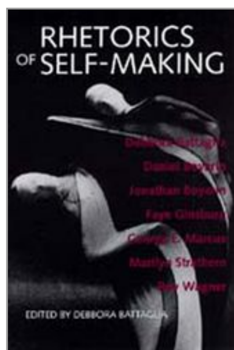

Rhetorics of Self-Making
Debbora Battaglia

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Production Values: Indigenous Media and the Rhetoric of Self-Determination

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[−] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter addresses the recent development of` video, film, and television made by, with, and for Aboriginal Australians. It sketches briefly the context for the emergence of Aboriginal media as it has been shaped by the interdependence of specific local situations and historically changing government policies, as well as transformations in consciousness of Aboriginal and Euro-Australians, and in the broader transnational polity known as the fourth world. Of particular interest is how differing notions of selfhood are negotiated through such work: these range from notions of community authorship embedded in indigenous understandings of cultural property and expression, to concepts of self-determination that have emerged in the political struggles of Aboriginal people in relation to the Australian state, to notions of individual self.

Keywords: video film, imagery, Aboriginal Australians, Aboriginal media, selfhood, community authorship

This chapter addresses the recent development of video, film, and television made by, with, and for Aboriginal Australians.[1] I will sketch, briefly, the context for the emergence of Aboriginal media as it has been shaped by the interdependence of specific local situations and historically changing government policies, as well as transformations in consciousness of Aboriginal and Euro-Australians, and in the broader transnational polity known as the fourth world. Of particular interest in the context of this volume is how differing notions of selfhood are negotiated through such work: these range from notions of community authorship embedded in indigenous understandings of cultural property and expression, to concepts of self-determination that have emerged in the political struggles of Aboriginal people in relation to the Australian state, to notions of individual self-expression valorized in venues for media exhibition in which indigenous media work is shown to (mostly) non-Aboriginal audiences. Although my analysis of these discursive intersections is somewhat preliminary, it can help clarify the complex intersections of the multiple rhetorics of self-making that shape the lives of contemporary indigenous peoples, rhetorics that undergird state media policies as well as the transnational circulation of indigenous imagery.

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The ever-increasing involvement of Australian Aboriginal people in visual media production over the last two decades[2] is part of the legacy of the Labor government's liberal left policy toward Aboriginal "self-determination" from 1972 through 1975 (Leigh 1988). Since then, the range of televisual media generated with and by Aboriginal Australians corresponds not only to differences in the experiences of those living in urban, rural, and traditional settings, but also to the diverse social positions Aboriginal people occupy, the various ways they have attempted to gain visibility and cultural control over **(p.122)** their own images, and the manner in which they are differentially positioned in Australia's "national imaginary" (Hamilton 1990). Unfortunately, this diversity has not always been accounted for by those setting broadcast policy (Molnar 1989, 147),[3] despite a broader ideological climate favoring multicultural expression as an acceptable version of the Australian polity (Hamilton 1990).[4] While a policy of administered self-determination for Aborigines (with all its contradictions) was put in place over the last decade, in practice, Aboriginal culture is flattened, reified, and assumed to be homogeneous.

Aboriginal work in film and video is as diverse as the Aboriginal producers who make it, from traditional bush-living people to urban dwellers whose history of contact with Euro-Australian culture may go back as far as two hundred years. Urban Aboriginal film- and videomakers, such as avant-garde filmmaker/photographer Tracey Moffat, are comfortable in claiming individual authorship of works, operating comfortably within the structures of an international independent film world, albeit addressing problematic issues of Aboriginal identity (Langton 1993, 13; Murray 1990).[5]

At the other end of the spectrum are traditional people living in remote areas of central, northern, and western Australia, whose contact history may be as brief as a few decades, yet who have been experimenting with video production strategies to suit their very local concerns for over ten years. As Aboriginal anthropologist and cultural activist Marcia Langton describes it: "Much of the production in remote Australia is the work of community groups [that] … have their own production values, distinct aesthetics, and cultural concerns" (1993, 14). I address here (for the most part) work being produced by these remote, relatively traditional groups, video work that is understood to be authored by the community (or segments of it) rather than by individuals, and whose audiences are primarily but not exclusively themselves.

Situating Indigenous Media

My work is part of an ongoing effort to open a "discursive space" for indigenous media that respects and understands the work on its own terms. Langton has identified such efforts as necessary "to develop a body of knowledge on representation of Aboriginal people and their concerns in art, film, television, and other media and a critical perspective to do with aesthetics and politics, drawing from Aboriginal world views, from Western traditions and from history" (1993, 28). New discursive possibilities have emerged in anthropology **(p.123)** and cultural studies that self-consciously reject notions of "authenticity" and "pure culture" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988b; Hall 1992). In line with such theories of cultural production, indigenous media can be understood as part of a powerful new process in the construction of contemporary and future indigenous identities (Ginsburg 1991; T. Turner 1992).[6] Taking my lead from ideas expressed by Aboriginal media makers, I have argued elsewhere that indigenous productions are often directed to the mediation of ruptures of time and social relations in ways that point to a cultural future (Ginsburg 1991). They address history by bridging relations between generations when the activities of "traditional culture" are no longer effective in doing so. This may be very direct, for example by stimulating ceremonial production

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in a new generation, as occurred with the Nambiquara in Brazil who reinstituted a nose-piercing initiation as a result of watching themselves on video (Carelli 1988).

Video works also provide an especially important arena for Aboriginal self-production. As a novel form, new media enable a re-visioning of social relations with the encompassing society which more traditional indigenous forms cannot so easily accommodate. In this way, indigenous media have been used as vehicles for reproducing and transforming cultural identity for indigenous people who have experienced massive political, geographic, and economic disruption (Carelli 1988; Michaels 1987a; T. Turner 1992). Thus, tapes are often imaginative Aboriginal interpretations of not only powerful relationships to land, cosmology, and ritual but also fragmented histories of contact with Europeans; continued threats to language, health, culture, and social life; and positive efforts to deal with such problems in the present. In media production, Aboriginal skills at constituting both individual and collective identities through narrative and ceremonial performance are engaged in innovative ways that are simultaneously indigenous and intercultural.

While new media forms have been embraced by many members of indigenous groups as powerful means of collective self-production that can have a culturally revitalizing effect (Ginsburg 1991; T. Turner 1990), this should not mask the fact that the introduction of these forms has also been experienced as a threat. The broad marketing of VCRs and the launching of communications satellites also brought the hegemonic shadow of mainstream television into the daily lives of indigenous people living in remote areas. The impact has been especially powerful for traditional Aboriginal people in the Central Australian desert since the 1980s, for whom satellites and VCRs catalyzed their first efforts at media production, based on both local initiatives and state interventions.

Aboriginal Media

(p.124) In the Australian context, “television” refers to the use of electronic broadcast technologies for the production and dissemination of images to large or small groups of people via television monitors. Practically speaking, this encompasses a range of practices. Perhaps the most interesting are those that use combinations of low-format video and televisual technologies but whose organization and work are uniquely embedded in local Aboriginal communities, for example, the Warlpiri Media Association (WMA) at Yuendumu or EVTV at the Pitjantjatjara settlement of Ernabella in South Australia. These local groups have explicitly challenged the imposition of mainstream Australian television by making and showing their own and other Aboriginal videotaped productions. These might include everything from extensive taping of ceremonies, to local sports events, to MTV-inspired music videos performed with Aboriginal bands singing in native languages.

By contrast, the Aboriginal commercial television broadcaster, Imparja, delivers programming very similar to that viewed by American television consumers, except for one or two evenings a week when programs by and about Aboriginal Australians can be seen. One lineup might segue from a situation comedy, to regional news, to indigenously produced segments on Aboriginal bush methods for cooking kangaroos, to an international soccer match. The broader cultural meanings of such unexpected combinations that emerge in Imparja's televisual “flow” are a constant source of discussion. One need only turn on a television in Central Australia to provoke a lively debate as to whether Aboriginal programs are a mere token presence in the commercial context or the opening wedge for transformations in the ways that Australians are envisioning their own diversity.

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Thus, in Australia, Aboriginal media have become a visible element in what Annette Hamilton calls the Australian "national imaginary," part of a social formation that operates by the conflation of rhetorics and implicit ideologies of individual and national selfhood (Hamilton 1990)[7] Drawing on ideas from Benedict Anderson, Edward Said, and Jacques Lacan, Hamilton uses the term to describe the means by which contemporary nation states constitute "imagined communities" through the circulation of televisual images even more than the print media discussed by Anderson in his now classic work (Anderson 1983). Hamilton uses Lacan's idea of the Imaginary (as the mirror phase in human development when the child sees its own reflection as an "other") to describe imaginary relations at the collective level. Mediated encounters with those who are culturally different can be seen as ourselves looking at ourselves while we think we are seeing others, for example, in films **(p.125)** such as *Crocodile Dundee* in which the outback and Aboriginal knowledge play a critical role in validating the settler presence in the country (Hamilton 1990, 18).

Such representations of the Australian nation circulate in an increasingly "internationalised image-environment" (1990) in which representations of indigenous peoples now carry a heavy load, as Donna Haraway (1992) has pointed out so cogently. Aboriginal media have become implicated in these commodified images of Aboriginality, which now include "hi-tech primitives." Such imagery escapes the control of indigenous makers as it romanticizes them, for example, in Wim Wenders's short-lived 1992 film *Until the End of the World,* in which a crew of Aboriginal technicians assist mad scientist Max Von Sydow in his efforts to use technology to make visible people's dreams, thus playing quite literally on the notion of Dreamtime, the English gloss for Aboriginal cosmological systems. This is in contrast to those images of natives presented in traditional settings (the noble but exoticized savage) or as victims (the vanishing race) that are increasingly problematic for Euro-Australian (and other) consumers who are aware of and uncomfortable with our implication in the lives and historical circumstances of these "Others." Conversely, I would argue, there is a pleasure for such consumers in regarding the image of the indigenous videographer as a kind of bush cosmopolitan, at ease with both tradition and Western advanced technology; such an image evokes a kind of futuristic nostalgia, even if it masks inequality and culpability.

Commodified images of Aboriginal producers along with Aboriginal acrylic paintings and popular music groups such as Yothu Yindi are part of the cultural capital on which contemporary Australia builds its national image for consumption and circulation in the arenas of tourism, political affairs, and the marketing of culture overseas (Beckett 1988; Hamilton 1990; Myers 1991). As a relatively benign example, the Australian consulate circulated a festival of Aboriginal film and video in the United States in 1993 as part of the United Nations Year of Indigenous Peoples.

Still, although their perspectives certainly differ, indigenous producers, sympathetic media activists, and government administrators alike see both the activity and product of Aboriginal cultural production in film and video (and other forms) as linking diverse populations as well as the past, present, and future in various "imagined community/ies" of the nation.[8] In service to that vision, the capabilities of Aboriginal media to transcend boundaries of time, space, and even language are seen as effectively mediating historically produced social ruptures. Thus, support for Aboriginal media comes in part from the imagined role they can play in constructing an inclusive if uneasy **(p.126)** vision of the nation that, at least televisually, is beginning to take account of its Aboriginal citizens.

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Outback Television

Prior to the setting of government policy, two important community-based Aboriginal media associations developed at the relatively traditional remote communities of Yuendumu on Warlpiri lands on the edge of the Tanami Desert in Central Australia, northwest of Alice Springs; and Ernabella on Pitjantjatjara lands in South Australia, just south of Uluru (Ayers Rock). Both are Aboriginal settlements with highly mobile populations that can vary from five hundred to a thousand over the course of a year. Founded by missionaries in the 1940s, they became self-governing by the 1970s and retain infrastructures consisting of a community store, a town office, a police station, a primary school, a health clinic, a church, an art association, and local broadcast facilities. Langton succinctly describes the Warlpiri settlement of Yuendumu:

> On the surface, Yuendumu is a desolate “fourth world” settlement of concrete block “houses,” windswept red soil, minimal employment, poor diet and health. But there is a strong determination by the Warlpiri people to survive, to fight back, to retain a heritage of great antiquity and continuity. (1993, 59)

In 1982, American researcher Eric Michaels, a consultant for the (then) Institute of Aboriginal Studies, went to Yuendumu to conduct a long-term study of the impact of media on traditional Aboriginal people in Central Australia. Michaels had been trained in the United States by Sol Worth, whose famous project of teaching filmmaking to Navajo suggested the possibility of culturally distinct practices of media production and reception (Worth and Adair 1972), an empirical argument against McLuhan's view that the medium is the message (McLuhan 1966).

While Yuendumu and many other Aboriginal communities had not received the steady flow of mainstream Australian broadcast television available in most non-Aboriginal communities, they were acquainted with popular cinema through community viewings of rented films, attending theaters in the nearby town of Alice Springs, and the circulation and viewing of videos on their own or resident whites' VCRs. By 1983, essentially every extended family had access to at least one VCR (9 for 900) on which they could view rented tapes in “appropriate groupings respecting avoidance restrictions and other traditional constraints on congregating” (Michaels 1986, 8). Michaels's research on Aboriginal media reception drew heavily on Nancy Munn's insightful work on Warlpiri iconography (Munn 1973), suggesting **(p.127)** analogies between their experiences of production and reception of video and their production and reception of their traditional graphic system. “For Warlpiri viewers,” according to Michaels,

> Hollywood videos … are very partial accounts which require a good deal of interpretive activity on the part of viewers to supply contents as well as contexts which make these stories meaningful. When home video made it possible for Warlpiri to control the place and membership of viewing groups, it became possible to assemble the small interpretive communities which are associated with other performances in which stories are told and their associated graphics displayed. At this point, video viewing became a most popular and persuasive camp activity. (1986, 12)

Following Worth's model, Michaels helped train people to produce their own videos based on Aboriginal concerns. The Warlpiri Media Association (WMA) grew out of this activity. Between 1982 and 1986, Warlpiri videomakers produced hundreds of hours of tapes on subjects ranging from traditional dances, to a piece memorializing a massacre of Warlpiri people by whites, to recording of local sports events. Originally, the tapes were circulated via camp VCRs. In April 1985, WMA established its own very local low-power TV station via a homemade transmitter that provided a way to broadcast locally produced tapes to the community and to pull in the signal

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for the state television channel, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). WMA and other similar operations were considered illegal because the state had no licensing category for such small-scale broadcasters (Michaels 1986). This bureaucratic vacuum for Aboriginal media was an important index of the ambivalent governmental stance toward Aboriginal initiatives.

From the local perspective, government neglect had positive effects. It meant that there was room for community control and the development of an innovative production style, both aesthetically and in work relations, appropriate to local social organization, narrative conventions, and communicative strategies. For example, the substance and formal qualities of the tapes have a distinctly Warlpiri sensibility. In contrast to the free-floating signifiers that characterize most Western televisual semiotics, Warlpiri tapes show an intense focus on particular landscapes, consistent with the way traditional Aboriginal knowledge is made meaningful by associations with specific geographic locations (Michaels 1986). But of equal if not more importance is the social organization of media production; the ways in which tapes are made, shown, and used reflect Warlpiri understandings of kinship, group responsibilities for ceremonial production, and the control of traditional knowledge (Michaels 1986). Traditional Aboriginal production does not emphasize **(p.128)** the creative “self-expression” of individuals or assign them responsibility as authors. All cultural production is part of a broader effort at self-production in the collective sense.

> Stories are always true, and invention even when it requires an individual agent to “dream” or “receive” a text, remains social in a complex and important sense that assures truth. Rights to receive, know, perform, or teach a story (through dance, song, narrative, and graphic design) are determined by any identified individual's structural position and social/ritual history within an elaborately reckoned system of kin. Novelty can only enter this system as a social, not an individual invention. Not only is one's right to invent ultimately constrained, it is particularly constrained with respect to the kinship role for it is the geneaology of an item—not its individual creation—which authorises it. (Michaels 1987b,65)

Similar developments occurred at Ernabella, a remote Pitjantjatjara community in South Australia (Batty 1993; Molnar 1989, 25ff; N. Turner 1990). There, in 1983, local people, with the help of white schoolteachers, began producing video programs that immediately became quite popular. By April 1985, Ernabella Video Television (EVTV) was established, providing “local broadcasting on the world's cheapest community television transmission system (less than $1,000 worth of equipment purchased from a 10 cent surcharge on cool drinks in the store)” (quoted in Dutchak 1992, 48). In seven years, EVTV has produced thousands of hours of community television. Broadcast is stricdy regulated by the local media committee, made up of male and female elders, in terms of both substance—so that images are not shown that violate cultural rules regulating what can be seen (e.g., sacred ceremonies)–and timing, so that television does not interfere with social activities.

Locally based groups like WMA and EVTV are able to maintain Aboriginal control over video production and viewing in keeping with their own community standards. As Philip Batty, a media activist in Central Australia, assesses it, WMA and EVTV “had managed to establish their own local television service funded through their own local resources and became familiar with the basic processes of television production, long before the arrival of television via satellite” (1993, 114). This was accomplished by funding and managing their projects on their own terms and applying an active if basic knowledge of television technology in locally relevant and meaningful

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ways, which gave them the confidence and community consciousness to deal with the arrival of mainstream television via satellite when that occurred. Additionally, video production in remote communities has had a remarkable effect in terms of cultural production. For example, for Pitjantjatjara people, the work **(p.129)** of EVTV "had the effect of engendering a kind of local renaissance in traditional dance, performance and singing. The various video programmes depicting the actual land where the dreaming lines were located gave renewed strength to traditional beliefs and values within the communities" (Batty 1993,113).

Satellites and Air Rights: Imparja

Over the 1980s, the Australian government took an increasing interest in the development of Aboriginal media. The problematic nature of state intervention is exemplified in Imparja, Australia's first Aboriginally owned commercial television station. The story of Imparja originates in concern over the consequences for Aboriginal people of the launch of Australia's first communications satellite, AUSSAT. This event brought the destructive potential of broadcasting commercial television to remote areas of the nation for the first time, including many Aboriginal settlements and communities in Central Australia whose geographic isolation had protected them from such intrusions. After much debate regarding what was the appropriate action to take, members of CAAMA, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, who had organized a very successful and indigenously based radio station, mobilized and made a bid for the satellite downlink license to Central Australia. Their petition to the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal was made initially as a symbolic assertion of the presence and concerns of that region's Aboriginal people. Much to their surprise, their proposal was taken seriously. As it turned out, the national Tribunal provided the arena for the articulation of state media policies that, at least nominally, were in support of the concerns of remote-living Aboriginal people.

In 1986, after considerable struggle with more commercially viable competitors, CAAMA won the license. The private commercial station they now own, Imparja, began broadcasting in January 1988, serving approximately one hundred thousand viewers in Central Australia, over 25 percent of them Aboriginal, as opposed to 2 percent in the general population (Batty 1993). Thus far, in addition to public service announcements and logos with images of Aboriginal people, Imparja has been regularly broadcasting programs produced by CAAMA. Their most successful program is *Nganampa–Anwer-nekenhe* ("Ours"), a magazine show on Aboriginal culture produced in four Aboriginal languages (with English subtitles), broadcast on Thursday nights. In its first two years, Imparja was viewed with great optimism, although some media activists prophesied that Aboriginal interests would be swallowed up by the "survival needs" of a costly commercial television operation. For example, **(p.130)** in the opinion of Michaels, government support for self-determination was based largely on Western economic and cultural models that attempt to construct an Aboriginality that is a mirror of Euro-Australian culture: "the emphasis on technology and high production values (intended rather than realised) seems part of a more general attempt to constitute Aborigines as 'world Class, export quality' natives. They feature what the government sees to be 'good' Aborigines doing productive (i.e., non-Aboriginal) things" (1986, 63). Many since have come to agree with the pessimists; they are disappointed by the lack of Aboriginal presence in Imparja's programming and personnel, arguing that two to three hours out of seventy hours a week, even at prime time, is insufficient Aboriginal programming. Freda Glynn, an Aboriginal woman who was cofounder and Director of CAAMA (from 1980 to 1991), resigned because of internal disagreements over the way Imparja was developing.

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> Our original aim was to get some control over the satellite so that we could use it to suit our own purposes. … I remember saying that television was like the second invasion of our country, that it would be just as destructive as alcohol… . We wanted to see a lot of black faces, people speaking our local languages… . We were especially interested in using it for educational purposes… . Maybe this can still happen … but look at Imparja now, it's no different to any other commercial TV station. … In a way, it has become what we tried to stop. (Glynn, quoted in Batty 1993, 123).

In contrast to small-scale groups like WMA and EVTV, Imparja is a large multimillion-dollar station in which information flows follow the imperatives of commercial television oriented toward mass audiences. The so-called need for advertising—and therefore programs that are assumed to draw big audiences—supersedes investment in programming for Aboriginal viewers, in keeping with the management's orientation toward profits and Euro-Australian interests. To the white management, Aboriginal programming is regarded as not lucrative because there is a drop-off in European viewers; advertisers do not view Aboriginal people as significant consumers. And this does not even begin to address the complexities of mass broadcasting from an Aboriginal perspective. For example, how are images of people who have died to be handled, when Aboriginal mortuary rituals prohibit the circulation of names or images of those who have passed away?

Nonetheless, Imparja, as one of the first indigenously owned commercial television stations in the world, is held up by the government as a successful example of Aboriginal development and self-determination, a ploy that sometimes backfires (Batty 1993, 18). The comments of a 1991 Nigerian visitor to Imparja (cited in Batty 1993) are instructive:

> **(p.131)** He had been told that this was the only Aboriginal-owned television station in Australia, and was therefore keen to see how an indigenous group ran such a service and in what ways it differed from mainstream stations. He was amazed to learn that the federal government had given the local Aboriginal people more than $18 million to set up and run Imparja over three years, but perplexed to discover that the station only employed four Aboriginal people out of a total staff of thirty-two and that Imparja's programming was 98% white! While Imparja is totally cloaked in the rhetoric of “Aboriginal self-determination” and is supported by many millions of “Aboriginal dollars” provided by the government, the main beneficiaries do not appear to be Aboriginal. (1993, 122)

The case of Imparja makes clear that even well-intentioned attempts to increase the visibility of Aboriginal accomplishments and concerns in the mass media are often fraught with complexities that white policy makers would rather ignore. In an international climate characterized by a problematic rhetoric of “self-determination,” state officials are in the contradictory position of creating government programs promoting indigenous self-expression, yet wanting to claim that Aboriginal initiatives are evolving through a (collective) self-initiated process (Beckett 1988; Rowse 1992). Even more ironic, the mastery of new communication forms as a means of resistance and assertion of rights is often motivated by dire political circumstances created by the very governments that also provide much of the necessary support for production, a telling instance of a system some have labeled as “welfare colonialism” (Beckett 1988).[9] Thus, rhetorics of self-determination can gloss the fact that the scale and “rules” of mass media may be completely inappropriate to traditional Aboriginal concerns and efforts to use media as a site for self-production and cultural reinvention.

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Local Knowledge Versus The Global Village: The Tanami Network

As my last example, I want to discuss the recent development of the Tanami Network. In this case, state-of-the-art video technology is being used in the service of reviving Aboriginal communication patterns in which local areas are the center from which information emanates, a reversal of the European model that sees the urban cities as the center and the remote communities as the periphery.

When I was in Australia in 1988, criticisms of Imparja by more remote Aboriginal media associations had escalated. Regarding Imparja as deaf to their complaints, people at Yuendumu became engaged in an effort to develop communications in ways more suited to their concerns and activities. Along with three other Aboriginal communities in the Tanami area of Central **(p. 132)** Australia (Lajamanu, Willowra, and Kintore), they formed the Tanami Network, a video conferencing system that uses satellite signals to link these settlements to one another and to the urban centers of Alice Springs, Darwin, and Sydney. The compressed video technology allows groups of people to see and hear one another via what some have called a “space-age picture telephone” (O'Loughlin 1992). As an indication of their interest, the communities jointly contributed over $350,000 in mining royalties and other community funds to establish this system.

Their sentiments were articulated at a workshop at Yuendumu in 1990 when the technology was first demonstrated to the community. There, two paintings by a Warlpiri woman, Jeannie Nungarrayi Egan, were used to show different models of communication. In the first painting, depicting the current hegemonic model, Warlpiri communities are shown as dependent for information on *kardiya* (white people's) centers such as Alice Springs or Darwin. The second painting represents the Tanami Network's decentralized, interactive model, in which large white settlements are not privileged over smaller Aboriginal ones.

When I was at Yuendumu in 1992, shortly after the network had been put in place, Peter Toyne, a former principal of the Yuendumu school who has been active in organizing the network, placed its goals in cultural and historical context from a Warlpiri perspective.

> The establishment of the Tanami communities over the last 50 years severely disrupted the traditional network of information and personal contacts which existed amongst people in the area. The Aboriginal people have responded by attempting to reassemble the earlier network through the use of motor vehicles … outstations … and through such telephone and radio links as have escaped the restrictive control of non-Aboriginals in the communities… . Aboriginal community members have stated repeatedly that they want the links to work out family things and help keep the traditions and Aboriginal law strong… . The Tanami Network is being developed in the belief that it offers a completely new line of approach to many of these problems by changing the basic dialogue through which the services are planned and delivered. (Toyne 1992, 1)

The Network has already been used for purposes as diverse as “sorry business” (funeral arrangements), driver's education, and long-distance marketing of Aboriginal art to places such as Santa Monica (Toyne 1992). While some are skeptical of the expense and specialized nature of the technology at a time when so many basic needs—health, nutrition, shelter—are not adequately served, others are intrigued by the Tanami Network's possibilities, using arguments like those articulated by Eric Michaels: “Producing Aboriginal community media in locales with no productive economic base … could **(p.133)** prove more successful than agricultural,

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industrial, or other material development projects, precisely because of the traditional interest and expertise in information management” (1987b, 69).

For Euro-Australian policy makers, their interests in this new project are enmeshed in their construction of Aboriginality in the current “Australian imaginary,” Australia's media-sawy natives as a mirror of an ideal Euro-Australian middle class: clever and up-to-date, yet conservative. A headline in Australia's capital–“Resourceful Aborigines use latest technology to preserve tribal life” *(Canberra Times,* March 20, 1992)—captures one dimension of this construction. For policy makers, the Tanami Network offers a positive affirmation of initiative on the part of remote-living Aborigines. Thus, whatever its final outcome or relative utility, one can see in the Tanami experiment an ironic convergence of Aboriginal interests in self-production via the use of televisual technologies to reconstitute regional connections, and national rhetorics of indigenous self-determination.

Transnational Mediations

Indigenous media producers not only inhabit national public cultures but are also part of “global cultural flows” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988a, 1). As Aboriginal people become more knowledgeable about media production and representation, they can provide alternatives to the internationally popular but distorted imagery of the technologically able but traditionally exotic indigene, as in the Wenders film. In contrast to such commodified representations, Aboriginal media producers are also engaged in arenas constitutive of an emergent global fourth-world/first-nations identity[10] in which different rhetorics of self are summoned in support of indigenous media.

One can see how these different rhetorical structures come to bear in events organized for the exhibition of indigenous media production. Most prominently, in exhibition venues organized by and for indigenous people, media is framed by a rhetoric of self-determination not in the economic entrepreneurial sense of the Australian state but in a way that evokes nationhood and political independence while implicitly suggesting the privileging of collective interests over those of the individual. Yet in Aboriginal venues associated with the showcasing of independent film and video, indigenous work is drawn into Western rhetorics of self-expression that valorize the individual as a political or artistic agent. Implicit in this rhetoric is a person detached or even in opposition to a broader polity. Recent shows of indigenous film/video organized by dominant cultural institutions situate them as new forms of aesthetic/political production, focusing on “individual makers” in **(p.134)** places associated with “auteurship” in the arts, such as the New Museum (1990), the Museum of Modern Art (1990, 1993), or the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center (1992), all sites of exhibition of indigenous media. Although this has been changing as the broader Zeitgeist in the West embraces multicultural and identity-based politics as frames for the exhibition of various expressive media, the structures for showing work in most cases still put forward “the artist,” repressing the embeddedness of individual artistic production in broader social and political processes.

This is in contrast to the views of indigenous media producers who almost never speak of themselves as artists concerned primarily with aesthetics and formal issues, detached from communal concerns. Rather than accepting the dominant culture's model of the media text as the expression of an individuated self, they stress the *activities* of the production and reception of indigenous media as processes of collective self-making, part of a continuum of social action for Aboriginal empowerment. This position is especially evident in the rhetoric used at international film/video festivals for the work of indigenous peoples, which have burgeoned since 1985. For many, these festivals are preferred venues, over more “high culture” national

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institutions that privilege the notion of autonomous individuals whose needs for expressive activity override other concerns. These events are becoming the basis for constituting an emergent organization of indigenous media producers, such as the First Nations Film and Video Makers World Alliance formed at the September 1992 Dreamspeakers Festival in Edmonton, Canada, or the Native American Producer's Alliance formed at the Deadwood Festival in January 1993.

The social relations built out of these media practices are helping to develop support and sensibilities for indigenous actions for self-determination, locally, nationally, and internationally. Self-representation in media is seen as a crucial part of this process (Langton 1993). As an example of how these goals are being put into action, Dreamspeakers has already spun off into a First Nation's Film Festival held in Sydney in July 1993, organized by Aboriginal documentary maker Frances Peters, in which 50 percent of the works are Aboriginal and the rest are from other indigenous groups. Clearly, the transnational social relations built out of media practices are creating new arenas of cooperation that transcend local and even national borders.

In conclusion, I want to suggest that indigenous media has been able to flourish in part because of the social and discursive spaces created by the disjunctures and mutual misapprehensions in the multiple rhetorics of self-making that shape the funding, production, and reception of such work in **(p.135)** both dominant and Aboriginal cultures, as well as in transnational circuits. However misguided, government policies built on strictly economic models of self-determination have helped mobilize support for this work as a productive activity, often harnessing funding to bureaucratic agendas such as tapes on using health care or social security systems. Interestingly, even work funded for the most utilitarian of purposes on the part of the state often is reconceived in creative ways that tie contemporary problems to the horrific effects of the colonial encounter, a narrative refusal of a victim status that is to be “solved” by state aid. Aboriginal producers see their media work, whatever its topic, as enabling them to assert their own cultural and historical realities to themselves and the broader societies that have stereotyped or rendered them invisible.

Exemplary of a different disjuncture in the rhetorics of self-making is the problem of exhibiting indigenous work in institutions built on rhetorics of individual self-expression that characterize discussions of expressive media in Western cultures. By contrast, indigenous media works often have a form of communal authorship embedded in complex claims of rights to tell and receive cultural knowledge, positions that complicate structures of distribution and public culture in which the (media) artists5 position is valued as being outside or critical of society. Instead, indigenous producers situate their work as continuous with struggles for political self-determination. In the imaginative space of film, video, and television lie possibilities for Aboriginal communities to envision their current realities and possible futures, and to find new arenas for collective self-production and self-representation that create links among indigenous makers around the globe.

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(2.) Different aspects of this involvement are summarized nicely in essays by film historian Michael Leigh (1988), filmmaker David MacDougall (1987), as well as the late Eric Michaels (1986) and communications scholar Helen Molnar (1989)—who reminds us that many remote-living Aborigines have been producing their own radio programming since the 1970s, “leaping over the print generation to begin recording their languages, stories, music and culture” (Molnar 1989, 148).

(3.) While to Euro-Australians, different “traditional” groups may seem undistin-guishable, linguistic variation alone makes it clear that they are not a monolithic block; of the two hundred Aboriginal languages originally spoken, approximately sixty are still in active use today (Black 1983, 3).

(4.) There was no effort to establish Aboriginal broadcast policy until the early 1980s, when questions were raised about the potential negative consequences of the 1985 launch of a communications satellite, AUSSAT, on remote-living Aboriginal people (Wilmott 1984).

(5.) For anthropological analyses of Aboriginal “self-determination” and the production of Aboriginal identity in relation to the state, see Beckett 1988.

(6.) The term “indigenous media” respects the understandings of those Aboriginal producers who identify themselves as “First Nations” and indexes the political circumstances they share with other indigenous people around the globe. Whatever their cultural differences, these groups all struggle against a legacy of disenfranchisement of their lands, societies, and cultures by colonizing European societies, as occurred in Australia, the United States, Canada, and most of Latin America. “Media”—whether referring to satellites or VCRs—evokes the huge institutions of the television and film industries that tend to overwhelm the local cultural specificities of small-scale societies, while privileging commercial interests that demand large audiences as a measure of success. While the institutional dimensions of media—especially television—shadow their intersection with the lives of indigenous people, they do not determine the outcome. For that reason, I also stress another meaning of media: the activity of mediation.

(7.) For a similar articulation of this idea, also see Dermody and Jacka 1988.

(8.) For example, this was evident in an Alice Springs newspaper article announcing the recent debut of an Aboriginal compressed video network in Australia's Central desert: “Tribal business has gone space age in the outback” (O'Loughlin 1992).

(9.) The Department of Aboriginal Affairs began funding Aboriginal broadcasting initiatives in 1980. Since 1984, it has provided more than $1 million each financial year to support regional Aboriginal broadcasting (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1989).

(10.) Some of these festivals include the Native American Film Festival, held regularly in San Francisco and New York City; the Two Rivers Festival held in Minnesota in the fall; the Pincher Creek World Festival of Aboriginal Motion Pictures, which has been replaced by Dreamspeakers, convened in September 1992 in Alberta, Canada; and the Interamerican Film Festival of Indigenous Peoples, held every two years in South America.

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