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TOWARDS A FURTHER REDISCEPTION OF THE AUSTRALIAN PASTORAL FRONTIER

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This article proposes a reading of Aboriginal agency on the Australian 'pastoral frontier' that departs from some of the conventional interpretative patterns. Such a proposal simultaneously constitutes a reinterpretation of the secondary sources published since the late 1960s, as well as a critical analysis of the historical debates on Aboriginal 'collaboration' and resistance. The pastoral invasion of Aboriginal districts was the major recurrent form of early invasion, and a common pattern of experience has been identified. It goes without saying that, given their provisional character, the following suggestions should be the subject of further investigation.

The notion that Australia witnessed a sometimes determined resistance by indigenous clans trying to repel invasion by now enjoys a wide currency among historians and the general public alike. In some areas, the fierceness of such resistance forced the implementation of conciliatory approaches. Despite recent accusations of inaccuracy, the most valid estimation of the overall casualties of racial warfare proposed so far remains that of Henry Reynolds - approximately 20,000 Aboriginal people and some 2,000 to 2,500 Europeans (including their associates). Figures, as well as sources, sometimes have the power of objectifying word of mouth reportage through print, thus becoming historical 'fact'. Much of the recent historical debate, reflecting this, has revolved around Reynolds' 'computing' achievement.

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Figures aside, the classic, in many ways unsurpassed (and frequently quoted) summary of 'frontier' conflict in Australian conditions remains that of Edward Curr:

In the first place the meeting of the Aboriginal tribes of Australia and the white pioneer, results as a rule in war, which lasts from six months to ten years, according to the nature of the country, the amount of settlement which takes place in a neighborhood, and the proclivities of the individuals concerned. When several squatters settle in proximity, the country they occupy is easy of access and without fastnesses to which the blacks can retreat, the period of warfare is usually short and the bloodshed not excessive. On the other hand in districts which are not easily traveled on horseback, in which the whites are few in numbers and food is procurable by the blacks in fastnesses, the term is actually prolonged and the slaughter more considerable.6

In fact, notwithstanding this nineteenth century narrative, it has been noted that Australian frontiers frequently tended to be much less transitory than the classic American one described by F J Turner.7 In a large part of the Australian continent, the 'frontier line' had passed, the land had been settled, and yet 'frontier' conditions had not disappeared. It has therefore been recently proposed to replace the term with a more appropriate one:

'Frontier' suggests a steadily moving line of violence, with conflict over when the line has passed. In Australia the process of confrontation was more protracted, and very much more confused. Sometimes there was no violent phase at all, and where there was it did not end neatly. Therefore I want to replace 'frontier' with Marie Louise Pratt's notion of the 'contact zone', which is not a moving line, but a social territory.8

While Australian usage thus slightly differs from that of the American, stress is traditionally laid on 'contact' rather than on 'settlement' - and the provisional character ceases to be a prominent feature of the Australian frontier stage. Yet, even if Australian frontiers have tended to be more enduring than American ones, the first opening of the frontier had rarely been particularly difficult. How, then, can such persistence of frontier conditions be explained, when the traditional notions of
Aboriginal helplessness and passivity in preventing invasion are considered - and traditional explanations of a harsh and distant environment are criticised.?

Aboriginal resistance against European incursion was frequently compromised by demographic fragility. Vulnerability of local environments also contributed to the non-viability of Aboriginal traditional economies in this situation. With the drastic reduction of the local fauna, and the depletion or near exhaustion of water supplies by sheep and/or cattle, Aboriginal resistance had to face a situation in which armed protection of traditional areas from invasion could not be generally enforced for sustained periods. The inherent fragility of indigenous economies was a determining factor in shaping Aboriginal choices. As a result, occupation of tribal landholdings by invading parties generally had to be, in the long run, accepted.

The logistical impossibility of maintaining sustained military efforts, and at the same time providing for community needs and traditional practices, usually meant that military activities could not be maintained for long enough to render conquest impracticable. Aboriginal communities faced a situation in which they could not retain 'exclusive' possession of their tribal landholdings.

If Aboriginal clans typically ruled out sustained military action, possession of traditional estates had to be maintained through a successful process of accommodation with white settlers. The degree of limitation of European conquest during the pastoral invasions of Australia was comparatively low when compared to other experiences of the settlement of a European population, and yet, in significant areas, a degree of limitation was clearly established - even if, by its unwritten nature, it rather resembled a truce. The fact that in most areas these balances of power were to be challenged (but only at a much later stage), or that settlers would not ultimately fulfil the terms of the unwritten agreement, does not mean that accommodation and diplomacy had not been successfully attempted. It has been persuasively argued that some sort of mutual unspoken agreement was devised and worked for sustained periods.

Yet extreme difficulty in sustaining military resistance was perhaps not the only determining factor involved in Aboriginal decision making. This article proposes a
reinterpretation of the strategic objectives informing the resistance of indigenous communities on the pastoral frontier (as other types of colonial invasion, and other frontiers such as close agricultural settlement and mineral enterprises, for instance, presented tribal landowners with a completely different set of problems). With the exception of the very earliest phases of contact and settlement, local clans may have come to consider the pastoral stations established in their tribal landholdings as a sort of asset, rather than an enemy or alien presence. The pastoral station provided goods and services that came quickly to be considered as absolute necessities.

It is here worth considering Tim Rowse's analysis of pastoral life in the Kimberley, based on Mary Durack's popular narratives of the pastoral regime. A clear pattern of relationships emerges from these sources: as long as the pastoralist doesn't interfere with tribal affairs and provides suitable rations to the black people, Aboriginal interests are willing to accommodate his necessities, provide labour and accept his patronage. Traditional ritual life endures a process of transformation, to respond to the newly acquired centrality of the pastoral station, and to accommodate the necessities and rhythms of a pastoral economy. Rowse's interpretation of the pastoral frontier, in fact, emphasises Aboriginal achievement, accommodation and consent (and to some degree, a sharing of power). The regime depicted, the Pax Durackia, is one in which Aboriginal and European worlds are rigorously separated - albeit interlinked - and in which, for instance, the traditional life of the local mob and its rites has adjusted to accommodate the life of the pastoral station and its rhythms. Aboriginal hierarchies and identities are protected and fostered, in exchange for labour. Of course, it is not an accommodation between equals, and yet it is a very effective way to enforce customary rites and identities, and with them, survival, persistence and enduring connection with land (and, in the long run, rights to customary property).

As demonstrated by works such as Ann McGrath's and Dawn May's on the Northern Territory and Northern Queensland pastoral industries, this kind of industry and the Aboriginal mode of production were rarely non-compatible. What has proven true for the northern part of the continent may have also been the case in other areas of the pastoral frontier. In the north, the exceptional combination of wealth of evidence, both oral and written, and preserved industrial conditions due to relative lack of economic development may have only made more apparent a situation which
had also existed in other parts of the country. Such a possibility should not be excluded on the basis of mere lack of recorded evidence.

As Inga Clendinnen has recently stated,

[t]he picture of relations between black and white in this country must not be made too bleak. Not all white institutions have been inimical to black interests. For example: right across the North, in a classic colonial paradox, Aborigines became the main custodians of the introduced animals which had usurped their land. The early cattle industry could prosper only because of its low-paid or unpaid black labour. In return Aborigines were able to stay in close contact with their country, received basic clothing and equipment, tobacco and rations for themselves and their closest kin, and, perhaps as important, learnt some new and exciting skills.20

Such a pattern was not confined to the northern part of Australia.21 In addition, it was in existence for a much longer period than merely that of the early phases of the pastoral industry. In the North, this situation was preserved by several factors - among which were the remoteness and relative economic underdevelopment of the area, and a pastoral invasion carried out at a much later stage than in other parts of the continent. This has meant that the accommodation could be recorded much better, and consequently analysed thoroughly, by what is by now a fairly developed historical literature.

But this situation could not simply be the result of a fortunate coincidence, of a compatibility between pastoral and traditional systems that did not require local accommodation. After all, the European economy on the pastoral frontier could have opted for a different kind of workforce than the Aboriginal one: a more stable one, less willing to follow what was perceived as an utterly alien lifestyle - as a matter of fact, pastoralists were also not particularly pleased with the European workforce. In some districts, as a result of Aboriginal strategic approaches, the pastoral invasion - as opposed to attempts to establish a plantation economy for instance - would prove the only viable way to actually 'settle' the country.22 Would-be settlers may have had to prefer pastoralism to other enterprises because of Aboriginal intransigence, as well as
other factors. Aboriginal agency, as well as and perhaps as much as world markets and 'the tyranny of distance', shaped Australia's history. Furthermore, as a result of this voluntary effort in sustaining a pastoral economy, it could be argued that Aboriginal agency promoted the emergence of the conditions that were described in the *Australian Legend*. The centrality of Aboriginal participation in the pastoral frontier, and thus in the context of the whole of Australian history, may need to be thoroughly reassessed.

Here, Blainey's notion of Australia as a "land half won", then, becomes particularly significant. Yet, ironically, the causes that have brought about this situation differ dramatically from those identified by that senior historian, and should definitely include Aboriginal agency. Indigenous resistance and Aboriginal decision making (rather than merely a harsh and hostile environment) should also be brought into the picture, and figure as crucial factors. After all, a 'hostile nature' has always been a suitable scapegoat in the explanation of exotic and colonial failures.

It is useful at this point to quote extensively from Pamela Lukin Watson's surprisingly overlooked work on the early colonisation of the Channel Country in South West Queensland:

On Mooraberrie [station], Duncan [the station owner] listened to tribal elders expounding aspects of Aboriginal Law with genuine interest and respect. [...] Although settlers on the American frontier very often acknowledged Indian ownership of territory, this was not the case in Australia. William Duncan was one of the few exceptions. 'Father believes that it is an uncontestable fact that the Aborigines are the rightful owners', Duncan-Kemp wrote and in conversations with his children, William Duncan sometimes referred to two local elders, Billy-Two and Mary Ann, as 'the landlords'. Speaking on her own behalf, Duncan-Kemp alludes to the Channel Country as Aboriginal land, sometimes writing of squatters as 'usurpers', or 'trespassers'.

Yet, it was not a case of mere symbolic recognition.
At least to some extent, William Duncan adjusted his management of Mooraberrie to reflect this reality. On a practical level, the Duncans accepted the Karuwali decision as to where the Duncan Homestead should be built. They acquiesced too in the right of tribespeople to refuse them access to sections of the property, and in some parts of Mooraberrie the locals posted guards and sentries to warn away whites. For one month of the year, the Duncans could neither use nor visit one section of their property because Kooridala (possibly the group whom Breen refers to as the Mitaka) and other tribespeople were celebrating very secret ceremonies there connected with the moon.

Yielding primacy to native juridical and procedural rules was another way in which the Duncans acknowledged Karuwali rights to the land. Duncan Kemp describes many episodes in which pastoral routines were disrupted or terminated by cultural considerations. Unlike the case elsewhere, these interruptions were never construed as 'blacks being unreliable'. Tribal Law, in particular, presented the Duncans with major problems because sometimes valuable staff members were offenders, and punishments were often severe. Putting prevention first, the Duncans took care that no action of theirs should unwittingly cause one of their staff or associates to break the Law [...] 27

And such an approach would also produce apparent economic advantages:

Duncan-Kemp and her father are two of the few pastoralists who acknowledge in detail the irreplaceable contribution made by the indigenous population to the establishment of the cattle and sheep industry. William Duncan encouraged the family to recite as grace before meals: 'White pioneers, black saviors'. And Duncan-Kemp herself declared, 'the white man explored and pioneered the interior, but it was due largely to the blackfellow that the country was opened up'. 28

In one respect, though, Lukin Watson's analysis might have to be reframed. 'Mooraberrie' (and Lukin Watson's somewhat idyllic narrative) constitute an outstanding exception more because the accommodation between pastoralists and
local clans had been both explicit and conscious, than because other areas did not witness similar agreements. On other properties, the compromise would more commonly be implicit, perhaps largely unconscious on the part of the coloniser, and certainly less comprehensive. However, this does not make such an arrangement any less of an accommodation.

The aim of the resistance of Aboriginal clans would rarely be the exclusive possession of land or the re-establishing of a pre-invasion situation. Clans would rather fight only when compelled to - and with an acute sense of responsibility, often misinterpreted as acquiescence, or a 'sense of defeat'. Their struggle would be waged in order to protect what they considered non-negotiable: the retention of tribal identity through permanence on the land, and the full enforcement of customary law and customary practices within the Aboriginal community. Of course, this is not to say that disruption or a 'sense of defeat' were not present at all. What this article both proposes and stresses is that these were not the only characteristics underlying and determining Aboriginal actions.

Rowse's more recent work on rationing has also shown that the nature of this institution, undoubtedly a pervasive practice in the context of the Australian pastoral frontier, should be reassessed. Rationing became a weapon, which Aboriginal clans used in their struggle for the preservation of autonomy and, in the longer run, non-extinguishment of native title. The possibility of being allocated rations, and at the same time retaining independent methods of allocating resources and formulating policies pertaining to tribal matters, was indeed a positive factor in the move Aboriginal clans made towards the accommodation that took place.

What emerges is a pattern of resistance more oriented towards retention and exercise of control within the Aboriginal community, than towards active resistance against European dominance - a strategy that entailed a rigorous separation between 'blackfella' and 'whitefella' spheres of control. This suggests that Aboriginal clans facing pastoral invasion and its aftermath may have been waging a very peculiar war of resistance. It was a resistance characterised by very limited but nonetheless clearly defined objectives, in which economic non-viability of the pastoral station on the
tribal run was interpreted primarily as a damaging outcome, as an event potentially capable of leading to the breakdown of traditional affiliations.

The practical terms of this accommodation were obviously not static, and were constantly tested and redefined according to shifting regional balances of power and local necessities. Both its unwritten nature and its very localised validity also made it subject to personal choices and attitudes, making it exceptionally difficult for historians to detect. Such an accommodation eventually reached a crisis in many areas of the continent, with the gradual break-up of the great pastoral properties during the first decades of the twentieth century, and the introduction of labour saving technologies in pastoral and rural production.\textsuperscript{31} This renegotiation was also an extremely localised process, and followed a relatively long period of accommodation. The 'second dispossession' was carried out at very different times in different areas, according to local developments, necessities and circumstances - and it has been persuasively demonstrated that the 'second dispossession' was no less brutal than the first.\textsuperscript{32}

If settlers clearly and outspokenly fought for freehold on the land, as sources consistently demonstrate, Aboriginal clans resisting the pastoral invasion of their districts may have fought for something entirely different, in a varied number of ways. One objective, however, has been strikingly consistent in their struggles: retention of tribal access to tribal lands.\textsuperscript{33} If the strategic objectives of the two conflicting sides were so different, relative success of one side may not necessarily mean complete defeat of the other. There was room for accommodation, room between contrasting but also not completely diverging interests. Aboriginal efforts, as well as those of settlers, should be assessed by the extent to which their own aims have been attained. It was obviously a very uneven struggle, but asymmetry of objectives should perhaps be the main and first point to be established.

Aboriginal struggles, then, resemble those of other local communities facing the intrusion of both a capitalist economy and state intervention. This article is not the place to deal with such a wide issue. Yet the literature on this subject is united in suggesting that local responses to outside intervention usually insist on strict
enforcement of local allegiances and identities, and on strict separation of spheres of authority.\textsuperscript{34}

The majority of readings which have been proposed to explain Aboriginal workers' participation in the pastoral industries also require amendment.\textsuperscript{35} The Aboriginal workforce may have accepted particularly harsh conditions (assisting, as a matter of fact, the pastoral industry in its struggle for survival) not simply because local balances of power were against them. In fact, Aboriginal workers often had other options, and could scale down commitments according to their needs and cultural considerations. As already suggested, they may have contributed to the survival of the pastoral industry in order to help their communities retain what was perceived as a viable way of life.

Some of the early anthropological literature is in this respect extremely perceptive. For example, W E H Stanner noted that "there is a sound calculus of cost and gain in preferring a belly regularly if only partly filled for an output of work that can be steadily scaled down", and A P Elkin had defined this attitude as "intelligent parasitism".\textsuperscript{36} While these definitions were formulated in a rather derogatory way, both, nonetheless, acknowledged the intelligence involved in Aboriginal agency. The process of decision-making these anthropologists observed may have been part of a deliberate strategy, a form of voluntary taxation to maintain the viability of pastoral enterprise. Aboriginal workers may have been prepared to accept extremely exploitative arrangements, as a result of their tribal agendas. By doing so, they would also protect the pastoral station, which they perceived as an important asset of their communities, an asset located on their tribal landholdings, which had become a prerequisite for local Aboriginal identities.\textsuperscript{37}

The frequent cases of assistance offered to exploring and overlanding parties should also be seen in the light of inter-tribal politics, and not only as an attempt to get rid of the visiting parties as soon as possible, or, as it has been suggested, as a humanitarian disposition towards invading Europeans.\textsuperscript{38} Having a pastoral station established on one's run rather than on the neighbor's one was an incommensurable advantage in terms of local politics, and would have enhanced the clan's status.
In this context, Aboriginal fighting strategies, as well as Aboriginal 'collaboration', need to be reinterpreted. Aboriginal clans very rarely fought a total war against invading Europeans. Rather, they stubbornly fought to secure for themselves a share in their countries' produce, as well as access to spiritually relevant areas within their tribal landholdings - the main characteristics of tribal rights to property. When they did not defeat the Europeans, even when they clearly had a chance to do so, it may have also been because they did not want to, and not merely because they were not sufficiently organised and prepared, or lacked military coordination (as many European observers believed). The very fact that Aboriginal clans were sometimes able to drive settlers out of their countries should suggest that where they did not, it may have been the result of a strategic decision on their part. Aboriginal clans rarely wanted pastoralists to go. Rather, they wanted them to respect their autonomy in their own matters. And pastoralists initially were often quite willing not to interfere, and to enforce a *laisser-faire* policy.39

If a comprehensive reassessment of the aims of Aboriginal struggles on the pastoral frontier is accepted, the implications are far reaching, and involve what amounts to a paradigmatic shift of interpretation.40 The suggestion here is that Aboriginal strategies of resistance may have been successful to a surprising and still unacknowledged extent: local control of Aboriginal matters, clear separation of European and Aboriginal spheres of influence, and limited but secure access to a range of European commodities and services. These were secured in huge areas of the country and for a protracted period of time.

It is not surprising that nationalistic historical narratives, such as Geoffrey Blainey's - intent on celebrating 'victory against the odds' - should deal awkwardly with the whole of Aboriginal experience in relation to white Australia. This could be the result of both a chronic underrating of the Aboriginal *praxis*, and of the apparent lack of any victory to be celebrated.41 In vast parts of the continent, native title was not extinguished, the land was not settled permanently, the frontier had not been closed, and the Aboriginal 'problem' has remained. This, of course, is so not because native title extinguishment has not been attempted; on the very contrary, it was that Aboriginal resistance had been effective enough to prevent its extinction.
Why has the Australian historiography of race relations encountered so many difficulties in detecting such a situation? Almost by definition, a struggle that makes secrecy its major characteristic (out of necessity, of course, but also as a result of traditional habit and uneven balances of power) is a very difficult one to record. This produces an almost paradoxical situation for the historian: when secrecy is deployed, efficacy, pervasiveness, and success are proportional to elusiveness.\textsuperscript{42} Such a resisting strategy does not need a chain of command, or an articulated and coordinated structure. The vision of the world that constitutes its ideological background is already available in the resisting community, and its activity does not need to be centrally planned and organised. What J C Scott has argued, in the case of peasant societies, about their 'everyday forms of resistance' could as well apply to the resistance of Aboriginal communities on the pastoral frontier:

Everyday resistance may be an aggregate of individual actions, but this is not to say that they are uncoordinated. Here again, a concept of coordination or organisation derived from formal, institutionalised settings is of little use in understanding action in small communities with dense informal networks and historically deep subcultures of resistance to outside claims. […] No formal organisation is created because none is required; and yet a form of coordination is achieved which alerts us that what is happening is not merely individual action.\textsuperscript{43}

The end result of such a strategic approach is that the more this resistance is carried out successfully and comprehensively, the less evidence is left behind, and the less possibility of detection by the opposing side. This is its strength.

Aboriginal behaviour that was not easily understandable as military action was overlooked by even the most attentive of nineteenth century observers; in fact, it has rarely been detected at all. Aboriginal resistance has been traditionally characterised by covert action, rather than by open and challenging behaviour. Armed resistance against pastoralists has been relatively rare, and when it was deployed, it was frequently carried out well outside traditional frameworks.\textsuperscript{44} When confronted with such a 'conspiracy of silence', the Victorian observer had two possibilities. It was either a matter of uncovering its existence and producing the evidence, or being
unaware of its presence - and only suspecting what was going on, without being able to make it explicit. In dealing with Aboriginal actions, most of the sources only display a strong, even if frequently inexplicit, sense of disquiet.45

Historians in their turn have had to deal with this consistent failure to grasp the tactical characteristics of Aboriginal resistance, and with the chronic and permanent inadequacy of European observations of Aboriginal communities. The confrontation between this type of Aboriginal resistance and the European colonising discourse, in the sphere of intelligence, may have been consistently in favour of the indigenous party (of course, such a strategic failure could also be brought about by a vested interest on the behalf of settlers in minimising any resistance at all).46 As well as a strategic incapacity to acquire 'knowledge' about Aboriginal communities, wishful thinking and the exclusion from sight - and consequent elimination from record - could be at work.47 Lack of evidence, the most prominent characteristic of the study of Aboriginal history, would, paradoxically, become the main cue by which the characteristics and effectiveness of resistance could be detected.

Lack of evidence in relation to the praxis of Aboriginal resistance was a result of two convergent and complementary aspects of nineteenth century Australia. Generally speaking, Europeans did not want to see (or did not have the cultural possibility of seeing) strategic thought and coordination behind indigenous decision making, while, on the other hand, Aboriginal resistance endeavored successfully to prevent Europeans from detecting the permanence and importance of traditional structures.48

Tonkinson's 1974 anthropological analysis, of a test case in Aboriginal behaviour, constitutes a clear example of the fact that an apparent incapacity to interpret Aboriginal resistance is not only a nineteenth century problem - or a peculiar feature of settlers' historical narratives.49 Even when the evidence clearly points to the existence of a coherent and developed praxis of opposition - as in the case of the Jigalong Mob in Western Australia - and even when this is fully attested to, and made the subject of anthropologic examination, we witness a refusal to acknowledge Aboriginal resistance. *Aboriginal Victors of the Desert Crusade* analyses a case of Aboriginal victorious resistance (through the upkeeping and adaptation of traditional law in a non-traditional context, after the migration to the mission and Aboriginal
integration in the pastoral economy). This is described at length, and nonetheless the causes that produced such a situation, traditional strength, Aboriginal agency and indigenous strategic approach, are mainly overlooked:

[...]his seemingly [Aboriginal] autonomous control is illusory because government decree could put an end to their present way of life at any time; so far, however, this has not happened. Outside intervention has been minimal and manageable, so the Aborigines have a pragmatic and realistic basis for feeling that as long as they remain at the mission and follow the dictates of the [Aboriginal] Law, they control the powers of self-regulation. They do in fact govern themselves and make their own decisions in what are to them the most meaningful aspects of their life.\(^{50}\)

Effective resistance is in this text identified, recorded, highlighted and described, and yet its deceptive and elusive nature - one of its main characteristics - persists in Tonkinson's examination. And what was happening in the 1960s, in an extremely marginal area of the Western Desert - an area only recently 'settled' - could have happened almost anywhere on the frontier of pastoral Australia. This resistance would not be recorded, and even when observed would not be understood, and (but only at a later stage) would be superseded by other balances of power, other negotiations.

The outcomes of this struggle and the legacy of the pastoral accommodation are to be detected in the survival of Customary Law, in the survival of local identities and allegiances, and most of all, in the survival of native title. After all, the 'Mabo N 2' and 'Wik' decisions of the High Court have only recognised the continuous existence of a specifically indigenous kind of property. It is arguable that these property rights have not reappeared out of the blue, or been reinvented to fit contemporary needs. On the contrary, what was defined in legal terms as native title has been defended throughout the various phases of the history of white/Aboriginal relations.

Hence when, at a later stage, the different Australian States and territories (and later still the Federal Government) attempted to increase their control over Aboriginal lives, and in fact to denounce the previous pastoral accommodation, they had to struggle with a firmly established legacy of a very resilient Aboriginal identity. This
identity had not only survived settlement and dispossession, but had many times accommodated successfully to the new economic and cultural conditions of the pastoral frontier and sometimes reflected the retention of tribal connections with tribal landholdings.51

The end result of Aboriginal agency and European invasion is the 'double occupation', a situation in which traditional landowners were tacitly accorded some (crucial) customary rights on their traditional landholdings.52 It was a situation in which 'symbiotic' relationships had relatively quickly developed between local clans, and the pastoral enterprises based on Aboriginal landholdings. Aboriginal clans had naturally been upset and their lives disrupted by the pastoral expansion (their numbers decimated by both diseases and frontier violence, and sometimes, increased intertribal fighting), but in huge areas of the country and for an extended period of time, their structures remained intact. What is most important, some of these communities were still dwelling on their lands, maintaining connections and performing customary obligations. Such an achievement is a fact still to be fully acknowledged by a historical debate still developing among accusations of 'black armband interpretation' and 'blindfoldness'.53

When the last remnants of this kind of accommodation were finally abandoned, at the end of the 1960s, with the extension of 'citizenship' and full wages to Aboriginal workers, some Aboriginal sources read these developments in a controversial way. Rowse highlights this contradiction in one of his most recent articles:

The alteration of the Constitution in the 1967 referendum is often recalled [...] as the event by which Indigenous people 'got citizenship'. Lovelock's [an old Aboriginal pastoral worker] memories draw on a different oral tradition. His version of that change is a tale of decline: the moment of 'citizenship' is when reserves were closed and indigenous communities, persistent throughout the 'welfare' days, were eclipsed. A lot could be lost if Indigenous people left (or were pushed out of) their communities and began 'escaping notice'.54

Of course 'accommodation' does not mean a 'fair go' - and to describe such a situation, some authors have spoken of "uneven negotiation" and "contested
subjection". However, it seems to me that the elements that should be stressed remain negotiation and contestation, rather than subjection and unevenness. Retention of tribal identity and customary residence (or, of course, the successful establishment of new ones, in a continuous line with traditional custom) signified uninterrupted tribal occupation for indigenous landholders, and then, in a longer (and more contemporary) perspective, the retention of unextinguished native title in parts of the country. Bain Attwood has perceptively stressed the 'revolutionary' nature represented by native title detection in Australia:

the historical changes Mabo portends in the space of Australia challenge a narrative of the nation which has measured its progress relative to an Aboriginal absence or dispossession in that space while simultaneously constructing Aboriginality as the past, and so Aboriginal possession of the land of Australia symbolises for conservatives the end of progress and thus the end of history.56

Nathan Wachtel's concluding words, in his classic work on Peruvian Indians entitled "The Vision of the Vanquished", could be relevant to the description of Aboriginal struggles (and Aboriginal success):

Passive resistance, certainly, by the force of inertia; but that force was deliberate and cultivated, the inertia ferociously defended. Here tradition provided the means of refusal; silent, obstinate refusal, repeated with each new generation. [...] one may even say that this type of revolt, this impossible praxis, has in a way emerged triumphant.57

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1 The literature on the pastoral frontier is by now fairly extended and will be the subject of this article. Two of the most outstanding historical works on this frontier are, D May, Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry: Queensland from White Settlement to Present, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1994; and A McGrath, 'Born in the Cattle': Aborigines in Cattle Country, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987.


3 See, for examples, H Reynolds, The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia, Penguin, Melbourne, 1982, which demolished any notion of Aboriginal passivity; R Broome, Aboriginal Australians: Black Response to White Dominance, 1788-


6 As quoted, for instance, in ibid.


9 See, for a classic example of this interpretative paradigm, D Pike, Australia: The Quiet Continent, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1962.


12 See, in relation to this context, N Loos, Invasion and Resistance, op. cit.

13 H Reynolds's 1972 book's third chapter was entitled 'Accommodation'. Curiously, this interpretation of the dispossession processes almost disappeared from his subsequent works, which tended to underline the degree and importance of Aboriginal military resistance. With the White People would, a couple of decades later, reintroduce this category into the author's interpretation of white/Aboriginal relations. See H Reynolds, Aborigines and Settlers, Cassell, Melbourne, 1972; and H Reynolds, With the White People, op. cit. A later edition of the same book has been published a decade later under the more explicit title of Black Pioneers. See H Reynolds, Black Pioneers: How Aboriginal and Islander People Helped Build Australia, Penguin, Melbourne, 2000.

14 The conclusion of Reynolds' study of Aboriginal Tasmanians resistance is particularly explicit: 'Robinson was negotiating what was, in effect, a treaty. It cloaked the political reality that the colonists had failed to impose a military solution and were forced to offer terms; that after significant negotiation, during which the terms were modified and then accepted, there was then a strong obligation to meet the conditions of the treaty'. H Reynolds, Fate of a Free People, op. cit., p 149.

15 See the argument of Heather Goodall underlining the close causal connection between the depressions of the 1890s and 1930s and attempts at 're-dispossession' of Aboriginal communities. H Goodall, 'New South Wales', in A McGrath (ed.), Contested Ground: Australian Aborigines under the British Crown, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995, p 58. See also Bain Attwood's argument that it was at the turn of the century that 'a new era in relations between Aborigines and Europeans was about to begin, one which would prove to be less personal and consensual'. B Attwood, The Making of the Aborigines, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989, p 134.


17 Such an interpretation follows a consistent line in Australian historiography, and not at all a recently established one. See, for example, the 1958 article by W E H Stanner in which he compared Aboriginal attitudes with 'something like the spice-trade to the mediaevals'. W E H Stanner, 'Continuity and Change among the Aborigines', Australian Journal of Science, XXI, 1958-9, p 101.

18 A McGrath, 'Born in the Cattle', op. cit.; D May, Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry, also op. cit.
19 J Clendinnen, True Stories, op. cit., p 70.
21 For an analysis of the difficulties encountered by European entrepreneurs in their attempts to establish a plantation economy in remote areas (difficulties that would motivate the importation of Kanak Labour from Melanesia) see C Moore, Kanaka, University of Papua New Guinea Press, Port Moresby, 1985.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., p 34.
28 J Critchett's Distant Field of Murder, in spite of being a regional history of the invasion of the Western District of Victoria, provides a clear example of the limitations in the objectives of Aboriginal resistance. This strategy was developed rather to impose a fairer distribution of the land's produce than to enforce the exclusion of pastoralists from their areas. See J Critchett, A Distant Field of Murder: Western District Frontiers, 1834-1848, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1990, especially pp 87, 113.
30 According to anthropologist Barry Morris, for example, the suppression of Aboriginal society had been a three phase process, the first one being characterised by Aboriginal (underpaid) participation in the pastoral industry and retention of traditional subsistence patterns (the second and the third ones consisting in Aboriginal concentration in missions or country town and in expulsion from the pastoral workforce carried out since the 1950s). See B Morris, 'From Underemployment to Unemployment: The Changing Role of Aborigines in a Rural Economy', Mankind, 13, 1983. Incidentally, Dawn May's interpretation of Aboriginal participation in the pastoral economy proceeds along similar lines. See D May, Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry, op. cit.
31 See H Goodall, Invasion to Embassy, op. cit., p x; and part 3; and also J Critchett, Untold Stories, cit, p 111; and p 234. The final crisis in Aboriginal employment in the Northern pastoral industry, a crisis that had begun in the 1950s and had forced many Aborigines off their runs by the end of the 1960s, could be interpreted as a further instance in the process of renegotiation of accommodation on the basis of changed balances of power and changing needs of the pastoral industry.
32 See H Goodall, Invasion to Embassy, op. cit. Ironically, the fact that Aboriginal resistance tended to effectively cover its tracks has created considerable difficulties after 1992 when many Aboriginal communities registered their claims through the native title legislation.
33 Such a reconsideration would be consistent with Marie Fels' persuasive reassessment of the Aboriginal contribution to the Native Police in Victoria. In her work, Aboriginal participation in the repressive institutions of the coloniser is shown as a site for survival and advancement of locally


35 See A McGrath, 'Born in the Cattle', op. cit.


32 Bain Attwood had also proposed a similar interpretative transformation of the cognitive strategies with which we approach the history of Aboriginal peoples, in his critique of 'Aboriginality'. See B Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989.


29 ibid., pp 451-452. 'Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot-dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so forth'. ibid. p 419.


26 The parallel with J C Scott's work on the 'weapons of the weak' is captivating: 'I]t is seldom that the perpetrators seek to call attention to themselves. Their safety lies in anonymity. It is also extremely rare that officials of the state wish to publicise the insubordination. To do so would be [...] above all, to expose the tenuousness of their authority [...]. Thus, the nature of the acts themselves and the self-interested muteness of the antagonists conspire to create a complicitous silence that is reflected in the historical record'. J C Scott, *Resistance Without Protest*, op. cit., p 422.

25 Gillian Cowlishw's *Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas* is of extreme interest to the study of white Australia's representations of Aboriginal people. Her argument is that the differences between the 'redneck' pastoralists and the 'egghead' anthropologists projects were less significant than it is normally assumed, and that both groups were in fact incapable of developing an effective strategy to deal with Aboriginal strategies of outsiders management. See G Cowlishaw, *Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas: A Study of Racial Power and Intimacy in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999.

24 For a critical and comprehensive discussion of the nature of bias in nineteenth century sources relating to racial conflicts, see, J Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1986; and especially pp 311-335.


22 Ibid, p 143.


20 This concept is taken from H Goodall's *Invasion to Embassy*, op. cit., especially 'Part 1' and 'Part 2', and even more specifically, pp 57-72.

29 See, for example, H Reynolds, 'From Armband to Blindfold', *The Australian's Review of Books*, March 2001. Of course, observing that a debate is somewhat sterile does not imply maintaining that both the debating positions deserve and display the same degree of scholarly attention.

