

THE POWER TO FRUSTRATE GOOD INTENTIONS

Or, The Revenge of the Aborigines

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We are all subtly dominated by tacit presuppositions.
—*W. E. H. Stanner*, 1958

A Synopsis

In what follows, I take a mole's view of a large postcolonial problem: the difficulties in the way of keeping cultural differences steadily "in mind"—and the cascading consequences of failure.

The Setting

Toward the end of the 1950s, the anthropologist Joseph Casagrande was moved to assemble a collection of essays, written by ranking anthropologists and focusing not on scientific theories or findings but on their own personal relationships with particularly valued informants. *In the Company of Man* appeared in 1960, and both the title and the tone of the introduction suggest Casagrande had been fired by Edward Steichen's "Family of Man" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955. (The MoMA collection of photographs was then published

as a large, beautiful, and remarkably fast-breeding coffee-table book.)¹ Those radiant photographs assumed that behind trivial variations in color, customs, and costumes, we are brothers (and sisters, parents, children) under the skin. Here is Casagrande's description of an anthropologist's incorporation into the life of "his" tribe: "With luck and in good time . . . his presence will be taken for granted. The people will answer his questions, see that he is fed, invite him to ceremonies. . . . They will laugh at his mistakes and breaches of native etiquette, and they will be amused or perplexed by *his* queer customs"—the anthropologist as charming child.² The relationship between anthropologist and informant is declared not only "unique among the varied forms of human association" but even capable of conjuring away the imperial taint, because it "reverses the power distribution." That relationship is, above all, "a memorable *human* experience, yet most anthropological writings tend to obscure the fact"—as indeed they did in the days before self-implication became the fashion.

Casagrande's sunny introduction does not prepare us for what is to follow, as anthropologists accustomed to writing formal reports wrestle (or refuse to wrestle) with the unfamiliar literary project of looking *at* their informants rather than *through* them. Anthropology—a professional commitment to understanding different others—is always a reckless enterprise; and exposing how it is actually done, more reckless still. Individual contributors admit to loneliness, frustration, and episodes of near-paranoia, while collectively the essays cast a cold light on the weirdness of anthropological endeavor: on the necessarily ambiguous, even anomalous status of both anthropologist and informant, and on the interestingly equivocal nature of anthropology's claim to be a science. Anthropologists must choose to detach themselves from their home societies and to live among strangers for significant periods of their lives. Informants must be ready to talk with these strangers and yet somehow preserve their innocence under interrogation: should they become too analytic or too reflective, they will preempt the anthropologist's role, and their information will be accordingly devalued. Hence the preference, exhibited by several contributors, for naive informants, from lucid children to "chiefs" so tranquil in their authority as to speak without reserve. Other informants are cherished because they are reassuringly grudging; others again, because, having already been detached from the home place, they are ready to talk with their anthropologist as fellow-members of the wider world.³

1. Joseph B. Casagrande, ed., *In the Company of Man: Twenty Portraits by Anthropologists* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960); Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955).

2. In 1960 the masculine pronoun could still be employed with serene inclusiveness, despite the prominence of female anthropologists in Casagrande's America.

3. For the chiefs in the Casagrande collection, see, e.g., Raymond Firth's "Polynesian Aristocrat" and Thomas Gladwin's "Perus"; for the translucent child, Harold Conklin's "Hanunóo Girl"; and for the outsider-insider, Margaret Mead's "Weaver of the Border" and John Adair's "Pueblo G. I." Victor Turner's natural-born outsider, "Muchona the Hornet," is in a category of his own.

In view of the revealed delicacy of their evidential base, these essays display little of the magisterial clarity that many expect of formal anthropological writings—“this is thus and means thus-and-so.” It seems that it is only after the retreat from the field, with inchoate experience pleasantly coagulated into notes and photographs, and at the distance necessary to get a grip on sliding sensations, that conventional levels of coherence can be achieved. But whatever the essays imply about anthropology’s claim to be a science (I for one am persuaded that it is), the Casagrande essays surely demonstrate it to be a literary art.⁴

The Anthropologist

The Australian W. E. H. Stanner was one of the score of anthropologists Casagrande invited to rub margins with luminaries like Clyde Kluckhohn, Margaret Mead, Raymond Firth, Charles Wagley, and fast-rising young stars like Victor Turner. Stanner will be the focus of my inquiry into the precarious science and the subtle literary art of understanding others.

Stanner (1905–81) was a Sydney journalist when he was converted to anthropology by hearing a lecture given by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, founding professor of anthropology at the University of Sydney. Stanner’s apprentice work was directed by Raymond Firth and Stanley Elkin in Sydney, and later by Bronislaw Malinowski in London. Having spent anthropological time in Africa, Papua-New Guinea, and the Pacific, as well as Australia, Stanner engaged vigorously in public affairs: in 1938, the year he received his doctorate, he delivered so powerful a paper before the Royal Anthropological Institute in London on the exploitation and neglect of Aborigines in Australia that he was invited to submit a report to the Australian government.⁵ Stanner had an interesting war, working first in the department of information, then creating and leading a “Bush commando”: an observation unit surveilling great stretches of the north and north-west of the country. Transferred, against his will, into military administration, he climbed fast through the military hierarchy, to retire as a well-traveled and much-consulted lieutenant-colonel. He continued to offer anthropological advice to governments, in the single year of 1947 finding himself called upon to inquire into postwar problems of New Guinea, Fiji, Western Samoa, and East Africa. He also advanced steadily in the narrower world of Australian academic anthropology. By 1959, the year he wrote his “Durmugam” essay, he had “already worked

4. See, e.g., Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” in *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 412–53, for an anthropological performance, and his *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988) for his analysis of other anthropologists’ performances.

5. The gist of the report is given in an article, “The Aborigines,” published in 1938, then reprinted in W. E. H. Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays, 1938–73* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979), 1–22.

in ten countries where some kind of colonial regime controlled a subject people.”⁶ Within Australia, Stanner is best remembered for his five “Boyer Lectures” (Australia’s version of the “Reith Lectures”), delivered over national radio in 1968 and titled “After the Dreaming.” A mordant indictment of the negligence, ignorance, and casual cruelty of white Australia’s treatment of Aborigines since first contact, “After the Dreaming” provided essential fuel for the flare of popular indignation in the early seventies, which transformed governmental engagement with “the Aboriginal problem” from intermittent benevolence to anxious concern.⁷

An impressive career, then—with a kind of influence in high and low places that few anthropologists enjoy. But from 1950 on, and despite his multiplying academic and administrative responsibilities, Stanner redirected what energies he could to the people he had met on his first field trips in the early 1930s: the Aborigines of Port Keats and the people clustered around the settlement on the Daly River about 150 kilometers southwest of Darwin. That is seriously tough territory, especially for an ageing man, but through the years Stanner kept going back. He had his last trip when he was seventy-three, three years before his death.

I have chosen Stanner from the Casagrande field because of his rare mix of academic distinction, administrative experience, political influence, and personal tenacity; because he was confident in the science of his discipline and his own tough-mindedness; and most, because I admire him wholeheartedly.

The Informant

Stanner responded to Casagrande’s invitation with an essay about a Nangiomeri man called Durmugam, met on his first field trip in 1932, last seen in 1958 only a few months before the essay was written, and now, as we are told in a moving postscript, dead. The essay was important to Stanner. When, three years before his own death, he selected eighteen of what he judged to be his most important essays for publication under the provocative title *White Man Got No Dreaming*, “Durmugam, a Nangiomeri” was among them.⁸

Durmugam was not Stanner’s closest Aboriginal friend-informant. Stanner names the artist Pandak, one of the Diminim clan, as having that role. (Pandak

6. Diane E. Barwick, Jeremy Beckett, and Marie Reay, “W. E. H. Stanner: An Australian Anthropologist,” in *Metaphors of Interpretation: Essays in Honour of W. E. H. Stanner*, ed. Barwick, Beckett, and Reay (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1985), 22. This essay offers the best account I know of Stanner’s education and his multiple careers.

7. W. E. H. Stanner, “After the Dreaming” (1968), reprinted in *White Men*, 198–248.

8. Stanner, “Durmugam, a Nangiomeri” (1959), in *White Man*, 67–105. I have chosen to refer to the Durmugam essay as reproduced in *White Man Got No Dreaming* because I will be referring to other essays in that volume and because the only difference between the Casagrande 1960 and Stanner 1979 versions is that the word *aboriginal* acquires a capital *A* in the interim.

gave him the painting Stanner would use for the endpapers of his *White Man Got No Dreaming*.) But it was the Nangiomeri Durmugam whom Stanner chose for this exercise, perhaps because he intuited the challenge of that choice and because he was an intrepid man.

The Performance

Despite having worked with Firth and Malinowski, Stanner seems to have escaped their epistemological and existential anxieties (“who am I? what am I doing here?”), relying instead on his native shrewdness and analytic acuity, and on his journalist’s confidence. He was there; he will tell us what happened. He also had formidable literary muscle, and for Durmugam he flexed it.

Stanner begins with some Firthian scene-setting. We are in an Aboriginal camp on the Daly River, and something is afoot. Naked men smear themselves with bright earth pigments, then drift discreetly away. Women and children drift after them. The young anthropologist hastily secures his stores (he is a careful fellow) and scuttles after them: “I had to cast around a good deal to find the right direction, but eventually the sound of a distant uproar led me out of the savanna and on to the edge of a clearing where I could see more than one hundred men . . . locked in noisy battle.” We are plunged into a Conradian scene of “savage, vital splendour”: painted bodies leaping and twisting, the air lit by flying spears, and everywhere a great clamor raised, less by the warrior combatants than by the hundred or so wildly partisan and highly participant observers.

Hovering on the sidelines, Stanner began to see a pattern in the chaos. Those glinting spears were not heavy iron-bladed spears but light spears, designed to wound rather than to kill. The men had arranged themselves in two fluid lines, one side marked with yellow body paint, the other white; and they were hurling insults as energetically as spears, taking time out for wild face-pullings and rude gestures, including an especially rude one that involved turning one’s back on the spear-throwing enemy. Stanner identified the dynamic of the battle: two matched warriors would engage, attract a train of supporters, and the one-to-one duel would melt into a general melee until other paired champions emerged, to refocus the action and to accumulate their own entourage.

As he came to grasp the form of the action, Stanner’s eyes “were drawn and held by an Aboriginal of striking physique and superb carriage who always seemed pinned by an unremitting attack” and who “seemed, as far as any individual could, to dominate the battlefield.” When the battle died, “as if by agreement” with the sun, that warrior’s spears had penetrated flesh many times, while “after a peerless display of skill and courage” he remained unwounded. And then this “savage incarnate” (“glaring ochre . . . tousled hair . . . the spears”), this splendid fellow (“he stood at least 6 feet 3 inches, and must have weighed a sinewy 180 lb”)

came over to the novice anthropologist, smiled, and “asked me in the most civil way if I had liked the fight.”⁹

So Stanner met Durmugam, and was, understandably, bowled over, especially when Durmugam, after chatting for a while, suggested he should move his camp upriver and closer to his own so they could talk further. (Just how that talk was conducted—with what degree of fluency—is left mysterious, but the language was almost certainly English.) A few weeks later, Stanner would see Durmugam again, this time tenderly supporting a young man through the bloody business of initiation; and again, the ceremony completed, he came to sit by Stanner’s fire, where his direct but thoughtful responses to questions about the ceremony made Stanner hope he had discovered “a new main informant, always one of the most exciting moments of fieldwork”—especially, we want to add, when the informant comes wrapped in such local glamour and yet is so eager for conversation. After that one evening of campfire talk, Stanner moved his camp upriver, and thereafter saw Durmugam nearly every day. Stanner had found the anomalous individual he needed: a man who played his traditional roles with vigor, yet delighted in talking with strangers.

Stanner had need of encouragement. He had gone to the Daly in 1932 because Radcliffe-Brown had decamped to Chicago, leaving him directionless; and another anthropological elder had promised he would find “half a dozen unstudied tribes” of “wholly uncivilised natives” along the Daly: “the unspotted savage,” as Stanner sourly puts it. The advice was sadly out of date. As Lévi-Strauss would find in Brazil, so Stanner discovered along the Daly not savages but a corrupted place two generations deep in postcontact squalor: “a barbarous frontier—more, a rotted frontier, with a smell of old failure, vice, and decadence.”¹⁰ The misdirection would become the more galling because another energetic, ambitious young anthropologist, also with a journalistic background—and in so small a field, his rival—would find very nearly “unspotted savages” in remote East Arnhem Land only three years later.¹¹

Stanner had swallowed his chagrin and settled in to analyzing the corrupted society around him. Over the next years, he would see the dispossession drama replayed in other parts of Australia’s north. He would see the violence, the expropriations, the offhand brutality—the inadequacy of missions and governments to preserve and protect. But he learned something important in those early days along the Daly: that the social disaster had been compounded, even initiated, by Aboriginal choice. Whites had been in the region since the 1870s,

9. Stanner, “Durmugam,” 66–70.

10. Stanner, “Durmugam,” 80.

11. For Donald Thomson’s account of his adventures with the hunter-gatherers of East Arnhem Land and a selection of his stunning photographs, see the beautiful new edition of *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*, ed. and intro. Nicolas Peterson (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2003).

lurching from one failed enterprise to another, and the tribes had left their homelands to find and follow them. Why? In part, Stanner thought, through an innocent desire to see strange sights, but also through a hunger for the white men's goods—tobacco, tea, sugar and flour, iron wares—which had come drifting into their territories through gift or trade. He characterized the stage of the colonial experience enacted along the river in the 1930s as already “a protracted tertiary stage of adaptation,” with “many of the preconditions of the traditional culture—a sufficient population, a self-sustained economy, discipline by elders, a confident dependency on nature”—gone, and along with those preconditions “much of the culture, including its secret male rites.” What remained were “some secular ceremonies, magical practices, mundane institutions, and rules of thumb for a prosaic life”: as he dubbed it, a “Low Culture.”¹² But he grasped as well that, even with traditional culture scarcely more than a memory, and despite the apparent misery of their lives, Aborigines were continuing to pursue their own distinctive way of being in the world.

Stanner also found evidence of a revived ritual cult—hinted at by others, revealed to him by Durmugam. The Nangiomeri had walked away from their own country some time before the turn of the century, first to the gold mine at Fletcher's Gully, and then, when that enterprise failed, to the copper mine on the Daly. Durmugam's mother had died at the mine when he was about five. All he could remember of that time were “endless, bloody fights between the river and the backcountry tribes, and numbers of drink-sodden aborigines lying out in the rain” (82). He was taught nothing of the secret male culture of the Nangiomeri. Then, in his early twenties, he and a few other youths followed the old trade route to the Victoria River, a region as yet less disrupted by the white presence, and there, in Stanner's telling of the tale, he embarked on a quest, seeking out men who could teach him the old wisdom: “On the Victoria, he was initiated into the secret rites of the older men” and introduced to the complex social prohibitions which provided the rites' social and intellectual frame. He also encountered a new cult, “the religious cult of Kunabibi which Sir Baldwin Spencer had noted in 1914,” and believed himself transformed by its ritually invoked experiences. When Durmugam returned, Stanner says, he brought with him “a secret wisdom, a power, and a dream shared by no-one else on the Daly River” (83–85).¹³ Two decades later, on Stanner's second field trip in 1934, Durmugam would give Stanner access to that wisdom, that power, and that dream when he revealed the secret doings of “Big Sunday,” as the cult was publicly known. Bound to secrecy,

12. Stanner, “Durmugam,” 83–84.

13. “The cult of Kunabibi, the All-Mother . . . assumed the local form of the cult of Karwadi, by which name the bull-roarer, the symbol of the All-Mother, had been

known in the days of the All-Father” (Stanner, “Durmugam,” 84). Thus, “Kunabibi-Karwadi.”

Stanner was taken across the river to a secret dancing ground where he saw the devotees in ceremonial action: “They told me I was the only European they had allowed to do so.” Watching, Stanner decided that the cult was taking hold in psychological response to the miserable poverty and unrest of the 1930s: “The cultivation of a great secret and its expressive right was, for Aboriginal men at least, a compensatory outlet” (85).

Stanner did not meet Durmugam again until the winter of 1952, when he was forty-seven. Durmugam, about ten years older, was “white-haired, with failing eyesight, but still erect and still a striking figure of a man.” Around him, Daly River society had changed again. Material misery had alleviated: “The blacks were on wages and very money-conscious.” They were also accumulating possessions (“gramophones, torches, kitchenware, even bicycles”). Meanwhile, “the old men had lost authority,” the “Big Sunday” rites had not been practiced for several years; “many of the young men openly derided the secret life.” And Durmugam was tense. Young men were trying to lure his wives away. When Stanner returned two years later, in 1954, Durmugam still held his women but was even more anxious, and more desolate. He was also increasingly anti-European: “He said several times, almost angrily, ‘the blackfellows have their own laws’” (90–91).

When they met again, in 1958, Durmugam told Stanner, bitterly, that “great shame had come upon him and he would be better dead.” The youngest wife of his four wives, his favorite, had run away with his son by his first wife; a married daughter had been abducted by another man (taking her daughter with her, which suggests a very consensual “abduction”); another wife had been sexually abused by men of an enemy tribe on the grounds that she had seen a sacred bull-roarer in Durmugam’s camp. The accusation of carelessness was insult enough. Durmugam had appealed to the police to fetch his wives back; the police had said no one had broken any European law. He had appealed to his white employer and to the Catholic priest who had earlier served as the local Protector of Aborigines, and they had interceded on his behalf. They had failed. Then, while Stanner was briefly absent from the river, the women were returned and (as Durmugam understood it) the impudent young men were banished from the settlement. But then they were back, more impudent than ever; the young wife had decamped again; and his daughter’s lover was proclaiming he would come and take her whenever he chose.

Stanner had already intervened once in the matter. Now he intervened again, in part because he feared intertribal violence, but more, as he explains, because “Durmugam’s natural rights had suffered [and] the injustices were compounding.” Stanner reminds his readers that “there is such a thing as Aboriginal customary law”; that the law “has *in part* broken down” [Stanner’s italics], but that now the law must be enforced. Why? To alleviate the suffering of men like Durmugam: “Old contempt and new solicitude have a common element: a kind

of sightlessness towards the central problems of what it is to be a blackfellow in the here-and-now. . . . For this reason hundreds of natives have gone through, and will go through, the torment of powerlessness which Durmugam suffered” (92–93).

The last three pages of the essay report the old man’s death and Stanner’s response to it. Durmugam died in the Darwin hospital of inoperable cancer; having accepted baptism, he was buried in Catholic ground at Rapid Creek. Stanner reports these facts, then launches into a long, lovingly detailed description of a traditional burial Durmugam had attended twenty years before. (There had been none since.) This was the ceremonious interment his friend had deserved. In those last three pages Stanner makes the point twice: “In other circumstances this would have been done for Durmugam”—and again: “No doubt all this would have been done for Durmugam had things worked out differently” (103–4).

Thus Stanner ends his story of the friendship between an anthropologist and his informant. The essay is eloquent, moving, passionate. It also raises a host of unsettling questions about the pitfalls along the way of understanding others.

Continuity and Change

In 1958, the year before he wrote the Durmugam essay, Stanner delivered a presidential address to the anthropology section of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Science—the Discipline Assembled. He titled it “Continuity and Change among the Aborigines” and chose it for inclusion in the *White Man Got No Dreaming* selection.¹⁴

His first target was the ignorance and the complacency of administrators who kept pursuing a policy of assimilation because they refused to acknowledge, or even to notice, the “primary reality”: that Aborigines are different from us and, wherever they can, will make life choices different from ours. “There is a vast area of Australia,” he said, “where Aboriginal life is not what it was and never will be again”; nonetheless, “wherever any considerable body of Aborigines are left, and live together, they are living a life of their own.” His conviction was grounded not on hearsay (a slap at the desk men) but on experience: “Speaking only of places and people I know well . . . those Aborigines I know seem to me fundamentally in struggle with us. The struggle is for a different set of things, differently arranged, from those which most European interests want them to receive.” He then identified the apparently inexhaustible source of administrative error: “We keep on confounding our perceptual routines of mind with some sort

14. Stanner, “Continuity and Change among the Aborigines” (1958), in *White Men*, 41–66. Presidential addresses are usually sedate, even soporific affairs, but in this one Stanner set about it with a vengeance.

of absolute social reality. We keep on with a presupposition that our styles of life have a natural virtue; and with the folly that an exact knowledge of the facts is a luxury and not a necessity of policy and Administration.” The “fact” that mattered now and that had to be recognized was the restlessness, materialism, and opportunism of the younger Aborigines. He disliked it. But it was the new reality and he refused to deplore it, deploring instead the lack of “competent scientific inquiry [into] the states of mind, the grievances and aspirations of those young men and women.” It is for anthropologists “to bring into focus the structure and quality of the life . . . going on between the two worlds” and then for administrators to respect the anthropologists’ “fact-finding methods and reasoned counsel.” Anthropologists should shape policy, as he himself had shaped policies beyond Australia (42–44).

Stanner proceeded to a brilliant critique of the naive “progressivist” account of the colonizing process, a critique still relevant today: “Our models of explanation have been based either on the dramatic secondary causes—violence, neglect, disease, prejudice—or on the structure of Aboriginal society, or both.” That structure, he added, has been “depicted as so rigid and delicate, with everything so interdependent, that to interfere with any part of it—say by fencing off the hunting territories, or by prohibiting ceremonies—is to topple the whole, in rationale, design and structure.” These assumptions were, as they remain today, far too simple: “There is at least some evidence which allows one to say that here were a people exploring a potential of their structure, a people taking advantage of its flexibility.” He pointed again to his experiences on the Daly in the 1930s, and to the ingenuity and zest with which “the encroaching myalls” chose to “use every claim of right they had—kinship, affinity, friendship, namesake-relationship, trade partnership—to get and keep a toehold [in] European sources of supply and work.” And so they were continuing to do. Stanner’s Aborigines were not victims but agents struggling with “drive and vitality” to continue to live as Aborigines alongside, and if necessary in defiance of, the whites on whom they were now dependent (47–48). Stanner also specified the ethical principles that must always override mere expediency in administrative action, and these focus on the discreet use of power: “The principles are clear. Is this use of power arbitrary? Is the decision just? and is it goodneighbourly?” He recalled, briefly, the situation in the 1930s, with the “High Culture of tradition” gone and only “‘rules of thumb for a prosaic life’ surviving”; he recalled the abortive effort to “reconstitute the High Culture” through the revival of the Karwadi/Kunabibi cult. Now, twenty-five years further on, after the disruptions of war and of the new prosperity, the cult was derelict and there was “conflict and confusion” everywhere.

It is here that Durmugam makes a brief appearance as a symptom of that “conflict and confusion”: an unnamed “old man,” once “the most feared and influential in the region” but now “derided,” with a wife run away with his son by

another wife, and another son assisting in the abduction of a daughter (61–62). Stanner presents this ugliness as the face of the future: “Nowhere, as far as I am aware, does one encounter Aborigines who want to return to the bush, even if their new circumstances are very miserable. . . . the one thing that seems to continue is the effort of the restless, if baffled, Aborigines to work out terms of life they know how to handle.” Those terms must be “still fundamentally Aboriginal in type,” and Stanner urged his colleagues to search for them in the vision of life informing the “Dreaming.” Now that “the traditional way of life has vanished,” he said, “. . . the fundamental [metaphysical] plan will have the strongest continuity of anything in that life” (49, 62, 65).

Thus Stanner nailed his formidable colors to the anthropological mast. Roundly rejecting the simplistic notion that there can be only two options for solving “the Aboriginal problem”—“the methods of the past and assimilation”—he demanded instead “a policy based on a real knowledge of what is taking place among the modern Aborigines, not a *mystique* about their imaginary future” (54–55). For Australia (and possibly anywhere) at that time, Stanner’s conceptualization of “culture” was admirably dynamic and present-minded: rejecting nostalgia, focusing squarely on the Now.¹⁵

Stanner also had subtle things to say about change and about history, mainly in work regrettably left unpublished. In a preface written four years before the Durmugam essay for a planned book on “social change,” he refined that chronically evasive term by distinguishing four elements within the concept: “continuity, a damping down of change, a resistance to change, and change itself.” History and anthropology were therefore complementary: if history was “the narrative of how one thing leads to another,” anthropology was the study of “the constants which persist when one thing *is* leading to another. . . . Anthropology postulates change, and, mainly, studies continuity. History postulates continuity and, mainly, studies change.” He therefore looked toward a new “social history” to identify “the persistent relationships which impose limits and directions on what change can be in a particular society.” In a letter to an ex-student, written in 1959, Stanner also displays the sophistication of his understanding “on the ground” when he describes as “predictable” the unhappy division among the Port Keats people between “the modernists who can’t catch on to the formless new, traditionalists who can’t let go of the deformed old.”¹⁶

15. Here is Stanner five years later, with his theory of what he called “operational anthropology” now more clearly formulated: “The general idea of studying human affairs as a dynamic or developmental structure of operations, exemplified in transactions about things of value, has a higher utility and a greater potential than the idea of a persisting of enduring relations between persons in roles. . . . An ‘operational’ anthropology would substi-

tute a study of real relations—giving, taking, sharing, loving, bewitching, fighting, initiating—and to make human sense of their cultural varieties.” W. E. H. Stanner, *On Aboriginal Religion*, Oceania Monograph 36 (1963, Sydney: University of Sydney, 1989), 103–4.

16. I am indebted for this essential material to Barwick, Beckett, and Reay’s fine biographical essay, “W. E. H. Stanner,” esp. 26, 32.

Analysis

So, at last, to the puzzle. By the mid-1950s, Stanner had reached an enviably nuanced and unsentimental understanding of the complexities of cultural change, spelled out in that tough-minded presidential address of 1958; yet in that same year he was urging white authorities to enforce an otiose traditional law on a recalcitrant people. Why? What had happened to his sympathetic recognition of the necessary conflict between “the modernists who can’t catch on to the formless new [and] traditionalists who can’t let go of the deformed old”? Those insights were abrogated by his intervention in the Durmugam affair, and his intervention was no mere gesture: while he claimed to have intervened “without much hope,” he followed the matter up when he was briefly in Darwin, and by the late fifties the Stanner guns were heavy caliber.¹⁷ He had publicly acknowledged the death of the “traditional way of life,” acknowledged the shocking vitality of the new—yet his old friend’s humiliation led him to actions that ran counter to his social analyses and to his declared ethical principles. For surely this reaching of white power into black affairs was arbitrary and (if we rough-count the numbers involved) a very long way from “good-neighbourly.”

This attack of intellectual incoherence in an unusually clearheaded man exposes a small shoal of problems. Most obviously, there is an unexamined notion as to what “right law” is and how it might be legitimately enforced.¹⁸ Stanner acknowledged that Durmugam’s “traditional” methods of enforcement—physical strength, authority gained through secret knowledge, collective male interest in the control of women—had evaporated in the sun of the new prosperity. Nonetheless, in this instance, Stanner wanted “traditional law,” here identified as “right law,” resuscitated and enforced over a people now living a quite different life, and he wanted it enforced by white power: a power he had earlier insisted must refrain from crass interference in the evolving ways of “being Aboriginal.” (Stanner would soon engage in the legal struggle to protect Aboriginal claims to secure ownership of reservation lands, but there his aim was the extension of white property laws to safeguard Aboriginal interests, not the replacement of white law by traditional law.)¹⁹ He also abducted a cherished notion from his own culture when he invoked Durmugam’s “natural rights.” He did not say what these rights were or how they were grounded, nor why similar rights did not extend to the young Aboriginal men and women seeking their future. Instead, he justified his intervention as helping to avert (deliberate, chosen) violence among angry men moved by tribal loyalties, while he knew the delinquent women would be beaten, and beaten often, with not the least choice in how matters were settled.

17. Stanner, “Durmugam,” 94.

18. On the distinctiveness of cultural perspectives on law, see, e.g., Clifford Geertz, “Local Knowledge: Fact and Law in Comparative Perspective,” in *Local Knowledge*:

Further Essay in Interpretive Anthropology (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 167–234.

19. See, e.g., Barwick, Beckett, and Reay, “W. E. H. Stanner,” 42.

We have to notice that, throughout both essays, Stanner remains implicitly dismissive of any notion that women might have any rights, in the sense of a socially guaranteed area of choice, over anything at all, including the disposal of their own bodies. They barely figure in the early accounts, and when they do they are represented as opportunistic, greedy, and properly under the control of men. Stanner tells us, confidently, that during the thirties Aboriginal women could be bought for “a fingernail of [tobacco] or a spoonful [of tea]”; that women, married or single, “were eager for association with Europeans and Chinese.” He adds that “their menfolk . . . not only did not object but often pushed them to such service,” and we are left to wonder about the nature and the need for those “pushes.”²⁰ Throughout, the defining characteristics of what it is to be “Aboriginal” remain for Stanner exclusively male. It is impossible to imagine him discerning any of Durmugam’s perceived qualities—dignity, honor, spiritual passion—in an Aboriginal woman, and he betrays not the least doubt that Durmugam’s runaway wife and daughter must be forced back into servitude to save an old man’s pride.

Different understandings of “right law” (which means different understandings of everything) have been a large stumbling block in the path of a decent reconciliation between white and black Australians since the time of first contact: a stumbling block too often obscured by clouds of smoke-machine rhetoric. Meanwhile, selective tenderness for an idealized “traditional law” has remained influential in Anglo thinking about Aborigines—with socially disastrous results. Out of a small legion of references, I offer only one: Joan Kimm’s *A Fatal Conjunction: Two Laws, Two Cultures*, in which Kimm explores the remarkable tenderness some white (male) judges, and the legal system more generally, extend to black male offenders for violent crimes against black women. The violence, despite more than two hundred years of eruptive change, is sanctified as “traditional.”²¹

Stanner’s thinking continues uncharacteristically muddy as he struggles to define Durmugam’s relationship to his own tribal society. At times, he is represented as “an unusual man in unusual circumstances”; at other times, as exemplary both *of* his people (“a blackfellow in the here-and-now”) and *for* them. He is a man who “represented and embodied all the qualities that blacks admire in a man”—a man who “after his death . . . will be spoken of as a ‘big man’.”²² And all

20. Stanner, “Durmugam,” 85.

21. Joan Kimm, *A Fatal Conjunction: Two Laws, Two Cultures* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2004). Stanner’s selective blindness in this matter may have been part of what Tim Rowse has called “the gratuitous identification with aged male authority” among the older generation of male anthropologists. Tim Rowse, “Strehlow’s Strap: Functionalism and Historicism in Colonial Ethnography,” in *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, ed. Bain Attwood and

John Arnold (Bundoora, Australia: La Trobe University Press, 1992), 88–104, esp. 93–96. Strehlow’s shifting conceptualizations of “traditional authority” and his own intimate relationship with it are delicately traced by Barry Hill in his superb biography of Strehlow, *Broken Song: T. G. H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

22. Stanner, “Durmugam,” 92, 98.

this emphasis on ideal normativity comes after Stanner has persuaded us that in sacred or spiritual matters Durmugam was unique, nurturing “a secret wisdom, a power, and a dream shared by no-one else on the Daly River” (83–85). Meanwhile, in the long-running affair of the runaway wife, Durmugam enjoyed the support of his own and some of his wife’s kin, but beyond that inner circle Stanner reports “mixed feelings, perhaps mainly cynical amusement,” with “some of the young bloods delighted” (84, 91). And we are left wondering just how local Aboriginal society viewed him. As a “big man”? Or as a foolish old one?

There are also troubling opacities in Stanner’s account of Durmugam’s interactions with the Europeans living along the river. Stanner introduces Durmugam as “the man believed by Europeans to be the most murderous black in the region”; then, immediately, he is redefined as a worker especially valued by whites for his physical strength, his reliability, and his steady good temper (we are told his “white” nickname was “Smiler”). Much more consequentially, Stanner identifies one white farmer as Durmugam’s particular patron. It was a relationship of long standing. Durmugam had worked with the man in a variety of trades (mining, sleeper cutting, building) elsewhere before following him back to the Daly in the twenties; Durmugam and his wives were camped on “his” land; Durmugam had appealed to him for assistance in the affair of the runaway wife. And that is all we hear of this interesting fellow. The Durmugam we are permitted to see is defined solely in terms of his interactions with Stanner.

And there, Durmugam’s conduct does not fit the Stanneresque “type” of Daly River Aborigines at all—those men and women who lived by extortion, with their importunings “as peaceable and persistent as running water” (74). Stanner tells us that he had been given the status of Durmugam’s wife’s brother (83). He has already explained the usual strategy behind such “adoptions” of white men: to gain reliable access to their goods. Yet Durmugam asked no benefits from Stanner, nor any compensation for their hours of talk and companionship beyond an occasional twist of tobacco “when he had run out”—the implication being that the tobacco was for his own immediate personal use, not for wider distribution (Durmugam, in other words, was not “battening”). Even more mysteriously: despite their formal kin relationship, despite Stanner’s solitariness, despite local customs and local aspirations, “Durmugam did not offer his women to me on any occasion.” And we ask (though Stanner does not), “why not?” Had he once offered Stanner a woman and been decisively rebuked, we might understand. But never to have offered one? And never to have asked for rations, hatchets, alcohol? Where is this “traditional man’s” duty to his dependent kin? Yet these omissions—these offenses against what Stanner has claimed to be traditional tribal practice, and also against the new techniques of accommodation to colonial reality—do not puzzle Stanner at all. Instead he takes them as a mark of Durmugam’s personal dignity and as a tribute to his own: a manifestation of honorable male friendship, Anglo-style.

To further dramatize Durmugam's virtues, Stanner sets up a sustained comparison with another man he had known even longer, the Murinbata Tjimari, nicknamed "Wagin." Wagin had some of Durmugam's external attributes. Although "half [Durmugam's] size," he was as formidable a fighter—but only because he dodged so artfully. He was more applauded as a dancer—because he played to the gallery. He was, in Stanner's opinion, "a liar, a thief, an inveterate trickster, a tireless intriguer . . . an arch-manipulator, with wit and charm but no principles, and ready for any villainy that paid." Stanner also thought him a troublemaker, playing black against white and using the knowledge he had acquired through personal experience of court and jail "to instruct other blacks in the limits of police powers." We might think that this experience would make him exactly the right man for "the welter which contemporary life had become," given that flexibility and opportunism were now prime virtues, and that techniques for bamboozling intrusive white police had become a large social asset. But for Stanner, Wagin remains a thoroughly reprehensible fellow. Stanner informs us, sardonically, that Wagin would later become "the friend and confidant" of another white Australian, "who greatly admired his intelligence, knowledge, and imaginative gifts, but took a somewhat sentimental view of other aspects of his character." The implication is that the second man was deceived, and we wonder if he was. We also wonder what it would mean to be deceived in these circumstances (72–74). As for the Karwadi-Kunabibi cult in its brief heyday: a more skeptical observer might have dismissed it as a brittle pastiche concocted by a handful of men yearning after a vanished status—or else, given the long presence of missionaries and that abrupt elevation of the "All-Mother," a skeptic might have scanned it for Catholic resonances. Stanner will have none of that, insisting that the cult he saw practiced in 1934 was no postcontact deformation but an authentic continuation: "A complementary idea which was beautifully appropriate, socially and psychologically—the idea of the All-Mother—to continue where the All-Father had failed." He declares the cult's theme to be "reconstitutive, not revolutionary or millenarian," and exults in its purity: "Still no prophetic element! Still the guiding conception of continuity with the Dream Time!"²³

Yet even in Stanner's resolute account, we glimpse another Durmugam and can construct our own provisional alternative biography out of the glimpses. Displaced from birth, his kinsmen indifferent to their heritage, Durmugam had sought sacred knowledge from anyone who would teach him, his dogged pursuit of a phantom "High Culture" fed by a conscious sense of personal deprivation. In the violence of the thirties, he had accumulated prestige as a fighting man, but that prestige drained away as (for whatever reason) he refused to function as a conduit between resource-rich whites and his own dependents—refused even to

23. Stanner, "Continuity and Change," 61; Stanner, "Durmugam," 85.

offer advice on how to handle whites. How could so strange a man be “representative” of his people? Meanwhile, we notice, if Stanner does not, Durmugam’s readiness to exploit his white connections for his personal interest. When age had robbed him of the strength to punish physically, Durmugam turned not to his own male kin but to his white employer, the white missionary, the white police, and finally to his fortuitously arrived and powerful white friend Stanner (“he [had] developed . . . the idea that I was ‘boss’ of all the soldiers he saw”). Durmugam was determined, indeed eager, to invoke their outsiders’ authority to coerce not only his fellow tribesmen but also his own immediate family—something people of Aboriginal descent remain loath to do today.

If Wagin provides the overt contrast to Stanner’s Durmugam, he also opens the way for a continuous covert contrast, this one between Durmugam and all other Aboriginal men we see in action: “Durmugam had a feeling for the truth, whereas Tjimari [Wagin] had none . . . his probity of mind made him invaluable on matters of theoretical insight. Unlike many Aborigines he had great mental stamina.” And so Stanner continues, enthusiastically, while we subdue a fugitive thought that surely an initiated man ought not be quite so forthcoming with his secret knowledge.²⁴ Throughout, Stanner’s use of the key term *Aborigine* wobbles between two polar meanings: on the one hand there is the mass who have accommodated to change (bicycles, gramophones, “importunities . . . like running water”), and on the other hand there are the tiny few who, like Durmugam, have remained aloof, seeking to retrieve a world still glimmering on the edge of memory.

Clear-thinking Stanner appears to be performing a remarkable soft-shoe shuffle, as Durmugam, that part-time, self-created “traditional man,” transforms into an exemplar of “a blackfellow in the here-and-now”—one whose broken system of traditional law must nonetheless be repaired, and repaired by white intervention. What is happening to Stanner’s thinking here?

On “Character”

The classicist A. D. Trendall, writing an appreciation of Stanner after his death, summed up his old friend:

He brings to my mind something of the character of an ancient Roman, for he possessed to a high degree those qualities which the early Romans greatly esteemed. Not least of these was *gravitas*, the full meaning of which cannot be adequately conveyed by any single word in English but which signifies that seriousness of demeanor which is the outward token of a steadfast purpose.²⁵

24. Stanner, “Durmugam,” 90.

25. Arthur D. Trendall, foreword to Barwick, Beckett, and Reay, *Metaphors of Interpretation*, ix.

These are precisely the qualities with which Stanner endowed Durmugam: a seriousness of demeanor signifying “steadfast purpose,” coupled with a lofty resistance to change. Stanner, normally so sensitive to the multiple undertows swirling beneath that simple one-syllable word *change*, here sets an immovable rock called “character” in its midst. Durmugam, possessing character, is impervious to change; Wagin, lacking character, spins with every current.

Throughout his narrative, Stanner discerns in Durmugam gentleman-like qualities—he is reticent about sex, women identified as defective social and moral beings, exalting the role of ageing males in sustaining an untroubled social order—which Stanner implies are universal but which look decidedly British to me. We have been told how Durmugam was viewed by his fellows: as a man with a “hot belly,” dangerously jealous of his rights.²⁶ Stanner presents this insiders’ assessment, but then immediately sets it aside to replace it with his own: “His face suggested rather dignity, strength, and self-possession. While in no sense stony, it was not kindly. There was no trace of brutality or coarseness, but not of great sensibility either—simply a calm, strong face without any excess”—and so, fulsomely, on. And as we stare through the mist of words, the familiar face of a British gentleman looks back at us from the page (and, behind it, the equally familiar lineaments of a noble Roman).

Stanner tells us, briskly, that during the year of their last meetings Durmugam was losing his singularity, spending his days gambling and asking Stanner for money. By so doing, Durmugam ought to have lost his exemplary status for Stanner, while reinforcing his typical or illustrative status for us. (*Exemplary*: fit to be imitated”; *typical*: illustrative, serving as a warning”—as my *Concise Oxford* puts the distinction.) But character is forever. On Durmugam’s behalf, Stanner resists a conclusion he drew readily about other men—men like Wagin, who had also gone through the “transformative experience” of initiation forty years before but who now behaved in ways found morally and aesthetically repellent. We are thrust into a mirror-maze where men (the cards are different for women) sit shuffling their particular cultural packs, then fan the cards to find a match.

There is a serious problem here. Some preliminary attribution of character is essential if we are to establish terms of engagement with a stranger, yet the attribution can only come out of our own preexisting cultural repertoire. A negative characterization can kill curiosity, as with Wagin (why did Stanner not investigate how Aborigines saw trickster figures?). A favorable initial character-

26. For an elegant investigation into Aboriginal understandings of “the person,” see Basil Sansom, “The Past Is a Doctrine of Person,” in *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, ed. Jeremy R. Beckett (Canberra: Aborigi-

nal Studies Press, 1988), 147–60. Sansom’s primary subject for contemplation, Ol’ Luke, was also a Daly River man.

ization can create the climate for intrepid exploration, but we must not linger in that initial phase too long. It is difference we are seeking, not confirmation.²⁷

Implications

Too much brooding on the Stanner/Durmugam relationship can make anthropology seem little more than the product of the accidental collision of biographies. Stanner, relinquishing his hopes for “unspotted savages,” had resigned himself to the melancholy colonial reality of the Daly. Then came Durmugam, in his glorious prime and his warrior fig, defying time, asking no favors, and as eager as his anthropologist to fathom the shape and meanings of a “High Culture” disrupted before he was born. With his appearance (I am tempted to say *apparition*), Stanner’s arid field was suddenly revealed to be rich and deep, especially after Durmugam chose to open its secret ceremonial life to him. Then came those seventeen years of separation: years in which Stanner transformed from novice anthropologist to a man of power in academic and administrative affairs. Returned to the Daly Aborigines, he recognized that the confused contest between the impulse to change and the impulse to remain the same was a consequence of inexorable workings of history. Nonetheless, the contemporary fascination with material things—their choice of tea and tobacco, bicycles and gramophones, over the physical austerities, the intellectual athleticism, and the self-transcending mysteries of the old ways—offended his fastidious spirit. Durmugam’s obstinate resistance to the loss of that lost world hinted that resistance might yet be possible, at least for a remarkable man. Then, through that last year of their meeting, Stanner had to watch as the final vestiges of strength, authority, even a confident sense of self, seeped from his old friend—and this when Stanner himself was fifty-three, an age when we become attentive to the diminutions inflicted by passing years. Despite his resolute clear-sightedness, despite his sturdy recognition of “the vital will of the blacks to make something of the ruined life around them” as they struggled to create new cultural forms, the parable underlying Stanner’s account of his friend’s decline is a familiar one: the once-noble man sitting by the ashes of his campfire, his wives fled, his sons contemptuous, robbed of his rightful authority by the malice and ingratitude of the young. In Stanner’s refracted image, Durmugam the Nangiomeri looks very like an Antipodean Lear. With the drama cast in those familiar terms, Stanner

27. I say this with some feeling because, for a time, the *gravitas* image blinded me to the ecstatic dimension in the Aztec warrior experience. See Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

was moved to intervene in what his own intellectual analysis demonstrated to be a lost cause.²⁸

Stanner was uncomfortably aware of the perplexing doubleness of the roles he assigned to Durmugam: the “unusual man in unusual circumstances” who nonetheless “embodied all the qualities the blacks admire in a man” and who “came to good terms with Europeanism, but found it saltless all his days.” He briefly tried out the idea of “benign dissociation” to capture that doubleness, then let it drop, instead casting Durmugam as a man consciously engaged in translating between “an oafish Europeanism and an Aboriginal idealism,” with the translation performed not by anthropological vocation but by existential necessity.²⁹ In matters relating to Durmugam, and only in those matters, the conceptualization of culture framing Stanner’s analysis slides from one of dynamism to one that looks very like Ruth Benedict’s famous clay cup: unique, god-given, fragile, but with enough of the shards surviving to be collected and restored by ceremonious action and wistful memory.³⁰

As for Durmugam: he can be recast as a man who chose to transcend a miserable reality (those drunken Aborigines lying in the rain) by consciously transforming himself into a “traditional man”—first by seeking out esoteric knowledge and ritual experiences, then by passionate reflection on those experiences. Those reflections must have been largely solitary until the young anthropologist arrived, alert, curious, and as eager as Durmugam for serious talk.³¹ That revision of Stanner’s “Durmugam” might suggest a further refinement in his notion of culture, for there is a discontinuity or contradiction between culture understood as the presence of the past in taken-for-granted ways of being and Durmugam’s style of “sustaining tradition” by an effort of will. Durmugam’s self-consciousness, his intellectualization of his situation, was deeply attractive to Stanner. Simultaneously, these qualities condemned Durmugam to social isolation and so to social impotence. It is possible that Durmugam’s misery was Stanner’s fault, after all.

28. Contrast the delicacy and discretion of James B. Watson’s compassionate but distanced analysis of Bantoa, another man caught betwixt-and-between: “an ‘opening man’ . . . ironically unable to open any of the doors he so hopefully tried for himself.” James B. Watson, “A New Guinea ‘Opening Man,’” in Casagrande, *Company of Man*, 128–73, 171.

29. Stanner, “Durmugam,” 97, 98, 101.

30. Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), epigraph.

31. The tempting comparison is with Victor Turner’s “natural theologian,” the Ndembu Muchona, but Stanner lacked Turner’s insight into his relationship, and Durmugam lacked Muchona’s élan. Turner, “Muchona the Hornet: Interpreter of Religion,” in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 131–50, esp. 136–39; first published in Casagrande, *Company of Man*.

Conclusions

How much ought we to make of these lapses in what might be called the visible logic of Stanner's thinking? Does the captivation of the imagination entail the betrayal of the scientific ideal, as some evidence in this case implies?

Céline wrote somewhere: "All that matters happens in the shadows. We know nothing of the real history of mankind." But what is it that transpires in the shadows? The impulses of the affective and the sensuous life? The inner life of the imagination? Kenneth Read's *The High Valley* appeared only six years after the Casagrande collection but is a world away in its awareness of the emotional nexus between anthropologist and subjects. Read's mode of attachment to his chosen people was a kind of generalized sensuousness. He knew the succor he could draw from the line of a shoulder, the curve of a lip, the warmth of his new friends' startlingly comprehensive hugs (these could include affectionate grabs for the genitals).³² Stanner was much less aware of the hive of unexamined notions and feelings buzzing behind his practiced skepticism. Nonetheless, the idea of Durmugam had captivated him from their first meeting and gained in intensity and complexity thereafter. Stanner was haunted by an unstained vision of the physical hardihood, intellectual sophistication, and spiritual exuberance of the "Traditional Aborigine."

Surprisingly, given his resolute worldliness, Stanner was a superb analyst of Aboriginal ceremonial performance. The captured imagination can open a way into the zone of shadow where defining emotional and intellectual events happen. Consider this fragment of Stanner's account of the Murinbata version of the Karwadi bull-roarer ceremony, where he traces the sensory experiences, electric with social meaning, built into the fluent choreography:

The [initial] formation is one in which physical association is intimate. The men sit flank to flank, with knees often crossing, and with arms often flung around the shoulders of neighbours. . . . [Then] "the men's" faces take on a glow of animation and tender intent. At the last exclamatory cry—"Karwadi, Yoi!"—everyone shouts as with one voice. An observer feels that he is in the presence of true congregation, a full sociality at a peak of intimacy, altruism and unison.³³

We might observe, waspishly, that this "true congregation" depends on the exclusion of women, but to do so would miss the deeper point. Stanner has taken us inside a different world of feeling to show us things we could not otherwise see—not least, men's joy in a simplified social world with no women in it. He reveals something of the "affective and sensuous life" of strangers to us;

32. Kenneth Read, *The High Valley* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966).

33. Stanner, *Aboriginal Religion*, 103–4. For a more intellectualized account of ritual life, see Stanner, "The Dreaming" (1953), in *White Men*, 23–40.

and he does it, in part, through his “sensuous and affective” response to Durmugam. Without Durmugam as magnet and metaphor, Stanner (and therefore, we) would know less of the emotional shapes, the metaphysical meanings, the peculiar excitements and gratifications, of Aboriginal ceremonial life, and less, too, of the curiously serene stoicism of their way of being in the world. Yet Stanner, who set his face so sternly against sentimentality, was led by that same love for Durmugam toward a fantasy of a restored Aboriginal traditional culture: a “*mystique* about an imaginary past” that continues to befuddle thinking about Aborigines today.³⁴

There are swings, and there are roundabouts. I sometimes think that the captivation of the imagination—the tension between attraction and analysis, between our fascination with difference and our desire to overcome it—lies at the heart not only of the anthropological enterprise, but of all serious expeditions beyond the limits of our skin. An inflamed curiosity is especially essential if we are to keep the hope of transcultural understanding alive.

Stanner wrote to an old student about the Durmugam essay: “I wrote it in, and with a passion. He was such a man, I thought I would like to make the reading world see and feel him as I did.”³⁵ And he succeeded. We “see and feel” Durmugam because Stanner, lifting him free from the obscuring fog of generalities about “Aborigines,” has obliged us to look. But we need not “see and feel him” just as Stanner does. I found my “Durmugam” in Stanner’s writings, and my “Stanner” too. I also learned that my understanding of both men was defective—that I needed to learn and think more about each. This is a looping path toward enlightenment, and possibly an endless one, but it is the surest one we have.

A Postscript on Power

The Durmugam-Stanner affair and its muddled, dispiriting outcomes replay a script first written during the first years of contact at the close of the eighteenth century and replayed many times since. I have told the story of some of those shining friendships and their sordid, painful unraveling in a book titled *Dancing with Strangers*.³⁶ The dance of hopeful advance and chagrined retreat continues, in part because we share Stanner’s difficulty in sustaining both ardent concern and the analytic distance not to be made careless by it. Meanwhile, the engagement necessary, if we are to penetrate the otherness of others, endows

34. See, e.g., Tim Rowse, *After Mabo: Interpreting Indigenous Traditions* (Carlton, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1993).

35. Barwick, Beckett, and Reay, *Metaphors of Interpretation*, 26.

36. Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers* (2003; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

the otherwise powerless with a sour and futile power: the power to frustrate our good intentions. Faced with the reality of Durmugam's pain, Stanner intervened; failed; and failed to resign himself to his failure. Now, nearly fifty years after his impassioned analyses and recommendations, the social malaise enveloping many Aboriginal Australian communities continues to confound the hopeful interventions of whites. Since our coming to Australia, the Aborigines have suffered serial expropriations of land, of family integrity, of opportunities for effective choice. The injuries inflicted upon them remain invisible to many, but on some of us they weigh heavily, as they weighed on Stanner. Then we discover, as he did, that we cannot undo the damage in which we have been complicit, nor even much ameliorate it. Our power to control the world does not extend so far.³⁷

37. For an example of this kind of despair at the present time, see David McKnight, *From Hunting to Drinking: The Devastating Effects of Alcohol on an Australian Aboriginal Community* (London: Routledge, 2002). For present pessimism, see Peter Sutton, "The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Policy in Australia since the 1970s," *Anthropological Forum* 11.2 (November 2001): 125–73. For engaged

and beautifully articulated present research on this topic, see, e.g., Maggie Brady and David F. Martin, "Dealing with Alcohol in Alice Springs: An Assessment of Policy Options and Recommendations for Action" (working paper 3, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra, 1998).