Introduction

A Return

In Australia's far north, heat greets a visitor like a warm hug, enveloping the body as it exits an air-conditioned aeroplane. It's still some time from what is known as the 'Wet', and residents here will have months of the 'build up' left to contend with before the clouds open and monsoon storms bring sweet relief. For now, I'm covered in sweat, beads springing forth across the bridge of my nose and rivulets forming, running between my shoulder blades, and down the backs of my legs. Waves of heat rise from the tarmac where a small aeroplane waits, baking in the midday sun, and blow towards the small building where a small number of passengers sit on rows of plastic chairs. I'm returning to the small Aboriginal community of Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Australia, a very remote island that I have been visiting since 2006 (see first map in the frontmatter). The small commercial plane in which I'm travelling departed from the Australian east-coast city of Cairns, and is now making a brief stop in the small town of Normanton before flying on to the island community. My fellow passengers are the usual mix of Aboriginal people and government workers from the range of service delivery agencies across the region.

The flight attendant calls 'all aboard' and those making the onwards journey from Normanton to Mornington Island trudge across the tarmac and resume their seats for take-off. After crossing the Australian mainland coast, the plane heads out over the ocean, and soon the Wellesley Islands will become visible below. Though located in northern Australia, the Gulf of Carpentaria does not have the crystal-clear turquoise waters of the iconic Great Barrier Reef, known to many from postcards and tourist advertisements. Instead, circulatory tides push

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and pull sediments, creating pastel-cloudy waters reminiscent of milky tea, but a keen eye can recognize the signs of life that teems in the saltwater below. We cross over the South Wellesley Islands, including the largest Bentinck Island, and then on to the southern end of Mornington Island in the North Wellesley Islands where the community of Gununa is located (see second map in the frontmatter). Gununa is now the only permanently occupied settlement in the Wellesley archipelago; a community of approximately 1,100 people (see third map in the frontmatter), one of many similarly sized remote Aboriginal communities that dot northern and central Australia. Like many of these communities, only a small number of non-Aboriginal people, Whitefellas or *marndagi* as they are referred to locally, live there.

This book is about the everyday lives of Mornington Islanders, both Aboriginal people and Whitefellas. Primarily it is about the lives of Aboriginal Mornington Islanders, as they navigate under conditions that are variously described by others as in 'crisis'. The Australian media is flooded with this crisis narrative, particularly portrayals and images of Aboriginal ill health and violence. The supposed crisis is ongoing and continues to unfold, seeping and leaking out of any contained understanding of the temporal boundedness that might be expected when the term is invoked. What this means is that Aboriginal people continue to find ways to endure and to belong, new ways to create value and meaning and to relate, both in their relationships with one another and to the material world in which they live. It is these modes of enduring and the intensity that these experiences generate that are the core concerns of this book.

In spite of its intellectual and ethical focus on core issues of Aboriginal people's lives, this book is not a manifesto for the necessity of interventions into those lives, nor does it contain suggestions for how to 'fix' the situations that it describes. Rather, it details the range of contexts and conditions under which people already persist, presenting a means of thinking about living in the contemporary in ways which do not foreclose their potential futures. Around the world, studies that focus on endurance are more and more common, a necessary response to the array of social marginalization, economic austerity, militarization and environmental crises which typify late capitalism. Many of these studies draw on the work of anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli, whose book *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (2011) has come to define the field.

Povinelli's particular contribution has been to draw attention to the ubiquitousness with which endurance-related events permeate daily life. These 'quasi-events' are those that do not quite reach the status

of an 'aha' moment, Povinelli tells us, and at times slip and slide from view, making them difficult to catch or to hold. It is ethnography's attentiveness to the minutiae of daily life that makes it so well suited to describing the modes of endurance that Povinelli describes, and ethnography forms the methodological basis of this book. Nonetheless, as will be discussed further in this introduction, taking an ethnographic approach to Aboriginal lives is at odds with the opinions of some scholars writing in this space, who argue instead for the taking up of advocacy and political positions which deny anthropology's core practice. As it relates to Mornington Island, what resonates from Povinelli's work is how a committed focus that centres Mornington Islanders does not avoid the difficulties of recognizing the marginal position that they occupy within the contemporary nation state, nor the grittiness of the conditions under which they persist.

By the time that I began visiting there, Mornington Islanders were familiar with anthropologists, having sporadically hosted a number of researchers over the twentieth century. More recently, some Mornington Islanders have been involved with the state-mandated processes of native title, and have become accustomed to articulating their knowledge to researchers for the purposes of having their underlying rights to land and sea recognized by law. Such was the familiarity with the anthropological project that shortly after I had arrived on the Island in 2007, Mr Cyril Moon, a senior Lardil Aboriginal man, knocked on my front door and asked if I was 'the anthropologist'. When I nodded, he responded that I should get my (note) 'book' so that we could 'get goin'. In what would become a pivotal relationship, Cyril began to refer to me as his daughter, thereby incorporating me into the local kinship idiom. The significance of this inculcation was that it provided a shorthand way for others to determine their relationship to me, a means through which Mornington Islanders could make sense of my sociality within their existing schemas. The concentration of my experience was of ten months living on Mornington Island in 2007 and a subsequent six months in 2008, followed by shorter return visits in 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018. For some of this period I was undertaking research towards a PhD in anthropology at the University of Queensland.

In attending to the ideas of endurance and intensity, I speak into the intellectual space created by the ethnographic legacy of a number of researchers who have worked on Mornington Island. In particular, I chart a way of thinking about remote Aboriginal life that does away with tropes that foretell the end of Mornington Island social and cultural identity, something that became the erstwhile task of my anthropological forebear David McKnight (1999, 2002, 2004, 2005). I return to

McKnight's work throughout this book, not only because of his prolific contributions about Mornington Island, but because of the gravity of his pronouncements about those who live there and their future. Though McKnight's ethnographic legacy is voluminous, his analytic is focused almost solely on social and cultural loss, promoting a deficit discourse when it comes to Aboriginal personhood. This perspective has provided little in the way of a foundation on which to build a hopeful future for Mornington Islanders, and it is this absence that provides the rationale for this book.

Mornington Island: A Brief History

Mornington Island is the largest in an archipelago of islands in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria, Queensland, in the northern part of Australia. At the south-west end of Mornington Island is the largest and only permanently occupied settlement in the Wellesley Islands, a community called Gununa. Gununa is what is known in Australia as a 'discrete community', in the sense that the population primarily comprises Aboriginal people and the community exists as a service point for the Aboriginal population that live there, with very little private economic enterprise. Access to the Island is via plane or boat and travel around the Island itself is via a network of unsealed roads, most of which are impassable for several months of each year, including during the annual monsoon from December to February. The Mornington Shire Council is a local government area classed as 'very remote' by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010), based on its distance from any major Australian town or city.

During the 2000s Gununa had a fairly stable population of approximately 1,000 Aboriginal people and 100 non-Aboriginal people (ABS 2006: Table B07, 2011: Table B07, 2016: Table G07).[1] The demographic profile of the Aboriginal residents was one of a youthful population, with over 40 per cent under the age of nineteen in 2016 (ABS 2016: Table G07). This mirrors trends Australia-wide, which are of both a youthful and growing Aboriginal population (Langton 2010: 95). Another aspect of growth in the population has been the numbers of non-Aboriginal people living in the community, which has almost doubled from 68 to 130 people in the ten-year period from 2006 to 2016 (ABS 2006: Table B07, 2016: Table G07). Some of this growth reflects large infrastructure-building projects at the local airport and jetty and the expanding population's need for services. It also reflects the glacially slow pace at which Aboriginal people are being supported to develop skills and take up

employment in positions to manage and service their own community, making them reliant on skills and expertise from elsewhere.

The non-Aboriginal settlement of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria began during the late 1800s and has had profound and ongoing impacts on Aboriginal residents. Oral history accounts report the brutalization and massacres of Aboriginal people across the islands at this time, including in the South Wellesley Islands. The enslavement of Aboriginal people into *beche-de-mer* and sandalwood industries by non-Aboriginal traders provided the justification for the establishment of a Presbyterian Church mission station at the southern end of Mornington Island in 1914. As has been extensively detailed elsewhere, particularly by McKnight (2002, 2004, 2005) and Memmott (1979), the origins of the contemporary community of Gununa were on the same site as the mission camp. What started as a modest Church mission camp set up by the first mission superintendent Reverend Robert Hall began what would become decades of Church control and the monitoring of Aboriginal people in the region (Wharton 2000: 11). Over subsequent years, Aboriginal people from various parts of the North Wellesley Islands – the Lardil and Yangkaal people – were moved to live within the mission compound and in Aboriginal camps located nearby. The Queensland Government also relocated a number of Aboriginal adults and children from the adjacent Australian mainland, sometimes as punishment for what was described as errant behaviour[2] (Blake 1998: 38; Trigger 1992: 39–40).

Under the guise of 'protection', Aboriginal people became a source of labour exploited by the mission, their intimate knowledge of the local landscape and its resources used to obtain food to fuel mission economies. The murder of Reverend Hall by an Aboriginal man in 1917, and a subsequent siege at the mission house involving mission staff, galvanized the Church and Government's resolve to maintain a permanent presence on the Island. The Aboriginal man responsible for Hall's death, 'Bad Peter', was sent with six other Aboriginal people to the Saint Helena penal colony in Moreton Bay in South East Queensland and was said to have drowned there. Though sometimes framed as a dispute over tobacco, in the historical record this is an extraordinary instance of the rejection of a non-Aboriginal presence in the region and of the occupation of Aboriginal lands.

As relates to Church administration of the Island, a period of relative stability followed from 1918 to 1942 when the Reverend Robert Wilson was mission superintendent. As in many Indigenous communities both in Australia and North America, the Church approach involved removing Aboriginal children from their parents to live in mission dormitories, to work in mission enterprises and to learn English (see Figure 0.1).

This has been exceptionally destructive to Aboriginal social and cultural wellbeing, with enduring and intergenerational effects. Though this period can be characterized as one where Aboriginal culture was increasingly produced in the context of 'intercultural' relationships through interactions with mission staff, there was simultaneous maintenance of a distinct social and spatial Aboriginal domain in which language, local knowledge and kinship relations were paramount (Dalley and Memmott 2010). The maintenance of this domain was integral to the sense of persistence and endurance against non-Aboriginal interference and in the transmission of cultural knowledge.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the Church brought all residents to live in proximity to the mission, and recruited Aboriginal

Figure 0.1. Aboriginal children with school teacher Lucy at the Mornington Island Mission, 1936 (UQFL57, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library).

assistants, especially Aboriginal people from the mainland, to convert Aboriginal people to Christianity. In 1947 and 1948, Church authorities moved approximately sixty Kaiadilt Aboriginal people from Sweers and Bentinck Islands in the South Wellesley Islands to the Mornington Island mission[3] (Evans 1998: 47). The trauma associated with this relocation was reflected in Evans' observation that Mornington Island was considered by Kaiadilt people as a place of 'exile' (Evans 1998: 15). In the immediate aftermath of the removal, no babies born to Kaiadilt mothers survived to infancy, a startling reflection on the damage of Church practice and the potency of connection to country. The displacement of Kaiadilt people meant that within forty years the entire Aboriginal population of the Wellesley Islands, who had for millennia lived rich and varied cultural lives across the entire archipelago, were uprooted to live in a single settlement.

From the 1950s, Aboriginal people were sent from Mornington Island to the mainland to work as domestics and station hands on cattle stations, often under horrendous and abusive conditions and for little or no pay. These years, particularly when the Reverend Douglas Belcher was mission superintendent from 1950 to 1969, involved the continued surveillance and control of Aboriginal people. The mission dormitories were permanently closed in 1953 (McKnight 2002: 61). A growing promotion of Aboriginal culture, including its export to the outside world via the selling of handcrafts and performances of a dance group, brought income and travel opportunities for some Mornington Islanders, including the famous Lardil artist Dick Roughsey. Instrumental in the marketing of Roughsey's work was the commercial airline pilot Percy Trezise, in a partnership which began when the men met at a holiday resort in the mainland Gulf town of Karumba (Roughsey 1971: 132). Roughsey's (1971) autobiography and a collection of letters that he wrote to Trezise (held at the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland) detail his experiences during this period. What stands out in Roughsey's letters is the degree to which the daily life of Aboriginal Mornington Islanders was controlled by the mission superintendent, even during the 1970s. In spite of being a highly respected and published author, dancer and senior Aboriginal songman, Roughsey was nonetheless required to seek approval from the mission superintendent (who was referred to by the Lardil kin term '*guntha*', meaning father) in order to travel to the mainland and to spend money that he had earned as part of his artistic endeavours. Roughsey's letters reflect his frustration at the continued infantilization of Aboriginal people by the Church and at his limited access to money and resources that he had earned.

The late 1960s through to the early 1980s were notable for the conducting of anthropologically significant research by David McKnight,[4] Paul Memmott (1979), John Cawte (1972) and Virginia Huffer (1980), and linguistic studies by Ken Hale (which contributed to a Lardil dictionary published in 1997) and Nicholas Evans (1992), who later produced a Kayardild dictionary. Also at this time, Aboriginal people across Australia were agitating to have greater control over the governance of their communities, a position nominally supported by the Presbyterian Church, which was financially unable to provide for the growing population. In somewhat controversial circumstances, the withdrawal of the Church in 1978 (which by then had become the Uniting Church) was followed by Mornington Island being gazetted along with the other Wellesley Islands as a shire under Queensland state legislation, the *Local Government (Aboriginal Lands) Act 1978* (Blake 1998: 42). The special legislation, which also applied to another mission at Aurukun on western Cape York, established a local council responsible for administering the provision of services to residents (Martin 1993: 3). The Mornington Shire Council consisted of a generally elected Mayor and Councillors, usually Aboriginal people, and a non-Aboriginal Shire Clerk. As I discuss in a later chapter, this model of governance, split between an elected Aboriginal board and non-Aboriginal administrators, was also prevalent in Aboriginal corporations being set up on the Island to administer services for Aboriginal residents.

These governance structures became vital to the administration of the Island, particularly as housing was upgraded from basic shacks made out of corrugated iron to permanent housing from the 1960s onwards. Building new accommodation became a priority after 1976, when tropical Cyclone Ted destroyed much of the existing housing on the Island, leaving many Aboriginal people without shelter (Brine 1980). The houses built in the aftermath of Cyclone Ted would form the foundations of what is now the contemporary community of Gununa. In spite of the establishment of permanent housing at Gununa, Aboriginal people continued to advocate for infrastructure to be developed at decentralized locations around the Wellesley Islands, on the country estates to which people maintained spiritual and ancestral connections. During the 1980s and 1990s, injections of funding from the Commonwealth-funded Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and the Mornington Shire Council paid for the construction of 'outstations' or 'homelands', as they were also referred to at the time (McKnight 2002: 171). The largest of these was at *Nyinyilki* (also referred to as 'Raft Point' or 'Main Base') on Bentinck Island, which facilitated the return of Kaiadilt people to the South Wellesley Islands for extended periods

of time (Evans 1998: 50). An important aspect of the development of outstations was the cutting of roads around the Wellesley Islands and establishment of an airstrip on Bentinck Island, greatly enhancing the access that Aboriginal people had to the more remote parts of their country (McKnight 2002: 172). These endeavours also benefited significantly from the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program that began on Mornington Island in 1980 and provided wages for Aboriginal labour to assist with road and house construction (Memmott and Horsman 1991: 273).

The 'return to country' heralded by the construction of outstations carried over into a more active pursuit of land and sea-based native title rights for Aboriginal people. From the mid-1990s, the Carpentaria Land Council, based in nearby mainland Burketown, managed the administration of a 'Sea Claim' over the waters in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria, which culminated in a legal trial. The determination of the Sea Claim in 2004 found that Aboriginal people had non-exclusive native title rights in waters surrounding the Wellesley Islands, and was a formal recognition of the 'spiritual connection' and ongoing use of marine resources which Aboriginal people had maintained for many generations (National Native Title Tribunal [NNTT] 2004: 23). Four years later, the precedent of the Sea Claim determination provided the basis for a consent (i.e. not litigated) determination that recognized exclusive rights to land over almost all of the twenty-three Wellesley Islands (NNTT 2009). These processes affirmed legally what Aboriginal people had always known; that they were and continue to be the rightful owners of the lands and seas of the Wellesley Islands.

At the same time as these significant developments in access and rights to land were occurring, Aboriginal people were also experiencing the compounding impacts of years of intergenerational trauma and poverty, marked by a proliferation of health and social problems. Alcoholism, self-harm, suicide and inter-personal violence, coupled with high unemployment and poor education outcomes, were becoming increasingly evident (McKnight 2002). A 2009 report found that out of twelve Indigenous communities in Queensland, between 1995 and 2006 Mornington Island had the second-highest prevalence (after the community of Aurukun) of offences against the person, property offences and 'other' offences[5] (CMC 2009: 42). Of particular concern were the rates of reported offences against the person, which were over 18.5 times higher than the Queensland average over the same period (CMC 2009: 42). These social phenomena and their imbrication with alcohol consumption was the focus of McKnight's *From Hunting to Drinking: The Devastating Effects of Alcohol on an Australian Aboriginal Community* (2002),

the best-known book about Mornington Island (e.g. Austin-Broos 2011: 134; Langton 2010: 99; Sutton 2009: 40).[6]

The majority of McKnight's (1999, 2004, 2005) research was structural in nature, richly detailing Lardil systems of kinship, animal and plant classification, ritual and sorcery and so on. *From Hunting to Drinking*, though, was a departure in approach and intent, instead taking a highly personalized interpretation of 'the destruction of cultural and social life'. McKnight's most damning assertion was that 'Mornington Island now consists of a community of individuals who are bereft of a social identity except in negative terms; they used to have this or that, they used to be this or the other, but now they have nothing and are no one' (McKnight 2002: 6). In *From Hunting to Drinking*, McKnight yearned for a different time, of Aboriginal people as he had apparently known them to be, socially and culturally intact. He was unable to recognize the endurance of Aboriginal people against the most constrained and trying of conditions. McKnight's book was strongly criticized for its abandonment of critical engagement in lieu of emotional, shattered-Eden 'remarks and opinions' (Sackett 2004: 241; cf. Sutton 2007). Turner (2003: 81) incisively questioned the 'ethics of dwelling on the pathologies of contemporary Aboriginal communities at the expense of people's dignity. What purpose does this serve?'. In attending to this question, the ethnography here is a speaking back to McKnight's narratives about Mornington Islanders.

What Now

The title of this book, 'what now', is a common form of address on Mornington Island, and in some other Aboriginal communities in Australia. Depending on the intonation of the speaker, it can variously mean 'what *now*?' as in, 'given what came before, what do you think will come next?'. It can also mean 'what news do you have of a particular situation or event?'. If said quickly, 'what now!' also acts as a greeting, functioning in the same way as 'hello' or 'hi'. It is the multiplicity of uses and meanings that is instructive. 'What now' elides past and future tense, a way of considering what has been or what has occurred, as well as way of opening a dialogue on what might be to come in the future. It is the concern with both of these aspects of remote Aboriginal life that dominates policymaking in Aboriginal affairs in Australia. What governments are concerned with, and the broader public tasks them with, is how to create or impact change to craft better futures for remote places (Lea 2012).

The time in which I was living on Mornington Island, researching this book and then writing it, was one in which questions about 'Aboriginal issues' were coming to the fore in Australia in unparalleled ways (Dalley and Martin 2015). The constant media attention afforded to such issues was in large part stimulated by the Australian Federal Government's Northern Territory Emergency Intervention (NTER) into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory in 2007. The 'Intervention', as it became known, involved the introduction of radical policies guiding the provision of services in remote communities, ostensibly aimed at reducing disadvantage and dysfunction for Aboriginal people (see a range of papers in Altman and Hinkson 2007, 2010). The Intervention was particularly sensational because as part of the implementation of racially particularized policies, the Australian Federal Government suspended anti-discrimination legislation (Sutton 2009: 37). Though not located in the Northern Territory, Mornington Island is one of many communities that has been targeted by particularized policies as part of the 'Closing the Gap' ideology, the Australian Government's attempt to reduce statistical inequality between Aboriginal people and the broader population in areas like health and education (Kowal 2015a; Peterson 2010: 250).

Many viewed the suspension of anti-discrimination legislation in the Northern Territory as extreme and as an affront to the kinds of liberal, multicultural values that drive much of broader Australian society. This effrontery was compounded by the use of uniformed Australian Defence Force personnel to roll out the Government's policies. The imagery of uniformed soldiers moving into Aboriginal communities graced the covers of Australia's national newspapers, crafting an image of order and control to contrast the disordered and dysfunctional people that they had come to assist. In constructing this image of authority, these portrayals sought to reassure a concerned public that something was about to change in remote Aboriginal Australia. But any optimism for positive change was short-lived. In the regularly reported Government statistics on 'Closing the Gap', most indicators point to a widening chasm between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal statistics of wellbeing, suggesting life for Aboriginal people, particularly in remote Australia, is getting worse rather than better.

As well as in policy, timeliness and temporality are recurrent themes in Aboriginal anthropology. The idea that Aboriginal culture is thousands of years old and on a collision course with modernity is a trope that permeates national media and the broader Australian consciousness (Kowal 2015b). It is also the case that Aboriginal people take great pride in the longevity of their endurance, often describing themselves

as the oldest living culture on earth. But to make a rather obvious point, Mornington Islanders are not trapped either in the past or future; they are alive now and deeply embedded in rich social lives. The Mornington Islanders with whom I spent many months over many years did not just have a 'social life' in the way that others might for example, compartmentalize various parts of their lives. Mornington Islanders' sociality permeated every part of their world; it was the centre of their being and the core of the way in which they knew the world. To say that Aboriginal people are social is to understate it; their relationships with others and the desire to continuously reproduce and perform those relationships drives all facets of daily life. So why are Mornington Islanders so committed to the reproduction of these distinct social worlds? To answer this question, it is necessary to understand that the logic of an Aboriginal community begins with the same basic premise of any remote Australian place. That is; with a small population, residents living in close proximity tend to be particularly aware of one another. Compounding this social awareness is the fact that the Mornington Island population is residentially confined to within an extremely small geographic space, half a dozen streets arranged around a main street only 2 km long.

The intensity of social life on Mornington Island was a product of both the isolation and containment of the Island, and particularly in the community of Gununa where the vast majority of residents live. As mentioned previously, by a range of geographic, economic and social measures, the Island is considered 'very remote'. The comings and goings of residents are also influenced by the limited modes of transport on and off the Island: expensive aeroplane travel twice a day and boat travel, generally only undertaken by local Aboriginal people who have intimate knowledge of the tides and seas around the islands. As a destination, Mornington Island seldom draws tourists or visitors, there now being no private tourism businesses active on the Island. In addition, the local Council, composed of Aboriginal representatives elected by permanent residents, has in place a permit system which accounts for the arrivals and departures of non-residents. What this meant is that Aboriginal residents seldom come into contact with those from outside their known social worlds, though this is changing.

The majority of local residents are Aboriginal people whose families have resided on the islands and on the nearby mainland for many hundreds or perhaps thousands of generations. This genealogical intensity has been magnified by high rates of intermarriage among Aboriginal residents, a history that reaches at least as far back as the living memory of the oldest of local residents, and probably stretches back about three

thousand years to when the islands were first inhabited (Rosendahl et al. 2014: 258). This means that now virtually all residents consider one another kin or 'family'. David McKnight (2005: 130) referred to this as a form of 'relational density', being the many thousands of kinship relationships between Aboriginal people on the Island. Mornington Islanders' knowledge of one another, of each other's personal histories from conception to the grave, has made them specialists par excellence on the social lives of others, the breadth and depth of which was a constant source of wonder. The orientation towards the social and its proliferation was the guiding force of virtually all being and paramount in all decision-making. Even situations of discord provided opportunities for Aboriginal people to garner support by reorienting the lens of their social world to focus more closely on others.

Mornington Islanders conceive of their own personhood within a richly embedded and illustrated social world, where their kin position and reposition them in an ongoing and dialogic relationship of relatedness. As knowledge of the 'Dreaming', a term used to describe Aboriginal religious and spiritual worlds, begins to lessen, the immediacy of interpersonal relations is affirmed as paramount. This is not to say that particularized knowledge, such as of 'story places', which are physical landscapes inscribed by the activities of ancestor spirits, is unknown to Aboriginal people. Through this book, and particularly in Chapter 5, I will discuss some of the persistent aspects of Mornington Island belief and spirituality which tie particular people to places or animals within their local landscape. It is nonetheless the case that a diminishment in the fully elaborated nature of this knowledge has reduced its potency and hence its transmission to younger generations. The efficacy of transmission has also been tempered by a general reorientation of Aboriginal people away from 'country', and increasingly towards 'town', i.e. community life. In everyday life meeting the growing expectations of government agencies, managing households and money, taking care of children and the demands of kin have come to take precedence. For some, there are also the everyday demands of employment.

Aboriginal people living on Mornington Island have limited integration into the paid workforce, and the meagre value of Australian Government welfare payments results in a particular kind of impoverishment. In 2016, 45 per cent of all Mornington Island residents (Indigenous and non-Indigenous people) aged 15 years and older had a weekly income of less than AUD 399.00. The most common income bracket was those earning AUD 150.00 to AUD 299.00 per week, which is the equivalent of an Australian Government parenting payment or similar (ABS 2016: Table G17b). Though government welfare is not the

kind of impoverishment known in many other parts of the world, it creates particular issues in Australia, where the cost of remote living is much higher than in regional and urban centres. Despite offsets and subsidies provided by the government, such as low housing costs and the provision of free health and education services for Aboriginal residents, other basic living costs, especially food, fuel, clothes and household goods, are high on Mornington Island, sometimes astronomically so. Exorbitant prices, which are generally for goods rather than services, reflect both the expense of transporting goods to the Island but also the costs associated with employing staff to sell these goods and the lack of competition in the market where they are sold. Low household incomes combined with the high costs of goods fosters ethics of sharing and borrowing goods and the pooling of resources, practices that are dependent on sustaining relations to the degree that requests to borrow are granted.

Another outcome of low workforce participation is that Mornington Islanders are time-rich. For the most part, the hours of their day can be expended in a manner of their own choosing. It is this excess of available time that generates particular kinds of boredom. Mornington Islanders referred to the quietness that beset the community, or to their own boredom, as being 'slack' or 'too slack', i.e. that there was nothing to do and that there was nothing of interest happening. To occupy time, people played video games and watched TV and DVDs, smoked, washed clothes, cleaned their yards, visited family and sometimes went hunting or fishing. As well as this, open stretches of time gave rise to alcohol consumption and, particularly for younger people, cannabis use, as well as playing cards for money at one of the 'gambling schools' around the community. Though policymakers often discuss how to reduce or ameliorate the nefarious symptoms of boredom, rarely is boredom itself spoken about (Musharbash 2007). The long stretches of time in which no work or formal activities were organized meant that Mornington Islanders were highly dependent on one another for activity and companionship, and it was this reliance that inturn fostered a particular kind of social intensity and belonging to one another and to place.

Writing Ethnography

The research presented here largely reflects a kind of anthropological fieldwork now seldom undertaken in Australia. In bygone eras, anthropologists would head 'out bush' with a swag, a Toyota and a letter of introduction to a missionary or local clerk, and would return twelve or

eighteen months later with notebooks filled, and rolls of film waiting to be developed. More often than not the time they had spent in a community was in a kind of total immersion, living with Aboriginal people and gradually coming to understand holistically aspects of the worlds in which they were ensconced. The costs of conducting fieldwork, the time constraints on research and the highly politicized nature of representations of Aboriginal people and places have made this kind of research increasingly uncommon. Aboriginal people have insisted that anthropologists make themselves accountable to the communities that they research, ensuring the continuing transformation of the discipline.

In other parts of the world, Indigenous people are contesting anthropology's project, describing it as one of colonialism, proposing instead a kind of 'ethnographic refusal' (Simpson 2014). As scholar Audra Simpson describes for the Iroquois and Kahnawà:ke of North America, a refusal addresses the 'dissonance between representations that were produced [by anthropologists] and what people say about themselves' (2014: 98). Simpson's work borrows its leading turn of phrase from the anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1995). Ortner's point of view was quite different to that of Simpson, in that while she recognized that ethnographic refusal was a seductive political position, it carried with it the pitfall that a lack of thick description could result in the homogenization of cultures under colonialism. This homogenization stemmed, Ortner argued, from the abandonment of thickness and holism, a kind of 'cultural thinning', without historical depth or the nuances of a culture as an elaborated form, reduced to a reactionary, resistance position.

Of course, who can and should be involved in the writing of these portrayals is a point of contention in the debates as they play out in contemporary Australia. There are many that take the view that assuming an authoritative voice on such matters acts to disempower Aboriginal people, who are after all more than capable of telling their own stories (Wright 2016). Another view, which I share to a degree, is that if we accept that the production of knowledge about others has at times been harmful, we as anthropologists and non-Indigenous scholars must also shoulder some responsibility for righting (or literally re-writing) those discourses. This endeavour, one that I initially undertook with the confidence of naivety, and lately a sense of unease, has nonetheless been underpinned by a sustained commitment to the people and community that I have lived in, visited and been connected to for many years.

My sense of purpose in this undertaking has been heavily influenced by my family's settler-colonial history in Queensland. A key figure in this history is my maternal grandmother's grandfather, Dr Thomas Tate (1842–1934), an Englishman and medically trained naturalist who came

to Australia via New Zealand in the 1860s. Part of his story includes being a passenger on the *Maria*, a ship that was infamously wrecked off the Queensland coast in 1872 en route to New Guinea. Some survivors were reported to have been killed by local Aboriginal people. Tate went on to catalogue animals and plants in Cape York as a member of the Hann Northern Exploring Expedition, and was later a school teacher in the Torres Strait. Subsequent generations have inherited Tate's settler-colonial fascinations. During the 1970s, my maternal grandmother collected Aboriginal stone artefacts on the pastoral properties where she lived in Western Queensland and donated them to the Queensland Museum. That my inherited family history centres and speaks of these figures as part of a lauded Australian pioneering spirit sits uneasily with the reality of their involvement in the dispossession of Aboriginal people. Indigenous scholars have highlighted time and again how necessary it is for non-Indigenous scholars, including settler descendants such as myself, to position ourselves within rather than outside narratives about coloniality.

Though these issues are not unique to the discipline, within anthropology there has been what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1988) refers to as a 'pervasive nervousness' about representation, particularly in settler contexts. The nervousness that Geertz refers to means that anthropologists are continually asking: 'What should anthropologists be writing about? Are there some issues that anthropologists should not write about?' In Australia, these questions have been debated intensely since 2009, following the release of the anthropologist Peter Sutton's book *The Politics of Suffering*. In his 2009 book and in earlier essays, Sutton's primary contention was that Aboriginal 'culture' could not, and should not, be seen as benign in the formation of dysfunction (Hinkson 2009: 54–55). In making this argument, Sutton largely rejected the notion that historical processes, namely 'colonial conquest', could be considered causal in any singular sense, going so far as to describe such a position 'at best a case of sad ignorance, and at worst an obscene abuse of this appalling disaster for the purpose of scoring cheap political points' (Sutton 2001a: 141). This political point scoring, Sutton argued, was a tactic employed by those of the 'liberal consensus', which included anthropologists and which Sutton defined as having driven Aboriginal policy, particularly during the era of 'self-determination' from the late 1970s onwards (see also Kowal 2008).

Within anthropology, the debate that followed revealed the acrimony between proponents of strongly held political positions, with some welcoming Sutton's exegesis while others were staunchly critical of his ascription of causation. This latter group included Andrew

Lattas, Barry Morris (Lattas and Morris 2010) and Gillian Cowlishaw (2010) with whom Sutton had earlier engaged in debate via a series of journal articles (Cowlishaw 2003; Sutton 2001a, 2005). Cowlishaw had been critical of Sutton for the lack of Aboriginal voices in his discussions of causality, especially given the contention that 'suffering is an experiential rather than objective condition' (2003: 3) and that 'an empirically established, statistically high level of violence and destructive behaviours gives no insight into community relations or the level and meaning of suffering' (2003: 4). Beyond this, Cowlishaw, and those who shared her views, figured a different relationship between history and culture, in which the ongoing failure of government to allow Aboriginal people to determine their own affairs took causal primacy over the influence of culture. Another of Cowlishaw's (2003, 2010) concerns was the view that anthropologists could assist in the meaningful resolution of such complex issues, especially given the highly politicized context and her belief that 'public debate should not be confused with policy formation' (Cowlishaw 2003: 7).

Cutting to the heart of the matter for anthropologists, Aboriginal academic Marcia Langton (2010: 92) noted that 'during this debate, a predictable dilemma has gripped the anthropological imagination in Australia, raising the relevance and efficacy of the discipline in the context of extreme situations in which the state and its subalterns conflict'. Langton's insight is shared by many within and outside the discipline. Unlike the former issue of causality, on this issue Sutton and Cowlishaw seemed to reach some tenuous agreement, albeit for slightly contrasting reasons. For Sutton:

> The in-depth methodology of anthropology and its encompassing theoretical base, not mere assemblages of medical or criminal facts alone, can assist official policies and practices to move beyond their present, tragically ineffectual standing to a point where their communities have a chance of a better life. Yet one should not exaggerate the value of anthropology in this highly politicized context – its role is now always likely to be minor, and indeed we may have seen the end of the era in which it was otherwise. (2001a: 155)

Although not elaborated, Sutton's point is that the role for anthropologists (as distinct from other types of researchers) in interpreting Aboriginal-specific contexts may be diminished. Cowlishaw (2003: 4) similarly asks, 'does Australian anthropology have anything to say about the alleged crisis in Aboriginal society today?' and in the event that it does, 'do scholars such as anthropologists know what to do?'. On both counts, others have proposed some potential answers and solutions. In Central Australia, Ute Eickelkamp (2011: 132), suggests

that this question is best understood in the following terms: 'within the limit of the national purview, writing ethnographies of Aboriginal communities (which many no longer be societies) has become a moral issue pivoting on the definition of the real'. Eickelkamp (ibid.) went on to categorize the position of anthropologists on what defined the 'real': 'In the briefest terms: Aboriginalists (Black or White) are divided between those who see the need to address Indigenous suffering and those who see merit in focusing on other issues'. Perhaps a more nuanced approach to undertaking ethnography, however, is not so much about choosing to centre or ignore suffering, but to understand how suffering and endurance exist side by side.

In taking this approach I recall the research of the American anthropologist Lucas Bessire (2014), whose ethnography of Ayoreo people, among the last groups to exit the Amazonian rainforest, addressed many similar issues to those on Mornington Island. Bessire (2014: 7) used the phrase 'a death foretold' to refer to the ways in which his anthropological forebears had conceived of unprecedented upheaval among South American Indians, wherein: 'The supposed death of culture also meant a wider social death' (ibid.). Bessire attempted to redress this conflation by charting a difficult course between recognizing the horrors of the destruction of the rainforest and the apocalyptic changes it wrought on Ayoreo lives, while also not foreclosing what their lives could become.

Endurance and Intensity on Mornington Island

One of the key themes of this book is the endurance of living in a very remote community, contained in space and far from the kinds of life that other Australians might be familiar with. In focusing on daily life and the minutiae that construct and affirm remote distinctiveness and belonging, the emphasis is on the intense nature of relations and the social forms that produce and reproduce particular kinds of personhood. Anthropologists sometimes call this a 'relational ontology', where the primary axis of personal orientation is towards one's own personal kinship network (Poirier 2013). While a focus on relationality is not unique to Aboriginal society, it is the persistent and overriding nature of relations to kin that not only differentiates, but also separates Aboriginal people's lives from those of the broader society. In this sense, this book aims to capture the particular feel of living in a remote Aboriginal community in Australia during the 2000s. It is because of the recursive quality of social processes that the book also explores the dynamically

changing nature of Aboriginal people's lives, creating possibilities that are unpredictable, even for those who know the people well.

Mornington Island and the Aboriginal people living there have endured under direct governmental policy since the establishment of the mission in 1914. From that time, Aboriginal people have been influenced by church and government policies which have ultimately transformed the ways in which they live. But to present these forces as external to Aboriginal ways of seeing the world or as the product of governmental policy is only a partial representation; Aboriginal people have also internalized these processes and rendered some of them as their own. To take a relatively benign example, and as will be explored in Chapter 1, in collaboration with Whitefellas, Aboriginal people have established a range of organizations to attract government funding and provide services in their community.

It is true that all Australians undergo change and are influenced by government policies, but the degree of change for Mornington Islanders over a one-hundred-year period has been highly accelerated. It has been the struggle to adapt to rapid change which has led to local conditions that some would describe as a 'crisis'. In particular, Mornington Island has a range of issues associated with low levels of workforce participation, extreme rates of violence and poor health and educational outcomes. Excessive consumption of alcohol and other illicit substances are also part of this milieu. These statistics are not an attempted roll call of dysfunction, but a means of showing that life is not always a kind of remote island utopia for the residents of the Wellesley Islands. It has been the persistent endurance of Mornington Islanders, against such incredibly fraught conditions, which constitutes the most developed sense of optimism for the future.

Chapters 1 and 2 of this book relate Mornington Islanders' experiences with the state and the non-Aboriginal people that come to live in their community. This begins in Chapter 1 with a discussion of the development of Gununa from a Presbyterian mission station to a contemporary Aboriginal community and its governance as a socio-politically defined space within the Australian nation state. Chapter 2 focuses on the experiences of Whitefellas living on Mornington Island, most of whom come to live on the Island to work for government agencies. In spite of the contained and socially intimate nature of the community, these Whitefellas live structurally and spatially separate to Aboriginal people.

Chapter 3 deals more exclusively with contemporary Aboriginal family and households. The chapter begins with an overview of some of the

changes to kinship, marriage and the raising of children on Mornington Island and the ways in which these changes have influenced the construction of 'family'. Chapter 4 examines alcohol management and its consumption at the Lelka Murrin Tavern, known locally as the 'Pub'. The permanent closure of the Pub in 2008 and the designation of the Wellesley Islands as an alcohol-free 'dry' zone had particular implications for Aboriginal residents. One of the places that alcohol consumption occurred following the implementation of alcohol restrictions was at outstations located on Mornington Islanders' country across the Wellesley Islands. As is described in Chapter 5, identification with 'country' remains a defining element in the social identities of Mornington Islanders. This salience is derived from extended systems of intergenerational descent which link Mornington Islanders not just to defined areas of land and sea (estates) but also to ancestors who previously lived on country. Changes to systems of descent are discussed in this chapter, as well as how access to country informs the demonstration of connection and the recognition of ownership by others.

The number of books about Mornington Island, notably those by David McKnight, place it among the most-written-about Aboriginal communities in Australia. That such a volume of material exists indicates both the social and cultural complexity and imagination of Mornington Islanders, and broader interest in understanding their lives. Today Mornington Islanders live in perilous conditions, steeped in the cruel practices of settler-colonial and missionary history, made worse by poverty, boredom and excessive alcohol consumption. Such are these circumstances that Mornington Islanders deploy intense sociality to shield themselves from the forces in their lives that they are least able to control. The social intensity that they construct becomes their mode of endurance. The subtlety of these practices, both reflexively produced and otherwise, evades simplistic representation and essentialism, but instead reveals itself most potently in this ethnography of the everyday.

Notes

1. A number of issues have been identified with the ABS enumeration of remote Aboriginal populations in Australia (see Morphy 2006, 2007).
2. Some of these people came from the areas around Turn Off Lagoon, Burketown and Lawn Hill and have thus been thought of as being Waanyi and/or Ganggalida. Based on historical records, Trigger (1992: 39–40) estimated that forty-two adults and children were removed from the mainland to Mornington Island between 1914 and 1942.

3. A number of reasons have been proposed to explain this removal, including the compounding impacts of drought, and a cyclone which spoilt fresh water sources (Evans 1998: 47; Memmott 2008: 19).
4. Most of McKnight's publications, however, came towards the end of his life, with four books published in 1999, 2002, 2004 and 2005. David McKnight died in 2006 (Sutton 2007: 28).
5. 'Offences against the person are homicide (murder), other homicide, assault, sexual offences, robbery, extortion, kidnapping, abduction and deprivation of liberty, and other offences against the person. Offences against property are unlawful entry, arson, other property damage, unlawful use of motor vehicle, other theft, fraud, and handling stolen goods. 'Other' offences are drug offences; prostitution offences; liquor (excluding drunkenness); gaming, racing and betting; breach of domestic violence protection orders; trespassing and vagrancy; *Weapons Act 1990* (Qld) offences; good order offences; stock-related offences; traffic and related offences; and miscellaneous offences' (CMC 2009: 41).
6. It was also the most well-known among Aboriginal Mornington Islanders. On some occasions, I heard Mornington Islanders describe themselves using the analogy in the title of the book, 'from hunting to drinking', to (somewhat flippantly) explain why they had chosen to drink on a particular occasion.