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Do Rocks Listen? The Cultural Politics of Apprehending Australian Aboriginal Labor

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# Do Rocks Listen?

## The Cultural Politics of Apprehending Australian Aboriginal Labor

It is as if “the *reality* of the mode of production enters the scene at the moment when someone is discovered who invents the *theory* of it”

—Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*

ONE HOT, STICKY November day in 1989, a large part of the Belyuen Aboriginal community was gathered on the coast of the Cox Peninsula, across from the Darwin Harbour, to participate in one of the last days of the Kenbi Land Claim.<sup>1</sup> Five of us—myself, Marjorie Bilbil, Ruby Yarrowin, Agnes Lippo, and Ann Timber—stood back from the hustle of microphones and notepads and the hassle of nonstop questions from government officials for as well as against our side. The other four women ranged in age from 38 to 70 (I was 27) and came from a variety of Dreaming (totemic) backgrounds. We stood listening to Betty Billawag describing to the land commissioner and his entourage how an important Dreaming site nearby, Old Man Rock, listened to and smelled the sweat of Aboriginal people as they passed by hunting, gathering, camping, or just mucking about. She outlined the importance of such human-Dreaming/environmental interactions to the health and productivity of the countryside. At one point Marjorie Bilbil turned to me and said, “He can’t believe, eh, Beth?” And I answered, “No, I don’t think so, not him, not really. He doesn’t think she is lying. He just can’t believe himself that that Old Man Rock listens.”

This scene in a variety of forms and settings has been repeated over and over since I first met the people living at Belyuen in 1984. Whether on sacred site registrations, ethnobotanical surveys, tourist excursions, or in my own classroom—where I use a similar story to illustrate the concept of cultural hegemony—questions always turn to a matter of belief: does the judge, the ethnographer, Belyuen people, or I believe that Dreamings listen, smell,

talk, or, more generally, intentionally act and react to the presence of humans nearby? And they turn to issues of value and evaluation: what political or economic weight should these beliefs be given, and in what social realm should they be assessed? Are Aboriginal people working, in the commonsense meaning of that word, when they talk to local Dreamings or when they sit and relax, talk, play cards, or sleep on a beach? And how should this work be stacked up against the kind of labor that produces the Australian gross national product?

That these behind-the-scenes conversations inevitably return to questions of belief and value is striking in contrast to the singular absence of such questions in the jural scene. While the Commonwealth government has made Aboriginal cultural traditions the productive motor of indigenous land rights, it has splintered the referent of “the cultural” and sidestepped a direct confrontation over how to assess human-environmental interactions and cross-cultural notions of labor.<sup>2</sup> The land commissioner listens to Betty Billawag in order to evaluate the cultural authenticity of her notion of human labor and the Dreaming environment. In his effort to balance the beliefs of the Aboriginal community with the needs of the larger non-Aboriginal community, he does not critically interrogate the cultural beliefs that subtend and organize his own evaluative schema. Not surprising. *Those* beliefs “went underground” long ago, as if they were themselves a Dreaming.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the culture of progress, productivity, and political economy that subtends his evaluations remains, in the policy world, an unassailable totem.<sup>4</sup> Again, not surprising; the cultural frameworks subtending political economy (not the disputable ways of assessing political-economic systems) were long ago transmuted into neutral, natural, and objective fact. Belief may be part and parcel of society and culture, but labor, ecology, and economic value refer to material conditions most accurately approached through a scientific paradigm. As Baudrillard (1975) noted, subaltern perspectives on labor, political economy, and the nature of human-environmental interactions are subordinate to the dominant

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perspective not only because they are popularly imagined as preceding it in social evolutionary time but also because they are represented as beliefs rather than a method for ascertaining truth. Aboriginal traditions are legally productive not because they are "true" but because they are beliefs and thus part of the multiculturalism to which the contemporary nation-state can demonstrate a liberal reconciliation. But reconciliation with multiculturalism ends where a conceptual accommodation to a multi-economism would begin.

Put in a more obvious way, what the Commonwealth—through its courts and public realm (media)—is evaluating is not the verity of Betty Billawag's and other Belyuen Aborigines' descriptions, but whether or not their words represent the common beliefs of the community and, if they do, whether or not these beliefs can be said to reflect an evolving set of Aboriginal traditions. The significance of culture is its presence or absence in the person and community and its positive relationship to traditions, not its positive or negative relationship to environmental or economic "facts." Thus the real conflict over the grounds for assessing the value produced by human action in the environment is never addressed in formal legal venues although it may be tentatively raised in political settings. A full discussion is forever deferred to second-level issues: Are these beliefs sufficiently traditional? Are there a sufficient number of believers to constitute a community? How does the nation-state balance the economic needs of the entire nation with the cultural traditions and beliefs of a minority population? The cultural organization of Western disbelief—its deep disbelief that Dreamings can listen in anything but a metaphorical sense—forever eludes the grasp of liberal political-economic theory and the environmentalism that sprouts from it. The incorporation of some form of Aboriginal law into Commonwealth legislation merely serves to mask further the subterranean machinations of Western cultural notions of production, value, leisure, and labor, their subjects and objects, and the relocation of objectivity from the cultural to the ecological-economic realm. But such masking must occur in liberal democratic nations like Australia, where multicultural "rights" must be reconciled with economic and environmental "reality."<sup>5</sup>

In many critical ways, political-economic anthropology (even the most recent version of culture and political economy) has also sidestepped the perplexing problem of how to incorporate or represent local non-Western understandings of labor and the environment. Some political-economic studies have begun to acknowledge the relationship between dialogically constituted local knowledge and global political-economic processes. Since Peter and Jane Schneider's classic *Culture and Political-Economy in Western Sicily*, the attempt has been made to move away from a world-systems approach and toward a theoretical perspective that emphasizes the

cultural construal of politics and the economy (di Leonardo 1991:26–27; Roseberry 1989). In its most elegant form, political economy is understood as a framework for analyzing unequal relations and access to cultural and material resources and power.<sup>6</sup> However, serious questions remain: Is there an internal limit to political-economic approaches to the cultural construction of economics? If culture is a lens through which the local group mediates the practices and policies of the larger system (Ortner 1989:83), then what of the lens of the larger system and its practices of knowing? Is a lens sufficient to explain the manner in which culture and power articulate? In any case, how are these beliefs and practices in conflict with Betty Billawag's ways of knowing the human-environmental nexus? And how are the cultural assumptions underlying political economy linked to dominant institutions of power? Is this cultural underpinning reinscribing dominant power over local minority communities even as the researcher is trying to empower local sociocultural practices or, at least, to portray the systematic and historical ties between local and global cultural and political-economic institutions (Wilmsen 1989a; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991)?

### The Subject of Labor

If my answer to Marjorie Bilbil is correct, if the land commissioner does not believe that the rock is a semiotic agent but does believe that the Aboriginal women and men believe that it is, then he is left with the problem of how to think about their belief. What does it indicate about *them*? About himself? About the economic viability of a multicultural nation? More specifically, he might have wondered, like his predecessors in the judiciary before him, how these beliefs affect who is granted sovereignty over land and how citizenry rights are distributed.

Since the colonial period, nation-states have denied full citizenship to hunter-gatherers based partly on the belief that they had not sufficiently extracted themselves from or productively engaged their environment, and partly on the more pragmatic "self interest of the colonial powers, who did not want to be hampered by the inconvenience of acknowledging the rights of indigenous peoples, or of colonial rivals who might try to acquire land from those peoples" (McRae et al. 1991:110). Colonial legal theorists and Enlightenment thinkers bridged the conceptual and pragmatic side of indigenous disenfranchisement by basing the partiality of hunter-gatherer property rights on their supposed partial achievement of human subjectivity. The hunter and collector owned only the "Acorns he pickt up under an Oak or the Apples he gathered from the Trees in the Wood," because to these objects "something (i.e., intentional labor) was annexed" (Locke 1988[1690]:28–32). Hunter-gathers did not own the

land through which they moved because nothing had been added and because the human subject who could “add to” and “transform” the land had yet to be formed; the land remained “empty” (*terra nullius*) of people or, more precisely, “unoccupied” (as against *occupatio*) by fully human subjects and the civil nations they were able to create (Hocking 1988). It is true that some colonial legal theorists like de Vittoria, Grotius, Vattel, and Pufendorf argued that indigenous Americans owned their land and thus “should not be deprived of civil and political rights.” But they also argued that “Spain could assume rights over the Indians and their land if it was for the benefit of the tribes” (Schaffer 1988:22). Not surprisingly, the dubious bestowal of civil benefits became the key rhetorical means through which indigenous land was acquired.<sup>7</sup> The prevailing view was that the rights that Aborigines had to their resources, and in some colonial contexts their land, were based on occupancy (which simply depended upon the presence of people) not ownership (which depended upon the transformation of the environment typically through cultivation). Because no one prior to the Crown owned the land, Aboriginal communal rights to it were a subset of Crown rights to and needs for it. By implication, Aborigines could alienate their land only to the Crown (McRae et al. 1991:110).

Anthropologists, ecologists, environmentalists, and legal theorists who defend hunter-gatherers’ and the fourth world’s environmental and human rights against wider state and business interests usually do so against this colonial background, but they also do so within a theoretical framework imported from the West and built upon Western concepts of what happens when humans act in the natural world. In particular, they partition local cultural beliefs about the limits and meanings of *human* and *environment* from scientifically apprehended “facts” of ecological and economic systems. For example, they might argue that no matter what indigenous people believe occurs when they act in the environment, this does not alter the fact that they rely on these environmental resources for their livelihood. Or they might argue that by believing the land is sentient or populated by spiritual agents, indigenous people are better able to manage their ecosystems—and this can be shown by measuring their work-leisure ratios, the rate by which they alter their environment, or other aspects of their economic practices. In all cases, however, writers rely on Western notions of human intentionality, subjectivity, and production embedded in the very legal discourses they seek to oppose, which creates an unresolvable tension between the political goals of these projects and the theoretical frameworks in which they reside. This is apparent in even the most radical reconceptions of gatherer-hunter societies. Three scholars’ works bear special attention, for each tries in a very different way to upset historical treatments of the fourth world.

First, Robert Gordon, moving from Edwin Wilmsen’s provocative work, has argued that the so-called bushmen or San peoples in Namibia were produced by colonial policies of land appropriation and material dispossession (1992). The debate over the origins of the Namibian bushmen has been long and acrimonious. What is most striking is the careful attention each side has given to the material basis of Namibian San life. While both those who argue that San groups are dispossessed pastoralists and those who hold that they are besieged hunters and gatherers quote local people, the argument in the literature has centered on the economic and ecological facts of the case and how they should be measured and assessed.<sup>8</sup> And who could argue against resting the case on those facts?

Tim Ingold has critiqued approaches to the fourth world in quite different terms. He has strongly argued against conceptualizing the hunting mode of production in a way that defines hunter-gatherers as less fully human than other social groups. In his *The Appropriation of Nature* (1987), Ingold notes the correlation between the denial of human and civil rights to hunter-gatherers and the confusion of the economic *activity* of people who hunt and collect for the *behavior* of animal foragers. To counter this, he returns to human intentionality as the “component of action that transforms the forager-predator into a gatherer-hunter” (Ingold 1987:95). Intentionality becomes the key diacritic to the human; or, echoing Marx, who echoed the humanists who preceded him, through “purposeful action” man established himself as a subject and thus distinguished himself from the animal and object world. The distinction between the extractive behavior of nonhuman animals and the appropriative (fully and distinctively human) behavior of hunters and collectors is “the *subjective intentionality* that is brought to bear on the procurement process, and by virtue of which it is lifted from the sphere of extractive behaviour to that of appropriative action” (Ingold 1987:79, 106–107). The defining feature of production is not, then, producing in excess or transforming one’s environment but “the subjection of an extractive process to intentional control” (Ingold 1987:105). It is through this subjection that the human subject is produced, and it is at this moment that the primate became the human.<sup>9</sup>

In a series of essays, Nuit Bird-David takes yet a third tack to the reconceptualization of hunter-gatherer societies by rooting their difference in their “attitude” or “style” toward the natural environment rather than in their material or social organization (technology or mode of production). Through this redefinition she seeks to alter public policy regarding hunter-gatherer people. Bird-David’s analysis of the “giving environment” (1990, 1992a) and the “cosmic economy of sharing” (1992b) among immediate-return societies (the south Indian Nayaka, the Mbuti of Zaire, the Batek of Malaysia) seeks to tear down the walls dividing humans, animals, and natural objects and envi-



ronments on the basis of agency. By attempting to do so, she promises to provide a startling critique of economic and political policy premised on that divide. Rather than grounding hunter-gatherer society in universals of human nature, she moves from “the natives’ point of view” and describes the similarities and linkages between human and natural agencies. She writes, “each group has animistic notions which attribute life and consciousness to natural phenomena including the forest itself and parts of it such as hilltops, tall trees, and river sources” (Bird-David 1992b:29). “Natural (human-like) agencies” socialize with, give gifts of food to, and have personalities like the Nayaka, Mbuti, and Batek. In short, when Bird-David discusses intentional action in an economic context she seeks to show how humans organize their material activities based on the assumption that a natural sentient environment will give what is needed. It is through an apprehension of these cultural frameworks (metaphors in particular) that Western theorists and policymakers can begin to make sense of immediate-return societies’ economic actions, in particular, why these societies think and act as if they “have it made” (Bird-David 1992b:32).

A nagging question remains. Do hunter-gatherers, no matter how you define them, really have abundant resources or do they just think they do? That is, are the Nayaka, Mbuti, and Batek deluding themselves, especially given the national and global context of their environmental practices? Bird-David is careful to note that the very formulation of questions such as this one depends upon a Western preoccupation with scarcity and famine and with the uncertainty of the naturalized objectified world. Nevertheless, Bird-David speculates on how beliefs affect people’s actual material conditions and on how attention to these beliefs might reformulate public policy with regard to hunter-gatherers. It is in the effort to answer these questions that she ultimately returns to a qualitative division between not humans, animals, and objects but cultural belief and economic-ecological reality. Turning to metaphor theory as a communicative bridge between delayed-return societies (into which Western capitalism and Australian Aborigines fall) and immediate-return societies, she argues that specific metaphors such as natural environment as bank allow policymakers to reconceive the relationship between humans and the animate natural world. Through a metaphorical bridge, policymakers would be able to see that hunter-gatherers’ attitude toward the environment *really does generate wealth*. Thus metaphor theory—changing our lenses—holds out to Bird-David the possibility of achieving an ultimately consensual community. Recourse to Habermasian notions of ideal communication, however, presents its own set of problems. First, a tendency toward cultural reification sets in whereby the authentic style of hunter-gathering is a “trust in abundancy” undermining those groups who do not show such unswerving faith in

the good temper of the environment. Second, too singular a focus on communication turns attention away from the knitting of cultural frameworks and social, economic, and politico-legal power. And it assumes that communication and translation are the only barriers to achieving an ideal community rather than exploring the ways that representation and conceptualization arise from the various efforts of social groups to secure resources, entrench power, and understand the historical conditions in which they find themselves.

What has been the effect of these evolving cultural and political-economic frameworks for how hunter-gatherer labor action is valued and evaluated in national legal and economic realms? On the surface, altering the essential meaning of production from “transformation and increase” to “intentional subjection” counters legal and economic policies that discriminate against communities whose economic history or praxis includes hunter-gathering. In Australia, where I have conducted long-term research, the reconceptualization of Aboriginal socioeconomics seems to have aided generally in the courts’ and legislature’s positive reevaluation of Aborigines’ traditional cultural practices, if not specifically their contemporary labor practices. For example, in the 1992 Australian High Court decision *Eddie Mabo v. Queensland*, the doctrine that Australia was terra nullius at the point of colonization was overturned because it was seen to rest on a “discriminatory denigration of indigenous inhabitants, their social organization and customs.” Moreover, the High Court argued that for Commonwealth, state, or territory governments to extinguish native title, they must meet the nondiscriminatory standards laid out in the Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act of 1975, which bars the taking of Aboriginal land without just compensation. The broad scope of this decision potentially subjected all unalienated Crown lands in Australia to a traditional Aboriginal land claim.

While seemingly a striking reversal of previous court positions (but see Povinelli 1994), the *Mabo* decision and prior state land rights legislation did not discuss directly how to value or evaluate Aboriginal labor, except to measure how it contributed to the material well-being of the community (that is, in terms of “detriment”).<sup>10</sup> Thus in the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act of 1976, the Land Commission is charged with examining how a successful land claim might harm the economic development of the larger region and how an unsuccessful claim might harm the economic livelihood of the Aboriginal claimants. Local understandings of labor action in no way aid in this economic evaluation. Instead, Aboriginal notions of what happens when humans work in the environment fall within a broader category called “Aboriginal traditions.” To summarize grossly, in the recent *Mabo* decision and in most earlier pieces of state land-rights legislation, Aborigines who have managed to maintain

some sufficient level of traditional life (their cultural knowledges, traditional social practices, and land ties) can be granted unalienable title over their traditional land. What constitutes a viable level of traditional life is unclear. Some High Court justices distinguished between those contemporary social practices that have legitimate ties to “traditional law or custom” and those that do not, with some leeway provided for cultural change. For instance, Brennan’s discussion of cultural change appears quite broad; for traditions to maintain their legal veracity Aboriginal groups must simply continue “to acknowledge the laws” and “to observe the customs” so far as practicable. Likewise, Deane and Gaudron bow to the dynamism of culture, apparently acknowledging current trends in cultural theory, which see traditions as fluid rather than frozen and see ethnography and law as always “caught between cultures” (Clifford 1988:11).<sup>11</sup> In their view, an Aboriginal society can change and still retain traditional rights to its land, “provided any changes do not diminish or extinguish the relationship between a particular tribe or other group and particular land.” Irrespective of their purity, then, traditions act as the litmus test of cultural cohesion and land rights; the labor theory that Betty Billawag espouses is a subset of these traditions. In sum, while Aboriginal traditions are the locus of value in land-rights cases, these same cultural beliefs are left behind when the evaluation of Aboriginal labor action is made—Aboriginal beliefs about work and Aboriginal productivity and labor action are separated, the latter quantified and qualified by Western empiricism. What then are Belyuen thoughts on labor action and how do they represent what happens when they act in the environment?

## The Subject of the Dreaming

If, in Western political economy and humanism more generally, the feature that differentiates human life from animal or object existence is subjective intentionality and appropriation, then analyses based on this difference are unable to describe adequately Belyuen praxis. At Belyuen, subjective intentionality and appropriation are traits that characterize human, animal, and object lives. Or, all humans, animals, and objects have the potential to be intentional subjects; if humans are unique, it is in their ability to interpret the meaning of an event or to determine if it has any significant meaning at all (Povinelli 1993b). Even here, humans are not absolutely differentiated from other beings. What are the implications of this cultural organization of material-economic life for how Belyuen work is valued and evaluated?

The Dreaming can be understood as the given condition of the human and natural world established in the ancestral past. There are many types of Dreamings, including descent Dreamings (*therrawen*) and conception

Dreamings (*maroi*). But all matter (human and animal bodies, objects, and environments) is conceived as the congealed labor of ancestral Dreaming beings. While the mythic actions of some dreamtime ancestors were concentrated at certain now-sacred sites, the land is more generally permeated by signs of their present-day intentionality and agency. So, for example, in the region where I work, certain water holes were formed by the travels of Dingo Dreaming, who moved underground, popping up at certain places to perform certain feats. In all the places he came up, he left a water hole. These water holes not only mark what happened in the past, they also show where Dingo remains today.

It is a rather simple task to show how Belyuen women attribute subjective intentionality to humans, animals, and objects and how this organizes their economic and interpretive practices.<sup>12</sup> Because the Dreaming mandate provides all humans, animals, and objects with the potential to act as an agent, all events may be a result of a Dreaming’s, animal’s, or object’s subjective intentionality. Everyone, even small children, monitors bodies, objects, and the environment for changes or odd behaviors that might portend critical meaning—meaning that may be the difference between a hunting trip resulting in bounty or calamity or, more seriously, in a person’s life or death. Not to be able to interpret the messages that animals, objects, persons, or Dreamings send can radically transform a person’s relationship with the Dreaming environment: rather than being an interlocutor with a patron Dreaming, the person may become prey to a predatory Dreaming. Three cases suffice to give a sense of the range of ways that the Dreaming environment interacts with human social and economic action.

### Case 1: Belyuen’s Lights (June 3, 1993)

During a short visit to Belyuen in the dry season, I was told about a young women’s *pidjawagaidj* (maturation) ceremony held at Belyuen and the surrounding countryside the December before. Women from all over the Daly River, Cox Peninsula, and Darwin regions came and participated in the making of a young Belyuen woman. One of my mothers (BG) described an event that happened during one evening of the long ceremony.

The southern Daly River women were housed in a small adult education building in the back of the Belyuen community close to a large water hole. This water hole is the site of a number of Dreamings including Belyuen, after whom the community is named. Belyuen is a trickster clever-man and a conception Dreaming for many Belyuen children. On one of the first nights of the Daly River women’s visit, Belyuen emerged from the water hole in the form of a big light. BG noted the cause of the big light: “different sweat, different language . . . lucky no one sick.” BBM agreed and added, “never been do that with us when

we [have] ceremony. That old man [Belyuen] been hold back. He knew we asked them [the Daly River women] to come and help us with this ceremony.”

### Case 2: The Nyoidj and My Truck (June 5, 1993)

At midday, 14 older women, assorted children, and I went to Bagadjet, a small vine jungle on the west coast of the Cox Peninsula, to fish, crab, dig yams, and shoot for wallaby and pig. Soon after arriving I left with one of my daughters, shotgun in hand, walking down the coast toward a series of swamps where pigs sometimes wallow in the afternoon heat. We returned later with no pig but a small wallaby. While we were away, the other women and children had collected crab, shellfish, yam, and sugarbag (indigenous honey).

As we cooked and distributed the food, two of my mothers (YR and LA) told me that a *nyoidj* (a type of spirit) in the form of a black crow had been mucking around with my truck while I was gone. They explained to me that the *nyoidj* did not recognize my truck. YR said, “it’s different from last time [from the utility vehicle I rented the previous year].” Not to worry, they assured me, each of them had sung out (called out) to the *nyoidj*, letting it know that the new truck was mine—“same old Beth.” We all laughed. LA concluded our short talk with the statement, “Might be why you been lucky today.”

### Case 3: The Gandu and the Wagalwagal (February 14, 1989)

Here is a story that my mother (BBM) told me one afternoon at the Women’s Resource Center at Belyuen.

Sometimes when you are walking through the bush you see and hear that grass in front of you go shshshshsh. You think *ngaden* [goanna] made that grass go shshshshsh. But when you try and catch it you meet a spear right between your *yingi* [breasts]. *Gandu* [foreign man], not *ngaden*, that one. *Wagai ganiya* [finished, you’re lying down now; that is, you’re dead]. But if you listen first, that *wagalwagal* [honeyeater bird] will sing out *werrigwerrig* and you’ll know: that’s not a *ngaden*, that is a *gandu mungul* [malevolent male stranger].

In these three examples, the subject of intentional action is clearly not human. In the first case, light acts as the medium for a Dreaming water hole (Belyuen) to signal the foreignness (strangeness) of the southern Daly River women. At Belyuen, *stranger* carries a variety of meanings, including unknown person, person from nonlocal lands, or person whose unusual actions make him or her a stranger to kin or residential group. This strangeness (or foreignness, “im different”) can cause Dreamings and the landscape more generally to react in a dramatic fashion. Dreaming sites and ecological environments become volatile and unproductive: in a usually placid harbor, waves suddenly surge up and swamp a sea hunter’s dinghy; or, after women have had no luck finding crab in what

is usually a productive mangrove, winds rage on the coast sending blinding sand. If social conditions allow, Belyuen women will attribute the cause of such quick and unexpected environmental changes to the presence of “strange” sweat and language. Nonlocal people’s words and bodies are not recognized by the landscape, causing it to become upset and jealous. In contrast, familiar sweat and language make the countryside sweet and productive. Thus, in the first case above, the foreign sounds and smells of the southern Daly River women caused Belyuen to send out a bright glowing light from a dark deep pool, but no more since he knew that the nonlocal women were there helping local women. Case 3 simply suggests that the ability to act with subjective intentionality includes not only Dreamings (therrawen and maroi) and spirits (*nyoidj*, Case 2) but also the animal world. The *Gandu* and *Wagalwagal* story is just one of a large body of narratives that describe which animals and plants have knowledge of or relationships with other animals, places, people, and environments.

Not only are the subjects of the above narratives not human, their nonhumanness is a necessary part of the performativity of the story. The fact that Dreaming water holes can hear and smell the language and sweat of foreign women allows BG and MB to use the story of Belyuen’s light for specific social ends. But BG and MB depend on their listeners knowing the social relations that exist among the groups and the environments being discussed in the story, as well as on the sentient nature of the water hole. Listeners (myself and others to whom the story has been told) can be expected to interpret the appearance of the light as a (potential) indexical sign showing the proximate relationship among southern Daly River women, Belyuen women, and local Dreamings—which groups are “close up” and “more further” from Cox Peninsula Dreamings (usually therrawen Dreamings) and thus which groups are right and wrong for the countryside. Indeed, just in case I have not fully understood the import of the light, BBM carefully notes, “never been do that with us when we [have] ceremony.” However, this statement does not simply oppose the southern Daly River women to Belyuen women. Instead it comments on yet a third set of people: regional Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups who claim that Belyuen families are themselves squatters on the Cox Peninsula—migrants from the south displaced during the colonial period—and that their real country lies on the coastal side of the Daly River, several hundred miles away. BBM’s statement comments indirectly on this claim. If this were so, why does Belyuen react only when other people work and conduct ceremony on the Cox Peninsula? In short, the belief that Dreamings (water holes or otherwise) can listen, smell, and react allows Belyuen individuals to use these reactions to negotiate the hierarchical relations among social groups and landscapes without being responsible for the socioeconomic



implications of those hierarchies (see also Myers 1986 and N. Williams 1987). After all, Belyuen women say, “not us, that Dreaming now been do'im.”

In Case 2, foreignness is again the immediate cause of an unusual event. This time instead of an environmental feature (a water hole), a crow comments on the presence of strange objects and people. The crow in this case is a nyoidj—the spirit of a human ancestor lodged in a place where the person spent a significant or meaningful part of his or her life—of a deceased aunt of mine. Thus, as in the first case, the social work accomplished with this second narrative depends both on a shared belief that animals act intentionally and on the shared background knowledge of the social ties binding the individuals and environments described. Milig is a site on the west coast of the Cox Peninsula where two senior women (MB and BA) and I led an outstation during my first visit to Belyuen in 1984. I was just a young kid (22 years old) and knew nothing—I was not an anthropologist or anthropology student. Moreover, I had never been to an Aboriginal community and knew very little about Aboriginal beliefs. However, growing up in the rural woods of Louisiana and having spent much of my life camping, I was strong, a fairly good hunter (and gatherer), and comfortable living outdoors. During the time I spent working for MB and BA, hunting with them, chopping wood, driving, and so forth, I learned everything I know—they “schooled me up.” Bagadjet is a small dense vine jungle up the east coast from Milig where MB, BA, and I spent much of our time, digging yams, looking for sugarbag, and collecting crab and shellfish. More importantly, Bagadjet is the last place where we hunted (and the place where we cried for each other) before I left for two years. Soon after, BA became too sick to camp on her own; she died of emphysema in 1989 when I was back at Belyuen. When women and I now hunt at Bagadjet, crows sometimes act strangely and women often interpret them as being BA.

Knowing the social ties that bind people to each other and to places critically affects the interpretation and socioeconomic use of nyoidj stories. Because of how this nyoidj treats me and my things, I am like other strangers (especially with my Western come-and-go lifestyle)—dependent upon Belyuen women to keep me from becoming prey to a predatory Dreaming—and especially beholden to Belyuen women for teaching and nourishing me when I had nothing. The nyoidj indexes the vast social, emotional, and intellectual distance that I have traveled since first arriving at Belyuen, and it points to the network of social obligations, in traveling this distance, I have accrued. The one little wallaby I shot cannot begin to repay this social debt, although it is a start. Again, the nyoidj story's social productivity is anchored in a certain cultural framework—crows can be subjective agents bearing messages to savvy listeners. Other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups who do not accede to this cultural logic

are not moved by its performance. Or they are moved for other reasons while acceding to its form.

As I and many others have noted, some Aborigines' belief that all materiality is a potential source of intention-driven meaning places high value on interpretive ability (see also Myers 1986:67 and N. Williams 1985). Humans may be just another subject in the landscape, but they face the daunting task of sorting through and weighing the significance of countless minor and major oddities that occur everyday. What does it mean that so-and-so's son has suddenly lost a lot of weight? Is his wife pregnant or has a clever-man “kidney-fatted” him?<sup>13</sup> Why did a sea turtle act in an odd manner? Is it really a conception Dreaming (*maroi*) or did the harpoon not lodge properly in its back? Why did a water hole suddenly dry up? Is it saddened (*mari wedjirr*) by the death of an older woman or are local white residents sinking too many water bores? Because all social relations (links among persons, social groups, animals, objects, and places) create potential social rights and obligations, the ability to make or refute linkages convincingly is a highly valued and potentially valuable skill. In the context of contemporary land claims and land disputes, where Aboriginal men and women must elaborate the ties linking and separating numerous individuals and groups to or from various places, not only for local Aborigines but also for non-Aboriginal lawyers, land commissioners, and anthropologists, the value of such interpretive ability has certainly not lessened. Here I want to explore briefly how Belyuen women attribute cause to the natural oddities that spring up during everyday land activity in the face of two potentially competing environmental explanations: the Dreaming and development.

#### Case 4: The Four-Legged Emu (June 20, 1992)

After finishing an outstation survey, a handful of older women and I pulled into an outstation camp on the interior of the Cox Peninsula. The married couple who run the camp were gone. They had left a few hours earlier on a shooting expedition. Expecting that they would have a number of kangaroo, wallaby, and, hopefully, bullock on their return, our party decided to visit with other members of the camp and await the married couple. While we waited and drank tea, my aunt (MB) told us about a series of events that had occurred in the Daly River coastal region.

During the early dry season, on an outstation on the south side of the Daly River, two brothers came upon a four-legged emu drinking from a water hole. The brothers trapped the emu and brought it to Wadeye (previously Port Keats) so that a senior man and woman from their family—on whose land the outstation is located—might look at it. Upon seeing the emu, the older man and woman insisted that it quickly be taken back to where it had been



found. This the two brothers did, releasing the emu near the same water hole.

Why did the emu have four legs? What did the old man and woman know? Belyuen women currently have two seemingly competing frameworks for answering these and other related questions. On the one hand, they may attribute the cause of the emu's body anomaly to toxic pollution caused by economic developments in the region, for example, exploratory on- and offshore oil drilling. These oil wells provide a source of much-needed royalty money for the structurally impoverished Aboriginal families living in the Cox Peninsula and Daly River regions, but they also threaten to upset the natural and Dreaming ecology of the region. Many Aboriginal groups are now engaged in heated inter- and intragroup discussions about whether safe drilling should be allowed to proceed. On the other hand, Belyuen women may attribute the emu's oddity to Dreaming intentionality. Like the Belyuen light, the four legs are a sign that something or someone did something wrong—someone or something was wrong for the area or acted in a wrong way. Or perhaps this is a Dreaming that people had forgotten about and its place (its sacred site) is the water hole from which it was drinking. Of course, the two perspectives are often articulated—no final difference exists between natural and ecological environments. As MB later speculated, the Dreaming might have sent out the four-legged emu to signal the damage that oil wells can cause to the region. The four-legged emu, like the Belyuen light, rearticulates Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal frameworks that have already been hybridized by the political-jural and economic institutions and regulations established for (or in response to) Aboriginal traditions. Federal and state parliaments have passed regulations that force companies to do business with the Dreaming. Not surprisingly, Aborigines now read their capital needs through signs the Dreaming sends.

Whether one explanatory frame is picked (Dreaming or development) or whether they are (re)articulated, how such questions are answered depends upon the elaboration or refutation of the ties binding the various human, animal, environmental, and Dreaming actors and groups involved in both actual and narrative events (see Bauman 1986). In short, explanation relies on the sociopolitical relations and the speech acts that mediate them, as various clusters of people try to make sense of a strange event and the reasons specific people are recounting that event. The speech acts are themselves organized by local principles for agreeing and disagreeing, for forming communal narratives, and for serializing persons, places, and events (see Povinelli 1993a:253–270). People ask, What relations are motivating the event and the narration of the event? The sheer number of possible sites and levels of intentionality complicate the task of interpretation. For instance, a listener trying to pinpoint where cause or intentionality lies in the above emu story is presented with numerous

points of entry. Answers to these direct and indirect questions lead listeners to remark upon and evaluate the emu story in starkly different ways, from dismissing the entire event as “nothing, just emu” to proclaiming those involved as having “rubbished” a Dreaming for economic gain and as needing to be harshly punished. Sites of entry may include the following:

*The storyteller and the audience:* What might her motivation be? Does she have ties to any of the people, places, or animals discussed? Is she for or against development? What is my relationship to the storyteller?

*Human actors in the story:* What were the motivations that led people to act in the way that they did here, to take and then return the emu? How is each person related to Dreamings in the region? Are any of the actors involved in a land dispute where the emu was found, and if so, with whom? Does anyone have an emu Dreaming on or off the Wadeye community?

*Dreaming actors in the story:* Is there Dreaming intentionality here? Does this make sense of what a Dreaming might do? Why might it have done this in this particular instance?

While in Belyuen women's eyes the above cases are all instances of nonhuman subjective intentionality, in what sense are they instances of human and nonhuman appropriative action? In other words, how do they conform to or diverge from Western notions of property and larceny?<sup>14</sup> Cases 1, 2, and 3 describe nonhuman appropriative action insofar as they include action that is conscious and purposeful. But none of the cases describes appropriative action in the sense of setting aside materials, objects, or bodies for a particular purpose or someone's exclusive use. However, there are many senses and cases in which human and nonhuman actors appropriate materials, objects, and bodies for their exclusive use. Dreamings (therrawen and maroi) appropriate human bodies and landscapes in ways I have discussed at length elsewhere (Povinelli 1993a). Briefly, conception Dreamings (maroi) appropriate the human reproductive process itself—the conception spirit “realizes itself as the child.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, all human life is, at one level, the material that descent therrawen Dreamings have appropriated in order to manifest themselves in each successive generation (see also Munn 1970 and Myers 1986:50). Finally, the Dreaming has already appropriated the entire geography, establishing in humans “a habit of mind that looks behind objects to events and sees in objects a sign of something else” wherein the “unusual is valuable in itself” (Myers 1986:67). Nancy Munn has summarized these various Dreaming appropriations of materiality (or instantiations through a variety of natural materials) in the following

ways: "(1) metamorphosis (the body of the ancestor is changed into some material object); (2) imprinting (the ancestor leaves the impression of his body or of some tool he uses); and (3) externalization (the ancestor takes some object out of his body)" (1970:142).

In sum, Belyuen women do not assume that transformation, appropriation, or intentionality are attributes that reside either uniquely or most fully in the human realm. Rather, humans are simply one node in a field of possible intentionality and appropriation. The Dreaming epitomizes the transformation and appropriation of landscapes', humans', and animals' bodies and personalities for reasons individuals and social groups can only try to interpret.

How do these expanded nodes of subjective intentionality and appropriation change how Aboriginal work and leisure should be evaluated? In an environment in which Dreamings, animals, and spirits (*nyoidj*) are always potentially monitoring one's action, what constitutes the boundaries between work and leisure? If local language and sweat make the environment productive and sweet—one's bodily productions are constantly producing the environmental conditions in which one is acting—are there any limits to what constitutes work?

#### Case 5: Hunting Relaxation (April 15, 1989)

After a tragic death in the community, BBM sickens and asks that I take her family fishing and hunting for *warrgu* (mangrove worms, *Teledo sp.*). We negotiate between two possible sites and wind up on the north coast of the Cox Peninsula. It is quite a nice mid-April day. One of my older grandmothers (*djemele*) clears the ground for a small camp, while several of us walk up the beach for turtle eggs and several others walk through the scrub behind the beach to look for sugarbag. As our party walks along the beach, BG and her young daughter collect a variety of plastic bottles, plates, and cups and several sets of unmatched thongs brought in by the tide, and they are accused of shopping. BBM spends most of the day sleeping on the beach, listening to gossip, or telling and hearing old stories about the campsite. After everyone returns from their excursions, we bake and eat a big *lour* (flour damper) and corned beef before returning to the community at dusk.

In Case 5, BBM seems to use a hunting and gathering trip as a recreational (leisure) activity rather than an economic one in order to leave behind the stressful social conditions of the Belyuen community for the relaxing rhythms of the sea. The work of mourning, grief, death, and despair is lessened to a significant degree by the leisure of sleeping and relaxing on a long white beach or walking through the bush collecting sweet foods for the belly and old memories for the mind. Sometimes in the midst of such hunting and gathering trips, moreover, a

woman (or man) will discover signs that help make sense of a recent traumatic event. Indeed, women and men often walk through the bush looking as much for the meanings and distractions it holds as for the foods it provides. Whether they are emphasizing food or memory, Belyuen women's use of hunting and gathering to produce relaxation and ease of mind has already been influenced by its juxtaposition to new modes of production and their concomitant social formations (sedentary settlement life, wage labor, and welfare). Belyuen women compare hunting activities and capitalist wage-labor, saying that the one produces a lightening and lifting of the body while the other produces anxiety and despair. Indeed, some conservative members of the Northern Territory and federal governments have represented contemporary Aboriginal hunting and gathering activities as leisure activities in order to undermine land claims based on economic need. Because Aboriginal people no longer *need* the "bits and scraps" of food that they collect from the bush, the argument goes, their hunting activities are essentially no different from those of non-Aboriginal campers.<sup>16</sup> Therefore Aboriginal groups should not be given special rights denied to non-Aboriginal sportsmen. However, women know that the productive effect of their leisurely labor is very different from that of most non-Aboriginal Australians. This productive difference lies in the way their leisure produces both life-enabling knowledge about the countryside and the abundance or scarcity of the foods and materials found there.

Whether or not a person actually hunts, gathers, or fishes on a bush trip, he or she is likely to gain various levels of useful knowledge, such as what sites are rich with foods and what sites are dangerous due to current Dreaming or social conflicts. The following two cases provide everyday examples of what one can get out of a trip by just coming along for the ride.

#### Case 6: Binbinya and the Salmon Run (March 9, 1989)

Twelve adults and about the same number of children from two Belyuen families traveled to an estuarine creek on the west coast of the Cox Peninsula. During the half hour before the tide came in, five of our group went into the mangrove to collect crab and shellfish. Afterward we moved to the creek and seven of us (the same five plus two others) began fishing. For reasons my mother (BBM) attributed to the cold weather, salmon ran in large schools up the creek. Our party caught ten, plus a number of smaller red snapper, brim, and catfish. Throughout the day several members of our group sat near a fire we had made, drank tea, played *buta* (a local card game), and ate fish others had caught and bread others had brought.

**Case 7: The Gandu (January 29, 1989)**

On the way to Twofellow Creek, an aunt of mine (DA) pointed out the place where her daughter saw a gandu mungul. DA described him as wearing red hair made from a horse's mane. My grandmother (djemele) added that he had teeth wrapped around his face like a bridle. Others in the truck asked a quick series of questions: Where exactly had he stood? How big was he (tall or short)? Did he lie down in the grass or stand straight up and still? In what truck was DA's daughter?

Both of these works of leisure significantly influence women and men to go on bush trips (or, for that matter, to stay at home), even if they have no particular interest in hunting, fishing, or collecting. In Case 6, many members of the Binbinya foraging group did little by way of caloric production. Instead they ate up fuel and whatever else we found or had brought (tea, bread, sugar, and corned beef). But they left with more than a full belly. As others have noted (Cashdan 1990 and Winterhalder 1987), being there provided them with knowledge of the richness of food patches, of their changing productivity, and of techniques for exploiting resources that will be useful to them over time. In short, leisure produces knowledge that will have important long-term consequences on the material basis of Belyuen social life. In Case 7, everyone on the truck who heard the Gandu story learned a number of critical ways of differentiating strange men from ordinary strangers: red horse's hair, teeth necklaces, and grass beds. Moreover, they learned where the stranger had been sighted and who he had been looking for ("In what truck was DA's daughter?"), and therefore what place to avoid and what kin group to warn. Thus even if persons coming along for the ride did not leave with a full stomach or ecological-technological knowledge, they left with life-enhancing knowledge.

But a more critical work of leisure, especially in the context of this essay, becomes apparent when situated in the framework of subjective intentionality and appropriation. No matter the material usefulness of knowledge, just being there becomes productive once our analysis is situated within a perspective of a sentient environment. For instance, some Dreamings in the countryside depend upon the presence of the human body in order to instantiate themselves (maroi, or conception Dreamings, for instance), whether or not that body is hunting, fishing, or collecting. This does not mean that persons will not have a conception Dreaming unless they move through the countryside, but rather that the restriction on their mobility has an effect on the spatiality of maroi expression. Policy that restricts Aborigines onto small settlements or community areas threatens to constrict the range of certain Dreamings (but see Povinelli 1993a:165–166), which then potentially narrows Aborigines' affective and jural attachments to places. Thus, just traveling through the

country allows the maroi to express itself throughout the region and allows humans to form attachments to this broader region. Not only does being there allow certain human-Dreamings interlocutors to function most fully, but just being there can critically affect the productivity of the surrounding landscape. Because the by-products of human labor—sweat and speech—are seen to influence strongly the productivity of the countryside by affecting the disposition of the Dreaming, the presence or absence of local people can directly affect the plenitude or scarcity of the foods they hope to collect. The familiar sounds and smells of local people please and calm the countryside, creating within it an abiding affection for these same people and a willingness to provide the foods, goods, and signs they are seeking. In sum, if land and humans are interlocutory subjects, then leisure is a labor with social and economic value.

**The Draw of Political Economy in Fourth World Studies**

Let us return to the courtroom one last time and to the ways in which Aboriginal beliefs about the nature of labor action and the human-environmental encounter are assessed. The split manner in which the law (and the public debate about the law) appraises Aboriginal belief cannot be overemphasized, and neither can the problems this appraisal poses for political-economic anthropology. Currently the assessment of Belyuen practice is based in the first instance on a litmus of cultural traditionality and then, after passing this test, on a comparative evaluation of the material needs of the Aboriginal community and the economic effect of a land grant on the wider community. Note, however, that even when an Aboriginal community is the wider community, an even wider non-Aboriginal community can be found (the region, the nation, the trading bloc) whose interests in economic terms will be greater. On the one hand, then, we have belief as a diacritic of authentic multiculturalism (the interiority of cultural difference); and on the other hand, we have economic statistics, manipulatable, yes, but still some gauge of cold economic reality (the exteriority of the economy and its material resources).

While belief and value—or more exactly, divergent epistemologies and the socioeconomic and legal apparatuses that support them—are at the heart of the conflict, Western economy and its epistemologies have been miraculously separated from the discussion. Western beliefs are not on the examining table. Instead, land conflicts are framed as the necessary compromises that need to be made as the nation-state tries to balance tolerance for multicultural perspectives with the necessities of economic development.



Given this political-legal context, what are the potentials and limits of a political-economic approach to the study of the fourth world, or any world in which labor action and subjectivity are differently perceived? By political-economic anthropology I mean those approaches that examine domination and subordination in terms of the control of material relations of production and representation. Thus, under political economy I am including a fairly wide-ranging and eclectic body of work.

Clearly political-economic approaches to issues of domination and subordination hold out much to an analysis of the fourth world. Building in some way on Marx's theory of labor and resource exploitation, anthropologists and other social scientists see political economy (and forms of structural marxism) as offering a revolutionary framework for understanding and representing the devastating effects of world capitalism on a diverse set of non-Western societies. While political-economic analyses of social change have been heavy-handed in many cases, a political-economic framework has allowed scholars to see a common pattern to local social transformations which connects, in a very compelling way, the plight of Kung women with that of South American miners, Sumatran and Italian peasants, and Caribbean cane-workers.<sup>17</sup> In addition, political-economic conceptions of the cause of the material conditions of the poor and dispossessed strongly contrast with dominant economic paradigms like rational choice, maximization theory, game theory, and other neoconservative models for analyzing micro- and macroeconomics that locate the cause of poverty in the practices of the poor and dispossessed themselves.

Scholars of the fourth world have drawn on two trends in political economy to situate historically contemporary bushmen camps, especially to explain why, throughout the world, they "literally smell [of] death and decay" (Gordon 1992:2; see also Trigger 1992). In an effort to explain these material conditions, many of us have turned to, on the one hand, an analysis of the material relations of production that exist between indigenous communities and the larger nation-state and, on the other, the discursive regimes that constitute indigenous people as premodern societies, thereby undermining their political and economic aspirations (Schrire 1984). By representing the economic dependency and hardship wrought by national policies for and academic representations of indigenous peoples, this wide-ranging work has played a critical role in the struggle for indigenous civil and land rights. What then is the problem?

While political-economic theory has aided in unpacking the material and social relations of state domination and exploitation of fourth-world communities (in some cases showing that the subsistence mode of production is produced, rather than simply exploited, by global capitalism), it has done little to overturn the basic tenets of Western notions about the qualitative divides among hu-

mans (subjects-agents), nonintentional animals (predators-prey), and objects (insentient things) or, where some effort has been made to do so, the division between belief and fact reemerges in the policy portion of papers. Having arisen from the *long duree* of the social sciences' effort to define the difference between human and nonhuman nature and between culture and materiality, political economy remains solidly within hegemonic notions of the defining criteria of human subjectivity and object nature. Thus the kind of radical rethinking that Belyuen notions of labor and subjectivity pose to the analysis of labor action and the environment is unthinkable within political economy. We can certainly discuss local beliefs but these are always grounded in the actual material conditions of the community and the material relations between the community and the larger national and international order.

Because political-economic approaches still privilege Western forms of assessment, a reevaluation of hunter-gatherer subjectivity has done little to increase the worth of hunter-gatherer productivity in a comparative economic framework. In an increasingly heated discussion of global environmental change, population growth, and limited resources, science and economics—and those other disciplines that incorporate their empirical methods—are turned to as dispassionate observers of the factual nature of human-environment relations and the economic and ecological risks and benefits associated with development projects. Because of this, most contemporary land claims include supplemental reports on the economic benefits of them to the indigenous community, on the development prospects of the area for local and regional governments, and on the environmental consequences of maintaining or developing the area. Social science projects with a humanistic, theoretical, or activist bent are sometimes enlisted to examine the "soft side" of these discussions: how local people will experience economic change, how the government or a nongovernmental organization might soften the impact of development on a local community. But the evaluative apparatus of national or international economic policy has been little influenced by non-Western understandings of human-environmental relations. Until it is, indigenous groups will always lose the war of need. Some wider perspective will always be generated that puts their lives "in context."

Thus as anthropologists, we must be careful not to be, as was once widely discussed, objective neutral players in these global disputes, but to be careful, self-reflective players.<sup>18</sup> We need to be especially on guard for the ways in which the state and the international business and financial communities can draw on our rhetoric to reenrench their own interests, much as the New Right has recently begun to draw on Gramscian notions of cultural hegemony in order to demonstrate the importance of a culture war by the right.

For however liberal are the legal bows to indigenous traditions and knowledge, they actually entrench state rights over indigenous communities using the very models we generate. State authority over indigenous communities is reestablished even as state institutions are represented as acknowledging (or reconciling themselves to) indigenous traditions. This sleight of hand is achieved through court and legislative mandates that recognize the traditional rights of Aboriginal people and at the same time give state institutions the right to sort contemporary Aboriginal social and cultural practices into the traditional (valuable) and the untraditional (valueless). Rather than opposing Aboriginal land rights, a position easily redeployed by Aboriginal activists as oppressing Aboriginal people and thus easily inciting a human rights controversy, the Australian government expresses sorrow for the effects of past European actions on Aboriginal people (although those Aboriginal groups who suffered most gain least) and supports multiculturalism in the form of Aboriginal traditions. But in the midst of elaborate displays of remorse and appeals for reconciliation, the state has managed to maintain control over what will be the testable, factual basis for a claim, whose beliefs will be evaluated for their cultural authenticity and worth, and what will be the criteria of labor's evaluation. In no way has the non-Aboriginal Australian government or public altered its understanding of the factual grounds of work, labor, human subjectivity, or environmental insentience. In short, the state produces a classic Batesian double message. It tells indigenous persons, "Your beliefs are absolutely essential to your economic well-being; your beliefs make no rational sense in the assessment of your economic well-being."

Rather than challenging the factual grounds of state authority, the debate in Australia over native title has repositioned the government as the middle ground between the rabid right and the radical left, between conservative public analysts and cultural pundits who argue that recognizing native title has plunged "property law into chaos and 'given substance' to the ambitions of Australian communists and the Bolshevik left" and radical Aboriginal groups and activists who would challenge rationality itself—the values and principles upon which the modern nation-state rests.<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

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1. The Kenbi Land Claim is an Aboriginal land claim for the Cox Peninsula, Port Paterson, and Bynoe Harbour region, Northern Territory Australia (see Brandl et al. 1979).

2. Some of the historical context to the emergence of land rights legislation is touched on in Peterson 1988. For a general discussion of the *Mabo* decision and the Native Title Bill see the special issue of the *Sydney Law Review* 15(2) (1993).

3. Belyuen women use the phrase "went underground" to refer to, among other things, what happens when a Dreaming withdraws from the phenomenological world because of human (usually mis-) behavior (see Povinelli 1993a:155).

4. See Baudrillard 1975; Goux 1990; and Fitzpatrick 1992.

5. New Zealand, Canada, Norway, and the United States present similar cases.

6. Handler 1988; Sider 1986; and P. Williams 1991.

7. And, it should be noted, it is the key means by which international standards of human rights are applied (An-Na'im 1992; Pollis and Schwab 1979; and Renteln 1990).

8. Not surprisingly, works arguing that San groups are dispossessed pastoralists cite local people as supporting this view, while those who view the San groups as besieged hunters and gatherers quote local people as supporting their position.

9. Moreover, undermining intentionality as that which drives or shapes human action through recourse to the imaginary, the unconscious, or fantasy would not change the yawning divide he posits between the human and the nonhuman. In other words, psychoanalytically informed models of human labor would still falter over the uniqueness of human psychic-psychological action (for example, see Marcuse 1966).

10. In the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act of 1976, even if the land commissioner finds for the traditional Aboriginal owners, he or she must comment and consider

the detriment to persons or communities including other Aboriginal groups that might result if the claim were acceded to either in whole or in part; the effect which acceding to the claim either in whole or in part would have on the existing or proposed patterns of land usage in the region; and where the claim relates to alienated Crown land, the cost of acquiring the interests of persons (other than the Crown) in the land concerned. [Neate 1989:18–19]

11. Law is increasingly seen in narrative and ethnographic terms (Jackson 1988; West 1993; and P. Williams 1991).

12. I do not mean to differentiate women's views from men's views in any absolute way. Because of their common lives, beliefs, and political-economic predicaments, Belyuen women and men share certain broad frameworks for understanding the effects of human bodies on the Dreaming environment, even if they have somewhat separate ceremonial texts and economic practices. And, at Belyuen, ways of conceptualizing human-land relations vary as much between family groups as between gender groups. I use the phrase "Belyuen women's view" to designate the social locus of my own understanding.

13. Kidney-fattening is a physical operation whereby a cleverman makes an incision in a sleeping person's side removing his or her kidney and replacing it with straw. The victim, unaware of the cleverman's attack, slowly wastes away and eventually dies (see Elkin 1980).

14. See a related discussion in Myers 1988.

15. Merlan 1986:475; see also Falkenberg 1962 and Hamilton 1982.

16. Belyuen Aborigines' hunting, fishing, and collecting activities actually contribute significantly to their dietary needs (see Povinelli 1993a and Coombs et al. 1983).

17. Thus, this search for a common unity, and through this unity a common answer to the diverse human experiences of labor and resource exploitation, seems more rooted in universalist than relativistic tendencies in anthropological theory (see Geertz 1973; Sahlins 1976; and Roseberry 1991).

18. Arturo Escobar's (1995) examination of development rhetoric in the third world seems to complement this essay's argument.

19. Hugh Morgan, *The Australian*, 13 October 1992.

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