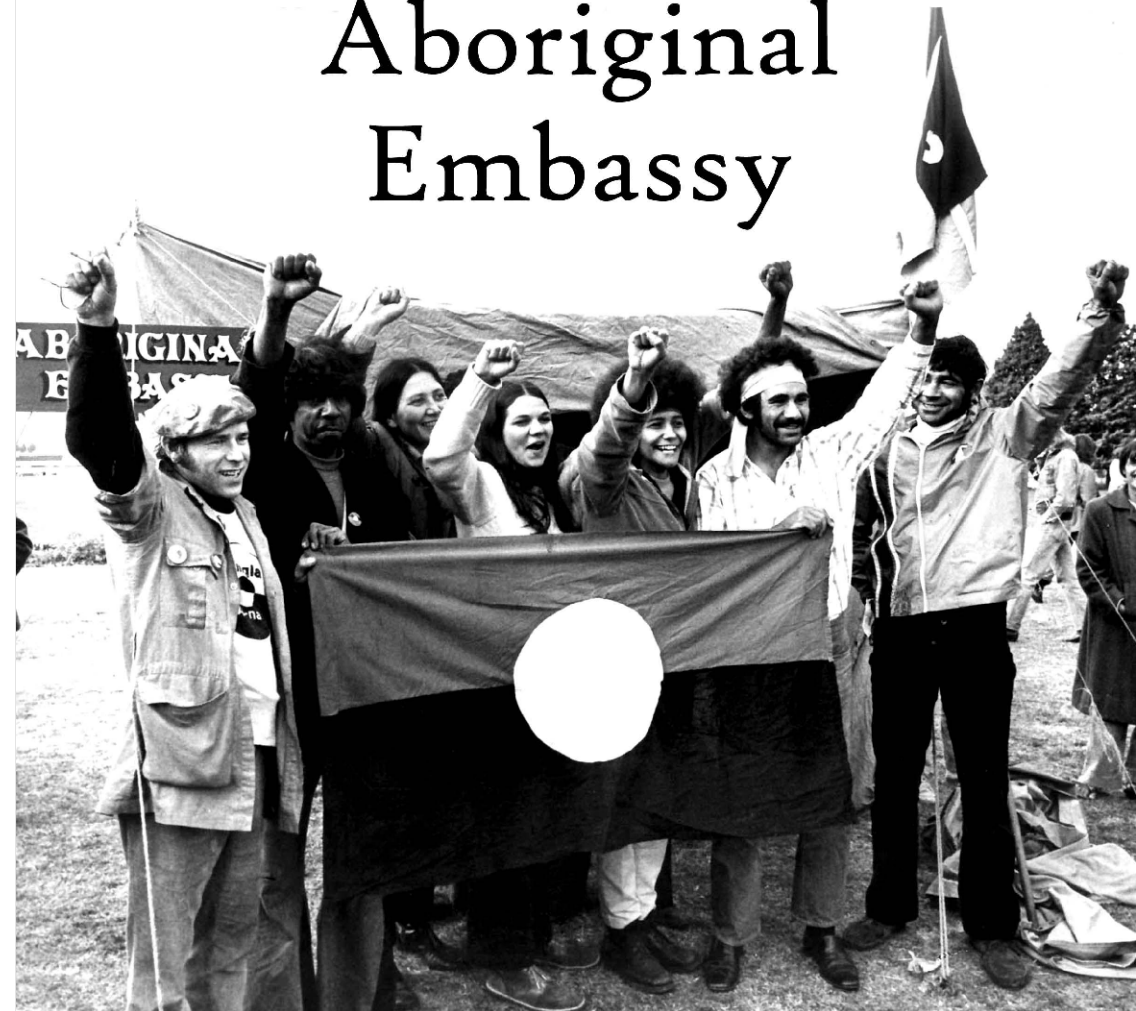


- ¹⁷ See Goodall 1996 generally.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Taffe 2005: 164-216 passim.
- ¹⁹ Commonwealth Government 1972, 'Australian Aborigines: Commonwealth Policy and Achievements'.
- ²⁰ *Canberra News*, 27 January 1972; Goodall 1996: 339.
- ²¹ *Newsletter On Aboriginal Affairs*, No. 1, April 1972: 5.
- ²² 'Aboriginal Embassy, Canberra' (text of an information sheet handed out by the Aboriginal Embassy), reprinted in *Newsletter on Aboriginal Affairs*, No. 1, April 1972. These flags can both be clearly seen in a photograph accompanying Newfong 1972: 4-6.
- ²³ *Canberra News*, 31 January 1972.
- ²⁴ *Identity*, November 1972: 4.
- ²⁵ See footage of these activists in *Ningla A' Na*.
- ²⁶ *Identity*, November 1972: 4. More generally, see Lothian 2002, chapter 4.
- ²⁷ *AAL Newsletter*, October 1969: 6; *The Koorier*, vol. 1, no. 7: 12. Lothian 2002: 133-134.
- ²⁸ Lothian 2002: 133-134.
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- ³⁰ *The Koorier*, vol. 1, no. 5, 27 January 1969: 1; *Smoke Signals*, April-June 1969: 3.
- ³¹ *Broadside*, 12 June 1969: 4.
- ³² Bob Maza, cited in Tompson (ed.) 1990: 162-163.
- ³³ Paul Coe, cited in Colin Tatz and Keith McConnochie (eds) 1975: 105; but see also footage in *Ningla A' Na*.
- ³⁴ *Weekend Australian (Review)*, 2-3 January 1999: 15.
- ³⁵ Kemp 1972: 20; Bostock 1973: 14; 'Basically Black', *New Dawn*, December 1972: 2.
- ³⁶ Gilbert 1994: 121.
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- ³⁹ See footage in *Ningla A' Na*.
- ⁴⁰ See Eggleston 1970: 17-81 passim.
- ⁴¹ Foley 1988a: 109; see also Foley 1988b: 30.
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- ⁵⁰ *New Dawn*, May 1972: 3; *Aboriginal Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 3, March 1980: 11.
- ⁵¹ Foley 1988b: 30.
- ⁵² Briscoe 1978: 14.
- ⁵³ Paul Coe, cited in transcript of *Lateline*, 22 May 1975, in Elizabeth Eggleston Personal Papers, Item 178.
- ⁵⁴ Robinson 1993: 131 f/n 120.
- ⁵⁵ Robinson 1993: 116, 140.
- ⁵⁶ See footage in *Ningla A' Na*.
- ⁵⁷ See footage in *Ningla A' Na*.
- ⁵⁸ Robinson 1993: 164-165; Robinson 1994: 58-60.
- ⁵⁹ Robinson 1993: 168-171; *Ningla A' Na*.
- ⁶⁰ *Ningla A' Na*; Bostock 1973: 14.
- ⁶¹ *Ningla A' Na*.
- ⁶² Dow 2000; Statement from the Aboriginal Tent Embassy re the third firebomb attack 2004.
- ⁶³ Dow 2000.
- ⁶⁴ *The Age*, 10 December 2005.

Moving Blackwards:

Black Power and the Aboriginal Embassy



Kathy Lothian

Moving Blackwards: Black Power and the Aboriginal Embassy

Kathy Lothian

It is February 1972, and Canberra's Parliament House lawns are a busy, thriving protest site. Only metres from the front steps of the building a green-striped beach umbrella marks the spot where, on Australia Day, several Aboriginal activists set up camp. Now the umbrella has been joined by several tents. Cardboard placards display roughly-drawn slogans proclaiming the activists' anger and intentions: 'DESTROY ARNHEM LAND WE DESTROY AUSTRALIA'. 'WHY PAY TO USE OUR OWN LAND'. 'WHICH DO WE CHOOSE. LAND RIGHTS OR BLOODSHED!' ¹ Above them all, flapping from the umbrella's canopy, the sign that binds them: 'Aboriginal Embassy'. To stand on the road, with the big White building behind, and the small Black encampment in front, is to stand in a tense middle ground between two worlds of mutual incomprehension. While the machinery of the nation churns behind, the lawns in front play host to young Aboriginal people stretched out in the summer's morning. There might be tea drinking, guitar playing, planning, debating. Later, there might be exchanges with passers-by, leaflets being handed out, or photographers angling for the best frame. For a time, the Embassy has become Canberra's most curious landmark, its goings-on featured in newspapers around the country. In the press photos, several young men steadily return the camera's gaze. They stand before their creation, their clenched black fists defiantly raised. ²

Black Power

In the late 1960s, in that liminal space between the end of federal government policies of assimilation and the beginning of self-determination, stood one group of Aboriginal activists who were certain that they would overcome. Along with older and more conservative campaigners, they rejected assimilation and the White dominance of Aboriginal affairs. But it was the depth of their anger, their impatience and their disenchantment that marked their politics as new. This group was dismissive of a worldview that counselled eventual change. They were tired of the letter writing and petitioning, the focus on equality and multiracial togetherness of the dominant Aboriginal organisations. While they were intensely proud of their Aboriginality, in a way that was much more vocal than their elders had been, their reading of Black American activists had also been enlightening. They not only recognised the parallels of poverty, racism and political powerlessness between themselves and other oppressed minorities, but were also coming to learn that legislative change, no matter how grand or

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² See, for instance, *The Tribune*, 27 March – 3 April 1972.

³ These issues are explored in more depth in Lothian 2002: 35-46 passim.

⁴ Lothian 2002: 35-46 passim.

⁵ *Smoke Signals*, September 1969: 3; *AAL Newsletter*, October 1969: 2-3.

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¹¹ *The Herald* (Melbourne), 12 January 1972.

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symbolic, was no guarantee that their problems would be addressed. It was time for new tactics to be considered.³

These were the activists of the Aboriginal Embassy, that enduring symbol of Aboriginal demands for land rights. But the Embassy is much more than a story about land. It is also a story about these activists, their preoccupations and their alignment with Black Power. Black Power was an attitude that manifested itself in numerous ways through the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was embraced by both pragmatic Indigenous activists committed to reconciliatory approaches and, although they were in a minority, those inclined towards a revolutionary and violent solution. At its heart, however, Black Power represented an overt rejection of the lack of power in Aboriginal lives. For some activists, this meant a drastic reshuffling of Aboriginal organisations where Whites held important decision-making roles. Others saw the adoption of Black Power ideas as a way of focusing on a positive reclamation of Aboriginal identity. For others, the fight against racism and poverty was paramount.⁴

The first unmistakable Black Power upheaval was felt in August 1969, when activists in the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League invited Caribbean Black Power leader Roosevelt Brown to visit. Shortly afterwards, and claiming to be 'enlightened' by him, they issued a statement that described the proper role of Whites within the organisation as 'standing back' while Aboriginal decision-makers did their job.⁵ Over the next couple of years the shockwaves rippled, as the idea took hold among other organisations — the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney, and the national umbrella organisation, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI). Here, a bitter clash at the 1970 annual conference resulted in the formation of a new organisation. In the National Tribal Council, it was declared that Aborigines would decide their own priorities, free from paternalistic White 'do-gooderism'.⁶

An even more militant organisation was formed at the end of 1971, when Denis Walker, the son of long-time Aboriginal campaigner Kath Walker, announced the formation of the Black Panther Party of Australia. Once described by the *Australian* as a 'calm young man',⁷ he was now known for his abrasive and provocative militancy. 'Everything was taken off you with a gun', he declared. 'The only way you are going to get it back is with a gun'.⁸ Along with his 'field marshals' — young Aboriginal men including Paul Coe, Gary Foley, Gary Williams and Billy Craigie, as well as Jim Doherty and Sam Watson — Walker had declared his commitment to the American Party's revolutionary ideology of armed self defence of the Black community and the 'eventual overthrow of the system'.⁹ Just as the American Panthers had done, the Australian Panthers demanded a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held among Aborigines in order to determine 'the will of black people as to their national destiny'.¹⁰

The American Panthers were, Walker argued, teaching Blacks to 'stand up and assert their rights — and they're getting them'.¹¹

The end of 1971 and beginning of 1972 saw a flurry of militant activity by Black Power activists. In Brisbane, a demonstration over racism resulted in complete chaos. Queensland activist Pastor Brady and other Aborigines threw punches at the police. Walker climbed onto the roof of a car to address the demonstrators, holding his arms in a giant V. Stones were thrown, a policeman kicked as he lay on the ground.¹² By the end of the day, nine Aborigines had been arrested, including Walker. Outside the courthouse following their hearing, they gave a collective Black Power salute and later, in an interview, Walker explained the mood. It was, he said, the beginning of a 'big breakout'; the first time that Blacks had said 'we're going to do it our way and to hell with the authorities'.¹³

Late in the year, the Captain Cook memorial in Hyde Park, Sydney, was covered with land rights slogans. Several days later, a tower at La Perouse was graffitied with clenched fist symbols of Black Power, along with 'Black is beautiful', 'Black is proud', and 'Pigs are suckers'.¹⁴ In Victoria, the walls of the Advancement League headquarters were decorated with clenched black fists and Black Power slogans directed against 'honkies' and the slow transition to Black control within the organisation.¹⁵ Early in January 1972, Michael Anderson achieved momentary celebrity by reminding Australians of Evonne Goolagong's trip to South Africa in 1970. Anderson was a Black Power activist originally from Walgett, a town in country New South Wales that had been targeted by the Freedom Rides in 1965. He attended the Australian Open tennis tournament wearing a 'Black Power is Black On' badge, asked Goolagong to become a spokesperson for Black Power and to decline the MBE she received in the New Year's honours list.¹⁶

Despite this show of militancy, Black Power activists actually held much in common with their predecessors. Although Black Power activists were generally more outspokenly and confidently Aboriginal than older Indigenous campaigners, many of the differences between the new guard and the old were attitudinal and stylistic. Just as previous campaigners had done, Black Power activists campaigned for equal rights and protested loudly about the status of Aboriginal citizenship. In addition, as Heather Goodall and others have shown, the fight to regain land among militant campaigners of the 1960s and 1970s was also an important goal with a long precedent.¹⁷

By the late 1960s, however, campaigns for land were increasingly being fought not only on moral grounds, but also on the basis that Aborigines had particular rights that stemmed from their status as Indigenous people. Two of the most significant campaigns of this decade were those fought by the Gurindji and the Yolngu. Supported by Aborigines both moderate and radical, these land claims became powerful national symbols of the fight for land rights. Together, they

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Canberra News

The Courier Mail

Herald (Melbourne)

Identity

Koorier

Ningla A' Na, documentary film, 72 minutes, dir. Allesandro Cavadini, Australia 1972

New Dawn

Smoke Signals

Sunday Australian

Sydney Morning Herald

Tribune

In the 35 years since the first erection of the Embassy, its significance as a marker of the demand for Aboriginal land rights has taken on legendary qualities, and those demands have remained as urgent as ever before. Erected again and again since 1972, the Embassy now maintains a constant — if uneasy — presence among the tourist surrounds of Old Parliament House. In this time the encampment has been variously described as an ‘eyesore’ and a place of pilgrimage. It has inspired artwork and has been the target of several firebomb attacks.⁶²

Although the Embassy’s symbolic importance to Indigenous people was recognised in 1995 when it was listed on the Register of the National Estate,⁶³ White Australia has either continued to avert its gaze from this organic and ramshackle reminder of the Indigenous presence in Australia, or has continued to seek its physical removal. In the most recent governmental attempt to erase the Embassy, Minister for Territories, Jim Lloyd, has argued that the site would be better served by an authorised and structured exhibition. Here, camping would be disallowed and carefully controlled displays would provide an educative function for tourists.⁶⁴ Perhaps more symbolically, in the Bicentenary year of White occupation of Australia, the seat of Australian government simply moved away. It now lies further up the hill, where the main view from the front steps is not a shabby Aboriginal encampment but a sweeping expanse of manicured lawn down to the old White building and onwards to the war memorial.

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contributed to a growing expectation that the importance of land to Aboriginal people would find an appropriate governmental response.¹⁸

The policy announcement, when it eventually came, was a harsh blow. On 25 January 1972, Prime Minister McMahon’s statement boasted of the achievements in Aboriginal Affairs, and proclaimed empathy with the ‘Aboriginal [desire] to have their affinity with the land with which they have been associated recognised by law’. Nonetheless, and despite the recommendations of the Office of Aboriginal Affairs, McMahon’s statement effectively denied Aboriginal land rights. Instead, his vision was for a system of ‘special purpose’ leases, conditional upon Aboriginal peoples’ ‘intention and ability to make reasonable economic and social use of the land’.¹⁹ The response from Black Power activists was instantaneous.

The tents

*The Embassy’s focus on land is underlined from the very beginning. The very first announcements by Michael Anderson, who is fast surpassing his initial claim to fame as an intimidator of Evonne Goolagong, are that ‘the land was taken from us by force — we shouldn’t have to lease it’, and that the group would remain on the lawns until ‘the Government reconsiders its statement’.*²⁰ *In early February, the Embassy announces its official ‘land rights policy’. It is a five point program demanding ownership of all reserves in Australia, preservation of sacred lands, Aboriginal ownership of the Northern Territory as well as areas of ‘certain cities’, and six billion dollars as compensation for all other land.*²¹

*Throughout February, orange, green and white tents sprout overnight on the Parliament House lawns, and the number of protesters begins to swell. Over the next few months, John Newfong can often be seen around the encampment. Newfong is an Indigenous activist and journalist from Stradbroke Island, and has become an official Embassy spokesman. One can imagine him standing his ground on the lawns, in earnest discussion with reporters. Perhaps he gestures to the spot above the entrance to the main tent, to explain the significance of the two flags that now fly alongside the ‘Embassy’ placard. One, he might say, is an African international unity flag in black, green and red stripes, adopted by activists to represent the people, the land and the blood shed by Aborigines who have died in defence of their country. The other, a black and brown flag to signify the people and the land, is overlaid with a white spear and four crescent shapes surrounding it, signifying four men seated around a campfire.*²²

*This is clearly no ordinary protest and Peter Howson, the Minister for the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts, is disturbed. The declaration of an Embassy, he worries, implied the existence of a sovereign state or separate nation. This, he insists, ‘cut[s] across the Government’s expressed objection to separate development’.*²³ *From his viewpoint as a political conservative, Howson is right to worry. The*

Embassy does not merely hint at the existence of a separate nation. It is a self-evident statement.

Black pride

While the Embassy did represent one of the earliest explicit declarations of Aboriginal sovereignty, Aborigines had long been aware of their separateness from the life of the nation. In fact, the rejection of 'whiteness' as 'rightness' was the foundational politics for many Black Power activists. For these campaigners, the essence of Black Power lay in its refusal to internalise a sense of inferiority. To be a Black Power activist was to have a positive sense of one's identity. It was to build a new set of truths. As Victorian activist Bruce McGuinness put it, a 'Blackward step' would be 'a forward step'.²⁴

Some Black Power activists drew upon Black American activism to promote an overtly 'Black' image. The 'Afro' was a popular hairstyle for those who were 'black and beautiful'. Walker dressed in the black leather jacket and dark sunglasses of the Black Panthers, while Redfern activist Bob Bellar chose the Panthers' black beret.²⁵ Clenched black fists began to appear everywhere: at demonstrations, on badges, in leaflets and newsletters. Aspects of Black American language found their way into activist dialogue. 'Honky' or 'the Man' was the terminology used to describe the white oppressor, 'Uncle Tom' the label given to those seen to be in collusion with him. In 1972, McGuinness announced that the old book of rules had been torn up. The new book's title was 'Black is beautiful, right on brothers and sisters, and screw you whitey'.²⁶

Activists also found reading material that resonated with their own life experiences and desires. McGuinness recommended Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton's best-selling *Black Power* as useful guides for Aboriginal Black Power activists. The latter book, which promoted the need for Black people to eschew coalitions with Whites and to 'redefine themselves', McGuinness wrote, 'should be a prized possession of every Aborigine'.²⁷ Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson and Angela Davis were also useful background reading.²⁸ It was Malcolm X's autobiography and speeches though, that most captured the imaginations of some of the younger Aborigines, with his uncompromisingly militant rejection of White culture, his pride in being Black, his belief in Black nationhood, and his call for self-defence 'by any means necessary'.²⁹

Adopting these visual and rhetorical symbols of Black America did not deter Black Power activists from calling for pride in Aboriginality. Bob Maza, for instance, was an Indigenous activist from Queensland, who had been living in Melbourne during the late 1960s and had moved to Sydney in the early 1970s. From 1968 he began an urgent campaign to 'create an awareness of the Koorie as a race', pointing to the honour, integrity and self-discipline of the 'old

*From the beginning, the McMahon Liberal government has been affronted by the existence of the tents. Former Prime Minister John Gorton had raised the possibility of their removal at the very first sitting of parliament that year. But now, Ralph Hunt, Minister for the Interior, is finally able to approve the new ordinance to make it illegal to camp on Parliament's doorstep.*⁵⁵ *Now it is possible to act. Six days after Aborigines around the country march in a national demonstration for land rights, the police move. It is only the first of two bloody and brutal encounters with the protestors. On both occasions, they march in military style from Parliament; their dark uniforms a stark contrast with the Whiteness of the building. On both occasions, the violence is frightening. Despite the insistence of the protestors that 'We Shall Not Be Moved!', several activists find themselves ferrying the injured to hospital. When it is all over, the remaining Aborigines cluster in little groups, looking dazed.*⁵⁶

*Few want to abandon their Embassy. A meeting after the second violent removal of the tents reveals not only the protestor's resolve, but also the depths of their anger. Chicka Dixon reminds everybody of the need for 'sustained action'. Foley wants to show the government that they mean business — with a few Molotov cocktails. Walker suggests that, if the tents are removed for a third time, some sort of 'destruction' be inflicted on White society.*⁵⁷ *But many protestors also fear that a further confrontation with police will result in deaths.*⁵⁸ *In the afternoon of 30 July, after re-establishing the Embassy and spending the day on the lawns with hundreds of White supporters, the Embassy staff allow police a passage through the crowd, and the tents are peacefully removed.*⁵⁹

Although the defiant image of the Aboriginal Embassy continues to stand as one of the most significant moments in twentieth century Aboriginal political history, the connection with Black Power activism has often been overlooked. Certainly, not all Embassy supporters aligned themselves with Black Power. The Embassy, in its encapsulation of the claim to land rights, had the wide support and participation of Aborigines from the entire political spectrum. Yet in July 1972, when the McMahon Liberal government attempted the Embassy's removal, there they were, dozens of activists with clenched black fists thrust in the air. Amid the chants of 'LAND RIGHTS — NOW!', Walker strode the lawns in his Black Panther jacket, waving the Aboriginal flag. John Newfong, Paul Coe, Michael Anderson, Cheryl Buchanan, Gary Foley, Billy Craigie, Ambrose Golden-Brown, Tony Coorey and Roberta Sykes, many of them Redfern activists from the Medical and Legal services, all defended the tents. Bob Maza, along with Anderson, brought the National Black Theatre to the lawns, where it performed 'the whole history of Aboriginal/European conflict' in its 'Embassy dance'.⁶⁰ Despite their defeat by police, the feeling that they had won a moral victory was running high. Surely their claims could no longer be ignored?⁶¹

to read about the Black Panther community survival projects in the United States — free clothing, political education classes, free food programs, and a news service, as well as a ‘Free Breakfast Program’ for children, and a ‘People’s Free Medical Research Health Clinic’. Party Chairman Bobby Seale had promoted the programs as means of ‘organising the people’, and letting them know ‘that in this time, in our time, we must seize our right to live, and we must seize our right to survive’.⁴⁷ When Gordon Briscoe, an inaugural council member of the Legal Service, visited a Redfern house in June 1971 on business related to the service, he was outraged. Inside, the Aboriginal client was so ill that he was unable to speak, his impoverished family unable to afford medical attention.⁴⁸

The determination to ‘seize the time’ that Aboriginal activists had shown in their establishment of the Legal Service was redeployed. Within only a few weeks, the Aboriginal Medical Service had opened for business a few doors down from the Legal Service in Regent Street, Redfern. Here volunteers provided basic health care and developed programs to counteract the increasing numbers of patients coming to the service with health problems caused by malnutrition.⁴⁹ Free fruit and vegetables were delivered to Aboriginal families, and the Breakfast for Children Program provided Aboriginal schoolchildren with breakfast on school mornings where otherwise they might have eaten nothing.⁵⁰

Although Foley and other Black Power activists readily acknowledged the way in which these programs were inspired by the American Black Panther Party,⁵¹ the programs were, nonetheless, a response to the unique conditions of the Aboriginal community. Transformed to meet the needs of inner-city Aborigines, activists also understood them as being embedded within the fight for land rights. For Briscoe, the services represented ‘the contemporary extension of the historical resistance to white superiority.’ They were statements of independence and self-assertion, aimed at getting White society to recognise that ‘this is our land and we mean to get it back’.⁵² For Coe the Legal Service had a definite role outside the provision of legal assistance. It was, he argued in 1975, an interim step leading towards a Black nation. ‘I believe, and always have believed’, he maintained, ‘that the Aboriginal people have never ever relinquished their sovereignty or their rights ... that we have always been and still are, a nation within a nation — that we are a sovereign people.’⁵³

The tents

*In July, in the midst of the crisp Canberra winter, the Embassy stands firm. Now it has gained a new emblem. While the black and brown flag with its traditional insignia still flies, politicians who cast their gaze over the lawns from their office windows cannot fail to be struck by the new addition. A new flag, arresting in its design and colours of black, red and yellow, boldly underscores the Embassy’s assertion of Aboriginal nationhood.*⁵⁴

Aborigines’.³⁰ In June 1969 he suggested that Malcolm X’s teaching and example could do much to enhance this self-discovery. ‘I only hope that when I die I can say I’m black and it’s beautiful to be black. It is this sense of pride which we are trying to give back to the aborigine [sic] today’, he claimed.³¹ Malcolm X taught him, he argued, that it was possible to ‘walk tall and with pride’, and that only a positive self-image could effectively challenge the internalised impact of White supremacy.³² Law student and Redfern activist Paul Coe agreed, believing that that Black Power was all about actively working against assimilationist paradigms through the ‘re-instating of black culture wherever ... possible’.³³

It was this position on Black Power that Maza carried with him when he attended a Black Power conference in America in September 1970. After attending workshops with other Black Power delegates and meeting Black American groups around the country afterwards, he was ‘burning with passion’ to implement some of the ideas he had gleaned. He was particularly impressed by Amiri Baraka’s National Black Theatre in Harlem. They were ‘so powerful’, and ‘so strong’. Maza loved the way they were using theatre as a teaching medium and so, with a little theatre experience of his own behind him, helped to establish a National Black Theatre (NBT) in Redfern, in 1972.³⁴

This multifaceted theatre and community place was a space that could be used as a childcare facility during the day, where Black Panthers were known to participate in poetry readings for local children, and where community meetings were held. Carole Johnson, a dancer with a Black American company, had remained in Australia after her tour finished and it was here that she trained the dance division of the theatre. An art workshop produced sculptures, carvings and ceramics, as well as posters for demonstrations. Drama and writing workshops taught basic skills, and ‘Ebony Profile’ was established as a Black casting agency for advertising, television and film.³⁵

Black theatre was a consciously political undertaking from the beginning. The performers and writers involved aimed to put forward what they saw as a specifically Aboriginal view of social reality and to challenge White audiences. NBT was consequently often described as ‘protest theatre’, but its function was much broader. It was actively intent on exploring those factors that constituted Aboriginality. The theatre’s creative works were to be used as tools for recovering a different historical tradition and for putting forward Aboriginal narratives of dispossession. They would counter White-controlled images of Aboriginality and promote Black pride. This version of Aboriginality would not only declare its separateness from white Australia but also would celebrate it and teach it to others. For many, Aboriginal theatre was no less powerful than the Aboriginal Embassy or the Black Panther Party in achieving political goals or promoting Black Power.³⁶ The theatre of NBT lay in the idea that there was no significant

slippage between the parts the actors were playing and the reality of their lives once they had left the stage. Life on reserves and missions, in fringe towns and inner urban communities, seasonal work, racial violence, the continuing impact of colonialism and the intersections between past and present provided the creative impetus for Aboriginal theatre. So too did the political activities of the theatre's actors, many of whom, as playwright Gerry Bostock observed, were involved in multiple spheres of activism. Those involved in Black theatre were just as likely to be found working with Aboriginal community organisations or at the Aboriginal Embassy — because, Bostock argued, they knew that 'to do the job that has to be done involves struggle on many fronts, and you can't devote yourself to one area'.³⁷

The tents

*As the months drag on into autumn and then into winter, the Embassy protesters lose none of their conviction, nor their anger. Although they leave — for jobs, families, other cities — there is reunion around the tents on the weekends, and talk of land rights in the air. And when the protestors come together to discuss their goals, there is talk of other things too. They know that the tents are a devastating visual reminder of the aftermath of dispossession, and they know that 'land rights' and 'civil rights' are intimately connected. If you were to pass by the Embassy during these months, a staffer might hand you a flyer listing a broad range of concerns. You might learn of an 'Aboriginal Embassy Manifesto', which begins by asking whether Aborigines have 'received a fair deal' in return for losing their land. It points to inequalities in education, wages and the law, as well as extremely high mortality statistics. Or, you might chance across an information sheet titled 'Why an Embassy?' It begins with a denunciation of the government's policy on land, but moves swiftly to paint a picture of Aboriginal living conditions — high unemployment and infant mortality, malnutrition, gonorrhoea, scurvy, tuberculosis, gastroenteritis and trachoma.*³⁸

*To attempt to deal with these problems, many of the Embassy campaigners are actively involved in 'community survival programs' in inner-city Sydney. As much as their commitment to land rights, it is their daily confrontation with poverty and racial oppression that binds them. One of these activists is Gary Foley. From Nambucca Heads in northern New South Wales, he has been a significant figure in the Black Power movement in Sydney for several years. He also loves a good argument. When an elderly White woman approaches him one day as he is lying on the Embassy lawns, full of moralistic advice for the demonstrators, it is all the encouragement he needs. 'Listen! Lemme tell you something!' He jabs his finger at her. 'We've done alright in the past two years in Sydney without people like you. And we're going to do alright for a long time to come. We're going to get our bloody land, even if we have to fucking well take it!'*³⁹

Black independence

For young Redfern activists, racism was a constant presence. It permeated every facet of their lives but found its clearest expression in their frequent encounters with the police — which arose, they were certain, from an official campaign of intimidation, harassment, and high-level surveillance.⁴⁰ Police behaviour at the Empress Hotel (the 'Big E'), or the Clifton Hotel in Regent Street was a typical example. 'It was like a taxi rank', Foley claimed. 'They'd come in and beat the shit out of everyone inside, arbitrarily arrest anyone who objected, and when the wagons were full they'd drive off and lock people up on trumped-up charges'.⁴¹ Simply to be on the streets of Redfern late at night was enough to contravene the 'unofficial curfew'. If you were on the streets after 10 pm, recalled activist Chicka Dixon, 'brother, you're taking a chance'.⁴²

It was Foley, his cousin Gary Williams and Paul Coe who eventually took decisive action. Coe, Foley claimed, 'started trying to convince me and Williams that we could do something about [police harassment]'. He began encouraging them to read political literature, but was becoming particularly enthusiastic about his discovery of a campaign called the 'Pig Patrol' that the Black Panthers had begun in America. He handed the information to Foley. 'This is a great idea. Read this'.⁴³

These activists realised that, while they could not trail police around the streets with loaded weapons as the Black Panthers were doing, the techniques were nonetheless easily adapted for Redfern. They could at least carry notebooks and pencils. Thus armed, some activists entered the 'Big E' one Saturday evening in 1969. 'As the pigs began to do their nightly act we started writing down everything that they were doing', Foley recalls. 'We wrote down their numbers, their van numbers, who they were arresting'.⁴⁴ After several months, a group of activists including Williams, Foley, Paul and his sister Isobel Coe, Tony Coorey, Les Collins, Lyn Thompson, Shirley Smith (Mum Shirl) and James Wedge had amassed a vast amount of incriminating evidence.⁴⁵

What followed was a series of meetings between these activists and Hal Wootten, Dean of Law at the University of New South Wales. They were, he noted, an 'impressive group', intensely proud of their Aboriginality, and determined to solve the social problems that beset their community.⁴⁶ The first Aboriginal Legal Service of New South Wales was consequently launched only a short time later. While activists relied heavily on the assistance of sympathetic White lawyers, this was the first organisation in the state to be conceived, established and controlled by Aborigines since the Aborigines Progressive Association in 1937.

Institutional racism was crippling Aboriginal life in Redfern in other areas as well, and young Black Power activists continued to seek a solution. Coe continued