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Sovereign bodies: Australian Indigenous cultural festivals and flourishing lifeworlds

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Sovereign bodies: Australian Indigenous cultural festivals and flourishing lifeworlds

Abstract

In 2008, I was an observer at a two-day workshop concerned with the future of the Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival. The delegates were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from across Cape York Peninsula, representing communities (Indigenous townships) that dance at this long-running event. There was an openfloor discussion; following cultural protocols, one by one elders got to their feet to speak for country. A highly respected elder told of how he and his family cared for country - walked, talked, sung, hunted, burned - to keep their ancestral lands healthy, as the land looked after them. He then passionately implored his audience to understand that dancing at the Laura festival is the same. My memory is of the old man becoming animated and agile, made young as his feet stomped the floor, his traditional country manifest in the room. As someone who has been to many Indigenous festivals, I saw dust rising, that old man dancing. After him, elders stressed their support for the festival and its role in gathering people from across the region to strengthen and affirm the Cape as a multicultural Aboriginal domain, and as a means to maintain and develop strong culture for the Cape and surrounding communities. All the participants then undertook an exercise to arrive at the festival purpose or mission statement. Despite the range of people and communities in the room, it did not take long for consensus to emerge. The countrymen were unanimous that the Laura Festival is a significant event for maintaining cultural integrity and passing on tradition to young people. That old man does not dance alone.

Keywords

bodies, australian, sovereign, indigenous, lifeworlds, cultural, festivals, flourishing

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Chapter 7

Sovereign Bodies: Australian
Indigenous Cultural Festivals and
Flourishing Lifeworlds

Lisa Slater

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14 In 2008, I was an observer at a two-day workshop concerned with the future 14
15 of the Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival.¹ The delegates were Aboriginal and 15
16 Torres Strait Islander peoples from across Cape York Peninsula, representing 16
17 communities (Indigenous townships) that dance at this long-running event. There 17
18 was an open-floor discussion; following cultural protocols, one by one elders got 18
19 to their feet to speak for country.² A highly respected elder told of how he and 19
20 his family cared for country – walked, talked, sung, hunted, burned – to keep 20
21 their ancestral lands healthy, as the land looked after them. He then passionately 21
22 implored his audience to understand that dancing at Laura festival is the same. My 22
23 memory is of the old man becoming animated and agile, made young as his feet 23
24 stomped the floor, his traditional country manifest in the room. As someone who 24
25 has been to many Indigenous festivals, I saw dust rising, that old man dancing.³ 25
26 After him, elders stressed their support for the festival and its role in gathering 26
27 people from across the region to strengthen and affirm the Cape as a multicultural 27
28 Aboriginal domain, and as a means to maintain and develop strong culture for 28
29 the Cape and surrounding communities. All the participants then undertook an 29
30 exercise to arrive at the festival purpose or mission statement. Despite the range of 30
31 people and communities in the room, it did not take long for consensus to emerge. 31
32 The countrymen were unanimous that Laura Festival is a significant event for 32

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38 1 The Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival is held biennially 15 kilometres from Laura, 38
39 at the Ang-Gnarra Festival Grounds, Cape York Peninsula, Queensland (330 kilometres 39
40 from Cairns). The workshop was an initiative of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 40
41 Arts Board (ATSIAB), and was held over two days in Cairns, on 5–6 May 2008.

41
42 2 Throughout this chapter, ‘country’ refers to the Indigenous concept of traditional 41
42 or customary lands that hold multi-dimensional relationships, networks, history and law. 42

43
44 3 I use the general term Indigenous to refer to the diverse nations and clan groups that 43
44 comprise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. 44

1 maintaining cultural integrity and passing on tradition to young people.⁴ That old 1
 2 man does not dance alone. 2

3 There are hundreds of Indigenous festivals across Australia, from small 3
 4 community gatherings to large-scale productions complete with rock star stages, and 4
 5 the corresponding talent. Since colonization, there has been a history of Indigenous 5
 6 public performances for non-Indigenous audiences. My focus here is on what 6
 7 are readily called Indigenous cultural festivals, and more so those events that are 7
 8 innovations of the ‘traditional’ ceremonial life that now unfolds in settler, liberal 8
 9 Australia. They are public performances, manifestations of a sacred, ritual world. In 9
 10 particular, I am drawing my observations and analysis from festivals I have attended 10
 11 and researched (but absolutely not limited to these examples, or excluding events 11
 12 in urban Australia), such as Garma (Northern Territory), Laura Aboriginal Dance 12
 13 (Far North Queensland) and KALACC festivals (Kimberley, Western Australia). 13
 14 These festivals are held on lands that are recognized under forms of land rights 14
 15 and native title, and ‘traditional’ culture is practised and is acknowledged by, and 15
 16 affects, state and corporate activities. Like many Indigenous festivals, they have a 16
 17 similar purpose: to maintain and strengthen culture. Yet it is Indigenous culture that 17
 18 worries so many people in the mainstream. In this chapter, I examine Indigenous 18
 19 cultural festivals as creative commitments to the ontological primacy of land and 19
 20 non-Western sociality and ritual life, which emerges in a deeply intercultural world 20
 21 dominated by settler liberalism. A hope and aim of these events is to compose anti- 21
 22 colonial relations, arguably whereby ‘culture’ is not a commodity to be scrutinized 22
 23 and judged but rather recognized as emanating from complex lifeworlds. 23

24 In the same month as the 2011 Laura Festival was staged, academic John 24
 25 Morton (2011) wrote an opinion piece for *The Australian* newspaper, entitled 25
 26 ‘Threadbare paradigms hamper Indigenous progress’. He wrote that since the 26
 27 new millennium, there has been a ‘dramatic’ shift in Australian public intellectual 27
 28 debates addressing Indigenous issues. Previously, Indigenous difference – here 28
 29 identified as ‘culture’ – was the vehicle for achieving Indigenous rights and political 29
 30 recognition; currently, the reigning public discourse – promulgated and popularized 30
 31 by Aboriginal public intellectual Noel Pearson – is the need for Indigenous people 31
 32 to engage with the ‘real economy’. Put simply, political responses to Indigenous 32
 33 socio-economic issues have been directed largely towards mainstreaming. Morton 33
 34 (2011: 2) goes on to argue that Pearson and his supporters are not opposed to 34
 35 difference, but rather to ‘those who wish to sustain a culture of victimhood’. By 35
 36 drawing on Marcia Langton’s attack on the ‘old Left’, he associates ‘victimhood’ 36
 37 with keeping ‘Aborigines in a non-modern place’. Putting aside whether he is 37
 38 correct to suggest that there has ever been such an easy division between left 38
 39 and right, and previous steadfast support for ‘culture’ (and his un-nuanced use 39
 40 of the term ‘difference’), if Morton is discussing an intellectual debate, it is one 40
 41 that has been had in the disciplines of anthropology and Indigenous studies, 41
 42 42

43 4 Countrymen is a gender neutral term for Indigenous traditional owners, readily used 43
 44 in northern Australia. 44

1 surrounding Peter Sutton's (2009) book *The Politics of Suffering*. He worries over 1
 2 the politicization of the academy, and wants to defend Sutton's work (and person) 2
 3 from what Morton sees as an ideological attack by some on the academic left. 3
 4 But he is most troubled by Aboriginal 'culture'. Morton took the opportunity to 4
 5 reiterate Sutton's thesis: 5

6
 7 [C]ertain forms of Aboriginal tradition, when corrupted in the context of 7
 8 modernisation, led to distress and dysfunction. Aboriginal child-rearing 8
 9 practices, strategic recourse to legitimate violence and the articulation of 9
 10 extended kin obligations were placed under the microscope and found to be 10
 11 inconsistent with the encroachment of imposed regimes of schooling, policing 11
 12 and welfare, which relied on other *rationalities* for potential good effect. (2011: 12
 13 2, emphasis added) 13
 14 14

15 The problem identified by Sutton is one of differing rationalities: realities or 15
 16 ontology. Broadly speaking, Indigenous and settler colonials have ontological 16
 17 differences. Yet Morton advocates for a neat middle ground. Relinquishing 17
 18 ontology is a very different proposition from setting aside ideological differences. 18
 19 However, for the moment I will put aside these criticisms to return to culture. If 19
 20 somewhat tentatively, Morton weighed into the 'culture wars' or the politics of 20
 21 engagement with Indigenous policy and its role in the imagined futures of and for 21
 22 Indigenous peoples (Hinkson 2010: 1). While Morton suggested an ideological 22
 23 slanging match, Altman and Hinkson's edited collection, *Culture Crisis*, which 23
 24 contains diverse scholarship, notes that 'culture' has become an object of critical 24
 25 attention – a 'site of intense, future focused contestation' (Hinkson 2010: xiv). 25

26 What is this thing called Aboriginal culture, which is simultaneously revered 26
 27 and deplored? Indigenous visual arts – that is, paintings from remote Australia, not 27
 28 urban art – are close to universally admired. Even the most conservative politicians 28
 29 are photographed in their offices with a desert dot painting – or an Arnhem Land 29
 30 bark or the subtle red earth tones of the Kimberly – as backdrop, roundly praised 30
 31 as good culture. At the same time, kinship systems and obligations to extended 31
 32 family are readily, with bipartisan support, condemned as 'an impediment 32
 33 to progress'. Maybe this is to confuse the question, or even to ask the wrong 33
 34 question. A specific practice only becomes 'Indigenous Culture', as Eric Michaels 34
 35 (1994) points out, once it is taken out of local networks of production, circulation 35
 36 and exchange. My above example works, as Morton does, with mainstream 36
 37 formulations of 'culture' or cultural difference as an object or processes abstracted 37
 38 from its material and discursive relations. It is an arrangement that, on one hand, 38
 39 commodifies Indigenous culture as an aspect of the mainstream economy and, on 39
 40 the other, essentializes it as unchanging traditional practices that are a bad fit with 40
 41 modernity. To produce good culture, it must be disarticulated from bad culture. 41

42 But why does that old man dance? What are the forces or assemblages to 42
 43 which he binds himself when he – like his countrymen – speaks of the vital role 43
 44 of cultural maintenance, and the place of festivals in this process? In drawing 44

1 readers' attention to Morton's article, I am not only taking the temperature of an 1
 2 ongoing debate, but more importantly I think he publicly discloses presumptions 2
 3 that are foundational to the popular construction of 'Indigenous culture' and the 3
 4 'Indigenous problem'. Before continuing, I know I risk making Morton into a 4
 5 straw man (or worse, a whipping boy), and this is not my intention. Rather, I am 5
 6 arguing that public discourse – or what passes as political debate – is hampered 6
 7 by 'threadbare paradigms', but the same cannot be said of much scholarship in the 7
 8 broad fields concerned with Indigenous issues. It is a rich resource – as is to be 8
 9 found elsewhere, such as in local programs and initiatives such as festivals – for 9
 10 understanding our present, and realizing just and desired futures. I want to propose 10
 11 that there are vastly different articulations of culture being expressed by that old 11
 12 man and Morton. Or, to be more accurate, what is at play is ontological politics. 12
 13 Indigenous cultural festivals, I argue, are an innovative responses to keeping 13
 14 culture alive – meaningful lifeworlds comprised of local networks of production, 14
 15 circulation, exchange, sociality and law, embedded in settler, liberal modernity. 15

16 Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians live in entangled and interdependent 16
 17 lifeworlds. All Australians are influenced by government policies and bureaucratic 17
 18 decisions, yet Indigenous people and communities are marked by cultural, 18
 19 historical, socio-economic (more often perceived, but sometimes geographical) 19
 20 differences and, despite processes of colonization and assimilation, they continue 20
 21 to assert sovereignty. These apparent differences between lifeworlds play out in 21
 22 political and social fields. The questions of how to theorize such difference-yet- 22
 23 relatedness within an increasingly expanding and complex social field, Hinkson 23
 24 and Smith (2005: 157) argue, is a crucial challenge for accounts of 'Indigenous 24
 25 Australia' and anthropology in general. 25

26 Wrestling with this very material dilemma, they propose the 'intercultural' 26
 27 as a productive concept. There are not, they argue, separate Indigenous/non- 27
 28 Indigenous spheres that meet at an 'interface'; rather, their approach is one that 28
 29 considers 'Indigenous and non-Indigenous social forms to be necessarily relational, 29
 30 and to occupy a single socio-cultural field' (Hinkson and Smith 2005: 158). 30
 31 Sympathizing with their intellectual project, Patrick Sullivan (2005) is wary of the 31
 32 term 'intercultural', arguing that the concept emerges from and is limited by the 32
 33 modernist project of 'caught between two worlds'. He calls for the development of 33
 34 relational anthropology, which accounts for the fluidity and contestation privileged 34
 35 by many Indigenous peoples, and which reveals complex fields of interrelations 35
 36 and co-location. In this sense, he proposes that cultures should primarily be 36
 37 understood as effects of strategic and political relationships (Sullivan 2005: 184). 37

38 There are cultural differences, but they emerge in a relational field: the 38
 39 reproduction of cultural differences is in a field of interdependencies, imbrications 39
 40 and relatedness (Preaud 2009: 119). Importantly, there is no site of neat convergence, 40
 41 for example, where state policies and bureaucracy and local difference and 41
 42 divergence unite; rather, it is in the thickness of everyday life that people navigate 42
 43 the effects of power-laden relational processes – be they familial, local, regional, 43
 44 national or global. In this shared social domain, socio-economic disadvantage – or 44

1 what is too commonly thought of as the ‘problem’ (and sometimes the promise) 1
 2 of Indigenous culture – emerges. It is in *our* present that so-called traditional 2
 3 culture is harnessed as a resource for ameliorating social issues. Why? Because 3
 4 strong, healthy life is made from, among other things, a world that is meaningful, 4
 5 shared and valued by self and others. The festivals that are the focus of this chapter 5
 6 represent a public space within contemporary Australia where ‘traditional’ or 6
 7 customary culture takes precedence and structures exchanges and events – with, I 7
 8 would argue, the express purpose of enlivening and enriching life. 8

9 The association of non-Indigenous people (particularly settler colonials) 9
 10 with ‘modernity’ and Indigenous people with ‘tradition’ or ‘not modern’ (yet) is 10
 11 commonplace. Arguably, it is particular practices or performances of Indigeneity 11
 12 that are categorized as the pre-modern, to which liberal settler societies then 12
 13 attribute aesthetic-moral value. As Weiner and Glaskin (2006, quoted in 13
 14 Preaud 2009: 42) write: 14

15
 16 The emergence of a domain called (variously) the ‘customary’, the ‘traditional’ 16
 17 and/or ‘the Indigenous’ is made visible chiefly in the bi-cultural context of the 17
 18 modern nation-state. The ‘invention’ of tradition is not, as the phrase might 18
 19 suggest, an essentially autogenously generated transformation from within a 19
 20 community perceived to be spatially and culturally distinct. It is a gloss for a 20
 21 particular moment in inter-cultural relations, especially of an asymmetric nature. 21
 22

23 We are in a particular inter-cultural moment – albeit a long one – whereby 23
 24 commentators, public intellectuals and politicians alike worry that traditional 24
 25 culture is limiting and delaying Indigenous people’s entry into modernity. To return 25
 26 to Morton (2011: 5) as one such example, he finishes his article with ‘as we move 26
 27 beyond the era of what Pearson calls “the campaign blackfella”, we will be more 27
 28 ready to accept that the most important problem shaping research is the desirability 28
 29 of Aborigines entering more fully into modernity’. For many, I think this would 29
 30 be perceived as a reasonable expectation of research and, more generally, public 30
 31 policy. However, the underlying assumptions are that there are two separate social 31
 32 domains – the Indigenous and non-Indigenous – with the former either outside 32
 33 or standing at the threshold of modernity. I would contend that the more pressing 33
 34 scholarly concern should be the study and conceptual unravelling of this damaging 34
 35 false binary. 35

36 The intellectual project of Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2006) monograph *The Empire* 36
 37 *of Love* is to critique the accompanying discourses of individual freedom and 37
 38 social constraint that circulate in settler-colonial societies. The idea of freedom, 38
 39 the fantasy of individual choice, in Povinelli’s theoretical arrangement, is 39
 40 produced within a liberal assemblage of conflicting cultural modes of modernity 40
 41 and tradition – or what she refers to as autological and genealogical imaginaries 41
 42 (also see Probyn 2008): 42

43
 44

1 By the *autological subject*, I am referring to discourse, practices, and fantasies 1
 2 about self-making, self-sovereignty, and the value of individual freedom 2
 3 associated with the Enlightenment project of contractual constitutional 3
 4 democracy and capitalism. By *genealogical society*, I am referring to discourses, 4
 5 practices, and fantasies about social constraints placed on the autological subject 5
 6 by various kinds of inheritances. (Povinelli 2006: 4) 6
 7 7
 8 She sets herself the assignment of understanding how these discourses animate 8
 9 and enmesh ethical and normative claims about the governance of love, sociality 9
 10 and bodies, and in so doing operate as strategies of power that contribute to the 10
 11 material conditions that over-invest in some to live prosperous and optimistic 11
 12 lives, while others are diminished – ‘the power to cripple and rot certain worlds’ 12
 13 (Povinelli 2006: 9). Despite the fact that socialities can be radically different, I 13
 14 would argue that there are not two competing cultural modes. The genealogical 14
 15 web of kinship relations to human and non-human worlds, ancestral traditions and 15
 16 attendant obligations give life deep meaning to many Indigenous peoples, while 16
 17 settler liberal subjects are largely formed within social systems that privilege 17
 18 self-fashioning discourses. The reality, as Elspeth Probyn (2008: 235) writes, 18
 19 is that ‘we live viscerally between interpellation and freedom’. Settler liberal 19
 20 governance promulgates freedom and choice, while responsibility is not only 20
 21 to the self but bears the traces of genealogical constraint: self-fashioning within 21
 22 the limits of family and community values makes a good and proper citizen. 22
 23 However, the state recognizes autological – modern – subjects if they conform to 23
 24 the Western imaginary of agency, citizenship and responsibility (Preaud 2009: 57). 24
 25 Concurrently, the state perceives others – in this case, many Indigenous peoples, 25
 26 whose agency, responsibilities and humanness derive from alternative sociality 26
 27 and order, human and more-than-human world – as beholden to tradition, so thus 27
 28 not being autonomous, fully modern agents. The discourses of autological subject 28
 29 and genealogical society are a claim on what makes us human, and they contribute 29
 30 to securing settler liberal power and reproducing it as normative (Povinelli 2006). 30
 31 The discourses of modernity and tradition obscure the distribution of power and 31
 32 value within the Australian state, and the complex navigations and inventiveness 32
 33 that compose the quotidian for minorities in intercultural domains. My concern here 33
 34 is the dilemma for Indigenous people of negotiating the discourses of autological 34
 35 subject and genealogical society, and how this impacts upon their everyday lives. 35
 36 These very lifeworlds are routinely not taken into account when ‘culture’ is 36
 37 abstracted from its material and discursive relations – be it to praise or problematize. 37
 38 These discourses cannot be understood outside of people’s familiar lives. They 38
 39 are not a set of rules that one applies to life; rather, Indigeneity enfolds in dense 39
 40 social worlds (Povinelli 2006: 85). Lifeworlds – or thick life, to borrow from 40
 41 Povinelli – generate sociality, which has its own local obligations, responsibilities, 41
 42 social identities, agency and hierarchies. Povinelli’s goal is to understand how the 42
 43 discourses of modernity and tradition shape social life, so we can begin to ‘formulate 43
 44 a positive political program’ – a politics of thick life – ‘in which the density of social 44

1 representation is increased to meet the density of actual social worlds' (2006: 21). 1
 2 I wish to follow her. Arguably, what are commonly referred to as customary or 2
 3 traditional cultural practices are Indigenous relational ontologies, being privileged 3
 4 and performed in shared social domains.⁵ Where else are the spaces of enunciation 4
 5 or performance of contemporary Indigeneity if not here and now? What are the 5
 6 experiments in living that emerge from Indigenous peoples contesting modernity? 6

7 To quarrel with and expose the inequitable power of Western visions of 7
 8 modernity, post-colonial scholars are attentive to alternative or hybrid modernities. 8
 9 If modernity is best understood as an attitude of questioning the present, as 9
 10 Gaonkar (1999: 13) assumes, then modernity is everywhere. All modernities 10
 11 are contextual. Western modernity, with its distinctive moral and scientific 11
 12 vision, distinguished from its own ancient past and non-Western societies, is 12
 13 associated with the development of industrial capitalism, which ushered in social 13
 14 and economic transformations, and with them the production of new forms of 14
 15 subjectivity (Gaonkar 1999: 15; Knauff 2002). As others have argued, this is not 15
 16 modernity but the history of the West, which is also a history of exploitation and 16
 17 domination of Indigenous peoples justified by racial logics of primitivism and 17
 18 tribalism (Chakrabarty 2000; Povinelli 2006). The intellectual, political terrain 18
 19 from which I draw is that of postcolonial, African, Indigenous and subaltern studies 19
 20 organizations, artists, writers and thinkers, who have interrogated the Western 20
 21 construction of modernity as power-laden, secular, disembodied and separate 21
 22 from the non-human world (e.g. see Ahluwalia 2010; Arabena 2006; Fanon 1963; 22
 23 Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre 2007; Marika 1999; Mbembe 2001; 23
 24 Moreton-Robinson 2007; Povinelli 2002). Critiquing the commitment of European 24
 25 political thought to the human as ontologically singular, Chakrabarty writes: 25

26
 27 I take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human, and think from 27
 28 the assumption that the question of being human involves the question of being 28
 29 with gods and spirits. Being human means ... Discovering 'the possibility of 29
 30 calling upon God [or gods] without being under an obligation to first establish 30
 31 his [or their] reality'. (2000: 16) 31
 32

33 The agency, love, wiliness and creativity of spirits, ancestors, country – the 33
 34 more-than-human world – are called upon, or rather made manifest in the 34
 35

36
 37 ⁵ According to Preaud, relational ontology refers to 'each person or agency is uniquely 37
 38 articulating constellations of relationships that define his/her/its being: here singularities do 38
 39 not derive from individual internal characteristics but from the ordering of a particular 39
 40 network (or rather sets of networks if we add to kinships networks of places, histories, and 40
 41 myth) and ways of navigating through it: each agent thus appears as a moving node of a 41
 42 network and, indeed, it is the very condition of their *being*' (2009: 123–4). He goes on to 42
 43 argue that relational ontology is a 'general property of living systems and not specifically 43
 44 attached to particular segments of the human population and it is from a relational nexus of 44
 45 heterogeneous elements that singular positions are articulated' (2009: 134).

1 world, because they are vital to many Indigenous people's relational ontology. 1
 2 If a meaningful relationship with a particular 'country' is constitutive of being 2
 3 and self, then it cannot be left out or put aside for the so-called prize of secular 3
 4 modernity (Preaud 2009: 29). Articulating maligned or largely unrecognized (or 4
 5 unrecognizable) alternative ontologies into spaces dominated and mediated by the 5
 6 liberal settler state produces contestation and creativity. In this sense, Indigenous 6
 7 cultural festivals are expressions and generation of, as well as experiments 7
 8 in, Indigenous modernity. 8

9 Across Australia, and globally, Indigenous cultural festivals are growing in 9
 10 number and influence, ranging from small community events to those of national 10
 11 and international reach and significance (Phipps and Slater 2010). There are literally 11
 12 hundreds of Indigenous festivals and celebrations in Australia, most of which are 12
 13 local events driven by community organizations and individuals, with very little 13
 14 funding or outside support, with a focus on contemporary cultural practices: 14
 15 sport, music, art or 'traditional' culture. The driving force of these events is often, 15
 16 in mainstream speak, community well-being: the gathering together of people to 16
 17 celebrate, share and remember, and clear a public space that is dedicated to the 17
 18 values and aspirations of the people and place. Notably, as Michelle Duffy (2005) 18
 19 suggests, because festivals are structured events, they bring groups and communities 19
 20 together to mark out particular socio-political, historical and cultural affiliations. 20
 21 Like mainstream festivals, Indigenous festivals are deployed as a means to enhance 21
 22 community creativity, belonging and well-being, and thus nourish community 22
 23 resilience. Scholars have recognized festivals and community celebrations as 23
 24 important events that provide both material and symbolic means of responding 24
 25 to and coping with change (Gibson and Connell 2011; Gibson and Stewart 2009; 25
 26 Mulligan et al. 2006). And many Indigenous Australians face relentless change. 26

27 Historically, Indigenous people have participated in festivals commemorating 27
 28 nationhood, and staged counter-festivals to protest colonization and to celebrate 28
 29 survival. They are a means of entering into dialogue with mainstream Australia 29
 30 and testimony to ongoing political struggles (Kleinert 1999: 345). The annual 30
 31 Survival Day concerts staged across Australia unsettle and challenge official 31
 32 Australia Day celebrations, and have grown out of a long history of utilizing 32
 33 public performance to remind broader Australia of the continuing Indigenous 33
 34 presence. For contemporary audiences, performance has become an increasingly 34
 35 familiar aspect of cultural practice among Indigenous peoples. Such events are a 35
 36 testimony to ongoing political struggles, and for both Indigenous performers and 36
 37 their audience they provide an important context for the contemporary negotiation 37
 38 and transmission of Indigenous people's, and more broadly Australian, identities 38
 39 (Myers, quoted in Kleinert 1999). 39

40 In recent years, several major Indigenous festivals have emerged, including 40
 41 Garma Festival (North-East Arnhem Land, Northern Territory), The Dreaming 41
 42 (South-East Queensland), Barunga Festival (Northern Territory), Laura Aboriginal 42
 43 Dance Festival (Cape York, Queensland), Coming of the Light (Thursday Island, 43
 44 Torres Strait Islands) and KALACC Festival (Kimberley, Western Australia). 44

1 In 2003, in recognition of the vibrancy and significance of Indigenous festivals, 1
 2 the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade funded a touring photographic 2
 3 exhibition, *Kickin' up Dust: Contemporary Festivals of Indigenous Australia*, 3
 4 featuring images of the Torres Strait Cultural Festival (Thursday Island), Stompem 4
 5 Ground (Broome, Western Australia), Larapuna (Tasmania) and Garma festivals 5
 6 (Payne 2003). The lineage of all of these festivals is extremely intercultural: from 6
 7 ceremony practised on country to rodeos, sports days and country shows, to the 7
 8 glamour of international arts festivals and a long history of arts and culture being 8
 9 deployed to ameliorate social issues. 9

10 In recent years, there has been an increasing academic, government and 10
 11 philanthropic interest in community celebrations, and particularly in the relationship 11
 12 between community art and well-being (see Mulligan et al. 2006; Phipps and 12
 13 Slater 2010). In turn, philanthropic and government agencies increasingly are 13
 14 receiving applications for funding for Indigenous festivals. Notably, the Australia 14
 15 Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board (ATSIAB) (2008), as a 15
 16 part of its industry development strategy, Celebrations, is supporting festival events 16
 17 in recognition of their artistic, cultural and economic benefits for Indigenous peoples. 17

18 Telstra Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the Australian telco, Telstra, 18
 19 initiated the three-year research project for which I was primary researcher, after 19
 20 identifying a need for evidence-based research.⁶ The foundation was receiving 20
 21 numerous funding applications that relied upon anecdotal evidence to demonstrate 21
 22 the connection between Indigenous celebrations and strengthening social well- 22
 23 being (Phipps and Slater 2010). What became clear during the research was 23
 24 the number of government and non-government bodies that were initiating, or 24
 25 responding to, the thirst for Indigenous community celebrations and events. 25
 26 However, differing pressures, ambitions and agendas often drive funding agencies 26
 27 and Indigenous communities. Add to this the fact that that festivals are run by 27
 28 diverse and divergent bodies – be they community agencies, such as sport and 28
 29 recreational or arts workers, Indigenous organisations or councils, professional 29
 30 events managers, or energized and passionate individuals – all with varied capacities 30
 31 and resources. All events, no matter how big or small, rely on volunteers – be 31
 32 they local or from elsewhere – and the goodwill of community – individuals and 32
 33 organizations – elders' and traditional owners' approval and support, compliance 33
 34 with council regulations and some form of sponsorship, even if it is the local 34
 35 shop. This is quite apart from, as any arts/community sector worker knows, the 35
 36 relentless demands of applying for funds, reporting and acquittal. This is all to say 36
 37 that Indigenous festivals are complex contemporary events, which makes them 37
 38 captivating to study – and no doubt challenging and rewarding work. 38

39

40

41 6 This project started in 2007 and won the support of the Australian Research 41
 42 Council under the Linkage grants scheme, 'Globalising Indigeneity: Indigenous cultural 42
 43 festivals and wellbeing in Australia and the Asia-Pacific' (LP0882877, 2008–10), partner 43
 44 organization, Telstra Foundation (see Phipps and Slater 2010). 44

1 Indigenous festivals, as Rosita Henry (2008) writes, have grown in tandem with 1
 2 state policies that foster the celebration of culture as a further means to govern people. 2
 3 For all the positive aspects of Indigenous festivals – like all arenas of Indigenous 3
 4 lives – they operate within a web of government and non-governmental agencies and 4
 5 corporate agendas, values and power relations. Indeed, funding and supporting such 5
 6 events could be regarded, in some instances, as cunning forms of governmentality. 6
 7 Henry (2008: 53) points out that ‘the state deceptively asserts its presence *within* the 7
 8 festivals. Indeed, agents and agencies of the state colonize the festivals, so that the 8
 9 festivals become prime sites for recognition of the “effects” of the state’. 9

10 This can most readily be observed in what events and programs are funded. For 10
 11 example, at the Barunga Festival, the Department of Lands and Planning’s Road 11
 12 Safety Branch sponsors the ‘Road Safety Song Competition’. Local bands become 12
 13 the medium to deliver government directives ‘about safe and appropriate behaviour 13
 14 for drivers, passengers and pedestrians’ (Barunga Festival 2010). Most of the bands 14
 15 perform their usual repertoire with the addition of lyrics such as ‘don’t drink and 15
 16 drive’, ‘wear your seatbelt’ and so on. For all the import of road safety awareness, 16
 17 the means of delivery are paternalistic, and it is assumed that the problem is one 17
 18 of ‘education and promotion’, and that people only need to learn ‘proper’ conduct 18
 19 and they will adjust their behaviour. (Notably, the competition is popular but that 19
 20 might have little to do with the ‘awareness’ campaign and much more to do with the 20
 21 opportunity it affords to perform in front of countrymen.) However, partaking in such 21
 22 events should not simply be interpreted as submitting to the process of assimilation 22
 23 or naivety. Indigenous festivals and public performances have long been creative 23
 24 means to negotiate and intervene in forms of state power, to mark out a continuing 24
 25 presence and legitimacy, and to assert some agency in a rapidly changing world 25
 26 dominated by mainstream values and bureaucratic power (Henry 2008: 54). 26

27 Since colonization, there has been a history of Aboriginal public performance 27
 28 for non-Indigenous people. However, they have been received primarily as modes 28
 29 of ‘cultural’ tourism or entertainment, representative of a ‘primitive’ age or dying 29
 30 culture. Kleinert (1999: 347) writes that: 30

31
 32 Colonial history is replete with a rich history of such performances. However, the 32
 33 importance of these cultural representations has been largely overlooked, either 33
 34 bracketed off from history as anthropology ... appropriated as theatre, viewed 34
 35 primarily as a form of entertainment and a spectacle of an exotic primitive Other. 35
 36 36

37 Françoise Dussart (2000: 76) argues that the forced sedentarization of Central 37
 38 Desert Aborigines, which imposed inter-group residency on various Aboriginal 38
 39 societies, resulted in public ritual becoming an important tool for inter-Aboriginal 39
 40 engagement. At this time, non-Indigenous viewers other than anthropologists were 40
 41 rare. During the Protectionist era, mainstream community festivals and events, 41
 42 such as rodeos and rural shows, provided an opportunity for Indigenous peoples 42
 43 to embrace the performative potential of such events for political engagement 43
 44 with settler society (Henry 2000: 587). However, with the introduction of various 44

1 *Aboriginal Land Rights Acts*, public performance became a ‘kind of legal tool’, 1
2 due to the legislation requiring proof of genealogical and religious connections to 2
3 the land (Dussart 2000: 76). Government officials thus became a new audience 3
4 for public ceremonies. The socio-political role and effectiveness of these cultural 4
5 performances for Indigenous people went largely unacknowledged by non- 5
6 Indigenous audiences until the last two decades, when the Australian public more 6
7 broadly began to appreciate aspects of ‘traditional culture’. More importantly, 7
8 however, the state’s recognition of the continuance of Indigenous land ownership 8
9 and governance saw the emergence of Indigenous organizations – such as land 9
10 councils and various cultural-political bodies – in which customary law became 10
11 further entangled with bureaucracy and state-based process. As discussed 11
12 earlier, this produces fields of interrelation and co-location, or the intercultural, 12
13 in which Indigenous people must navigate asymmetrical political power and 13
14 competing social identities and boundaries. Settler liberal governments’ intrusion 14
15 into, and bureaucratization of, Indigenous lifeworlds, alongside mainstream 15
16 embracing of Indigenous cultural performance, produces new contexts for the 16
17 articulation (and transfiguration) of ‘Indigeneity’ into the Australian political 17
18 space (Preaud 2009: 32). Festivals might also be thought of as experiments in and 18
19 expressions of the agency of ‘country’. 19

20 The Indigenous cultural festivals to which I wish to draw attention are those that 20
21 I understand to be an innovative extension of what is known as ritual or ceremonial 21
22 life, within the transmutations and constraints of settler liberal colonialism 22
23 (Preaud 2009: 49). As noted, festivals I have attended and researched, such as 23
24 Garma, Laura Aboriginal Dance and KALACC festivals, inform my analysis. 24
25 These three festivals are held in regions where there are discrete Aboriginal lands 25
26 recognized by the state, and where ceremonial life and ‘traditional’ culture and 26
27 languages remain strong and exert significant influence on state and corporate 27
28 activities. Broadly speaking, they have a similar purpose: to keep culture strong. 28
29 KALACC festival is held every few years in different locations across the Kimberley, 29
30 Western Australia. It takes place over five days, and attracts up to 3,000 people. 30
31 The Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre (KALACC), whose objective 31
32 is to strengthen Kimberley Aboriginal social, cultural and legal values, organizes 32
33 the event. The event gathers Indigenous people from across the Kimberley to learn 33
34 and maintain songs and dances, to sustain culture and to demonstrate sovereignty. 34
35 The event is closed to tourists and visitors, and only a few select influential people 35
36 from outside the region are invited (KALACC 2011). The annual Garma Festival 36
37 of Traditional Culture is one of Australia’s premier Indigenous cultural festivals. 37
38 It is an initiative of the Yolŋu Indigenous people of North-East Arnhem Land, and 38
39 is held on traditional lands, Gulkula, near the mining town of Nhulunbuy in the 39
40 Northern Territory. At Garma, Yolhu culture is practised and shared through visual 40
41 arts, Bunggul (traditional dance), Manikay (traditional song), contemporary music, 41
42 workshops and forums, and men and women’s cultural tourism programs. Garma is 42
43 open to tourists and visitors, but only through an application and invitation process 43
44 (Slater 2006). Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival began over 30 years ago, and is held 44

1 biannually 15 kilometres from the township of Laura, Cape York, Queensland, on 1
 2 Kuku Yalanji land. The three-day program is a celebration of the region's Indigenous 2
 3 cultures, primarily featuring dance groups from across Cape York and into the 3
 4 Torres Strait, and has become one of the largest gatherings of Indigenous people in 4
 5 Australia. It is open to tourists (Slater 2010). 5

6 There are, as mentioned, hundreds of events scattered across the country, many 6
 7 of them small, local festivals with the express purpose of cultural maintenance and 7
 8 transmission. Notably, as much as they are highly intercultural events, festivals 8
 9 are not only showcases for or spectacles of the remnants of Indigenous traditions 9
 10 or contemporary artistic expression, but in many cases are temporal, material and 10
 11 socio-cultural spaces in which Indigenous people affirm and maintain the ontological 11
 12 primacy and agency of ancestral lands and beings. There are different categories or 12
 13 levels of Indigenous knowledge – public, sacred or secret-sacred – often referred 13
 14 to as inside/outside, which designates the appropriate level of access and openness 14
 15 of the knowledge to 'outsiders' or those who are not holders of the law. The 15
 16 manifestations of ancestral beings or country at festivals – be it through song, dance, 16
 17 designs, objects or stories – is at the level of public knowledge (Preaud 2009: 44; 17
 18 Magowan 2000). The KALACC festival, Preaud (2009: 45) writes, 'can be seen as 18
 19 an extension of the movement of secularization of ritual power or, to put it differently, 19
 20 the projection of ritual practices into novel situations and sets of relationships'. 20
 21 Festivals are another means by which Australia, on the local, regional and national 21
 22 levels, is affirmed, contested and reproduced as Indigenous country. An alternative 22
 23 modernity is actualized, and the more-than-human world of country, spirits and 23
 24 ancestors materializes in shared social domains, where it can test the secular modern 24
 25 commitment to and desire for a world of the ontologically singular. 25

26 Cultural festivals reterritorialize the state and non-Indigenous peoples into 26
 27 an alternative sociality. One of the express purposes of festivals is as agents for 27
 28 transforming relationships with settler Australia – be it government or citizens. In 28
 29 these spaces, Indigenous and mainstream Australians are positioned as equivalent, 29
 30 and 'our' lifeworlds are co-located and entangled. What distinguishes and gathers 30
 31 'us' is Indigenous law and governance, largely made prominent in these spaces 31
 32 through ceremony, but it is also asserted in a variety of other ways, such as meetings, 32
 33 talks and workshops. For a few days, the imaginary notion of 'we' is re-composed. 33
 34 Countrymen are the hosts, all others are guests and 'we' are interpolated into an 34
 35 assemblage in which 'country' is a, if not *the*, primary actor; power relations shape- 35
 36 shift. I am not suggesting that the significance, or affect, of this is recognized or 36
 37 responded to in the same way by all: if one has little experience in particular forms 37
 38 of sociality then attentiveness and humility might just be one of the best options. 38
 39 What does it feel like? What are the possibilities? How are notions such as respect, 39
 40 reconciliation and equality tested in these places? I am proposing that the festivals to 40
 41 which I draw attention here are an experiment in anti-colonial relationality. 41

42 Cultural festivals are creative, and I would especially argue very generous, 42
 43 ways in which Indigenous people have made themselves present in the world and 43
 44 continue to challenge a history that had rendered them absent (Henry 2000: 586). 44

1 To be ‘rendered absent’ from history is to be made marginal to the civic body, which 1
2 reinforces the values of the settler, colonial culture. In turn, Indigenous people’s 2
3 incorporation into the national body too often comes at the cost of their being 3
4 subject to and limited by mainstream discourses and representations of modernity 4
5 and tradition. In so doing, the socio-cultural differences that are life-sustaining 5
6 and generative do not inform the very government policies that are being created 6
7 to improve Indigenous lives. Indigenous peoples and cultures have long been 7
8 denigrated, misunderstood, discounted and appropriated, made meaningful or 8
9 meaningless through a colonial lens, but rarely recognized as material expressions 9
10 of world-views and sociality that anchor and tend life. I am in no way suggesting 10
11 that festivals are the only or remaining space where ‘culture’ is performed – of 11
12 course, this is in no way true: culture is lived in the everyday. Furthermore there 12
13 are an abundance of ‘cultural’ programs and initiatives that are developed and 13
14 supported by government and non-government agencies in conjunction with 14
15 Indigenous communities as a means of addressing social issues. However, what is 15
16 well documented – and most especially etched into the lives of Indigenous people – 16
17 is the assimilative pressures upon peoples who are embedded within a dominant 17
18 culture. A vital component of sustaining and supporting socio-cultural well-being 18
19 is the creation of public spaces in which Indigenous values, hopes, ambitions and 19
20 imagined futures can be asserted over and against the social construction of reality 20
21 by state practices and the mainstream (Morrissey et al. 2007: 245). 21

22 Scholars have noted the importance of performance for Indigenous cultural 22
23 politics, most especially knowledge transfer and the renewal and assertion 23
24 of Indigenous identity (Henry 2008; Myers 1994; Phipps and Slater 2010; 24
25 Slater 2007). In public discourse, it has become distressingly familiar to hear of 25
26 inter-generational breakdown in Indigenous communities, and the associated social 26
27 and cultural distress. It is well understood that a sense of identity is a prerequisite 27
28 for mental health and, as Morrissey (2007: 249) and others argue, cultural identity 28
29 depends not only on access to culture and heritage, but also on opportunities 29
30 for cultural expression and cultural endorsement within society’s institutions. 30
31 Groundbreaking reports such as the national report of the Royal Commission into 31
32 Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) and *Bringing Them Home* (National Inquiry 32
33 into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their 33
34 Families 1997) have highlighted the devastating role that fractured or lost cultural 34
35 identity has played in the lives of Indigenous people. When I refer to cultural 35
36 transmission, I am not only discussing the teaching of particular practices, such 36
37 as traditional dance or painting, but much more importantly the inter-generational 37
38 transfer of social relations and worlds of meaning. Here I follow Tim Ingold (2000) 38
39 and Martin Preaud, who conceptualize the transmission of cultural knowledge ‘not 39
40 in terms of a set of contents passed on from one generation to the next but as a 40
41 nexus of relations generated in the immanent field of country, or the environment’ 41
42 (Ingold, quoted in Preaud 2009: 101). To return to an earlier discussion, if one’s 42
43 social identity – one’s ‘beingness’ – is constitutive of meaningful relationship with 43
44 ‘country’, and networks of kinship with the human and non-human – that is, a 44

1 particular cosmological order – then it is vital to life itself. In the context about 1
 2 which I write, the import of cultural transmission is to maintain, bind and actualize 2
 3 social relations to ‘country’ in ever-transforming social fields, not to return to a 3
 4 mythical, pristine, pre-colonial past (Preaud 2009: 109). Cultural festivals are 4
 5 one such *route* for reinvigorating significant relationships and social identities, 5
 6 with the express purpose of strengthening young people’s capacity to navigate the 6
 7 demands of a deeply intercultural world, and to be innovators and agents of the 7
 8 new roles and possibilities generated in our shared present. 8

9 If I were to attempt an answer to my own question, ‘Why does that old man 9
 10 dance?’, I could simply answer, ‘So his children’s children can also dance, or be 10
 11 known by, their country’. But this is to say little if one separates particular practices 11
 12 from local networks, relations and conditions of production. Public formulations of 12
 13 Indigenous culture often have it as practices somehow exercised in discreet social 13
 14 domains, subject to corruption by modernity but not of modernity. The discourse 14
 15 of the conflicting cultural modes of modernity and tradition operates to obscure 15
 16 complex fields of interrelation, co-location and power relations in which people’s 16
 17 lives are embedded. It produces the ‘Indigenous problem’, and the solution as a 17
 18 movement more fully into secular, liberal modernity. In so doing, we fail to attend 18
 19 to the complex navigations and experiments in living that constitute marginalized 19
 20 peoples every day, and more so to care for their hopes, values, pain, love and 20
 21 desired futures. Cultural festivals are creative assemblages composed of and from 21
 22 the pressures and promise of a globalizing, intercultural world. That old man, I 22
 23 would contend, was affirming festivals as contemporary practices for nurturing 23
 24 the ontological primacy of land and alternative forms of sociality. Why? Because 24
 25 it constitutes their social reality, and people will fight (however tactically) for their 25
 26 worlds of meaning. In this sense, I am arguing that cultural festivals are peaceful 26
 27 weapons in a continuing ontological political contest. 27

28 28
 29 29

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