



INTRODUCTION

Aborigines have invaded England on two occasions. In January 1978, Aboriginal activists Paul Coe and Cecil Patten, together with white lawyer Bruce Miles, set out from the English shore in a small rowboat. Their plan was to row several kilometres out and then return to the shore to take possession of the island by planting the Aboriginal flag, as the British had done at Farm Cove in 1788. This they managed, although in poor weather the boat capsized, nearly drowning Miles, and there were very few people to record the symbolism of the sodden event; it is mostly forgotten in the annals of the Aboriginal movement. Ten years later, on the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the British, Aboriginal activist and storyteller Burnum Burnum (Harry Penrith) repeated the act with much greater public relations success: widely reported in Britain and Australia, Burnum's actions were in sharp contrast to the celebrations taking place in Sydney Harbour.¹

These protesters were a long way from home, but wanted to draw attention to the origins of the colonial relationship between European settlers and the original inhabitants of Australia. Their actions showed how arbitrary the British act of possession was, while confirming the unwillingness of Australians to respond to indigenous claims for recognition and justice. These acts form part of a long history in which Aboriginal and Islander peoples, or their advocates, have gone outside or beyond the Australian nation-state, physically and ideologically, in order to pursue civil and indigenous rights and improve the lives of indigenous communities. I call this history *indigenous transnationalism* and it is the subject of this book.

What is indigenous transnationalism?

Transnationalism is an old phenomenon but a relatively new type of enquiry. Even before nation-states existed, communal boundaries had been traversed by both material and ideas. Mobility, trade and communication are the conduits of transnationalism, enabling flows of people, goods, skills, diseases, lifestyles and beliefs, as well as fostering common interests among people in different locations. Human communities, including modern nation-states, exist because of the physical boundaries of geography, ecology and biology, as well as the intangible boundaries of culture and national history. However, none of these boundaries are permanently fixed. The bounded political cultures of nation-states are not simply produced by asserting and defending territorial boundaries but require openness to certain transnational phenomena (in the case of Australia's origins, Anglo-Celtic migration and British finance, for example) and closure to others (treaty-making and non-white migration).

In contemporary discussions, the term 'globalisation' is often applied to explain anything that exceeds national boundaries.² However, the subtleties of human experience are lost in this definition, because it implies that all cross-border activity can be seen with a global lens, and understood as some combination of 'planetary integration, globally recurrent stratification, and/or worldwide isomorphism'.³ The insistence on a global scale to account for transboundary flows and connections forecloses on other understandings that focus on the history and character of the connections themselves. For urban sociologist Michael Smith, transnational approaches are distinct from the type of globalisation research that assumes the nation-state is in decline. By contrast, he sees:

... *transnational* social relations as 'anchored in' while transcending one or more nation-states ... the transnationalist discourse insists on the continuing significance of borders, state policies, and national identities even as these are often transgressed by transnational communication circuits and social practices.⁴

Transnational analysis demonstrates that nation-states do not completely account for the reality of human experience, yet retain great power and importance in peoples' lives.

Groups of people engaged in transnational activism do so for several reasons. First, the problems being tackled (such as pollution or underdevelopment) do not necessarily originate in the territories where

their effects are faced. Secondly, processes of collective action rely heavily on the exchange of information and comparison between groups in many territories. Finally, the goal of this activism is often to create universal standards to which local practices should conform.⁵

This book argues that history of indigenous Australians' activism in defence of their rights can be better understood if we attend to its transnational dimensions. The Australian nation-state, I suggest, is a space criss-crossed by ideas, values and norms that have arisen elsewhere and have influenced indigenous activism. The 'Aboriginal predicament' thus cannot be understood if thought of as a strictly national matter. How it is not, and why that matters, are questions the book addresses.

The method of the book is basically historical. It is possible to see the transnational links in a chronology of some of the main events in indigenous Australian history. The book reconstructs these episodes with an eye to the links being made at each moment. Some of what is presented here deals with events already examined by Australian historians, such as the London-based humanitarianism of the mid-19th century and its influence on colonial policies regarding Aborigines and land. The book reconsiders and reclassifies these histories using a transnational approach that treats the flows of ideas and people and their effects as the central issue. Other episodes, such as the extensive travelling of radical indigenous activists from the late 1960s on, have never been properly studied and so the book also contains new research conducted from a transnational perspective.⁶

But simply observing the movement of ideologies and activists across borders, and the connections and solidarity between them, is an insufficient account of indigenous transnationalism. We need to understand the motivations of those making the connections. I use the figure of a 'higher authority' in order to account for the way indigenous peoples have appealed to external powers in order to restrain colonial and national authorities and to have their claims heard. Part of the term's appeal is its refusal of what has been the dominant approach in international relations – realism – in which the sovereignty of states is restrained by no higher authority.

Higher authorities are both ideological and institutional manifestations of universal moral order. This makes sense because indigenous Australians (and others who identify as indigenous) are numerical minorities amid large settler populations. Indigenous peoples' use of violence was always met with a punitive colonial reaction. As colonial power was consolidated, indigenous peoples found other ways of expressing their sense of injustice and organising to that end. For indigenous

peoples, this has involved presenting their claims within much broader moral and legal contexts than the colony or nation provides for.

One approach is to distinguish between two kinds of 'higher authority', either a set of broad norms or universal values (such as Christian morality or human rights), or, alternatively, a powerful body to enforce such norms. Both are transnational in the sense used above: a set of norms that are known to be widely shared through the links between different bounded communities; or the power of an external body to exert its influence across particular communal boundaries. Yet, we can also think of a productive relationship between the two, where appeals to particular norms and values help create and legitimise an enforcing body and where using international organisations and institutions helps spread awareness of and support for the values on which they are founded.

The book argues that indigenous transnationalism involves appeals to higher authorities in this productive double sense. Moreover, it reveals a desire to make sense of and ameliorate the difficulties of life in doing so. Classical indigenous economies and societies were integrated closely with the natural world. People made sense of their vulnerability to the fluctuations of the environment by acknowledging a cosmological order in which all things were related through common creation.

Post-contact transnationalism has sought to place the suffering of indigenous peoples in a moral world in which Europeans also exist. Israeli writer Avishai Margalit has observed of such beliefs, 'that in another place or another time there exists, or will exist, a moral community that will listen to their testimony'; these are acts of faith.⁷ Indeed, we need to include a spiritual dimension to our analysis if we are to understand how indigenous peoples have come to terms with their circumstances in ways that enabled political actions of various forms. The necessity of the world as it is, as it is oppressive and marginalising, the 'reality' of progress, development and the imperatives of nation-building, have all been met with calls to higher authorities of various types. Consequently, the book will argue that indigenous transnationalism is not an opportunistic political movement, but indicates many indigenous peoples' commitment to a universal order of experience and justice; one in which indigenous and other peoples can co-exist.

Higher authorities also reinforce the contingency of the bounded social units we call nation-states. Sociologist Sanjeev Khagram has suggested that transnationalism is 'the rule not the exception ... the underlying, albeit fluid and variable, reality rather than a derivative by-product'.⁸ Our 'countries' are always under construction; there is no

mythical past when this was not true. Yet, the book retains the centrality of the Australian nation-state to the concerns and aspirations of indigenous peoples living in its territory. Although it is critical of the way Australia has historically responded to indigenous claims, it is not in any sense a call to abandon the nation-state as a context for political action. The argument is not intended to supersede solely domestic accounts of the problems faced by indigenous peoples or the responses they and others have made to those problems. It is rather an addition to the current debate within Australia that is too narrowly construed. It is an argument that purely domestic accounts of the Aboriginal predicament are not adequate, especially as the processes of nation-state transformation continue to accelerate.

At its simplest then, transnationalism is the crossing of the boundaries of social units. The centrality of nation-states in contemporary politics suggests that the bulk of any analysis will be on the crossing of national boundaries. However, this book argues that the motivations underlying indigenous transnationalism both precede and exceed colonialisation and can be found in the way that indigenous peoples lived before 1788.

Prior to the settlement of Europeans in the south-western Pacific, indigenous peoples were engaged in patterns of encounter across and along boundaries. These are visible in indigenous norms about access to resources, diplomacy and mobility across others' territories, in trade and the sharing of culture. Moreover, these practices of negotiation brought some indigenous Australians into contact with people from South-East Asia. We can recover this history and reflect on the principles of classical transnational relations.

The bulk of the book deals with indigenous interactions with universal ideologies of justice after European settlement, and particularly those ideologies with and against which indigenous peoples forged new identities and relations with the colonies and nation-state. A series of introduced ideologies – humanitarianism, evangelical Christianity, communism – connected indigenous individuals and communities with much larger processes and ideas of morality. While the imported universal doctrines often supported colonial and state intentions, at times they ran counter to the basic logic of colonisation and gave indigenous peoples a sense that the colonists could be exposed to their own moral and philosophical commitments. In so doing, this encouraged new forms of indigenous politicisation.

Little of this, however, restrained or influenced the colonies or the nation until the creation of an international regime of human rights and the simultaneous consolidation of the global economy. This liberal ideology

and its institutions brought new intrusions but created a global normative order in which the practices of nation-states could be scrutinised effectively. Moreover, the human rights movement had its adherents inside Australia, who participated in the global dialogue on human rights and brought about the formal achievement of civil rights for indigenous peoples.

Those achievements did not address (and partly obscured) indigenous claims to land and collective cultural experiences. The existing understanding of human rights could not satisfy such claims for difference. The most recent phase of the indigenous struggle – what is here called *indigeneity* – has had some success, but is very far from completing its goals. Much of this work takes place in the institutions of the United Nations (UN) and the book addresses this work in detail.

In fact, the book explores the links between indigenous transnationalism and indigeneity (the assertion and pursuit of *indigenous* difference and rights). The idea that particular rights are held by indigenous peoples and no others (because of their priority) is not a popular view among non-indigenous Australians. Few are willing to see that the Australian state, nation and identity were constructed in ways that excluded many indigenous interests. A transnational approach encourages us to return to the fundamental question of indigenous rights: if indigenous peoples have inherent rights but live within the boundaries of existing nation-states, who should determine how these rights are to be expressed and enjoyed? This is an opportunity to understand a political aspiration that has existed since the earliest moments of colonisation in Australia: the expectation of Aborigines and Islanders that their presence and their ongoing needs would be treated impartially and with respect.

Nationalism and transnationalism

Indigenous people number very few in Australia. Though this is a rapidly growing population, Aborigines and Islanders represent only 2–3 per cent of the total population. They are outnumbered not only by those of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Celtic ancestry but also by Chinese, German and Italian migrants and their descendants.⁹ Rarely on surveys of electoral concerns do Australians register the needs of indigenous people among their highest priorities.

Nevertheless, their political movement punches well above its weight in numbers, gaining media and political attention far greater than any group other than ‘the Australian people’ as a whole. Moreover, Australians who have travelled widely, especially to North America and Europe, often encounter people who speak unprompted about the situation of Aborigines. International readers of newspapers and audiences