This book is an ethnographic exploration of change and continuity in the lives and social orientations of Aborigines around the town of Katherine in the Northern Territory of Australia (map 1).

Though the book’s focus on town life is somewhat unusual among Australian Aboriginal ethnographies (but see Cowlishaw 1988, Dagmar 1978, Sansom 1980), this is crucial to my approach. I first spent almost three continuous years around Katherine (1976–1979) and have spent time in the area every year since then. From my early focus upon the differential socio-spatial orientations toward hinterlands and their manifestations in daily life characteristic of the camps and people of the Katherine Aboriginal scene (chapter 1), I came to realize that the town had a centrality in their lives that I could properly explore only by writing an avowedly intercultural ethnography. That is, it could not presuppose the autonomy or independence of the social field as solely indigenous, or Aboriginal, but needed to explore interrelationships constituted as ones between Aborigines and others over time and at different levels. The attempt to understand continuity and change in this light leads me to examine socio-spatiality from a number of perspectives on the Katherine scene and to relate that scene throughout the book to wider contexts.

Chapter 2 is an account of the relationships of an Aboriginal woman to the town whose connection with it not only spanned her entire life and the great change in the town since World War II, but whose
familial background is centered on the town. That is shown to be crucial to her understanding of the evanescence of a former “place” in Aboriginal terms, in what is now the main street of Katherine town and also relevant to understanding changes in the socio-territorial identity of the town in Aboriginal terms (chapter 4). Chapter 3 explores the relations of Aboriginal people to hinterlands and shows elements of dissolution and of continuity in those relationships.

Government Aboriginal affairs policy in Australia has clearly shifted since the early 1970s, from a more coercive and directive project of “assimilation” to one of “self-determination.” National concern with the character of the indigenous “self” has been at the basis of reconstitutive measures, including land rights in the Northern Territory. Chapter 5 places the Katherine scene, and the emergence of the land rights era, in the context of the changing formation of the Australian nation-state and the terms central to it: “people” and “land.” Analyzing the implications and effects of wider (national and international) movements in public thinking and policy and relating them to the Katherine scene, I suggest that many aspects of the recent relationship between Aborigines and the Australian nation-state can be best understood as mimetic, or imitative (Taussig 1993), rather than coercive in character. In the imitative relationship, questions of representation are important. Aborigines, like other Fourth World or indigenous peoples, are highly susceptible to others’ representations of who and what they are, and this susceptibility plays a large role in shaping their conditions of life. Issues of the deployment and authority of specifically anthropological representations on the Katherine scene and the wider indigenous scene are developed throughout the book.

Chapter 6 examines the contestation over definition of spaces within the town in interactions between Aborigines and others. It provides a counterpoint to chapter 2 in showing some of the unhomelike aspects of the town from Aboriginal perspectives. It also contrasts with chapter 5 in pointing to continuous, as well as new, elements of repression and contestation in the relations between Aborigines and others within the town, some of these elements—as white townspeople would observe—actually having become more intense since the liberalization of Aboriginal affairs policy.

Chapter 7 renews the focus of chapter 2 on places as differentiating in Aboriginal terms by exploring the recent appearance of a place near the town and relating this to wider issues of indigenous cultural creativity, the burdens and constraints imposed upon it, and the accusations of “inven-
tion” that have figured largely in recent “sacred sites” disputes and heritage issues in Australia.

In the conclusion (chapter 8), I argue that the mimetic character of the intercultural relationship between Aborigines and the nation-state needs to be seen as part of a social technology of imitation, continuous with other forms of Western invention in its tending toward reproducing the world as knowable, boundable, and manageable.

It is difficult to properly acknowledge all the people who have shaped this work, because it has really been in the making since I first came to Katherine in 1976. Many of the people who contributed to it beyond measure have passed away in the years since then: Alice and Peter Mitchell from the Gorge camp, Gordon Bulumbara from Barunga, Maggie Datba from Mudginberry, Willy Byers from Kalano, Nida Waramburr and Ruby Allison from the western side, and recently, Peter Jatbula, originally from Limbat but very much from town, too, and Elsie Raymond, originally from Delamere and Willeroo, but also a person of Katherine town. Katherine reminds me of them.

Among many others I would particularly like to acknowledge for having taught me about the town and its environs at close quarters and from more distant vantage points are Julie Williams, Sandy Barraway, Nipper Brown, Bill Harney, Phyllis Winyorrotj, Ivy Brumby, Patsy Brown, Daisy Bordurlk, Noel McDonald, Mae Rosas, Jessie Roberts, Betty Lardy, Jimmy Conway, Lulu Jilimbirnga, May Page, Mae Rosas, Maggie Datba, Amy Dirngayg, Sarah Heppelwhite, Ruby Ngalwara, Lily Kruger, Nellie McCoy, Graham Campbell, Nida Lowe, Tom Kelly, George Kelly, Gary Cartwright, Fred Costello, Mick Maloney, Marnie Evans, Eddie Ah Toy, Tex Moar, Jimmy Forscutt, Wally Christie, Norman Jensen, Mae Govan, Michael Somalios, Bill Windolf, Pearl Ogden, Judy King, Mike Canavan, Ted Lowe, David Ross, Larry Ah Lin, and Lana Quall.

Henry Scott was extremely generous with his time, discussing with me aspects of Katherine’s history in detail. For their information and help concerning Katherine town’s history of roads and works, I thank Dan Darben (chief district engineer 1965–1974) and Trevor Troy (Transport and Works, Katherine). For the detailed information they were willing to supply about the history of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) “hot springs” camp, I am grateful to Ted Morris and Lindsay Phillips. Tom Kerwin and Noel Buntine gave me some
interesting insights into the recent pastoral history of the Katherine area, and Mike Nicholas, John Havnen, Robert E. Lee, John Ah Kit, and Mick Peirce, perspectives on Aboriginal organizations in town. I am grateful to David Dalrymple and Ruth Morley, both formerly associated with Katherine Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, for information on its functions in Katherine and the surrounding area and for discussion of “dry area” and other alcohol-related issues. Robyn Morris, Kerryn Taylor, Ken and Julie Barnes, and Jane Dowling were generous in discussing with me aspects of institutional separatism between whites and blacks in Katherine, only some of which I have been able to incorporate here.

I got much friendly assistance from staff at the Commonwealth Archives, Darwin, the Northern Territory Archives Service (where I would especially like to acknowledge Jenni Wright), and at the Katherine Historical Society. My thanks also to John Roberts and Peter Johnson of the cartography section in the Department of Geography, Sydney University.

Among academic colleagues, I thank Lowell Lewis for reading and commenting on some chapters, Les Hiatt for his critical reading of a draft of this manuscript, and Jeremy Beckett both for comments on a draft and for the long-term inspiration his own work has been to my efforts to revise “Aboriginal studies” in appropriately intercultural terms. I particularly thank Fred Myers for comments on a pre–final draft of this project, which have helped me cast it in its final shape. I also salute Steve Feld who, at a late stage, encouraged me to drop some of the dry language and keep the stories.

Finally, I want to thank Alan Rumsey—my husband, colleague, and hardest-working critic—who read through a number of drafts, offering numerous suggestions and comments. And James and Jesse. It was hard for them to see why I wanted to write this—too much work, not enough fun—but they were patient and came to take a personal interest in the book—or, at least, in Mommy’s finishing it.