin. If it does not, then it is not, traditionally, a ‘real’ marriage. This is one criterion distinguishing marriage, as such, from a ‘selfish’ or individual-centred sweetheart relationship (Berndt and Berndt 1981, 207).

The Berndts did not emphasise, as much as contemporary readers may wish, inequalities between men and women, and youth and age, in access to these ‘individual-centred’ departures from prescribed sexual conduct. The issue of how individualism was gendered and ‘aged’ tends to remain suggestively open in their
work. However, they do acknowledge the possibility that young girls’ individualism was a latent force within Aboriginal tradition.

There is not enough information on the score of how many young women resent, even if not to the extent of active opposition, marrying men they have not chosen for themselves. Probably they are in a minority, in circumstances where family-arranged unions are accepted as normal, offering a woman comparative economic and social security. The exceptions, commemorated in myth and story as well as in more or less factual accounts, keep the possibility of rebellion alive and at the same time serve as a warning to girls who might try to imitate them (1981, 198).

Annette Hamilton’s study of Anbarra child rearing led her to generalise about the ways in which individualism could co-exist with conformity. ‘The giving and receiving of food and women, the control of aggression through ridicule and interference’ and pressures ‘to conform to traditional role expectations formed early in life’ combine to give individuals a sense that their personal identity is deeply related to their place in a network of kin-defined rights and obligations. When all this becomes too much for a person, he or she can move from one group to another. The capacity to move away ‘must be the deepest and most significant freedom in Aboriginal society’ (Hamilton 1981, 152–3).

To emphasise movement as individual freedom was part of a new generation of ethnographic writing about Aborigines which postdates the ethnography upon which the Berndts based their textbook. In the early 1980s Les Hiatt celebrated this new orientation as ‘the documentation and analysis of process, in contrast to the preoccupation of earlier generations with structure, form, and function’ (Hiatt 1984, 15). This work featured a ‘break with traditional group sociology in order to stress the interests of individuals’ (1984, 21).

Fred Myers’s Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self (Myers 1986), an instance of this focus on process, thus extensively indexes the notion ‘self’. However, in his view, it is not an ‘egoistic self’ which the Pintupi value when they respect the autonomy of other persons. Rather ‘knowledge of The Dreaming is experienced as the basis of autonomy and the prime source of value.
Subordination becomes temporarily necessary to achieve the full autonomy valued in egalitarian society' (Myers 1986, 266). And

Genuine autonomy is not a product of private will, but results only through successful negotiation in relations with others. Coming from outside the individual, this autonomy – finally established as zeal of upholding the law ‘without sorrow’ – is a representation within the individual of a socially valued moral imperative (Myers 1986, 124).

When Myers explains ‘individual autonomy’ in this way, it is useful to remember that he is expounding the norms which he inferred or heard expressed when he was among Pintupi. As I understand it, he is not suggesting that the Pintupi esteem in equal measure all assertions of individual autonomy. The issue of the gender and age attributes of sanctioned autonomy is left open in his work (though his autonomous individuals seem to me to be mostly male), and it is intriguing that fighting and ‘making trouble’ can also be understood, he suggests, as the ‘assertion of autonomy’ (1986, 161–2).

To the extent that it is difficult to capture in any single formulation the nature and limits of traditions of ‘individualism’ among Aboriginal people, it is difficult to generalise about how colonial circumstances might promote, block or secure continuities in individualism. But to establish that there is a theme to be explored, I offer some vignettes from ethnographic writing.

In reporting his work at Wiluna in the 1970s and 1980s (1977, 1988) Lee Sackett says that traditions of respect for individual autonomy discourage the development of sanctions against drinking.

The overall failure to react against drinking and drunkenness could very well be because it might be more a disregard of the Law to create new rules (even to cover a non-traditional element) than to allow the persistence of excessive consumption. And even if instituted, any new rules would lack the authority of tradition and, in all probability, make inroads into the personal freedom provided for by the Law (1977, 98).

Yet Aboriginal people may postulate and encourage individual autonomy which is quite opposed to such a permissive approach.
to alcohol. In the fourth part of this book, Kerrie Miller and I have documented the ways in which staff of the Central Australian Aboriginal Alcohol Programs Unit (CAAAPU) embraced Alcoholics Anonymous – a therapeutic philosophy and practice. The AA method maps a ‘recovery’ in which a new sense of autonomous self-hood is established. CAAAPU discovered and debated both tensions and congruities between ‘Aboriginal tradition’ and this AA-inspired ideal of the recovering individual. CAAAPU was tapping into some powerful currents of modernity. Robin Room has argued that AA’s ‘twelve-step consciousness’ has become a generalised model of individual redemption in contemporary North America (Room 1992).

The development of the market for ‘fine art’ produced by Aboriginal people has also heightened the potential for conceptions of ‘individuality’ to arise in the colonial encounter. Morphy gives a fascinating account of the competing frameworks available for understanding the worth and aspirations of the Yolngu artist, Narritjin Maymuru. The early reception of his work stimulated this man to conceive of himself as an ‘artist’ with a unique expressive power. However, Narritjin faced missionary advisers who saw his status in terms of their own ideology of Aborigines’ evolutionary development as a group; in their conception there was no place for outstanding entrepreneurial individual Aborigines (Morphy 1991, 32–6). Nic Peterson cites ethnographies by Luke Taylor and Francois Dussart, who worked among artists of western Arnhem Land and the western desert, respectively, in the 1980s, to make the point that the market success of individual artists may put pressure on those artists to conceive the images they paint as their own property. The monetary returns on sales by individuals have given rise to disputes in which other individuals assert

a right to income from paintings because of traditional rights they have in the religious life of the clan of the painter or from the paintings actually having been produced cooperatively but being sold by a single person to the art dealers and the seller not always sharing the funds appropriately (Peterson 1991, 72).
Finally, the tensions between common ownership of images and the artist's unique powers and styles of expressing them is a theme of Vivien Johnson's biography of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri. Her argument is too much bound up with a reading of particular images for me to summarise, but its effect is to suggest that Tjapaltjarri's choices of subject and style can in part be understood as an attempt to resolve that tension between individual expressive power and collective ownership (Johnson 1994, 78).

The colonial encounter has provided opportunities for young women to assert their individuality, particularly in the crucial matter of selecting partners for sex and/or marriage. These assertions and the resistance with which they were met are at the centre of Nancy Williams's study of the way Yolngu have struggled to define the jurisdiction of their customary law in the context of the Yirrkala mission. She reports that young women sought and received local white Australians' support for their assertions of individual preference, to the disapproval of Yolngu leaders. Such was the combined pressure of girls' assertions and non-Yolngu encouragement that in a 'District Village Council' meeting in 1970 Yolngu leaders modified their government of girls:

> girls were allowed to complete their education if they wished before being married. If they married before leaving school, the marriage was not to be consummated until the girls' education was complete. Girls born in 1967 and after were not to be betrothed by their families. Marriages were to be governed by rules stipulating correct subsection memberships (malk or 'skin' relationships), correct mother's brother (ngampa), and correct religious relationships to land (madayin) (Williams 1987, 153).

It should be pointed out that struggle over the nature of young women's sexual subjectivity is hardly confined to Yolngu. In different ways the claim to autonomous sexual subjecthood has also been an issue in the politics of sex education in the United States, with feminists pitted against leaders of the 'moral majority' (Fine 1988). In Australia, the work of researchers such as Johanna Wyn has exposed a similar arena of contest between conventional views of heterosexual femininity and health.
education which implies an alternative, more autonomous female sexual subject (Wyn 1994).

With the entry of Aboriginal people into the Australian social security system, from 1941 to 1975, cash replaced rations as the most important material basis of Aboriginal subsistence. Welfare cheques are made out to individuals, and individuals are encouraged to open bank accounts. Has this change promoted new forms of individualism among Aboriginal people? Nic Peterson argues that it has not done so among Aboriginal people of the non-urban regions of the Northern Territory (and perhaps his argument holds for indigenous Australians in the rest of non-urban northern and central Australia). Rather, money has become a resource within an economy still largely ordered by older considerations of kinship which militate against the individual accumulation of wealth.

Money is used entirely for consumption. The egalitarian tendencies in Aboriginal society which detach people from property and the inequalities it produces, prevent accumulation and the conversion of cash into capital. Capital still inheres in social relationships and, for those over forty, at least, in the accumulation of religious knowledge. Such relationships are maintained by the circulation of money, goods and judicious sharing of knowledge, not by husbanding them (Peterson 1991, 84).

Peterson can thus explain the Aboriginal penchant for gambling with cards as an alternative accumulation strategy. That is, an individual can quickly amass enough winnings to buy expensive goods (such as a motor vehicle). Because he/she is not slowly accumulating cash through thrift, he/she does not have to go for months denying kin. Rapid cash accumulation through cards obviates the difficulty of setting up the social relationships implied by habits of individual parsimony. 'Saving' has been achieved without the formation of that alien figure – the thrifty subject.

HOUSEHOLDS

One of the strongest demands currently issuing from Aboriginal people and their supporters is for more and better housing.
TRADITIONS FOR HEALTH

Whatever the design of the houses which are built to meet this demand, there can be no doubt that the supply of houses to Aboriginal people forms a material threshold to a significant social change: the precipitation of a new social form called the household. Households can be conceived by public health researchers as a key site for the production of healthy styles of life and of appropriate health-seeking behaviours (Berman, Kendall and Bhattacharyya 1994).

Public health officials and researchers are not the only interests to conceive the household as a salient social form; so too may local Aboriginal organisations. Elizabeth Povinelli gives an example, from the Belyuen community, of the ‘household’ being produced as a salient category by the interactions of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Community councils are under pressure (from residents’ aspirations and from governments parsimonious with subsidies) to increase revenue.

One controversial way is through the payment of rent. In order to collect rent from those who use a house, the Belyuen Community Council retreats to the notion of residential unit: What group lives in a house, which is the primary kin unit there, and who is the senior head? When these persons are confronted for payment, they use extended kinship and the valorized notion of the traveling Aborigine to disassociate themselves from any particular building to which they are assigned: ‘I got big family here ... I just leave this stinking house anyways. I shift [move camp] for a change’ (Povinelli 1993, 172).

Elsewhere I have documented the (similarly problematic) efforts made by Tangentyere Council to treat town-campers’ domestic groups as ‘households’ for the sake of distributing the costs of commodities which are associated with the use of houses: electricity and water (Rowse 1988).

The plasticity of Aboriginal domestic groups, in both their behavioural realities and in the invoked principles of their composition, is probably materially sustained by the existence of what John Taylor calls ‘urban housing systems’, particularly in the larger remote towns of northern and central Australia. Collecting data in Katherine in the mid 1980s, Taylor documented the movement of individuals and domestic groups through a ‘housing system’ consisting of town camps, caravan parks,
Aboriginal hostels and mainstream town houses. The movement is not all in the same direction (from town camps ‘up’ to town houses), and many of those who reside for a time within the urban ‘system’ also move back and forth between town and bush (Taylor 1990). Helen Ross, in her ethnography of Halls Creek Aboriginal housing system, pointed to some Aboriginal people’s preference for small dwellings or an ‘inconvenient location’ as socially acceptable ways to distance themselves from the demands of relatives and others (Ross 1987, 111, 115). We should not assume the permanence of such preferences and strategies.

Diane Smith has reviewed the literature on the Aboriginal household. She notes that the terms in which Australian governments have knowledge of Australia as an ensemble of ‘households’ may be inappropriate to ‘knowing’ Aboriginal Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) thinks of a household as a co-resident group who ‘have common housekeeping arrangements, i.e. they have some common provision for food and other essentials of living’ (Smith 1991, 6). But Aboriginal people sharing a dwelling will not necessarily eat together nor sleep under the one roof, Smith objects. Aboriginal households also had ‘porous social boundaries’ consistent with the high mobility of Aboriginal people. She refers to households’ ‘stable core and ... mobile fringe’ (1991, 12). Smith refers to studies in which Aboriginal households are shown to be made up of more than one economic unit: there is sharing of goods within each unit but not between them. Using the ABS definition, there could be more than one household within a house. On the other hand, sharing between residents of a number of houses may be more important than sharing within any one of those houses. Smith concludes that, in the economic sense favoured by the ABS, there are not, generally speaking, Aboriginal households.

Smith does not try to say what notion could replace ‘household’ as a category empirically adequate to Aboriginal social life. Rather, she refers to the significance of ‘a level other than the household’, implying that much of the effort which Aboriginal people put into their social life helps to sustain that other unnamed ‘level’. From her review of the research there may be two other ‘levels’ – one ‘below’ (a number of distinguishable
groups within the one house) and another 'above' (cooperation between residents of different houses). From the point of view of those who design the state's systems for collecting economic data, this is no solution: Smith has done little more than persuade them that their usual assumptions are misleading.

However, definitional precision need not be our concern here. What Smith has done is suggest some ways that 'household' may be one of the contested sites of contemporary governmental rationality. She does so when she writes that

while 'the household' is certainly a useful concept for referring to the physical realities of a dwelling and the individuals residing there, many Aboriginal households are compositionally complex and often characterised by a state of considerable flux in membership and by economic vulnerability (Smith 1991, 15–16).

Smith's contrast between definitional simplicity and empirical complexity points to the possibility of another contrast - a contrast of a more normative kind which is implicit in the project of government to which I referred above in citing Povinelli's Belyuen example. That is, social and economic policies may be predicated on an assumption that the ABS definition is or should be empirically adequate. The project of governing Aboriginal people includes the effort to make house residents jointly responsible for the houses which they are now inclined to use. Compositional complexity, fluctuating memberships and economic vulnerability are each conceivable as undermining the 'normal' domestic order which a great many Australian domestic groups demonstrate to be practically achievable. It is not necessary to adopt that normative stance (and I do not infer that Smith has adopted it) but the opportunities and pressures to adopt it seem to me to be undeniable.

COMMUNITY

Nganampa Health Council consultants have recently suggested an alternative response to the difficulties of postulating accountable Aboriginal households. As much as any advocates could, the Nganampa consultants insist that houses maintained in
working order are now a condition of advances in Aboriginal
health (Nganampa Health Council 1987). But they argue against
two misconceived ways to make houses serve as 'health
hardware'. First, they are suspicious of attempts to solve the
problems of Aboriginal house use merely by architects' acts of
cultural empathy: 'All too often the shibboleth of culturally
appropriate housing in fact provides a mechanism for service
agencies to avoid their responsibility to ensure that housing
programs provide functioning and maintained health hardware'
(Pholeros, Rainow and Torzillo 1993, 112). But maintained by
whom? Not by a 'household'—that is their second critical point.
Their study of house use at Pipalyatjara in 1991–92 found
extraordinary fluidity in the size and composition of houses,
making insupportable the fiction that each house had its
accountable 'household'.

So who was to be held responsible for monitoring each
dwelling's state of repair? The Nganampa consultants suggested
that the Pipalyatjara community as a whole be treated as a
'household': that is, as the unit of Aboriginal social life which
owned, belonged to and looked after the Pipalyatjara housing
stock.

The model of 'house ownership' may need to be modified in
communities, such as Pipalyatjara, with high mobility. The community
may be seen as the house and the houses are simply rooms within the
house (community). Each room (house) will play its part sometime
during the year as a major provider of health hardware facilities and as
such must be maintained (Pholeros, Rainow and Torzillo 1993, 30).

This suggestion has to be met with a sympathetically sceptical
question: is the 'community' any more coherent and stable a
social form than the 'household' whose fluidity the researchers
have demonstrated? Elsewhere the problems of postulating
'communities' as emergent units of Aboriginal social life have
been discussed (Hamilton 1987, 136–7; Smith 1989; Rowse 1992,
50–58). Kim Doohan and Elspeth Young have suggested that
service providers conceptualise Aboriginal social life as based
within regions of long-standing cultural significance, regions
made up of a number of 'communities' where people reside
temporarily (Young and Doohan 1989). Without denying these

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points, here I would like to emphasise not so much the fragility of ‘community’ but the imperatives to overcome that fragility through cultural innovation.

There are at least two reasons, both of great interest to ‘public health’, for Aboriginal people to think of themselves as having responsibilities, as co-residents, for bounded zones called ‘communities’. First, ‘community’ is a notion of increasing jurisdictional significance. Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory have been able since 1979 to declare their community or town camp ‘dry’ (alcohol-free). This implies a challenge to supervise and police the boundary between the dry community and the unregulated external world. Aboriginal people have recently demonstrated a desire to perform that policing work themselves. This requires their commitment to a bounded jurisdiction (the community) and sets them a task of negotiating a balance between the mandates of ‘community’ and the imperatives of ‘family’—the sub-jurisdictions which persist within communities. Much of Part Five is about this aspiration towards community policing and the terms in which it has sometimes been understood.

Second, Aboriginal people have shown an unmistakable interest in the physical infrastructure which makes up the material base of outback communities: houses, sporting grounds, schools, telecommunications facilities, retail outlets, mechanical workshops, airstrips, clinics. A glance at this list should make the point that some of these goods facilitate a defining feature of what we might call ‘traditional’ Aboriginal sociality: movement across large distances. That is, these fixed goods have become essential underpinnings of a continuing, but modified, mobility.

It is no longer realistic to expect that non-Aboriginal authorities will build and maintain these resources without some Aboriginal contribution. Indeed, the policy of self-determination assumes that Aboriginal people strongly desire to manage these facilities themselves, an assumption which experienced officials in government and Aboriginal organisations now know to treat with reserve. That someone has to deal with the practicalities of construction, maintenance and budgeting is now an inescapable
stimulus to the formation of certain senses of community among Aboriginal people.

Kim Doohan's ethnography of the remote town of Aputula (Finke) points to possible terms of coexistence of such a sense of community with older Aboriginal imperatives to be dispersed and mobile. She asks 'whether or not an Aboriginal "community", taken as a residential group, can persist when, first, its members maintain obligations and responsibilities to other people and places and, secondly, when patterns of residence and mobility reinforce aspects of personal, rather than collective, autonomy' (Doohan 1992, 68). Her answer is a sensitive formulation of Aboriginal adjustments of their culture to new circumstances.

The meaning of a 'Finke (or Aputula) resident', then, cannot be derived merely from a census. The concept can only be fully understood ethnographically. Residents are those people who consider themselves and are considered by others as belonging to Aputula – being 'same family' but not necessarily 'one countrymen'. They are people who have and can expect to live with each other (often at Aputula). For many senior Aboriginal people there is a clear idea that they have 'lived together for a long time'.

The persistence of this network of people who 'live together' is not seen to be diminished by the high degree of mobility of its members. This stable co-residential group is the collective embodiment of broadly similar individual life histories, reinforced by notions of kin and country. Their responsibilities do not include the maintenance of this network as a stable residential group. It is not a consideration. Instead, they have responsibilities to help 'look after' sites, objects and umma [songs, stories] for their own country, and for the country of their affines and children, and to ensure the reproduction of the 'community' of Aputula as a resource base (Doohan 1992, 76; my emphasis).

The latter task will include accepting work as councillors and employees in the various institutions of Aputula, even if only for a time. Some people may make 'careers' in such work.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that 'medical anthropology' could benefit by looking at the discursive and material forms of the wider colonial
encounter. The management of this encounter should in turn be conceiv ed as a project of 'government', a new project now that it seeks to constitute Aboriginal people as subjects of government. I have outlined what seem to me to be three of the major 'subjects/objects of government' – the individual, the household and the community. If 'self-determination' means anything then its meanings must surely include the effort, in contemporary processes of governing, to constitute new formations of the Aboriginal 'self' – the household, the individual, the community. When the colonial situation is analysed as a project of government which highlights these levels of social existence, our conceptual vocabulary has no need for notions of 'Aboriginality', 'non-Aboriginality' and 'tradition'. Instead these terms remain intensely interesting and relevant in another way: they are to be treated, with some critical reserve, as strategic and tactical resources in the mobilisation of people and money in projects of government. The new social technologies of government and self-determination are emerging from the (sometimes conflict-ridden, sometimes cooperative) interactions of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.
PART TWO

The central Australian Aboriginal family as a site of welfare intervention
Assimilation and beyond

THE WESTERN FAMILY

Although historians differ in their explanations, there is widespread agreement that between the end of the seventeenth and the end of the nineteenth century, the phenomenon called the modern family emerged in western societies. What are the features of the modern Western family? I have drawn the following points from two historians, Tamara Hareven (1976, 1987) and Lawrence Stone (1981).

- Decline of the influence of kin over a child-rearing conjugal unit (mother/father/children). This decline is felt especially in decisions about fertility, careers, bringing up of children.
- Companionate marriage whose ideal foundation is that it realises each individual’s emotional and sexual needs.
- Households consisting of two generations (father, mother and their children), with no necessary links (kin or friendship, economic or emotional) with nearby households.
- A concept of the child as being something other than an immature adult – a creature with its own social identity and special needs.
• Specialisation of women's work so that in order to be more child-centred, the biological mother is less involved in material production or 'bread-winning' outside the house.
• The evolution of the concept of privacy in matters of bodily function and emotional/erotic gratification.

In White Australia, by the middle of the twentieth century, this family form had become firmly established, not only in popular values, but also in the architecture and spatial planning of cities and in the structure of the labour market and social policies. Until the 1940s, Aboriginal Australians were not under systematic pressure to submit their lives to such social policies. Rather, the remaining 'original Australians' were dealt with under a series of separate and exclusionary State laws and policies whose most common intervention into family life was to disrupt it and displace it with the institutional care of individuals. The exclusion of Aboriginal people from mainstream social policy began to come to an end in the 1940s, beginning with legislation, in 1941 and 1942, which provided Child Endowment in respect of all Aboriginal children except 'nomadic' people (Altman and Sanders 1991, 3). As Altman and Sanders argue, the extension of such payments to Aboriginal people was in part a response to the mission and welfare lobby's pressure for better government financial support for the institutions in which they offered pastoral care of Aboriginal people. Until the 1960s, a substantial proportion of the welfare payments for which Aboriginal people were becoming eligible were given not to Aborigines themselves but to those who ran these institutions.

However, as governments became convinced that all Aborigines were to be trained for citizenship – a view which achieved political dominance by the early 1950s – the ideal of citizenship had to be articulated. By then Australian citizenship was defined, through established industrial and social policies, partly by reference to an ideal of family. Frank Castles (1985) has argued that 'citizenship' in Australia and New Zealand has had much to do with the ability to earn a living. An important part of the state's effort to create the conditions for citizenship was therefore the provision of a job for the able-bodied man. From
1907, the 'basic wage' for the male was calculated according to the assumption that he supported an unpaid wife and a few children. Citizenship, apart from being a legal status, an ensemble of entitlements, was also a set of characteristic behaviours and capacities, practically embedded in presupposed forms of household and kinship. Therefore, when governments undertook to train all Aborigines for adult citizenship their practice included training them for mothering and fathering in a certain family form.

THE TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL 'FAMILY'

What kind of 'family' did Aborigines of the central Australian region have by the 1950s? Were they organised into 'households'? The ethnographic account of the Aboriginal 'family' should be consulted with care to answer this question, as the literature is produced by writers with a variety of interests, in a variety of times and places. Some writings do not mention a unit called the 'family'. For example, TGH Strehlow finds no use for 'family' in his description of the social order regulating the inheritance of rights to land and ceremonies in Aranda Traditions (Strehlow 1947). By contrast, Fred Myers's Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self (Myers 1986) includes two different senses of 'family'. On the one hand, describing his field work site, Yaiya in the 1970s, Myers refers to co-resident kin (sharing fire, food and sleeping spaces) as family. On the other, he elucidates a term, 'family', in the Aboriginal English in which the Pintupi sometimes explained their social order. 'Family' referred to people spread over a region who were understood to be related to one another in various important ways. Myers helpfully uses quotation marks to distinguish his (American/Australian) concept (family) from the Pintupi concept ('family') that he chose to feature.

Mervyn Meggitt's study (1962) of the Walpiri, as they were in the 1950s, is interesting because although he is prepared to say (unlike some ethnographers) that there is an Aboriginal family - a co-resident conjugal unit with children - he is also very keen to point to the embedding of that family in wider structures of kinship.
The social relationships into which family members enter to fulfil other functions of the group are not necessarily bounded by the current limits of the family as a household, nor do they involve only past and present members of the household... Family members consume much of the food they gather and use many of the objects they manufacture; but they distribute a significant quantity of these things to relatives outside the family in return for other goods and services. Educative, as well as economic, functions are also generalized beyond the family and through the kinship system. Thus young girls receive domestic and ritual training not only from their mothers but also from married elder sisters and mothers' mothers. Boys derive much of their knowledge of kinship organization from the patient teaching of their mothers' fathers; they learn hunting and fighting techniques as much from uncles and brothers-in-law as from fathers and elder brothers. The sister's husband, the mother's mother's brother, and the classificatory sister's son take a larger part in disciplining a youth than do his father or brother (Meggitt 1962, 81-2).

Because the 'family' is linked (in the physical structure of camps, as well as in the lines of obligation and emotional bonding) to a wider structure of kinship, the duties of 'parenting' are diffused among a number of adults, not confined to the child's two biological genitors.

Finally, Frederick Rose has proposed a model of ecological process to relate the broad and the narrow senses of 'family'. He asks:

how far and how long could and did an individual family of a man, wife (wives) and offspring operate independently and separated from the rest of the community? There is considerable evidence in the literature to show that at particular times of the year, when food in a restricted area was plentiful, Aborigines congregated in considerable numbers, and at other times these large groups broke up. The question is how far did they break up and was it to the individual family? (Rose 1987, 106)

His answer:

The individual Aboriginal family could, and on occasion did, live independently of the community for periods extending in some cases up to several months (Rose 1987, 108).

Confronted with a number of 'levels' in the social forms of a culture, can we clarify matters by arguing that one level is the
'basic unit' of society (as some might say of the nuclear family/household in non-Aboriginal society)? The ethnographic literature should make us wary of nominating any emergent aggregation (dyad, family, band, tribe, 'family', community) as primary or basic. It seems better to conceptualise a process in which a number of social forms vary in their salience to Aboriginal people in different circumstances. Under certain conditions (ecological, emotional, biological) family (in the sense of co-resident mother, father and their children) may be of primary significance; under other conditions, or for other purposes, the family in this narrow sense is much less important. Once we take into account (a) that central Australian Aborigines lived in a variety of circumstances by the middle of the twentieth century (townships, town camps, cattle station camps, missions, settlements, nomadic), and (b) that the introduced economy was both extending geographically (adding rations to natural foods) and changing internally (substituting cash for rations), then it becomes almost impossible to sketch 'the Aboriginal way' upon which assimilationist welfare pressures were beginning to act.

That being so, I do not find it possible to discern within Aboriginal law/custom/tradition an underlying family form which became the basis of resistance to the colonial pressure to 'assimilate' to the family forms assumed in mainstream Australian social policy. This is not to say that Aboriginal people accepted or acquiesced to assimilation; it is rather to disclaim the possibility of basing a narrative of recent colonial history on a generalised model of the Aboriginal family. We can infer, however, that Aboriginal people may have resisted the highlighting of any one set of associations among kin as primary. In the deployment of ideologies of kinship, they have had good reasons to remain opportunistic.

WELFARE AS COLONIALISM

The most infamous 'welfare' interventions into Aboriginal life have denied Aboriginal parenthood and attempted to smash the family (however we define it) as the site of cultural reproduction. Such 'welfare' practices were initiated wherever there were
remnant indigenous populations, producing offspring of mixed (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) descent. The official rationales for the removal of children have varied in the explicitness of their racism, but always it was presumed that, at the very least, a child needed his/her Aboriginal heritage less than the European heritage that the state could help to confer. Aboriginal people have bitter memories of the arrogance of that presumption and its effects.

So it was in central Australia. In 1914, a school for so-called 'half-caste' Aborigines (known as 'the Bungalow') was established in Alice Springs. After moving from site to site as it grew, in 1929 and 1932, the Bungalow was replaced in 1945 by the Anglican St Mary's home. To these institutions were removed Aboriginal children born from a White (usually the father) and a Black (usually the mother).

Whether or not the physical separation of parents and children was forced by the state or agreed to by parents, the presumption that Aboriginal children would be better off if culturally disinherit ed is a striking instance of colonial arrogance. Merely to mention the practice, without going into its various circumstances, has become a way to undermine the pretensions of the word 'welfare'. Accordingly, it has become all too tempting to present the separation of children from parents as typical, as the quintessence of a 'welfare' which was really cultural 'warfare'. This is a misconceived view of 'assimilation' in practice. In central Australia, raising Aboriginal children away from their parents became the exceptional, not the typical, welfare practice. The more usual practice of settlements and missions was to try to reform Aborigines' kinship practices to encourage the emergence of a self sufficient father/mother/children household.

This intervention into Aboriginal social relationships was not attempted on a wide and systematic scale in central Australia until after the Second World War. From 1937 to 1949, the Northern Territory Administration set up Jay Creek, Haasts Bluff, Arltunga, Arinyonga, the Bungalow, Yuendumu and Hooker Creek as ration depots with various degrees of Christian Mission participation. To this network the Administration soon added Santa Teresa (replacing Arltunga in 1953), Warrabri and Papunya
in the late 1950s, Amoonguna (replacing the Bungalow) in 1960 and, finally, Docker River in 1968. Not only did it take a long time to set up this network of rationing and training sites, but their capital works programs were often slowed by lack of funds and their programs were chronically understaffed. In one region of central Australia, the Sandover, a projected settlement was never built. Finally, many Aborigines lived on neither missions nor settlements, but on pastoral properties and in illicit urban ‘fringe camps’. It proved very difficult for the Administration to introduce to the cattle station communities the training programs which were conducted, haltingly and misguided, on settlements and missions, while the ‘fringe camps’ were effectively beyond the reach of ‘welfare’ (Collmann 1988, 73–104).

Whatever the material deficiencies in the apparatus of assimilation, Aboriginal kinship and household process became a ‘problem’ with which the Welfare Branch staff tried to deal. The account which follows is based largely on my examination of Welfare Branch files relating to Areyonga, Haasts Bluff, Jay Creek, Papunya, Yuendumu and Hooker Creek. The problem of ‘family’ can be analysed as four ‘problems’ generated by the assimilation project: ‘fathering’, ‘mothering’, ‘the meal’ and the ‘household’.

FATHERING

In White Australian society, fathering has few essential components. There are probably only three which are rarely questioned: a father should be biologically the male progenitor; he should be the sole or major breadwinner (that is, the first claim on his earnings should be the purchase of his wife and children’s basic necessities) and he should be the main source of discipline in the child’s life. In White Australian society it is not expected that a father will necessarily be a very nurturant parent, nor a parent who imparts a lot of knowledge, as mothers and schools, respectively, have been invested with these two responsibilities.

How did traditional Aboriginal fathering differ from this? Anthropological literature tells us that it was a consequence of Aboriginal marriage customs that the mother of children would co-habit with a man (or, over her lifetime, with a series of men)
who was/were not necessarily the progenitor(s) of all her children. Biological and social paternity were not equated. Moreover, this man’s child-rearing responsibilities were not determined either by his biological paternity or by his marriage to a woman with children to rear. Rather he had responsibilities in the rearing of his brothers’ and sisters’ children, that is, child-rearing (fathering) rights and duties had as much or more to do with a man’s sibling relationships as with his marital partnership. From a child’s point of view this means that several adult men would ordinarily have been significant sources of ‘fatherly’ guidance.

The other aspect of ‘fathering’ where White and Black Australians differ is in the direction of a man’s responsibilities to provide. A man who marries owes a continuing material service to his wife’s parents and siblings. His most binding and significant transactions were/are not the provision of all or nearly all that sustains his wife and child, but his ‘brideservice’, the flow of goods to his affinal relations. Theirs are but the strongest claims on him, for others (such as his siblings) also make claims which cannot generally be denied. Meanwhile, his wife or wives and children are partly provisioned by their own efforts and by sharing within networks in which the wife is a legitimately demanding person.

How congruent were Administration ideals of fathering with such traditions? There were two parts to the assimilationist push. One wished to impart to ‘able-bodied’ men that they should earn their sustenance. Early in the history of the ration depots-cum-settlements, the kind of ‘work’ for which men could be paid included hunting, especially collecting dingo scalps on which there was a cash bounty. As the assimilation program matured, however, there was a narrowing of the definition of the kind of work which was rewardable, since it was intended that on settlements and missions, men should gain work experience that would prepare them for outside employment. The trouble was that there wasn’t enough work of that kind for the number of men that had to be rationed. Men on settlements therefore received a confusion of messages. Told that work was essential to their sustenance, they were given work which was not valued,
even by the Europeans themselves in some cases. Many jobs were made up in order to make the point that an able-bodied man must earn his keep.

Second, assimilation included training Aboriginal people in the use of cash. From the mid 1950s, payment on settlements was in the form of rations plus a little cash. As the cash component grew relative to the rations component, in accordance with training policy, men were supposed to direct the expenditure of their pay to the support of their wife or wives and their children. In effect, money rapidly changed its official status in the mid to late 1960s. Ceasing to be a supplement to rations, with which 'luxuries' could be purchased from the canteen, it became what was required to buy basic goods for one's family, who had hitherto been rationed by the settlement staff as a matter of course. Judging from Welfare Branch files, it was widely observed by Settlement staff that many men did not switch their use of money in this way, but gambled, bought cars, grog and other pleasures, very often in patterns of behaviour which sustained their bonds with other men. The same staff knew that these men knew that the Administration would not allow their children and spouses to starve.

As for men's educative and disciplinary responsibilities as 'fathers', the tendency and aspiration of the settlements was to relieve men of many of their chances to show children country and the knowledges that go with country. Some staff may have tried to go further and to ban initiations. However, Annual Reports of the Welfare Branch in the 1960s note, without apparent alarm, that initiations were still taking place in the vicinity of settlements such as Areyonga and Amoonguna, and no doubt this was true throughout the region. Travelling ceremonies also moved through central Australia, provisioning themselves and replenishing their numbers by stopping near settlements, missions and cattle stations. The continuation of these rituals of male socialisation underpinned the resilience of traditional Aboriginal ideas about the responsibilities of adult men toward children and youths.

The persistence of certain conditions in the cattle industry further weakened the assimilation program's effort to construct an orthodox 'fathering' role in this region. Recent historical
research on the NT cattle industry (McGrath 1987; Rowse 1989, 268–71) argues that the training that Aboriginal boys received within the cattle industry was determined by a customary alliance between some pastoralists and senior Aboriginal men. That is, to prepare a boy for manhood was a joint undertaking, a ‘bicentral’ program of instruction in the ways of both country and cattle, in which senior Aboriginal men imparted skills of manhood that were essential to stock work and imparted skills of stock work which were essential to the evolving, post-colonial Aboriginal notions of manhood. It is likely, in short, that in the cattle industry Europeans showed much more respect for the way Aboriginal men trained boys to be men. Cattle industry requirements were probably more in sympathy with traditional Aboriginal ‘fathering’ than were settlement and mission intentions to reconstruct Aboriginal parenting. (This contrast is complicated by the fact that some settlements and missions – Hooker Creek, Yuendumu, Haasts Bluff, Hermannsburg – ran small cattle enterprises.)

MOTHERING

Traditionally, the biological mothers were not the sole or even the primary givers of care to children. A woman nearly always shared her camp with co-wives and sisters, women in a position to help her to rear an infant. According to Annette Hamilton (1981), by the time a child was five it would be venturing beyond the physical space patrolled by its mother, to be part of a wider camp peer group to which quite a number of adults would relate. Children ran freely in camps, and still do. Hamilton also argues that infants had to be both lucky and tough to survive and that non-survival would not have carried the same weight of tragedy in Aboriginal society as it has in the West since the ‘demographic revolution’ – a change in Western fertility which has reduced the number of births per woman and increased the prospects of, and the emotional and economic investment in, those offsprings’ survival.

Since the 1960s, infant and child morbidity and mortality have been an important political representation or numerical index of
the success or failure of welfare and health programs. The prominence of this index in public recognition of Aborigines' problems must be understood as an artefact of our culture, not of theirs. This same child-centred European culture determined the shape of medical and social interventions on settlements, from the early 1950s, particularly the attempt to construct the biological mother as primary care-giver. Demographer Alan Gray has commented on the focus on infant and child mortality in the 1960s:

Partly this was because among the only indicators of Aboriginal health that was (sic) available for some places during the 1960s were estimates of infant mortality. Partly it was also because those infectious and parasite diseases which were partly responsible for high rates of infant and child loss could also be attacked by well-tried clinical and public health interventions (Gray 1989, 7).

To understand the attempted induction of biological mothers into 'mothering' it is first necessary to know something of the practice of rationing. In its earliest form, police rationing, rations consisted of raw, uncooked foods (flour being the most important item) issued weekly. In the 1950s, nutritionists argued that small children's nourishment was at risk under this system. Therefore settlement clinics and schools became the site of new or supplementary food issues, consisting of fruit, fruit juice and cooked meals served on plates and in mugs. Mothers were strongly encouraged to bring their children daily to clinic or school. In doing so they also placed themselves in a position to learn from 'Sister' how to be a better mother - more hygienic, more thoughtful of nutrition and so on.

There is ample testimony in Welfare Branch files that this regime created quite contradictory effects. On the one hand, biological mothers were addressed as if they were the primary givers of care to children. They were singled out from the corpus of adult females and instructed to be the nurturant, fully-responsible parent. On the other hand, these same mothers were displaced by clinic and school staff whose routines became a kind of composite ideal mothering regime. Young Aboriginal women thus had responsibilities both conferred and taken away.
Meanwhile, the older women back in the camp continued to run women’s camps (*jilimi*) in which many aspects of female Aboriginal culture, including the wisdoms of child-rearing, would have been reproduced. Diane Bell (1982, 1983) has argued that these camps have allowed an adapted, woman-based culture of ‘nurturance’ to continue among central Australian Aboriginal women, even if such camps are still overshadowed by the implanted institutions of ‘nurturance’ – the clinic and the school – which do not necessarily attract the participation of senior women.

It should therefore be no surprise that young women were not induced to become the kinds of mothers that it was hoped they would be. Welfare Branch files, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, contain negative assessments of Aboriginal women’s mothering – assessments which pondered whether teachers and clinic staff could ever withdraw their respective ‘mothering’ functions. Such critical reflections are also the theme of *Yuendumu and its Children*, a study of child health which can be read as a critique of Warlpiri mothering (Middleton and Francis 1976).

**THE MEAL**

One of the taken for granted features of White Australian family life is the meal. The meal is a most important institution in any society, a definitive locus and focus of domestic life. Just what kind of occasion ‘the meal’ should be has been an issue of enormous importance in central Australia in the last forty years.

I have already mentioned that up to the 1950s, rationing consisted of the weekly issue of dry rations. In 1955, Health Department and NT Administration officials began to question the adequacy of this regime. Were people, particularly small children and pregnant and lactating mothers, getting the nourishment they needed? Was not a lot of issued food wasted? Was not a lot of food redistributed in directions that undercut Settlement training, that is, to ‘idle’ able-bodied men? Were Aboriginal people cooking and eating their rations in hygienic conditions in their camps? Could children ever be expected to learn table manners if they ate most of their food in camps? The
Branch's answers to each of these questions prompted them to introduce 'communal feeding' in the late 1950s. That term refers to the collective feeding of entire settlement populations in large dining halls, according to a schedule determined by the institution.

The facilities for communal feeding were constructed on central Australian settlements between 1957 and 1963. Some dining halls were divided by a curtain, to separate male diners from female, but at least one Superintendent removed this divider in 1961 in a conscious experiment in social engineering. Branch records contain much evidence that communal feeding was a difficult experience for everyone. Staff shortages and unexpected numbers of Aboriginal residents meant that the facilities, when fully used, were stretched beyond their capacity, leading to problems of order and hygiene. A lot of Aboriginal people, particularly older ones, felt uncomfortable eating in such conditions, and many took food back to the camp in billies and hats. It is hard to make a judgement about the food served, but it seems that many Aboriginal people welcomed the chance to keep provisioning themselves from bush tucker and, probably more significant, from the canteen. Indeed, the Branch undermined the communal feeding system by promoting the canteens, that is, by letting people have cash and by opening settlement stores where they could learn to use it.

I introduced this section of the paper by describing it as a conflict over 'the meal'. I mean that in two senses. The first sense should be obvious by now: communal feeding was a bureaucratically constituted 'meal', a deliberate effort to replace 'the meal' whose setting was the camp. The second sense in which there was conflict over 'the meal' is more subtle. There are two ways we can think about what a meal is: as food, and as social relationship. The characteristic, high-minded fallacy of the Branch was to conceptualise the 'meal' primarily or even exclusively as the ingestion of food and to suppress from its collective official thinking the social dimension of the meal. I believe that it was politically important to suppress the meal as social event because in that event much that is characteristic of Aboriginal social life is reproduced. Food sharing signifies
relationships in these daily events we call meals. There could be no more intimate assault on the sociality of another culture than to recast its meals into the forms decreed by the dominant culture. What is so striking about Welfare Branch files on this subject is that this assault was conducted primarily in the name of nutrition. This is a good example of the cultural politics that may be implicit in a medicalising view of the world.

The strangest aspect of Branch policy on communal feeding is that it was still expected, officially, that Aboriginal mothers would eventually learn to be the buyers and preparers of their family's food. Having displaced the camp and reduced Aboriginal adults to being mere recipients of regular cooked meals served on plates and tables and eaten with knives and forks, the Welfare Branch thought it could still somehow induce in women a commitment to housekeeping and mothering.

THE HOUSEHOLD

In the 1960s, central Australian missions and settlements gave Aboriginal people a chance to move from humpies to houses. The Administration tried to train women in the use of household appliances and in house cleaning. As families became more adept at using houses without facilities, they would graduate to the use of houses with their own bathrooms, toilets and labour-saving devices. (See Heppell 1979, 8–17, for a critical account of 'transitional' housing policies.) The houses provided were designed to accommodate a standard sized nuclear family. From 1969, settlements with such houses were required to charge a small rent for their use, that is, to introduce families to the idea that they were households not only in the food-buying, -preparing and -consuming sense, but also in the financial sense, needing to budget to cover basic costs of family life.

Many Aboriginal people have not used houses in these ways. By the early 1970s the gloomy reports of house 'abuse' are to be found on Welfare Branch files: several 'families' crowding into the one house, rents not paid, ill-advised food-purchasing by parents, failure to ensure that children were well fed and clothed and dutiful in school attendance. There is no doubt that in the
years 1969–72, government officials were forced to admit their failure to bring about the emergence of the 'family' – competently functioning as a 'household' – for which they had striven for a generation. Aborigines' parenting and household management were well below the standard which health, education and welfare agencies then saw as essential to well-being.

CONTINUITIES?

Inquiring into the recognition of Aboriginal customary law, from 1977 to 1985, the Australian Law Reform Commission asked whether Aboriginal traditional marriages should be subject to regulations about the duty to maintain spouse and children and about the property rights of women. The Commission saw no justification 'for imposing a new maintenance regime on the parties to traditional marriages', nor for legislating 'a special right of action to enable parties to traditional marriages to have their property rights determined' (Law Reform Commission (LRC) 1986, vol 1, 199). The Commission's reasons for reaching this conclusion included the opinion that

the extension of maintenance obligations to traditional spouses would not reflect Aboriginal perceptions of the role of husbands and wives in maintaining the domestic economy. Traditionally each party to a marriage has been regarded as an independent contributor of food and services to the family (although the kinds of food and services varied between husbands and wives) (LRC 1986, vol 1, 199).

Upon dissolution of a marriage,

the extended family system provided a strong network of support so that if, for example, a woman with a number of children was unable to support herself and family, assistance was readily available. This feature of Aboriginal society remains strong today ... The reality is that economic security (to the extent that it exists) has to be re-established in each case by remarriage, sharing within the extended family, employment (where available) or reliance on the social security system, or some combination of these (LRC 1986, vol 1, 200–1).

These views are symptomatic of what we could call the more enlightened approach to traditional Aboriginal kinship and domestic economy that have emerged since 'assimilation' was
abandoned as policy. It is easy for a later generation which identifies with such enlightened views to feel critical of and even superior to the health, education and welfare officials whose work was driven by belief that assimilation was necessary and desirable. Yet, however uncomfortable the thought may be, there remain certain tensions between Aborigines’ modes of domestic life and the presuppositions of European and (in some cases) Aboriginal staff who service Aborigines and who worry about the many factors which seem to undermine health and retard the achievement of educational and economic equalities.

In the last fifteen years, some health, education and welfare services have passed into Aboriginal community management. The state’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ‘welfare’ policies are now mediated through policy decisions and service delivery in which indigenous Australians themselves play a prominent part. To what extent is this merely a nominal Aboriginalisation of older services? How much difference does the ‘indigenisation’ of community management make to the operative definitions of Aboriginal need and to the ways of satisfying those needs?

Indigenous Australians should be guaranteed the resources which they need in the adaptation of their traditions to their contemporary conditions of life. However, their commitment to ‘self-determination’ should not obscure the historical question of the degree of continuity between older practices of colonial government and the emerging agendas of Aboriginal health, welfare and education organisations. In particular, it is necessary to attend to any problems which may remain in the relationships between Aborigines’ modes of domestic organisation and the frameworks and assumptions of service delivery. Almost twenty years after the onset of official disillusionment with assimilation, the ‘family’ – the forms it takes and the responsibilities it is assumed to have – remains a problem. Aboriginal organisations are grappling, in various ways, with issues of Aboriginal people’s family/household/domestic organisation.

Let me illustrate this by referring to aspects of the work of Tangentyere Council and Nganampa Health Council.

In the thirteen years 1977–1990, Tangentyere Council built about 150 houses and erected almost as many tin sheds on town
camps. It has undoubtedly responded to Aboriginal wishes to be better housed. Previous welfare housing programs by the NT Housing Commission and the Welfare Branch cannot compare with this fine performance. There is no doubt that part of Tangentyere's success lies in having set up structures of representation which mediate between town campers and such government and commercial agencies as banks and the Power and Water Authority. Those mediators (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff) are answerable to an elected Aboriginal Executive and Council drawn from the town camps.

However, it has not been easy for that representative machinery to induce town campers to make the changes in domestic organisation which seem to be necessary once they become house dwellers. In particular, the payment by households of fortnightly rent and quarterly and half-yearly power and water bills has been a matter requiring Tangentyere staff's continual attention (Rowse 1988). Town campers are having to learn to be 'households' in this financial sense, that is, to be a budgeting collective of co-resident adults and children. No such social formation has ever existed in the culture which forms these town campers. Tangentyere finds that it must preside over the precipitation of this new social unit, the budgeting 'household'. For Tangentyere, therefore, certain aspects of Aboriginal behaviour have become problematic. When Tangentyere Council initiated what it called the 'Social Behaviour Project' in 1990, its submission described town campers' problematic behaviour in terms that went beyond any ambition to restore or maintain the 'Law' ( Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal); it included elements of an agenda for attaining what might once have been called 'social efficiency'.

[Alcohol related violence, inappropriate sexual behaviour, the spending of money on liquor leaving little or none for food, the ignoring of obligations to non-drinking relatives, neglect of commitments to work, study, hire-purchase payments etc., damage to personal and public property, and inappropriate behaviour towards host families by bush visitors (Tangentyere Council nd, my emphasis).

It is no criticism of Tangentyere that we can locate its work within a welfare tradition. The Council is an innovative actor within this
tradition, and it is accountable to Aboriginal people in ways that previous agencies were not, but it is part of the tradition nonetheless, because its interests lie in a reformation of the Aboriginal domestic group.

Whether Nganampa Health Council partakes in this tradition is a question with which we might read the Uwankara Palyanyku Kanyintjaku (UPK) report (Nganampa Health Council 1987). The UPK report focuses on features of domestic technology which are essential to doing something about many of the identified morbidities on the Pitjantjatjara homelands. It concludes that without well designed housing and fixtures, maintained in good order, money spent on clinic-based health care on the Pitjantjatjara Lands will be largely wasted. Government agencies must therefore rethink the relationship between housing, transport, and other infrastructure policies, on the one hand, and health servicing on the other. Similarly, the communities and government agencies must create management structures capable of maintaining housing infrastructure favourable to health.

However, the UPK report was almost silent about the behaviour of those who use these houses — Anangu themselves. The notable exception to that generalisation is John Willis's short but insightful discussion of how Anangu use houses. Willis's essay included the most explicit admission that Anangu aspirations are problematic. He referred to 'changing people's perceptions of what [conventional houses] imply in terms of health' (Nganampa Health Council 1987, 86). He later alluded to a tension and a possible compromise between what some Anangu say they want and what Anangu lifestyle seems actually to require.

Willis's essay was an appendix to the UPK report. Can we infer that his social analysis was peripheral to UPK's argument? The report, apart from this appendix, was not entirely silent on how Anangu fit into its schemes for improving health. In its Executive Summary, the report stated its aim to inform Anangu 'about the prerequisites for healthy living and the likely health benefits of particular behavioural change' (1987, 2); and it later acknowledged (1987, 78) that 'most programmes require a behavioural change to produce an improvement in health'. Note that this formulation does not specify whose behaviour nor the
content of the change. However, the report went on to admit that 'it requires continuous activity to keep public health on the agenda of communities'. More revealing than these two comments were passages which implied Anangu behaviours appropriate to the technological improvements which the report seeks. The washing of children, clothes and bedding were mentioned several times, as was gardening. And once the report actually identified who will do this washing: on page 24 it was mentioned that mothers wash young children.

In an effort, perhaps, to avoid an older welfare discourse which blamed Anangu for failing to live up to official expectations in matters of domestic organisation, the UPK report simply maintained an ethnographic silence about how domestic life could or should be changed – a silence breached only by an entirely orthodox attribution of domestic hygiene responsibility to 'mother'.

I do not wish to belittle the great advances in theory and practice made by Tangentyere and Nganampa. What both organisations have to say to governments is that self-determination, if it is to mean anything, requires a holistic approach to matters dealt with variously and fragmentedly by government agencies. In my remarks here, I simply wish to identify a problem that can never be taken off the agenda: the relationship between health, education and welfare servicing models and the traditions of Aboriginal peoples' domestic routines.
Values, tactics and HALT

[Actions in response to petrol sniffing should originate from and be controlled by the Aboriginal people (Senate Select Committee on Volatile Substance Fumes 1985, 220).

The Healthy Aboriginal Life Team (HALT) began as the Petrol Sniffing Prevention Team, working in Yuendumu and Kintore in the mid 1980s. In 1987, the Team’s three members – Hinton Lowe, Christine Franks and Andrew Spencer Tjapaltjarri – adopted the name HALT, and began to apply the lessons of their Yuendumu and Kintore interventions on the Pitjantjatjara lands, funded by a three-year grant from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. By the time the Menzies School of Health Research was commissioned to evaluate HALT’s work (beginning of 1990), the team had become adept in voicing and writing a theoretical rationale for its activities. This essay is devoted to an exposition and critique of HALT’s theory.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH PETROL SNIFFING?

In a 1987 paper, Hinton Lowe acknowledged the medical view of petrol sniffing – that it causes a number of dysfunctions of body
and brain. Lowe also noted the disruption and damage to property, particularly offensive to non-Aboriginal residents of affected settlements. Lowe then drew attention to Aboriginal adults' experience of their children's intractability (Lowe 1987, 316). Their feelings include

shame, anger, fear, sorrow, grieving, embarrassment, blame and anxiety. Helplessness and a sense of failure are sometimes evident. Apparent lack of response or care can sometimes be interpreted as apathy masking a denial of true responses to the problem. Hostility to others and demands for whites for helpful or controlling interventions are recognizable forms in which denial is also enacted. The suffer himself sometimes becomes the scapegoat for the adult's problem of helplessness.

The essential problems of petrol sniffing, as HALT defined them, are the dissociation of children from adult kin, and those adults' sense of ineffectiveness and low self confidence.

**HALT'S AIMS**

Discussion by Franks (1989, 15) of HALT's Yuendumu intervention referred to 'the eventual success in eliminating petrol sniffing at Yuendumu' and to Andrew Spencer Tjapaltjarri's confidence 'that petrol sniffing had been eradicated and would not come back' (1989, 18). However, the latter phrase follows immediately a discussion of the community's uncertainty as to whether one particularly tenacious sniffer had really ceased. After summarising further interventions, Franks concluded (1989, 18):

By the end of December 1984, petrol sniffing had stopped. Follow-up showed relapses of short duration in October 1985, April 1986 and September 1986. One other boy joined in the 1986 episodes. The relapse events were handled rapidly and competently by the community.

With respect to the Kintore intervention, Franks recalled (1989, 20) 'the elimination of sniffing there by August 1986'. However, she then noted 'relapses', saying that, despite them, 'no further recruitment to the practice has taken place, and even sniffers
assessed as chronic have experienced beneficial periods of abstinence.

These accounts imply that HALT’s goal was to eliminate petrol sniffing altogether from a given community.

In Lowe’s 1987 paper, however, HALT foreshadowed a more modest objective: ‘prolonged abstinence from sniffing’ (Lowe 1987, 318). Later writing by HALT confirmed and elaborated this revision. In their ‘Introduction’ to the 1989–90 Annual Report, HALT acknowledged that ‘petrol sniffing has not been eradicated’. As they explained ‘Dependent drug use is intractable; and youthful experimentation and risk-taking is universal. The acceptable limits can only be determined within the groups where it occurs. Their own social norms will ultimately determine the level of use’ (HALT 1990, 3). HALT then distinguished between a community’s intolerance of petrol sniffing and the intolerance shown by outsiders, arguing that it is the former which is important. Later in this Annual Report, HALT reinforced this emphasis on the norms of the community, describing as ‘essentially the aim of HALT’s program’ (1990, 10) ‘a shift in Community social norms relating to behaviour of children and youth which is generating controls and deterrents to prevent sniffing’. It followed that ‘the more useful indicator for evaluation of HALT methods and strategies is the qualitative process of attitude change in the community’ (1990, 18).

HALT nonetheless retained some reference to the behaviour of youth, and not just to the norms and actions of adults, in reporting its own effectiveness. The indicators of success are to be the ‘significant interruptions’ (1990, 5–6) to the sniffing of a hard core of ‘long term chronic users’, interruptions which ‘break up the sniffing group (cohort), diminishing mutual reinforcement of the behaviour. The risk of recruitment of the new sniffers is also reduced by this fragmentation.’

In short, the objectives of HALT were refined with practice. Rather than the elimination of all sniffing, HALT presented its intentions in three points: the community’s greatly reduced tolerance for petrol sniffing, leading to new levels of vigilance and caring by community members which would, in turn,
significantly interrupt the sniffing of even the most inveterate sniffers and fragment their peer group.

PETROL SNIFFING AS AN HISTORICAL LEGACY

HALT affirmed Aborigines' traditional child-rearing ways, but argued that those ways have become less effective through the influences of non-Aboriginal people. This historical thesis raised the issue of the extent of such change: what remained within Aboriginal culture that could be the basis of refurbished child-rearing practices? In some formulations the extent of damage seemed devastating (Lowe 1989, 226).

The loss of language, the attenuation of social roles and the erosion of authority are the outcome of many forms of oppression, victimisation, dispossession and subversion of Aboriginal society since 1788.

But was this true of central Australia? Lowe (1989, 226) offered Papunya as an example of a settlement at which the government pursued 'a programme of systematic resocialisation', but he also cited (1989, 225) Myers's description (in Pintupi Country Pintupi Self) of Pintupi kinship based on observations of the Pintupi after they had begun to move away from Papunya in the early 1980s. He thus implied that even after two decades of residing at Papunya, being systematically resocialised, the Pintupi retained a vital, functioning kinship system.

Though the extent to which 'systematic resocialisation' has been effective remains uncertain in HALT's argument, three more specific historical themes can be identified in HALT writings. One is what they call 'the decline to dependency' – an effect, they assert, of the resourcing of Aboriginal people.

Fire-arms, steel axe heads, motor vehicles, processed flour and sugar, packaged meats, domestic animals, teachers, magistrates, policemen, doctors and missionaries have been delivered or provided and have resulted in diminishing the roles of gathering and hunting food, parenting and child-rearing and the teaching and instruction in the knowledge of the past life and environment of the group (Lowe 1987, 316).
The result of this provisioning had been that, first, the elders’ authority was challenged by ‘the cohort of young men whose access to alcohol and money displaces knowledge as the dominant form of exchange’; and next, the usurping of these young men’s prominence by ‘petrol-sniffing juveniles who “get on top” by their monopoly of fear’ (1987, 317). Lowe does not say to which communities he would apply this description, but, as a model of social pathology, it implies that intervention must restore the authority of the elders and the prestige of their knowledge, so that both usurping cohorts – the young men and the juveniles – are put in their proper political places.

The second theme was that colonial influences have worked to refashion Aboriginal kinship to bring it closer to a European norm: the ‘nuclear’ family. HALT’s 1987–88 Annual Report, referring to Kintore and Pukatja (Ernabella), argued that a number of historical pressures had devalued the traditional structures and introduced western conceptions of nuclear family models. The range of child rearing resources was considerably diminished in this process. Focus on nuclear family roles of the two parents had both increased the stress of persons in those roles, and attenuated the roles traditionally assigned to other significantly related individuals (e.g. grandparents, mothers’ brothers) (HALT 1988, 34).

The implication of this argument was that HALT had to try to re-establish the child-rearing roles of kin other than the biological parents of a given child, in order to replenish each family’s traditional child-rearing resources.

The third of HALT’s historical arguments had to do with Aboriginal masculinity (1988, 229).

Male social roles have been particularly eroded in the course of these incursions by outsiders and organisations into their domains. Their retreat to alcohol use and the violence it often precipitates can be interpreted as a surrogate form of regaining lost power roles and as a palliative for deep unresolved grief at their loss.

On the basis of these historical arguments, a community’s return to traditional ways is to be understood as including: the restoration of the authority of elders, particularly of men’s authority, and the revival of the prestige of their knowledge; the
reduction in Aborigines' dependency on resources provided by outsiders; and the re-integration of the nuclear family within the wider matrix of kin.

HALT'S CRITIQUE OF CONTEMPORARY WELFARE SERVICING

According to HALT, contemporary practices of Aboriginal welfare administration have shown unfortunate continuities with the past. For example in the 1987–88 Annual Report (HALT 1988, 14),

the introduction of control measures by outsiders, such as legal sanctions, or of diversionary strategies such as recreation or institutional rehabilitation programs, can further erode parenting roles ...

... A further hazard arises in 'targeting' the sniffers themselves, or even the total segment of the population which is perceived to be at risk: i.e. 'youth'. These strategies can lead to fragmentation of the characteristic intergenerational linkages in Anangu society.

Christine Franks (1989, 14) has argued that some attempts to resolve the petrol sniffing problem have imposed non-indigenous definitions of what, fundamentally, is at fault.

(Doctors and nurses express concern at the toxic effects of hydrocarbons or lead fractions in the fumes; teachers at the truancy and class disruption; store managers at break-ins; the police at the offences and public disorder; welfare officers at the 'neglect'; and, generally, non-Aboriginal residents at the threat to personal safety, the damage and thefts of personal property and invasions of privacy.

The definitions thus tendered to the Aboriginal communities suggest that the problem lies with the concerns of outsiders, and responsibility for addressing it has frequently been projected onto them by the Aboriginal residents.

Franks has also remarked the obstinacy with which some non-Aboriginal staff have clung to established forms of welfare servicing. She found that they 'could not let go of old ideas that there were simple solutions that were service-oriented and managed' (1989, 20). It was necessary for HALT to spend a lot of time persuading such staff to withhold services in order to give space to HALT's different approach, Franks recalled.
TOWARDS A NON-DEPENDENT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMUNITIES AND SERVICE AGENCIES

Despite the ravages of colonial history, 'the social systems of (Central Australian) communities and the capacities of individual members of them, are intact and viable today' (HALT Annual Report 1987–88, 1988, 9). The same Report (p.13) referred to 'the reactivation of relationships' (see also Lowe 1989, 224), and avowed HALT's aim 'to activate the traditional social system which provides care, controls behaviour and reproduces the culture of its constituents'. In an interview, Hinton Lowe argued that because of the erosion of men's roles, women remain the only sources of Aboriginal social control. One of the real challenges for HALT, he added, was to get men to see the point of regaining control over adolescents.

In short, whatever damage history has done to Aboriginal people, those opposing petrol sniffing must neither pity nor underestimate them, but affirm that 'the capacity to resolve these problems through adaptive change is inherent within traditional Aboriginal life ...' (Lowe nd, 3).

[The rhetoric of victimisation, defeat, disease and deficiency, characteristically repeated by many champions of Aboriginal rights and interests, while often motivated by a well meaning objective of increasing the allocation of resources to Aboriginal communities, also has harmful effects. It constantly reinforces the negative Aboriginal self-image, which is itself the most effective mechanism for the maintenance of oppression and disadvantage.

That contemporary central Australian Aboriginal cultures are both damaged and resilient determined the way HALT established working relationships with communities. The complexity of history's legacy is felt in the fact that HALT had to struggle against some aspects of contemporary Aboriginal behaviour while seeking to build upon others.

To become an 'intermediary and mediator within the network, in contrast with a role as provider or deliverer of services and solutions' (Lowe 1987, 319), HALT had first to establish that the community that had invited them to help would accept HALT's novel methods. HALT had much to say about the complexity of
the process of gaining knowing acceptance. At first, acceptance had been uneven. Referring to HALT’s work on the Pitiinantjarana Lands, the 1987–88 Annual Report referred to some communities’ ‘core authority figures’ (HALT 1988, 31) whose acknowledgment of HALT’s value had ‘increased access of the Team’. Similarly, Franks (1989, 17) recalled that at Yuendumu, slowly, ‘acceptance [of ‘how we would work’] was demonstrated by visits from elders and persons of influence’.

However, HALT’s 1987–88 Annual Report also warned of the dangers of HALT being introduced and mediated to the community by key figures. One of the ways external agencies (with their ‘exotic corporate structure’) have imposed themselves on communities has been to assign:

pre- eminent authority ... to one individual (usually male) as ‘President’ or ‘Chairman’. The dominance this affords and the preference outsiders commonly exhibit for negotiation with this person, contribute to a disproportionate degree of authority, by the ‘power of patronage’ which is thus conferred (HALT 1988, 62).

To be introduced to a community via such political mechanisms could thus result in further ‘erosion of traditionally authentic authority in the Community’.

In short, although mindful of the value of early support from significant persons (who may well be Presidents and Chairmen), HALT was also aware of the dangers of resting ‘community acceptance’ entirely on the assent of such figures, lest that relationship of mutual patronage uphold an unauthentic (in HALT’s view) distribution of authority within the community.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COUNSELLING

Because HALT offered counselling rather than material resources, those mediating HALT’s introduction to the community would be less likely to be motivated by material gain. HALT acknowledged that not providing material resources could hinder community acceptance. There may be ‘considerable antagonism’ to the HALT approach because it ‘does not include any claim for an increase in resources or facilities, at least in its initial phase’ (1988, 30). HALT
refused to meet the expectations raised by the usual kind of intervention, believing that its counselling would soon be seen as more beneficial than material resources or 'diversionary' programs.

Though acknowledging that counselling is an 'introduced western method', Franks (1989, 16) argued that to counsel was not to compromise Aborigines' independence, but to help its realisation. She recalled (1989, 17) that her counselling at Yuendumu had led to the community's redefinition of the sniffing problem 'as a family problem, in terms of the loss of the children who sniff'. She continued:

It is important to know that this re-definition of the problem was not introduced or imposed by the counsellor. Counselling skills were employed which enabled this to be achieved by the group: this process then led to authentic initiative and motivation to address the problem (Franks 1989, 18).

Authentic initiative was more likely because HALT tried to use 'indigenous language and representational symbolism', such as paintings, in communicating with Aboriginal people. HALT used the word 'internalisation' to describe the effect of such communication. To use such 'familiar cognitive modes' (Lowe 1989, 224) 'ensures that existing capacities for reception, processing, and dissemination of new ideas are exploited, and results in authentic appropriation and validation of the acquired information'. The 1987–88 Annual Report used the verb 'trigger' (1988, 21) to refer to the process by which HALT's stimulation is consonant with pre-existing orientations, resulting in 'authentic appropriation and validation of the acquired beliefs' (1988, 12).

HALT described the process signified in such terms ('trigger', 'internalisation', 'authentic') as 'an adaptive process which contrasts with assimilationist strategies to achieve change by the replacement of traditional Aboriginal patterns with alternative western values, concepts and skills'.

These claims were HALT's most ambitious assertion of what was different and therefore successful about its approach. HALT claimed to be able to overcome the disadvantage of being an external agency and to establish an intimate rapport with
Aboriginal ways of thinking – a rapport based on the fundamental Aboriginal value, reciprocity. As HALT construed reciprocity (ngaparji-ngaparji) 'the conception of delivery of remedies and solutions by outsiders ('targetting') is repudiated. Empowerment of the host group is the broad aim' (1988, 10). Counselling and indigenous styles of communication, they argued, were essential to this new relationship of reciprocity.

The counselling relationship was not necessarily easy to establish. To convey their difficulties, HALT employed a clinical psychological perspective to make sense of Aboriginal people's attitudes. As Franks argued (1989, 14) Aboriginal parents have suffered a 'progressive loss of confidence ... in regaining control of their own children and youth'. HALT's 1987–88 Annual Report (1988, p.13) remarked that parenting is attenuated 'when fear, confusion or shame diminish involvement with the sniffer'. The HALT emphasis was not only on the legacies of colonialism, but also on the specific damage that petrol sniffersthemselves had done to adults' confidence: 'the snifing itself is a factor contributing to the problematic conditions being addressed' (1989, 14). Accordingly, whereas all Aboriginal people had suffered, to some degree, the usurping and disorganising effects of non-Aboriginal interventions, some families had suffered the additional damage wrought by seemingly incorrigible offspring. Franks referred to 'those families whose functioning has become distorted and powerless' (1989, 19). 'In most [Yuendumu] cases parents, extended family and children were angry, afraid or apathetic. Some evinced unresolved grief for the loss of their children or disassociation from other relatives. These persons needed sensitive complex contact.'

At Kintore, the HALT team took some trouble to overcome the effects of parental 'grief'. Because the children were not dead but merely 'lost', grief was not being dealt with through the usual 'sorry' rituals, and so became an emotional obstacle to the adults' rethinking the problem. Lowe used the term 'denial' to refer to this obstacle. 'Denial' took the form of 'apathy' and 'demands for whites for helpful or controlling interventions' (Lowe 1987, 316). Franks referred to the need to 'reach out to them and sometimes to take the initiative'.

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HALT’s perspective thus supported interventions which seem to have been very confronting experiences for the Aboriginal adults concerned.

OTHER RELEVANT RESEARCH

HALT’s theory is a notable example of a problem posed by welfare colonialism’s shift from ‘assimilation’ to ‘self-determination’ (or ‘self-management’). The shift compels a more affirmative stance towards Aboriginal people’s capacities to deal with their problems. However, it also creates a new interpretive dilemma: when Aboriginal people seek the assistance of non-Aboriginal resources and authority, does their request betray a learned helplessness and a lack of confidence in their own ‘traditional’ ways, or does it arise from a reasonable appraisal of the limitations of old ways of doing things, in the face of challenges without precedent? In a way, the HALT theory is an example of the ease with which a commitment to ‘self-determination’ can give rise to a new standard by which Aboriginal actions can be judged, a new basis upon which to define some Aboriginal behaviours – such as adults giving up on petrol sniffers – as pathological.

In commenting on HALT’s theory, I want to argue that its affirmation of the Aboriginal family implied a presumption of knowledge, that is, a claim to know the trajectory of Aboriginal tradition’s adaptation to the unprecedented challenges of petrol sniffing. Before getting to that critical conclusion, however, I wish to review what some other observers of remote Aboriginal people have said about an apparently widespread crisis in adult authority. HALT was not alone in seeing this crisis as the key to the efflorescence of petrol sniffing.

Annette Hamilton’s study of child rearing among the Anbara of Arnhem Land (Hamilton 1981) is relevant to my theme, even though it does not attempt to describe the transformations of Anbara life by the pressures of non-Aboriginal society. Rather Hamilton expounds what she infers to have been the traditional, pre-contact ideologies and practices of child rearing insofar as she was able to observe them in ‘the struggling, disordered, anarchic,
highly individualised Aboriginal camp' at Maningrida in the late 1960s when Maningrida Settlement was about ten years old. She asks how Aboriginal parents ensure that children growing up in such an 'anarchic' camp become adults able to take their place in an 'extremely formalised and ordered social system', and why, in becoming part of that system, Aboriginal people are not turned into 'submissive, obedient, perhaps remarkably similar characterised persons, who resembled one another and obeyed rules automatically' (1981, 149)?

Her answer begins by acknowledging that, by European standards, Aboriginal adults are extremely indulgent and permissive towards children. However, two features of Aboriginal society help to lay psychological foundations for accepting adulthood's characteristic pressures to conform. First, 'certain subtle pressures are brought to bear on children'. For example, 'by never denying the child's wants (which are considered identical to its needs) the adults demonstrate unselfish behaviour' (1981, 150). And adults refrain from acting aggressively towards children, thus conditioning a child's confidence that, throughout life, what he/she wants can be got by asking (sometimes with extraordinary persistence) rather than by aggression. Second, individuals are labelled as having a certain 'nature' – manifest in their early behaviour; and 'there is a strong tendency for them to react according to the expectations of others' (1981, 152).

The main agent for conformity in childhood is the peer group, and within this children work out the appropriate behaviour patterns for the role they have been cast in.

In sum,

The centripetal forces of sociability and the centrifugal ones of self-assertion, individuality and aggression are mediated by customary behaviours – the giving and receiving of food and women, the control of aggression through ridicule and interference, and the control of excessive individuality by pressures to conform to traditional role expectations formed early in life.

The important phrase in this formulation is 'by customary behaviours'. If I understand her correctly, Hamilton emphasises the absence of a deliberated socialisation regime, of systematic and
focused training, in relation to Aboriginal children (before their rites of passage into adulthood) – in marked contrast to regimes of child socialisation characteristic of European society (1981, 153):

For our children, the suppression of individual desires and submission to adult authority occurs at a very early age in conjunction with bodily routines such as feeding, cleanliness, and other 'attachment' behaviours. The child's acceptance and sense of self-worth depends on it accepting the dictates of others, almost inevitably its parents, who have absolute and unquestioned control even to the point of physical attack.

Non-Aboriginal people are often dismayed by Aboriginal parents' apparent acceptance of what seems to be the out-of-control behaviour of small children and by the fact that Aboriginal children are firmly and rapidly promoted out of childhood unruliness and into grown up responsibility only at a relatively late age. But what more profoundly distinguishes Aboriginal from non-Aboriginal ways, if I have understood Hamilton, is that, traditionally, Aboriginal people have not had to have a body of child-rearing precepts nor a sequence of institutionalised regimes of child management – at least nothing that could compare with the formalised regimes of their European counterparts.

The techniques and practical wisdoms of child rearing which are most European families' inheritance have therefore had little parallel in Aboriginal society. Only recently, when European authorities have demanded that Aboriginal adults, particularly the biological parents, clothe and feed their children in certain ways, regulate their movements according to the timetables of school and employment, and impart to them a new decorum and manners, has it become possible to observe or to experience, as a 'lack' of child-rearing discipline and knowledge, the latent and subtle procedures of Aboriginal socialisation. At first, it was probably only non-Aboriginal people who would call these traditions a lack of child-management expertise. However, with the rise of petrol sniffing, the impact of its associated disruptions and property damage, and with the dawning knowledge of the physical and intellectual harm it can do to the sniffers themselves, many Aboriginal adults may also have begun to wonder what
their culture contains which could help them rein their children in.

The implication of Hamilton’s comparison, in brief, is that it can be read as predicting that Aboriginal parents might come to sense the limited utility, in the present, of their previously successful practices of child rearing, and so look to imported models.

David Hope, former superintendent of Amata Settlement, seems to be describing this crisis of tradition when he writes:

Traditionally, children enjoyed a comparative absence of discipline. Boys in particular were gently bonded to custom through the devoted mentorship of their elders, and then propelled into the galaxy of knowledge and responsibilities of adulthood through the transforming event of initiation. Thus the exercise of authority was never seen as an artifice for controlling children, but rather tied into the world of adults regulating their relations with one another, to the land, and to the supernatural. In these circumstances children were, in a sense, incidental to the real concerns and politics of the society, all of which were focused in the adult domain. Taken together these traits have not always been helpful in dealing with contemporary affairs (Hope 1987, 101).

‘In large modern settlements,’ he goes on to observe, ‘children have been able to generate a life to a large extent independent of the dictates of tradition.’ Petrol sniffing is a product of such discontinuities, with the result that ‘the discharge of adult authority in society has become confused’ (1987, 102).

While adults are genuinely and publicly concerned, in reality they only react to petrol sniffing if there are accidents. Otherwise children go ahead more or less unhindered. Children have at their disposal relatively powerful devices of social manipulation which they can use destructively in the absence of norms and conventions which might otherwise teach and nurture them.

That the conditions of life on the modern settlement promote such an ‘absence of norms and conventions’ is a theme of Robert Tonkinson’s paper on Jigalong (Tonkinson 1988). Tonkinson points to ‘the tension between the Aborigines’ desire for autonomy and their ... wish for intervention by outsiders to solve seemingly intractable problems affecting the community’ (1988, 395). One of the problems he discusses is ‘vandalism’ by young
people – a new problem for western desert people to consider. Parents, traditionally, were happy to allow [children] a great deal of freedom. There was so little of importance to deface or destroy that vandalism never posed a problem’ (1988, 402). Such indulgence by Aboriginal adults continued in the post-contact era, when non-Aboriginal missionaries became an authoritative presence in the lives of these people and when, within the settlement they sponsored at Jigalang, there arose an unprecedented aggregation of children. Because the arenas of Whites and Aborigines came to be segregated at Jigalang,

parents took for granted the caretaking role of the whites in the ‘settlement’ arena. Parents continued to indulge their children during the time spent together each day in the camp, and felt little or no responsibility for their behaviour elsewhere (Tonkinson 1988, 402).

However, when the ownership and control of the entire settlement was transferred to Aboriginal people, they could no longer overlook their children’s vandalism. Yet what were they to do about it? For there were

no traditional precedents and no easy solutions, since for most adults the corporal punishment of their children was, and still is, anathema, while to beat other’s children invariably produces hostility and frequently a violent reaction from the other parents .... With no generalized policing roles within the society, neither individuals nor the council will take responsibility for the problem (1988, 402, 403).

Nor have teachers been persuaded to punish children physically despite the fact that ‘local whites ... see the situation as serious and getting out of hand’ (1988, 403).

The Aboriginal people of Jigalang, Tonkinson adds, are wary of taking on the disciplinary tasks expected by Whites, in case they (Aboriginal adults) lose the cooperation of children; adults are conscious of the attractions of White ways for their younger folk (1988, 403).

Adults therefore want to avoid actions that might alienate their children from the Law, and would rather tolerate vandalism, etc. than run the risk of losing the younger generation to the new law.

One could add that, insofar as ‘vandalism, etc.’ includes petrol sniffing, the price of that tolerance may be a small but sad toll of
debilitation and death among the young. The priority of the Law's transmission may therefore be even more onerous in its price than Tonkinson allows. The people of Jigalong have had to consider these questions very recently and very suddenly, with the onset of 'self-determination' policy. In the era of 'assimilation', Mission authority had governed their children, so sparing Aboriginal adults from realising how life on settlements had changed the balance of power between young and old.

A crisis of authority on contemporary western desert settlements is one of the themes of Ralph Folds's study of schooling on the Pitjantjatjara Lands Whitefella School (Folds 1987). His chapter 'The petrol sniffers' argues that it is a crisis of both Anangu and White authority, and of the relationship between them.

Schools on the Lands have been unable to cope with sniffers, according to Folds, partly because the very presence of schools helps to inspire children to sniff petrol. Whitefella schooling contributes to the discontinuities of outlook between adult and young Anangu, 'the tensions and conflict between generations' (1987, 56). Both teachers and Anangu adults suffer the sniffers' insubordination, but in different ways.

Schools have found it difficult to deal with truancy. 'To petrol sniffers going to school is an act of rebellion against the solidarity of the petrol sniffing group' (1987, 59). Truanting sniffers taunt other children and teachers. Some teachers have had their personal property vandalised, their schools damaged and their physical safety threatened by sniffers; and 'schools have increasingly encountered great difficulty in staging events without attracting concerted opposition from the sniffers' (1987, 64). When children who sniff attend school 'they find many ways to subvert classroom life' (1987, 65). Folds illustrates this proposition by reference not to class work in the usual sense, but to the 'daily showers, frequent washes and weekly delousings [which] are a mandatory and highly regimented part of school life' (1987, 65). The result of sniffers' subversion of schools' hygiene regimes, according to Folds, has been not so much a collapse of teacher authority as a redefinition of its scope and modes (1987, 66).
Most senior boys' teachers have given up, often to the muted disgust of their more zealous junior colleagues in the lower grades. As one senior boys' teacher rationalised, 'the kids are old enough to make up their own minds about washing - and I'm a teacher not a policeman'.

What it means to be a teacher has had to be reconsidered in the face of the sniffer's challenge, reports Folds. The curriculum has had to be adapted in the endless quest for 'relevance' or for activities which have, if nothing else, 'entertainment value' (1987, 66). Folds implies (and the implication aroused angry responses to his book) that the result of this adaptation is a dereliction of the teachers' task (1987, 67).

In desperation, teachers have tried the familiar worksheet-based busywork exercises, gardening, chicken-raising, camel-catching, building dune buggies, hunting, and maintaining and riding trail bikes and BMXs.

Anangu adults, in a different way, have also seen their authority seriously compromised by sniffers. Folds refers to 'parental dismay and concern' (1987, 57) and explains that 'as children the sniffers are not subject to the Law and are not considered to be responsible in the way that whites believe them to be' (1987, 68). One early response to the older sniffers, 'the use of initiation to redeem sniffers, in order to force them into the ambit of Pitjantjatjara law', has now lost favour with Anangu, since it devalues the ritual, is not comprehensively effective, and confers sacred and secret items of knowledge on irresponsible young men (1987, 58). Anangu adults have been prepared to resort to the authority of the school conceived 'as a kind of super child-minding centre which, if nothing else, helps keep [children] out of trouble' (1987, 59): but the school, as already noted, is itself a weak instrument of control.

Folds is at pains to show the difficulties of combining the authority of Whites with that of Anangu adults, for the two groups do not share an understanding of the problem. According to him (1987, 69):

In the eyes of most whites the sniffers are vandals, destroying their property. For their part, Anangu see whites as adopting an unfeeling,
attitude towards the sniffers. To Anangu the sniffers are to be pitied – they have lost their cultural heritage because of white influence.

The more pitying attitude of Anangu did not seem to have led them to answers to the sniffers' challenge to their authority. 'The same practices of avoidance and passive resistance long honed against white authority figures in the classroom are equally effective against elders' argues Folds (1987, 71). The compassionate response sniffers have received from Anangu adults, however hard to justify to most Whites, has paid off in some cases who 'have mended their ways, undergone initiation and have been accepted back in the community where they are now holding respected positions' (1987, 72). However, whereas the youths whose insubordination remained uncorrected by initiation would once have been killed or speared for their infractions, Anangu are not so ready to resort to such measures lest they themselves incur the punishments of White society. The result is that Anangu have in many cases decided that their only option is 'to isolate a contagion which poses ... a grave threat to the social order': that is, to exclude sniffers from family life. 'These are severe sanctions in a small, isolated and otherwise collective society' (1987, 72). And such sanctions have their casualties: 'Life becomes intolerable as sniffers face severe ostracism on one hand and chronic sickness and death on the other' (Folds 1987, 73).

In Sarah Dunlop's 1988 report on 'disturbed behaviour' to the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Dunlop 1988), petrol sniffers did not emerge as a distinct category of the behaviourally disturbed. Using multivariate analysis on thousands of items of comment collected from central Australian Aboriginal people, Dunlop elucidated a twelve-part typology of behavioural disorders. She argues that this typology comprised the deep structure of her respondents' views; she found that petrol sniffers were scattered across nine of the categories of disturbing behaviour (1988, 65).

'The range of terms and attributes which people use to describe troublesome individuals does not distinguish between behaviour which was substance induced and behaviour with other causes. (emphasis in original)
Their typology of disturbed behaviour paid attention to effects rather than causes. Disturbed behaviour which resulted in property damage was not evaluated as negatively as 'violent disturbed behaviour against people ... Indeed, in some cases community members express concern about property damage but do little to attempt to deal with the problem. This inaction may reveal their own priorities' (1988, 65). Explanations of the disturbed behaviour of petrol sniffers were many and various. Only a third of those said to behave in a disturbed way and who were also sniffers were understood by her informants to be 'bored' (1988, 83); the disturbed behaviours of the other petrol sniffers were explained by reference to many other factors, including parental neglect.

The implications of such a myriad of explanations for the development of prevention strategies are not clear. A community may set up activities designed to relieve boredom, for example, and such activities might, in practice, involve all sniffers in the community, even those whose disturbed behaviour is attributed to causes other than boredom. One of Dunlop's conclusions is that there is no necessary connection between the explanations offered for a person's behaviour and the suggestions which her Aboriginal interviewees made for relieving the distress caused by disturbed behaviour.

The Aboriginal people to whom Dunlop spoke were concerned at the limitations of their old methods of therapy and social control. They evinced a sense that their culture is at a turning point, unable by itself to deal with all disturbed behaviour. Dunlop urged agencies to recognise Aboriginal people's admission of the limits of their knowledge, for 'where people perceive a problem as having no precedent in traditional times, the usual consequence is that no traditional care is seen as appropriate' (1988, 141). Aboriginal people told Dunlop that petrol sniffing, in particular, was one of the new threats to the soundness of people's behaviour - a threat requiring new, non-traditional responses (1988, 87). Many (but not all) told her that the efforts of the ngangkaris were to no avail. Not only the powers of ngangkaris but also those of parents are in doubt. People described 'the behaviour of parents in leaving behind their petrol
sniffing children when they go away for weekends ... as a simple reaction of frustration on the part of the parents and relatives...’ (1988, 137). In some of the 54 communities about which Dunlop obtained data, HALT had been at work, advocating more confidence in Aboriginal traditions of adults’ care for children. She commented that: ‘people may perceive sniffing as an issue which can be tackled, particularly with the influence of (HALT)’. It is interesting to note Dunlop’s data about who was caring for disturbed people (1988, 102):

In about half the cases, the main responsibility for care of an individual had fallen on a combination of close family members such as parents, siblings, children or spouses. A further group (one-sixth) were cared for by other family members, such as aunt, uncle, brother-in-law or sister-in-law.

This reveals a limited but significant use of the extended family in care. From the point of view of HALT’s argument about the regressive tendency towards nucleation of family form, these data are inconclusive. Do they confirm the decay of the extended family or do they suggest the potential for its enhanced use? Certainly there is a strong ethic of what Dunlop calls ‘family care’ (1988, 120): ‘the overwhelming message is that people would prefer community and family care.’ Unfortunately Dunlop does not always specify the sense in which she is using the term ‘family’.

From within this complex field of challenges perceived as new, traditions seen as no longer relevant or as limited in their effectiveness, and promotions of family strength such as that conducted by HALT, there emerged Aboriginal people’s views of the management of disturbed behaviour (1988, 142):

a combination of the traditional (such as concern for children, and respect for the value of going ‘out bush’) and non-traditional (such as community wide coercive action) to cope with a very non-traditional problem.

The non-traditional feature mentioned in this quote (community-wide coercive action) deserves to be labelled ‘non-traditional’ because, as Dunlop observes, many central Australian
communities are unprecedentedly large and long-term congregations of families, and their residents still resist the idea that another resident – not of their family, but authorised by the ‘community’ – could discipline their child. Such division (1988, 188–9) ‘is not seen as an insurmountable problem, but [as] one which may continue to create dissent, even if people in theory agree to the principle of community action’.

Though she is more wary than Dunlop of the labels ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’, Maggie Brady makes a similar point: the persistence of cultural values of individual autonomy and family loyalty militates against the formation of community-wide mandates to create sanctions against petrol sniffing.

While it is often asserted, and indeed has become conventional wisdom, that petrol sniffing continues to be practised because previously tradition-oriented Aboriginal groups are ‘losing’ their culture and suffering from family ‘breakdown’, on the contrary it appears that in many instances traditional cultural mores are alive and well. People are behaving in an entirely appropriate manner in which they adhere to customary modes of conduct and family loyalties (Brady 1992b, 111).

She cites the town of Ngukurr’s experience to suggest that communities which are successful in developing sanctions against petrol sniffing may have to take many ‘non-traditional’ steps (1992b, 160–6).

At this point, I would like to draw together the threads of agreement and disagreement between these commentators and HALT. Among the matters of agreement, the following themes are prominent:

- there has emerged a crisis in the confidence of many Aboriginal adults in remote Australia when it comes to confronting the more extreme forms of youthful alienation from their values and authority;
- there does not seem to be a widely held theory among Aboriginal adults about what causes young people to sniff petrol, and the issue of causation is, in any case, secondary to the issues of developing effective forms of caring and authority;
• petrol sniffing is a different problem to different authorities, and one should not presume that what makes it problematic for Aboriginal people is the same as what makes it problematic from the point of view of medical staff, teachers, police, and others;

• Aboriginal youth live in an environment defined by authorities emanating from two kinds of source – Aboriginal adults (to whom youths are likely to be related as ‘family’) and non-Aboriginal adults (who are present as functionaries of health, welfare, education and policing agencies of the state). The relationships between these two kinds of authority have been and remain problematic.

The word ‘problematic’ in my last sentence is deliberately vague and question-begging, because it is on the issue of the proper or advisable nature of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authority that there seems to be most disagreement. HALT’s view is starkly clear: non-Aboriginal authority has intruded in the past, disempowering Aboriginal adults, and so it should now withdraw. HALT was always keen to point to the non-authoritative nature of its own interventions: their relationship with communities was one of reciprocity, they insisted, and they were wary of using ‘councils’ or ‘Chairman’ as their initial points of introduction to communities. HALT also insisted on the ‘authenticity’ of their hosts’ responses to their counselling, by using graphic idioms and story-telling as the media of much of their interaction. Above all, HALT thought it important to deny expectations that, as an integral part of their concern about petrol sniffing, they would deliver material resources such as motor cars, outstation infrastructure and program-based jobs. The powers and resources needed to deal with petrol sniffing were already there, they insisted, immanent to a culture which had lost its self-confidence.

**AUTHORITY AND DEPENDENCY**

The risk of this undoubtedly humane and historically sensitive theory of intervention is that it may have attached little
importance to some of the ways in which ‘authority’ is entangled with ‘dependency’. To elucidate this point, I will begin by asking why HALT celebrated the western desert construct walytja but neglected the notion kanyininpa.

When the HALT writings expounded the quality in Aboriginal people’s traditions which would be of most help in forming sanctions against petrol sniffing, they foregrounded the western desert term walytja. The word refers to Aborigines’ sense of relatedness and mutual responsibility, of being mutually identified with one country. HALT celebrated this construct, finding it encoded in systems of classificatory and consanguineal kinship and enacted in the extended, rather than nuclear, family so that it constituted the practical sinews and the moral foundations of Aborigines’ continuity as a people bound to help one another. The HALT view rested on what Aboriginal people such as Andrew Spencer Tjapaltjarri have taught and on such descriptions of central Australian Aboriginal culture as Fred Myers’s Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self (1986).

HALT did not mention, let alone give prominence to, another Pintupi construct to which Myers has given attention: the notion kanyininpa which Myers glosses as ‘holding’, looking after, and ‘nurturance’. The term is used to refer to the relationships between parents and their offspring and between senior and junior generations; it therefore has connotations of authority, as well as of nurturance. That the HALT theory made no mention of kanyininpa seems strange at first, for the concept is relevant not only to HALT’s promotion of the potential for family-based caring, but also to its critique of central Australian Aborigines’ contemporary ‘dependency’. However, Myers’s exposition of kanyininpa yields a more complex understanding of ‘dependency’ than offered by HALT: it implies that those over whom authority is exerted are also quite properly dependent. To be boss is also to have a duty to look after.

This has two implications. First, and to get back to a point made by Tonkinson, those who have authority over the young must not deal too harshly with them. If adults wish their children to leave the freedoms of childhood behind and to be initiated into the responsibilities and privileges of adulthood, they must not only
command but nurture and woo. If non-Aboriginal authority removes or questions some powers of command, and if it tempts young people with an alternative vision of what it is to live well, then Aboriginal adults must reconsider their mix of commanding and wooing tactics. If Aboriginal adults are sometimes more willing to ‘tolerate vandalism, etc. than to run the risk of losing the younger generation to the new law’ (Tonkinson 1988, 403), then it may not be because Aboriginal adults have no regard for the material property dear to Whites, and it may not be because they suffer a lack of confidence. It may be because, in the tactics of adapted Aboriginal authority, there are bigger things at stake: keeping the goodwill of the younger folk.

HALT took an important step in respecting the extent to which Aboriginal adults differ from non-Aboriginal adults in their notions of what is problematic about petrol sniffing. However, it was also easy to be too knowing about that – that is, to know what Aboriginal adults could and should do on the basis of their (different) traditions. My alternative suggestion for a politics of cultural respect is that non-Aboriginal authority should leave room not only for Aboriginal adult values, but also for Aboriginal adult tactics. If a space for tactical experiment is left, then Aboriginal adults who are dealing with the new conditions in which authority must combine with nurturance will be able to call on non-Aboriginal authority and non-Aboriginal resources when it seems to them to be appropriate, without being understood as ‘dependent’ on outside help.

A second implication arising from taking kanyininpaa seriously is that, according to Myers, the construct gives a basis for the Pintupi to expect and to rely on what the welfare state will provide. He reports that for Pintupi people kanyininpaa illuminates their relationships with government agencies (Myers 1986, 282):

On the whole, Pintupi understand the Australian government and its representatives as largely autonomous ‘bosses’, to whom deference and obedience is owed. In turn, the government is obliged to ‘help’ and ‘look after’ the Aborigines. Their interpretation of past government behavior convinces Pintupi that their view is appropriate. They reason that the government gave them food, that the government gives pensions to the old, and that it has said, repeatedly,
that it wants to 'help' Aborigines. Finally, others tell them the government should help and is not helping enough. In these ways, Pintupi assimilate government actions to their indigenous political theory.

The significance of this argument for a theory of dependency is that the dependent position makes sense to the Pintupi, not just as a pragmatic adjustment to non-Aborigines' authority and affluence, but also as an extension to new circumstances of one of their fundamental understandings of how social life persists. It follows that to pathologise dependency and to see it as helplessness visited on a colonised people by exterior authority is to contest a significant application of the Pintupi construct on which relations of nurturant authority are based. An intervention theory which denies resources, though pleasing to cost-conscious governments, questions the relevance of kanyininpa to a very large part of contemporary Pintupi experience.

CONCLUSION

HALT's analysis presented the problem of acting according to two historical theses which seem to be in tension: that Aboriginal culture has suffered damage, so that it tends towards disempowered dependency, and that certain traditions of response to social disorder remain sufficiently alive among Aboriginal people that, with a change in welfare practice, they remain the basis of re-empowerment and independence. Holding to both arguments (as it seems necessary to do) leaves one with no clear scenario for the affirmation of tradition. The tension between the two theses points to the site of an experiment.

In refining its objectives, and in the name of empowering parents, HALT highlighted the enhancement of community norms and sanctions against petrol sniffing; these were at least as important among its objectives as the elimination of petrol sniffing itself. But to highlight 'norms' must also be to entertain the possibility that people's norms will vary: divergence between Aboriginal norms and non-Aboriginal norms, and differences of opinion among families or sections of Aboriginal opinion. An approach which valorises 'tradition' and 'empowerment' should
be prepared for this outcome; community consensus – over what is tolerable and what should be done about intolerable things – may not be easy to achieve. Indeed, HALT’s aspiration about the emerging salience of an introduced social form – the ‘community’ – sits awkwardly with its affirmation of ‘family’. Brady has argued that to uphold ‘family’ may be to stall the emergence of ‘community’ authority. A theory of ‘empowerment’, such as HALT’s, is incomplete if it does not specify the level – individual, household, ‘family’, ‘community’ – to which the ‘self’ of ‘self-determination’ refers.

Aboriginal people seem to be engaged in an assessment of the strength and relevance of their traditions of social organisation, in particular the norms and practices of kinship and of adult authority over children. Settlements and missions have inaugurated a new ecology of Aboriginal life. Notwithstanding the movements of decentralisation to ‘Homelands’ or outstations, young people still tend to be aggregated and subject to influences unprecedented in pre-contact traditions. How to apply and to adapt older understandings of adult authority is thus a major issue in Aboriginal people’s social evolution. The mixture of authority and nurturance within adult action towards children is a matter of great subtlety. It would seem that, until recently, these matters have not had to be considered so explicitly nor debated so protractedly by Aboriginal people. Child rearing up until recently has simply worked well enough, as unconsidered practice.

The issue of how the authority of Aboriginal adults is to be adapted is made more complex by the possibilities of outside intervention by various agencies of non-Aboriginal society (some of which now employ Aboriginal staff). Aboriginal people and their advisers and observers are variously critical of the purposes, nature and outcomes of past interventions. Some critiques emphasise the theme of interference (‘cultural genocide’); others underline the apparent dependency that such interventions have cultivated among Aboriginal people; and others point to the ways that settlement and mission authority obscured and delayed Aboriginal recognition of changes in their social environment.

Aboriginal people have been precipitated into ‘self-determination’ as if they were always already self-governing.
collective subjects. HALT’s experience shows that what it means to ‘empower’ Aboriginal people is hardly straightforward. Aboriginal people’s options should include declining to exercise, or taking up with only the greatest hesitation, powers which non-Aboriginal people think that they need to exercise.

The representation of the Aboriginal ‘subjects’ of self-determination is made more complex by the HALT theory’s consideration of profound and even ‘unconscious’ mental processes. Both Franks and Lowe argued that ‘grief’ and ‘denial’ were important but unrecognised themes of Aboriginal people’s thinking about petrol sniffing and, presumably, about other instances of severe social dysfunction. This sensitivity to the psychological dimension of Aboriginal life was both the basis and the outcome of one of HALT’s defining practices – intensive counselling of sniffers and their families. But HALT’s recourse to explanations such as ‘denial’ cushions one of the vulnerable surfaces of its theory: the implicitly prescriptive projection of a course of recovery for Aboriginal parents and the stipulation of certain actions as faithful to recovering tradition. To the extent that the HALT theory was subtly prescriptive, it affirmed Aboriginal people’s values at the cost of leaving little place for their tactics.

EPILOGUE: A DOCKER RIVER VIGNETTE

Do Aboriginal people of the western desert have the resources to look after their old people properly? A recent research project led by Susan Woenne-Green (1995) was inspired by uneasiness, among some of the region’s leaders, that they don’t.

She showed that it is partly a question of what properly means. Green and her collaborators (Mantatjarra Wilson, Lorian Brooke, Jo Harrison, Sandra Lewis, Tjikalyi Colin, Jorna Newberry and Valeri Foster) take a position on what is proper by arguing for a new criterion for classifying old people as ‘at risk’.

‘At risk’ refers not only to the possibility of dying but also to the possibility that the person might soon be in circumstances which will force a temporary or permanent removal from community, family and
country to a nursing home, quite possibly without their agreement or against their wishes (Woenne-Green 1995, 35).

They document old people’s distress at being away from their homelands and country in the final period of their lives. But ‘proper’ care refers not only to considerations of location. It refers also to the involvement of those ‘family’ whom the old person deems to have a duty of care; and it refers to waru (fire, and firewood). Waru is metonymic: it stands for a complex of things of which it is but one part, the social relationships and activities of a hearth.

Place, family and waru – these sound like the ingredients of an old age which is lived within nurturant tradition. Yet Woenne-Green and her colleagues are determined to discourage any sentimentality about ‘Aboriginal traditional way’. Unsupported, it is not enough. Too many old people have had to endure neglect because of others’ misplaced confidence that traditions of nurturance were strong enough to meet old people’s needs. Woenne-Green and her colleagues make a case for new community-based institutions. Not only do they define and advocate old people’s needs, their argument amounts to an essay on the emerging salience of ‘community’ as a category of both administrative discourse and Aboriginal governance.

The researchers had a chance to observe an experiment in institutionalising new forms of care for old people. At Docker River a cluster of serviced pensioner houses began to provide a new home for several old folk in April 1993. ATSIC funding for the four staff soon ran out, but from this brief experience there flowed arguments about whether such care was ‘culturally appropriate’. Those who thought it inappropriate worried that the cluster of twelve units looked like a town-based residential facility. They protested that the residents should not be lumped in together: they should be ‘at home’ being looked after by their ‘family’. Woenne-Green and co. are not persuaded. They counter that the facility’s appearance is irrelevant; the important thing is that it enabled families to limit their involvement in caring for old people. Each caring family could thus develop a caring regime
which it could sustain. That way, the old people ceased to be ‘at risk’ (of being sent to the old people’s home in Alice Springs).

The report tries to produce a realistic, rather than an idealised and prescriptive, account of the way western desert families work. It therefore implicitly challenges some versions of the arguments of HALT, particularly HALT’s confidence in the nurturant capacities of walytja (kin) and its scepticism towards the building up of externally-funded systems of social support.

Reporting discussion among Anangu, the authors reveal a prescriptive culture. That is, people referred to older ways as better than now, and they put forward a duty of care, by young for old, which was continuous with the duty of care by which older people had ‘grown up’ the young. Inter-generational responsibilities are acknowledged, even if not always acted upon. One respect in which older ways were better was that contemporary housing tends to nucleate families, making it less likely that older folk will camp together. People also compared store food unfavourably with ‘bush’ food. These norms and evaluative contrasts are the cultural basis for contemporary standards of care, but such standards are not met in sustainable programs: housing, nutrition, transport (for people and for goods such as waru), laundry facilities, accessible toilet/shower/laundry, cheque-cashing and money management. ‘[T]he disjunction between what ought to happen and what is possible in the circumstances is the cause of substantial misunderstanding, tension, frustration and distress to senior people, carers, community councils and health staff’ (1995, 63). And this, the authors assert, is a failure in policy.

Such failure has an ideological basis not only among government officials, but also among Aboriginal people themselves, the report argues. Old people are not a powerful constituency, partly because they view their circumstances as personal misfortune, and also because of the persistence of the assumption (among Anangu and others) that relieving such misfortune is a family, rather than a community, responsibility. Old people are also victims of their own nurturant outlook. For example, they have been easily induced to place their own need for housing behind those of younger folk.
VALUES, TACTICS AND HALT

The Docker River initiative began to lift old people out of this political trough. Staff became advocates of the poorly mobilised pensioner constituency. Yet these new advocates did not necessarily usurp a political capacity which belonged to others, as a ‘zero-sum’ view of power (all too common in accounts of colonialism, including HALT’s) might have it. The facility, a publicly-subsidised communal effort, made it easier for families to keep their old people with them; it therefore reinforced the normative fiction that it is towards family that old people properly turn for help. It also freed, for more concentrated political effort, those ‘family’ who were most practically concerned with the needs of the old folk. Thus, a communal facility may complement and enhance ‘family’, not detract from it. Another important political development in the region has been the rise of ‘Women’s Centres’ – advocates and providers of services to old people, among their other functions.

Susan Woens-Green and her colleagues have not only ‘upped the ante’ in the advocacy of dedicated services to old Aboriginal people, they have contributed to our understanding of the changing forms of western desert sociality. It has become a cliché of political critique to question the cultural appropriateness of ‘communities’, to characterise them as the unwanted residue of the era of assimilation, an administrative imposition on the indigenous order of country-based kinship. This report subverts such easy antinomies between old and new, imposed and authentic, institutions. It makes a case for the development of externally-funded ‘community’ facilities, not in a spirit of capitulation to the attrition of ‘tradition’, but out of a researched conviction that communal facilities are now essential to livable traditions.
PART THREE

HIV/AIDS and self-determination
Cultures of sexuality

THE NOVELTIES OF OUR SITUATION

The recent advent of HIV/AIDS has brought to health service delivery in the Northern Territory an unprecedented stimulus to reconsider the approach to the control of sexually transmitted diseases among Aboriginal people. Schopper (1990, 1268) has argued that in many ‘developing countries’ the challenge of HIV/AIDS is directing attention to the relatively poor state of control over sexually transmitted diseases. This generalisation applies to the central Australian Aboriginal population.

Sister Ellen Kettle’s history of health services in the Territory bears witness to long neglect of this problem. Her book mentions gonorrhoea, syphilis and donovanosis as diseases found among Aboriginal people in different locations in the Territory since the late nineteenth century, but it is clear from her narrative (which ends in 1970) that venereal diseases did not claim health authorities’ attention as much as tuberculosis, leprosy, malaria, whooping cough, poliomyelitis, measles, gastro-enteritis and trachoma. There was spasmodic attention to gonorrhoea when single non-Aboriginal men were gathered. For example, she discusses the Northern Territory Administration’s efforts to keep
Aboriginal women of the Darwin region away from the Vestey’s meatworks workforce in the second decade of the twentieth century. One effect of such concern was the setting up of Kahlin compound in 1912 and the compulsory treatment of Aboriginal venereal disease cases (but not non-Aboriginal cases). In central Australia segregative public health measures were also favoured. The approach of the railroad construction gang in 1928–29 provoked authorities to expel scores of Aboriginal people from the vicinity of Alice Springs; they were told to go to Hermannsburg. Similar concerns about Aboriginal women infecting non-Aboriginal men helped to persuade the Australian military command to assist the Finke River Mission to establish ration depots at Haasts Bluff (1940) and Areyonga (1943). Fears of contagion, in other words, led to policies of segregation rather than to the elaboration of the means of treatment. Two pieces of information supplied by Kettle suggest the ineffectiveness of this policy, even by its own limited criteria of success. In 1934 Dr McCann found no venereal disease among the Hermannsburg population, while Hackett found gonorrhoea in and around Alice Springs (Kettle 1991, vol 1, 196, 189). In the same year, at the Bungalow (which was then the ‘half-caste home’) on the edge of Alice Springs, there was an outbreak of gonococcal eye infection.

No doubt some of the non-Aboriginal authorities’ fears of contagion were prompted also by the perceived prevalence of syphilis among Aboriginal people. However, it was easy for diagnosis far from laboratories (and sometimes far from doctors) to confuse syphilis, yaws and donovanosis. Yaws, a non-venereal condition, appears to have been endemic in the pre-contact Aboriginal population. According to Kettle (1991, vol 1, 163) Dr Eymann’s medical report on his tour of the Centre in 1896–98 ‘confused tertiary yaws with syphilis and considered the latter widespread’. Not until 1936 (Hackett 1936) was there an attempt in the literature to clarify the distinction between the two diseases and their estimated prevalences in the Northern Territory. That clarification has, in turn, led some to speculate that there was then little or no syphilis in the Aboriginal population and that endemic yaws had given Aborigines immunity to other treponemal infections. Kettle joins Jacobs (1978) in suggesting that
syphilis has spread among Aboriginal people only recently, after the elimination of yaws. This theory remains controversial.

The medical kit issued to the Hermannsburg Mission by the Commonwealth government in the 1930s included a urethral syringe, suggesting official concern that gonorrhoea might be found, but it seems that the campaign against yaws took pride of place in the Mission’s limited medical work. The campaign against yaws throughout the Northern Territory may have been one of the most successful interventions by missionaries in the lives of Aboriginal people (1991, vol 1, 158). Before penicillin (which became available in the Territory in 1943–44) salvarsan and acetylsarsan were used. Theoretically, injecting for yaws was a job for police as well as missionaries, but a 1929 review of Aboriginal welfare policy and practice found that police were reluctant to perform such medical duties (Bleakley 1929, 11). That missionaries were effective against yaws – eliminating it at Hermannsburg by the 1950s, for example (Kettle, vol 1, 196) – possibly increased the acceptability of the earliest welfare initiatives to Aboriginal people. Perhaps a frontier of yaws relief also began to give Aboriginal people an inordinate respect for the coloniser’s ‘magic bullets’, establishing a certain model of curative medicine and arousing expectations that all diseases could be fixed with a needle or a pill.

Not only did penicillin become available to be used against a number of bacterial infections in the 1940s, but a network of ration depots and settlements was established in order to service what were then judged to be the medical and educational needs of central Australian Aborigines. However, the earliest surveys of the health status of Aborigines on these settlements and missions seem to have paid no attention to venereal diseases. In her summaries of the 1952 surveys by Dr Brock and of the 1956 surveys of Dr Hargraves, Kettle makes no mention of attempts to estimate the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases. Dr Hargraves has confirmed (pers. comm.) that his surveys were not about such problems; I have not been able to check Dr Brock’s reports at first hand. Dr Hargraves recalls, however, that there was plenty of undocumented gonorrhoea in Alice Springs at that time, though none, so far as he or anyone knew, in the rural

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areas. He also recalls seeing tertiary yaws among Aboriginal people who had only recently come into contact with non-Aboriginal medical services.

Kettle’s history rarely mentions the Commonwealth Department of Health making efforts to treat sexually transmitted diseases in the post-war period, apart from mentioning a male donovanosis case seen at Hooker Creek in 1954 and treated in Alice Springs. The very mention of an individual case implies that such diagnosis and treatment was a rare event. It tells us nothing about the prevalence of donovanosis.

The scant knowledge of the prevalence of venereal diseases among Aboriginal people by the early 1970s is reflected in Peter Moodie’s survey of research findings, completed in April 1972.

The lack of a clear picture of the occurrence and effects of venereal diseases arises from several interrelated factors: the reluctance of cases of venereal infection to report for diagnosis and treatment; reluctance of individuals in a survey to submit to examination of the genitals; and lack of specific test (serological or skin test) with the exception of tests for lymphogranuloma venereum (Moodie 1973, 163).

Moodie could adduce ‘no recent figures for the clinical prevalence of gonorrhoea’ (1973, 164) and nor could he report more than anecdotal evidence of occasional clinical cases of ‘ulcerating granuloma of the pudenda’ (1973, 165) in central Australia. Referring to Hackett and to the recent advice of Dr Cook (Chief Protector of Aborigines and Chief Medical Officer of the Northern Territory Administration 1927–39), Moodie appeared to lend credence to the view that ‘venereal syphilis was ... unknown in the Northern Territory Aboriginal population before 1939’. He added that ‘since then there have been increasing opportunities for its repeated introduction and spread within the Aboriginal population, and with diminishing cross-immunity from yaws venereal syphilis threatens to be an increasingly important factor in Aboriginal morbidity in the Northern Territory’. With the advent of AIDS in the 1980s, it becomes necessary to add ‘and mortality’ to the last sentence.

Accordingly, when Central Australian Aboriginal Congress began to educate central Australian Aboriginal people about HIV/AIDS in the mid 1980s, there were possibly two important
novelties in the situation. One arose from the possibly relatively recent (looking back one, or at most two, generations) occurrence among Aboriginal people of at least one of the STDs which is of relevance to AIDS/HIV epidemiology and prevention – venereal syphilis. The other more certain and more important novelty arose from the fact that the control of STDs had never been a strategic priority of the health care system. In late 1991, Dr David Scrimgeour and I found that only two central Australian health service delivery organisations had a strategy for STD control: Nganampa Health Council and the Department of Health and Community Services. Staff of the Department seemed unaware of the strategy’s existence (Scrimgeour and Rowse 1991). The efforts by Congress and other agencies seeking to warn Aboriginal people about HIV/AIDS were unprecedented. For the first time, Aboriginal people were being asked to think in preventive terms about the relationship between illness and their ceremonial and sexual practices.

My earliest conversations, in 1991, with men of Bushtown revealed to me that people there had been startled by their first news of HIV/AIDS. One man told me that fearful discussions had taken place in every camp. I was told by one community leader that some people may even have misunderstood a poster intended to tell how HIV is not transmitted, and so may have become more worried than they needed to be. At that time, a sporting team took a box of condoms to Barunga. There was apprehension that anyone might have AIDS and transmit it. Since then the fear has abated and the issue of AIDS is less on people’s minds, I was told.

Administered to thirteen men aged 17 to 39 over a ten week period, my interview schedule included a number of questions designed to test men’s retention of HIV/AIDS education and to gauge the extent to which they saw themselves to be at risk. Three of the thirteen said that they had not heard of AIDS. Among the ten who recalled something, eight had been part of a formally constituted AIDS-education audience (at school, college or community meetings), one did not indicate his sources of information, and one mentioned TV news and signs in the clinic. When I questioned further the three who had not heard ‘a doctor,
sister or health educator' explain about AIDS, I found that only one had heard nothing at all, one had 'heard a white bloke talk about it', and the final man mentioned television as a source.

The quality of these men's awareness proved to be uneven. Asked to say what they remembered having heard, unprompted by me, only five repeated the most heavily emphasised message of the region's AIDS education campaign: use a condom. However, more than these five men knew that AIDS could be 'caught' through sexual contact. When I asked, later in the interview, 'How do you get AIDS?', an additional six men referred to sex. Other things remembered unprompted were: that it was best to stick to one sexual partner (mentioned by three men); that there is no cure (two men); that syringes should not be shared (two men); that AIDS came from outside the world of Aboriginal people (two men).

These answers should be considered with those given to two other questions: 'How do we know if someone has AIDS?' and 'Can doctors cure or stop AIDS?' The purpose of the former question was to find out if people thought they could avoid HIV infection simply by avoiding sexual partners who showed what they took to be the signs of HIV infection. In my earliest discussions with Bushtown men, I had come across a young man (who proved to be one of the town's acknowledged eccentrics) who confidently proposed that you could easily tell which women could infect you. His erroneous approach to AIDS avoidance turned out not to be typical of those whom I interviewed. Nine out of thirteen men were sure that lay diagnosis, using such 'signs', was not adequate: they mentioned the need for a blood test or for some unspecified medical procedure ('only doctor knows'), or they simply said 'we don't know' or 'we can't tell from looking'. Of the remaining four men, two could not answer the question at all, and two referred to getting skinny and getting marks on the skin. The latter answers are difficult to interpret, as I did not try to explain in my questions the distinction between asymptomatic HIV infection and the resulting illness condition (which can include weight loss and discoloration of the skin) known as 'having AIDS'.
As for the possibility of cure, three men were simply unable to answer this question, and one answered that there was a ‘special tablet’ for curing AIDS. Most of the remaining nine were certain that, as yet, there is no cure, though two admitted that they did not think themselves well-informed on the issue of ‘cure’; they groped for an answer. (During the period of my fieldwork, The Bulletin ran a cover story whose headline, displayed outside newsagents in Alice Springs, implied that a cure was at hand.)

I asked three questions concerning the respondents’ sense that AIDS might be a near or a remote threat to their health. There is an unavoidable element of prompting in such questions: why would I be asking them, the respondents could be expected to wonder, if there were not some degree of menace? I therefore attach significance to some respondents’ persistent refusal to give me an answer indicating that they felt even the distant presence of that menace. To the question ‘Have you ever heard of an Aboriginal person having AIDS?’, seven men answered ‘no’. At the time of my fieldwork, it was my understanding that there were no confirmed cases of HIV infection among Territory Aborigines. In their answers to two subsequent questions (‘Do you think any [language group] people could get AIDS?’ and ‘Do you think there is a possibility that you will get AIDS?’) four of these seven men admitted to feeling some vulnerability. In other words, three men out of thirteen did not acknowledge AIDS as a risk to themselves, even after three questions had prompted them to do so. Those who did see it as a possibility recalled rumours about this or that person living on a central Australian community being HIV-infected. Only one person cited a rumour that a Bushtown resident was infected. A pattern in others’ answers was the contrasting of town (Alice Springs) and Bush. Four men nominated ‘town’ as dangerous: one commented that town-based women were ‘really crazy, just go for anyone’, while the other three told me that, in town, one’s sexual behaviour was much more likely to be promiscuous, one of them naming grog as a contributing influence. In what they said to me, the Bushtown people’s vulnerability depended on the extent to which they visited town and ‘played up’. Consistent with that view, one of the men not yet perturbed by any sense of the threat of HIV/AIDS
told me he felt safe in Bushtown because 'we're right in the middle of the desert'... [we've got] 'bush food and strong things here'.

I hesitate to venture a generalisation about the state of awareness revealed in these answers, except to say that the subject of HIV/AIDS had evidently been successfully introduced to Bushtown men by 1991. There would seem to be enough information among these men so that, when the issue is raised with Bushtown folk again, Bushtowners will help to inform other Bushtowners. Educators from outside are no longer the sole or even the major source of the first levels of AIDS awareness, however important they remain as catalysts of further Bushtown conversations.

One Bushtowner who has some professional experience of health promotion (including AIDS awareness programs) told me that it was quite a new thing for Bushtowners to have to think of a causal relationship between having sex and becoming grievously ill. Traditionally, Bushtowners have had their own clear distinctions between 'right-way' and 'wrong-way' sex, but these categories refer to the prescriptions and proscriptions of kinship, to the issue of which persons one may not have sex with, not to the manner of sex itself. In any case the old penalty for wrong-way sex was death inflicted by aggrieved guardians of the law, not sickness, he pointed out.

In the last few years, this man continued, there has been much unprecedented discussion of how to have sex and how not to have it, but there is not yet an 'answer'. After asking him to explain this word, I understood him to mean that there has not yet been clear feedback from Aboriginal people to their educators, no confirmation that the safe sex message was being understood and acted upon. Petrol-sniffers, by contrast, were articulate about their experience, after they had ceased to sniff, and those campaigning against petrol-sniffing had thus developed an understanding of their clientele's ways of thinking. When it comes to promoting AIDS awareness, however, educators such as he are as yet uncertain about how (if at all) their work is being understood and transformed into new behaviour. He seemed to find it amusing that he could, at times, feel as estranged from his
culture as I was, an outsider who did not even speak the language. He too was culturally removed – a bearer of new knowledge whose meaning and significance to its intended audience was not yet clear. From other things that he said, I took this man’s sense of alienation to refer particularly to his still junior relationship with ritually senior men. He referred to the work of an Aboriginal AIDS educator who has sought to modify secret men’s rituals which have been identified as an AIDS risk. While supportive of this man’s work, he warned that non-Aboriginal people should not delude themselves by thinking that, with a few dedicated and respected cultural go-betweens such as himself and this man, the entire culture was being laid open to the AIDS awareness message. The process of cultural innovation and diffusion was much slower than that, he was warning me. When he made this point, I took him to be referring to other aspects of Aboriginal culture as well, not only to the High Culture of secret men’s business.

This is an important warning, and I understood it to reflect a long-standing Aboriginal practice of preserving ‘the Aboriginal domain’ (Trigger 1992) from non-Aboriginal intrusion. I was struck by the way one man expressed himself when telling me that, in his boyhood, mission and welfare authorities had not tried to give sex education to Bushtowners. We might think of that as neglect, but he put it positively: ‘we controlled our own law, government didn’t interfere. It was floating really clear.’ The promotion of AIDS awareness can thus be experienced not only as necessary and helpful but also as another way to challenge Aboriginal autonomy. I think this fear was behind the remarks of a man who, despite seeing the necessity of promoting safe sex to his people, admitted with a grim laugh to feeling resentment at a ‘half-caste from Darwin or somewhere’ who gave an AIDS-awareness talk to Bushtown men: ‘I’m thinking he’s fooling us around. Maybe take him out bush, cut his off.’

To the extent that such reactions evoke the cultural conservatism of central Australian Aboriginal people, it is as well to know that I was told that while sorcery remains an important feature of people’s explanations of misfortune, illness and death, people wish also to acquire new knowledge about health and
illness from non-Aboriginal people. Indeed, one man said that people get frustrated and angry if an Aboriginal health worker cannot produce a bio-medical explanation of the disorders presented to clinics. This is paralleled by Janice Reid’s reports that Yolngu found value in bio-medical accounts of death and misfortune at Yirrkala in the mid 1970s (Reid 1983).

Bushtown’s male Aboriginal health workers told me that men do not seek the help of a Ngangkari (traditional healer) when they notice an STD symptom. This does not imply the irrelevance of Ngangkaris to Bushtowners: another man who has since resumed work as an Aboriginal Health Worker saw a visiting Ngangkari about his damaged hamstring. That Ngangkari’s visit had been prompted by a Bushtown resident’s advanced cancer condition, Alice Springs Hospital having discharged him as incurable.

Because central Australian Aboriginal people’s situation is historically novel in a number of respects noted above, and because one of Bushtown’s most astute cultural brokers admits to great uncertainty about how Aboriginal people are reacting to AIDS awareness education, I could place only the most tentative and debatable interpretations on the cultural data I was able to gather by fieldwork and by reading. Throughout this chapter my observations are tentative and speculative. The most important point I can make is that the culture of sexuality is a dynamic and contested field of possibilities.

A KNOWLEDGE BASE FOR HEALTH PROMOTION?

It is a commonplace of the literature on the prevention of AIDS that programs which are intended to change sexual behaviour should be culturally specific; that is, they should address a ‘target’ audience whose characteristic sexual behaviours and norms of sexual conduct have been investigated, documented and taken into consideration in the design of health promotion messages. Thus, under the heading ‘some constraints to behavioural change’ Van Dam (1989, 144) includes ‘lack of knowledge and insight into behavioural patterns relating to sexuality and drug use in various population groups’. In a review of evaluative studies (completed before mid 1987) of attempts to promote
'behavioural change to reduce risk' Becker and Joseph (1988, 408) highlighted 'the need to diversity research activity by including investigations of minority populations and young adults'.

Anthropological research would seem to be ideally suited to contribute to this task. However, critical reflection on the inadequacies of anthropology as a discipline and a review of the accumulated wisdom of 'health promotion' theory and practice lead me to temper such programmatic optimism about medical anthropology. Without ruling out the possibility of anthropology's contribution to the design of more effective health promotion strategies, let me sound some warnings.

Anthropology is not rich in its knowledge of the cultural variability of sexual behaviour. In a 1991 Social Science and Medicine symposium 'Anthropology Rediscovers Sex', Donald Tuzin pointed out that the discipline has shied away from documenting sexual behaviour, preferring to record normative statements about sexuality; he argues that the 'norms' inferred from such statements are all too easily misconstrued as descriptive and prescriptive of actual sexual behaviour. Tuzin's own conversations with Melanesian men about their sexual practice have revealed to him that their sexual acts are both private and extremely various. He concludes that sex is a domain of experience which is 'peculiarly resistant to cultural standardization', and so norms count for little as determinants of sexual behaviour and sexual experience (Tuzin 1991, 871). There is surely something familiar about that conclusion for those with experience in health promotion. For has it not often been found that research subjects who are knowledgeable about the difference between safe and unsafe behaviours continue to do unsafe things? For instance, research on students at Sydney University in 1987 found a discrepancy between belief in safe sex messages and self-reported sexual behaviour (Turtle et al. 1989, 374). What people do with their 'knowledge' has thus become an important question.

In the second half of the 1980s, a multi-disciplinary team of researchers at the Macquarie University School of Behavioural Sciences investigated the culturally complex contingencies of actual sexual practice by gay and heterosexual men (whom we
can assume to have been mostly, if not all, non-Aboriginal). Their work may be taken as an attempt at a deeper exploration of ‘attitudes’, seeing attitudes as embedded in social structure, popular culture and the unconscious. Health promotion should not assume ‘a rationalist notion of the subject’, they argue. AIDS policy, they continue, ‘must address itself to the field where the subject’s margin of calculability is at its narrowest – the field of sex, desire, pleasure and death’ (Waldby, Kippax and Crawford 1990, 183). Can this ‘field’ be made an object of scientific investigation, yielding results that can be fed into health promotion campaigns? Are we not also at the margins of empirical certainty and of the instrumentalisation of the results of social scientific effort?

The anxiety implicit in these questions is justified, in my opinion, but it need not be a counsel of scientific nihilism and policy despair. For there are elements in the theory of health promotion which provide a more hopeful perspective. Recent advances in the theory of health promotion tell us that it is not simply a matter of broadening social science investigation so as to include (in order, later, to be able to change) ‘attitudes’ and unconscious wishes and fears, important as they may be. It is also important to consider the skills and powers of the people whom we wish to reach. As Crawford and her colleagues illustrate ‘the acceptability of a behaviour should be interpreted broadly to include not only the fully-fledged form of the behaviour but the skills that are involved in the production of it as is required: for example, how does one proceed gracefully to find out about a new partner’s sexual past?’ (Turtle et al. 1989, 375). It follows that the social distribution of skills and powers of negotiation are an important part of what we must study in order to illuminate the promotion of safe sex.

Writers on health promotion as a political process have spelled out some of the implications of this inclusion of skills and powers. Nutbeam and Blakey have warned us to be sensitive to the limitations of the mass media as a vehicle of health promotion.

The mass media are completely inappropriate for developing the type of personal and social skills required by many individuals to enable them to avoid or effectively manage potentially risky situations. By
developing these skills, the more personal and interactive methods of communication have been found to be successful in supporting behaviour change and maintenance among defined groups whose behaviours place them at greater risk of infection (Nutbeam and Blakey 1990, 237).

The phrase ‘more personal and interactive methods of communication’ can be taken to commend that AIDS-promotion pedagogy be more democratic and participatory. Nicholas Freudenburg, drawing on the experience of AIDS prevention work among the ethnic minorities of New York City, has observed that ‘too many AIDS education programs rely on one-way communication’. He calls for ‘an interaction in which learners teach about their community, culture, and values, and teachers listen so that they can anchor education in an existing framework’ (Freudenburg 1990, 593). He adds ‘most AIDS prevention programs focus too much on individual behaviour and too little on the social and political factors that shape that behaviour’. The decision to use or not to use a condom illustrates his point. Influential factors include:

what one thinks about how people are supposed to relate to each other, especially about sex; whether one believes acting now will pay off in the future, or if one even has a future. It includes how friends will react, what religion says, and what using a condom means about the kind of person one is. For a woman, it means thinking about how a male partner is going to react if she asks him to use a condom. So AIDS education programs that tell people about the benefits of condoms, show people how to use them, and then hand them out only begin to address the problem (1990, 595).

Freudenburg underlines that ‘gender relations, how our society and culture define what it means to be a man or a woman’ must be a central issue for AIDS prevention programs (Freudenburg 1990, 595). Because, in any society, gender relations are likely to be a site of conflict and exploitation, it follows that the promotion of safe sex is almost certainly to be a political intervention into the life of the group one is trying to help. Accordingly, Freudenburg cautions AIDS educators against adopting ‘a simplistic view of culture’. The challenge for AIDS educators is to identify elements of the culture that can support prevention and risk reduction, and
to help populations to question other elements that increase risk’ (1990, 596).

If anthropological research is to be relevant and useful to the reduction of risk of AIDS among central Australian Aborigines, it will not be by delivering to AIDS educators a cut and dried description of Aborigines’ sexual norms. Rather my research can suggest some ways to think about promoting AIDS awareness as a political process of cultural intervention and self-transformation. There is only a fragmentary ethnography in the pages that follow and there are very few prescriptions for culturally-appropriate behaviour by AIDS educators. Rather I have attempted to bring together: the above observations from the literatures on health promotion; some ethnography on recent changes in Aboriginal gender and age relations; and some observations I have been able to make through interviewing Aboriginal men in Bushtown. The result may help the reader to think in new ways about the problems of reducing the risk of AIDS among central Australian Aboriginal people.

WHAT IS ‘SAFE SEX’?

The operational definition of ‘safe sex’ that seems to be dominant in AIDS education in Australia is ‘sex with a condom’; great effort has accordingly been expended to publicise the value of condoms, to explain their use and to make condoms easy to obtain. This is certainly true of AIDS education to central Australian Aboriginal communities. Without necessarily criticising this definition of ‘safe sex’, it is worth considering other possible answers to the question, in order to be more aware of the fact that ‘use condoms’ is a particular cultural construction of the meaning of the term ‘safe sex’. Safe sex could also mean, for Aboriginal people:

- discontinuing anal penetration;
- discontinuing all vaginal penetration;
- remaining with one partner all one’s life;
- being highly selective of one’s partner and, in particular, rejecting sexual liaisons with (a) any man who is bisexual
and/or (b) anyone who has had sex with a non-Aboriginal person.

Each of these definitions of 'safe sex' is open to criticism that it is (a) insufficient and/or (b) irrelevant to the circumstances of Aboriginal people in central Australia. Yet it must be admitted that condom use may also suffer each of these flaws. That is, condoms are not absolutely efficient as a barrier; they sometimes break. And condoms may be abhorrent or at least unattractive to some Aboriginal people; we have yet to evaluate the take up of condoms since they first began to be advocated as a public health measure around 1986. Some sexually active people may respond to what they hear about AIDS by embracing a notion of 'safe sex' that is less likely to be advocated by public health authorities, for example, becoming more discriminating in their partner choices. This, indeed, has been found to be the response of students at the University of Sydney and at Macquarie University (Crawford et al. 1990).

I suggest that we see such possibilities as something more than mere error, misunderstanding or non-compliance with the best advice. Unfortunately, I did not ask my interviewees what they thought 'safe sex' was or what 'safe sex' strategy they found most practicable and appealing. However, it is possible that, when considering how we advocate 'safe sex' to central Australian Aboriginal people, we attach some importance to the fact that the seroprevalence of HIV among central Australian Aboriginal people appears to be extremely low and may be zero. We should therefore acknowledge publicly that it is rational for Aboriginal people to continue to do what, apparently, many of them have been doing: favouring Aboriginal over non-Aboriginal partners, and (according to some interviewees) recognising the dangers of sex with Aboriginal people who have sexual contact with the non-Aboriginal population. To affirm such discriminations as a version of 'safe sex' should not substitute for the promotion of condoms, but it would at least give health promoters the opportunity to tell Aboriginal people that there is merit in some things they already do. In committing health promotion to intervention into another culture, is it not better to think of 'safe sex' as a continuum of
more and less effective practices than to disseminate a notion of ‘safe sex’ that is simple and absolute? Simple and absolute messages may be well-suited to health promotion campaigns conducted through mass media, but the interactive media advocated by Nutbeam, Blakey and Freudenberg would seem to require more nuanced and contextual definitions of safe sex.

A CULTURAL SETTING FOR CONDOMS

One of the striking findings of research into the first few years of AIDS health promotion is that many homosexual men in certain cities of the world have rapidly and massively changed their sexual behaviour: ‘the most rapid and profound response to a health threat which has ever been documented’, according to Becker and Joseph (1988, 407). Although this change in gay male culture may be explained in terms of rational fear, other cultures with high HIV prevalence have not been so responsive (Caldwell, Orubuloye and Caldwell 1991). High seroprevalence and high mortality from AIDS do not therefore translate automatically into highly adaptive behavioural change, it seems. Rather, responses would seem to be mediated by the cultural and political setting of the epidemic. Something about some gay male cultures, it can be argued, has facilitated many gays’ shift from unsafe to safe sexual practices. Here the Macquarie University researchers have made some useful theoretical suggestions. Kippax and her colleagues have tried to explain why ‘homosexual men have transformed their sexual behaviour, while heterosexuals have only gestured towards modifying their sexual behaviour’ (Kippax, Crawford, Connell et al. 1990, 8). They argue that heterosexuals have had little direct experience of the consequences of the AIDS epidemic. Furthermore, heterosexuals perceive AIDS to be a disease of an unnatural sexual practice; ‘natural’ sex is not vulnerable to HIV infection, they tend to think. Kippax and colleagues then go on to point out how important it is for heterosexual culture that heterosexuality is taken for granted as the natural form of sex. How one does heterosexual sex is therefore not so much the subject of conversation; explicit instruction in heterosexual sex is a poorly developed part of our culture. Instead of sharing a
culture of erotic fantasy and technique, as gays have developed, heterosexuality 'is governed by the imperative of some notion of a naturally given sex drive and the related discourse of love and marriage' (1990, 10).

Though this argument needs to give more consideration to heterosexual pornography and to the flourishing sector of magazine publication in which the techniques, etiquettes and mores of heterosexual pleasure are interminably discussed, the broad point is convincing; heterosexuality has not been as conscious of itself as a culture as the culture of homosexuality (or 'gayness') has been, because heterosexuality is either assimilated to the categories 'nature' and 'procreation' or submerged in romantic notions of attraction. The consequence of this difference may be that heterosexual practices are less subject to negotiation and reconstruction than the sexual practices of gay men have been. Heterosexuality, as a culture, is less articulate about itself. Kippax and her colleagues conclude that

the establishment of 'safe sex' norms is dependent upon an opening up of heterosexuality and thus enabling men and women to talk about sex. Research examining the ways in which children and adolescents learn about sexual practice and sexual relationships is important, as is research which examines the ways in which successful heterosexual couples have managed negotiation. Gay men have been able to negotiate 'safe' sex and we can learn from their success (1990, 16).

BUSHTOWN HETEROSEXUALITY

Is the culture of sexuality among central Australian Aborigines a heterosexual culture? It is important to specify what this question means. The question refers not to partner choice and actual behaviour but to the ways in which people consider themselves as sexual beings – their sexual identity. Carol Vance has reminded us of the importance of the distinction between behaviour and identity in the social analysis of sexuality. Thus, it is possible for men who have sometimes engaged in sexual acts with other men to see themselves as 'heterosexual', not as 'bisexual', nor as 'homosexual'. These categories are cultural constructs and we cannot assume that all cultures use them (Vance 1991).
TRADITIONS FOR HEALTH

In thinking about my Bushtown fieldwork, it has been my practice to treat the culture of Aboriginal sexuality as 'heterosexual'. Early in my research, I was criticised for this. One Aboriginal woman who heard me read a paper criticised my innocence; she urged me to spend time in the vicinity of a certain hotel in one of the Northern Territory's northern towns. There, she assured me, I would be aware of young men enjoying clandestine liaisons with one another, under cover of darkness, and under the influence of alcohol. A non-Aboriginal colleague who identifies himself as 'homosexual' endorsed this woman's effort to open my eyes, citing his own acquaintance with homosexual Aboriginal men. Others have mentioned to me the presence of Aboriginal men in the gay male scenes which are now established elements of some Territory towns. From another quarter came evidence that Aboriginal men could not be assumed to engage in sex only with women. In my fieldwork in Bushtown, I was told that older men traditionally enjoy sexual privileges over younger men in certain phases of the latter's training in manhood. However, Christian influence had all but eliminated the exercise of this right, he assured me. When I mentioned this to another man of Bushtown, he said that what I had been told may or may not be true, but that it was not my business to know about such things. As far as he was concerned, homosexuality is not part of the sexuality of his people. Another man of his age (late thirties) confirmed this. From that moment in my fieldwork I ceased to look for male homosexuality as an element of Bushtown's sexual culture. I was motivated not merely by respect for the secrecy of men's ritual life, but also by the conviction that, in the ways in which Bushtown men thought about themselves and talked with me about sex, sex was something men do with women. Men doing it with men was so far beyond any discursive construction of what sex was commonly understood to be, that 'homosexuality' did not exist as an affirmed sexual identity. This may also be the case for traditional Aboriginal women of central Australia.

I would like to emphasise that I am not claiming that Aboriginal people of Bushtown never enjoy same sex partners. Perhaps they do. However, I wish to claim that the sexual culture of Bushtown
people known to me is heterosexual; that is, opposite sex partnering is taken to be the normal and natural pattern of sex, and sexual alternatives are ignored, disdained or wondered at. The promotion of safe sex to Aboriginal people in central Australia should therefore continue to assume an Aboriginal culture of heterosexuality.

Following Kippax and her colleagues, we can then ask: is the heterosexual culture of central Australian Aboriginal people likely to be resistant to the promotion of safe sex and, in particular, to the development of forms of sexual etiquette which encourage partners to negotiate the specifics of their sexual play in the light of safe sex precepts?

I can only begin to answer that question by adducing the following findings from fieldwork:

- I asked thirteen men if they had ever discussed with their wives ‘the risk of AIDS’. Seven said that they had not done so, and six said they had.
- I asked thirteen men ‘what can you do to avoid getting a sexually transmitted disease?’ Two said, as part of their answer, that it would be wise to question sexual partners about their health and sexual history. Both acknowledged the potential for embarrassment in such an exchange.
- I discussed with fifteen men the ways in which males acquire a practical knowledge of sex. Apart from one who told me that his girlfriend had been his teacher in such matters, they described an exclusively male heritage of sexual knowledge. They said that they had received no instruction, as adolescents, from the school or the mission, though one Yirara College graduate said he had there been told a few things (‘about sex fantasies and all that’).

Learning about sex in Bushtown seems, for men, to continue to be an informal process, deriving from long association with more experienced friends and with older men (particularly older brothers) who talk freely and even boastfully about their sexual adventures, and who sometimes gave advice. One of the oldest men I interviewed (39 years) said that his brother’s advice had included ‘growling’ at him for consortling with women from
inappropriate skin groups; another (early 20s) said that his father had warned him at age 11 (when he was starting to play around sexually) that he should delay his sexual debut until he was 18. However, the explicit imposition of embargoes and restraints seems not to have been the main part or purpose of these men’s sex education. My guess is that, from an early age, it is made known to Bushtown boy children that girls from some skin groups are appropriate long-term friends and partners, while girls from others are increasingly (as the child grows older) to be avoided. Beyond the learning of such ‘skin’-based avoidance rules and etiquette, it seems, very little sexual interdiction has been thought necessary to the bringing up of children.

The content of such sex education as has taken place, informally, has therefore consisted of practical advice from other men. The way this happens has recently been changed in one important way: Bushtown youths and men have access to sexually explicit videos, including ‘X-rated’ material. All those to whom I spoke agreed that TV and video now play an important part in informing young men of sexuality and love, and that there is a keen interest in ‘sexy video’. Among other things, they acquire a better understanding of the variety of positions and methods of giving and receiving sexual pleasure. Perhaps more can be learned from sexy videos than has hitherto been imparted by other men. Such videos are an incitement to sexual experimentation, the exploration of the ways of pleasure, to be tried out with girlfriends (but not, according to one man, with one’s wife).

Most men spoke either neutrally or approvingly of this new knowledge. The grounds of approval were sometimes interesting. Not only might men’s enjoyment be enhanced, but also women’s, three men suggested. One said that sexy videos taught a new sexual etiquette: how to be ‘gentle, polite, manners’, not like a ‘savage’ doing what you like, but ‘humble’. Perhaps by conveying women’s pleasure as clearly and dramatically as they do, sexy videos have stimulated in some men a new regard for women’s sexual response, their rights to pleasure. There were other, more censorious reactions. One man was critical of the ‘swearing’ and the sexual explicitness; they were ‘not good for kids to hear’. He
and another man were also worried that the audience would be 
 aroused by the videos, and one said that fantasies of sexual 
 violence were stimulated.

Despite these contrasting evaluations of ‘sexy video’, all the 
 men spoke of the video-viewing group as being, properly, a male 
 group. One man conceded that a husband and wife could watch 
 together (not in the company of other men, I think he intended), 
 but he criticised families in which children were also allowed to 
 be present when ‘sexy’ material was on screen. One man, critical 
 of the violent fantasies induced in the ‘sexy video’ audience, said 
 he used to watch them with his wife until she ‘got sick of them’; 
 they no longer watch them.

Men vary in their depictions of the ideal or the typical ‘sexy 
 video’ audience. One man said that it should comprise initiated 
 men only; another specified groups of ‘unmarried men alone’, 
 saying that, as an unmarried man, he would feel embarrassed to 
 be part of an audience consisting of both married and unmarried 
 men. Still another man said that some men (the boy’s brother, 
 father or uncle) brought male children into viewing groups. Most 
 commonly, however, the viewing group was described as ‘just 
 men’ or ‘just young men’. A certain kind of male teasing is 
 possible within such an audience, said one man – comments such 
 as ‘that’s you, having sex’. Another man suggested the delicate 
 nature of the pact among the audience’s members, stressing that 
 it had to be composed of young men of the same age, a ‘peer 
 group’. If men of different ages watched together, it would not be 
 as private, and young men watching would be embarrassed as 
 others outside the viewing group became aware of their interest 
 and teased them as ‘poofers’.

A new narrative material (the ‘sexy video’) has been given a 
 space within Bushtown sociality (despite Bushtown Council’s 
 resolution, a few years ago, to ban them): a space defined by rules 
 which draw variously on distinctions of gender and age. One 
 man speculated, but claimed not to know for sure, that Bushtown 
 women were watching these videos as well. It is plausible that he 
 could be in a state of ignorance on that issue, because, 
 traditionally, central Australian Aboriginal culture is defined, in 
 part, by age and sex barriers to the flow of some kinds of
information (Michaels 1986). New knowledge of the possibilities of heterosexuality is thus being distributed along well established pathways of conversation and intimate exchange – pathways characterised by the segregation of male from female spheres (and perhaps, though the evidence is weaker, by age differentiation within the sexes). That is the situation that has been described to me, at least; I have no first hand knowledge of ‘sexy video’ audiences. At the very least we can say that the Bushtowners sometimes speak as if there were norms of sex and age segregation, of senses of what is proper and improper in the sharing and restriction of such knowledge.

This returns me to the question of the heterosexuality of Bushtown sexual culture. We might summarise Kippax and her colleagues by saying that they have distinguished between two economies of sexual knowledge. In the same sex world of gay males in certain cities, there is the paradigm of the open economy: men share with men an understanding of what sexual behaviour is possible and share not only a willingness to negotiate with each other about the means to pleasure but also a willingness to negotiate what is desirable on health grounds. Their open economy of sexual knowledge facilitates the absorption of ‘safe sex’ propaganda, assisted by genuine fear and grief at the AIDS toll. By contrast, the heterosexual culture of Bushtown (and it is hardly unique in the heterosexual world) could be characterised as a dual economy in which men learn from men and women from women. On the male side of this dual economy, men appear to share information with each other (and seize upon new sources of information as all-male video-viewing groups), but they engage in sexual activity with women whose sexuality they have previously experienced at least partly through the discourse of other men; the sexual discourse of women, in turn, is largely if not exclusively directed towards other women.

Contrasting the two ‘sexual economies’ in this way can imply that the negotiation of safe heterosexual sex is a remote or unlikely possibility. Of course such a conclusion makes no allowance for men’s and women’s abilities to establish intimate partnerships across the sexual divide. But even if the long-term
sexual relationships among Aboriginal people facilitate that kind of communication about sex (and I have no reason to think that they don't) what about the heterosexual activity that takes place outside those long-term relationships? Perhaps the latitude for negotiation within the short-term liaison is rather narrower, and the effects of the dual sexual economy are more pronounced.

**Patriarchy and Negotiation**

Helga Mittag has sketched a profile of the ideal recipient of the 'safe sex' message.

AIDS prevention entails using a condom, avoiding high risk activities such as anal sex, establishing the extent of risk infection from potential sexual partners, and so on. From a psychological viewpoint, such behaviour entails particular qualities in the individual concerned. In particular, they need to be able to verbalise matters concerning sex, to express their sexual desires to their partner and to themselves, and to reflect upon their own sexuality and that of their partner *without embarrassment or conflict* (Mittag 1991, 783).

In what I have written so far – contrasting, as ideal types, the open and unitary sexual economy with closed and dual sexual economy – I have been dwelling on the possibility of *embarrassment* and of its overcoming. What about *conflict*? In much writing about relations between the sexes, the parties to sexual negotiation are held to be living in a relationship of power and of conflicting interests. Yet this perception is not to be found in all writing about the promotion of safe sex. For example, one paper discussing late adolescents' knowledge of AIDS makes the following suggestion.

Development counselling needs to be offered. Young people need to be taught empowerment, assertiveness, and negotiation skills. They need to be made aware that they have the power to take control of their sexual behaviour, and that they are responsible for themselves. An effective technique which can be used in this type of education is role-playing of hypothetical situations (Roscoe and Kruger 1990, 46).

This seems to imply that one (ungendered) has power for the taking as long as one has the confidence to take it; role playing is a way to acquire that confidence. I do not wish to describe this as
absolutely a ‘wrong’ way of thinking, but it is misleading to the extent that it fails to differentiate between the structural positions of individuals, their differential commands over material and symbolic resources, their diverse life histories as people who have experienced achieving their goals and meeting social acceptance or lowering their sights in the face of social marginality. In particular, this perspective shows no curiosity about the structure of power relations between men and women, or young and old.

A more realistic perspective is to be found in a paper on Hispanic/Latina women of the USA.

[Public health messages requesting women to discuss sexual practices and condom usage with their sexual partners do so in ignorance of cultural norms governing sexual behaviour … Their] Traditional Hispanic women are expected to be modest, faithful, and virginal. Cultural norms dictate that these women enter marriage with little knowledge about sexual practices and rely on their husbands for the acquisition of this knowledge. It is also not generally normative to discuss sexual matters. Current messages advocating knowledge of the sexual history of one’s partner and discussing ‘safe sex’ before sexual involvement ignore these normative expectations for women’s behaviour. Behaviour inconsistent with these norms may be viewed negatively by a woman’s partner and adversely impact a developing relationship (Mays and Cochran 1988, 952).

The question raised by this observation is: once ‘ignorance’ of Hispanic norms is dispelled among the senders of public health messages, what do those senders do? Do they defer to these norms or help women to contest them? The problem with the analysis quoted above is its over-integrated view of culture – as if ‘Hispanic culture’ was comprehensively intelligible in terms of the norms mentioned. But are the norms uncontested? Are there not Hispanic/Latina counter-norms available to be drawn on? Is not Hispanic culture to some degree penetrated by the wider American culture to which it is connected – a culture rich in contested affirmations of women’s rights? These are questions that no cultural analysis of public health should leave unposed, even if they are not necessarily easy to answer.

This principle of cultural analysis – that we avoid proposing over-integrated, monolithic models of other people’s culture – can
be illustrated by reference to the culture(s) of male homosexuality. The Macquarie researchers found it necessary to distinguish two kinds of change in gay men’s behaviour: ‘changes in relationship’ (such as restricting the number of partners) and ‘changes in sexual conduct’ (altering what one does with a sexual partner). Connell and his co-workers interpret their data as showing that the men who were more likely to change relationships were those who were more insecure in their homosexual identity. ‘The people who have least cultural support for what is still, in the broader society, a stigmatised sexuality, could be expected to react defensively to the AIDS crisis, especially in the absence of reliable information about safe sex or of consistent safe sex models among friends’ (Connell et al. 1989, 399). Within what I have referred to above as the gay male culture there are ‘dimensions of social power and cultural marginalisation’. If that is so among gay men, then it encourages us to be sensitive to ‘dimensions of social power and cultural marginalisation’ within any culture whose health promotion needs are being researched, including the culture of central Australian Aborigines.

To pursue further a power-centred cultural analysis, it is useful to return to some observations made by Kippax and her colleagues about heterosexuality. Because it is taken for granted as ‘natural’, heterosexual sex tends not to be discussed; rather it becomes the subject of two sets of culturally available understandings – the ‘male sex drive’ discourse and ‘love and romance’ discourse. In the heterosexual act that is constituted within these two sets of understandings, men are placed in the role of being active and initiating, women as receptive and passive. ‘A tendency to passivity is undoubtedly internalised by women but it is also enjoined upon them; likewise, a tendency to be active is enjoined upon men’ (Kippax, Crawford and Waldby 1990, 20). I do not wish to generalise to central Australian Aboriginal people the results of studies of the sexuality of urban non-Aboriginal Australians. However, I do wish to pose the question: does the heterosexual culture of central Australian Aboriginal people create pressures for men and women to see themselves in similar terms? With the advent of literacy and
television/video, some of the cultural materials conveying such constructions of sexuality have certainly become available to central Australian Aboriginal people. Diane Bell, in her profile of a Warrabri woman whom she calls 'Joan' Nungarrayi, says that Joan's favourite reading was the 'Dear Abby column in womens' magazines' (Bell 1980, 252). To what extent pre-existing Aboriginal notions of heterosexuality differ from, and resist the incursion of, such popular non-Aboriginal discourses is unknown to me. However, it is reasonable to speculate with Kippax and her colleagues about the restrictions that such increasingly available constructions of sexuality may place on men's and women's willingness to negotiate their sexual practice.

It would seem from a number of studies published since 1980, that men's violence towards women is another factor which must have a bearing on women's powers of negotiation. In the late 1970s, the Law Reform Commission asked Diane Bell and Pam Ditton to interview central Australian Aboriginal women about the possibility of reforms in law that would complement rather than undermine Aboriginal social cohesion. They reported that 'Many women express horror at the incidence of rape and violent abuse of women which sometimes occurs today within their society.' The women said that it was more common nowadays for women to live far from their own kin; they were thus less protected from their male partner's violence (Bell and Ditton 1980, 17). They cited some women's observation that

the new law ... was lighter than the old law on sexual offenders. Under the old law, sexual violence was punishable by death, but today, in the opinion of women, rapists and the like get off lightly (1980, 66).

Both Judith Atkinson, consultant to the Office of the Status of Women, and Audrey Bolger, reporting to the Criminology Research Council and the Northern Territory Commissioner of Police, have observed that Aboriginal women are at greater risk of dying at the hands of their mentolk than are all Aboriginal people of dying in custody. Both authors argue that cause of death statistics and statistics on reported crime underestimate the extent of the problem of male violence against women. Although not all the violence mentioned in these reports was sexual (disputes over
access to food and money were also reported to be important), it can be argued that a general climate of physical intimidation is hardly conducive to women's sexual freedom and is discouraging of their efforts to negotiate with men about any aspect of their sexual activity (Atkinson 1990; Bolger 1991).

Diane Bell and Topsy Nelson have been led by such analysis, and by what they know of certain central Australian communities, to question what they call 'the silence regarding intra-racial rape' (Bell and Nelson 1989). Like Bolger and Atkinson, they are highly critical of lawyers and judges who believe that 'Aboriginal custom' implies acceptance of Aboriginal men's violent behaviour (sexual and non-sexual) towards Aboriginal women (Bell and Nelson 1989, 413-14).

According to ethnographies by Bell, Dussart and Rose, women's capacity to negotiate the circumstances of their sexual behaviour changes with age. Rose (1992, 131) tells us that 'as girls grow into womanhood, ... wife-husband relations become far more symmetrical'. She argues that husbands (to whom marriage means much more than to wives) therefore have an increasing interest in meeting their wife's expectations. Bell writes of marital 'careers'.

Women's marital careers ... fall into different periods. In the first she is the promised wife but not abused; she learns the role of wife. In co-wifeship she has first a role model in an older woman (sic) and later, as the older wife, she has support in the rearing of her own children. In second and subsequent marriages, she expresses her desires and preferences more clearly as she achieves greater maturity and status in the community. In her final marriage or retreat to the plumi (women's camp), she achieves companionship, economic security and ritual status (and if she seeks it sexual satisfaction) (Bell 1980, 251).

However, Bell's case materials imply that this achievement of autonomy is not untramelled by male hostility and violence (1980, 252, 253), and when she reports that 'I frequently heard men declare that they would prefer a mature widow to a young troublesome wife' (1980, 260) we may wonder at the meaning of 'troublesome' to such men. Perhaps Dussart's unpublished conference paper on 'The choice of widowhood among Warlpiri women' can help to tell us. Young women of her acquaintance
strive to please themselves in their choices of mate, she argues, and therefore make 'trouble'.

I have observed few instances of young women running away from their promised husbands, because most of them eloped before they were sent to live with them. To avoid to be sent to live with their promised husband, women take lovers so they increase their chances to not be forced in a promised marriage and hope that their promised husband finds them too promiscuous (Dussart 1990, 7).

One of the Bushtown men told me that girls who are promised 'escape' to Alice Springs for a few months before going into their assigned marital relationship. In this period of freedom they are likely to be sexually active, and so constitute a possible source of infection, he added.

Depicting the options that have faced older women who are widowed, Dussart apparently concurs with Bell when she writes of pre-contact Warlpiri society that 'most anthropologists have neglected the fact that widows and kin groups could postpone a re-marriage, that widows and potential future husbands had a say in who they wanted as a partner, and more specifically have overlooked widows' choice not to re-marry ...' (1990, 12). Nowadays older women continue to exercise such choices. Dussart argues that what makes such choice possible is that a woman's obligations to her kin change as she matures. 'While younger wives are urged to follow their husband, to take care of him, to ensure he will not elope with other women, no such requirement is imposed on middle-aged and older re-married women, as their priority and responsibilities are first to their own kin group' (1990, 17). Dussart later adds that women who choose not to remarry 'generally say they do not want to lose their financial autonomy and fear men's violence ... they keep their emotional, financial and religious help for their close kin network and proudly say that they are not interested in sex' (1990, 21). One of the risks of sex for women, it would seem, is having to put up with men's insistence on their various privileges and powers.

These ethnographies build up a picture of a society in which women have exercised some choices about whom they married and, by inference, about with whom they had affairs. However, it is also clear that such choices were made under pressure which
sometimes amounted to violence by male kin or by suitors. As women got older they had more chance of success in asserting their wishes.

What place does the condom occupy in that field of contested sexual politics? Unfortunately, because of the obvious difficulties of a male researcher obtaining such information, I have no data on what sexually active women think about condoms; but I did ask Bushtown men. Only five of ten men who had heard of AIDS recalled unprompted that the message 'use a condom' was part of what they had been told. However, eight out of thirteen men said that they had used a condom at some time; my questioning did not require the men to distinguish between frequencies of condom use. There is some evidence that some women have been emboldened by health promotion messages to negotiate safer sex. Five men recalled women having suggested that they use a condom, and another said that he had heard of that suggestion being made to other men. These answers contained no implication that this was thought by men to be an offensive way for women to behave. However, of the other seven men with whom I discussed condoms, one commented that such a suggestion could make a man angry or put him off having sex; nonetheless, the same man told me that he was aware that some women carried condoms. Another man said that a girl who is known to carry condoms will acquire a reputation for being too available sexually.

From these admittedly limited data, we could not confidently infer any normative consensus among Bushtown men that women should or should not ask their men to wear a condom. It would seem that men vary in their likely reactions to women's negotiation of this form of safe sex; and women, no doubt, vary in their willingness to give such negotiation a try. Perhaps the most awkward interchanges about condoms might occur between a husband and wife. At least, this is an anxiety voiced to me: a man known by his wife to be carrying a condom was signalling to his wife that he was unfaithful, he warned.

Men revealed certain anxieties about condoms in their discussion, but I did not encounter anything as substantial as a stated cultural norm which would inhibit or restrict their use.
One anxiety confided to me was that, if a man wished to use a condom, his woman partner would infer that he thought her unclean and a carrier of infection. I could see the setting of such an anxiety when a man told me that men exchanged gossip about which women currently or usually had infections. So it is possible for men to be worried that a woman could be concerned that she had become the object of negative male gossip.

Men deal with (and perhaps also promote?) some anxiety about condoms by joking about them. Twice I was told of an incident which had amused Bushtowners: a man reached into his pocket for money at the store check-out and instead pulled out a condom, to the embarrassment and mirth of those around him. Mates could tease each other about carrying condoms, with its connotation that the carrier had sex on his mind. Other jokes likened condoms to hats or dwell on the awkwardness of the sexually inexperienced who did not know what to do with a condom. Such joking and teasing among men could well be one of the cultural conditions of condoms’ acceptability; we should not infer that embarrassment, or, more precisely, joking about others’ embarrassment, necessarily spells rejection. As one man reminded me, Bushtowners have known about condoms only in the last few years.

Some care in the promotion of condoms is nonetheless advisable. I asked men if it would be socially acceptable to sell condoms in the community store. Five men told me that young men would find this very embarrassing. One man said that young men, seeing the condoms on the shelf, would think about their use on their own bodies and feel shame. In the last few years young men have been able to obtain condoms not only from the clinic and the male Aboriginal health workers but also from a non-Aboriginal man who has worked for Bushtown Council for many years. He takes a great interest in the welfare of young men, and his home is one of the favourite haunts of male teenagers. His work as an unofficial ‘youth officer’ was commended to me by several people. His practice has helped to establish certain conventions about the way condoms are handled in the community.
One of the enemies of such conventions (of all conventions?) is the small child. A few men told me that children had sometimes made toy balloons of condoms – an embarrassment and (if the condoms had been used) a health risk. The hygienic and discreet disposal of condoms is a much greater problem in the camps and dwellings of Bushtowners than in the typical home of the non-Aboriginal Australian.

I recommend an attitude of cautious optimism in the promotion of condoms as a means of 'safe sex'. The cultural barriers to young women's self-assertion are real but neither absolute nor insurmountable if the reports of Bushtown men and of women anthropologists are any guide.
Narratives of pathology

In an exploratory paper on ‘STD research and programs in Aboriginal communities’, Rob Moodie has linked the incidence of STDs to Aborigines’ transition from ‘a status of semi-nomadic self sufficiency to a situation of sedentary forced dependence’. He continues:

These upheavals continue to occur superimposed by an overwhelming burden of virulent racism resulting in tremendous social and cultural dislocation. This has led, in many cases, to a breakdown in social controls and laws that have impacted upon and marginalized urban Aboriginals in particular. Problems such as alcoholism and petrol snuffing occur both as ‘symptoms’ of significant social dislocation and as ‘causes’ or associated factors in sexual transmission of disease. In Central Australia, traditional genealogical systems are extremely complex and also prescriptive in determining interpersonal, and sexual relationships. However, where individuals or groups regularly break these social laws there has often been an associated increase in domestic violence and sexually transmitted diseases (Moodie 1991, 35).

Working in the field of public health among agencies servicing a ‘traditional’ Aboriginal population, it is common to hear such linking of the breaking of Aboriginal law with the rise of certain
pathologies. (Rob Moodie was formerly Medical Director of Central Australian Aboriginal Congress and had much to do with making HIV/AIDS awareness a priority for that organisation in the mid to late 1980s.) In this chapter, I will suggest that the pathology of the Law and the pathology of bodies have each become available to the other as metaphors.

It is possible to give an account of traditional customs of marriage in which some tension between old and young is implied to be endemic to 'the system'. Rose's recent description of marriage among the people at Yarralin, as she found them during the 1980s, starts with the assertion that marriage is a way to ensure the distribution of people over country. That is, marriage arrangements enact group political strategies which may be in tension with the feelings of individuals, particularly the feelings of women, for whom the married state is much less desirable than for men. She also notes that, because marriages are conceived in such terms by Yarralin adults, 'the burden of the plans which one generation develops is borne by the younger generation' (Rose 1992, 124) - not borne without complaint and resistance, as she makes clear. I understand her to imply that such tensions are not new features of marriage around Yarralin.

Other accounts argue a thesis of social change, and so raise the issue of the point of view from which change is to be described. In 1980, Bell and Ditton, after interviewing women from a number of town and bush camps in central Australia, provided the following summary of old women's senses of a changing order.

In most remote and isolated communities older women expressed real displeasure and distaste at the falling age of marriage for girls. Every old woman to whom we spoke insisted that in the past, under the old law, girls did not marry until 'their breasts hung down'. While young girls, a rarity, were married younger to 'settle them down', to give them some responsibilities as a co-wife to an older woman. Today girls are being married, and being permitted to marry, younger and younger in an attempt to quieten them down. In so doing they are not entering the marriage with an older man who already has a wife. Frequently they are marrying young men who are correctly related but not implicated in the same family arrangements as in the past. The marriage is not hemmed in with a number of rights and obligations which can be strictly enforced by both families. The marriage does not
continue the education of the girl in the role of wife, nor does it bind the man in the same way as it did in the past. In those areas where young girls are exposed to media images of the love marriage and where there is freer contact between the sexes, they are becoming wilder. In response to the offensive behaviour of the young girls, they are being married to quieten them down, but, the end result of responsible young women is not being achieved (Bell and Ditton 1980, 93-4).

I understand the words ‘wild’, ‘offensive’ and ‘responsible’ to be used in paraphrase of what old women were thinking in the late 1970s; that is, Bell and Ditton place the reader in a position of alignment with old women’s negative judgements of young girls who are not pleased to follow old customs. Bell and Ditton do not explicitly distance their own views from those of the old women who spoke to them; and they give no reason for the reader to think that they sympathise with the point of view of the younger women.

However, Bell and Ditton do convey some of the pathos of the old women’s position. The traditional antidotes to what these older women term ‘trouble’ are nowadays not easy to practise or commend. As Bell and Ditton point out, it was harsh punishment which kept the old law strong. They paraphrase one old woman as saying that

younger men did not make trouble for younger women. If they did they would be killed. That law is finished now, she claimed; ‘It was a hard and strong law. Young girls didn’t make trouble in the olden days’ (1980, 77).

The ‘trouble’ here referred to is both young men’s violence towards women and young men’s and women’s flouting of their families’ efforts to regulate their behaviour in the interests of the achievement of orderly links, through marriage, between families. In the way these views are reported, the two kinds of trouble seem to be connected in the minds of the speakers: girls who flout their families’ wishes lose their protection against men’s physical abuse.

It might be expected that girls could feel resentment at such options – either taking one’s chances unprotected on a less restricted marriage and sex ‘market’, or acquiescing to the
protections that go with being promised to a senior man (and, possibly, his co-wives). Unfortunately, Bell and Ditton’s study did not report young girls’ feelings. The persistence of girls’ resentment seems to me to be implicit, however, in one of Bell and Ditton’s comments.

Today young girls who are wild and offend are often given over in marriage. The husband today may be closer to her age and, as there are fewer polygynous marriages being contracted, there is less chance of a co-wife to act as a role model. In many areas, especially those where young girls are exposed to a wide range of alternate behaviour patterns, the age of marriage is falling. In attempts to control youth, the punitive aspects of institutions such as marriage and initiation are stressed and the age of the youths is falling in both cases. A vicious circle is set up (1980, 28).

The difficulties of cultural change may be felt most severely by Aboriginal people of central Australia in the relationships between adults and children. In Chapter Three I have discussed an evident crisis in the authority and confidence of central Australian Aboriginal adults—a crisis whose most spectacular negative feature is petrol sniffing. Certainly, among the Bushtown people who spoke to me, there were some whose stated support for my research may have arisen from their linking of two currently pressing problems of ‘disorder’: the refractory behaviour of young people subject to family marriage strategies, and the health risk of sex ungoverned by the recently introduced, public-health-based rules of ‘safety’. That is, it is possible that just as Moodie links the break down of Law with the rising incidence of certain pathologies, so the older Aboriginal generation might find in the recent publicity given to the health dangers of sex a new metaphor for their fears about the breakdown of Law.

That fear has sometimes been expressed to researchers visiting Aboriginal communities in the north and centre of Australia. The Australian Law Reform Commission (LRC) received a number of requests that traditional Aboriginal rules of marriage be recognised, and therefore enforced, by the general law of Australia. (The Commission’s report mentions submissions from Roper River, Peppimenarti and Lajamanu.) While the Commission recommended recognition of Aboriginal customary
marriage in a number of respects, it refused requests to recommend that marriage 'promises' between Aboriginal families be enforceable by general Australian law on the grounds that such enforcement would conflict with a fundamental right to freedom of contract. The LRC added that 'the law cannot countenance physical coercion on any person to enter into, or remain in, a marriage or similar relationship' (LRC 1986, vol 1, 181).

To the extent that Aboriginal Law has lost sanctions it has changed. For Aboriginal people concerned with the maintenance of social relationships, people/land links and (now) good health, it is a matter of coming up with a new body of custom which has some prospect of being accepted and transmitted.

There is anxiety among Bushtowners that the old rules of marriage are being ignored. Yirara College is regarded with considerable ambivalence as a site of youths' learning new expectations about love and marriage. One Bushtown man told me that he had recently been watching on video a number of stories set in US high schools in order to gain some insight into the culture of courting and sex to which young Bushtowners are nowadays attracted.

There is a 'public health' basis for such anxiety. It was reported to me that Bushtown youngsters commence heterosexual activity while still very young. The ages I was given, in answer to the question 'How old are Bushtown men when they first have sex with a woman?' ranged from 9 to 14, with most answers clustered around 11 to 12. One man suggested to me that, at that age, there was no penetrative sex; the kids were only manipulating each others bodies. 'Real sex' commenced at age 18 to 19, he told me. In the absence of first hand knowledge, it may be wise to assume that the 9 to 14 year olds are beginning to try penetrative sex. It is extremely unlikely that 'safe sex' precepts are being observed by this age group.

Among adults, there may be some tolerance for such sexual precocity, or at least a feeling that it is unstoppable. Indeed, Francesca Merlan has sketched the theoretical basis for thinking that a more liberal approach could be taken to youthful sexuality by adults who were nonetheless continuing to try to ensure that
marriages remain a fundamental strategy for the reproduction of relationships among groups of Aboriginal people (Merlan 1986). In a review of ethnographic literature on the Aboriginal government of sexuality and procreation, she suggests that Aboriginal people have conceptualised sexuality and procreation as rather different orders of experience and social life. She is not saying that Aboriginal people failed to understand the causal connection between copulation and conception, rather she is drawing attention to some ways in which the social organisation of sexuality was not identical to or coextensive with the social organisation of biological reproduction and the transmission of rights.

Bell and Ditton’s discussions with Aboriginal residents on a cattle station gave rise to a snapshot of tradition being differentiated in this way in order to be adapted.

The affairs of young girls with younger men are permitted as long as the girl eventually joins her promised. I had the impression that the older women were prepared to tolerate more affairs of youth if ultimately it allowed the promise system to be maintained. In the past the older women disciplined young girls who avoided a promised marriage but today they are relaxing some of the conditions in the hope of preserving the overall strengths of the system (Bell and Ditton 1980, 66).

Similarly, my interviews with Bushtowners led me to think of the Law as an assemblage of rights and obligations which could be differentially treated as open to change. Here it is useful to distinguish three elements of customary prescriptions about marriage: marital fidelity; marrying the right ‘skin’; and accepting one’s promised spouse.

It should not be supposed that, in matters of marital fidelity, Aboriginal people have been, until the advent of colonialism, strict observers of their own Law. One study based on fieldwork in western Arnhem Land in the 1940s, by Catherine and Ronald Berndt, concluded that people commonly enjoyed sexual liaisons with partners other than their spouse (Berndt and Berndt 1951). They reported, however, that one was expected to conduct oneself with discretion and, in particular, one should choose one’s extra-marital partner from the same kinship category (or range of
kinship categories) as one’s spouse. The discipline of having no choice over whom one married was thus compensated by a high degree of acceptance of ‘illicit’ sexual companionship that nonetheless obeyed certain rules of decency. There seems nonetheless to have been a double standard. It was common for men to punish women whose extra-marital dalliance was known or suspected; the Berndts do not report instances of women being able to punish men for the same thing. Rose distinguishes between ‘discreet’ and ‘indiscreet’ extra-marital liaisons. ‘Married men and women of discretion who choose to have affairs, and some do not, conduct them circumspectly’ (Rose 1992, 131). ‘Indiscreet affairs are usually initiated by young women who are seeking a divorce and by those men who are too young to be promised a wife and are hoping to persuade a woman to run off with them, thus by-passing the promise system and acquiring a wife more directly’ (1992, 133).

All the men of Bushtown whom I interviewed said they were married (though not all of them were living with their wife). I asked thirteen of them if they had had sex with a woman other than their wife ‘since Christmas’ (5–7 months before the interview). Four men said that they had had no affairs in that time, one of them pointing out that the previous year he had had six affairs. One man may not have understood my question. The remaining eight told me that they had had one to four extra-marital liaisons ‘since Christmas’. Sexual activity outside marriage would seem to be common.

I asked how such behaviour was regarded by Bushtowners. Eleven men told me that it was very common, but that it could cause trouble, one man being careful to specify that he meant trouble between men (e.g. brothers-in-law), not just recriminations between spouses, though they too were cited as important. Seven men mentioned the disapproval of spouse and in-laws as factors that had to be weighed against the pleasures of playing around; I took them to be saying that the prospects of such troubles were a substantial, but not in every case decisive, disincentive.

The Bushtown men told me that, in the past twenty years, it had become more and more unusual for a young person to make
his first marriage to his 'promise'. However, this should not be taken to imply that no marriages now eventuate from promised partners. Adults may still make such contracts with one another, and it may still be very important for parties to such contracts to do so, but the men to whom I spoke seemed not to be counting on such promises being kept. It has come to be expected that young people will choose a partner for love. Defiance of the 'promise' made on one's behalf is now so common that custom is in the process of being recast; that defiance seems to have acquired a certain acceptance through its familiarity. I was told, however, that if a man does not like or approve of the son-in-law chosen by his daughter, he can snub that young man by refusing to incorporate him in ceremonies in which the father-in-law is an important participant. This would be a hurtful and shameful sanction for many Bushtown men.

If in one's first marriage, one is choosing one's own partner, rather than accepting a 'promise', then custom demands that that partner should be from one of the three 'right' skin groups. Diane Bell has discussed the tenacity of this rule at Warrabri over the years from 1959 (when Meggitt collected data) to 1979 (when Bell collected data). She confirms Meggitt's projection that polygyny was becoming less common, but her figures show that, if anything, a greater percentage of marriages are deemed 'correct' by her informants than had been by Meggitt's. She suggests, however, that Warrabri people in 1979 made less of the distinction between the 'preferred' and 'alternate' options within the range of 'correct' choices (Bell 1980, 249). A number of Bushtown men made a distinction which also features in the Berndts' account: if one is to be maritally unfaithful, it should be with a partner of the appropriate 'skin' group. Around the distinction between 'right skin' and 'wrong skin' partners a still powerful notion of propriety is constructed. The Bushtown men were well aware of which skins were 'right' and 'wrong' for them, though we should not assume that every one of them chose to take that distinction into account when choosing a casual partner. Some men told me that the distinction was no longer relevant to them, but they were in a minority among those interviewed.
I have no data on the proportions of marriages in Bushtown that are classified as 'straight', and I was told contradictory things about how common were incorrect marriages. Bushtown men varied also in their regard for these proprieties. I asked 'can you marry any girl you like?'. Three men were adamant that, as far as they were concerned, they could. A fourth gave me an equivocal answer, reflecting the contemporary rivalry between two dissimilar notions of correct behaviour – the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal. Others were sure, even vehement, about the continuing need to observe the 'skin law'. For them it seems essential to their sense of their culture's integrity and its difference from the mores of non-Aborigines.

I was given conflicting information about the consequences of wrong-skin marriages. One man said that the children of such marriages were in a very awkward situation when it came to ceremonial participation. Because your skin group membership determines which ceremonial occasions are open to your participation and which roles you play in rituals, to be of indeterminate skin membership was to be culturally marginalised. The opposing view (for men at least) was that, when it was important to have a definite skin, you followed the skin you would have got from your father, had he married correctly. It therefore remains unclear to me what sanctions, other than some people's censure, fall upon families whose members flout the precepts of 'straight' marriage.

Five of the men to whom I administered my interview schedule condemned the tendency towards the flouting of the 'skin law'. We could add another two to that five: one who mentioned the social disorganisation that results for the children of 'wrong-way' marriages (not being clearly assigned to a skin group); another who distinguished between 'strict' and other families, implying (possibly) that it was better (though harder?) to be 'strict'. In other words, only seven (at most) out of thirteen men were critical of the alleged tendency for young people to ignore considerations of 'skin' in order to marry for 'love'. It could be that I had a biased sample: willingness to discuss sexuality with a researcher who was a stranger may go with a greater receptivity to non-Aboriginal ideas about such topics.
However, I think we have no reason to be confident in identifying the direction of social change, if there is any change, in regard for these categorical prescriptions. Let me point to two items in the literature which prompt such caution. First, after noting how common 'incorrect' marriages were in Yarralin in the 1980s (over half), Rose makes the observation that this does not startle the people there because such misbehaviour is commonly to be found among the Dreamtime ancestors, whose deeds prefigure all human frailty. It was more important to the Yarralin mob, Rose suggests, that marriage distributes people over country to their satisfaction, than that categorical rules be observed (Rose 1992, 126). Second, it may be that settled and centralised life under welfare patronage made it easier to obey the 'skin law' while still exercising more choice. After observing Papunya in its early years, sometime superintendent Jeremy Long pointed out that such settlements brought together people in unprecedented numbers for unprecedented lengths of time; from the viewpoint of any individual there were many more 'right skin' potential partners in one's immediate vicinity than there ever could have been before (Long 1964, 78).

For those promoting HIV/AIDS awareness the conclusions seem clear. First, rather than refer to the modification of custom as a breaking down of 'law' in the matter of marriage, it might be better to speak of a shift in emphasis - from holding young people to their elders' 'promise', to maintaining a respect for the distinction between 'right skin' and 'wrong skin'. Some young Bushtowners say that the latter distinction means little to them now, but even they are conscious of the social pressures ('trouble') that can be caused by impolitic sexual relationships. Second, there seems to be little in Bushtowners' notions of right and wrong sexual behaviour that would place the old or even the modified proprieties of sex and marriage on the side of AIDS/STD prevention. The colonial disturbance of an ancient morality should not be assumed to be part of the epidemiology of STDs nor to be a risk factor for AIDS; and the restoration of older proprieties and authorities (whose erstwhile integrity may well be nostalgic fancy) should not be promoted as the 'Aboriginal
way’ to confront these public health problems. Other Aboriginal ways will have to be developed.

To these conclusions there are two exceptions. First, alcohol abuse is said to facilitate sexual intercourse which is indiscriminate in both its violation of ‘skin law’ and in its indifference to the rules of ‘safe sex’. Second, for bush people to visit town – where people from many regions mingle in a drinking milieu – is often said to be a journey from restriction to freedom of a kind; it is known among some central Australians as ‘leaving your skin at the bitumen’ (Alan Campbell, pers. comm.). Other than linking AIDS awareness promotion to culturally inspired campaigns against alcohol abuse and to the ‘safety’ of remaining as much as possible out bush on one’s own country, there seems little point to linking AIDS/STD prevention to any notion of cultural revival of a recently compromised system for governing sexual behaviour, as if ‘safe sex’ were vouchedsafed by continuing adherence to the ‘old Law’.

On the contrary, there may be reason to see some good, from a public health point of view, in some of the disturbances to the social ordering of sexuality and marriage. I refer to the possible enhancement of young women’s capacity to negotiate their sexual encounters with men. Some recent ethnographies have highlighted the volatility of this issue in Aboriginal people’s adaptation.

Vicky Burbank has studied ‘maidenhood’ in south east Arnhem Land in the late 1970s and early 1980s. She reports that a girl’s mother and mother’s brother(s) want her to marry someone who is ‘straight and also, hopefully, someone whose sisters and/or daughters could be exchanged back as brides for the boys in the marrying girl’s line’ (Burbank 1988). Nominally, it is the men who have the strongest interest in seeing that things work out this way, but Burbank points out that mothers also wish to exert an influence. Mothers are sometimes held accountable by their brothers when the adults’ plans go astray. Violence is sometimes exerted against mothers to help ensure their solidarity with the wishes of other adults rather than with their daughters. Burbank tells us that a girl’s wishes are increasingly likely to undermine these adult intentions, in two ways. She may insist on marrying a
young man who has neither of the desired attributes, that is, neither 'straight' nor facilitating further advantageous exchanges between families. Or, she may prefer not to marry at all, but simply to have sex with men who attract her, become pregnant and then bring up the baby in her domestic group of origin, supported by welfare benefits. Burbank reports adolescent girls' poor opinion of young men as potential husbands, commenting that in the early 1980s, the unmarried mother option seems to have grown in popularity (Burbank 1988; Burbank and Chisholm 1989).

The aspiration for autonomy by both young and old women is the theme of a paper by Robert Tonkinson, about a western desert township, Jigalong. He reports that women have reduced the frequency of polygyny by resisting their husbands' attempts to acquire second wives. That is, older women have been behaving in such a way as to reduce the likelihood that a young woman will join them as betrothed co-wife. For this affront, Tonkinson tells us, women have suffered the verbal and physical abuse of their menfolk. To the extent that they have remained intransigent, their resistance has coincided with many young girls' efforts to avoid the dictates of betrothal. Single parenthood has also become a popular status for young Jigalong women whose welfare benefits, skill at cards and supportive kin assure them of economic independence from the married state. Tonkinson has heard the English phrase 'free agent' used by young women of Jigalong to describe their ideal or actual condition (Tonkinson 1990).

The Yarralin girls to whom Rose spoke in the 1980s said that they did not like being promised (Rose 1992, 128). She notes that since the mid 1960s, when legal controls over Aboriginal movement were abandoned (and, she could have pointed out, when cash became a near universal substitute for rations), it has been easier for young people to move physically away from older people's authority. She does not differentiate between the degrees to which young men and young women have been advantaged by these changes, but she instances women's greater choice of spouse as one effect (Rose 1992, 175).
As these young women grow older, will they come to see their interests as common to all adults, men and women seeking to channel the sexuality of young people towards the advancement of their family interest, or will they continue, as adults, to uphold the right of young girls to be 'free agents'? Tonkinson's commentary is sensitive to the different positions of adult and adolescent women. He refers to occasions in which adults of both sexes combined in their efforts to prevail on young women to marry the man they favoured. From his material it would seem that adult women have expressed their interest in a more limited way: they have begun to prevent their husbands from taking a second and younger wife. Having improved the conditions of their own married life, they are in a position to commend the (thus amended) married state to their reluctant daughters, knowing the advantages which may accrue to themselves as aging adults by the well-judged marriages of their children. Burbank's portrait of Mangrove (Burbank 1988) shows men and women in an alliance to steer young people towards the 'right' marital choices. She mentions that mothers are bound into this alliance partly by their fear that men will hold them responsible for their son's or daughter's recalcitrance. They are at risk of being beaten if they do not uphold the family interest in their children's marital choices. Similarly, Rose reports that because marriages embody the interests of families in relation to country, 'in Yarralin it is most emphatically the case that a girl who runs away is in as much trouble with her own relatives as she is with her husband' (Rose 1992, 129). She adds the important observation that a young man who flouts a marital arrangement is not in as much trouble with his relatives because, as the son-in-law to his wife's family, a young man is, in the prescribed course of events, lost, perhaps for several years, to his family of origin. As a result, 'the very behaviour that parents condemn in their daughters they condone in their sons' (Rose 1992, 135).

Although Bell cites instances of women at Yalata sticking up for their daughters' autonomy (and citing non-Aboriginal law to legitimate their case), her general thesis is that women are now less powerful vis-a-vis men than they were in pre-colonial times. In her view non-Aboriginal influence has tended to empower
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men vis-a-vis women. Women who once would have supported their daughters' resistance to unappealing marriages are now forced to endorse adult men's wishes. Her work implies that non-Aboriginal interventions in Aboriginal life should therefore be sensitive to any opportunity to re-empower women, of all ages, in their dealings with men.

These writers point to a rather fraught and complicated relationship between women and girls, a relationship in which there seem to be many gaps in sympathy between adult women and their 'wild' daughters. Rhonda Bunbury's interviews with Yuendumu women in 1988 give ample expression to women's anxiety that their daughters see little point in post-primary schooling, do not expect to get a job, seek the pleasures of boys' and men's company away from parental scrutiny and seem to accept youthful pregnancies without necessarily embracing fully the responsibilities of mothering (Bunbury 1990). Similar anxieties have recently been expressed by mature Pitjantjatjara women in Tjilji Tjuta Atunymanana Kamiku Tjukurpawuwaangku (Looking after children grandmother's way) (Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council 1991).
Conclusion

To promote awareness of the health risks of unsafe sex (HIV and other STDs) will be the occasion of a new level of intervention by non-Aborigines into the culture of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people of Bushtown have no tradition of ‘sex education’ in which sex is related to health by being seen as a vector of infection. HIV/AIDS has compelled health authorities (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) to cultivate the mandate for ‘public health’ to reach further into Aboriginal culture.

It follows from this and from the reservations about mass media expressed in recent health promotion theory, that the indigenous appropriation of the safe sex messages must be encouraged. Instructors should be socially and culturally close to those whom they instruct.

‘Safe sex’ propaganda should strive to be affirmative of a continuum of sexual practices, or at least of those at the ‘safe’ end of the continuum. We must not invest all our hope in the condom.

Nonetheless, condom use must be promoted and our promotion must take into account that condom use implies personal skills and social relationships which themselves have to
be developed. Like all technologies, condoms are embedded in cultural understandings and in social relationships.

Health promotion is inevitably, and more or less aggressively, a project of cultural intervention and transformation. In analysing the culture into which we are intervening, we had best assume it to be dynamic, even conflicted in some respects: it is a structure of power and a milieu of tension and conflict.

One of the ambitions of health promotion in the area of sexuality should be to enhance women’s abilities to control their sexuality and their fertility. Recent ethnographic writing points to greater opportunities for young women’s self-assertion – one of the new dynamics of Aborigines’ colonised culture. Aboriginal customs regulating sexuality are changing. Aboriginal adults express concern that young people are commencing sexual activity too young, that they marry their sweetheart, not their promise, and that the custom of marrying ‘straight’ is being discarded. To the extent that Aboriginal people endorse and take on the tasks of promoting healthier sex, some of them will also be acting, in part, from concerns to preserve the political functions of marriage: the perpetuation of desired relations between groups and between people and country. So the meaning of ‘safe sex’ is likely to be multiply determined and disputed among the contending agendas of contemporary Aboriginal adaptations of their customs. Young people’s perspective on sex education will not necessarily coincide with or endorse these typically adult concerns. To some degree, young people are seeking to develop their own sexual norms. The promotion of healthy sex must therefore be nuanced not only by considerations of gender but also by an awareness of the politics of age differences and conflicting generational interests. The ‘indigenisation’ of sex education is therefore no simple matter.
PART FOUR

Producing sober individuals
Introduction

Both the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS 1989) and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC 1991) have argued the need to put more resources into the prevention and treatment of alcohol abuse by the Aboriginal and Islander people of Australia. They insist also that such resources be managed by Aboriginal people. It is expected that Aboriginal control will make prevention and treatment interventions appropriate to the particular cultures of alcohol use now to be found among indigenous drinkers. As well as benefiting from Aboriginal control, such interventions may be enhanced by ethnographic research. At least two recent papers (Brady 1992a, Moore 1992) have drawn attention to the value of ethnographic research in specifying drinkers’ cultures and so enabling – in ways yet to be spelled out in terms of therapeutic method – greater empathy between such interventions and their intended clients.

The two chapters which make up Part Four are about the interplay of Aboriginal control, ethnographic research and a particular therapeutic philosophy – Alcoholics Anonymous – which emphasises the effort of the individual to break free of the
culture of drinking. The interplay is complex, giving rise to overlapping but different accounts of what, if anything, is distinctively 'Aboriginal' about Aboriginal people's alcohol abuse and about certain efforts to remedy abuse.
Maggie Brady has cited a number of published accounts of Aboriginal people understanding their 'citizenship' as including, very prominently, the right to consume liquor (Brady 1990, 200–202; 1991, 179–82). If alcohol consumption can signify legal and social equality in a society of persisting racial inequalities, she argues, then those seeking to affect the Aboriginal demand for and uses of alcohol need to take note. The historical association between liquor and citizenship, in some Aborigines’ understanding, forces one to reconsider one’s taken for granted notions of ‘the citizen’. Writers inspired by Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’ (Gordon 1991) demonstrate that the content of ‘citizenship’ is not only variable historically (through time) and culturally, but is also subject, in any one time/jurisdiction, to disjoint logics (or ‘rationalities’) of government. To illustrate: ‘citizenship’ can be conceived both juridically, as a bundle of legal entitlements (e.g. to vote, to drink, to receive social security benefits), and culturally, as a series of

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capacities relevant (if not absolutely essential) to the optimal exercise of those rights (e.g. literacy and numeracy, budgeting skills, familiarity with banking and retailing). I have heard Aboriginal people complain that in northern and central regions of Australia, they received legal entitlements of citizenship – the right to buy and consume liquor – in advance of welfare authorities’ development of their capacities to drink without harm. In conversation with me in 1987 an Aboriginal man with a serious drinking problem compared such ‘citizenship’ with letting scrub-bred bullocks out of a yard to run amok. In its duty of care, he was arguing, the government had failed his generation.

Disjunctions between dimensions of citizenship (in this case, the juridical and cultural/behavioural) are endemic possibilities of modern government, according to the Foucauldian perspective. In the circumstances in which I worked, such disjunctions gave rise to a number of competing notions of ‘individual responsibility’ and to arguments about the relevance of ‘culture’ to assessments of such responsibility. Let me demonstrate this by referring to recent Northern Territory discussions about the relevance of cross-cultural understanding to alcohol policy and alcohol treatment.

CITIZENSHIP AND CULTURE

One view implies that there is no such disjunction for policy makers to concern themselves with, that ‘right’ is not to be judged against the test of ‘capacity’: all Territorians are equally entitled to acquire liquor and equally culpable in their use or misuse of it. Towards the close of the era of ‘assimilation’ policy (c.1937–72) this notion of juridical equality became unassailable, an item of humane conventional wisdom. Those who then protested Aborigines’ incapacity to deal with alcohol seemed to be clinging to a paternalist authority which could no longer survive liberal tests.

Such a view now informs one contemporary conservative policy position. In its submission to the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly ‘Sessional Committee on the Use and Abuse of Alcohol by the Community’, the NT Country Liberal Party
Central Council Working Party on Alcohol gave voice to this version of liberalism: 'There should not be two sets of regulations, one applying to whites, and another to blacks.' The need to reassert that principle arose because, in the view of the Working Party, there was a threat to the freedom of the whole population in some Aboriginal proposals to restrict the availability of grog (cited in D'Abbs 1991, 183).

Advocates of Aborigines' interests have recently become dissatisfied with such individualistic liberalism; they have begun to develop an alternative construction of 'rights', a notion of the rights of cultural groups, such as has been put forward in recent anti-discrimination legislation and judicial interpretation. For example, consultant anthropologist Paul Memmott has put forward a notion of cultural rights in order to defend the proposed Tyeweretye Social Club – a project intended to develop a culture of moderate liquor consumption among central Australian Aboriginal people. The critics of the Club proposal saw it as only another place for Aboriginal people to perpetuate their alcohol problems. Tangentyere Council, an Alice Springs-based housing and welfare organisation, replied that legislation conferring on Aborigines the right to consume alcohol had been, in effect, an unintended measure of discrimination against Aboriginal people because it had taken no account of the radically dissimilar cultural settings of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal drinking.

The discriminatory aspect of the equal-drinking-rights principle is that the existing norms of Anglo-Celtic drinking ... are neither culturally suitable nor sufficiently accessible to be put into practice by most Central Australian Aborigines. What was required, in hindsight, was a more cross-culturally sensitive approach to the introduction of drinking to Aboriginal people in order to obtain a less stressful and a closer fit between drinking behaviour and other Aboriginal social norms and values. What was needed was not equal drinking rights but equal rights in choosing a culture of alcohol consumption (Memmott 1991, 7-9).

In a submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Tangentyere Council advanced a similar critique: that it is not necessarily appropriate to consider 'rights' to be a
predicate of 'individuals' (Tangentyere Council 1991). Aboriginal society is traditionally 'kin-based rather than individually based'. Quoting an assertion made with respect to the rights of American Indians: 'individualism is counter-cultural', the submission argued that 'group rights, duties and obligations, which are the norm in Aboriginal society, do not sit well with liberal tradition and western law' (1991, 86, 113).

Attempts to apply such a culturally informed perspective in public policy debates raise issues that a post-colonial liberalism finds difficult to resolve. For example, Diane Bell has confronted the ambiguities of a culturally informed liberalism in her writings on the rights of Aboriginal women. Though 'promised marriage' and 'infant bestowal' seem to violate fundamental human rights, she points out, 'the exercise of those powers binds kin in a web of reciprocal obligations, rights, and responsibilities that have implications for land ownership and ceremonial duties: in short, they were part and parcel of the survival of the culture' (Bell 1992, 349).

Should certain individual rights of Aborigines be supported if their exercise threatens 'the survival of the culture'?

In 1990, the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, Mr Marshall Perron, wrote a well publicised letter to the then Prime Minister Hawke, reporting that some Aboriginal people had requested that drinking rights conferred in 1964 now be withdrawn. His press release (as reported by CAAMA Radio) explained that these Aboriginal people did not understand that such a move would be repugnant to 'Australia’s laws of equal opportunity'; however, they had told him 'that they had been forced to give up most of their traditional law and thought other Australians should give up some of their laws in return' (Perron 1990). At least one other conservative politician toyed nostalgically with the thought of re-introducing special restrictions on Aboriginal people’s rights to consume liquor, claiming a mandate for such a policy from Aboriginal people who are now desperate and dissatisfied with the bitter fruits of liberal theories of their rights (NT Parliamentary Record, 16 August 1990 9928–9962).
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Tangentyere Council has acknowledged some basis in Aboriginal opinion for these suggestions. 'Aboriginal people are not exempt from the kind of thinking that says the ills unleashed by opening Pandora's Box can be vanquished by closing the lid', commented the Council's submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Traditional Aborigines, in particular, may think that way. However, the Council went on to argue that among Aboriginal people there was no consensus about drinking rights, and that it was fruitless to seek one. Tangentyere Council remained 'strenuously opposed' to attempts to 'impose second-class citizenship' (Tangentyere Council 1991, 40-1).

DRINKING AS A GROUP ACTIVITY

The notion that the 'individual' may be of debatable importance has not been confined to these discussions of 'rights'. In matters of treatment and intervention, the 'individual' is also a problematic category. One may detect a trend in public policy away from seeing the individual as the primary object of knowledge and site of intervention, as in the classic Alcoholics Anonymous model. While allowing that AA's focus on individually-borne 'disease' and individually-motivated renunciation has helped many drinkers, recent anthropological and public health approaches have pointed to the shared and communal nature of drinking behaviour and the consequent need to alter, by diverse measures, the contexts of drinking (Ashley and Rankin 1988).

Such contexts may be understood broadly or narrowly. 'Social marketing' campaigns may target a whole statewide or nationwide 'culture of alcohol' to which certain strategies (for example, promoting low alcohol beer) are addressed. Or context may refer to what Zinberg calls 'the setting' - the immediate physical and social environment of liquor consumption (Zinberg 1984). Ethnographers proceed on the basis that research into context, in the latter, narrow sense, should focus on the idioms of social solidarity in specific settings. Brady and Moore have each suggested that such research would not only elucidate the
pleasures and meanings of alcohol use to the users, but also give us an appreciation of the group potential for ‘social control’ (Brady 1992, Moore 1992).

‘Social control’, in the drinking setting, is understood as serving two functions: it reproduces the possibility that liquor can be consumed, while constraining individual drinkers to behave within certain limits, to drink moderately and to refrain from violence. The individual liberty to drink is thus balanced against the minimal need for collective order. Contexts are thus conceived as powerful vis-a-vis individuals. In Bain’s central Australian study (Bain 1974), ‘context’ is conceived to be the kin-based group. ‘The initial spread of alcohol consumption is within a family and once it is, for most families, it spreads right through’ (1974, 45). ‘[T]he pressure of kinship in Aboriginal society is extremely intense, so much so that individual choice can be almost eliminated’ (1974, 46). In 1984, O’Connor (1984, 180, 181) wrote in similar terms of drinking groups on Alice Springs town camps: ‘Alcohol is as essential to the life and existence of those camps ... as is the air they breathe to the persons who live there’...

‘The choice is simple: drink and belong, or abstain and remain outside.’ Such ‘group dependence’ on alcohol, or ‘contingent drunkenness’, compels some rethinking of anti-alcohol strategies, O’Connor argues. In similar terms Sansom has described life in the mid 1970s on a Darwin town camp (Sansom 1980, 44): ‘the business of organising the grog ... gives the fringe camp its character and its raison d’être’.

Bain made no recommendations about public policy, but saw some hope in the ‘very determined efforts [which were then] being made by the non-drinking minority to exercise some control’ over drinking, to make it less excessive (1974, 52). O’Connor suggested a strategy of advocating weaker forms of alcohol and urging moderation, not necessarily abstinence. He called for the promotion of Aboriginal employment in order to widen people’s social networks and to provide less time for alcohol consumption. These suggestions are further examples of how the ‘grog’ problem can be tackled in non-individualistic terms.
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If such ethnographic knowledge as Bain, Sansom and O'Connor offer gives grounds for optimism and for constructive intervention, it is because of the positive resonances of the notion of 'social control'. That is, group cohesion can be understood not only as the means by which individuals are recruited to excessive drinking, but also as the mechanism by which drinking behaviour may be kept moderate within, or excluded altogether from, a given group.

However, Brady draws on ethnographies of Aborigines' political processes in order to warn us not to over-estimate Aboriginal group cohesion. In particular, she argues, community councils enjoy only the weakest of mandates to control community residents' behaviour (1990, 206–7). She refers to Aborigines' 'deeply felt respect for the autonomous right of an individual to conduct his/her life in a particular manner, even if this involves harm' (1990, 216). Citing Myers's studies of the Pintupi (Myers 1986), she suggests that individual autonomy is respected because such respect helps to sustain relatedness, thus promoting 'tolerance for the sheer qualities of individuality, including temporary, erratic and violent outbursts' (1992, 705). Traditionally, low population densities and the nomadic subsistence of small kin-based groups have obviated the need for Aborigines to develop enduring authority structures or censorious codes of behaviour. Avoidance and moving away from trouble were serviceable mechanisms for limiting the harm done by difficult or violent people. In her recent summary of relevant ethnographies Brady concludes that 'social "controls" may themselves serve to facilitate and reward drunkenness, and that by and large inebriation in itself is neither disvalued nor disallowed' (1992, 710).

The Pitjantjatjarra Council's submission to the Northern Territory Sessional Committee dwelt on this theme, drawing explicitly on the work of Brady and Myers. According to that submission, social control among Aboriginal people is compromised by their 'strong respect for the rights of the individual to get on with his or her own business. Drinking, like many other activities of daily life, is considered to be someone's
"own business", even if it adversely affects that person and others in the community' (Pitjantjatjara Council 1990, 33).

From the point of view of designing interventions, what can be gained from a body of ethnographic knowledge which, in some writings, places the emphasis on 'group cohesion' and in others draws attention to individuals' prerogatives to defy collective norms? Is the Aboriginal capacity for 'individual autonomy' a cultural basis for interventions such as Alcoholics Anonymous, which seek to empower individuals who are disenchanted with their heavy drinking peer group and who wish to defy its norms of insobriety? Though Brady does not explicitly exclude that possibility, the tenor of her case is that individual autonomy works better to enable drinking than to enable individual choices of sobriety or moderation. It is as if individual autonomy must be asserted more strongly in refusing a drink than in accepting one.

Yet we should pause before accepting such a cultural generalisation. For are there not places - such as statutory 'Prohibited Areas' in the Northern Territory - and groups (perhaps likely to be comprised of women) where non-drinking is normative? If so, then 'individual autonomy' might imply that a person has the liberty to affiliate him or herself with a camp of non-drinking kin/friends or with a camp of drinking kin/friends, as that individual sees fit. Moreover, such an 'autonomous individual' has the liberty to change from one milieu to the other, at different moments in his/her life, a liberty quite consistent with 'binge drinking'. By acknowledging that, in some regions at least, contemporary Aboriginal culture has become divided in respect of alcohol use, it becomes possible to postulate the coexistence of diverse practices of 'group cohesion', on the one hand, and assertions of 'individual autonomy', on the other. We need not regard group cohesion and individual autonomy as two competing images of Aboriginal culture.

THE UNIVERSAL INDIVIDUAL?

Among those active in the prevention and treatment of alcohol abuse, there is a strand of thought which holds ethnographic knowledge at a distance. Among the principals of CAAAPU
(Central Australian Aboriginal Alcohol Programs Unit), for example, the attributes of the drinking culture are understood to be primarily erroneous modes of thought, as hindrances to sobriety. If a drinker distinguishes between wine and beer ('I used to be a wine drinker but now I'm only a beer drinker, so I've no longer got a problem') or between full strength and light beer, this is not to be understood as a useful illumination of the logic of his or her drinking culture, but only as an instance of that person's denial of his/her problem – the disease alcoholism. In this view, all the cultures of the drinkers are to be understood primarily as diverse rationalisations of drinking. An ethnography of drinking cultures therefore has little to offer. Indeed, such ethnography may dignify 'denial' as if it were 'culture'.

Essential to any AA-based treatment, therefore, is the process of persuading the drinker to disown comprehensively his drinker thoughtways and behaviours, to reframe as error and as illness the subjectivities of the drinking self. Such is the philosophy of the Central Australian Aboriginal Alcohol Program Unit's recent initiative against 'grog' in central Australia. CAAAPU made no secret of its AA inspiration. Eric Shirt, a North American Indian consultant to CAAAPU from 1991 to 1994, told a central Australian gathering of health professionals that 'the central message in recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous and in all self-help groups is I AM RESPONSIBLE' (Shirt 1993, unpaginated, emphasis in original).

Norman Denzin's The Recovering Alcoholic (Denzin 1987) offers an extended account of AA's philosophy of individual responsibility and its group dynamics. He argues that it is fundamental to AA processes that the individual is understood beyond the context of his/her 'culture'. The 'self' which is embedded within a particular drinking style of life must be turned into an object upon whom the AA member can reflect distantly and critically, in collaboration with his/her AA group. AA discussions generate a divergence between old and new selves. The AA member learns to talk in a certain language about the emotionally disordered and sick person he/she was/is under alcohol's grip. The new talking self is created and sustained by AA's typical group dynamics. Taking it in turns to talk and
employing a shared vocabulary of the emotions gives rise to a self whose characteristics are essentially the same for all group members, ‘a public structure of private lives’ (1987, 118).

As the alcoholic witnesses fellow members of his group going through the same process he has gone through, the pieces of his self begin to fall into place. He begins to see that he is like every other member of his group. He begins to understand how the same list of words can be applied to all alcoholics, not just him (1987, 76).

The new identity which this process produces – an identity signified by the person no longer denying his/her condition but saying ‘I am an alcoholic’ – requires the subordination of the particularities of the drinking self to the ideal universal sober self which AA produces and sustains. This process of subordination can be described as a repudiation of the ‘culture’ which ethnographies of drinking would describe; a repudiation with its own cultural conditions of possibility – the AA group, a sub-culture which is itself open to such ethnographic description as Denzin’s.

An insistence on life-long sobriety and on an ideal universal notion of the alcoholic individual may thus be in some tension with the ethnographic perspective. Joan Weibel-Orlando, in a North American Indian context, has pointed to the affinities between the ethnographic perspective and a more modest notion of treatment success. In her view:

it is the anthropologist who is psychologically and intellectually prepared to put forth the notion that total life-long abstinence is not always a culturally appropriate goal of substance abuse intervention (Weibel-Orlando 1989, 152).

Weibel-Orlando evokes the drinker whose life exhibits a different kind of individual autonomy from that idealised by AA – a series of group attachments through which he/she moves in and out of sobriety.

[1]he abuse/intervention/recovery/use and abuse cycles which longitudinal research allows us to observe may be an indigenously developed self-regulatory pattern upon which institutional interventions can be modelled so as to afford them more cultural relevancy...
She continues:

Perhaps one substance abuse intervention goal can be the lengthening of periods of abstinence, quiescence, and moderation and to foster self-regulatory drinking behaviour so that culturally appropriate drinking bouts fall short of life-threatening events either to the drinker or his associates (1989, 152).

Such cycles and the possible self-regulatory patterns they embody have not to date been prominent in the perspectives on treatment 'outcome' developed among Aboriginal initiatives against alcohol abuse. Maggie Brady (Brady 1995) has recently drawn attention to the dominance of Alcoholics Anonymous, with its focus on life-long renunciation supported by an ongoing therapeutic group, among Aboriginal interventions into alcohol abuse. She warns against letting 'their options for treatment... [be] narrowed rather than expanded' (1995, 1496).

The next chapter examines the efforts which were made by one Aboriginal treatment initiative to situate its leaders' adherence to AA in the context of 'Aboriginal tradition'.
How to relate the potential of individual autonomy to the demands of group affiliation? The previous chapter has surveyed some of the different ways in which the problem of 'individual/group' has arisen in discussions of Aboriginal people and alcohol abuse: discourses of 'rights' and public policy on alcohol; ethnographic descriptions of the cultural setting of drinking; and in one influential therapeutic model. It was against this contentious and confusing intellectual background that Kerrie Miller and I wrote up an account of the work of CAAAPU. In the following excerpts we have retained the present tense, even though CAAAPU has since been gutted by a withdrawal of government funding.

IMPLEMENTING CAAAPU'S 'GROG ACTION PLAN' 1992-94

CAAAPU's 'Grog Action Plan' (GAP) offered a wholistic view of the alcohol problems of central Australian Aboriginal people (CAAAPU 1992). GAP drew from the literature on alcohol treatment the conclusion that there should be a combination of approaches, taking into account that alcohol consumption was
not caused by any one factor, but by many. It was necessary to think of the individual drinker in terms of his/her ‘socio-economic status, education level, family, employment, psychological conflicts, drug use career and “physiological forces”’ – and employment would be especially important. The GAP noted that ‘negative life events and other post-treatment factors such as family environment, family functioning and work contribute to the recovery process’ (CAAAPU 1992, 55). Other factors contributing to the origin and persistence of alcohol problems were ‘unemployment, boredom, family breakdown and lack of social and economic opportunities’ (1992, 56).

Consistent with this wholistic view, the GAP projected three lines of development for CAAAPU.

**Making CAAAPU regional:** The GAP saw the problem of Aboriginal drinking as regional. Those who formed CAAAPU attached great importance to getting bush communities to think about their own grog problems and to formulate local ‘grog action plans’ upon which CAAAPU could develop a regional strategy. However, at the time when the GAP was written and published (the summer of 1991–92), the bush communities had yet to formulate such plans. Nonetheless, it was appropriate to ‘start in town’ because bush communities had apparently assured CAAAPU that ‘the problem begins in town’ (1992, 12). CAAAPU remains committed to a regional solution in the long term, but its work has to date been confined to town-based programs. The only services complementary to CAAAPU established outside of Alice Springs have been Anyinginyi Congress’s Alcohol Program, based in Tennant Creek.

**Extension of CAAAPU’s powers to control and to coordinate alcohol programs:** The GAP argued that in order for CAAAPU to plan a network of services, it was desirable to reallocate alcohol program money from other organisations (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) to CAAAPU. Alternatively, alcohol program workers in other organisations should be seconded to CAAAPU ‘on an experimental basis for a year’ (1992, 43). In practice, three funded programs were handed over to CAAAPU: by Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (becoming Women’s Day Care), by the Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD) (becoming the
training accreditation consultancy) and by Tangentyere Council (becoming Men’s Day Care).

Ensuring that residential treatment did not stand alone: While committing CAAAPU to a residential treatment program, the GAP acknowledged that CAAAPU needed to implement other programs complementary to residential treatment. Researching the literature showed that there was certainly a place for residential treatment, but the literature also indicated what was to be avoided: ‘residential treatment centres, most of which were under-resourced, staffed by untrained workers, had no well defined treatment program, and were considered failures’. These had usually ‘operated without complementary elements, such as hospital intervention programs, effective assessment procedures, education and other prevention programs, after-care, and employment and job training schemes’ (1992, 17).

In CAAAPU’s implementation of the GAP, the programs which have complemented residential treatment have been: Training (staff and others), Men’s Day Care and Women’s Day Care. The Men’s and Women’s Day Care programs have had a dual purpose – both recruiting new clients to treatment and keeping an eye on those who had left residential treatment.

The intended effect of pursuing these three lines of development was to enable CAAAPU to pursue a comprehensive strategy, under the headings ‘primary prevention’, ‘secondary prevention’ and ‘tertiary intervention’. However, CAAAPU has not been able to become active in all parts of this strategy. The activities we have underlined below are those in which CAAAPU, in practice, has developed a sustained involvement (either in collaboration with another agency or as the sole responsible agency) in its first three years.

Primary prevention: School-based education programs; mass media campaigns; programs to strengthen families; programs to strengthen Aboriginal culture; youth programs; recreation programs; alcohol control policies.

Secondary prevention: Early intervention/detection programs in hospitals, Aboriginal medical services and community health centres; sobering up shelters; day centres; minimal intervention counselling services; self-help manuals; prison-based
education/intervention programs; drink-driving programs; life
skills training programs; referral from community agencies
(welfare); training and employment programs.

Tertiary intervention: Alcoholics Anonymous; individual and
family counselling/therapy; detoxification; residential treatment;
dry camps (outstations); co-dependency programs (Al-Anon, etc.);
aftercare and relapse prevention programs.

In practice, CAAAPU has put its energies primarily into 'tertiary
intervention': residential treatment has been its biggest single
commitment, the linchpin of its work.

The GAP went to some trouble to justify the emphasis which
CAAAPU, inspired by Indian-run treatment centres in Canada,
wished to place on residential treatment. The authors of the GAP
acknowledged that 'the Australian experience with Aboriginal
residential alcohol treatment centres has not been a positive one'
(1992, 47). They quoted researcher Nick Heather's scepticism
about the cost effectiveness of residential treatment, then noted
that Heather conceded that certain drinkers may do well in such
programs: drinkers with 'dysfunctional family or work
relationships; low social stability; and/or social disadvantages in
general'. The GAP concludes that 'these characteristics would
describe the overwhelming majority of, if not all, Aboriginal

These same factors also make it necessary to adopt modest
expectations of the effectiveness of residential treatment. For
example, the GAP quotes research on factors militating against
successful outcomes: 'bad housing, unemployment, and fractured
relationships' (1992, 55). In such a social environment, planning to
provide relapse prevention is more realistic than expecting one
bout of treatment to be permanently effective. Lasting changes in
drinking patterns will take a long time (1992, 20):

Current thinking is that relapse is a 'normal', perhaps even a
necessary, part of the process of behavioural change and that clients
should be equipped with skills to avert relapse or cope with it if it
occurs.

CAAAPU's efforts at relapse prevention, according to the GAP,
were to be: a 'living skills' course at the Day Centre (budgeting,
dealing with demands of relatives); cognitive/behavioural skills training in residential treatment; and after care. 'Helping people to keep sober when they return home is an essential part of treatment and community healing' (1992, 66). In practice, CAAAPU has not yet found it possible to develop an extensive aftercare program other than (a) negotiating with Tangentyere Council for a 'sober house' to be provided at one of Alice Springs's 18 town camps (negotiations for a town house with the NT Department of Lands and Housing having proven unsuccessful because of nearby residents' resistance), and (b) non-residential programs which both recruit new clients and maintain contact with existing clients. The non-residential programs have included hosting weekly AA meetings attended by a small number of clients, and visiting the sobering up shelter.

The meagre development of CAAAPU's 'aftercare' program may be due in part to the slowness of bush communities to develop their own grog action plans, and also to the very dispersed and transient nature of CAAAPU's clientele. However, CAAAPU's non-residential programs have attempted to impart 'living skills' as an everyday part of their service, emphasising money management, time management and 'survival' in general. The 'cognitive/behavioural training' to which the GAP refers was intended to provide clients 'with different ways of viewing situations, alternative responses to predictable high-risk situations, and the means of changing their lifestyles' (1992, 52).

Such training aims to strengthen individuals; it cannot alter the environment which that individual must pass back into. The emphasis on such training and the underdeveloped state of 'aftercare' means that CAAAPU's main practice has been to promote individual improvement through a short (four weeks, later increased to six) period of treatment. Producing strength in the individual has sometimes been stated as a major goal of CAAAPU. Addressing the issue of 'aftercare' in May 1994, a CAAAPU publicity package commented:

In order to recover, a person must develop a functionally independent personality. He must recognize that he can function independently but that he needs others for a balanced life. A person with a functionally independent personality has an integrated approach to
life. He recognizes his strengths and abilities and is capable of acting independently, yet acknowledges his limitations and is willing to ask for and receive help in those areas. He is willing to take responsibility for his own recovery with the appropriate help from other people and a Higher Power.

The GAP admitted that in thinking about anti-alcohol strategies, it remains an unresolved issue whether the priority should be on the individual or on community factors. The Nechi Institute's approach in Canada, the GAP noted, 'stresses the importance of individual sobriety as a necessary precursor to, rather than a possible result of, community development'. However, the GAP cautiously pointed to the value of employment to recovering clients, suggesting that 'treatment programs should explore the possibility of assisting patients in finding employment upon discharge' (1992, 55). In practice, however, CAAAPU has not developed an employment placement program.

In view of CAAAPU's emphasis on residential treatment in the three years 1992–94, it is important to remember that the GAP's original endorsement of residential treatment programs was cautious:

their usefulness in relation to community alcohol problems is limited, particularly if residential treatment is the sole element of a strategy, and especially when that "treatment" is provided in poorly resourced facilities with untrained or inadequately trained workers (1992, 49).

We would not argue that CAAAPU's facilities have been poorly resourced, and nor do we think that CAAAPU has skimped on the training of its workers. However we note that the GAP expressed a wish to complement town-based residential treatment with 'a Day Centre with a variety of programs for problem drinkers, families of problem drinkers and young people', 'regional dry camps' and 'a mobile treatment program to reach large numbers of people in bush communities' (1992, 49). CAAAPU has not yet been able to provide the regional dry camps and the mobile treatment program, but it did provide a non-residential program for most of the three years.
THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF CAAAPU

There is no doubt about the cultural identity of CAAAPU's management and senior staff. They proudly identify as Aboriginal people. However, the cultural identity of the programs themselves requires a more careful discussion.

In an early statement, 'Talking Straight, Talking Open', CAAAPU wrote that 'in the old days if we had problems, our Law and culture showed us the way'. One of the planning assumptions stated in the GAP was that 'alcohol services for Aboriginal people stand the best chance of succeeding if they are culturally appropriate' (1992, 13). An item of the 'CAAAPU philosophy' reads: 'Aboriginal culture, and the strengthening of Aboriginal culture, are the keys to successfully addressing the grog problem' (1992, 65). Only Aboriginal people, the GAP tells us, 'are positioned to develop programs with the cultural content they believe is necessary to restore Aboriginal people to wholeness and health' (1992, 36). In such statements (and there are many others which we could quote), CAAAPU defined its project as 'Aboriginal' in both management and content.

At the same time, CAAAPU's leaders made clear their wish to draw ideas and inspiration from the work of Canadian Indians, the Poundmakers Lodge and the Nechi Institute. The GAP argues that the two peoples have had parallel experiences of colonialism and in particular with alcohol. Alcohol misuse had become destructively intertwined with the cultures of both peoples.

Both Indians and Aborigines developed patterns of heavy binge drinking in groups, binges which tend to continue as long as money to buy alcohol is available. In both groups, traditional extended family networks, with their complex systems of duties and responsibilities, served to aid the spread of destructive drinking patterns. People of both cultures still regularly suffer from open prejudice and frequently internalise, to some degree, the popular caricature of 'the drunken Aborigine' or 'the drunken Indian'. Both found themselves marginalised, facing massive unemployment, chronic boredom, and bleak futures (1992, 45).

The Indian experience was also exemplary for CAAAPU in that the Indians 'had succeeded in not only adapting programs and
techniques developed in non-Indian settings but had, through the incorporation of traditional Indian ceremonies and cultural practices, developed distinctly Indian programs for alcohol treatment and the training of alcohol and other drug workers' (1992, 45). CAAAPU leaders therefore embraced their Canadian Indian consultants, Eric Shirt and Associates, as fellow indigenous people. The GAP announced CAAAPU’s intention

that a treatment and training program be developed by Central Australian Aboriginal people, incorporating Aboriginal cultural features and tailored to the needs of the Central Australian Aboriginal community, which will be based on the model used at the Indian-run Poundmakers’ Lodge ... (1992, 39).

As late as May 1994, a month before CAAAPU terminated the relationship with Eric Shirt and Associates, Director Doug Walker introduced a CAAAPU information kit with the words: ‘CAAAPU Treatment and Training is designed by Aboriginal/Indigenous people’.

The manner and timing of the decision to dispense with the Canadians’ services in June 1994 have been controversial within CAAAPU. However, many have welcomed one consequence of this change: CAAAPU is now running its programs without any non-Aboriginal help. People say they are proud that Aboriginal people are doing this. Some people, but not all, had begun to see the Canadian influence as an obstacle to CAAAPU being truly indigenous.

A debate about what was Indian, what was Aboriginal and where they did or did not overlap seems to have begun early in the conduct of CAAAPU’s programs. Our notes from the second counsellor training workshop (March 9 to April 3, 1992) remind us that

many participants felt that the cultural sharing between Indian and Aboriginal people was very important. One participant felt that at this course they had started to identify their own culturally appropriate ways of treatment (Mezies field notes).

We would like to suggest that this cultural sorting out could never be simply a process of drawing boundaries between Indian, Aboriginal and White elements of the programs, for two reasons.
First, there is cultural variety among Aboriginal people themselves; second, the argument that alcoholism is an illness brings with it a need to judge what aspects of Aboriginality should be rejected, as part of the illness, as well as what should be reinforced.

THE DIVERSITY OF ABORIGINALITY

In the CAAAPU opening ceremony, early in 1992, four speakers used a little of their own languages and then addressed those assembled in English. Doug Walker and Doug Abbott referred to the ceremonial smoking of the area being opened; they pointed out that although they had been inspired to do the smoking by observing the important place which 'spirituality' occupied in native American alcohol treatment, the smoking ceremony was not imported from Canada, but indigenous central Australian Aboriginal people had long been using smoke in their ceremonies, and CAAAPU would further that tradition. A second speaker was Eli Rubuntja, who is not only a senior Arrernte man but also a Lutheran evangelist. His talk mentioned, among other matters, the evil nature of alcohol. Eli's speech brought CAAAPU's work into line with a tradition of Christian concern for the morally decaying effects of alcohol on Aboriginal people. The third speaker was Agnes Palmer, an adherent of the Roman Catholic faith who remains Arrernte in language and in cultural identity. Her themes were healing and the recovery of spiritual wholeness.

We may take this ceremony, and these speeches, as illustrative of the diversity of CAAAPU's cultural inheritance. CAAAPU is without doubt an Aboriginal organisation, but modern Aboriginality has been enriched by borrowing from other traditions: the Canadian combination of native healing and Alcoholics Anonymous, the Lutheran sense that life is a struggle not to stray from God, and a contemporary wisdom about health and healing as matters of the spirit as well as of the body (a wisdom which refuses to see 'spirit' exclusively in the terms provided by any one cultural tradition).
Eric Shirt has acknowledged the difficulty posed by the cultural diversity among Aboriginal people. In his 'Where Are We Now? A Strategic Review of CAAAPU's Activities 1992–93' (Shirt 1994, 9) he alluded to the obstacles to incorporating elements of Aboriginal culture into alcohol treatment and recovery services: 'significant differences in cultural practices and languages by homeland'. Aboriginality, he seemed to say, is a quality which varies significantly within the region.

If anything, Shirt's words understate the degree of cultural difference among CAAAPU's many Aboriginal clients. Not all of CAAAPU's clients have been formed by traditional Aboriginal spirituality and law. Being Aboriginal is not even a criterion for admission to treatment. A small minority of CAAAPU clients are not Aboriginal at all, others are of Aboriginal descent but come from families and regions in which Aboriginal spirituality is no longer part of the passed on cultural heritage. There is a spirituality suffusing CAAAPU's work, given concrete expression every morning at the 'smoking ceremony', in a dedicated 'smoking pit', with its climax of mutual affirmation. But this is not a culturally specific spirituality; it is a generalised, but powerful, sense of human fellowship, underpinned by a sense of common suffering (from colonialism, from the disease alcoholism and from life's general pressures). It is interesting that, according to some CAAAPU staff, the smoking ceremony fell into disuse around the time the Canadians were sacked in June 1994; the ceremony had become identified, in some people's minds, with the Indians and therefore was 'not our thing'. However, in September 1994, the Alcohol Awareness trainees revived the ceremony and invited residential treatment clients to join them. (Other staff dispute this account, denying that the smoking ceremony was ever discontinued or discredited.)

CULTURE/ILLNESS/DENIAL

In the theory of alcoholism and the practice of treatment embraced by CAAAPU, 'Aboriginal culture' is not regarded entirely as a source of strength. For example week 8 of the counsellor training program (it would be week 16 of a combined
sequence of alcohol awareness and counsellor training) 'studies the correspondence between Aboriginal culture and the alcoholics' culture in such areas as disrupted family life, loss of community, high stress, exploitation, denial of limitations and technological change'. In his review of CAAAPU's work in 1992 and 1993, Eric Shirt (1994, 9) wrote of central Australian Aboriginal culture that 'some traditional healing practices and cultural norms are incompatible with contemporary treatment methods'. He did not specify these incompatibilities.

Another way to say this is that the culture of drinking and the culture of Aboriginal people overlap, so if treatment is to separate the alcoholic from the culture of drinking, that will also require the alcoholic to distance him or herself from certain ways of being Aboriginal. CAAAPU leaders are critical of approaches to alcoholism which seek to make compromises with the culture of drinking. In the Northern Territory, some public policies on alcohol are based on a philosophy of 'harm reduction' and make use of popular and scientific distinctions between harmful drinking and non-harmful drinking, between full strength beers and low alcohol beers. CAAAPU leaders say that these distinctions should not be supported because they are part of the alcoholics' way of denying their dependence. In a discussion with us (June 15 1993), some of the CAAAPU leaders were dismissive of studies of drinking which try to describe the drinking culture in terms of the distinctions used by drinkers themselves: for instance, the distinction between 'only drinking beer' and 'really' having a drinking problem. They were similarly critical of distinctions between full strength and low alcohol beers. Such distinctions were 'mistaken awareness' and 'drunks' rationalisation'.

These CAAAPU staff then went on to argue that it was also 'denial' - something for drunks to hang onto - to argue that alcoholism is not a disease. They were critical of anti-alcohol perspectives which emphasised the social context of alcohol misuse, rather than focus on the disease itself. Those (including local Aboriginal organisations) who point to a lack of jobs and a lack of housing as factors in the alcohol problem may be producing rationalisations for alcoholics, they suggested. People
can have these things if they get sober. People are scared of the responsibility of these things, these staff argued.

The view that 'alcoholism' is a 'disease' is powerful in CAAAPU thinking. It is possible for any features of the drinkers' culture – including features which some classify as 'Aboriginal way', including the 'harm reduction' views of governments and including the social policy arguments of Aboriginal organisations – to be reframed as 'denial', that is, as ways of not confronting one's disease. For CAAAPU, denial, in any form, is the enemy.

If 'alcoholism' is a 'disease', is it the same disease in every culture which suffers it? We explored this question with CAAAPU leaders because a 'disease' is usually thought of as outside culture. We do not refer to the Chinese form of tuberculosis or the Chilean version of breast cancer or the Norwegian manifestations of HIV. However, the coordinator of the residential treatment program, Lana Abbott, assured us that there is an 'Aboriginal' form of alcoholism - a particularly virulent and disabling form. The ways in which alcoholism is a disease for whitefellas are not necessarily relevant to the Aboriginal case, she explained. Aboriginal drinking is intense and high risk. Many Aboriginal drinkers have not adopted household or personal budgeting thereby allowing drinking to be more immoderate, exhausting all available cash; there is no conserving of resources, Aboriginal alcoholics take whatever is there. Aboriginal people learned to drink not for pleasure, but just to get drunk. Because Aboriginal alcoholism was so severe, abstinence is the only goal for Aboriginal people now and in the foreseeable future. Moderation might be a reasonable goal later on, but not now, she concluded.

Eric Shirt's 'Where Are We Now?' says that:

Alcohol works especially well for Aboriginal people because their present life is filled with painful experiences of oppression and hopelessness. And because it works so well, alcoholism has been woven into the very fabric of Aboriginal life - *not one Aboriginal person can get through a day of his or her life without having to deal with alcoholism* (Shirt 1994, 10; my emphasis).

Eric Shirt and the leaders of CAAAPU have portrayed 'Aboriginal culture' as a complex mixture of behaviours and beliefs. These behaviours and beliefs may or may not include 'law and
spirituality' relevant to treatment; they are likely to include denying and self-denigrating behaviours, associated with the acceptance of alcohol abuse, the estrangement of the sexes, low individual self-esteem, and violence arising from blocked expression of deeply felt distress. This culture is common to alcoholics, but its Aboriginal forms are particularly depressed and introverted. In the view of CAAAPU, some norms of this culture must be challenged and undermined by a new cultural practice: the mixed sex therapeutic group whose dynamics encourage people to look deep into themselves and to tell others what they find there.

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS AS CULTURE

CAAAPU's treatment philosophy states that 'the AA philosophy and twelve steps of recovery are an integral part of the CAAAPU treatment program' (CAAAPU 1993, 6). It has been essential to AA's work all over the world that clients learn to distance themselves from those aspects of their culture which have propped up their drinking. From the client's point of view, the AA group is a new (sub)culture which empowers the client to continue this critical review and, where necessary, repudiation of the culture which has supported his/her drinking. CAAAPU's commitment to AA is therefore crucial to its critical assessment of 'Aboriginal culture'.

One CAAAPU worker, Agnes Palmer, has suggested that there are precedents in Aboriginal tradition for one feature of AA practice: the client's review of his or her life. Aboriginal notions of illness, misfortune and death require

that the individual or community look for and examine the cause of disorder or death that occurs and that payback laws be satisfied. The individual in his recovery must examine his life and take responsibility for his actions while drinking in order to recover (Palmer 1994).

In this way of aligning AA with Aboriginal tradition, the onus is on the individual to examine him or herself, and the effect of such self-examination on his/her relationships with others is left open.
It may be that the effect, in the short term, is to distance the self-examining individual from many close relations and friends.

By adopting the ‘disease’ notion and by fostering the Alcoholics Anonymous group as a form of aftercare, CAAAPU approaches Aboriginal traditions in ways both respectful and critically innovative. CAAAPU aims to confront the pathological while supporting the spiritually fortifying elements of Aboriginal culture.

It would be possible to argue that the ‘disease’ notion, the techniques of AA and the associated suspicion of the culture of the drinker as ‘denial’ are all North American impositions on local Aboriginal leaders. We do not share this view because we have witnessed the conviction with which the Aboriginal leadership of CAAAPU has tackled the task of sifting the good from the bad in ‘Aboriginal culture’. This is a task they have performed in their own lives, struggling to be sober Aboriginal people in a cultural setting which has, in their view, long given too much ground to the culture of alcohol. There is an affinity between the North American view of what is required in the recovery from alcoholism and the challenges which have been faced by these sober Aboriginal people. This affinity was, for two and a half years, the basis of a powerful attraction between CAAAPU and Eric Shirt and Associates, giving rise to a mutually beneficial working relationship at CAAAPU.

However, we have also noted that among Aboriginal people associated with CAAAPU there have been different views about what features of Aboriginal culture should be respected and sustained and what features should be confronted. Three issues have come to our attention: the mixing of men and women, the use of English as the language of residential treatment and the cultural style in which training is given. We wish to report on these issues, but we do not claim to know what is the ‘right’ or ‘Aboriginal’ way to think about them.

SEXES MINGLED

The residential treatment program attempts to encourage clients to be outspoken in their reflections on their own lives, and to do
so in groups made up of both men and women. There are well-tried precedents for such behaviour in non-Aboriginal culture: in the field of alcohol treatment, Alcoholics Anonymous is particularly well known for encouraging participants to reflect honestly and self-critically on their life, in front of a mixed group of fellow-sufferers from the disease of alcoholism. However, Aboriginal social rules have traditionally discouraged free discussion of some matters between men and women, so the adoption of mixed groups is culturally innovative and controversial.

In the first two four-week sessions of the residential treatment program in 1992–93, all the women clients were in one group, for women only. However, the counsellors thought that women were not participating as well as they could, and so mixed sex groups commenced during 1993. CAAAPU counsellors have since then been committed to the mixing of men and women. Married couples are not in the same group, however, and if two people are in a traditional avoidance relationship one can be shifted to another group. Residential arrangements keep men and women in separate sleeping quarters; no sexual contact, including between married partners, is allowed while people are in treatment.

In a May 1994 meeting with us some of the counsellors argued the necessity of this managed integration of the sexes. They said:

It is important to keep women and men learning together so that they can understand each other’s experience of the effects of cultural breakdown, including breakdown of respect between sexes. Much of the complaint of culturally inappropriate mixing of sexes, like the talk of loneliness and missing relatives, is ‘denial’. One counsellor pointed out that there are ways of respecting customs of avoidance and sex barriers, without completely segregating the sexes. In any case, their clients don’t show much respect for each other outside, when they’re drunk. Another counsellor chimed in with the view that ‘culture’, when referred to by those worried about mixing up the sexes, was not really culture but ‘the alcoholic’s cunning’. He reminded all present that people need to be on their guard against the sneakiness of alcoholism, using ‘culture’ as its front (fieldnotes).
There is no doubt that mixing the sexes challenges many clients. This is true for trainees as well. Kerrie Miller wrote the following comments after participating in an Alcohol Awareness Training module, in July 1993, in which there was a ‘truth’ session late in a week devoted to the topic ‘shame and guilt’.

The males sat in a circle surrounded by the females; they then completed a ‘naming ceremony’ (an Indian custom) where a feather was passed around the circle and each male stated full name and family ties. Several items had been placed on the floor in front of them - two items were then chosen and an explanation as to why these items were chosen (that is, what the items reminded them of) was then given. Participants described this session as ‘very personal’ and ‘intimate’, together with ‘culturally inappropriate’ specifically because session(s) were conducted in mixed gender groups. People stressed that cultural differences should be noted and respected - participants would have liked to have been made aware of what was involved and given an option of participation.

We also noted participants’ comments from the 6th Counsellor Training module (12 July – 6 August 1993):

The ‘shame and guilt’ sessions were particularly difficult sessions. However, the bonds that had been established among the participants over the past 18 months helped to overcome these difficulties. Some participants felt uncomfortable with the sexuality aspects, and thought it would have been more helpful to concentrate on alcohol issues. One person suggested that some sessions would have been better divided up into a men’s group and a women’s group. It was also suggested that people would not be obliged to participate or respond in all sessions. One participant thought that there should be more Aboriginal culture brought into the training.

Our notes go on to make it clear that participants nonetheless expressed overall satisfaction with this course.

The negotiation of new ways to respect sexual difference remains a continuing concern at CAAAPU. Here are three examples from our fieldnotes.

(From February 1994): June Goodwin, the Coordinator of the women's non-residential programs since June 1993, is an indigenous person from the South Pacific. She has been working with Aboriginal people for 18 years since living in the Centre. She attended Batchelor College Adult Education Course for two years. Her colleague Glenys Akarana
is not indigenous, but she is a long-time Alice Springs resident who has worked with Aboriginal people for thirteen years in the field of health, drugs and alcohol. Neither June nor Glenys are kin to the clients. Therefore, they are not restricted by customs which structure interactions among many Aboriginal people in the Centre; as they put it, 'we are able to interact with tribal family members during times when there would be family feud or tribal disagreements'. There are disadvantages which accompany their status and their greater freedom of interaction. 'Sometimes people on first approach will question our colour and race, we don't find this a problem as we have one message: "WE ARE HERE TO TALK GROG".' However, if they judge a potential client (male) to be very 'traditional' they will try to ensure that male non-residential program staff see him, or he may insist on this himself.

In September 1994, the Treatment Coordinator told us that a young male counsellor had confided to her that he was not feeling comfortable when counselling older female clients. (There were no female counsellors assigned to the treatment program at this time.) The Treatment Coordinator said that she advised the young counsellor to think of himself as his female client's only recourse. He had an obligation to her to overcome his reservations. The Treatment Coordinator told us that she was glad that he had reported 'his problem' to her.

One counsellor has recently expressed to us his reservations about CAAAPU's policy on mixing the sexes. He says that CAAAPU must have both male and female counsellors in order to respect people's jealous feelings. We need more traditional people doing the training, he said, so that the tribal people are not being counselled by 'half castes'. He has heard complaints about this from outside. He cited another male staffer who had also been hearing complaints about CAAAPU's lack of 'traditional counsellors'. (Some CAAAPU staff objected strongly to our reporting without censure such use of the term 'half-caste'.)

LANGUAGE

Some clients in CAAAPU's residential treatment program do not have English as their first language. This causes problems, especially as some of the language with which CAAAPU thinks
about alcoholism is 'high English', for example the term 'dysfunctional families'.

The counsellors are Aboriginal people, and that is important because, as CAAAPU's paper 'What is training?' put it:

Aboriginal people are the most effective people to help Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal counsellor is better able to relate because of his shared cultural experience, his ability to identify and his ability to relate to the experience of colonisation (CAAAPU 1994).

However, that 'shared cultural experience' is sometimes compromised by the language barriers among Aboriginal people.

Early in 1994, we analysed data from 60 client interviews conducted in November and December 1993 and February 1994. We had asked clients to tell us of any problems they were having with the treatment program. The problems most frequently mentioned (by one third of all interviewees) were cultural. For the most part the problem was the level of English used in lectures and counselling (though one man also objected to the mingling of men and women in the smoking ceremony and another (from Brisbane) expressed disappointment at the lack of what he regarded as 'Aboriginal culture' in the program). In a second series of client interviews, from March to July 1994, about the same proportion (13 out of 37 clients) mentioned language as a problem. Since then, CAAAPU has lengthened the residential treatment program from four to six weeks. One of CAAAPU's intentions was to give counsellors a better chance to break their lectures down into shorter and simpler components. However, English is still the only language of instruction. When we reported this problem to counsellors in May 1994, we suggested to one counsellor who speaks Arrernte fluently (and who occasionally breaks into her language during classes) that she take the Arrernte speaking clients in a separate group. Her reply showed the influence of CAAAPU's philosophy. After saying that CAAAPU does not have sufficient resources to divide the class, she went on to draw our attention to the implications of thinking of alcoholism as a disease. This view discourages breaking up the group because it is important for everyone to think of themselves as suffering the same disease. If you start to break up the group
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(into types of grog, different cultures, or petrol vs. grog or 'gaolbirds' versus voluntary clients) you create the conditions for 'denial'. That is, one group is given the opportunity to feel that their condition is not as bad as another's. Having everyone in the same group was an important levelling technique: everybody has the same problem with equal severity.

TRAINING

The delivery of CAAAPU's training program, until June 1994, was largely in the hands of Canadian Indians. In all the evaluations of training conducted by the Menzies School, the Canadian Indians have been highly praised for their work as trainers of counsellors. However, there have been a few dissenters. At an Alcohol Awareness Training module in June 1994, some NSW Kooris had expressed disappointment at a lack of 'Aboriginal culture' in the teaching offered by a Canadian Indian and her Maori associate. However, other students were very appreciative of what they called the 'professionalism' of these teachers.

When these teachers were sacked they were replaced by a mixture of Aboriginal and Pacific Islander people who had been trained as counsellors by the Indians when they first worked at CAAAPU. This change triggered a series of discussions about the merits of two different styles of training. The style practised by 'the Canadians' (including one Maori) was described by some trainees as confronting, as putting a lot of responsibility and even pressure on individual trainees to search within themselves and to verbalise their feelings to others in class. The other style was more relaxed, less confronting, with fewer pressures on trainees to perform in specified ways. Was the second style more 'Aboriginal'?

One of the trainers who came after 'the Canadians' told us after taking an Alcohol Awareness group in August that she 'felt frustrated because she thought they should be further in the development of themselves'. This is interesting because this trainer had been praised by trainees for being more relaxed, less confronting in her style of teaching. It was said that her style was 'more Aboriginal' (though the trainer herself is also of Maori
origin). One trainee who praised her 'Aboriginal style' recalled, critically, that their Canadian teacher had said that 'we use culture as an excuse for our behaviours'. Other trainees who approved the new teacher said that it had been wrong of the Canadians to train counsellors to adopt a critical attitude to Aboriginal Law, as many of their clients would be 'traditional'. They also praised the new trainer's use of simple, non-intimidating language.

However, another trainee said that he approved of the way 'the Canadians' had challenged them, confronting Aboriginal people more than they would usually allow. This trainee said that 'we need help to get to our feelings. It's scary and so we look for excuses.' The Canadian trainer's willingness to be 'pushy' 'was doing us the world of good. To take risks you have to be pushed. You can't have too laid back an approach or you'll not get anywhere'. It is ironical that this trainee's views were in some respects close to those of the new trainer who, though praised for her 'Aboriginal style', wished to make the students work harder on their personal development.
Conclusion

CAAAPU was a striking instance of the clash between two imperatives. On the one hand, a wish to assert the value of 'Aboriginality' and to insist on Aboriginal control over programs directed towards Aboriginal clients, whose problems were conceived as taking a particularly virulent and uniquely 'indigenous' form. On the other hand, the adoption of certain universalising perspectives, in particular, that of Alcohohics Anonymous in which the 'individual' is postulated as the author of his/her own recovery, seeking and then maintaining membership of a therapeutic group which is defined by its distance from the milieu of the drinking self. In the attempt to synthesise these two perspectives, CAAAPU staff engaged in a task of critically sifting through the cultural heritage of their clients, declaring some cultural practices and norms to be the basis of 'denial', to be obstacles to 'recovery'.

Some colleagues who have read the Menzies School evaluation of CAAAPU have found in it evidence of 'confusion' among CAAAPU staff. Some seek to explain this confusion by highlighting the role of the highly entrepreneurial Eric Shirt and Associates, suggesting that Shirt exploited the notion of a
common ‘indigenous’ predicament in order to market a culturally inappropriate North American therapeutic technique among Aboriginal people searching for hope. Certainly, the language and procedures of the materials introduced to CAAAPU by Eric Shirt and Associates were highly formulated, bearing the traces of their North American provenance. He and his colleagues tended to defend their model as an already indigenous package which needed little adaptation to local Aboriginal circumstances. The strain imposed on CAAAPU by this dogma is evident in the foregoing account.

However, it is important not to beg the question of ‘culture’ by embracing too quickly this familiar narrative of alien things imposed. There is much in the local Aboriginal context which predisposed CAAAPU’s leaders to be receptive to the Shirt model. And in discussions of public policy regulating alcohol consumption, there is an inescapable tension between viewing all people (including Aboriginal people) as ‘individuals’ (who enjoy rights of choice and who must determine their own fate as consumers) and acknowledging that Aboriginal people are different, sharing a common culture of alcohol, and so must be treated as a group with ‘group rights’.1 In researched descriptions of ‘Aboriginal culture’ the emphasis alternates between the group dynamics of Aboriginal alcohol consumption and the potential for individual autonomy. In the autobiographical statements of Aboriginal people who see themselves as ‘in recovery’, there is a tension between the imperatives of belonging to a convivial but self-destructive drinking milieu and the risk of social isolation which is taken with the commitment to abstinence, its potential for loneliness tempered by the fellowship of others ‘in recovery’. Some Aboriginal people who tell that story of recovery are also products of an upbringing influenced by ‘assimilation’ policy, through which they have become distant from some ‘traditional’ ways. These people nonetheless strongly identify as Aboriginal, and their leadership of organisations is recognised as ‘Aboriginal

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1 For a recent discussion of this problem, focusing on the Racial Discrimination Act, see Race Discrimination Commissioner (1995)
control’ in government programs in which that is a funding requirement.

The conversations within CAAAPU about modes of training, languages of instruction and the composition of discussion groups should not, therefore, be seen merely as ‘confusion’ occasioned by a North American hijack of therapeutic philosophy. These conversations were instances of the necessarily contested nature of Aboriginal heritage in the face of social technologies of public health which give certain meanings and emphasis to ‘the individual’, while also attempting to hold fast to ‘indigenous traditions’. The significance of Eric Shirt and Associates is that their marked influence, over a short but intense period of CAAAPU’s development, gave these issues a particularly stark clarity. CAAAPU will be remembered by some as a bizarre misadventure, a dogmatically defended and entrepreneurially motivated (mis)maching of North American individualism with local Aboriginal aspirations. To me, CAAAPU is a heightened illustration of the experimental and inherently risky nature of public health developments among Aboriginal people.
PART FIVE

Customary Law and Aboriginal self-policing
Introduction

Some communities may very well be able to re-institute their traditional Laws successfully, but many people have reservations and regard some ideas as nostalgia (Langton 1991, 367).

Marcia Langton’s remark, which summarises one of the themes of her report for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, captures the questing and experimental spirit in which Aboriginal people are compelled to consider the contemporary relevance of their Law. To the extent that the Aboriginal right to have their Law respected continues to be a topical issue, such caution as Langton expresses tends to be a minor theme in an otherwise polemical and deferential public discussion. The promotion of Aboriginal Law continues to have a strong symbolic and formal aspect, especially in ‘post-Mabo’ discussions in which it can be said that ‘Aboriginal Law does now run in Australia’ (Hocking 1993). A public health perspective requires that we relate these formal statements to the practicalities of governance.

According to Noel Pearson, ‘the unavoidable subject matter’ for post-Mabo negotiations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians ‘must at the least be (1) indigenous rights to land (2) rights to compensation and restitution (3) jurisdictional rights’
(Pearson 1993, 89). More recently, he has made it clear that the
Mabo decision implies ‘that Aboriginal law and custom is now a
source of law in this country’ (Pearson 1994, 181). What might
‘jurisdictional rights’ mean in practice? Under the heading
‘Exercises in self-determination’, Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Dodson included
‘voluntary community policing by Aboriginal people’; he
instanced policing at Tennant Creek, Elliott and Alice Springs
(Dodson 1993, 57–63). Michael Mansell’s reflections on the Mabo
judgment also pointed to innovations, such as Tangentyere
Council’s ‘night patrol’, in the implementation of ‘law and order’.
To Mansell the night patrol ‘demonstrates that ‘authorities are
beginning to see that it is futile to continue the policy of imposing
white values on remote Aboriginal communities’ (Mansell 1993,
175).

Meanwhile, population health studies have revealed the
prominence of ‘external causes’ of death among Aborigines in
some regions. ‘External causes’ include accidents, interpersonal
violence and suicide. Mortality data collected and analysed by
Hunter (1993, 84–5) show that for Western Australian Aboriginal
people in the early 1980s, ‘external causes’ have been a much
more prominent cause of death than for non-Aborigines. Hicks
(1990, Tables 2, 3 and 6) has made the same point for Western
Australia. Plant (1990, Figures 5, 6, 8 and 9) presents similar data
on ‘premature death’ and ‘excess mortality’ for Aboriginal people
in the Northern Territory and Australia wide. Khalidi compared
the ‘relative risk’ and ‘excess risk’ (1990, Table 6) of various causes
of death for central Australian Aborigines in the mid 1980s, and
found ‘external causes’ to be among the most prominent causes,
for both men and women. Divakaran-Brown and Honari (1990)
found that death by ‘external causes’ was second only to
‘circulatory diseases’ as a contributor to the ‘excess risk’ of death
among South Australian Aborigines in 1985. Hogg (1990, Tables 6,
7, 8 & 9) presents similar data for New South Wales Aborigines.
Separating ‘motor vehicle accidents’ from ‘injuries and
poisonings’, Honari’s analysis of the closest thing we have to a
‘national’ data set on Aboriginal mortality shows ‘injury and poisoning’ to be the second highest contributor to male excess risk in 1985 and the third highest for females in that year (Honari 1990, Tables 3 and 4).

These data suggest that social disorder among Aboriginal Australians is a major health problem, requiring ‘public health’ solutions. The direction in which a solution is to be sought, it is often nowadays suggested, is a rethinking of strategies for preventing and resolving conflicts among Aboriginal people themselves – a rethinking which looks to ‘Aboriginal customary Law’. Some calls to action leave open whether the need is for restoration of a politically eclipsed Law or adaptation of Law to new circumstances. For example Judy Atkinson (Atkinson 1990, 7) has written that ‘the only real answers are contained in our right and ability to redefine and articulate law’. The word ‘redefine’ seems important. However, she continues ‘that is, mechanisms of social organisation and social control which allowed our society to function in balance and equity to both sexes prior to 1788’. This suggests something more like restoration. Barbara Miller writes that ‘governments must empower Aboriginal communities to adapt customary laws to their present social control mechanisms’ (Miller 1991, 10). However, in a later formulation, the word ‘return’ replaces ‘adapt’: ‘the return of traditional social control mechanisms must be addressed by the Queensland government’ (Miller 1991, 13).

Chapter Eight, written in a spirit of sympathetic scepticism, will argue that in the search for a more healthy social order among Aboriginal peoples, there can be no simple return or revival of custom. Such scepticism is needed in order to accommodate such unhappy examples of the application of Aboriginal authority as that given recently by Frank Brennan. His Cherbourg example (the banishing of several violent youths for life from the community)

highlights the difficulties once the principle of self-determination is expanded to include the application of Aboriginal tribal law to a mixed community which is not remote and whose members are in contact
with other mainstream communities, are conversant with their individual rights, and whose actions affect the interests of other citizens who are not members of the community (Brennan 1994, 87).

Chapter Nine, telling some stories from Bushtown, will illustrate the difficulties of innovating social control techniques.
In 1992, Marcia Langton devoted her Wentworth Lecture to advocating Aboriginal solutions to the policing problems that she found to be implicit in Aborigines’ high rates of police custody and imprisonment. She called for ‘legislative and other kinds of recognition of Aboriginal Law and indigenous dispute-processing mechanisms from police officers, magistrates, legal counsel and others’ (Langton 1992, 5). She referred to ‘the ludicrous situation in which two or three white policemen, with one or two police aides, attempt to enforce an almost completely irrelevant law, while Aboriginal law and order breaks down because the Aboriginal system, and elders, are not accorded the authority they once had’ (1992, 12).

**LANGTON AND THE CONFLICT OF LAWS**

Langton is herself the author of an influential essay on Aboriginal ‘dispute processing mechanisms’ (Langton 1988), an account which attempts to substantiate them as ‘Law’. After noting that charge and imprisonment rates are high for ‘disorderliness’, she examines ‘swearing and fighting, both among Aboriginal people
and between Aborigines and others, to show how Aboriginal customary law is expressed in this behaviour, how the rules operate, and how culturally meaningful it is for Aboriginal people to employ these social devices, which are, I argue, ritualised codes' (1988, 201).

'Swearing and fighting have been organised forms of social interaction in the traditional Aboriginal societies' and 'oral abuse' is reported ethnographically as a 'form of punishment and fighting as a form of retribution', Langton reports (1988, 202). She cites evidence from Arnhem Land (L Warner and L Hiatt) and from the Daly River area (WEH Stanner). Stanner describes large fights as 'ritualised' and limited by implicit norms, such as using lighter weapons and ceasing when there had been a few casualties. The cross-cutting links between groups (through intermarriage) were the basis of these norms. Stanner describes the value placed on equality and reciprocity: a man offering his thigh for spearing by a man he had wronged, knowing that the man would inflict a wound, not make an attempt on his life; and 'two unreconciled women, giving each other whack for whack with clubs, but in strict rotation' (Langton 1988, 205). Swearing was variously employed by Aboriginal people: as part of fighting, to incite one's opponent, and as permissible obscenity between certain kin. Knowing how to swear is an important social skill, Langton argues, because swearing is made meaningful behaviour through shared norms.

Of Aboriginal swearing nowadays, Langton says: 'the intention of such language depends on the social relationships between the interlocutors and not on any quality of the words as such ... except in the case of epithets which imply absolutely prohibited behaviour' (1988, 211). So 'there is clearly a cultural basis for contemporary swearing and fighting in traditional Aboriginal society' (1988, 210).

Like other ethnographers (Sansom 1980, 105; Taylor as cited by the the Law Reform Commission 1986, vol 2, 20), Langton offers a model of ritualised fighting - a sequence of escalation and de-escalation - found in contemporary Aboriginal communities:

- The aggrieved calls a fight by swearing and accusing,
• The event must occur in a public place.
• No-one but particular kin and close friends may intervene.
• Kin must call off the fight if it goes too far.
• Individuals tend not to become extremely violent (unless extremely intoxicated) and finish the fight with threats and boasts about what they could have done.

However, pubs and public parks have tended to become the public arenas in which Aboriginal people in the southern regions of Australia conduct their fights, and these places are policed. When police intervene, some Aborigines 'use their traditional swearing and threatening codes as forms of insult and declarations of offence and accusation', and this may include threats and acts of violence against police or police property. Police then arrest Aborigines for assault and bad language. Police are thus 'interacting with a social process which is invisible to them ... treating a legal process of one society as an illegal process in their own society' (1988, 212). That 'social process' is invisible because the police are not aware of the characteristic 'discourse strategies' of the 'Aboriginal domain and space' and the 'Aboriginal legal order' (1988, 219).

Langton then goes on to say that Aboriginal people, seeing themselves as victims of institutionalised racism, 'have adapted a traditional cultural form to the purpose of sedition, however ineffective' (1988, 219). 'Sedition' is defined as 'action or language promoting discontent or rebellion against the government' (Macquarie Dictionary). She acknowledges that this redeployment of the 'dispute processing mechanisms as a response to the legal institutions – police, courts and the system itself – exacerbates rather than alleviates racial conflict' (1988, 219). But she also says that such seditious humour has a 'liberating effect' for its exponents (1988, 220), partly through the ironies of the innocence/ignorance which authority displays.

'Swearing and fighting among Aboriginal people in "settled" Australia are two aspects of evolving indigenous law, but are misperceived by the Anglo-Australian legal system and its enforcers as drunken anarchy and anti-social misbehaviour'
TRADITIONS FOR HEALTH

(1988, 221), she concludes. Aborigines pay a high price for the continuation of their law in this form.

Is it possible to accommodate this tradition? Langton believes that there could be informal arrangements with police to recognise certain places as dispute settlement arenas, subject to a more relaxed surveillance. It would be difficult to 'recognise' this tradition more formally, however. Whites would probably resent such 'discrimination'; and it would be difficult to distinguish behaviours which Aboriginal people do want policed – 'actual drunken or otherwise motivated lawlessness' (1988, 222). Nonetheless, a new defence could be introduced to non-Aboriginal law, and a consideration of the 'custom' described by Langton could diminish sentences for convictions occasioned by swearing and fighting.

Langton's instance of 'custom' – the ritualised and ordered nature of swearing and fighting – is compelling, but narrow: it relates to a relatively small number of offences for which Aboriginal people are frequently convicted and which thus make Aboriginal people vulnerable to culturally insensitive applications of White law and to high rates of imprisonment. She concedes that 'actual drunken or otherwise motivated lawlessness' – a rather indefinite category of actions – remains beyond the reach of these customary mechanisms, to be dealt with by other means. Her Wentworth Lecture even suggests that Aboriginal people are sometimes dissatisfied with White law because it is too lenient and non-interventionist. 'Crimes against women, including assault, especially assault arising from domestic violence, and rape, are ignored by the criminal justice system' (1992, 12). In making this point Langton appears to be in agreement with Chris Cunneen's reservations about the critique of the 'over-policing' of Aboriginal people: 'under-policing' is also a problem to the extent that 'the levels of violence perpetrated against Aboriginal women do not receive attention from police authorities' (Cunneen 1992, 76). Langton also acknowledges that, in remote communities with no resident police, the processing of disputes is sometimes dangerous, 'and some people want a police presence in their communities, if only for the duration of a particular crisis' (1992, 12). But such intervention, she recommends, should be less
inclined to arrest and more concerned to warn and divert people and get them home safely.

Langton's critique of policing, then, is hardly confined to a defence and promotion of what can be documented as 'customary law'. Indeed, in her report to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Too Much Sorry Business) she is clear about the possible limits and defects of 'custom'. In this study, Langton's writing about 'Aboriginal law', the heritage of authority which 'elders' seek to maintain, is various in its emphases.

She makes the now familiar connection between land and 'Law':

The ability of Aboriginal people to practise traditional Law depends on them at least having access to their land, at best having title and control over their land. The core of Aboriginal Law has to do with the knowledge and ritual pertaining to sacred sites. These places which underpin Aboriginal life are best cared for and preserved by the Aboriginal owners living nearby them and carrying out the ceremony for them. All other aspects of the welfare of Aboriginal society depend on this (1991, 366).

And she evokes 'the Law' as a rich intellectual tradition:

What our people mean when they talk about their Law, is a cosmology, a worldview which is a religious, philosophic, poetic and normative explanation of how the natural, human and supernatural domains work. Aboriginal Law ties each individual to kin, to 'country' - particular estates of land - and to Dreamings. One is born with the responsibilities and obligations which these inheritances carry (1991, 361).

She then elaborates this behavioural dimension of 'Law'.

There are many onerous duties, and they are not considered to be optional. One is seen to be lazy and neglectful if these duties are ignored and the respect, authority and advantages, such as arrangements for good marriages, opportunities for one's children, are not awarded. As many of our people observe, Aboriginal Law is hard work (1991, 361).

Langton expresses reservations about some of the ways in which respect for the Law is affirmed. According to her, the anthropological documentation of Aboriginal custom is flawed by
its too easy definition of behaviour as normal and functional. While this enables 'anthropologists and others' to assert 'that traditional Aboriginal societies had, and continue to have, a definable body of rules, norms and traditions which are accepted by the community' (1991, 350), it also makes anthropology indiscriminately accepting of what Langton refers to as 'anti-social behaviour amongst their subjects'. By presuming that behaviour is 'functional', anthropological accounts of Aboriginal social order do not address 'the distress, violence and unnecessary death in Aboriginal communities', and nor do they 'suggest ways of reducing unacceptable behaviour' (1991, 351).

Langton wishes to reserve a right to distinguish behaviours enacting 'rules, norms and traditions' which are pro-social from behaviours which she considers to be 'anti-social'. Her remarks on the contemporary conduct of Aboriginal inquiries into serious misfortune illustrate this more discriminating approach.

She begins by claiming a legitimate space, within law and order processes, for what she calls 'the Aboriginal coronial method' – meetings among Aboriginal people which try to ascertain the circumstances of a death, and to decide who has contributed to the death. Such inquiries are effective in 'shaming' people held responsible and accused of neglect or irresponsible behaviour or worse. Because such procedures are 'the most powerful means under Aboriginal Law of controlling the behaviour of individuals', they must not be impeded by police and courts, but must be allowed to take place 'before the arrest and removal into custody of any person alleged to have committed murder, manslaughter or grievous bodily harm'. The unfettered performance of such inquiries will allow 'paybacks' to occur, minimising grief and further paybacks, and giving Aboriginal people no reason to blame police for infringing kin obligations. 'Aboriginal Law must be carried out first for the sake of peace and order. Mayhem follows if the necessary payback ritual is not carried out' (1991, 364–5).

However, she then reports reservations about how this works in practice. 'Some Aboriginal people regard the consumption of alcohol by persons involved in [recent paybacks at Hermannsburg] as not just distorting Aboriginal Law but
breaking the Law’ (1991, 362). She reports that an unpopular element of Aboriginal Law, among some Aboriginal people to whom she spoke, was the attribution of personal responsibility. That is, Aboriginal attributions of responsibility sometimes gained political ascendancy over the non-blaming explanations derived from non-Aboriginal medicine: ‘the social cause of death takes priority over the actual cause of death’ (1991, 374). Finally, in the context of high adult mortality, traditional Aboriginal responses to death were worrying.

The particular ritual behaviours which have become intensified by the high adult mortality rates in the Northern Territory are prescribed violence, such as violence between female cognates and in laws at funerals, the heavy alcohol consumption which is required of relatives after a death to help close male kin mourning, and the concomitant violence which accompanies such drinking, and the ‘payback’ assaults and homicides which occur usually because some act has gone too far because of intoxication (1991, 378).

The way that death is dealt with in Aboriginal culture, in the context of high adult mortality rates caused by heart disease, respiratory disease and alcohol-related violence, produces a never-ending state of anxiety, more injury and more death, despite the best intentions of elders to keep the peace. The invisible physical toll of those suffering from heart disease and respiratory disease may be well understood by health workers. However, there are many traditional Aboriginal people who would not be able to accept that such diseases were, by themselves, the cause of death (1991, 379).

In Too Much Sorry Business Langton also reported women’s fears about lawlessness. Women told her that ‘Aboriginal Law does not help with domestic violence and that, for the women, the police are the only answer’ (1991, 373); she also writes that ‘the death of women and constant assault, both sexual and physical, of women and children, in Aboriginal communities far exceed in sheer numbers and the enormity of suffering the problem which custody and deaths in custody pose for men’ (1991, 373), a point made by others such as Judy Atkinson (1990), Audrey Bolger (1991) and Chilla Bulbeck (1992). Accordingly, ‘women are adamant that unhindered police involvement is required to control domestic violence’ (1991, 384).
In the contemporary circumstances of many Aborigines' lives, the authority of 'elders' can no longer be presumed.

Grog and petrol sniffing, especially in larger communities, where people from different traditional groups are mixed up in someone else's country, worsen tensions and result in violence which elders are unable to stop. As much as they would prefer not to, the elders must call the police to keep law and order. They realize that Aboriginal Law is not working in these situations and it is a distressing problem for them (1991, 369).

and

In some communities, elders have adopted an autocratic approach to running community councils, probably copying the Northern Territory Government style used with Aboriginal people ... The Land Councils seem unable to prevent this because of the remoteness of many communities and their disinclination (unlike Government) to 'interfere' with local politics (1991, 374).

For all these reasons the Law is, among Aboriginal people themselves, a contested tradition. Accordingly, Langton's allegiances to the Law stop well short of demanding that reluctant adherents be coerced. Referring to 'youthful offending to avoid ceremonial obligations under Aboriginal law', she speculates that it is

perhaps not just a result of the traditional fear instilled in youth, but a form of 'voting with their feet' on Aboriginal Law in favour of the easy life in Australian society. If that is the case, it is not our right to object to that decision. Nor should it be the right of anyone else (1991, 368, my emphasis).

I have quoted at length from Langton's work because hers is the most sustained and nuanced research effort in the study of contemporary Aboriginal Law as a tradition of social control. Her account refuses to gloss over, indeed it promotes to our attention, the fact that Aboriginal Law is now a contested tradition: not only a contest between White authority and Black, as it is often represented, but between Aboriginal men and Aboriginal women, Aboriginal youth and Aboriginal adults.

Langton's work opens up a space for a more complex consideration of the relationship between alcohol and law. In
order not to be diverted from the main theme of this Chapter, I have put some thoughts on this issue into Appendix One (Liquor and the Law). Langton’s candid report on the contemporary vicissitudes of Law parallels some of the writing issuing from the Australian Law Reform Commission’s 1977 reference on the recognition of Aboriginal customary law.

THE LAW REFORM COMMISSION AND COMMUNITY POLICING

a common theme was the need to assist and support Aborigines in maintaining order in their communities, even though there was no agreement on how this could best be done (Law Reform Commission 1986 vol 1, 84).

The Law Reform Commission (LRC) committed itself to the view that there is such a thing as Aboriginal customary Law, as attested in anthropology.

Although writers may disagree on particular issues, all agree that there existed, in traditional Aboriginal societies, a body of rules, values and traditions, more or less clearly defined, which were accepted as establishing standards or procedures to be followed and upheld. Furthermore, these rules, values and traditions continue to exist in various forms, today (LRC 1986, vol 1, 76).

The LRC further acknowledged that the notion of customary Law which they accepted was not what lawyers usually considered to be ‘law’, but included matters that were ‘more like rules of etiquette or religious beliefs, as well as other more obviously “legal” rules and procedures’. The LRC Report’s authors were encouraged by legal scholar Elizabeth Eggleston’s willingness to define law in terms of its functions, rather than by reference to any similarity of form to western law. They quote Eggleston:

The use of the word ‘law’ to describe measures of social control in Aboriginal society is justified ... by the belief that every society must have means for settling disputes, and must have law in this sense, no matter how difficult it might be to identify binding rules or institutions corresponding to the legal system in our own society (1986, vol 1, 77).
And they quote Justice Blackburn's rejection of the Solicitor General's argument, in *Milirrpum v Nabalco Pty Ltd*, that Aboriginal custom was not 'law' because it was not enforceable by a sovereign power within a definable jurisdiction:

The specialization of the functions performed by the officers of an advanced society is no proof that the same functions are not performed in primitive societies, though by less specially responsible officers. Law may be more effective in some fields to reduce conflict than in others, as evidently it is more effective among the plaintiff clans in the field of land relationships than in some other fields... [T]he same is patentlly true of our system of law. Not every rule of law in an advanced society has its sanction (Blackburn, J), cited in LRC 1986, vol 1, 77).

Though these formulations were rhetorically valuable, showing that the LRC was in reputable company in seeing Aboriginal customary Law as 'law', they were of little use to the LRC as pointers to how such 'law' could now be given form. For example, what might the 'less specially responsible officers' of 'primitive' Aboriginal society now be expected to do?

Kenneth Maddock, a legally-trained anthropologist, explained to the Commission why ethnographic evidence (drawn from the writings of Strehlow, Meggitt and Hiatt) does not substantiate such a notion of 'office'. The evidence adduced by Maddock points to two kinds of breach of traditional Aboriginal social order: 'public' wrongs and 'private' wrongs. If a wrong was a breach of sacred Law, it was punished by local ceremonial leaders; this was a 'public' wrong. On the other hand, if a person disregarded the marriage rights of another, he or she was open to retributive action by the person whose right was infringed, but there was no duty on any authoritative persons to punish the infringer; this was a 'private' wrong, in that retributive action was an option which a wronged party could exercise — often called 'self-help' in the literature of anthropology. Similarly, Maddock's reading of the ethnographies led him to distinguish between wrongs which create an obligation on authority to attack the wrongdoer and 'wrongs which merely justify attacks on him' (1984, 231).
It follows, Maddock argued, that there was evidently no role in traditional Aboriginal society analogous to 'the police', that is, those 'competent to assert themselves regardless of occasion and against no matter who' (1984, 228). Apart from senior ceremonial leaders whose authority over certain matters was absolute, no one person or set of persons was empowered to deal with the many 'private' infractions of custom, for example, marriage custom. Blackburn's notion of 'less specially responsible officers' was therefore far from being solid ground on which to base an adaptation of 'traditional law' to contemporary self-policing.

The LRC, in supporting recognition of Aboriginal customary Law, argued that it could be adapted to modern circumstances. Against TGH Strehlow's 'counsel of despair' that Aboriginal Law was lost, the Commission replied:

Accepting that Aboriginal traditions and laws have been subject to outside interference and to pressures of various kinds does not entail that those traditions and laws have vanished, or have ceased to be valid or recognisable. On the contrary they have in many areas survived and adapted. These changes, and the continuing interaction of Aboriginal societies with the general Australian community, must influence the ways in which recognition can occur. They do not preclude it (LRC 1986, vol 1, 90).

The LRC's strong sense of the historical variability of Aboriginal customary Law is reflected in its reasons for refusing to 'recognise' Aboriginal customary Law 'categorically', that is, as an entire and complete system of law. The LRC arguments against categorical recognition included observing:

the difficulties in, and inappropriateness of, embarking on a search for any one all-purpose definition of 'customary laws and practices'; ... the difficulties inevitably presented by the transitions which Aboriginal communities are experiencing and the long history of externally-caused disruption (1986, vol 1, 151).

If categorical recognition and definitive codification were unwise, then it followed that the consideration of Aboriginal customary Law was a matter for ongoing empirical inquiry. The LRC cited as 'salutary' a Federal Court judge's insistence on evidentiary support for assertions of Aboriginal custom or tradition (1986, vol 1, 462). Courts should consider carefully how they took testimony
on Aboriginal law. In particular, they should avoid the presumption of admitting evidence ‘where the custom is a generation-old ... but [not] where the custom ... is modern and possibly different’ (1986, vol 1, 477). The LRC also underlined ‘the need to identify correctly those witnesses who have both knowledge and authority to speak on a particular matter’ (1986 vol 1, 480). That this is not a straightforward matter is suggested by Lloyd and Rogers’s (1993, 159–162) critique of the prosecution’s approach to three sexual assault compensation cases in central Australia. In those cases, the prosecution neglected to put forward the views of Aboriginal women which would have contested male defence claims about ‘tradition’.

The LRC’s commendable openness to the contemporary adaptation of Aboriginal tradition entailed accepting, as unavoidable, certain tasks of judgment and interpretation. When was behaviour ‘traditional’? The LRC cited a case *Jacky Anzac Jadarin v R* in which the Federal Court declined to see wife-beating as custom. Testimony that such beatings were not unusual ‘goes no further than to describe something which may occur from time to time; it goes no distance towards establishing that such conduct is an accepted facet of Aboriginal society’ (cited in 1986, vol 1, 461).¹ Determining what is ‘traditional’ was also a problem for those making policy about, for example, the ways in which local Aboriginal courts might continue in Queensland ‘as courts have been operating in communities for many years and, despite deficiencies and criticisms, they have become an established part of community life’ (1986, vol 2, 42). It is reasonable to ask: Have they thus become part of local ‘tradition’?

The LRC had no way of dealing systematically with the historical malleability of custom and tradition. They accepted Bryan Keon-Cohen’s point that implementing ‘native justice’ would take different forms in different circumstances. ‘Thus, isolated traditional Aboriginal communities may require a customary law jurisdiction, while fringe-dwelling acculturated

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¹ See also Lloyd and Rogers (1993, 152, 156) for a case in which a Supreme Court judge rejected the version of ‘tradition’ offered by the defendant in a rape trial.
communities may require a local government by-law scheme’ (cited in 1986, vol 2, 9). They accepted Sackville’s advice that the nature of customary jurisdictions should not be presumed but should be a matter for ‘intensive discussion with tribal groups’ (cited in 1986, vol 2, 11). They quoted respectfully John von Sturmer’s sceptical view that the nature of ‘Aboriginal mechanisms’ and ‘the precise range of matters over which they “play” remain to be identified’ and that ‘the “mechanisms” do not “engage” the whole array [of] new matters which flow from the contact situation’ (cited in 1986, vol 2, 16). And they noted Taylor’s report that the persistence of ‘old custom’ disputing at Edward River was considered by many locals to be ‘unsatisfactory, especially the violence and injuries suffered’ (cited in 1986, vol 2, 23). If Aboriginal units of government were given autonomous control over law and order, the LRC concluded, ‘they would be at least as likely to propose new or hybrid solutions to their problems at the legislative or executive levels as to propose customary ones’ (1986, vol 2, 17).

Within this perspective, what observations and recommendations did the LRC make about community policing? In the event, the Commission’s commendation of self-policing did not take up much space in their report. The essence of its view was that:

The methods of self-policing available will vary depending on community needs and aspirations. Consultation is essential to ensure that the appropriate balance is reached. There is no single solution to the policing of Aboriginal communities. Police forces throughout Australia need to examine carefully the policing needs of Aborigines, to discuss these with Aboriginal communities and to be flexible and innovative in seeking solutions (1986, vol 2, 106).

A striking feature of this advice is that, in offering it, the LRC did not have to take any position on the nature or relevance of ‘Aboriginal customary law’. Rather, the LRC was moved to reflect critically on the limits of its own terms of reference.

[Problems of ‘law and order’ on Aboriginal communities, and of local involvement in the criminal justice system, involve issues of local government or autonomy which extend beyond the recognition of
TRADITIONS FOR HEALTH

Aboriginal customary laws, or increasing Aboriginal participation in local courts or police forces (1986, vol 2, 114).

In questioning the 'recognition' agenda which underpinned its entire project, the LRC authors quoted a submission from academic Daniel Craig. Craig argued that 'the real issue is not recognition of customary law. Rather, it is whether or not Aboriginal communities should be given political and economic control of their own reserves' (cited in 1986, vol 2, 76). The LRC agreed that the issue of recognition was 'inherently partial and tangential to the underlying question of autonomy' (1986, vol 2, 77).

'TRADITION' AND POLICING AT NGUKURR

Among those who have since written on the relevance of Aboriginal customary Law, not all have noticed the LRC's questioning of the notions 'tradition' and 'recognition'. When Suzanne O'Neill and Jane Bathgate were commissioned by the Northern Territory government to consider new policing strategies for immigrant and indigenous communities, they became preoccupied with substantiating a 'traditional' basis for Warden schemes in Aboriginal communities. In their Policing Strategies in Aboriginal and Non-English Speaking Background Communities in the Northern Territory (O'Neill and Bathgate 1993) the terms 'traditional' and 'tradition' are used abundantly but never clearly. I will argue that O'Neill and Bathgate's discussion of the cultural basis of the Ngukurr Warden scheme exhibits the rhetorical value but conceptual vacuity of 'tradition'.

Two Northern Territory policemen interviewed by O'Neill and Bathgate voiced a conception of Aboriginal tradition which is as problematic as it is common.

I've told this mob that things that happen in the traditional way I won't do anything about, but I said ... you can't overstep the boundary of what's traditional and what's not ... you've got a bloke who's punished fair traditionally I mean, gets his leg burnt or something, and it was a traditional punishment, and that he deserved that traditional punishment, he won't come up here complaining. But if he shouldn't have been done he'll be up here complaining ... but this mob know

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that if there was a death, I'll do the buggers who caused it (cited in O'Neill and Bathgate 1993, 70).

The police confidently claim the right to define the limits to which 'tradition' can go - no punishment should lead to death. Within this limit, however, there is another: 'tradition' must prove itself by commanding universal support. If a punished person complains, the police will infer that, by 'traditional' criteria, 'he shouldn't have been done'. What makes this a naive conception of 'tradition' is that it does not acknowledge that the 'boundary of what's traditional and what's not' might be inherently controversial. For example, Audrey Bolger (Bolger 1991) has reported debate among Aboriginal people about the degree to which 'tradition' ordains that a man might physically chastise his wife. If police make it known that they would ally themselves with those dissenting from a particular application of 'tradition', then we could only expect controversy over tradition to be exacerbated. Police authority does not stand outside the contest for authority among Aboriginal people; rather it is a resource to be called on and deployed.

O'Neill and Bathgate's account of the Warden scheme at Ngukurr exhibits the problems of depicting local policing as underpinned by a clear distinction between what is 'traditional' and what is not. They attempt this distinction a number of times. They report that 'a number of commentators have noted that the Warden's "role" in each community is one which has been performed on past occasions by the community "elders"' (1993, 63). In adopting the Wardens program 'the community wanted to reinforce traditional mechanisms for social control over some areas of conflict' (1993, 71), and the Wardens are a 'means for understanding and recognising traditional law, in a formal yet "de facto" manner' (1993, 91).

O'Neill and Bathgate's effort to substantiate the term 'traditional' is undermined, not substantiated, by what they write about instances of law enforcement. If anything, their details persuade a reader that a boundary between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' authority is difficult to delinicate.
Perhaps the closest they come to substantiating 'tradition' is in pointing out that each 'clan' or 'family' is a mini-jurisdiction within Ngukurr's community-wide jurisdiction. The Ngukurr Warden scheme includes:

a member of each clan as a Warden. By doing this, the traditional clan obligations are able to be respected and issues can be directed first to that clan's Warden, who can then redirect the resolution of the problem to the appropriate authority. Complementing this, the Wardens have an Agreement that in situations which require more than one Warden to settle a problem, the Wardens have the permission of the community when assisting a fellow Warden, to work across clan obligations and boundaries in the interests of resolving the issue (1993, 62).

The Wardens act as a screening mechanism by referring disputes to the 'proper' arbiter. If it is a matter of family significance, the family is called upon; if it involves a more serious law issue, it is referred to the more senior authority of the law men of the community. If it involves alcohol or 'more serious issues', the matter is referred to the police (1993, 77).

This seems clear until the last sentence: when a problem of social order is related to alcohol, the rules about whose responsibility it is are more difficult to state. O'Neill and Bathgate quote a community member saying: 'we're trying to avoid the police patrolling camp, and control our own problem...(but) one of those things we really can't stop is the full drunken man - we can talk to them, but the best thing is, put them in the cell....'(1993, 71). In contrast, they assure us that 'the main problems arbitrated by the Wardens are alcohol-related problems, or 'family problems', which may also be alcohol related' (1993, 76). According to O'Neill and Bathgate, Wardens may refer fighting brothers 'to the family authority figure', but 'if alcohol is the sole source of the trouble, then the Wardens refer the problem to the police if they cannot finish it' (1993, 77). 'If it involves traditional issues, the alcohol is seen as clouding judgements and precluding any rights. If necessary, the source of conflict will be pursued at a later time, but in the immediate instance the police are called' (1993, 77). The best sense one can make of this series of quotes - which never quite seem consistent - is that sometimes the Wardens deal with
drunks by themselves, sometimes they get the police to help them, and sometimes they hand the whole affair over to police control. It is relevant to add that a significant part of the Wardens’ measured work has been to assist the police to make Protective Custody Apprehensions (1991, 86–7). There does not seem to be a way to present the Ngukurr processes of dealing with alcohol-related incidents as being either ‘traditional’ or ‘non-traditional’. Rather there seems to be an ad hoc mingling of responses.

In short, O’Neill and Bathgate try to account for Wardens’ interaction with police by deploying a jurisdictional distinction – traditional/non-traditional. If no such clear distinction emerges from what they tell us about what people do, then perhaps the distinction should be discarded, as an hypothesis falsified by empirical enquiry. Faced with inebriated fellow residents, Wardens accelerate the referral of many disorders out of the family or clan jurisdiction and into the domain of the police, as they see fit in the circumstances.

In trying to substantiate ‘tradition’ O’Neill and Bathgate make a number of observations about the possible superficiality of policing which is not ‘traditional’. They say that ‘a knowledge of culture and Aboriginal law is essential to resolve problems effectively’ (1993, 72); and ‘though police may make an apprehension, the actual problem is not resolved until the traditional mechanisms come into play’ (1993, 71). But what does ‘resolving’ mean? Contrary to the promise of the two sentences just quoted, O’Neill and Bathgate offer some answers which are quite limited and pragmatic.

‘Resolving’ has been described by the Police Aide and the Council President as to either talk down an issue or dispute, or if deemed serious and beyond the control of the Warden(s), to call for the assistance of the Police Aide and/or police to respond to the situation (1993, 75).

The Wardens described success as keeping drunk people out of the community when they were drunk (1993, 86).

So ‘resolving’ does not necessarily mean putting an end to a difference of opinion between community members; such differences may be very deeply embedded in personal and
community histories. ‘Resolving’ may mean no more than limiting or ending a disturbance of the peace, something to be achieved with a show of firmness by a cooperating ensemble of Wardens and police. In this weaker but still meaningful sense, ‘resolving’ probably does not require insight into the ultimate (‘traditional’ cultural) basis of the dispute (though authoritative interventions may be smoothed by conformity to Aboriginal etiquette). It may not matter how much ‘traditional’ knowledge or authority is being applied to ‘resolve’ things in this weaker sense; all that needs to be claimed is that such ‘resolutions’ are of immediate value to those bothered by the disorder.

We are now in a better position to specify what it means to invoke ‘tradition’ in a description of Ngukurr policing. ‘Tradition’ is undoubtedly significant as a term of political rhetoric, pointing to the right of Ngukurr people – as a colonised people with a sense of their continuing independent heritage – to be involved, in various ways, in policing Ngukurr. On the basis of what O’Neill and Bathgate have written, however, I am not convinced that ‘tradition’ specifies either a clear domain of authority or a set of processes or techniques for dealing with matters in that domain. O’Neill and Bathgate’s language becomes vague when they attempt to refer to what ‘white law’ has eclipsed: they mention a withdrawal of traditional authority from ‘these areas’ (unspecified) and from ‘aspects of control’ (1993, 73). In its actual details their account presents a fluid picture in which Wardens and police pragmatically combine to deal with disorder – much of it alcohol-related – as they judge best in the circumstances. In short, the term ‘tradition’ signifies an Aboriginal claim to a right to be involved in policing, but it specifies neither a domain nor a modus operandi once that right is acknowledged.

Indeed, it would not be reasonable to expect ‘tradition’ to be of any greater significance than this because, in some respects at least, ‘tradition’ would appear to be a matter of dispute among Ngukurr residents. O’Neill and Bathgate mention in passing that clans which have come together at Ngukurr cannot agree as to marriage Law (1993, 78). Even more important, their bi-cultural consultant briefed them that Ngukurr people were not of one mind about whether there needed to be any women Wardens
and about the scope of Wardens' work. As well, not all Ngukurr residents agreed to all the by-laws that the Wardens were meant to enforce (1993, 108). O'Neill and Bathgate comment:

In a scheme which is designed to reinforce traditional social structures, these concerns reflect the need for a consultation process which ensures that all members of the community are permitted and encouraged to find an opportunity to voice their opinions on the appropriate operation of the Scheme (1993, 108).

It would be unreasonable to object to this proposal, but it would be unreasonable also to assume that a wider process of consultation would give rise to unanimity on these crucial issues. The content, methods and scope of 'traditional authority' are likely to remain matters of dispute.

Although they did not explicitly interrogate the notion of 'tradition', O'Neill and Bathgate came to conclusions which are consistent with the critique which I have offered. They recommend community policing strategies which do not rely on having to encode 'tradition' in a set of by-laws enforced by Wardens. Instead they advocate what night patrols have done elsewhere in the Northern Territory: negotiating a protocol of cooperative action between local police and the night patrol. No by-laws need be promulgated, and because such protocols are administrative arrangements, with no legislative basis, they can be reviewed by the two parties - local police and local Aboriginal leaders - without reference to the Northern Territory government.

I might also have written 'and without reference to "tradition"', but this would be to go beyond what O'Neill and Bathgate, uncritically reproducing the rhetoric of 'tradition', allow themselves to see. In their account of why night patrols work the notion of a 'traditional' jurisdiction again makes its insistent appearance.

The Council Patrols rely upon the authority derived from consensus in the community, reinforced by the traditional authority of the 'community elders' in matters of traditional disputes ...' (1993, 109, my emphasis)
However, when they attempt to elucidate that differentiation by referring to the ways some Aboriginal people distinguish non-traditional and traditional jurisdictions – ‘big trouble’ and ‘little trouble’ – the distinction comes unstuck in a most interesting way.

Big trouble encompassed problems with direct links to non-Aboriginal domains, such as the use of rifles or the involvement of alcohol. Little trouble referred to areas of ‘family’ business, such as domestic issues. The intersection of this point with the role of the police was not always clear however, and depended on the individual situation. For example in Tennant Creek, the police noted that they were receiving more domestic violence reports as the confidence of the community increased their willingness to report incidents to the police either directly or through the Patrols (1993, 113).

The interaction of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authority in dealing with disputes between men and women generated a process of reporting, referral and ‘resolution’ which the LRC might have called hybrid, neither clearly ‘traditional’ nor non-traditional.
One of the ways in which Northern Territory legislation has recognised an indigenous jurisdiction is the Liquor Act’s provision for ‘Dry [alcohol free] Areas’. However, a reading of the Annual Reports of the Northern Territory Racing, Gaming and Liquor Commission (formerly the Liquor Commission) since 1980/81 shows this agency’s persistent uncertainty, to put it mildly, about the effectiveness of Dry Areas. Peter D’Abbs confirmed this uncase and contributed to our understanding of Dry Areas in his 1987 study Dry Area Control and Aboriginal Communities. D’Abbs inspected statistical indices of alcohol-related disruption and compiled data on acknowledged alcohol consumption; he came to the conclusion that Dry Area declarations afforded some degree of control, but warned that the declaration does not in itself ‘guarantee control over liquor’. For there to be ‘control’, he argued, three other conditions would also have to be present (D’Abbs 1987, 7–8):

[T]he Council and other involved groups must have a coherent strategy for combating alcohol use, rather than a vague wish to be rid of the problems caused by alcohol abuse; the restricted areas must have genuine community support; and relevant organisations, but
particularly the Council and local police, must agree upon clearly defined roles for themselves and others in going about controlling liquor consumption on a day to day basis.

D'Abbs's conclusion should prompt two reflections on the Bushtown case. First, to what extent were these conditions fulfilled at Bushtown? Second, to what processes and outcomes does the term 'control' refer?

AN EMERGING COMMUNITY MANDATE

To take the second question first, it is not a simple matter to define 'control'. To 'control' liquor consumption does not necessarily imply ending liquor consumption. Dry Areas, to be sure, must be 'dry' in the sense that alcohol is not to be consumed within the Dry Area boundary. It is an offence to be in possession of liquor within that boundary. However, it is not inconsistent with such a rule that residents drink just outside the Dry Area boundaries. It can be argued that even if inebriated people then enter the Dry Area, and even if they cause havoc there, some degree of control has nonetheless been exercised. We might judge this to be a minimal and trivial degree of control, a 'control' too weak to avert continuing violence, disorder and health problems. Or we may argue that even a trivial control, over the site of drinkers' inebriation, is of some significance because it implies the potential of a new relationship between drinkers and the community as a whole.

For reasons which I hope will become clear, I choose to think about 'control' in the latter optimistic terms. It is of great significance that Bushtown people used available legislation to differentiate space which was previously undifferentiated; that is, to designate a place where it was no longer acceptable, to the Bushtown community, to consume liquor. That move may have had little immediate impact on most drinkers' behaviour (see Appendix Two), but it does postulate a 'community' interest or mandate. It is thus a step in 'community' development – the elaboration of a framework of 'community' rules.

I have put 'community' in quotation marks because it is unreasonable to assume that co-residing, Aboriginal people
constitute a ‘community’. ‘Community’ is a difficult political achievement not a natural condition or outcome of co-residence.

The emerging elements of a culture of restrained alcohol consumption can be classified into two categories: those in which the primary responsibility for reproducing the restraint lies with agencies outside Bushtown, and those for which Bushtown residents are themselves responsible. Certain restrictions on the local supply of alcohol have been negotiated by the major Aboriginal organisations representing the region which includes Bushtown. The application of these restrictions has encouraged the development of self-regulating measures, the most important of which is the Bushtown Wardens. Before discussing what I was able to find out about the Wardens system, it is useful to convey what I was told about similar efforts in self-regulation before my visits to Bushtown began.

There are three community advisers in my story. CA1 worked at Bushtown in 1990, before my first visit to Bushtown, so I have never met him. CA2 commenced work at the same time as the inception of the Dry Area, December 1990 – January 1991. He was replaced by CA3 in April 1992. I have been told of some of CA1’s policies in 1990 by non-Aboriginal observers. With CA1’s encouragement, three Bushtown men were made Wardens some time in 1990, their main task being to supervise the sale of alcohol at Nearby Roadhouse each afternoon. I was told that these men did not command sufficient respect: two of them were afraid of violence from drunks, and all three of them had put it to the Roadhouse manager that their services should be rewarded with free beer. I was told (by two observers) that it was common for CA1 to pay with beer for some work performed by Bushtowners.

Roadhouse management did not agree that Wardens enjoyed privileged access to beer. With such a lack of unity among key non-Aboriginal actors over how to reward Wardens and how to symbolise their authority, it is not surprising that these three Wardens became dissatisfied. I was told that one of them resigned by taking off his uniform and hurling it at the intransigent Roadhouse manager. This manager resorted to employing a non-Aboriginal bouncer for the rest of 1990. He recalled that year as a bad one; he was often in fear of a violent incident arising from
each day's beer sales, particularly on pay days, when Bushtowners would arrive from other roadhouses (60kms, and more, distant) already under the influence of alcohol. Unlike his predecessor, however, this Manager had not resorted to keeping handy a (well-publicised) rifle as a caution to intractable Bushtowners.

The year 1990 was indeed a bad one for Bushtown. Two of its senior people died as a result of drunken fighting. One was bashed to death; the other, his sister, is said to have died of shock and grief, having been present at the slaying. The man who was bashed to death was said to have been very strong, in both character and physique, a source of 'social control' in himself, an 'enforcer'. Tragic as these deaths were, one may point to their possible long term benefits. The deaths helped to crystallise community resolve to seek the declaration of the Dry Area. And the demise of a strong individual enhanced the possibility that other supra-individual forms of authority might develop.

THE WARDENS

In my October 1991 visit to Bushtown, about half way through the period of my study, I was told that a new group of Wardens had formed. According to CA2, the three salient family groups in Bushtown were 'represented' by at least one of the four Wardens - all young men in their twenties. That is, if all four men were working together, no family group could argue that it was being imposed upon by outsiders and, conversely, individual Wardens did not necessarily have to confront those with whom they were in relationships of avoidance or respect. Three of the four were drinkers, but, in the opinion of the Roadhouse manager, they were self-controlled drinkers not given to violence.

The Wardens had been paid under Bushtown's Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) since the beginning of their duties in the second week of September 1991; indeed, because of their long hours, they were the highest paid CDEP workers in Bushtown. They wore uniforms (with a community monogram on their khaki shirt). The Council was supportive,
bestowing its Toyota Hilux, in poor repair, but functioning, and paying the vehicle’s running costs.

Wardens and others told me that their most important duty was to patrol the Roadhouse while restricted liquor sales were under way, from 5pm to 8pm, with a six cans per person per day limit. Because the Roadhouse manager insisted on the observance of the two kilometre law, all drinkers moved from the Roadhouse to a patch of bush between the Roadhouse and Bushtown community. Some drinkers were even given lifts to this drinking spot by Wardens who had themselves purchased liquor. At the drinking place, the Wardens were on duty, preventing or breaking up fights; the Wardens also told me that they encouraged people to drink moderately. When all cans were exhausted, the Wardens would give people lifts back into Bushtown, a distance of about five kilometres.

It appeared to me that the Dry Area declaration had helped to stimulate the Wardens into life, as it had been necessary to ensure that the drinkers’ camp kept its distance not only from the Roadhouse but also from Bushtown itself. Certainly, the Wardens themselves told me that one of their main tasks was the preservation of that interval of bush between community and drinkers’ camp. However, notwithstanding their success in this, fights still broke out back in Bushtown, partly because one of the Wardens’ ‘services’ to drinkers was to give them lifts back, instead of letting a 3 to 5 kilometre walk have its sobering effects. CA2 told me that hardly a night went by without the Wardens fetching him, and once or twice a week he judged it necessary to phone the police. The Wardens suggested to CA2, after a few such nights, that Bushtown should get its own lock-up. Bushtowners referred to these Wardens as ‘Wardens’ or ‘police’. Their authority derived partly from the status and authority of the non-Aboriginal people backing them up.

Six weeks after the inception of the Wardens, the Council consolidated its initiative by putting forward four new community rules:

1. Anyone who gets drunk at [two liquor outlets within one hour’s drive] can’t come back to Bushtown until they have sobered up.
2. Anyone who buys grog at an outlet other than the [Nearby Roadhouse] will not be permitted to purchase grog at the Roadhouse on that day.

3. If the Bushtown community wishes to punish any resident, it can do so by authorising the Roadhouse to reduce that person’s daily purchasing limit below the standard of six cans per person per day.

4. Beer bartering and sharing is not allowed.

That Bushtown residents were beginning to achieve ‘community’, in respect of elementary rules about alcohol consumption, was evidenced by the early impressions the residents made on CA3. CA3 told me the first time I met him (April 22 1992), shortly after his appointment, that the Bushtown mob were ‘evolving’ their own ‘drinking ethic’ and were proud of it. He said that not only had his predecessor CA2 briefed him about certain Council rules regulating drinking, but so too had Bushtown Council members mentioned them in conversation, without prompting. They wished to minimise discontinuities arising from the succession of one Adviser by another, he inferred.

After this apparently promising beginning, why did the Wardens cease to work shortly after CA3 arrived?

PROBLEMS

When I put this question to Bushtown residents, early in July 1992, I received an intriguing range of answers. Some said that it was merely that the Wardens’ vehicle had been sent away for repairs, repairs which had taken much longer than anticipated. The Wardens would soon start again, these speakers told me, pointing out that there were fresh uniforms in storage in the Council office. Others said that, as well as having a vehicle problem, two of the wardens had got into such trouble themselves that the Council had sacked them. One had been jailed for being drunk at the wheel of a car (not the Wardens’) involved in a fatal accident; another was said to have misused the Wardens’ Toyota so conspicuously that the Council had to sack him. The remaining Wardens had lost interest and had declined
to use their own family vehicles for Wardens' work. In some outspoken variants of the second answer, it was argued that the Wardens had been a failure, both ineffective and abusive of their privilege in having a Council motor car.

The lack of community consensus evident in these remarks provoked me to persist in my interviews and to go back over my earlier data. Eventually I identified four issues which seemed to have emerged from Bushtown's brief experiment with self-policing.

The uncertain extent of the Wardens' mandate

When the Wardens first explained to me their duty to regulate where people drank their daily beer, they also mentioned that they were patrolling at night for petrol-sniffers; when they saw one, they poured out the can. They also took sniffers hunting during the day. CA2 told me that the wardens also rounded up kids for school and gave people lifts to the store. Some of these 'non-grog' activities proved to be controversial.

One forceful member of Bushtown Council, who saw the Wardens as failures, criticised what she saw as their lack of commitment to dealing with petrol sniffers. From the Wardens' perspective, however, regulating sniffers and regulating drinkers were very different problems. Sniffers are known to be irrational, unpredictable and dangerous - best not interfered with. Drunks can also be difficult, but in more familiar and less frightening ways. As well, sniffers were said sometimes to have been fiercely shielded by their families. One Warden told me that when Wardens emptied one sniffer's can, they were confronted by angry relatives demanding: 'Who bin hit that boy?'

The Wardens were not the only ones to be at a loss to know how to deal with sniffers. One senior man, a member of Council who told me that the Wardens had been a failure, told me that no adult knew how to deal with sniffers: sniffers were 'mad', and only luck would determine whether they died or survived. The police also are unsure how to deal with sniffers. Arresting some sniffers for misuse of a vehicle, the local police had 'charged' them with being 'in need of protection'. Superior officers, upon
reviewing this step, instructed local police no longer to use that charge, thus leaving police without a legal instrument to intervene, they explained to me. It may therefore be harsh to judge the Wardens for not knowing how to deal with sniffer.

The Wardens’ mandate was controversial in another way: their willingness to be helpful. Judging from approving comments which I heard, one of the ways that the Wardens made themselves acceptable was to respond to a wide variety of requests for help, such as giving people lifts between the Roadhouse and Bushtown, helping Bushtown residents who were having trouble with cars. Yet it was also possible to see such actions in a negative light, as Wardens driving around freely in the service of kin or friends. It seems to be intrinsically difficult to draw a boundary between proper and improper response to requests for help.

This difficulty is related to another:

**Distinguishing vehicles for communal use from vehicles which are ‘private’**

The Council/‘private’ distinction is commonly made by Aboriginal people of the region, but this is not to say that people agree about the classification of any particular vehicle or any particular instance of a vehicle’s use: frequently they do not. One of the signs of the fragility of ‘community’ mandates is that Bushtowners are quick to assert of another person that he/she is using a ‘Council’ vehicle for ‘private’ purposes. The Wardens told me that this accusation was levelled at them, and what I heard corroborates this. Late in 1991, Bushtown Council decided to devote certain royalty payments to replacing the Wardens’ battered Toyota. The Wardens were told to select something from a Maintown car yard. They surprised CA2 by choosing a vehicle of smaller seating capacity than he would have predicted. The Wardens were looking to their public standing: with few seats, CA2 inferred, the Wardens could give inoffensive reasons for refusing lifts.

If ‘Council’ is a fragile and disputable designation of a vehicle (or of an instance of a vehicle’s use), then would it have been
better for the Wardens to have used private vehicles and to be subsidised by the Council? When the Wardens' vehicle was absent for repairs, the Wardens declined to use their own. It is possible (I did not collect information on this point) that, like the Wardens' uniform, the Council vehicle symbolises the Wardens' authority, their status as bearers of a 'community' mandate, and their position of trust and authority. Wardens in a private vehicle would be open to the accusation that they were simply engaged in the same day to day concerns as other Bushtown residents.

By July 1992, one Warden was in jail because, while he was driving under the influence of alcohol, his car hit another and a woman passenger in that car died. Perhaps the only fortunate aspect of this sad incident was that he was not driving the Wardens' car; he was definitely 'off duty'. In subsequent conversations about the quality of the Wardens' work, I heard little mention of this accident. It is not clear whether it affected people's perceptions of the Wardens as a group.

Motor vehicles are an important part of the grog control story, whether or not there are Wardens, because much grog may be carried in them. Here again the 'Council'/private distinction may be important. The number of vehicles which might be used for carrying grog into Bushtown was significantly expanded in April 1992 when the Bushtown Council purchased eight vehicles from a Council savings account which the recently departed community adviser (CA2) had hoped would be used to purchase a nearby pastoral lease. Because the vehicles were purchased from this common fund, it was possible to regard them as 'Council' vehicles. However, because the vehicles were given or entrusted to eight person/households, it was equally justifiable to see them as 'private' vehicles.

I encountered both views among Bushtown residents in July 1992. CA3 and at least one councillor assured me that the vehicles belonged to the Council, though CA3 acknowledged that this was a loose arrangement with the users. He said that the Council might ban troublesome persons from driving these cars and might impound vehicles not kept in good repair or used for running grog. Council also expected the vehicles to be used in the vicinity of Bushtown, not taken on long trips, he told me. How
this worked out in practice I do not know, as my visits to the community concluded at this point.

Local law enforcement practices would have been a relevant factor in any vehicle control effort. At that time, July 1992, the police told me that the eight vehicles had not yet been re-registered, a matter they hoped soon to clear up. But in whose name would the vehicles be registered? The police explained to me a sentencing tradition among this region's magistrates in the enforcement of the Liquor Act. 'Private' vehicles, once impounded for carrying grog into a Dry Area, are lost to their owners for ever; when the impounded vehicle belongs to a Council, however, it is usually returned to the Council after a while. It would therefore have been in the interests of the Bushtown Council, wishing to make best use of the penalties of the Liquor Act, to register the vehicles in the names of eight 'private' owners. Alternatively, it could be argued that Bushtown residents could and should mandate their Council to be tough in supervision of eight 'Council' vehicles. Authority over vehicles and grog in Bushtown was thus to be formed within a field made up of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal powers: 'family' authority, Council authority and police/magistrate authority. How to register the eight vehicles was an instance of a general problem: how to contrive an alignment of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal powers which makes an enduring and legitimate structure of authority?

Perceived fluctuations in police support

The Wardens, their critics and their supporters all seemed to agree that the patrols and call-out visits of the local police were essential to the Wardens' authority. Indeed, Bushtown folk sometimes referred to the Wardens as 'police'. Those who thought the Wardens had failed told me that there should be a non-Aboriginal policeman based at the nearby Roadhouse and a police aide living at Bushtown itself. The Wardens and their supporters seemed to agree with this suggestion but also saw a continuing role for the Wardens. Some other communities with which Bushtowners have frequent contact have police aides and
lock-ups, supported by police. Viewed in this context, Bushtown seemed to some to be unfairly deprived.

One of the explanations I was offered for the Wardens ceasing to work was that police support was perceived by the Wardens to have declined around April 1992. At that time, the local senior officer had learned that he was soon to transfer to another region; it was common, he told me in July, for police who were about to be posted to modify their performance. He and his colleague had suspended their monthly overnight patrols to Bushtown and, according to Bushtown informants, the police had become less willing to come to Bushtown when called to deal with people infringing the Dry Area – a 'loss of heart' in the eyes of two influential Bushtown informants. The perception that the police were no longer backing the Wardens reduced both the authority and the self-confidence of the Wardens, I was told.

The police strongly approved of the Wardens. On two occasions they had conducted training sessions for them, and the Wardens had accompanied them on four or five monthly overnight patrols. It was difficult for me to know whether the police realised how important such associations were to the credibility of the Wardens among Bushtowners. There were also differences in style of authority to consider. The police told me that they had advised Wardens to refuse drinkers' requests for lifts from the drinking camp to Bushtown. From the Wardens' point of view, as I understood it, this would have been uncompassionate behaviour, arousing resentment.

The final issue which complicated the functioning of the Wardens was

The highly personalised nature of authority at Bushtown

The Wardens were responsible to a Council effectively dominated by a particularly assertive individual, Z, who is a committed opponent of alcohol and petrol use at Bushtown; both were abused by members of Z's family. As well as being a force on Bushtown's Council, Z attended meetings of various regional bodies which have been concerned with, among other matters, petrol and alcohol abuse. Z cited these political activities to me as
proof of commitment to Bushtown’s quality of life, and thus as a foundation of Z’s moral authority. Some Bushtown residents credited Z with both the inception and the liquidation of the Wardens’ scheme.

I gained an appreciation of Z’s views from two interviews. In Z’s view Wardens were frequently in dispute with one another about who was to use the Wardens’ vehicle; Z helped them to resolve such disputes. Z had tried to get Wardens not to drink on the job, and cited the jailing of the Warden involved in the road fatality as proof of the harm that their drinking had caused. Z was among those who saw the Wardens as having been too ready to help their own families while using the Wardens’ vehicle. Wives successfully pressured their Warden husbands, Z told me, adding that while having constant access to a Council vehicle, Z never needed family calls for assistance. Z’s access to a Council vehicle was to enable Z to take petrol sniffers (including Z’s sons) on day trips, to keep them out of trouble. Z believed that the Wardens should have helped and that they had been too scared of the sniffers.

Z’s sense of personal authority seemed to be based on the assumption that the Council would always rally to Z’s support. Z thus had little patience with those who saw that ‘family’ and Council could be in conflict; that problem did not present itself to Z, effective boss of both a family and the Council. Z was convinced, by July 1992, that the Wardens had failed. Only a police presence would work in Bushtown, particularly against petrol sniffing.
Conclusion

In Chapter One, I suggested that remote Aboriginal 'communities' were fragile – but not necessarily insubstantial – social technologies. Their fragility has much to do with the way in which persons think of themselves as belonging to family and to country, rather than to an administratively defined 'community'. To the extent that they are substantial, 'communities' are places where valued physical resources are kept and where people maintain access to money and retail goods. The future political significance of 'communities' is thus an open question. Whether a community can become a bounded jurisdiction (as allowed by Northern Territory 'Dry Area' legislation), which polices its internal and external relations in certain respects, can not be predicted from a knowledge of 'Aboriginal ways'.

That is, the point which emerges from the last two chapters is that 'tradition' should not be understood to determine the operational success or failure of such jurisdictions. Neither Ngukurr's nor Bushtown's policing problems can be accounted for by supposing that there are clearly demarcated spheres and techniques of policing – the traditional and the non-traditional. Nor can solutions take the form of simply prescribing more
'traditional' and less 'non-traditional'. 'Communities' are new assemblages of people and physical implements; to keep order within them requires an open-minded commitment to synthesis and innovation in social technologies. As the Australian Law Reform Commission observed, almost parenthetically, it is not a matter of 'recognising customary law'. It is rather a question of devolving to Aboriginal control the apparatuses of governance, including access to mainstream police, which history has left in their hands.
Aboriginal customary Law is hard work, Marcia Langton tells us. She supports the continuation of that hard work, but respects the right of people to opt out of it. So too did the Law Reform Commission when it suggested that whatever the virtues of Yirrkala’s proposed indigenous law and order scheme, it should include ‘an opting out provision (involving choice of trial in the magistrate’s court), or a right of appeal’ (LRC 1986, vol 2, 87). To advocate the recognition of Aboriginal customary does not entail accepting the confinement of individual indigenous Australians to the versions of ‘tradition’ which have become authoritative in their community.

It may be that the consumption of alcohol is one of the ways in which some Aboriginal people ‘opt out’, temporarily at least, from their Law. In her review of ethnographies of Aboriginal drinking Brady (1992a, 705–6) cites evidence that Aboriginal people recognise inebriation as a state of disinhibition from normal codes of conduct with Whites, but also with other Aborigines – a condition in which an individual’s autonomy is temporarily assured by their status as ‘drunk’. That is, alcohol may be ‘enabling’ in sociological and not only pharmacological terms. In
Sackett's view, inebriation works this way in Aboriginal peoples' relationships with White authority, not only in their relations with indigenous traditions of social control. 'Drinkers wield drunkenness to signal to others, both Black and White, they neither accept nor intend living in accordance with any form of hegemony' (Sackett 1988, 75).

No doubt there are Aboriginal people who fiercely resist certain instances of such enabling, such as those women and men to whom Langton refers, who without compunction insist that the police (perhaps assisted by Wardens or night patrol) curtail inebriated people whose 'actual drunken or otherwise motivated lawless' (Langton 1992, 222) they find threatening. On the other hand, it may be that from the point of view of some adherents to the Law, these calls to the police undermine traditional modes of authority.

The relationship between Aboriginal customary Law and drinking may be more complicated than the conventional wisdom enunciated by the Australian Law Reform Commission (1986, vol 1, 91).

There are, undoubtedly, factors which are tending to undermine Aboriginal customary laws and traditions, such as the availability of alcohol, and the influence of the mass media.

Without fully rejecting this proposition, I would make five cautionary comments on it:

First, it would be more in keeping with the Law Reform Commission's usual way of thinking about Aboriginal customary Law, as a tradition subject to historical variation, if the word 'undermine' were accompanied (or even replaced) by the word 'change'.

Second, Sackett (1977) suggests that if we think of the spatial distribution of alcohol consumption, rather than focus on alcohol use in one place, then the relationship of liquor to Law may be variable. Referring to the 1970s, he argued that the Law (by which he means rules of sexual partnering, customs of reciprocity and the regular practice of rituals regarded as essential) was both undermined and reinforced by liquor at Wiluna. On the one hand, liquor disinhibited people sexually, turned some people
APPENDIX ONE: LIQUOR AND LAW

into cashless mendicants who humbugged non-drinkers, preoccupied men's time and disrupted ritual schedules. Among western desert people, there were no 'rules governing use (and misuse) of liquor' (1977, 96). On the other hand, Wiluna was the only western desert town where rituals persisted in the context of liquor's easy availability. Men were attracted to Wiluna both by ritual and by the chance to drink. This provided regional reinforcement of both practices; that is, both liquor and Law (in the sense of ceremonies) flourished at Wiluna. This limited the damage which liquor was doing to ritual practice in the region. Were Wiluna to lose this unique place within the region's ecology of ritual and drinking, Sackett predicted, alcohol would probably triumph over Law at Wiluna (and at other places where drink is available).

Third, in explaining the appeal of alcohol and of the mass media to Aboriginal people, would it be entirely irrelevant or inappropriate to consider – as only part of the explanation – the rigor, restraints and demands of Aboriginal Law itself?

Fourth, if we were to grant that 'Aboriginal customary laws and traditions' are being undermined (and not just changed), is it not possible that 'alcohol' and 'the mass media' function to some extent as scapegoats, or at least as misleading specifications of a far more complex process of change in Aboriginal culture? This point has, in turn, two aspects. If alcohol is said to be undermining Law by stimulating violent crime which in turn helps to undermine traditional authority and social cohesion, then are we certain of the link between alcohol and violent crime? The Alcohol and Drug Foundation, Australia (ADFA) has issued the following caution:

The nature of the association [between alcohol and violent crime] is frequently unclear, causal inferences should not be drawn from associations without strong supporting evidence. In particular, it is not possible to evaluate the relationship between alcohol use and violent crime without knowledge of violent crime which is not alcohol-related and about alcohol use which is not associated with violent crime (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1991, vol 2, 308).
And finally, it is not a simple matter to point to any one factor promoting change in the adherence of Aborigines to whatever is represented as their traditions. Materials presented in Chapters Three, Four and Five point to adults' contemporary difficulties in persuading young people of the necessity of certain features of customary Law when other attractive ways of living are on view and available.

If the relationships between alcohol use by Aboriginal people and the reproduction of their culture as Law are so complex and speculative, then perhaps it is better to turn to more familiar arguments for being concerned about the Aboriginal abuse of alcohol: that it contributes to morbidity and mortality, and adversely affects the quality of life, not only of abusers, but of those around them. Exactly the same problems accompany non-Aborigines' abuse of alcohol.
Appendix Two

Searching for social indicators

I collected data in Bushtown over a period of forty-four fortights (from October 1990 to June 1992) on two easily quantified indices of alcohol's adverse impact on health and social order: alcohol-related arrests and the proportion of clinic presentations which were deemed to be alcohol-related.

POLICE APPREHENSIONS

Figure One summarises the police data. I asked police to give me fortnightly returns recording Protective Custody Apprehensions (PCAs) under S.128 (of the Liquor Act) and arrests for 'offences thought to be alcohol-related'. I asked them also to restrict their attention, in their reports to me, to 'Bushtown residents' but added: 'I would appreciate it if you would interpret "resident" pretty broadly – in the sense of "most of the time, recently resident" – to allow for the semi-nomadic nature of the people whose brushes with the law are of interest to my study.' The police were asked to differentiate male from female. Over the period of the study, 83 reported apprehensions and arrests were of men, and 40 were of women.
Figure 1  Number of police apprehensions over 44 fortnights
It is immediately evident that Figure One shows no trend. The declaration of the 'Dry Area' (which I take to commence with the erection of signs at the Bushtown boundary in Fortnight Eight, first week of January 1991) did not evidently affect the very episodic pattern of contacts between Bushtown residents and police. I thought at first that this episodic pattern could, logically, be traced to two factors: variations in the behaviour of Bushtown folk, or variations in the intensity of police surveillance.

If the objective of the 'Dry Area' declaration were to reduce the rate at which Bushtown 'residents' were apprehended by the local police, then we would have to judge the 'Dry Area' a failure, up to June 1992.

**CLINIC PRESENTATIONS**

Trends in alcohol related presentations to the clinic are graphed in Figure Two.

Two nursing sisters, JW and KM, alternated as sole sister during the period of the study. JW worked from fortnights 1 to 12 and 18 to 31; KM, from fortnights 12 to 18 and 31 to 45. I am satisfied that there were no significant differences between the two sisters in their criteria for classifying a presentation as 'alcohol-related'. Both took this to mean injuries sustained through fighting or through falls; and both assured me that they were never left in doubt, by the presenting patient and by those accompanying his or her presentation, whether alcohol use contributed to the injury sustained. The pattern of rises and falls in Figure Two does not seem to correspond with the three transitions from one sister's records to another's (fortnights 12, 18 and 31).

Some colleagues made the point, early in the project, that injuries from fights and falls were not the only health problems occasioned by the abuse of alcohol; they recommended that I try to include data on infants' 'failure to thrive' or clinic presentations of children under a certain age. I discussed this suggestion with KM (May 11 1991). She told me she could see no value in including such data, and I did not wish to press the issue as I was uncertain as to their significance. Whereas alcohol-related injury presentations can be taken as an immediate register of both
Figure 2  Alcohol-related presentations as a percentage of all clinic presentations over 44 fortnights.
alcohol abuse and community harm, failure to thrive and other possible infantile presentations are conceivably related to a complex of factors of which alcohol abuse is only one.

As in 'police apprehensions', no trend can be discerned in the data in Figure Two. The incidence of alcohol-related presentations is episodic, up and down without apparent pattern. There may be a seasonal pattern in the amplitude of these ups and downs. The periods in which the two outstanding 'peaks' occur (fortnights 8–14 and 31–37) are December 1990 to March 1991 and November 1991 to February 1992 — the two hot seasons within my period of observation. In hot times, people may be expected to drink more avidly; to the extent that they tend to be in a more dehydrated state, the alcohol will be more quickly metabolised. These are also the months in which Bushtowners, men in particular, are mobile for the purposes of 'man-making' ceremonies in which there is an ideological emphasis on male solidarity and on young males showing themselves to be maturing into independent, free-spirited men. It is therefore possible that hot times are particularly conducive to alcohol abuse and to free and even 'wild' behaviour by men. However, it would take observations over several years to confirm what can be no more than an impression of a seasonal pattern.

Whatever the difficulties of interpreting these two graphs, three points can be made with confidence.

First, it would seem that the 'Dry Area' declaration reduced neither the frequency nor the seriousness of the occasions of police apprehensions and violence attributable to alcohol abuse.

Second, my data show that women presented to the clinic in greater numbers than men. Over the period of the study, women's alcohol-related presentations were 75 per cent of all alcohol-related presentations (292 out of 388). There are two possible explanations for this (excluding an unbalanced population): women's greater propensity to present to the clinic, and women's greater likelihood of being injured in drunken violence. I think the emphasis should be on the latter explanation, for two reasons: other research (Bolger 1990, Atkinson 1991) indicates that women are disproportionately the victims of intra-Aboriginal violence; and other data in this study (the greater
tendency for men to be apprehended by police) suggest that men are more likely to be adversely affected by liquor. (I do not have data to tell me whether more men than women drink, nor whether men consume more than women, per head.)

Third, there is a reassuring consistency among these two (police and clinic) indices: they tend to share peaks. Two apparently independent indicators seem to converge in attesting that certain fortnights were made ‘busy’ by alcohol abuse. Such convergence in measures strengthens one’s belief in their validity.

But what do these two indices measure? What kinds of events are being counted here? Having got to know something of the Wardens’ work, I suggest that the events whose frequency is plotted on these graphs are more complex than they may at first seem. What is being measured is not only some effects of alcohol use, but also the increased responsiveness of both the clinic and the police to such effects. Such increases in clinic and police responsiveness can be attributed, at least in part, to the Wardens, whose work began around fortnight 26. Both the police ‘measure’ and the clinic ‘measure’ have in common the mediating actions of Wardens. Not only did the Wardens alert the community adviser (sometimes) to call the police, and not only did the police support the Wardens, but also the Wardens escorted people injured in fights to the clinic. They assisted the clinic sister by making sure that fights did not continue at the clinic. It is quite possible that the social indicators I chose to approximate the harmful use of alcohol at Bushtown also registered the diligence of the Wardens.
PART SIX

Conclusion
Traditions and health transitions

In my Preface and my Introduction I attempted to draw some connections between the topics public health, Aboriginal self-determination and government. If one of the strongest stimuli of the formation of modern government since the early nineteenth century has been the consideration of the health of whole populations, then it might be fruitful to think about problems of Aboriginal health as problems of governance. I meant this in a much wider sense than arguing that governments have some responsibility for the health of indigenous Australians. Beyond that indisputable proposition, I have suggested that the efforts to improve Aboriginal health have been activating new modes of governance among Aboriginal people themselves.

I do not draw a sharp distinction between indigenous ‘self-determination’ and what the Australian state (at national, State/Territory and municipal levels) is doing. Rather, I see indigenous self-determination as an experiment in new modes of government in which indigenous Australians and their organisations aspire to, and are given by governments, new roles within the reproduction of the social order of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I am not implying that ‘self-
determination' in this sense is a 'sell-out' or the subsuming of indigenous leaders into a more sophisticated colonial strategy. To make such a critique I would have to have put forward a conception of the 'true' interests of indigenous Australians, against which such 'subsumed' modes of political action could be compared unfavourably. I have no such idea of an alternative, better trajectory of indigenous political development (and I do not think that the notion of indigenous 'sovereignty' has yet been developed into such a political vision: it serves rather as a point of moral reference in some political debates).

If I have a critical interest in 'self-determination', it is not from the standpoint of an ideal path of indigenous political development. Rather, my critical interest is characterised by my concern about the ways in which the political 'selves' of 'self-determination' are conceived. In this book I have argued that insofar as governments develop policies of indigenous self-determination, they postulate three crucial notions of 'self': communities, households/family units and individuals. My studies in central Australia (with occasional reference to regions like it and near it) have demonstrated that when governments and Aboriginal people combine to address pathogenic problems of social order they are likely to postulate that Aboriginal people will act strategically and rationally as communities, as families and as individuals.

These suppositions of 'self' are made not only in respect of indigenous Australians. Foucault's notion of 'governmentality' can be understood as a working model of all modern government in which people are not merely objects of rule, but are constituted as subjects who enact modes of ruling. 'Government' is a process of more or less prescriptive enablement in which many 'non-government' agencies play important parts. Non-indigenous Australians live in social formations which include households and municipalities. I would add 'individuals', because an individual who knows how to 'look after' him or herself is as much a formation of social training as is a household which pays its bills and a municipality which deals with refuse and strife. The rise of healthy populations since the industrial revolution can be conceived, in part, as the acquisition of cultural orientations and
social forms through which people govern themselves hygienically and safely. Something like that social training is now on the agenda for the Aboriginal people of central Australia.

To what extent do the implied or explicit models of 'self', in current programs of indigenous self-determination, pose a challenge to indigenous cultural autonomy? To what extent are Aboriginal people being forced into acting as if they were a series of 'communities', made up of 'households' of nuclear families, and persons highly autonomous in their individual decisions about consumption? Unless we are to slip back into an ethics of 'assimilation', in which indigenous cultural autonomy is discounted as nothing more than a worrying resistance to living in a better (white) way, then these questions must be posed and taken seriously. However, I am very suspicious of any confident answers to them. I have maintained the view throughout this book that Aboriginal people are engaging in experiment with new social forms, and that the forms and guarantees of their future 'cultural autonomy' cannot be anticipated.

One reason for this is that many of their health problems are without precedent. For example, the management of diabetes seems to highlight the problem of the individual and the problem of the 'household'. Conventional clinical management of non-insulin dependent diabetes mellitus (NIDDM) - a highly prevalent disorder among Aboriginal people and a risk factor for kidney failure, cardiovascular disease and blindness - features a reconstruction of the patient's willingness and ability to monitor closely his/her body. In particular, prescribed adherence to a changed diet implies a reformation of arrangements within 'households' or hearth groups, and individuals are impelled to new kinds of self-awareness through being asked for regular readings of certain biophysical indicators. The massive prevalence of NIDDM among Aboriginal people of central and northern Australia is thus a stimulus to the production (or attempted instigation by health workers) of unprecedented senses and techniques of individuality and domestic order among Aboriginal people.

In a Canadian Indian context, Linda Garro has pointed out that health education about NIDDM must overcome a perception that
diabetes can be ascribed to colonialism and to the changes which have flowed from it. Though consistent with the known facts, this explanatory framework induces a sense of resignation, by individuals, in the face of unalterable history. Garro commends a health education project which draws on folk tales in order to develop another narrative of the coming of NTIDDM. She believes that this new narrative leaves space for individual action: 'the individual increasing self control over his or her life' (Garro 1995, 45). Her commendable suggestion lacks a consideration of the techniques and practices of 'self-control'. Health education is the promotion not only of new awareness and motivation but also of new techniques - assemblages of technology and behaviour at the individual, household and communal levels. A medical anthropology which gives emphasis to questions of meaning, to the neglect of issues of social technology, will not do justice to the problems of experimental adaptation which indigenous people have no choice but to confront.

One of the implications of the framework which I have put forward in this book is that there is reason to be cautious in linking the issue of Aboriginal health with the issue of Aboriginal self-determination. 'Self-determination' - as a slogan and policy heading - succeeded 'assimilation', and this gives rise to a tendency to assume that the two ideals are morally antithetical. That is, any development which can be characterised as harking back to 'assimilation' is likely to be seen as a betrayal of 'self-determination'. I am wary of such reasoning. It was through the period of 'assimilation' that central Australian Aboriginal people acquired many of the modes by which they now seek to be self-determining: collections of physical infrastructure, motor-cars, houses, welfare benefits. Because the three modalities of 'self' on which I have focused are fragile products of that history, it is very difficult to distinguish what, in their continued use, is 'harking back to assimilation' and what is striking out boldly and confidently towards the horizon of self-determination. Aboriginal people are engaged in a process of 'modernisation' which will imply some degree of convergence between their ways of life and those of the colonisers. While some of the specific practices of 'assimilation' are no doubt worthy of criticism, the term
‘assimilationist’ has never developed (and, in my view, never could develop) into a clear critical concept, nor into a clarifier of ‘post-colonial’ moral choices.

If ‘self-determination’, in the sense that I have considered it, is better understood as a theoretical framework for comprehending the modernisation of remote Aboriginal people, then how does it compare with the other major theory of modernisation in health studies – the ‘health transition’ framework?

A recent conference ‘Aboriginal Health: Social and Cultural Transitions’ (Darwin, 28–30 September, 1995) attempted to link the discussion of Aboriginal health with the international research program on ‘health transition’. According to two of the leading proponents of the health transition approach, John and Pat Caldwell, ‘one of the most certain conclusions in the social sciences’ was a positive correlation between parental education and reduced rates of child mortality, with mother’s education having the greater influence.

The Caldwells left no doubt that certain kinds of modernisation have been preconditions of falling infant mortality. Historically, three things have happened where there has been a health transition (measured in terms of infant mortality): ‘family priorities have shifted toward children’; ‘the prevention and postponement of death became increasingly the overriding social aim, distinguished from other competing ends’; and ‘individuals felt ever greater personal responsibility for taking action when action was needed’. ‘All these changes were assisted by the increasing ability of medical science to make an effective contribution, but they were also promoted by the secularisation of society, increased education levels, and the nuclearisation of the family.’ The key ‘individual’ is the mother – the link between the child’s need and the health services which might address that need. ‘Child survival is greatest when mothers have the greatest ability to take quick curative action on their own responsibility and when they are surest of their own judgment in what to do within the home. They can usually take quick action only if treatment is free and cheap’ (Caldwell and Caldwell 1995).

It is a matter of public policy whether Aboriginal people have available to them high quality health care which is free or
affordable on low incomes. It is not so clearly a matter of public policy whether Aboriginal women belong to ‘homes’ from which, functioning with a high degree of autonomy, they access a health care system in which they strongly believe. The modes of maternal action projected by the health transition researchers give rise to issues in which ‘public policy’, that is, the extent and nature of health services, is entangled with some of the more imponderable historical changes in ‘Aboriginal culture’ – the functions, size and internal dynamics of domestic groups, the divisions of responsibility between men and women, and among the women relatives of a child.

In another paper (not necessarily referring to the Australian Aboriginal context), John Caldwell has accepted that the design and delivery of health services will be enhanced by a willingness to intervene culturally in the ‘sexual politics’ of the serviced population.

If the position of women cannot be changed by exhortation or by modifying religion, then it may be changed by allocating more resources to the education of girls and the employment of women. If society cannot be radicalized, then community health services may be made to work by institutionalizing community control with some kind of guaranteed representation of all sectors of the community in the control mechanism. If the society is too inegalitarian or has too great a social gulf between the illiterate and the educated for doctors spontaneously to provide each with equal attention, then this may be achieved by changes in the atmosphere in which doctors are educated or by new types of in-service training or even by an inspectional system. If mortality-prone households are ones characterized by an unusually rigid patriarchal structure, then women and children may have to be given more decision-making power through the strength provided by female household health visitors with strong backing from the government and strong connections with the community health system. The situation might further be facilitated if these visitors also include family planning in their mandate. If women have access to too little money to pay for treatment, especially where there are divided budgets, then the health administration may have to introduce some kind of accounts system on the bill-now-pay-later principle with community organizations responsible for collecting payment from the husband (Caldwell 1993, 133).
Notwithstanding the weight of evidence pointing to the importance of 'a re-alignment of women's relationship within the family - with their husbands, their husbands' kin, and probably even with their children', the Caldwell's colleague, Gigi Santow, has cautioned against targeting women. She worries that perhaps 'the burdensome roles imposed by traditional society on its women have simply been re-imposed on them by researchers and policy makers.' She argues that interventions may be in jeopardy if they do not seek to win male support. She favours recruiting male interest in matters which 'are more usually viewed as the natural preserve of women' (Santow 1995, 158).

Whatever the variations in practical emphasis recommended by 'health transition' researchers, their commitment to promoting social change, especially in the culturally sensitive area of intra-familial relationships, is clear. In central Australia, that commitment is consistent with a post-colonial ethics only if Aboriginal people themselves are persuaded of the merit of such interventionist programs. To the extent that some, but not all, are so persuaded, the mandate to give priority to better health could promote social divisions - of gender and age, of 'education' and 'caste' - which are already to be found among Aboriginal people.

'Better health' is a modernising ferment, a political adventure.

The notions of modernisation which I have argued to be implicit in self-determination are therefore consistent with those derived by the 'health transition' studies. However, my ideas differ from theirs in at least two important respects.

First, the health transition studies have focused on child mortality as a comparative index of populations' health status. I am conscious of having dealt in this book with a different and rather narrow set of health problems which came before me in my work at the Menzies School of Health Research: petrol sniffing and alcohol abuse (and their associated toll of death and injury) and sexually transmitted diseases (I thought of calling the book 'Sex, Drugs and Aboriginal Control'). Whereas the health transition work is about what families (and mothers in particular) do about seeking solutions to the perceived health problems of their children, my work has been about how forms of governance - self, familial and communal - may be arising, or not arising. It
may be that my framework – seeing self-determination as a project of modernisation – will prove to be a framework for understanding a greater range of health problems confronting Aboriginal people, especially the increasingly prominent non-communicable diseases of adulthood.

Second, the health transition studies, at least in the more summary papers I have quoted, tend to employ a generalised model of ‘traditional society’. Nothing in the health transition writing of which I am aware has addressed the process by which a nomadic and dispersed people tends toward a more centralised and more sedentary way of life. The adoption of houses, motor cars and ‘communities’ is a social change of enormous importance for central Australian Aboriginal people. It has given rise to the problem of new social formations – the household, the community – whose solidity tends to be presupposed in social policies. Although the health transition studies have raised issues of household form, they have not had to tackle the question of the very pertinence of ‘household’ as a category of social planning and as a form of social life. Their concern with female/maternal autonomy, while probably appropriate to studies and policies of Aboriginal health, has to be considered in the context of the basic questions of social form which arise when a nomadic people adapts technology from a more centralised and sedentary society – the household, the community.

To the extent that these new forms remain comparatively weak, we could understand that weakness as the persistence of some of the other, older social forms of the ‘Aboriginal domain’. The Aboriginal domain is not to be understood as something residual, left over as the unfinished business of modernisation. Rather, the Aboriginal domain is the outcome of a number of strategies of cultural maintenance, some of them supported by contemporary government policies. Land rights, and the encouragement of land claims asserted as continuing people/country connections; respecting Aboriginal ideologies of kinship obligation; respecting Aboriginal ceremonial secrecy and senses of the sacred; allowing for ‘customary law’ in law enforcement and sentencing; the maintenance of traditional languages; and the observation of Aboriginal mortuary etiquettes – these are contemporary
strategies of cultural maintenance. It is not possible to foresee all the ways in which a struggle for cultural difference, via these strategies, may have an impact on the way Aboriginal people come to use and to value their community infrastructure, their housing, their cash, and other introduced technologies. The trade-offs for health between maintaining older cultural forms and embracing new social forms will be too numerous and too particular to be subject to any easy formula. Just as it was naive to believe that land rights is essential to improved Aboriginal health, so it would be equally dogmatic to make 'better health' a new mandate for assimilation. Rather, we should respect Aboriginal efforts to maintain the cultural dualities which are deeply structured into their colonial situation (Rowse 1992). Though the boundaries between the Aboriginal and the 'whitefella' domain may shift, the effort to reproduce that boundary, somewhere, is an understandable response to the colonised condition.
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*Traditions for Health* is based on a number of case studies, written while Tim Rowse was employed by the Menzies School of Health Research in Alice Springs. In each case – petrol-sniffing prevention, the policing of remote communities, the treatment of alcoholics and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases – the difficulties of asserting the relevance and meaning of Aboriginal tradition are apparent.

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In its introductory and concluding chapters, *Traditions for Health* draws on the work of Foucault (governmentality), on anthropological studies of ‘tradition’ and on the ‘health transition’ research program in order to suggest that the challenge of Aboriginal health is also the challenge of modernity.

Tim Rowse is currently an ARC Research Fellow in the Department of Government and Public Administration at the University of Sydney. He is working on a biography of HC (Nugget) Coombs. He is the author of numerous publications including *Remote Possibilities* (North Australia Research Unit ANU 1992) and *After Mabo* (Melbourne University Press 1993).