Throughout much of the previous century, agents of Western thinking—from colonial anthropologists, missionaries and tourists to administrators—generally assumed that tribal peoples and their cultures were doomed to destruction. The colonial administrative question was whether this was to be through ‘natural’ decline or ‘benevolent’ assimilation in the face of Western modernity; both frequently amounting to genocide. The more recent anthropological tendency has been to localize indigenous identities as isolated cultural units, or see them in a national policy frame. This has begun to change with the rapidly growing experience of, and literature on, globalization and Indigenous Peoples.1 In addition to the local and national, Indigenous peoples increasingly exist in a global framework, both self-consciously drawing on globalized strategies of rights and identity, as well as being objectively situated through international legal frameworks. The most recent example, the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, sets a new threshold in international protocols relating to indigenous rights, which over time will more and more deeply filter through to myriad local cultural assertions and struggles by peoples increasingly self-identifying as ‘Indigenous’.2 These processes of identification are taking place regardless of academic debates around the viability or intellectual and political consistency of a necessarily contingent term for these identities.3

In this first wave of revision, however, much of the writing has been engaged more directly with international rights-based institutions than with questions of cultural assertion. Despite its strengths, there is a tendency in this field to limit the understanding of indigenous ‘culture’ as a space to be attained and protected by the struggle for ‘rights’. Historically, anthropologists have tended to prefer endogamous sacred rituals and practices for their own peculiar historical reasons, and until relatively recently have neglected the messy realities of cultural interchange. This is linked to the relative absence of scholarly interest in indigenous festivals, possibly because these festivals bear the border-crossing taint

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of ‘inauthenticity’ that haunts ‘tourist and ethnic arts’ as described by Graburn. Indigenous peoples and their organizations increasingly support and champion these spaces of cultural identification, assertion and creativity, and have their own internal debates about their cultural traditions and lineages. Discussing the Hawaiian context, for example, Anne Kaeppler makes a point that applies more broadly:

Recently cultural identity has begun to take on a more political dimension as it has been transformed into a visual aspect of ethnic identity … More and more Hawaiians—male and female—are studying hula in order to become part of the ethnic movement … knowledge and understanding of this cultural form are valued as an ingredient of ethnic identity.5

This paper retheorizes the question of indigenous cultural assertion over a relatively short historical period. It is remarkable to recall that as recently as 1957 the International Labour Organization (in ILO Convention 107) promoted the ‘progressive integration into the life of their respective nations’ those peoples it identified as indigenous. Indigenous peoples have over an extended period deployed many strategies for resisting such social-Darwinist assumptions of their ‘disappearance’; not just through violence and direct engagement with state politics, nor just Scott’s ‘passively’ resistant ‘weapons of the weak”, but also with the remarkably generous and insistent gifts of cultural life. Throughout the history of contact with cultures of domination indigenous communities have asserted the vibrancy of their people, their land and their cultural life through sharing the sensual enjoyments of place, music and dance, food, games, work and sexuality, through to the closely connected depths of philosophy and religion (not necessarily separated from these enjoyments as in the dominant Western traditions). These acts of generosity have been both attempts to educate and civilize the dominating cultures into a proper ethics of living on country, as well as a direct political assertion of various forms of existence and sovereignty through means generally not recognized by the dominating cultures.

These performances of power have changed as the overlapping epistemologies of cross-cultural relations have shifted. The violent frontier and missionary colonial phases generally coincide with a shift in emphasis from the expression of ancestral connection to the performance of cultural adjustment movements with millenarian themes such as ghost dance cults. In an established phase of colonizing-nationalism (experienced as assimilationist modernity) indigenous performances read as ‘folk dance’ assert an indigenous presence in colonizing-national history as indigenous people struggle to attain the citizenship rights promised under nationalizing regimes but denied by practical racism. More recently added to these layers of performative meaning are the postcolonial possibilities of a globalizing indigeneity which rests on an uneasy balance between the assertion of
universal human rights and the special rights to local difference claimed by Indigenous peoples.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Indigenous peoples across the Asia-Pacific are loudly asserting that they and their distinctive cultures are very much alive. Despite the pressures of the developmental modernizers, who expected them to assimilate or otherwise disappear, these communities are using public cultural festivals as one significant strategic space to celebrate, renew and reinvent their cultural traditions. These festivals have varying origins; some in deep-rooted traditions while others are more modern innovations of the missionary, nation-building or cultural revival mode. All exist at the intersection of tribalism with local and national political contestation, and are variously touched by the social forms of globalism. Some festivals have a local emphasis with little conscious concern for the outside world, some are national events, and some are truly global in scope; drawing self-consciously on the contemporary global communications networks of cultural diasporas, tourism and media, strengthening their presence in the context of global rights-based institutions in the process. This aspect of Indigenous cultural assertion has been generally misunderstood and under-theorized through the lens of either romanticism or ‘salvage anthropology’ as cultural revival and survival, rather than as a seriously political and ethical practice. Understanding the significance of these festivals in a globalizing sphere of indigenous cultural production has implications at the level of cultural policy; for shifts between the local, national and the global as sites of political action, and most importantly for community life at the local level. It is time to look more closely at these celebrations as significant, playful and urgent acts of cultural politics.

Niezen and others remind us that ‘indigeneity’ as a self-conscious identity has been forged only relatively recently at the intersection of indigenous peoples’ activism and the human rights-based discourses and institutions of global governance. In the 1990s it became an increasingly widely used synonym for hitherto largely colonizing-national identity categories such as ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Native’ (Hawaiian, American, et cetera). This shift marks more than faddish neologism, because it is at the vanguard of a longer-term shift in opportunities for political action and corresponding identities beyond the dominating nation-state, both locally and globally. Indigeneity is arguably one of the most broadly dispersed and deeply lived examples of ‘actually existing’ identity globalism. As the identities asserted by indigenous intellectuals acting as rights activists in the UN offices of Geneva and New York, or artists and performers touring globally return to their communities, ‘indigenous’ becomes a powerful new category of cultural and political assertion which supplements and subtly transforms existing identities and platforms at home. It becomes available to locally situated actors to strategically, and increasingly naturally, think of themselves as
As the globally mobile Indigenous Australian artist Fiona Foley put it in regards to her own experience:

The direction for me currently is a duality that is both international and involved in regional Australia, it could be said this is the current direction for a number of indigenous artists, musicians, dancers, writers, directors, and actors. In the past decade, our lifestyle has led us all to meet offshore at various arts events, festivals, survey exhibitions, solo exhibitions, biennials and triennials. On more than one occasion, I have met the same Indigenous artist abroad, rather than in our native Australia.11

At the level of governance, rather than just displacing or bypassing indigenous action at the colonizing-national level, global indigeneity can further empower it by drawing on the momentum and legitimacy of a global rights-based order. This does not negate the authority of the colonizing-nation-state as the locus of political action, but it does displace its centrality, and re-emphasizes local mobilizations and identities in a global frame. This indigenous relocalization shifts the emphasis from a colonizing-national identity such as ‘Australian Aborigine’, to a more specific one such as ‘Yolngu’ or ‘Wurundjeri,’ from ‘Native’ to ‘Native Hawaiian’ to ‘Kānaka Maoli.’ These categories are by no means mutually exclusive, nor is it to say that (colonial) Aboriginality simply subsumed more local (pre-colonial) identities which have now reasserted themselves or been rediscovered as postcolonial identities. These and other categories have coexisted and will continue to do so as distinct forms of identity. However in certain circumstances and contexts a dominant sphere emerges, framing and subtly reshaping the other layers of identification. To rephrase Marx, it might be said that people can know who they are, but not in circumstances of their own choosing. The emergence of the global ‘indigenous’ identity enables (and is symptomatic of) a reordering of the ‘national’ in the cultural sphere. Gillian Cowlishaw makes this point in the Australian context when she writes:

Tribal names such as Ngempa, Budjidi, and Wangkamara are being publicly activated as a consequence of the new-found recognition of Aboriginal traditions … A hitherto muted store of knowledge and experience of things deemed ‘tribal’ has emerged. Fragments of languages are being revived and are circulating in everyday speech, and spiritual forces are alluded to with confidence. Disputes and rivalries concerning tribal identity and authority are increasingly evident. There is an apparent hunger among Indigenous people to assert a positive and unique identity, not as ‘equal citizens’ but as Indigenous peoples in contrast to the settler, invader, or immigrant status of their fellow Australians.12

The literature on globalization and Indigenous peoples tends to look at ‘culture’ as a space to be protected by the struggle for ‘rights’. Cindy Holder
argues that in human rights law, culture has characteristically been seen as a thing to be accessed or consumed, and in this sense implicitly a lesser right, rather than an activity integral to what a people is.\textsuperscript{13} This essay proposes that culture is not just an object of rights-based discourses but is also the \textit{terrain} of global indigenous political struggles; struggles which exceed the limits of rights-based discourses by seeking to assert a counter-universalist ethics of ontologically grounded ‘proper living,’ based on the primacy of indigenous peoples and their connection to place. Indigenous cultural festivals can be understood as one manifestation of this rapidly strengthening political and social phenomenon of global indigeneity.

As globalization in all its forms grows in intensity, not only at the level of transnational institutions of justice but also global communications, travel, and trade, so do opportunities for the insertion of marginalized cultures into an emergent ‘global imaginary’: the deeply routinized ways we think about ourselves and our world from an increasingly global perspective.\textsuperscript{14} This popular Yothu Yindi song from 1991 was announcing this emergent consciousness when it declared:

\begin{quote}
All the people in the world are dreaming (get up stand up)
Some of us cry for the rights of survival now (get up stand up)
Say c’mon c’mon, stand up for your rights
While others don’t give a damn
They are all waiting for a perfect day
You better get up and fight for your rights
Don’t be afraid of the move that you make
You better listen to your tribal voice.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

The song, concerned with indigenous ‘rights of survival now’ in the global context of ‘all the people in the world,’ ends with the singer Mandawuy Yunupingu calling out the very local, individual Yolngu clan names of north east Arnhem Land to ‘get up, stand up.’ At the same time the poetry of the song lends itself to any listener, indigenous or non-indigenous, listening for their ‘tribal voice.’

An effervescence of local indigenous cultural festivals is one manifestation of this subtle shift towards a globalizing indigenous identity which emphasizes the specifically local. Much of this effervescence is the revivification of established rituals, community events and celebrations as ‘festivals.’ On the one hand, this is a result of indigenous communities recognizing the transnational cultural form of the ‘festival’ as a known commodity in the global market of cultural exchange and tourist services, and similarly as an activity that can attract various governmental and other resources to enable indigenous people to do some of what they want with culture. On the other hand, the festival space can be seen as one of relative fluidity and license for transformative experiences and representations in a broader political project of decolonization and the assertion of indigenous sovereignties. Cultural performance can be simultaneously a commodity, a spiritual ritual, and a
transformative political project; these are not necessarily mutually exclusive, nor are they without occasional contradictions and tensions.

**Merrie Monarch Festival**

The Merrie Monarch Festival in Hawai‘i is an example of these cultural-political tensions being expressed across different social layers through the festival form. Held annually in Hilo, Hawai‘i, the core of the festival is a three-day *hula* competition, with other events revolving around it such as a craft market, free *hula* performances in hotels and a major street parade. The competition draws in *hālau* (*hula* schools) from across the Hawaiian islands and north America, the Hawaiian diaspora in the USA (California, Nevada, Utah and elsewhere), and *hula* enthusiasts from around the world. Visiting *hālau* from Japan are particularly prominent, and perform in the ‘*hoʻike* night’ which precedes the competition with other cultural performances from across the Pacific, such as Maori, Tahitian and Mexican dances. According to a key founder, Uncle George Na‘ope, the festival was initially established as a drawcard to promote tourism in the town of Hilo through a celebration of Hawaiian cultural traditions mixed with civic street parade.

From its very inception the Merrie Monarch Festival was organized around the playful device that presumed the festival to be happening under the rule of the last Hawaiian King.\(^{16}\) By honouring this Hawaiian monarch the festival plays with the notion of the continuing sovereignty of the Hawaiian kingdom which was overthrown in a coup by American sugar planters in 1893. King David Kalākaua was a great cultural revivalist, extremely well-travelled through Asia, north America and Europe, and was in tune with the folk-nationalist spirit sweeping the world in the late-nineteenth century. He opposed the repression of *hula* by missionaries, and established a modern role for *hula* by having it performed at his *Poni Mōʻī* (*coronation*) and later Jubilee celebrations, both for his subjects and international dignitaries. This unique history makes *hula* both the living expression of an ancient indigenous tradition and the self-consciously preserved expression (visually apparent through costuming such as the use of bloomers in the ‘ancient’ *hula kahiko*) of an historically specific expression of national sovereignty in the modernizing Kingdom of Hawai‘i. Kalākaua’s late nineteenth century cultural revival was a thoroughly modern gesture in keeping with the progressive nationalist spirit of the times, as well as an expression of specifically Hawaiian cultural politics.

While the revival and transformation of the hula tradition at these seminal events was of great importance to a Hawaiian audience, and the internal political struggles over genealogy and legitimacy, the international context of these performances should not be neglected. Revivals of the transformed ‘folk traditions’ of song, music, dance, variously secularized rituals and costumes were central features of the performative toolkit of late nineteenth century nationalisms. There is no reason to believe that the potential of *hula* as a Hawaiian national ‘folk-dance’ form should have escaped King
Kalākaua’s attention as he was received as royalty at the courts of monarchs through Europe and Asia. He was not only struggling for legitimacy of his own rule domestically but also for his kingdom internationally. As Silva puts it:

The nation’s sovereignty was unstable in ways that were parallel to Kalākaua’s own instability on the throne. His activities were aimed at constituting and strengthening the nation through re-enacting the traditional cosmology, which could not help but strengthen his position. He attempted to use tradition as resistance to colonization in many ways, including establishing the Papa Kū’auhau o Nā Ali‘i Hawai‘i (board of geneology) and the Hale Nauā to document traditional knowledge; arranging for the public performance of hula at the Poni Mō‘i (coronation); and arranging hula and dramatic performances of national narratives at the jubilee, his fiftieth birthday celebration.17

While the contemporary festival remains overtly apolitical, its prominent public place as a focus for Hawaiian cultural expression gives it a practical relationship to the contemporary assertion of Native Hawaiian cultural revival and expression, language and political rights. The festival’s engagement with the question of Hawaiian sovereignty is clearly quite distinct from the overtly political movements which pursue varied strategies for asserting Hawaiian sovereignty, and I do not claim that the organizers or participants of the festival necessarily see it as an assertion of that sovereignty. Rather, I am arguing that the effect of the festival and its cultural performances is to playfully yet deeply disrupt conventional notions of sovereignty and politics, colonial and anti-colonial. As very fine hula performances are watched nightly by thousands in the stadium in Hilo and broadcast on television throughout the islands, this public performance not only perpetuates and refines standards in the hula tradition it also cultivates and educates an audience with the preconditions to recognize itself as subjects of this Hawaiian national culture, much like Benedict Anderson’s nineteenth century newspaper readers.18

In a close analysis of the hula ‘ala‘apapa tradition, Amy Ku‘uleialoha Stillman analyses ‘the distinction between ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ hula at the time it first became a critical distinction; over one hundred years ago, in the crucible of innovation during the revival of hula at the court of King David Kalākaua (r.1874-91) after decades of missionary-inspired censure.’19 Stillman’s book argues that the distinction between hula kahiko and hula auana (‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ forms of hula respectively) has been understood dichotomously as ‘indigenous versus western’ in the context of the ‘renaissance in Hawaiian culture in and since the 1970s’.20 Her text respectfully implies that while this has become an important distinction for hula practitioners and audiences (it is, for example, the central organizing feature of performances at the Merrie Monarch Festival hula competition), other classificatory systems might be both more meaningful within a Hawaiian epistemology, and more
accurately reflect which hula are more clearly descended from pre-contact indigenous sacred practices and which reflect less sacred traditions. The intense solemnity of the audience in the chanting segments of both the individual ‘Miss Aloha’ performances and the group performances on the hula kahiko night of the competition suggest the recognition by performers and audience that a very serious cultural transaction is taking place. The calling out of sacred chants in the Hawaiian language in the stadium and relayed through television sets across the islands calls the audience into an intense experience, if not conscious recognition, of a living tradition of performing Hawaiian sovereignty.

In her discussion of hula, Hunani-Kay Trask says:

... the cultural revitalization that Hawaiians are now experiencing and transmitting to their children is as much a repudiation of colonization by so-called Western civilization in its American form as it is a reclamation of our own past and our own ways of life ... its political effect is decolonization of the mind.\textsuperscript{21}

As a prominent expression of that ‘revitalization’ Trask describes, and despite being framed by the colonial artifice of ‘competition,’ the festival is a cultural political act towards the ‘decolonization of the mind.’ In this regard the contemporary festival serves much the same function identified by Silva as the performances in the time of Kalākaua. She wrote:

The public celebrations of tradition served to alleviate some of the psychological harm done to the lāhui through the social and economic colonization ... These public performances demonstrated pride in Kanaka culture, art, dance, religion, and history, and in so doing they strengthen the collective identity of the lāhui as a nation ... Through Kalākaua’s efforts, these stories became part of the national narrative, which not only justified his rule but ... contributed to the identity of the lāhui as a nation.\textsuperscript{22}

The competition within the Merrie Monarch Festival opens with the singing of both the Hawaiian and United States national anthems (although not with equal enthusiasm). The display of both flags is prominent in other events that are clustered around this central competition, and in the final street parade the very visible presence of United States military units and bands stand incongruously alongside processions and floats of a wide array of community organizations (from canoe clubs to Elvis fans), beauty queens, and descendents of the Ali‘i whose Royal Order of Kamehameha I celebrates a unified Hawaiian kingdom. All these elements parade past the ‘Hawaiian Royal Court’ (selected to perform in this role for the duration of the festival) enthroned on an enormous float drawn by a truck. This wonderful civic parade, along with with other aspects of the festival, invites the question of which sovereignties are being recognized and naturalized through these performances. Silva is in no doubt as to the political effect
of such performances and street parades when she notes a precursor to this parade staged by Kalākaua at the opening of the Jubilee in 1886. The parade included historical tableaux derived from the oral tradition, presented on floats designed as giant canoes paraded down the street. Her close reading of the newspaper reports of the time shows the divergence of understandings of these events and presentations between the English and Hawaiian language press, and in the Hawaiian press between those with inside knowledge of the hula and other knowledge traditions and those without it. As part of her broader argument that these festivals are a means for asserting sovereignty as modern nationhood, ‘Kalākaua vehemently insists through these activities that the Kānaka Maoli are proud of their past (which is not forgotten) and so already consider themselves the equals of the Europeans and Euro-Americans.’

These contrasting understandings are nowhere more apparent than at the hula performed in honour of a United States warship stationed in Hilo, the USS Reuben James. In this remarkable annual event, closed to the public, the ‘Hawaiian Royal Court’ watches enthroned on the dock as a hula auana (modern or non-sacred hula) is performed for the ship and its crew, who stand at attention in full naval uniform. At its simplest, this event acknowledges and thanks the ship as a financial sponsor of the festival. At another level, this event could be seen as an act of co-option which recognizes United States military supremacy and its history and symbols of domination over Hawai‘i (such as illegal participation in the overthrow of the Hawaiian government) in such a way as to undermine Indigenous Hawaiian claims to sovereignty. At another level still, the staging of the performance in front of the ‘Royal Court’ simultaneously calls that colonial power back into a local political order with an overriding, unsurrendered layer of Hawaiian sovereignty expressed through a gentle, playful hula. These contradictory responses are characteristic of Scott’s ‘weapons of the weak’; which include cultural performances that disrupt the colonizing-national narrative but which are not open for the colonizer’s easy interpretation.

Ritualized cultural performance has been an integral part of indigenous encounters with colonizing cultures from earliest contacts to the present day. The historical record suggests a broad pattern whereby these performances become more significant in periods when colonial relations are more strongly contested or are shifting into new terrain. Edward Said foregrounds the centrality of this strand of anti-colonial, national cultural practice in Culture and Imperialism where the narrativization of the nation is understood as central to the struggle over sovereignty. Historians of Pacific colonial encounters, such as Clendinnen, Dening and Sahlins, emphasize an acute colonial sensitivity to these performances as a theatre of power integral to the earliest phases of colonization. They argue for taking these cultural performances seriously from both sides of the colonial encounter; lifting them out of the historical footnotes and onto centre stage of the
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colonial process—whether it be Captain Cook’s finally fatal encounters with Hawaiian ritual (and politics)\(^2^8\) or the New South Wales convict colony’s first Governor, Arthur Phillip’s, misrecognition of his own ritual spearing orchestrated by his adopted kin, Bennelong.\(^2^9\) This performative reading of the colonial experience applies equally to the missionary phase of colonization, with its requisite ritual performances of Christian conversion and adherence. In places where it was not repressed, the colonizing process elicited serious, sometimes urgent ritual displays and responses which attempted to bridge the cultural, political, spiritual and ethical divide between colonizer and colonized; calling the colonizer into reciprocal intellectual recognition with performative gifts of knowledge and ritual.\(^3^0\)

The literature on gift-exchange treats exchange and cultural dialogue as crucial to underpinning a sustainable way of life. Indigenous communities have been players on the globalizing stage, if often marginalized ones, for an extended historical period. Eric Wolf puts them at the centre of his world-systems historical narrative illustrating their significance, for instance in long-distance communications, well before the Conquistadors sailed to the Americas and so spectacularly brought those indigenous peoples to the attention of Europe.\(^3^1\) Today’s forums of Indigenous assertion stretch from the United Nations down to daily struggles for survival: in disputes about land-use; resource allocation; language; religious and cultural freedoms and education; health; employment and livelihoods. Indigenous communities are up against multinational mining companies, loggers, ranchers; assimilationists, corrupt or indifferent governments, armies and militias, the pressures of demography and poverty, everyday racism and exclusion. All these forces conspire against the sustainability of indigenous communities and their cultures. Through all this it is remarkable that many communities continue to offer up rich treasuries of cultural wealth as a gift, even to those from dominating cultures who are willing to receive them. Gifting, as a wealth of anthropological theory has shown, is a complex thing, calling the recipient into a web of reciprocal obligations.\(^3^2\) In this instance gifting includes a strategy for cultural survival and renewal, but also a gesture towards a deeper intercultural dialogue about being: at the level of ontological relations of space, time, epistemology and embodiment.\(^3^3\) This is very often either ignored as too difficult or obscure, interpreted through the cultural lens of New Age romantic mysticism in the genre of ‘Indigenous Wisdom’ writing, or gestured towards with post-structural uncertainty.

**Garma Festival of Traditional Culture**

While dominating cultures might easily fall into these routinized romantic misapprehensions of indigenous cultures at festivals they can also be a powerful medium for cross-cultural contact that can displace and reframe those characterizations through personal experience. As Mandawuy Yunupingu, one of the founders of the Garma Festival of Traditional Culture, has said of its purpose:
We’re living in fluid times, trying to discover in more profound ways what it is to be Australian. I think the vast majority of Australians would agree that Aboriginal Australians have a special contribution to make to that. But there seems to be a problem. I think most non-Aboriginal Australians accept that there is a deep intellectual strength to Aboriginal knowledge, but they seem to think of it as a mystery. I hope we are less of a mystery now.34

Garma is an intercultural gathering of national political, cultural and academic significance, and, simultaneously, a very local gathering of Yolngu clans on Yolngu land for Yolngu purposes.35 While suffering some colonial depredations and massacre, Yolngu people of Arnhem Land in the north-east of the Australia’s Northern Territory were relatively isolated from colonization until the mid-twentieth century. Through determination, creative adaptation and historical good fortune they have been able to maintain their land ownership, languages, kinship systems, and cultural and spiritual traditions largely intact through various colonial incursions into their lands. At the same time, Yolngu communities gathered into ‘mission towns’ are suffering the extreme physical and mental health afflictions of other colonized peoples in Australia and elsewhere, and rates of violence and death that create a perpetual air of mourning and crisis.

During the recently ended twelve years of Australian conservative national government from late 1996 to 2007, there was a cultural and political stalemate in Australia which elicited many civic responses and initiatives. A turn to ‘grassroots’ cultural and educational action made strategic sense as the only available space for the work of social transformation. The conservative government had refused to meet the challenges of the formally established process of reconciliation with Indigenous Australians36, and its attack on indigenous institutions, land rights and vilification of Aboriginal people themselves was a hostile return to a colonial mindset and assimilationist policies. Despite this there was a substantial constituency in the Australian public and key social institutions who remained deeply sympathetic to the notion of Aboriginal self-determination, cultural survival and further progress in formal and informal processes of reconciliation as the most effective ways to remedy Indigenous disadvantage. Initiatives such as the ‘Sea of Hands’ and the mass bridge-crossing ‘Walks for Reconciliation’ in 2000 demonstrated this support on a mass scale, and the possibility of the mutual human feeling that the work of decolonization requires as a starting point.

For Australian Aboriginal people at the twilight of the twentieth century the political situation offered little hope or comfort for Indigenous interests. It was a case of late-colonial business as usual, with a deeply conservative government (and disabled opposition) setting policy directions inimical to Indigenous cultural and linguistic maintenance, social or political rights. In this context of electoral political torpor, some Indigenous organizations and
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leaders were determined to fight with whatever strategies they had available to maintain and advance the political gains they had made in the previous two decades. While it has become necessary to point out the failure for those gains to be effectively translated into life outcomes and opportunity for Aboriginal people in much of the Northern Territory, the gains were significant. In particular, the establishment of indigenous organizations such as the Land Councils under the Land Rights Act had ensured a relatively secure, well-resourced base for indigenous land management and advocacy. In this period the long-standing Yolngu Chairman of the Northern Land Council (NLC), Gumatj clan elder Galarrwuy Yunupingu had been a prominent advocate for Yolngu and broader Aboriginal rights for almost thirty years. Educated for two years at an elite Brisbane school, his skilled English and bicultural understanding qualified him as translator for his father and other plaintiffs in the ‘Gove Land Rights Case’ (Millipurm v Nabalco 1971); a watershed moment in the Land Rights movement.

In 1999, Galarrwuy Yunupingu established the Garma Festival of Indigenous Culture with his equally famous brother Mandawuy, lead singer of the popular rock band Yothu Yindi. The Yunupingu brothers, both separately recognized as ‘Australian of the Year,’ mobilized their substantial cultural capital in the mainstream media to establish this unique cultural-political initiative under the organizational structure of the Yothu Yindi Foundation. Their project is supported by a shifting alliance of Yolngu clan groups, principally the Gumatj-Rirratjingu who make up the dyadic yothu-yindi (child-mother) relationship of the Foundation’s name. The two brothers were perhaps uniquely well-qualified and resourced in Australia to breach the chasm of mainstream Australian ignorance of Indigenous realities and to make a cultural leap in the process of decolonization. Over the years Mandawuy Yunupingu’s vibrant creativity and Galarrwuy’s political momentum, both drawing on a very strong grounding in Yolngu cultural life and law, had gathered together a well-connected network of support from across Australia and a reservoir of goodwill, particularly amongst educated, urban ‘southerners’ (as the population from the south-east of Australia is known ‘up north’). Mandawuy has a university degree from ‘down south,’ was the first Indigenous school principal in Australia at the bilingual Yirrkala Community Education Centre, and his bi-cultural, bi-lingual rock band has had an international following that broke into the Australian mainstream with the overtly political hit-song Treaty in 1992.

At the level of dealing with the national historical impasse in Australia, Garma has been a skilful Yolngu strategy to keep Indigenous issues on the national agenda through a highly localized, very specific, public intervention in the realm of representation and knowledge exchange and production. At the same time it has kept Yolngu leadership particularly prominent in that national arena, not without tension or contestation. Garma is also a pragmatic strategy both for reinforcing and strengthening local cultural practices, building new resources, and for engaging and incorporating
influential people in key institutions, such as media, law, health, public administration and education, into relationships of knowledge exchange and the call for reciprocity. This invitation to reciprocity allows for the recognition of forms and practices of Aboriginal sovereignty simply by being there on Yolngu land with a sincere intention to learn from Yolngu. That act in itself is an affirmation of indigenous forms of governance. Such opportunities are extremely rare for most Australians, who live in cities and thoroughly colonized places where indigenous sovereignty is less palpably visible and assertive. Galarrwuy Yunupingu is quoted by actor Jack Thompson in a Garma promotional DVD describing Garma as ‘a vision of Australia as it might be’.  

The bunggul is the space in which Yolngu epistemological difference is made visible to visitors from outside, while still not being easily understood at anything but a relatively superficial level of meaning. Galarrwuy gives a minimal exegesis of the performance and its meanings, making it possible to extract a sense of them at one of their many layers as being a statement about Yolngu systems of governance. An obvious example of this is the annual performance by the Red Flag dance group from Numbulwar at the southern limits of the Yolngu lands. Their humorous and spectacular dancing was an account of cultural contact with the Macassan fishermen with whom they traded goods, words, names and kinship for as long as 700 years. This performance can be seen both as an historical account, as a claim to the capacity for historicity, but perhaps more importantly as a continuing claim for the recognition of Yolngu sovereignty and their capacity to conduct sophisticated international diplomacy and trade over an extended period of time. It is first and foremost in the current political context an easily understood message for other Australians about the persistence of Yolngu forms of sovereignty. Further to that, the constant Yolngu retelling of the story of the Macassar trade to the point it has become somewhat idealized as an illustrative ethical model and reminder that a deeper reciprocal relationship is needed with non-Indigenous Australia. Franca Tamisari makes the point that Yolngu bunggul is art, law and an act of love, when she writes:

Dancing in any Yolngu ceremony ... (is) an event in which knowledge associated with country is transferred, judged, asserted, and negotiated, and through which obligations are fulfilled by offering help to, and demonstrating love and compassion towards one’s relatives. In this way Yolngu Law is seen to be immutable yet changing, maintained yet renewed, replicated yet reinterpreted ... ‘Yolngu dance because they hold the Law.  

In this respect Garma is a deep pedagogical exercise, particularly for Balanda (the Yolngu term for dominant culture Australians) who in most cases have no or very little knowledge of the Yolngu world. The Garma Cultural Studies Institute originally aspired to run accredited higher
education programs for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to learn more about Yolngu philosophy, environmental knowledge and community development studies. The very fact of visitors sitting down quietly with Yolngu women and watching them weave, or making a spear with the men, is on the one hand learning a simple new skill through watching and doing, but more significantly it involves unlearning western assumptions to begin approaching a Yolngu way of learning. This has been noted at Garma as a profound exercise in encountering Yolngu epistemologies at work which has visibly transformative effects on the Balanda participants, frequently leaving them in tears.44 Seeing corporate executives and national bureaucrats become playful enthusiasts for their gender-respective baskets or spears, attentively following their Yolngu instructors, will not immediately change the raw politics of land ownership and mineral rights in this country, but it does open the possibility of understanding the ontological differences that have been simultaneously reified and dismissed as ‘a mystery,’ and open a deeper dialogue that might make such changes possible. The themes of Mandawuy’s music and writing capture this spirit. As he explains:

The (Yothu Yindi) band takes on the same agenda to what I did in teaching really. But I’m a musician instead of a teacher. Our objective is to bring about a balance and understanding—a true sense of equality … It’s the difference we want to maintain, not the sameness. The sameness can be classified as assimilation. That’s what we don’t want—we don’t want to be assimilated—to think like a white man.45

Extending the concept of garma to Yolngu-invader interaction invites participants from the invader culture to consider not only their dominating sense of cultural difference from Yolngu but to recognise their interdependence with them and the land, culture and life world that they maintain. Mandawuy Yunupingu has articulated this as having implications for broader, even global, issues of social and environmental sustainability.46 These ideas of radical interdependence and balance can be found in Mandawuy’s music and writing, and in a range of textual and figurative representations by other Yolngu intellectuals. The collected artist statements in the remarkable Saltwater publication, based on the exhibition by the same name, are a small indication of the deep knowledge of the inter-relatedness of human beings, their relationships and the natural and spiritual worlds.47

As well as being the name of a ‘festival,’ garma is a concept and practice of the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land. Discussions of garma need to distinguish between uncapitalized garma as a form of Yolngu public, ritual, religious knowledge with an associated set of funery rites, and capitalized Garma as the event, held annually since 1999. For a garma to take place as a Yolngu public ritual there has to be a negotiation between competing, sometimes structurally hostile, but interdependent groups. When this resolution has been made, the ceremony can proceed around that point.48 Similarly, for Garma (the cultural festival) to have the active participation
of the various Yolnu clans who form the heart of the event by performing the evening *bunggul* (dance/ceremony) requires complex inter-clan political negotiations on a number of levels—from the sacred ritual and religious to the economic. At another level, Garma also calls upon the non-Yolnu guests to enter relations of reciprocity and negotiation with their Yolnu hosts whose land they are on. This reciprocity includes showing respect for Indigenous protocols and opening to Yolnu epistemologies, including the importance of various spirits and spirit beings to this place and the Yolnu world. Describing the significance of the site and its relationship to the spirit being Ganbulapula, Raymattja Marika, Waymamba Gaykamangu and Michael Christie have explained:

At Gulkula, he formed an open area, called yati, or a garma, for public ceremonials, for all the different Yirritja clans. And they gathered there together over the years, for ceremonies, especially for Yirritja mortuary ceremonies, where the bones of the deceased would be crushed and placed in hollow log coffin, and their spirits would be sent with a sacred string into the spirit world.

Even today, the Gumatj owners continue to call people together with the spiritual yidaki across the nation and the world, to come together in the spirit of garma. Using the old Yolnu ideas, the modern day spirits which come are exposed to a modern garma, where they come together to learn, to share and to develop ideas and celebrate together through art, through dancing, through radio, television, computers, internet, learning yidaki, learning about medicine, law, many different themes worked together.

In this explanation we are all ‘modern day spirits’ called together at Garma by the sacred yidaki (didgeridoo) to learn. This learning is offered very much in the mode of Tuhawa-Smith’s Decolonizing Methodologies following and respecting indigenous protocols directed by community elders in an historical context where that authority has been (and continues to be) undermined by processes of colonial domination. Garma is graciously offered as a gift or opportunity to settler Australia, inviting a serious, deep intercultural dialogue, and as a deliberate pedagogical model for how the colonizing-national story might be constituted very differently in a globalizing context through a shared process of decolonization.

**Conclusion**

The festivals discussed here share many common structural features, concerns and tensions; centrally, the performative expression of cultural identity in a cross-cultural context through the festival form. At the same time they articulate very differently contextualized indigenous modernities. The Merrie Monarch Festival has as its central organizing motif the image of an Hawaiian Sovereign, and its most potent central performances, the *hula kahiko*, are the renewal of an already-modernized *national* revival of the *hula* tradition. The Hawaiian people have a very long historical experience of
already large, agricultural-based territorial kingdoms with specialized, hierarchical divisions of labour were reorganized into a unified kingdom in the eighteenth century. While suffering terribly through the mass death from introduced diseases and the shocks of colonial modernity, capitalism and missionization for the next hundred years, a modernizing Hawaiian nation was being forged through this long crisis. In contrast with many other colonized, indigenous peoples, decolonizing cultural politics in Hawai‘i can draw on that historical experience of national sovereignty.

As a predominantly hunter-gatherer, clan-based society only recently experiencing colonialism the context is quite different for Yolngu people. Yolngu intellectuals have highlighted their extremely rich ritual, artistic and intellectual traditions in an attempt to reconcile with colonial modernity. Closed off historically from the option of a nationalist anti-colonial struggle, the cultural-political expressions of Yolngu through Garma and other cross-cultural spaces (such as the dynamic visual art movement) seeks to elicit and work with emergent strands of decolonizing Australian nationalism. Yolngu intellectuals have articulated this through indigenous metaphors and systems for balancing dichotomous tensions. The Yolngu and broader Indigenous Australian struggle is almost entirely framed as being for the recognition of both cultural difference and full citizenship entitlements (overcoming disadvantage) within the Australian nation; and, in the process, transforming it. In Arnhem Land and other remote northern Australian regions the Land Rights Movement has been about more than the legal recognition of Aboriginal land ownership. At its most developed in the Homelands Movement, this struggle has been for the reassertion of Aboriginal life and law on country (clan-based homelands). This is an emphasis on resuming and renewing local practices, while managing the social (rather than material) technologies of modernity with caution. These movements are calling for ‘mainstream’ (dominating culture) understanding of indigenous difference to allow an indigenous modernity to develop relatively free from the intensely destructive stresses of colonial domination. Garma has been a significant instrument in this call.

This essay situates the dynamic but little understood international phenomenon of indigenous cultural festivals in the context of globalization. It seeks to theorize the question of indigenous cultural assertion as both implicitly concerned with questions of rights while embodying performative ethics that at times exceed these discourses. Cultural festivals are one of the few consistently positive spaces for indigenous communities to forge and assert a more constructive view of themselves, both inter-generationally and as part of a drive for recognition and respect as distinct cultures in various local, national and international contexts. This essay argues that cultural festivals provide a potent space for intercultural accommodations to be negotiated on largely indigenous terrain, strengthening indigenous agency and resetting the terms of cross-cultural engagement for at least the
duration of these staged encounters. Cross-cultural performances have long been a part of the repertoire of strategies of indigenous cultural survival and assertion, sometimes even in contexts where those performances are part of the colonial exploitation of culture. In a period of intensified globalization the terms of this engagement are shifting. Indigenous cultural activism is moving beyond an emphasis on contesting the colonizing-national story’s exclusion of indigenous peoples and identities to engaging with an emergent global sphere which simultaneously reinforces specifically local identities and forms of governance. Clearly this is not happening with the same intensity everywhere, and it is certainly not a claim for a homogenizing globalism. However, it argues that cultural performances and celebrations are, among other things, assertions of indigenous power in this shifting context.

Note
The author wishes to acknowledge the ancestral röm-power-manā, generosity and hospitality of the elders, knowledge-holders and peoples whose cultural festivals are discussed in this article. Material quoted is from the public domain. The author worked for the Yothu Yindi Foundation as coordinator of the Garma Forum from 2002 to 2005.

Endnotes
2. The extreme newness of this identity is reflected in the fluid conventions around capitalization of ‘Indigenous Peoples’, ‘Indigenous Australians’, and sometimes even ‘Indigenous’ as proper nouns, as against the lower case ‘indigenous (for example, societies)’ as an adjective. Colloquially, the author has heard some Indigenous Australians referring to themselves as ‘an Indigenous’, extending the proper noun even further.


18. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised and extended edition, Verso, London, 1991. One of the anonymous reviewers of this piece made the additional point that ‘TV audiences learn about the cultural meaning of the hula performance through the commentary by the TV hosts and “cultural expert” Aunty Pua Kanahele.’


20. ibid, p. 2.


23. ibid, pp. 112-6.

24. ibid. p. 116. See also her discussion of the impetus for, ‘Creating a nation in a form familiar to Europe and the United States’ at p. 9 and the ‘emphatically masculine’ nature of those representations at p. 118.


29. Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*.


32. For a rich discussion of the reciprocity see chapter 5 in James, *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism*.

33. ibid, chapter 4.


35. The author worked for the Yothu Yindi Foundation over four years as coordinator of its Garma Forum of Indigenous Knowledge. While informed by that experience, the quotes and information used here are all available in the public domain.

36. The previous Labor Government had legislatively established a statutory body, The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to complete a ten-year process of national reconciliation by the year 2001.

37. As a statutory authority the NLC is responsible for a range of regional Indigenous governance issues including the distribution of mining royalties under the Northern Territory Land Rights Act, 1976.


39. Garma has been held each year since 1999 on the remote Gove Peninsula at a significant site called Gulkula. The site is about forty kilometres from the Gove airport and sits on an escarpment in a stringy bark forest overlooking the Gulf of Carpentaria. Garma involves about 1,000 people; roughly divided equally into Yolngu and non-Yolngu participants gathering at this site for a five day celebration of Indigenous culture. For detailed background to the festival see www.garma.telstra.com/aboutgarma.htm
In August 2007, in the closing days of the Howard Liberal Government, Galarrwuy Yunupingu made a very public switch in position from opposition to the ‘Intervention’ to very public cooperation with it in the form of a very favourable deal for his clan-base township of Gunyangarra. The media widely reported the ‘secret’ meetings of the Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough, and two senior Indigenous figures supporting the intervention (Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton) at Galarrwuy’s house. This moment of divisive political theatre, which was a sharp break of solidarity with the commitments made at Garma weeks earlier, was ironically a further reinforcement of Yolngu centrality in national politics, not least the symbolism of the Minister coming to the Gumatj clan leader to strike a deal. Not surprisingly this incident left many other clans and national indigenous leaders with a sour taste in their mouths. See Lindsay Murdoch, ‘Top leader now backs Territory intervention’, *The Age*, Melbourne, 20 September 2007.

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51. M. Yunupingu and H. Morphy, ‘A Balance in Knowledge: Respecting Difference,’ in Kleinart and Neale, eds, *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, p. 494. The metaphor (and practice) of Yothu Yindi’s music in some ways exemplifies this philosophical-ethical-pragmatic approach to proactively engage Euro-Australian and a wider global modernity. The band Yothu Yindi have combined the technology and musical idioms of western rock, reggae, country and western, and techno dance music with the lyrics and musical styles from popular (and in some cases revived) Yolngu manikay (song). See also Karl Neuenfeldt in Kleinert and Neale (above; p. 742), who writes that Yothu Yindi have successfully combined ‘the business of music and the business of culture’, with the musical and cultural aims complementing one another. This virtuoso cultural hybridism is both a spontaneously creative and generous act of sharing from a confident people secure in their identity, language, land and culture; and the urgent strategic manoeuvre of an otherwise culturally besieged people.

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52. ibid.
51. ‘Country’ in the Aboriginal English idiomatic sense of land to which one belongs, towards which one has traditional obligations, and so on. Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2004.

52. I specify the ‘colonizing-national’ as being the nation-state which continues to strive to actively dominate indigenous peoples; in the case of this paper, the United States and Australia. This is to distinguish it from the powerful identification of many indigenous peoples as being members of nations which never ceded sovereignty such as Hawaiians, and in other cases a re-identification of pre-colonial social units as having the status of nations along the lines of the Native American treaty nations.

53. Dipesh Chakrabarty calls into question the (usually western) assumption of a singular, global, present moment, be it modernity or otherwise; see D. Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002.