

# 5

## Practical Partnerships

On September 24, 2002, the *Purnu* and *Aboriginal Stockman* locomotives ran for the first time on the almost-complete railway line from Alice Springs through Tennant Creek. The historic event marked the final leg in a journey that began over a century before. The midday sun beat down on the crowd of 150-plus people waiting for the locomotives' "naming ceremony" to begin. Children ran about while off in the distance, under the pathetic shade of two Toyota Troop Carriers, a group of Warumungu men applied ocher to their sweat-drenched bodies. Inside one of the ADrail temporary offices, a group of Warumungu women sat waiting to apply ocher to their chests. I ducked in and said hello to the ladies. "Namikili, you got the Crisco?" they asked when I entered. "No," I said, "but I just saw Francine pull up—maybe she has some." The women needed the oil to moisten their skin and act as an adhesive for the ocher they would soon apply. Just as I turned to look for Francine, in she walked with the white plastic bag from the Food Barn and in it two bottles of vegetable oil—the generic Black and Gold, not Crisco.

Outside some ADrail workers hosed down the dusty dance area and set up chairs for the singers on the platform directly in front of the dancing ground. The food set out by the railway company had already been plowed through, but I managed to find a bottle of water and some watermelon for my elder son. I heard some people complaining that there wasn't enough to eat. Others said they should have waited until after the ceremony because now the dancers were missing out on their feed. But I saw L.G. walk into



Figure 5.1. Warumungu men dance at the naming ceremony for the *Purnu* locomotive in Tennant Creek.

the caravan where the women were getting ready carrying two heaping plates of food and a bag of Cokes and lemonade. Some performers were eating. With the women just about ready, Francine gave the sign to the CLC mob from Alice Springs, who in turn gave the thumbs-up to the ADrail management to start the festivities.

Duncan Beggs, an ADrail community-relations manager, stepped to the microphone to welcome the crowd. After a quick itinerary of the afternoon's scheduled events and a plea to keep kids away from the trains, the crowd was ready for the men's dance. It was 12:30 and hot when the young men began. They entered the dance area to the low-pitched tones of three singers and the crackle of six boomerangs clapping in unison. The steel railway tracks shone behind them as their bare feet pushed the red dirt forward while the green branches fashioned around their ankles jostled together. They stared solemnly toward the three elder men seated on the platform calling them with their songs. As the first song series came to an end, high-pitched voices called out from behind the singers. (Figure 5.1)

I looked over to see that the hecklers were the grandmothers of the young men, several of the elder women who would be singing next. Through gentle chides and jokes, the women pointed out the shortcomings of the

dancers—one moved too slowly, another missed a cue from the singers. By making these critiques, they claimed their own power and prestige as women, elders, and bosses for their country. The young men looked on stone-faced as the women corrected them. Each clap of the boomerangs drew the dancers closer to the singers. Together they retraced the tracks of their ancestors and recognized a new set of tracks that would cross with their ancestral ones.

When the young men finished, they walked back across the hot ground to the Toyotas for a rest. As the elder men left the stage, Dianne Nampin, a Warumungu woman and CLC executive-committee member, took the microphone. Nampin welcomed the crowd and spoke directly to the elders in the front row, addressing them in Warumungu. She thanked them for their presence and acknowledged their ownership of the country over which these locomotives would travel. Then, shifting her glance to the largely Aboriginal crowd and switching to English, she said that it was appropriate for one of the locomotives to have the name *Purnu* because it means “carrier.” Linking the traditional connotation of the term to the future, she went on to say that “maybe later on in the years it may be carrying people around; that’s why we call it *Purnu*. But I’m really happy with that name and so are the elders.” In Nampin’s speech she used the term *purnu* to refer not just to the locomotive but also to the tracks that will carry the trains, their cargo, and the passengers.<sup>1</sup>

The 1,420 kilometers of track between Alice Springs and Darwin is a recognizable conduit for trains, travelers, and new types of translocal ventures. It is also, as Nampin emphasized, part of Warumungu country, and as such the railroad officials had an obligation to engage with traditional owners about its use. Nampin was not the only one to recognize the types of linkages and businesses that could accompany the construction of the railway. ADrail’s Duncan Beggs continued where Nampin left off:

*I think Purnu is quite an appropriate name because the railway is young at the moment, and it’s up to ADrail to bring it on to construction so it can begin operating and carrying the train into the future. It is my hope and the hope of all people associated with the railway that other projects will flow, mining projects and that sort of thing will flow on from the railway being constructed. And that will bring other opportunities for people up and down the railway in the future. So it is very much appreciated that we are here today to unveil the names on these locomotives.*

Beggs’s speech was full of hope. With a depressed regional economy, he is certainly not alone in his optimism directed at the new transit system.

Mining, tourism, and other industries *may* all flow from this venture. The railway is seen as a beginning: for large-scale business ventures, regional opportunities, and Aboriginal–non-Aboriginal partnerships in and out of town.

In this chapter I follow the construction of the railway line to see what this new set of tracks can tell us about the formation and implementation of translocal and transnational alliances, the dynamic mixture of town and Aboriginal politics, and the necessity of integrating traditional practices and performances into the fabric and process of joint business ventures. How are Aboriginal relations with and obligations to country merged with a corporate emphasis on laying tracks and turning a profit? What are the contours of these partnerships that allow for coexisting business plans? Can these practical partnerships refocus the national debate about Aboriginal issues? Beginning in 2001 the construction of the railway line coincided with a floundering national view of reconciliation and an antagonistic notion of “practical reconciliation,” put forth by Prime Minister Howard. His now infamous stubbornness to apologize to Aboriginal people nationally for the Stolen Generation marred reconciliation politics and diverted attention from the work toward reconciliation that had been achieved under both legislated compromise and shifting industry and popular notions of Aboriginal histories (Goot and Rowse 2007:130). Although there was scant agreement nationally about what “reconciliation” should mean, politically the Howard government focused on practical reconciliation as a way to get around an emphasis on present social justice, historical injustice, and the link between the two (Tickner 2001).

The foil to Howard’s practical reconciliation—which meant “real outcomes” for Aboriginal Australians in term of jobs, education, and health care—was “symbolic reconciliation,” the public acknowledgment and integration of Aboriginal difference into a rights-based agenda of land rights, civil rights, and social justice (Altman 2004a; Goot and Rowse 2007; Rowse 2006). In this strategic separation the economic partnership between Aboriginal groups and railway corporations denotes the practical—necessary—work of Aboriginal development aimed at profit-making and economic investment, while the locomotive-naming ceremony is the symbolic—unnecessary—performance of settler guilt and a whitewashed Aboriginal culture that promotes acceptance but not “real” results. What this forced opposition misses is the link between the obligations borne out of seemingly “symbolic” acts and the necessary social actions embedded in “practical” policies. That is, the naming ceremony and the inclusion of Aboriginal names and people in the business of the railroad invites a *new set of obligations and relationships* that could bring together and ultimately change the parameters of corporate business, as well as Aboriginal politics.

The symbolic/practical divide forces an unnecessary choice and ignores the protocols that define Aboriginal modes of relation formed in ceremonies *and* through contracts. Aboriginal business—as ritual work and caring for country (in its many forms)—follows procedures that are rooted in Aboriginal “law” and are dynamic enough to change over time. Leaving aside the assumed binary, one can ask how engagements between transnational businesses, governments, and oftentimes-competing Aboriginal mobs redefine the local and national terrain of practical reconciliation and invite a different mode of operation for Aboriginal business. The construction of the railway line through Tennant Creek was part of a transnational business venture produced through a public-private financing scheme that brought together multinational banks and Aboriginal organizations; this partnership was motivated by a national desire to complete the unfinished business of previous generations, who had failed to connect the north-south train route. Completing the railway opened up Tennant Creek to the fluctuations and priorities of a national political agenda, transnational corporate financial plans, and the priorities and protocols of Aboriginal traditional owners. Over the years it took to finish the project, clashes over ownership rights, insecurities about who would ultimately profit, and negotiations concerning territorial boundaries and economic plans realigned the various sets of stakeholders multiple times over. There was no secure position to be found. Instead, the construction of the rail line highlighted the already-tense racial relations in town, the fragility of reconciliation as an inclusive national project, and the changing political dynamics in the town and the region.

## Constant Negotiation

The naming ceremony was the culmination of years of work and negotiation, bringing together transnational companies, local contractors, and several Aboriginal communities along the “track” (the local name for the Stuart Highway, which runs from Adelaide in the south to Darwin in the north). The economic futures of these interested parties may be variously affected by the goods shipped along the line, the services they might provide, and the revenue claimed by businesses, small land-owning groups, and town councils. This final leg of the rail line, which begins in Port Augusta in South Australia and until 2004 ceased services in Alice Springs, was envisioned a century earlier as a “land bridge route for trade with Asia and beyond for southern Australia” (Symon 2004:1). The transcontinental railway had been part of a young nation’s dreams and later a new territory’s hope for growth and independence.

One hundred and twenty-three years earlier, in 1879, South Australian

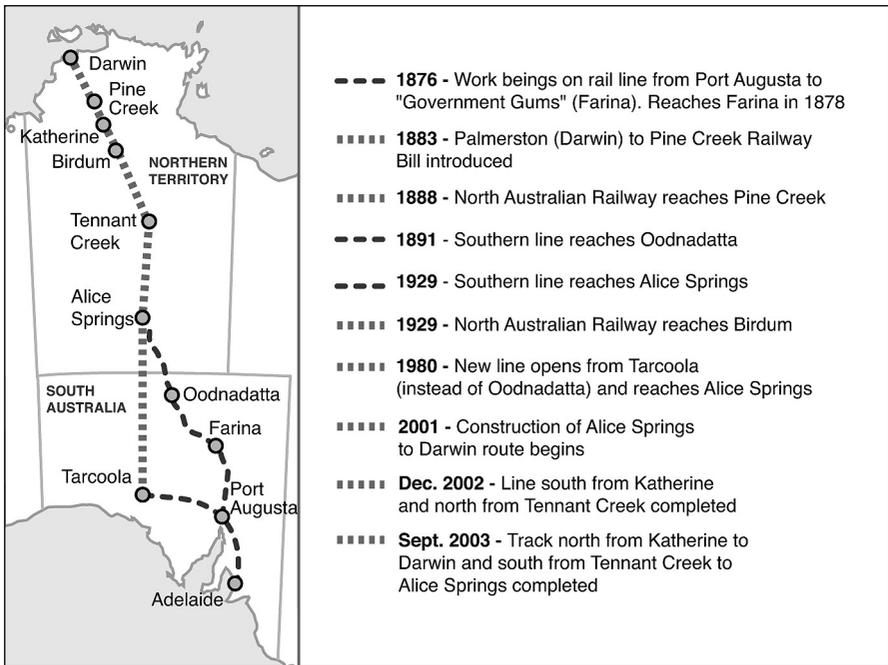


Figure 5.2. Stages of the transcontinental rail line's construction and final completion in 2003.

governor Sir William Jervis turned the first bit of earth at Port Augusta, inaugurating the railway line's construction. In that first turn of earth, Jervis and his financiers saw the beginning of an international trade route with "Java, Siam, India, [and] China" and increased "communications with Europe and America" (Symon 2004:3). In 1855 the New South Wales Railway governor spoke of a time "when the whole country would be covered with a network of railway...to help develop the resources of the country and increase the value of the vast Territory now lying waste" (quoted in Munday 2007:1). Jervis's vision of trade, international tourism, and increased connectivity took off over the next fifty years, and by 1929 the railhead reached Alice Springs. Bickering between state, territory, and commonwealth governments, two wars, and a worldwide depression intervened, and for the next seventy-five years the transcontinental railway line lay short of its final destination, in Darwin. (Figure 5.2)

After the Northern Territory became self-governing, in 1978, successive administrations attempted to gain the needed financial backing and support to complete the railway line. In 1980 the chief minister for the Northern Territory, Paul Everingham, argued for the centrality of the railway to the

territory's economic future: "We see it as the greatest single need in the evolution of the Northern Territory. We see it as fundamental to the continued growth and development of the Northern Territory and to a great extent to continued progress of Australia as a whole" (quoted in Munday 2007:8). A 1983 national feasibility study, however, concluded that the rail line "cannot be justified and would constitute a major misallocation of the nation's resources" (quoted in Munday 2007:8). But by the mid-1990s another commissioned study, the Wran Report, found that the Alice Springs to Darwin railway line would be feasible by the turn of the century. With an eye on that date, in 1995 the Northern Territory and South Australian governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding to signal their commitment to finishing the rail line in a joint effort (Symon 2004:4). The completion of the transcontinental rail line was part legend, part national dream, and part technological determinism.

Leading up to the turn of the century, the fulfillment of an earlier century's dream pushed parallel negotiations with investors, construction conglomerates, and local Aboriginal landowners in the Northern Territory. Unlike its twentieth-century counterpart, the new rail line would have to (1) be partially privately funded and (2) incorporate Aboriginal interests in the plan. Along with Aboriginal land rights, during the 1980s Australia also began to slowly privatize many of its previously publicly held industries. The new rail line venture was no different. By 1997 the South Australian and Northern Territory governments had formed the AustralAsia Railway Corporation (AARC) to manage the completion of the railway line in partnership with private sector companies. The Commonwealth pledged to support the project financially once the aid of the private corporations was secured. Unlike its predecessor the final leg of the transcontinental rail line would look to transnational investors for its funding and business plan. This expanded set of interests altered the terms of the railway's insertion into the regional and national economy and imagination—it was no longer a solely Australian dream and triumph. Railway advocates saw the new partnership as the only viable option for financing, conceiving of it as a "path-breaking development" for railway reform transnationally (Symon 2004:4).

In 1999 the AARC chose the multinational Asia Pacific Transport Consortium (APTC)—a partnership between Australian, United Kingdom, and American companies—to take on the task of organizing the construction, negotiation, and financing of the railway project. After false starts in 1943, 1961, 1975, and 1983, in 2001 construction on the final leg of the transcontinental railway began in earnest. By April 2001 APTC had secured enough funding to begin construction. In the final tally the private sector paid \$730 million, the Commonwealth added \$165 million, the South