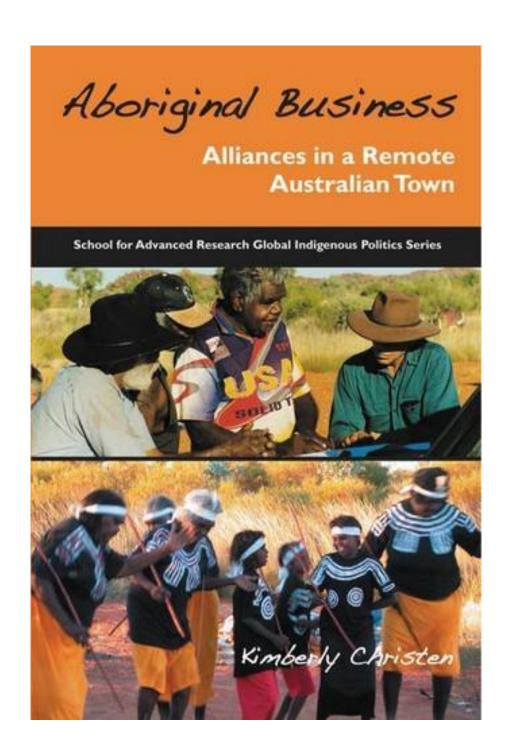


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### Review

This is an important book that has much to offer a wide range of readers. For those interested in indigenous media production, in forms of indigenous representation, in forms of intercultural corporation and negotiation, as well as for those interested in the consequences of recognition and those critically rethinking the consequences and misrepresentations of much neoliberal argument in Australia, Aboriginal Business is a valuable work. --Daniel Fischer, Museum Anthropology Review, Fall 2010

This smart and timely book explores the relationships between the Warumungu society of north-central Australia and their non-Aboriginal neighbors in the region of Tennant Creek. Using the concept of business, which in Aboriginal English usually refers to ritual activity, Christen discusses Aboriginal formal organizations, railroads, mining, tourism, and cultural production to establish the point that indigenous people do not live in isolation and the modern and traditional are not mutually exclusive identities. This is quite a brilliant piece of anthropological research. . . . Kimberly Christen appreciates and clearly depicts that the authentic Aboriginal experience includes the foreign and the modern. . . . The days of cultural isolation are over for indigenous peoples, and anthropology must accommodate, and has accommodated, this fact. --Jack David Eller, Anthropology Review Database, March 2010

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From the vantage point of the remote Northern Territory town of Tennant Creek in Australia, this book examines the practical partnerships and awkward alliances that constitute Indigenous modernities. It is an ethnographic snapshot of the Warumungu people as they engage with a range of interlocutors, including transnational railroad companies, national mining groups, international tourists, and regional businesses. Although the Warumungu are the traditional owners of the country in and around present day Tennant Creek, the history of white settlement and Aboriginal displacement has made this town, for better and worse, a site for the ongoing process of interdependent community-making. Anthropologist Kimberly Christen examines both the colonial past and the contemporary practices of alliance-making that set the stage for an alternative future, rerouting the national and global narratives that still seek to confine Indigenous people to the margins. Warumungu "mobs"?variously connected and shifting sets of kin?actively seek to carve out a space within a nation that both condemns and celebrates them.

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"Aboriginal Business - Alliances in a Remote Australian Town" by Kimberly Christen (Nungarrayi).

Kimberly Christen's easy to read book provides a really important picture of many of the demands of contemporary life faced by senior Warumungu women whose country contains the town of Tennant Creek, in the Northern Territory of Australia. These aspects are largely related to interactions with the Anglo-Australian mainstream, and not of a more personal kind.

The author says "This book is about alliances. It is an ethnographic snapshot of Warumungu engagements with a range of interlocutors, where tensions and compromises, hopes and fears, negotiations and trade offs are central."

These are placed in the context of some the changes which took place as a result of the election of the Howard government, and, to a lesser extent, the more recently elected Rudd government.

The use of "business" in Aboriginal English takes in a wider range of (non-commercial) meanings than in everyday English, and includes core cultural activities.

Kimberly is focused on alliances - of which Australia's First Peoples are undoubted masters, past and present. That said, there is a lot more to be teased out about Warumungu town life than an ethnographic snapshot allows for. This work provides a very good introduction, but is not an exhaustive and detailed account typical of earlier forms of academic anthropology. That may be a good thing.

Kimberly provides a wealth of detail covering various key events in recent times (late 1990s, early 2000) as

Warumungu people emerge from the changing times in the 1980s, when land rights arrived in Tennant Creek, and new Aboriginal organisations started up to provide housing, health and cultural services for people previously banned from town.

The 1980s were followed by native title determinations, negotiations with mining and railway companies, finding meaningful ways of life in town, housing associations, starting a tourist venture/cultural centre and the production of CDs of important Women's Munga (Ancestral Women) songs - this CD would be a good addition to the book - and the establishment of an indigenous digital archive. Kimberly writes about these from her informed position as someone who has been part of these events.

The key events selected show the active and creative roles played by senior women in forming alliances, sharing knowledge and safe-guarding special knowledge. Kimberly leaves no doubt about the ability of these Warumungu women to be effective managers given the complex balancing acts they are regularly required to preform as part of contemporary life.

The picture provided goes some distance towards blowing away some of the negative stereotypes of indigenous people which have been used to prop up the right of non-indigenous Australian politicians to remotely control the lives of First Peoples. First Peoples have to be very capable managers, making do with scarce resources.

The work is largely written from within a women's world. Warumungu life is marked by complementary opposition - and especially so in regard to men's and women's spheres. In some ways, Kimberly's book calls for a `companion' piece detailing contemporary life from the senior men's perspective.

While Warumungu women have enjoyed considerable support as part of alliances with those with Western worldviews, the position of some of their brothers is, in many ways, much more difficult. There is some good coverage of Warumungu men's lives.

As the subtitle says, "Aboriginal business" is about Tennant Creek town life - in one of the few towns in Australia where there is a high percentage of indigenous people vis-à-vis non-indigenous people.

This small town (Pop. 3000?) is often overlooked by those looking for the fantasy romance of "The Alice". Life in Tennant contains much of great interest to anyone interested in Australian realities. There is much to learn here - and Kimberly has certainly done so.

The breadth of her writing inevitably means some parts lack detailed historical and analytical depth regarding the difficult passage of Warumungu (and related) people from the 'simple enjoyment' of their living countries to present times.

The campaign to obtain a renal dialysis unit for indigenous people in Tennant Creek (as opposed to having to relocate 500 km to Alice Springs) is one example of a recent event which was passed over lightly. But there is much else covered.

There are many more stories yet to be told about Warumungu life and they can't all be told by one author in one book. While we can look forward to the days when Warumungu women themselves are authoring texts as well as songs, dances and paintings.

"Aboriginal Business" fills an important gap. It provides a sound introduction for anyone seeking to improve their understanding of the engagement of Warumungu women with some aspects of contemporary life. It can usefully be added to the earlier "Daughters of the Dreaming" by Australian anthropologist Diane Bell.

During the 20th century, of the million ounces produced by Nobles Nob gold mine - on the outskirts of Tennant Creek and firmly located in Warumungu Wirnkarra (Dreaming) country - Warumungu people received not a cent of royalties, and will inherit an enormous open-cut hole in the ground.

"Aboriginal Business" helps to provide a glimpse into the lives of people who will be, no doubt, far removed from the home places of many of the book's readers. Given the ongoing struggle for Australia's First Peoples to obtain decent living conditions from those who control Australia's wealth, that has to be a good thing.

Review by R.B. Reyburn (Japaljari) 20 August 2009

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