



MAKING CONNECTIONS

**ABORIGINAL WAYS & EVERYDAY WORLDS
IN REGIONAL SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

Yvonne K. Ellinghaus

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ABSTRACT

In 2006 and 2007 I conducted ethnographic research in Port Augusta, a regional town in South Australia. I engaged with various people; most of them were Aboriginal. I gathered information during observations and conversations in a range of settings such as streetscapes, homes and offices, churches and workshops, cars and cafés. This thesis is based on my experiences and the insights I (as a non-Aboriginal person) gained in these encounters. I present an anthropological study of everyday life and Aboriginal practice in Port Augusta.

Much research concerning Australia's Aboriginal people has focussed on remote Aboriginal settlements and has been framed with reference to particular Aboriginal, tribal or language groups. My research, by contrast, took place in a town of over 13 000 people, about one fifth of whom were Aboriginal. It involved Aboriginal people who identified with numerous different language groups. Whereas many other academics, tourists, or the media have been interested most in the seemingly extraordinary, exotic, and more spectacular aspects of Aboriginal living – Dreaming stories, relationship to country, spiritual beliefs, ritual, ceremony, or art – my thesis describes and interprets facets of the everyday worlds of Aboriginal people. I enquire into mundane activities, routine practices, habitual ways of doing things, common patterns of thought and ongoing struggles. I provide a fine-grained anthropological exploration of how kinds of Aboriginal sociality were lived in the process of day-to-day life in Port Augusta.

Although I discuss established social concepts such as family, language group and community, I propose a more encompassing notion of social connectedness and adopt a critical stance towards these often reified categories. I ask: How exactly was connectedness being achieved, maintained, envisioned and sometimes denied? Practices such as Aboriginal ways of driving, watching, meeting, talking, collecting, painting or classifying, I argue, were all significant to how connections, and sometimes disconnections, amongst Aboriginal people or between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people were forged and renewed. They were fundamental to how Aboriginal people created a sense of urban connectedness, imagined family ties, enlivened networks of

relatedness, worked together as a 'community of practice', or articulated a sense of Aboriginal commonality and distinction.

This thesis explores social connectedness as an ongoing process. Aboriginal people in Port Augusta did not simply 'have' connections. They continuously worked to establish or sustain connectedness. Genealogical ties, places of residence and similar circumstances equipped people with potentialities; they suggested possible connections. But these latent relationships needed to be realised. They had to be activated in everyday practice. Connections remained meaningful and effective because people actually lived them. Although forms of connectedness were sometimes objectified and reflected upon, they were not just a matter of conscious explication, discourse or representation. In many respects, I argue, Aboriginal connectedness, or Aboriginality, in Port Augusta were founded in habitual ways, in bodily dispositions and embodied practices.