***Aboriginal Business: Alliances in a Remote Australian Town*. Kimberly Christen. Santa Fe, NM: School of Advanced Research Press, 2009. 334 pp.**[*]

Reviewed by Daniel Fischer

Kimberly Christen's *Aboriginal Business* is an ethnography of Aboriginal people that places forms of intercultural partnership and Aboriginal corporate activity at its center. Christen explores the broad range of intercultural alliances, collaborations, and compromises taken up by Warumungu people in Northern Australia. In so doing she has crafted a novel and rich perspective on cultural reproduction and Aboriginal social life and provided a much-needed ethnographic window onto Tennant Creek, a small, popularly maligned town in the Northern Territory. Midway through the book Christen states that: "Tennant Creek is a town shaped by Aboriginal Tracks–in ever-changing forms" (p. 189). In this deceptively simple declaration lies a primary contribution of Christen's work. She demonstrates the complicated ways that Aboriginal interests, agencies, and institutions profoundly shape Australian places.

This is also a timely book. Its ethnographic engagement with the institutions and transformations wrought by self-determination policies comes at a time when those policies are under sustained critique and at the close of a decade that has witnessed a fundamental transformation in Australia's governmental policies towards Aboriginal people. The monograph provides numerous discussions and insights into what this transformation has meant in a particular town. In so doing it serves as an empirically rich reminder that the representations of social pathology mobilized in forms of governmental intervention and policy shift often neglect the lengthy history of Aboriginal projects and forms of cultural production that have grown under self-determination.

Aboriginal Business explores the alliances and intercultural (and inter-institutional) forms of collaboration that help to shape contemporary Aboriginal Australia over six chapters, evenly divided into three sections. The first addresses the emergence of self-determination policies and the land rights struggles of the 1970s. Christen begins from the observation that policies of self-determination and the recognition of Aboriginal rights included support for forms of Aboriginal corporation, and explores the ways that these policies—and the possibilities for Aboriginal institutional representation that they prompted—have transformed Tennant Creek. Section two focuses on forms of collaboration, first in negotiations with mining companies, and in chapter four by describing the negotiations and dilemmas entailed in completing the world's last transcontinental railway, running from Adelaide to Darwin, and right through Warumungu country. The final section focuses on the production of representations, following the creation of a music CD of traditional women's songs and finally the planning, design, and completion of Tennant Creek's Nyinka Nyunyu Aboriginal Art and Cultural Centre.

Christen's attention to intercultural social relations joins a range of ethnographies that have emerged over the past two decades. But she enters this conversation from Tennant Creek,

notorious in Australia as the 'town where the beer truck stopped.' This dystopic mythic charter—in which settlers built up a town around the stranded liquor supply, but some 7 kilometers from the nearest water—continues to feed stereotypes of the town's outback excesses and alcohol-fuelled violence. *Aboriginal Business* challenges these popular representations fundamentally and Tennant Creek emerges as a socially diverse, historically rich site of intercultural relationships, Aboriginal cultural activism, and a broad range of successful economic partnerships and intercultural institutions. Indeed, Christen's monograph can be read as an exploration of the different alliances, compromises, and institutions through which Aboriginal people have reshaped Tennant Creek's character.

Amidst the range of legislation informing self-determination policies, one outcome of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 and the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976 has been an explosion of Aboriginal organizations. As the work of Tim Rowse suggests, while the recent Northern Territory Emergency Response challenges 30 years of self determination policy, it has left—in fact could not easily address—the more than 3000 Aboriginal corporations that today constitute a significant Aboriginal institutional public (cf. Rowse 2006, 2007). Increasingly beholden to mainstream governmental bureaucracies, Christen describes how this domain has suffered disproportionately from the turbulence of ill-considered policy shifts and a long history of broader antagonism. Yet Christen demonstrates how Aboriginal corporations have nonetheless provided very real, transformative representational frameworks—addressing both particular instrumental aims and also providing organizational sites for Aboriginal people to pursue local forms of alliance and cultural production. While the importance of such organizations is hard to understate, a significant contribution of Christen's work is to make the 'alliances' that they entail and the ways these organizations have reshaped the cultural space of Tennant Creek the focus of sustained ethnographic attention.

In its second section, the monograph explores two arenas of negotiation and alliance that have overtly economic ends. In chapter four she discusses the historical centrality of mining in Tennant Creek. She utilizes this chapter to provide some historical context to the ways that Warumungu people have been able to secure consultations with mining interests, and have sought both economic security and forms of cultural recognition in this process. Yet as mining has proven unprofitable in recent decades, and has moved elsewhere, tourism has taken precedence. Her next chapter explores the negotiations, compromises, and complications entailed by efforts to build a north-south rail line linking Darwin and Adelaide, and running through Warumungu country. Christen demonstrates that contrary to some popular representations that would presume an Aboriginal incompatibility with 'modernity' and development, what many individuals and institutions seek is in fact not a cessation of development but rather participation and consultation: the right to be asked. These chapters begin to sketch what such consultations in fact involve while underlining the interests that Aboriginal people have in participating and supporting forms of economic and regional development, the willingness to negotiate and flexibility Warumungu have demonstrated, as well as the obstacles that they have faced in their continued efforts to seek such recognition and participation.

While the second section provides fascinating historical and ethnographic accounts of the increasing involvement of Aboriginal people in the economic development projects of Northern

Australia, the monograph becomes stronger in its focus on cultural production. In particular, in its final chapter *Aboriginal Business* provides a gripping narrative of the partnerships and negotiations behind Tennant Creek's Nyinkka Nyunyu cultural center. Moving from initial conversations through architectural consultation and design, the production of dioramas and the collection of objects and photographs, this chapter provides a rich account of the building of the Nyinkka Nyunyu center that brings readers with Christen and her Warumungu interlocutors across the Northern territory, from consultations with Anangu people at Uluru to Darwin's National Archives. In later stages of the project, Warumungu accompanied Christen to the South Australia Museum (SAM) where they were inspired by the Ara Irititja project—which uses digital technologies to repatriate and make the museum's collection available to communities in Central Australia. Inspired by this project, Christen's interlocutors began collecting photographs—thus drawing in past community workers and missionaries who contributed hundreds of photos to the project.

This is one of the more successful representations of Christen's interest in alliances, perhaps because focused on a single, clearly defined project (the cultural center) that spans Christen's long commitment at Tennant Creek. The chapter concludes the book with a strong and clear account of how alliances work over time—how relations are built and representations crafted. While other chapters feature compelling descriptions of intercultural work (in negotiating the route of the Adelaide-Darwin rail line through Warumungu country or in producing a CD of Warumungu women's songs for broad circulation) here the need for alliances comes to the fore strongly—making clear how shared work and 'practical, profitable collaborations' (p. 236) help to constitute the intercultural space that is Tennant Creek. In showing how Aboriginal cultural production takes place in forms of alliance and partnership, with audiences of different Aboriginal groups and of non-Indigenous people, the broad, socially diverse realm of NT life takes center stage in this final section. It is not depicted as a problematic externality to Indigenous cultural production but rather as increasingly ingredient to it.

This is an important book that has much to offer a wide range of readers. For those interested in indigenous media production, in forms of indigenous representation, in forms of intercultural corporation and negotiation, as well as for those interested in the consequences of recognition and those critically rethinking the consequences and misrepresentations of much neoliberal argument in Australia Aboriginal Business is a valuable work.

References Cited

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