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# Actions, Reactions, Interactions

The Townsville Aboriginal Movement and the Australian State

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**Thesis submitted by**  
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**in July 2010**

**for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the**  
**School of Arts and Social Sciences**  
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Theresa L. Petray

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Theresa L. Petray

(Date)

# Statement on the Contributions of Others

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This thesis was made possible by the following contributions:

## **Supervision**

- Associate Professor Rosita Henry
- Associate Professor Glenn Dawes
- Cultural Mentor: Associate Professor Gracelyn Smallwood

## **Financial Assistance**

- Endeavour International Postgraduate Research Scholarship
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## **Other Assistance**

- Adella Edwards, James Cook University Cartographer, who produced Figure 1.2, my fieldwork map.
- Rachael Cassells and Alf Wilson, who took several photographs which they have kindly agreed to let me reproduce here.

Every reasonable effort has been made to gain permission and acknowledge the owners of copyright material. I would be pleased to hear from any copyright owner who has been omitted or incorrectly acknowledged.

# Ethics Declaration

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The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Human* (1999), the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics. Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001), and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (approval number H 2695).

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Theresa L. Petray

(Date)

# Acknowledgements

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Just as I write about the interconnectedness of social movements with their surrounding contexts, so to am I inextricably connected with those I have been lucky to know throughout my research.

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which I carried out my research, the Wulgurukaba and the Bindal people. More specifically, I am indebted to the generosity and openness of the people who live on that land and allowed me to work with them for my research. It is impossible to name everyone who helped, but I would like to single out Gracelyn Smallwood, Florence Onus, Janine Gertz, Lilian Willis, Stephanie Miller and Jim Gaston. Gracelyn was very generous in the way that she immediately accepted my research ideas and went out of her way to ensure I succeeded. She brought me along to meetings and events and made sure that I met a variety of people. Her enthusiasm for my research was sometimes greater than my own, but luckily Gracelyn's optimism is infectious and I am lucky to have worked with her. Everyone with whom I worked was equally generous with me, and I appreciate all that they have given me for this research. There are no doubt others who I am forgetting in this list, and for that I apologise.

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# Abstract

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This thesis is an ethnographic exploration of the relationship between the Aboriginal movement of Townsville and the Australian state. This relationship is the sum of a number of actions, reactions and interactions between the state and the movement. The thesis rests on the conceptualisation of both the state and social movements as simultaneously structure and agent; that is, both states and movements are made up of individual actors but the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Rather than just being a collection of actors, states and movements are actors themselves. Because the key target of the Townsville Aboriginal movement is the Australian state, the two are inextricably and dialectically linked to one another on a number of levels. This thesis focuses on this relationship from the perspective of the social movement because I acted as a 'critically engaged activist researcher' while conducting field work in Townsville.

I begin my ethnographic analysis at the level of the individuals who make up the social movement. Through conversations with 'activists', I discuss what the term means and how they have come to that identity. In many cases, the activist identity is nurtured through state institutions, suggesting that the Australian liberal democracy is reliant upon public dissent for legitimacy. Next, I examine the ways in which these individuals form groups and networks. The shape activist organisational structures take is heavily influenced by the level of state engagement sought by activists, and unlike some international movements this state engagement is far more important than inter- and intra-movement links. Similarly, the tactical repertoires adopted by the Aboriginal movement are restricted to actions which are recognised as legitimate in liberal democracies, such as petitions and peaceful street marches. This thesis examines these actions, which become ritualised performances directed at a specific audience: the Australian state. Unlike many other

movements, however, the Townsville Aboriginal movement does not operate from a clearly discernible ideological framework. It is sometimes liberal, sometimes radical, more often both, and punctuated by autonomous spaces. I argue that this 'strategic nomadism', in which the movement changes its strategy depending on political and social factors, is a strength because it allows the movement flexibility.

Throughout this thesis, I argue that the Townsville Aboriginal movement and the Australian state are linked in a dialectical relationship. Activists are opposed to the state, but they seek their changes through the state. Moreover, states themselves need social movements to maintain their legitimacy as liberal democracies. This thesis provides an understanding of this dynamic relationship, expanding the conception of both states and movements by social scientists, and offering the Townsville Aboriginal movement an in-depth look at the way it operates.

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