Vernacular Patterns in Flux
Mirroring Change in an Aboriginal Workshop, Tiwi Designs, Northern Australia

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ABSTRACT
This essay traces vernacular and insular patterns of Tiwi artists emerging into cosmopolitan consciousness in Australia and beyond through experiment and change. Pattern shapes the postcolonial world of the Pacific, “spreading like a virus,” becoming a “logical framework for spreading new ideas” (Graeme Were, Lines that Connect: Rethinking Pattern and Mind in the Pacific, 2010). A resistance to white settlement combined a critical focus on traditional culture with pleasure in new materials and possibilities. The idiosyncratic patterns of Tiwi language mirrored this synthesis. The voice of this essay swings between mediating the production of designs within a Catholic Mission and a diary form documenting revelatory moments in a workshop. The vivid patterns printed on cloth were like a secret language in the face of implacable change. The formerly nomadic Tiwi and myself as workshop co-ordinator were both stretched in an imaginative hybridity.

Introduction
This essay reflects a personal experience of colonization and change in the Tiwi Aboriginal community in Bathurst and Melville Islands, northern Australia. Writing a journal was a central tool for me as white participant, similar to the importance of “fieldwork notes” by the anthropologist Michael Taussig.¹ By describing the processes and interactions of the art workshop, I trace the way in which the vernacular and insular patterns of Tiwi artists emerged into a cosmopolitan consciousness in Australia and beyond through fabric prints. The idea of inversion (positive and negative spaces, up and down) in contemporary art offers a particular approach to in-

commensurable aspects of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal culture. Another complementary strategy is to examine the differing patterns of English language in texts from explorer, ethnologist, missionary, and artist that confirm the complexity of colonial settlement for the Tiwi. The transformative language of Tiwi abstract motifs has been an integral form of expression from pre-contact to postcolonial times. The voice of this essay alternates between the larger context of mediating the production of designs at a Catholic Mission and a diaristic literary form documenting the revelatory moments experienced at an experimental workshop with up to eight artists and seamstresses. Patterns printed on cloth or painted on bark, wood, or skin had a complex geometry and meaning that was interpreted differently by viewers inside or beyond the island at a time of irrevocable change. Not only were the formerly nomadic Tiwi changed by contact with the wider Australian society (literacy in English, domestic houses, money, communications, cars), but I, too, as workshop coordinator, began to understand another pattern of being. The consideration of who observes, and who is observed is seminal.

The Voice of the Participant/Observer

I arrived on the island on 10 September 2012 early on a hot and hazy day. Passing in front of a rainbow serpent and birds in dazzling patterns painted on the walls of the small airport’s entranceway, I found Sister Anne. She could have been an academic in her muted floral skirt, sensible sandals, a grey T-shirt and short haircut. Crowds of Tiwi people hovered under trees nearby, adding to the darkness of the shade, waiting for arrivals and departures. I got in the back of the truck with Zac the dog and we drove the short distance to the old convent, now only for visitors, all the nuns gone. I had a simple room on the top floor, a crucifix still above the bed, and a tiny icon of the Transfiguration forgotten on the wall above the desk. I made a cup of tea in the kitchen, found sheets and a towel, and unpacked, looking out through louvres and meshed windows to the turquoise waters of the strait. The intensity of the brittle light on the red stony beach sprinkled with mangroves pierced me, with the reminder that it was thirty eight years since Terry had fallen to his death on those rocks.²

To write about one’s own part in the colonization and change of an Australian Aboriginal community, the first person and the active voice are necessary. To understand the vernacular of an Aboriginal culture, it is necessary to