locating ethnographic practice: romance, reality, and politics in the outback

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“first contact”

In early October of 1984, the banner headlines of the Melbourne Herald rang out “WE FIND LOST TRIBE.” This was the first public revelation of the entry into contact with Euro-Australian civilization of yet another remnant group of hunting and gathering Aboriginal people in Australia’s Western Desert. (There were nine people: two older women and their children, comprising two young men, a young woman, two adolescent boys, two adolescent girls.) With the publication, as well, a protracted struggle began among several categories of social actors to determine the meaning of this event and thereby define relevant courses of action. The meaning of the contact event and its consequences were interpreted differently by local Aborigines themselves, by the “new people,” the press, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Aboriginal agencies, and sympathetic whites—in terms of their own motivations and their favored conventions (romantic, scientific, medical) for representing the Aborigine. Ultimately, the Aboriginal claim to “own” the event as non-news prevailed, to some extent through their deployment of anthropological representation via “experts” (my co-researcher, Bette Clark, and me) who could mediate between them and the nation-state. In certain respects, the terms of this struggle took an ironic turn, if one considers the usual opposition of Western history to other people’s “myth”: this time, Aboriginal history opposed the mythical Australian appropriation of “first contact.”

As anthropologists, Bette Clark and I found ourselves playing a complicated role in this struggle that involved the problem of ethnographic representation in provocative ways. This paper is an exploration, then, of the theoretical and practical significance of a kind of ethnographic work, an interpretive practice, that I will call applied hermeneutics. Much has been made lately of the problems of representation as a signifying practice, but few have considered the practice of signifying in a concrete context.

practice, theory, and “representation”

The problem of “representation” is central to much of the current debate in anthropology as it is in history and in the arts. Scholars within (and between) all of these fields have been de-

This paper explores the contest over the meaning of the appearance of previously uncontacted Pintupi Aborigines in late 1984, arguing that an important site of Pintupi social action is transaction with the outside and their struggle to define their own framework of understanding. The event was interpreted by varying “audiences” in terms of their differing motivations and favored conventions for representing the Aborigine. I analyze my role as ethnographer, scientist, advocate, and academic and the use of ethnographic knowledge in mediating these competing discourses. [Australian Aborigines, interpretation, politics]
veloping critiques of representation that emphasize, varying, that accounts are "constructed" (or fashioned) according to discernible literary and visual conventions and devices, that they are situated in particular historical and social contexts, and that the accounts should be questioned as elements of discourses that purport to "know" but can be seen as legitimating relations of power, hegemony, and subordination. Collectively, such treatments have drawn attention to representation as a practice, a social practice of signification.

Underlying all the critiques (poststructuralist deconstruction, Foucaultian discourse analysis, and so on), which are sometimes referred to as "postmodern," is what Eagleton (1983) has called succinctly a challenge to the realist or representational sign, that is, the sign as "a translucent window on to the object," "quite neutral and colourless in itself" of which the "only job is to represent something else, become the vehicle of a meaning conceived quite independently of itself" (Eagleton 1983:136). The problem with this view of the "sign as 'reflection,' 'expression' or 'representation'" is "that it denies the productive character of language" (1983:136).

This is partly what Wagner (1980) meant by the "invention of culture," but in focusing on how language produces or constitutes the reality it depicts, critics have identified a variety of problems with ethnographic writings. One is that ethnographies may construct authoritative representations of others in a realist mold that misconstrues the world it purports to represent—in the sense of plurality of voices within that social world (Clifford 1983, 1986), in the sense of suppressing or ignoring the larger conditions that underlie the relationship between observer and observed (Asad 1986; Dwyer 1977; Said 1978), or in the sense of misconceiving the ontological status of the facts offered as representing some "system" beyond the events and processes in which the "facts" are intrinsically situated (Geertz 1973).

By calling attention to how the ethnographer, like the native, constructs reality, postmodern criticism seems to call ethnographic reality into question. For some, the rhetorical self-awareness about the making of anthropological discourse has tended to a rather Nietzschean skepticism about empirical knowledge as something determined entirely by the conventions and the project of the "knower." There are, however, other voices in the postmodern camp that can help formulate contemporary ethnographic practice in ways that are more accurate and engaged with the world.

The problem may not be with the attempt to describe, but with descriptions that efface their own status as signs and foster the illusion of perceiving reality without intervention. Of course, one solution to this difficulty, proposed early on within the Russian Formalist tradition, has been what Barthes called a "double" sign, a sign that calls attention to its own nature as a sign—to the construction as a construction. Another solution is implied in ethnographic practices of comparison, through which anthropologists learn to look through the sign—the textual representation—and the historically specific disciplinary questions to which it responded, toward a "reality" beyond the words, which remains the goal of understanding. These interpretive practices have been little discussed, as far as I know, but they suggest that an awareness of textual construction has an important place in ethnographic work.

Much of the recent reaction by anthropologists to the postmodern critiques by Boon (1982), Clifford and Marcus (1986) and by Marcus and Fischer (1986) has been based on the idea that this critique dismisses the reality of ethnography's project altogether (cf. Ghani 1987:346). I think this reaction is a misreading and a conflation of two trends in postmodern criticism—one which may indeed be nihilistic while the other may encourage anthropology to focus anew on more ethnographically productive sites.

For the purposes of simplicity, one can characterize the conflated critical positions as those of Clifford (1986), on the one hand, and Marcus and Fischer (1986), on the other. Clifford seems to stress ethnography as a genre of writing with specific conventions (especially the convention of "realism") and he is interested in ethnographic texts as they speak to each other and to other genres. Marcus and Fischer, if I read them rightly, are concerned with how changing conven-
tions of representation have broader political and social implications, how they might be used to come to terms with the anthropological problem of representing an altered, modern social reality.

For many practicing anthropologists, the literariness of rhetorical self-awareness gives it a rather self-absorbed, intellectualist, elitist, or apolitical quality removed from the nitty-gritty of social life. It can be, on the contrary, quite sensitive to relations of power, conflict, and implicit judgments. The questions raised may be appropriate to an anthropology that is less centralized, that has many masters—or many different sorts of audience. Marcus and Fischer write that:

> interpretive approaches can only remain relevant to wider readerships and can only be a convincing response to the perception of compelling global homogenization of cultural diversity if they can come to terms with the penetrations of large-scale political and economic systems that have affected, and even shaped, the cultures of ethnographic subjects almost anywhere in the world [1986:44].

So-called postmodern anthropology is, in such ways, asking questions similar to those generated increasingly by work under local auspices, that is, of a decentered and less Eurocentric anthropology.

In what follows, I argue in favor of this latter position as more positive and generative of these considerations of postmodern thought for contemporary anthropology. I use the case of my experience as anthropological consultant during the unexpected appearance of nine previously uncontacted Western Desert Australian Aboriginal people in late 1984 to illustrate my claim. The problem is how to represent polyvocality, not merely in subsequent analysis, but “on the ground” as a participant in varying discourses, multiply motivated by often clashing political and personal goals. I suggest that in the changing circumstances of anthropological praxis common to recent ethnographers, representation should be viewed as a contested process that is of central concern to the conditions in which most of the people we study now live.

**the context**

It is relevant that the Aboriginal people who are partly the subjects of this paper, Western Desert people who speak a dialect often referred to as Pintupi, were until the middle of this century hunter-gatherers. From the 1930s until the mid-1960s, these people had been leaving the desert and an autonomous foraging life (in which they lived in small groups of 20–25 people) for stays and finally sedentary residence on government settlements and mission stations (cf. Gould 1969; Myers 1986a; Tonkinson 1978). The reasons for this dislocation are complex and, at certain levels disputed (see Myers 1986a; Nathan and Japangkala 1983), but the expansion of Euro-Australian settlement is ultimately the reason.

The concrete context is not one of itinerant Westerners and an abstracted “Other.” In November of 1984, Bette Clark and I went to Kintore and Kiwirrura at the request of these two Pintupi communities. We carried with us a personal familiarity with the people, detailed previous ethnographic knowledge, and also the credentials as “social scientists” that we had accumulated through the years of our association with the Pintupi. In this situation, postmodern enough for any surrealist, representation itself—“reality”—was a central issue. Here, it was clear, if anthropologists do not construct representations, others (journalists, government officials, or white gatekeepers to Aboriginal communities) have an interest in providing representations of their own. Far from being alone, the anthropologist’s account competes not merely with other versions but also with other discourses. The empirical foundation of his or her knowledge, under these circumstances, may be of critical value. At the same time, I suggest, the practical circumstances of engagement (in this case, the context of “self-determination”) have an important interpretive value because they lead us to see new problems, new issues, in the data.

In these terms, moreover, an anthropologist’s accountability (to one’s subjects? to Truth?) for his or her representations is a directly related problem, because the struggle over the interpre-
tation of this event was itself a form of social action, possibly even a characteristic one in the lives of many encompassed communities. An important site of Pintupi social action now—in the production and reproduction of their identity—is their transaction with the outside and their struggle to define their own framework of understanding. One could take the discoveries of the meaning of Aboriginal action as revealed in current events and see them as a continuity of interpreting meaning that stretches from past to present, but that would fail to recognize how these interpretations are now meaningful in the different, political context into which the anthropologist is likely to be drawn.

the case and the actors

The first we heard that nine Western Desert Aboriginal without previous experience of Euro-Australian society had been contacted was a radiotelephone call to me in New York City from a schoolteacher friend at the Aboriginal settlement of Papunya, where the Pintupi had once lived. At that point, the discovery was still secret, not yet revealed in the press. Subsequently, I received a call from the Central Land Council (an Aboriginal organization based in Alice Springs). They asked me to act as consultant for the Joint Working Party of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Land Council to determine the identity and condition of the new people, their reasons for making contact, their aspirations, the expectations of the other Pintupi, and so on. There was tenuous cooperation and suspicion between these organizations, who represented different interests, and I was hesitant (as an outside American anthropologist) to enter such a conflict. But I was also very interested to find out what had happened, and I agreed when it became clear that the Pintupi themselves wanted me to come. It was decided that I would come with Bette Clark, who was then my wife and who had been working with Pintupi women as an anthropologist.

My fieldwork with Western Desert Aborigines began with dissertation research in 1973–75, at a small community (Yayayi) that had separated itself from the large government settlement for Aborigines at Papunya, Northern Territory. These Western Desert people had been the subject of curiosity in the popular press in the 1950s, after Donald Thomson’s expedition to “Shangri-la” (Lapilapi), where he camped for a few months with people who were Pintupi and still leading a hunting and gathering life (see Thomson 1975). In the early 1960s, there was much popular interest in the reports of patrol officers of the Welfare Branch (see Lockwood 1964; Long 1964a, 1964b) who were encountering the “last” traditional hunter-gatherers coming into contact with “white civilization.” Ian Dunlop’s romantic ethnographic film Desert People derives from this period, a last chance to record on film how Aboriginal people more or less outside the influence of white Australia lived their daily lives.

The fact that many Pintupi had only so recently come to have experience of settlement life made me interested in them, but they also had a fierce reputation as difficult and intransigent people at Papunya settlement. Throughout their history of settlement—during which many of them had died through illness, infection, and violence—these “last hunter-gatherers” preserved a kind of distance and autonomy from the assimilationist goals of the government agencies (see Myers 1986a: chapter 1).

I revisited Pintupi people with Bette Clarke as co-researcher in 1979 and 1980–81. It was at the end of this period, after a year of political developments, that Pintupi were able to move back to live in their own homeland area for the first time in almost 20 years—at Kintore, Northern Territory. This was 200 miles west of Papunya and Yayayi, the government settlements where they had been living when I first knew them. I worked on a claim for the return of Aboriginal land to its “traditional owners” for periods in 1981, 1982, and 1983—this was with claimant groups comprised of people of several different languages (none, however, from the Pintupi I already knew). In 1984, I completed a monograph on my research with Pintupi-speak-
ing people (Myers 1986a), just prior to the appearance of the “first contact people.” One observation is especially critical, I think, to the position I take in this paper about ethnographic representations. The sociohistorical conditions in which I engaged them (the intimate and relatively autonomous nature of the contact communities in which they lived and the conditions they placed on my participation) were always critical to what I learned. Aborigines maintained that to live with them I had to “help Aborigines,” that is, I had something like the obligation they had to each other as co-residents of a community. It was essentially on this basis that Bette Clarke and I comprehended our relationship to the events at hand.

By the time we arrived in Australia, there were several distinctive and conflicting representations of the situation, and these defined the dialogical constraints with which our ethnography was to contend. The event came to be defined, for many of the participants, as an opportunity for redemption and the formulation of an identity. I will try to outline the interpretive scenarios very briefly.

1. The Australian government, a Labour government with a policy claiming to be supportive of Aboriginal people and approaching an election, was concerned about the political repercussions of mishandling the treatment of the newly contacted people. Additionally, this government defined itself in opposition to the rather coercively assimilationist policies of the 1960s (see Rowley 1970) during which an earlier (and publicized) wave of Western Desert Aborigines had arrived at government settlements and had died in large numbers through illness and infection. The Labour party, since Gough Whitlam’s short period as Prime Minister in the 1970s, had been in support of “Aboriginal self-determination.”

The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Clyde Holding, had been one of the first to be informed of their existence and he had responded by telling journalists from the Melbourne Herald in his own electoral district—resulting in the rather sensationalist account to which I have referred. This story had repercussions among the Aborigines, not only because of their resentment about the publicity (focusing especially on photographs for which they received no compensation and which they demanded be returned), but also because it produced a flood of interest in these “new” scientific curiosities.

Holding and his bureaucratic representatives in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) seemed most concerned to avoid a repetition of such Aboriginal deaths at first contact as had occurred in the 1960s when those without much immunity to the many diseases they would face arrived in settlements. Politically as well as humanly, this would have been disastrous, and the DAA felt it to be their charge to ensure the health and well-being of these uncontacted people. Thus, Holding—presumably on the advice of others—wanted to send out a government-organized independent medical team to see to the health dangers, and this intensified as reports circulated of illness (colds, headaches). In fact, one doctor from the Northern Territory Health service, eager to visit the new people for his own reasons, took it upon himself to fly into Kiwirrkura (where they now were living) and begin examining them unofficially and without community permission. When he was discovered by the local leaders, the doctor’s notes were taken from him and destroyed. He was told to leave. The Pintupi objection was that he had not asked their permission. This incident, whatever its official status, greatly exacerbated tensions and distrust between the Pintupi communities and the Government.

2. The local Aboriginal people, who had actually made the contact, have generally been known under the rubric of “Pintupi.” Once themselves migrants out of the desert into “first contact” at settlements like Papunya, they had recently returned to their own former homelands at Kiwirrkura, Western Australia and Kintore, Northern Territory. The Aborigines saw the 1984 events in a very different light from the government, although for them, too, the meaning of this contact was partly a “redemption” from the misfortunes—illnesses, deaths, and culture shock—of the 1960s. Remembering the losses they had suffered when they moved to Papunya and attributing these to the doctors there, they wanted “no government doctors.” This is not, one should stress, a complete rejection of Western medicine, although their understanding and
acceptance of Western practices is anything but wholesale. In addition to being somewhat suspicious, most Pintupi prefer a medicine that is sensitive to their own cultural values. The Pintupi health service had its own doctor (at this time, David Scrimgeour), whom they trusted. Not irrelevantly, this independent health service had itself been in conflict with the more centralized Northern Territory Government Health Department since the Pintupi had first left Papunya in 1981.

In the Pintupi concern for the health of the new people lay a related, even more central issue. The newly contacted people were, it was insisted, “our relatives” and the Aborigines could “look after” (kanyininja) the people themselves. Two significant features are reflected in this characterization of the situation. First, the Pintupi defined the newly contacted people as “relatives” (walytja), to whom they had a responsibility and with whom they actually have a long relationship, only interrupted by the fact that these people were accidentally left behind when the others moved. (Indeed, other researchers and I had heard of the existence of this group consistently since the 1960s.) From this perspective, there was no “discovery” at all. The new people were not a last sighting of the Stone Age, helpless invalids, or “scientific curiosities,” as they were for the French television crews reportedly hovering above Kiwirrkura in a helicopter or for medical researchers who have been interested in the immunological responses of people biologically isolated from the infectious diseases known to most of the world. They were understood by the Pintupi as known people with individual histories, histories we were able to document in our report. As such, in the Pintupi view, the new people needed to be protected from the experiences of ridicule and shame to which they themselves had been subjected as “naked” bush people when they had first come into contact. This meant no filming or photography, nor prodding and medical examination by strangers.

Secondly, the situation of the newly contacted people came to represent the most central concern of contemporary Pintupi life: their autonomy. They, not whites—not even, or especially, the government—would decide what should be done. Possibly, in this way, they would redeem their past. I cannot know such deeper meanings with certainty and it is only after reflection that I have realized how the desire for redemption may have been central to formulating this event. It was a chance for Pintupi who had lost their mothers, fathers, siblings, children, friends—losses for which they still felt a responsibility for not having looked after them properly—to relive cathartically that circumstance, to recover and correct the past. The “losses” were frequently reiterated. Here, at least, in accounting for the terms of their struggle with this event, one can see how a focus on the politics of representation opens up our ability to consider meanings as they are being constructed (or, if you will, discovered) in all their ambiguity by the participants.

Redemption or not, the overt theme of almost all Pintupi pronouncements was of local Aboriginal control, an emphasis on “autonomy.” The cultural value Pintupi place on such autonomy had been a topic of ethnographic interest to me throughout my more traditional ethnographic work (Myers 1982, 1986a). The consistency between this ethnographically recorded (that is to say, “analyzed”) past and the current situation provided a critical interpretive connection in making the actions at Kiwirrkura intelligible for the government audience. Thus, the event was part of the more general Aboriginal struggle to recover their autonomy as people, to make contact over again—to relive or reenact it, in a sense—and to do it without losing their past. Local Aboriginal people would exercise the right to decide what may take place in their own communities. To the Minister’s dismay, the Pintupi at Kintore and Kiwirrkura refused to allow his medical team—the specialists—to visit the newly contacted people.

As the outside world—in the form of government officials, journalists, and curiosity seekers—sought entry, the issue of self-determination and of Pintupi identity became the interpretive framework of every interaction. The very communities to which the new people had arrived were themselves the product of Pintupi initiative to regain some autonomy by moving back to their traditional homelands where they had, in their view, unquestioned right of oc-
cupancy (see Myers 1986a). This was their country; outsiders must "ask" their permission in order to visit. Such was precisely the right they had lost in their own moves to Papunya 20 years before, and it was precisely this value that was challenged in the struggle described here. Moreover, within this framework, the new people were "relatives" rather than objects of science, that is, active subjects for whom compassion was appropriate.

The encounter itself, as formulated among many of the Pintupi, spoke directly to Aboriginal assertions of their adequacy and independent capacity. This time, obviously, things were different: this time, many Pintupi people asserted proudly, it was Aborigines who had found (and tracked down) the bush people. "White people," they told us, "could never have done this." The people of Kintore and Kiwirrkura could also take care of the "new mob," as relatives should.

The autonomy expressed in these statements had more profound internal cultural significance than is implied in the obviously political issues mentioned. In Aboriginal communities of the Western Desert, who has rights to knowledge and information is defined by one's status in local terms; the right to knowledge is not freely available to anyone but derives from membership in community life and participation in responsible interaction. Journalists and other inquirers (all classified locally at the time as "tourists") were not welcome. Partly this was because the Pintupi felt betrayed by the circulation of photographs for which they neither gave their permission nor received adequate compensation. This outcome merely repeated their own long history of being represented in films and other media. Partly, too, it was a consequence of a less explicit but powerful concern to control the meaning of local events. This came to be a wish for privacy as a form of control. Whites—and other outsiders—would not be allowed to make of the event whatever they wished. Management of the event itself and its meaning, what the Pintupi would have called "our own business" and would have regarded correspondingly as their responsibility, became an expression of the very struggle to maintain autonomy within the extended polity they now inhabited. Indeed, in the very refusal described, many people recognized a clash of interpretations and values. Several Pintupi stressed to me, that "White people don't think we can understand—but we can." They wanted whites to understand their plans and values: white people "must listen to us."

Such conceptions of autonomy, deeply rooted in indigenous conceptions of the person (cf. Myers 1986a), carried over into the very treatment of the new people and into Pintupi comprehension of the contact situation itself. Unlike the government, the local Aborigines were committed to sustaining the possibility of autonomy for the new people. The new people were not just administered to, not just passive recipients of care. They were able to participate actively in events and decisions (marriage, mourning, sharing food) and to live on land to which they had legitimate claim—all enactments of an autonomy which was important for psychological health and continuity with their own values. Absent the sensationalism, I think this would have been the routine way in which newcomers were received.

3. A third position was that of outsiders who saw the contact as generated by mining industry expansion into the desert and circulated around a rumor that the new people had been driven to make contact (really against their wishes) because one member of their group, the old man who was the husband of the old women, had been shot and killed by mining people. The resonances of this rumor with a countercultural "myth" of the violent and exploitative frontier cannot be considered here in any detail. I merely draw attention to how this incorrect rumor of a shooting read its own (well-worn) image of the pristine, romantic, and independent aboriginal world into a world invaded by the destructive and greedy forces of the West.

4. For the press, finally, there were many possible stories, but all revolved around the newsworthiness of "First Contact." Interest in this derived from European Australians' continuing desire to seem themselves as still new, still on the frontier, at the edge of nature. The press's requirement—of news—was directly in opposition to the Pintupi desire for privacy as a form of control.
the problem: terms of reference as consultants

It was on the conflict between medical science and local autonomy that the Minister’s and the government’s commitment to “self-determination” faltered, in that they did not think that local Aboriginal conceptions, judgments, and values could be the decisive ones. A simple cultural relativism is not so easily sustained here, however. What if the new people died? To whom was the Minister’s responsibility? He saw his responsibility to protect them both in terms of the probabilities of sickness and health as understood in Western medical (materialist) terms of cause and also in the light of Western values about the rights of individuals and communities. An anthropologist may speak easily of cultural relativism and self-determination, but what if the Pintupi conceptions of cause and effect were harmful to the new people? DAA personnel asked me just this. There was no clear right and wrong. Moreover, the Minister was not sure that what he heard was actually what the Pintupi wanted. He suspected that it represented the advice of more radical political organizations in Central Australia (such as the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress) that might want to embarrass the government. Or it might be prompted by the advice of whites, close to the Aboriginal community, whose countercultural sympathies—often deeply hostile to the rational science of the mainstream—romanticized the Aboriginal capacity for independence and judgment of new circumstances. What did the Aborigines themselves really want?

The government faced three essential problems. These were reflected in the terms of reference provided to us by the Joint Working Party of the DAA and CLC. The problems can be summarized as follows:

1. What did the local Pintupi people and the new contact people want? This would require knowing how to interpret Pintupi statements and actions. The government representatives were also concerned about whether the statements issued were authentic—that is, did they represent what the Pintupi really wanted or were they somehow transformed by others (activists, advisers, interpreters) in the transmission?

In this case, our past ethnographic knowledge provided a context for interpreting current assertions by Pintupi as well as their commonsense understandings of the new contact group’s motives for contact and reasons for action. Our analyses would amount to judgments about whether or not these were ways Pintupi usually render accounts of and for courses of behavior. Previous knowledge of many of the individuals involved, their backgrounds and relationships, was also a basis for fast and reliable study, not least because we already had relations of trust with most people at Kiwirrkura and Kintore—at a time when the Pintupi were extremely suspicious. Furthermore, as we were “experts” (with a Ph.D. and M.A.), the government could be seen to have acted responsibly in obtaining our advice.

2. Are the Pintupi plans and decisions informed? Are they based on comprehension of the risks and dangers of different courses of action (such as illness)? Obviously, this point raises most pressingly the question of whose worldview and values should predominate in the evaluation of the situation.

3. Thus, the third problem was whether the proposed course of action was beneficial or harmful to the local communities and to the new contact group—based on our “scientific” assessment.

Ultimately, the Pintupi communities prevailed in keeping out the journalists and the imposed medical examination, sustaining their view that there was “no news” and that local autonomy was the supreme value from which Aboriginal social action should proceed. The strategy of interpretation we deployed on behalf of the Pintupi followed their view of the event as “history”—to emphasize the detail of the new people’s lives, their genealogical links to known

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individuals in settlements, and their longstanding ties to the geographical area where they had arrived.

So, was this “First Contact” or the “Reaggregation” of band members long separated? What relationship did what we observed, as consultants, have to the practical issues at hand? The ethnographers’ strength was to see this contact not as a break from the past, but as an extension of Aboriginal goals and values.

**analysis: placing autonomy**

This review of a complex ethnographic practice helps to clarify how the political, historical, and social situation of the researcher(s) and the immediate issue determined the concepts through which we would “interrogate” the empirical evidence. Interestingly, the thrust of the anthropological analysis and the rhetorical strategy of its presentation was to deconstruct the “romance” of this first contact by presenting the local points of view and to show what benefits would flow from acceptance of Aboriginal autonomy.

I want to emphasize why the Pintupi historical account of the reaggregation of relatives could so powerfully provide the meaning of this event, counterposed to the more mythical “first contact” stories. In the Pintupi construction and that of the new people themselves, contact was no penetration of some membrane standing between the past and the present or myth and history. They had come south, having seen smokes, “to look for relatives.” What they enjoyed most, which was obvious to anyone, was extending their social ties, playing with children, taking on their roles as relatives to a much wider network than they had enjoyed in their isolation. Previously, they had only known of these relatives through their mothers’ reports. Why did they leave the isolation of the bush? When the old man who had been the father of the children died (at a place not far north of Lake Mackay known as Kuwarla), we learned, they were “sorry” (yalurpa) and left the area, heading south. Like other Pintupi in the numerous life histories we had gathered in the past and like Pintupi in the present, they moved away from the place of death. After a death (the wrongly rumored “killing,” which may have resulted from eating spoiled canned goods at an old mineral exploration camp), they had hoped to find some of their relatives, a common motive for travel—an acceptable basis of accounting for action to any Pintupi.

This is how we understood their project, their goals in the move. As applied hermeneutic, furthermore, the concepts used to represent this situation to the potential readers of our report—of “traditional culture,” “autonomy,” and of “self-determination”—were concepts that were immediately meaningful to our anticipated audience, rhetorical premises of our own culture that normally need no further interpretation and were, thus, enforceable terms. This form of translation represents a presentation that Nichols calls rhetorical demonstration:

We might say that the foundation of rhetorical demonstration depends on dressing topics, places common to demonstration whatever its subject-matter or medium, in the garb of commonplace, shared assumptions or opinions [Nichols 1981:179].

These “premises” also were the context defining my analysis of the empirical data.

It is important to illustrate how this proceeds. It was obvious from numerous observations and events that the Pintupi at Kiwirrkura did not treat the new contact people as entirely “special,” not as specimens to be cared for in a bell jar. Food, for instance, was more specifically given to them by others in the community, but this was regarded as similar to any other sharing with relatives. Thus, their food supply—things brought to the community by the local doctor for their consumption—was also extended to (or shared with) the larger group. This straightforward ethnographic fact required interpretation at other levels. It was related to the Pintupi management of the meaning and goals of the contact itself: these people were relatives (walyija) with whom sharing is appropriate; they were not scientific objects.
At yet another level of analysis, namely that of our evaluation of the impact of "contact," this "fact" takes on further relevance: the transition to the contact situation would have less shock for the new people. They received goods and care from people they knew and trusted as relatives, essentially an extension of the familiar contexts and circumstances they had known all their lives. When troubled by new diseases and strange circumstances, the comments and confidence of relatives were reassuring, offering a supportive context in which to explore what might be expected from new situations. Further, they were able to act themselves and to take on responsibility as independent actors within this frame—as relatives. One can see this clearly from what follows.

The local doctor's treatment started, similarly, from the premise of how local Aborigines would interact with the new people rather than from a scientific ideal of medical quarantine and isolation. He privileged their own values on interaction and gave an important responsibility to the judgment of the Pintupi themselves, a responsibility on which they prided themselves. Dr. Scrimgeour recognized that clothing and food would be shared with the new people (despite the danger, in Euro-Australian terms, of infection). The new people would not be able to understand restrictions on their movements and actions that might be based on an alternative theory of health and disease. Even those Pintupi who partly shared the Euro-Australian theory of "hygiene" would be unwilling to refuse the new relatives what they wanted. This meant that exposure to the sicknesses endemic to contemporary Aboriginal communities would be immediate and intense. Given this situation, visits by relatives from other communities would not tremendously increase the danger, while their presence might offer psychological benefits. The treatment, therefore, accommodated itself to the cultural realities of Pintupi life but was foreign to the plans envisioned by Holding's advisers. In the government's notions of authority intervening on behalf of subject populations, protecting their health, these advisers represented the hegemonic definition of contested reality by the nation-state with its refusal of authority to local understandings.

Those who have seen the film First Contact about highland New Guinea will remember how impermeable seems the membrane between "native" and "white explorer," between the primitive world and modern civilization. How different was the experience at Kiwirrkura! We arrived at Kiwirrkura after dire warnings from some in the DAA and others (on the other side) at the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress quite fearful of bringing infection to the new people. We were prepared to have no direct contact with them, but to find out about events and aspirations through talking to others—especially from my friend of long acquaintance, Freddy West, who was a leader at Kiwirrkura. Within hours of arriving at Kiwirrkura, however, as we sat at Freddy's camp, the new people simply walked up and sat down with us, introduced as "relatives" by kinship status and we talked. They were certainly, by language, the Pintupi of 20 years ago, but they were Pintupi and it was no different from meeting any other of Freddy's relatives just as we had done in the past.

In the stocktaking of one of the Euro-Australians who accompanied the Pintupi on their journey to find the "lost" people, their "material culture" was of significance. It consisted of a large metal axe, well-used and with a short handle, some wooden dishes (pitti), large bundles of spears and spearthrowers, and girdles woven of human hair. To me, as well, these objects, however roughly made in comparison to many I had seen over the years, had an authenticity and power as indexes of a life that was "other." I confess to having felt a special privilege when Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, the oldest of the young men, showed me his crudely hewn mirru (spearthrower) and other objects. The well-trained ethnographer, I wrote in my notebook that the spearthrower had no spinifex resin on the handle and no stone knife embedded there. Then, the frame changed as Tjapaltjarri, my "wife's mother's brother," invited me to throw his heavy spear, that precious potential museum object. And so I did, moving back from myth to the real relationship the Pintupi sought to establish. Tjapaltjarri and his spears were not the last living representative of a wholly other way of life; he was a man who was becoming a friend and
trying to help me to understand. It was this interpretation that Pintupi sought to have prevail in defining who they and the new people were: they sought to have history prevail over myth.

These examples illustrate, I believe, that the new people were not seeking contact with whites and European civilization; rather, they hoped to make contact with their relatives and continue their lives with them. In fact, the story was even stronger if understood as a history that began over 20 years ago, for this reaggregation was a return of the new contact people to an area which was their original homeland, to which they had, in Pintupi terms (through conception, residence, and inheritance), indisputable ties and rights to reside. This would be a different contact from that first contact of their relatives in Papunya and Haasts Bluff, the very relatives who now welcomed them to the community of Kiwirrkura. Living on their own land, the new people, unlike their contact predecessors, could exercise far more autonomy than the earlier contact group had been able to do.

Autonomy is the primary valuing structure of Pintupi social action, and the argument for its overwhelming significance had been the central theme of the monograph just completed before this trip (Myers 1986a). From that vantage point, what we saw taking place in the contested events of another first contact was dramatic confirmation by the local Pintupi communities of their insistence on their ability to control their lives, but the events also delineated the difficulty of doing so within the political structure of a nation-state. In other words, one could comprehend the emphasis on autonomy as doubly motivated, as it were, by its indigenous basis (on the one hand) and its contemporary contestation (on the other). The major impact of the arrival of the newly contacted group to Kiwirrkura was to raise the issue of self-determination in both Kintore and Kiwirrkura. The control of information, decision-making, and access to the area lay at the heart of what has been known as the “outstation movement” as it had been developing in the Western Desert. Since the early 1970s in Australia, there has been a notable movement of Aboriginal people from large settlements back to smaller communities closer to their traditional homelands and in which hunting and foraging play a larger role in daily life and the pressures of large populations are reduced. This sort of movement back to numerous small communities in the Western Desert has been precisely the focal point of the ongoing Pintupi struggle for social and cultural integrity, and it was at this point that the arrival of the bush people caused new pressure.

Within this context, furthermore, the demonstrable assertions of autonomy by the new people themselves represented the authentic continuity of current Pintupi aspirations with their past condition (signified by the contact people). In preserving the possibility of the new people’s autonomy, their relatives symbolically recreated their own.

The new Pintupi clearly regarded themselves as controlling their own lives and able to participate actively in events and decisions, as I learned from an incident that occurred the morning after Dr. Scrimgeour (of their own health service) had flown out to Kiwirrkura in the plane provided temporarily for the Health Service. The two “new” Tjapaltjarri men came to the camp where Bette Clark and I were sitting and asked us to tell Scrimgeour to take the plane back to Kintore where it would be safe. Both men, despite their young age, were known to be powerful mapamtjarra (curers, “doctor men”), possessing special capacities. They had been protecting the plane all night, they said, from attacking spirits who had tried to pull out parts. They feared that when the doctor tried to fly in the plane, he might crash and they were worried about him. This occurred in a dream, they explained (that is, “we saw it, dreaming”), understood by them as a real event.

Because of the larger situation, in which their capacity to contribute meaningfully to the social world was much threatened, I interpreted the significance of native doctoring in a way I had not previously comprehended. As native doctors, they were asserting their ability to take an active part in a situation that might appear to be beyond them, indeed to offer reciprocal aid to another. A powerful image of the impact of contact on Aborigines was embedded in this event. Pintupi still talk about their own loss of mapampa, the objects that are the source of
curing power, when they got sick during the early contact phases. The loss of maparnpa represents a loss of Aboriginal power, literally or metaphorically. The two new men, contrastingly, still with their traditional mudcurls and headbands and admired by their relatives, were regarded as full of power and able to cure the sicknesses to which the others were subject. In this sense, the new people’s independence and assertiveness constituted both proof as well as metaphorical illumination of the earlier destructive effects of contact on Aboriginal life.

history: a dialogical construction

The anthropological task was to translate the Pintupi’s understanding of the new people as relatives into terms that would hold the representation of the West at bay. This is, it should be clear, a revision of the ethnographer’s voice and at the same time, I believe, an acting out more faithful in its commitment to the native point of view.3 Our report presented the event as “no news,” in two ways. First, the interpretation interrupted the absoluteness of the “entry” into our history now, from the Stone Age to the present—which was the journalistic narrative. By claiming that we already knew about them, the report defended against further claims for scientific invasion. This was science as knowledge but also as rhetorical strategy. Second, by emphasizing the relevance of accepting local, Pintupi values (about autonomy, knowledge, relatives), the report provided a framework for comprehending the new people’s motive for contact—what they wanted from their lives—as well as for their treatment.

We interviewed the new people—to follow our terms of reference as consultants—about where they had been living, determining their residential history in narratives, and cross-checking them by finding out their conception sites (that is, the places their mothers were residing when they were conceived—an important dimension of social identity in the Western Desert). Guided by what I understood as meaningful reasons within Pintupi culture, these accounts were checked against more direct questions—addressed both to the new people and to the other Pintupi—about why they had made contact.

The ethnographic frisson of recognizing “culture” made palpably real, not unlike the experience in Sahlins’ (1981) recounting of Captain Cook’s demise in Hawaiian terms, consisted precisely in that their accounts of the contact event were so evidently continuous with ordinary Pintupi renderings. The powerful moments were those when custom and shared knowledge reached across the gap between the contacted and those already within the Euro-Australian orbit. When the two new men made their first contact with Pinta Pinta (the first person outside their group in 20 years), they tried to introduce themselves by explaining that their grandfather had died near the place where they met. Through calling on this basis for defining their identity, they were formulating their right to be there and suggesting a possible genealogical relationship to Pinta Pinta.

The general significance Pintupi attributed to the contact was repetitively resonant in actions. The primary assertion that they were kin was evidenced in their action against Freddy West (whom they had known as their relative, Tjukurti tjakamarra) the night after they were first contacted—when they threw spears at him in anger for not having come to look for them during the past 20 years. Some weeks later, the real sister of one of the new Tjapaltjarri men arrived from Balgo community to visit them; as she wailed in sorrow, they attacked her for having left them behind and never trying to look after them. When they saw her daughter, their “niece” (yukari), the cries of grief and loss as they hugged her were profoundly moving and demonstrative of their reasons and hopes for making contact.

metaphor and the embedded critique

To pursue these meanings was to understand, beyond specific claims, what the new people wanted from their changed lives and also to recognize how the presence of the Australian na-
tion—state and its administrative and political needs constituted a new reality against which Pintupi autonomy was to be tested. The first instance of this challenge, then, was in the meaning of the event itself and who would determine its meaning.

In interpreting this event, as a consultant, one had to see how the new people symbolized the larger issue of Pintupi identity and autonomy. This, I believe, was the meaning the Pintupi themselves tried to give: not just our rhetorical strategy or our metaphor. The issue was not their identity as “Pintupi” as an ethnic group, because that label does not represent a particular social group or any particular community of persons; rather it was their identity as Aboriginal persons with cultural rights to certain places and the expectation of self-direction. Pintupi stressed explicitly that they (that is, Aboriginal people) and only they could and did find the “new mob.” They contrasted, as I have pointed out, their autonomy and control in this sense as different from their own “first contact” in which they were the passive recipients of contact. Also, many of the Pintupi viewed the event not simply as a peculiar moment, but as within the context of their movement back into the desert in which they hoped to define the conditions of their engagement with the larger Euro-Australian society—government, tourists, mining industry. They took the opportunity of my visit, in this marked situation, to explain to me their plans for developing and controlling the area, their plans for new outstation communities, and so on. The question was whether Desert Aborigines had the right to determine who could come to their communities and who not. Thus, the new contact became, to some, an instance of this larger project.

At one time, an anthropologist could write and hope to engage the reader through the figure of sympathy for the situation of Aboriginal people. If one adopted this sort of presentation of the evidence, the first contact would be shown as assimilated in the larger responsibility and plans of local Pintupi leaders to rehabit the desert, as one more burden for Aboriginal people to bear. One could point out how the Aborigines now face the problem of controlling reporters who patrol the skies in small airplanes, trying to land on their remote airstrips to get the story—and then to leave. For the Pintupi, this invasion was purely and simply a failure to recognize their assumed rights to control entry to their own country.

However, in our engagement as consultants, we came to wonder if the bureaucrats and others in Australia could be moved by “sympathy” or whether they were now skeptical of the sincerity and authenticity of Aboriginal motives, implicit or explicit. (This is equally true now, one suspects, of any representation of Aboriginal cultures.) Cynical or not, the questions posed of Aboriginal action were serious threats to delegitimize Aboriginal “authenticity.” Were the Aborigines greedy, desiring to control resources that could be exchanged for money? Were they ignorant or naive about the realities of state and corporate power? Were they just lazy and unprogressive obstacles in the way of improving a declining Australian economy? What special right do these people have to land, different from those of hardworking white Australians? Were they simply manipulated by other white Australians with a different political agenda than the government?

These questions provided, if you will, the sociohistorical context of our advocacy research. To understand this is to recognize how significant the audience is in determining anthropological representations, of writing in a historical context. Here, the image implied in our report was of the re-creation of a Western Desert Aboriginal community—embodying hope for their future as a people founded on their autonomy and self-determination. Is this a representation that the hardened hands of the DAA would believe? If one knows the real forces arrayed against these Aboriginal hopes, forces they do not understand fully (if any of us does), was the situation to be understood or represented as poignant? Tragic? Where, in this contest, should the social scientist situate himself or herself? With hope, as many do, or with skepticism? Does it help the Aborigines simply to accept their understandings of the world if these are unrealistic? This might sound good to the Aborigines, but what is the consequence of simply deferring to a bad plan? When does deference become posturing?
Our account attempted to sustain what we understood to be Pintupi purposes and more deeply to link the contest itself to the project of Western Desert Aborigines to regain control over the conditions of their lives—a project that promised more for the health and future of the new people than any limited medical intervention could. How we reported it, its poetics (to be a bit grand), could not be separated from the politics in which representations are intrinsically embedded.

representation and anthropological politics

In this context, to focus on the problem of representation is to come face to face with the political implications of our knowledge within the social relations we study. Self-consciousness about our writing and research as a practice is not simply more productive for how we write. It is exactly the process of transaction in representation between the West and the rest that is the site of ethnographic practice, not as some abstracted hermeneutic but as the practice of interpretation within the very project of self-definition of the people we study.

During an earlier period, the political power of representation was not fully understood by most indigenous peoples. Often, anthropology acted on their behalf, defending the difference of local cultures both through its criticism of ethnocentrism and through its defense of their social orders in the mode of functionalist explanation. However, this redemption took place in terms chosen by the anthropologist, terms that made sense in his or her home communities. These representations were, further, used in the West (especially in American anthropology) to maintain a sense of alternative possibilities for social life. Now that indigenous peoples have come to be judged on the basis of such representations, anthropological practice may become itself a site of social action in the modern world.* That action, often enough, becomes one of contesting representation.

In reconceptualizing the interpretive practices of anthropological work, much depends on who one perceives the audience to be and what questions one is addressing. As for questions, whether an ethnography of Aborigines seeks to understand a “hunter-gatherer way of life” or to understand “the changing role of women and health care delivery” will have an important consequence, for example, on what one takes to be relevant. Both of these can be empirical questions, and such questions may well take their impetus from a variety of scholarly, practical, or disciplinary discourses. To put the issue of audience forward as central to interpretive practice, however, one might ask what gap exists between an anthropology that is responsive to the people with whom we work and the interests of academic anthropological theory (cf. Myers 1986b). In the present, Aboriginal people in Australia do understand the potential political implications of our representations. For that reason, as the Pintupi case shows, the concerns raised by postmodern criticism about the constructed nature of anthropological representations, constructions and conventions that the writers may take quite for granted but that may hide difficult assumptions and relations of power, are more significantly those also raised by our informants. This critical focus has no intrinsic meaning other than that of its use; it can lead us to sterile textual debates but also to more richly engaged research about the world in which we and our subjects live.

Anthropological study can provide more than a critical mirror for our own practices or critical distance on our own cultural perspectives. Because the assumptions of audience and purpose have been covert, the value of rhetorical self-awareness is in drawing our attention to the constructions through which, as professionals, we have learned partly to read but which still mask many difficult and misleading assumptions about the purpose and politics of our work. Alternative forms of anthropological practice may be theoretically liberating but not by denying empirical ethnographic work; in fact, we know our subjects better by holding them less definitively to the problems conventional to anthropology as academic practice, and that is the goal.
These applied practices may provide a horizon of interpretive questions that actually improves our appreciation of the data. Such practices may continue to appropriate those with whom we study to some extent into our frameworks, but they hold this appropriation in a tenison that is more than just our translation of them by giving priority to local political purposes. Thus, and only belatedly, did I come to understand the current Pintupi political project and their struggle to reformulate a cultural identity in its redemptive dimensions, recovering from the losses and sorrow of their earlier contact.

What makes the struggle over the meaning of “first contact” anthropologically meaningful beyond its account of a single event or a single group of people? In rendering this struggle intelligible even to those who opposed some dimensions of the Pintupi interpretation, my interpretation was heavily metaphorical—presenting the contest over meaning as part and parcel of the Pintupi struggle for autonomy, itself a struggle to maintain their own values in the face of Euro-Australian domination. I came to see in this contest the most significant social process in contemporary Pintupi life; thus, the new questions did improve my understanding of their lives. But this analysis, even located at the new pressure point of Pintupi cultural reproduction, speaks powerfully to our own conditions and presents metaphorically, an even deeper embedded critique (as Marcus [n.d.] and Marcus and Fischer [1986:116] have described them) of our society by revealing the processes of the state in dominating local constructions of what is. This contraposition of the local and the translocal, seen as contrasts between the intimate, local meanings and those derived from external realities, reveals what we have ourselves become and what sorts of autonomy we no longer even expect.

notes

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2Sansom (1980) has offered a splendid account of the significance of knowledge as a sort of “property” among fringe-dwelling Aboriginal people in Darwin.

3I am indebted to Susan Harding for helping me to clarify this point.

4Errington and Gewertz (1987) have also recently tried to show how interpretive and stylistic practices in ethnography—such as the emphasis on “reciprocity” and dialogue with informants—may be drawn into local political activities, a position that recognizes the material significance of any anthropological representation in a world where such accounts circulate in a broader ambit than ever.

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