

PHILIP BATTY

IMAGINING NATIONS WITHIN NATIONS

In December 1982, I had the pleasure of escorting a Canadian guest — Josephi Padlyat — on a journey from Alice Springs to the remote Aboriginal community of Santa Teresa, situated on the edge of the central Australian desert. Josephi — an Inuit man — and the then president of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, had been invited to Australia by the Public Broadcasting Association of Australia (PBAA) to help in the promotion of Aboriginal media services. At the time, I was the deputy director of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) — hence my involvement in the trip. There were several others who joined the party — a representative from the PBAA; my colleague, Freda Glynn (then the Director of CAAMA) an official from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs; and Josephi's non-Inuit assistant, who was white — like me.

Josephi was from Igloodik, a tiny settlement situated well inside Canada's Arctic circle — some hundreds of kilometres north of Frobisher Bay. He had been away from home for less than a week when we set out for Santa Teresa.

It happened to be an extremely hot summer that year, even by central Australian standards. By about midday — only halfway to our destination — the temperature had reached 41C. As the air-conditioning system collapsed in the all-devouring heat, Josephi (who had joked about the fact that he normally shovelled snow from the front of his house at **this** time of the year) was becoming increasingly uncomfortable, and fell silent.

On arriving at Santa Teresa (originally established as a "mission station" by the Catholic church in the 1940s) we were greeted by some of the non-Aboriginal administration staff who were polite, but not particularly interested in us, or even aware of what we were doing there

(despite correspondence sent weeks before). They directed us to the mission's church where we found the local Catholic priest. He was a little more enthusiastic about our Canadian guests and the development of Aboriginal media (Santa Teresa had no local broadcasting services at the time).

After exchanging some pleasantries, the priest took us off to find the Aboriginal council president.

The landscape around Santa Teresa is like the surface of the moon in places. The hills are grey and rise up to flat stony plateaus. Beyond the surrounding hills there are vast lakes of dry white salt, extending out to a broad, featureless horizon.

We walked around the ramshackle settlement in the oppressive heat, looking unsuccessfully for our host. We were about to give up and head back to the air-conditioned office when we heard someone call to us from a partially demolished house, enclosed by sheets of rusting iron. It was the president — an old Arrente man, surrounded by dozens of yelping dogs.

The priest — who was a fluent speaker of the local language, eastern Arrente — introduced Josephi to the old man and explained his purpose in coming to Santa Teresa. Both Josephi and the president did their best to communicate, but it quickly became obvious that they could not understand each other's heavily accented English (which was a second language for both), nor did the old man seem to understand the concept of "Aboriginal media". The conversation rapidly died. The two men stood in silence, not knowing what to say next. It was an exceedingly awkward moment.

Perhaps out of a sense of duty (or embarrassment), the representative from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs tried to re-start the conversation between Josephi and the president. He obviously felt that the two *indigenes* should be talking to one another. (After all, wasn't this the main purpose of Josephi's trip to Australia? — "to encourage dialogue and friendship between the Indigenous peoples of Canada and Australia"?) But neither the local, nor the *foreign* Aboriginal showed any further interest in talking — it was, in any case, almost too hot to think. Indeed, they both seemed to resent the well-intentioned, but inept attempts by "one of the whitefellas" to provoke further dialogue between them.

Soon we were in the car again, on our way back to Alice Springs, drinking luke-warm water from a plastic bottle, trying to keep physically and metaphorically cool. The next morning Josephi and his partner left by plane. I never saw them again.

This curious exchange took place thirteen years ago, and has remained fixed in my memory ever since, but for different and rather contradictory reasons.

In the first instance, it marked the beginning (at least in the minds of my colleagues and I) of a somewhat indirect, but highly productive relationship (over more than a decade) between CAAMA and Aboriginal broadcasting organisations in Canada, and to a lesser extent, in the United States. Secondly, the visit marked the internationalisation of the project to establish Aboriginal broadcasting in Australia. In a sense, it was one of the primary "origination points" in a complex and expansive narrative that has steadily consolidated its international orientation, producing innumerable texts and interrelated knowledges in its wake. More particularly, it provided further stimulation in the construction of a discourse of "Aboriginal media" — a discourse that continues to construct and be constructed by academic centres of learning, governmental and non-governmental bureaucracies, Aboriginal organisations, scholarly and non-scholarly groups, and many other institutions, located simultaneously, both at the centres and margins of the "developed" world — from New York to Santa Teresa, Igloolick to Melbourne, Ottawa to Alice Springs, Frobisher Bay to Sydney, Sioux Lookout to Canberra, and Montreal to Kunanarra.

Finally, the event at Santa Teresa awoke in me the dim but uncomfortable realisation that although my colleagues at CAAMA and I were committed to "fighting for the right of Aboriginal people to control their own broadcasting services and to establish an Aboriginal voice in the media", we might, instead, be simply developing "new" institutions and "Aboriginalities" determined primarily by the shifting requirements of the Australian nation state (Beckett, 1988; Weaver, 1984).

When the official from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs had tried to encourage these utterly different men — Josephi from the frozen Arctic and the old Arrente man from central Australia — to "communicate", was he encouraging them to perform according to certain scripts already written for them; to dance to representations and constructions, over which they appeared to have minimal control? Did they both have to play "the Indigenous other", and act according to their respective scripts — not so much for themselves (the "referents" in this semiotic game) but for the sponsoring organisations, the white officials and the government bodies who had an enormous amount of political capital riding on how well the two acquitted themselves? As "natives of the Commonwealth", were they expected — or at least encouraged — to

find a shared identity, not based on a "trade agreement", nor on a "common linguistic and cultural inheritance", but on their continuing colonisation, domination and disempowerment by colonisers originating from the same "mother country". In other words, were they being encouraged, by the very fact of Josephi's trip to Australia (paid for by the Canadian and Australian governments), to establish a relationship that could only serve to confirm their mutually subordinate positions within their respective, colonised countries? Was this a "shared identity" made possible only through their "shared capitulation" to the respective nation states that had transformed their ancestors and themselves into "Indigenous persons". More disturbingly, were my colleagues and I dancing to the same representations? And if so, to what extent was our project not so much a confrontation or a "fight" but more a re-negotiation of the terms of colonisation?

It would be an interesting exercise to investigate these questions by mapping the development of what I have loosely proposed above as the "narrative of Aboriginal media 'from its birth'", or construction, inside and outside separately *imagined* nation states (Australia, Canada, the United States). In this way we would effect a kind of comparative analysis that might reveal insights into the way in which such nation states produce, and are simultaneously produced by, notions of the "Indigenous minority". Certainly, the striking similarities between the development of Aboriginal media in Canada and Australia suggests that particular nations produce particular "Indigenous others" as a product of their respective "nation building" processes. Further, by clarifying the nature of this "Indigenous other", it may also be possible to delineate the various ways in which the "Aboriginal Voice" (so often cited in the literature on Aboriginal media but rarely examined) is constructed. Perhaps more to the point, what is the purpose of such constructions and who is served by them?

While this is not the place to embark upon such an ambitious undertaking I will provide a brief historical sketch describing some of the various streams in this emerging international narrative of Aboriginal media.

Significantly (perhaps inevitably), Josephi Palyat's visit to Australia in December 1982 — the first by a Canadian Aboriginal interested in Aboriginal media developments — did not have its genesis in any communication between Indigenous groups or individuals in either country. Rather, it was a communications consultant, Brian Walsh, who organised the trip. Walsh managed to acquire funds from the Commonwealth Secretariat (the administrative arm of the

Commonwealth) to bring Josephi to Australia.¹ In subsequent years, Walsh provided valuable consultancy services to CAAMA, particularly in relation to CAAMA's successful bid for a licence to operate a satellite television service (Imparja TV).

Some months prior to Josephi Padlyat's departure at the end of 1982, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) based in Canberra, appointed Dr Eric Michaels, an American anthropologist from the University of Austin, Texas, to conduct research into the possible impact of introduced communications services on remote Aboriginal communities. As far as I am aware, no Australian anthropologist had ever devoted themselves to a study of Aboriginal people in relation to electronic mass media, prior to Michaels' arrival (Michaels, 1983). Michaels, who had studied television in the United States, used certain methodological and theoretical models for doing anthropology — also a consequence of his academic grounding in the United States.

"Aboriginal television", as such, did not exist in Australia at the time of Michaels' appointment, yet he was able to publish his findings — three years later — in a report entitled, the "Aboriginal Invention of Television" (Michaels, 1986). Interestingly enough, as Michaels himself indicates in his report, it was his actual presence in the field that helped precipitate — quite significantly — what he rhetorically and rather vociferously claimed to be the "first Aboriginal television station in the world". While Michaels' was based at Yuendumu, central Australia, the "first" Aboriginal television actually belongs to the Ernabella Video and Television Association that went to air, also in central Australia, some months before (Turner, 1990).

With few exceptions, almost nothing had been published in local academic journals on the specific subject of Indigenous broadcasting prior to Michaels' arrival in Australia. In this sense, his work can be seen as a particular moment in the emerging narrative of "Aboriginal media" that began to construct and reproduce it as an object of academic study, and as a set of "knowledges" through which relationships of power and political articulation could be ordered. Certainly as this narrative began to unfold through the 1980s, Michaels' position as "an expert in the field", became increasingly more visible. He participated directly in the writing, and later, the criticism of the first substantial government policy document on Aboriginal broadcasting — "Out of the Silent Land" (Willmot, 1984). He was also an important witness at several hearings before the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal when

CAAMA sought and won the first radio and television licences ever granted to an Aboriginal organisation. Beyond finding the occasional place in the machinery of policy making, Michaels of course, created several productive "loose ends", for further academic study. In 1990, an entire edition of the journal *Continuum* (then published out of Murdoch University) was devoted to his work. One of his students, Michael Meadows, went on to complete his doctorate on issues concerning Aboriginal media (and has subsequently published an impressive body of work in the same area). Indeed, since Eric Michaels, there have been several postgraduate degrees awarded in the area of Aboriginal media studies and several more are currently in production, including my own. And of course, the "centre" that gave Eric Michaels his academic grounding and most of his ideas — the United States — has also produced further academic knowledge on Aboriginal media, notably through the work of Dr Faye Ginsburg, at New York University.

I recall attending a meeting at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) a few months after Eric's arrival from Texas late in 1982, when he was casting around for an appropriate location to conduct his field work. My colleagues and I suggested that he might work at CAAMA, but he was after something a little more remote, more exotic perhaps. Eventually we drove him out to the appropriately distant community of Yuendumu, situated some 350km west of Alice Springs. Like all of Eric's relationships with people and institutions, his association with CAAMA was often stormy, but ultimately, I think, productive. An indication of these multifarious entanglements can be gauged in his paper, "Aboriginal Content. Who's Got? Who Needs It?" (Michaels, 1987), where he documented a particularly heated exchange of letters and faxes over the issue of CAAMA's successful bid for the a licence to operate a satellite television service (Batty, 1995).

By early 1985, CAAMA had established a radio broadcasting network with transmission sites in four Aboriginal communities; created a video and television production capability; signed a radio programming contract with the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), organised training courses for forty Aboriginal "media cadets" and launched a bid for a satellite television licence. To a large extent, these initiatives had not occurred in response to any particular government policy.² Indeed, prior to CAAMA's establishment in 1980, there had been little interest taken by governmental agencies in Aboriginal broadcasting.³ Through to 1985 governmental regulation was therefore "chasing" events as they occurred, and not, as was the

usual case in the heavily regulated area of Aboriginal affairs, establishing policy frameworks that "allowed" events to unfold according to administrative edict. For example, when CAAMA decided, in late 1984, to apply for a commercial satellite television licence,⁴ both the Departments of Aboriginal Affairs and Communications were — in a policy sense — caught off balance. As a result, at one point in the licence hearing, the then Minister for Communications (Michael Duffy) did something that has never happened before or since. He personally intervened and ordered the Tribunal's proceedings to stop for a day while certain negotiations could be held between the contesting parties. Even this failed to deliver the outcome desired by the Minister (Bell, 1994).

Largely in response to the rapidly unfolding events at CAAMA, and the burgeoning academic discourse on Aboriginal media, the state agencies responsible for Aboriginal affairs and broadcasting set about, almost in a panic, to construct effective administrative machinery to regulate and control this emerging phenomenon. With few exceptions, they looked across the Pacific to their fraternal Commonwealth administrators in Canada for guidance — a nation with a comparatively long history of governmental management of Aboriginal broadcasting.

In 1984, the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Clyde Holding, established a "Task Force" to produce policy on Aboriginal broadcasting. After an extensive tour of government agencies and Aboriginal media organisations in Canada, the "Task Force" produced the foundational policy document mentioned above, "Out of the Silent Land". In the same year, the ABC brought to Australia Nic Ketchum, the Director of Television, Northern Service, at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He conducted a lightning tour of Aboriginal communities and wrote, in three days, a fifty-page report that provided the ABC with a guide to constructing Aboriginal media within a state-funded broadcasting apparatus (Ketchum/ABC, 1984). Not to be outdone, AUSSAT, the forerunner of OPTUS (and then primarily owned by the federal government), engaged Brian Walsh to complete a massive policy document on the possible needs of Aboriginal users of the domestic satellite (Walsh, 1984). Walsh immediately hired Dr Heather Hudson, a telecommunications specialist from the University of Austin in Texas (she was also one of Eric Michaels' PhD supervisors), to assist in the writing, and more significantly, the promotion of AUSSAT's policy directions. Hudson was a Canadian academic who, prior to taking up her appointment in Texas, had worked extensively with the Canadian Department of Communications on the development

of Aboriginal broadcasting and telecommunications services in northern Canada.

Apart from the fleeting visit with Josephi Padylat in 1982, representatives from CAAMA had made no real contacts with similar organisations in Canada or the United States in the years leading up to 1985. Rather, all potential communication between Aboriginal media organisations in North America and Australia had been mediated through the increasing number of government officials, semi-government specialists and academics, as indicated above. This did not necessarily result in the reproduction of Aboriginal broadcasting services, identical to those in Canada (Meadows, 1994). But it did produce, to a large extent, the necessary (and fundamental) "national will" required to construct (and pay for) the frameworks within which Aboriginal media in Australia might be constructed and regulated. In as much as CAAMA's very existence depended on this "national will", some earnest consideration on the part of CAAMA was given to conducting its own tour of Canada and the United States. In this sense, CAAMA began to play the necessary part of the "independent" Aboriginal media organisation, not only to fulfil its own charter, but also, to close the circle of government policy, and thereby, sustain it.

In July 1985, Freda Glynn and I visited numerous Aboriginal media organisations and associated government agencies across Canada and the United States. Unfortunately, limitations of space do not allow for a full account of this tour in this brief article. I will mention, however, two organisations that left a lasting impression on us and certainly influenced our thinking on the future development of CAAMA.

The Wawatay Native Communications Society at Sioux Lookout in Ontario was an organisation similar, in many respects, to CAAMA. Its administrative and main radio broadcasting facilities were based in a small rural township about the same size as Alice Springs with a similar Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population mix. The majority of its target audience lived in remote communities and spoke three or four related Aboriginal languages, like CAAMA's audience. Similarly, Wawatay's radio programs were presented in a mix of these local languages as well as English. Not long after our visit, both CAAMA and Wawatay began to deliver their radio programming via satellite, which in fact made their respective network configurations, on a technical level, very similar.

One aspect of the Wawatay operation that I found particularly fascinating was the extraordinary similarities in the way in which they were founded and developed. Essentially, Freda Glynn, a local

Aboriginal woman from Alice Springs, and I, a "whitefella" from the city, had worked closely together in establishing CAAMA. At Wawatay we met our Canadian doubles. Garnet Angecone, a local Ojibway-Cree man and Florence Woolner, a Canadian "whitefella" also from out of town, had a working relationship that was like the one Freda and I had enjoyed. Indeed, the organisational structures that grew out of these respective relationships were very much alike. In confronting these striking similarities, it occurred to me that the powerful forces of European colonialism were still very much at work. Not only had these forces reproduced very similar political and social structures in nation states located at opposite ends of the globe, it continued to structure and regulate social reality to such an extent that it could reproduce similar kinds of relationships between the ancestors of the colonisers and the colonised, despite a myriad of changes in the intervening centuries. All four of us believed, without question, that we were building Aboriginal media organisations as a means of opposing and countering the political and cultural hegemony of our respective nation states, but it was these same nation states, both with their origins in European colonial power, that made both our respective relationships, and our respective political location within these states, possible.

The other organisation I will mention briefly — the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) — provided us with a tangible model of an Aboriginal satellite-distributed television service as well as some direct assistance in CAAMA's bid for a television licence.

The IBC's operational base at Frobisher Bay was most impressive. It consisted of a modest, but effective television production facility attached to a satellite uplink that transmitted daily programming produced at Frobisher Bay and taped material sent in from remoter regions. It was exactly the kind of facility Freda and I had in mind for CAAMA. But for a number of complex reasons the type of television service that CAAMA did manage to establish bore little resemblance to the IBC's operation.

Due to unforeseen delays on the part of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, Freda and I were unable to attend the first hearing into the satellite television licence, which was conducted while we were in Canada. Nevertheless we presented our evidence, via a direct telephone link from the IBC's headquarters in Ottawa to the hearing in Alice Springs. Rosemarie Kuptana, the president of the IBC. (Josephi had left the IBC by then) also gave valuable evidence on CAAMA's behalf (Bell, 1994). Through this fortuitous event, the Tribunal was able to gain

first-hand knowledge of developments in Canada which, I would argue, had an influence on their decision to award the licence to CAAMA.

In 1988, CAAMA's television service, *Imparja TV* went to air via its own dedicated satellite transponder and began transmitting television and radio programming across an area the size of western Europe, encompassing well over sixty percent of all remote Aboriginal communities in Australia. Unlike the IBC's initial situation, where it had little effective control over satellite usage (Meadows, 1995), CAAMA had access to the satellite twenty four hours per day, from the beginning. Indeed, it was a condition of the licence that CAAMA use (and finance) an entire full-time transponder. It was this condition in particular, and the fact that the licence, despite substantial government subsidy, was deemed to be "commercial", that took *Imparja TV* in a direction utterly different to the IBC's service.

Initially, the plan had been to broadcast a mix of locally produced Aboriginal TV programming and general commercial fare, with the local production steadily expanding. For the first few months this worked relatively well, but gradually, internal conflicts began to emerge between those that favoured a commercially driven service as opposed to the mixed programming approach. These differences sharpened as internal competition for production resources increased. Ultimately, the commercial approach prevailed.

There are many governmental, political and financial pressures that need to be considered in understanding *Imparja's* evolution which, unfortunately, can not be dealt with here; but from my own point of view, many of the original aims of *Imparja* — for example, to provide a consistent level of regional television programming in local Aboriginal languages — is yet to be achieved. Nonetheless, given the fact that *Imparja* remains the only satellite broadcasting TV network in Aboriginal hands, this is still a possibility. *Imparja* also provides enormous potential for the further development of satellite delivered services, including the distribution of radio programming, and advantages in the area of independent income generation.

In 1993, Freda and I became joint winners of the McLuhan Teleglobe Canada Award, coordinated by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, for our work in assisting in the establishment of Aboriginal broadcasting in Australia. It was a great honour and we both felt that we were accepting the award on behalf of all the people who had made valuable contributions. We embarked on our second trip to Canada and attended a lavish ceremony in Montreal where the mayor of the city,

Jean Doré, presented us with the Award. We had been truly denoted as lead performers in the international narrative of Aboriginal media.

Aboriginal media in Australia — led in its initial stages by CAAMA — is a discourse that produces, and is produced by, an exceedingly complex set of negotiations between dominant and marginalised cultural forces within the Australian nation state. Competing for space in this process of negotiation is the shifting politics surrounding the construction of cultural difference, the production of policy, the politics of identity, the determinations of technology and a whole admixture of other discourses. CAAMA, and Aboriginal media in general, was a kind of by-product of these contestations between dominant and minority cultural forces, even though the line separating the two remains ill-defined and often breached by parties on either side.

In this sense, the emergence of Aboriginal media in Australia affords a rich site for investigating of the processes involved in the governmental regulation, management and construction of an Indigenous minority.

Over the intervening years since the meeting at Santa Teresa (encompassing eleven years of employment at CAAMA), it has become clear to me that any "Indigenous minority" must inevitably be constructed within, and be a product of its relationship with, a given nation state, regardless of how much that relationship might be contested; and further, if nation states are a product of "imagined communities", as Anderson (1984) suggests, then it is axiomatic that "Indigenous minorities" are also a product of such imaginings.

NOTES

- 1 From an interview with Brain Walsh recorded in 1996.
- 2 Personal communication with George Menham, a Department of Aboriginal Affairs officer closely associated with the development and implementation of DAA policy on Aboriginal broadcasting.
- 3 There had been various submissions by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to the ABC and Post and Telecommunications from 1974 up to 1980 to provide broadcasting services for Aboriginals, but nothing eventuated. The first comprehensive survey of Aboriginal broadcasting needs was completed by Brian Quiggley for the Australian Film and Television School in 1980.
- 4 This was formally known as the Central Remote Commercial Television Service Licence and covered the Northern Territory and South Australia.

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PART THREE:

PHOTO ESSAY