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BOOTS, BLANKETS, AND BOMB TESTS: FIRST AUSTRALIAN PETITIONING AND RESISTANCE TO COLONISATION

DR KAREN O'BRIEN*

Petitions are the symbolic representation of the unacceptable position of First Australians' standing in Australian society; they demonstrate the continuity and persistence of First Australian communities to assert their rights. This article draws attention to First Australian petitioning, which is used as a basis for questioning colonisation and colonial history. Rather than petitions being a form of endorsement for the legitimacy of colonisation, it presents a preliminary assessment of how petitioners instigated, set in motion, and subsequently brought about the change necessary to produce landmark legal decisions. Specifically, it proposes an extensive archival study of petitions and related documents to ascertain the true extent of national First Australian political participation. Through the act of petitioning, First Australian peoples not only communicate their concerns about their collective future and assert the right to manage their own affairs, they also demonstrate resilience, authority, and agency.

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I INTRODUCTION

With the advent of *Mabo* and *Wik*,¹ among other landmark decisions, it is important to establish new understandings of First Australian activism through the lens of petitioning to more accurately understand the full extent of Australia's political past. This article intends to draw attention to the use of First Australian petitioning as an instrument for questioning Australia's colonial history. It presents a preliminary assessment of how petitioners instigated, set in motion, and subsequently brought about the change that was necessary to produce landmark legal decisions.

This essay will begin by acknowledging the value that recognising petitions within a national framework and gaining recognition will bring. It will then outline the historical path that First Australians paved in creating political awareness through petitions, followed by further explanation as to how starting a conversation surrounding First Australian petitions can make a positive contribution to solidifying and giving voice to the First Australian narrative. By placing particular emphasis on the Larrakia Petition in this context, this section serves to reinforce the potential that First Australian petitions may have for enacting political and legal change. Ultimately, further investigation into petitions will significantly contribute to the First Australian narrative and illuminate

¹ *Mabo v Queensland (No. 2)* (1992) 175 CLR 1; *Wik Peoples v The State of Queensland* (1996) 187 CLR 1.

First Australian historical and ongoing resistance to colonisation. The intention is to provide a basis for a better understanding of the role of community-driven petitions in narrating the lived experiences of First Australians in their historical and ongoing resistance to colonisation.

II PETITIONS AS OPPOSITION TO COLONIAL RULE

A petition provides a record of action taken by First Australians to appeal to law. Petitioning itself is a direct means of placing concerns before a legislative body and requesting a change to the law, an administrative concern, or redress of grievance.² They are a valuable account of the experiences of First Australians, who are often underrepresented in colonial primary sources of evidence. First Australian campaigners utilised petitions as a means of opposing colonial rule. Through petitioning, First Australians articulated their grievances and sought legal redress of important issues.

States everywhere have sought to control First Australian people. Throughout their overlapping histories, First Nations peoples across the world have consistently contested this control.³ A socio-legal approach to the efforts of First Australian communities to resist state control draws attention to petitioning as an important field of research, and redefines the First Australian struggle for rights within the wide-ranging historical narrative and against contemporary notions of justice and injustice. According to Elias, the structure of violence control at the individual and state level is linked.⁴ However, superiority attained by violent means to control the behaviour of others has not yet been thoroughly explored.⁵ An approach that investigates State control of First Australian peoples and their petitioning action against it can add much to the broader narrative of past- and present-day cross-cultural understanding.

² Karen Ellingford, 'The Purpose, Practice and Effects of Petitioning the Victorian Parliament' (2008) 23(2) *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 86, 86.

³ See, eg, Ravi de Costa, 'Identity, Authority, and the Moral Worlds of Indigenous Petitions' (2006) 48(3) *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 669; Larissa Behrendt et al, *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines* (Allen & Unwin, 2003); Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Treaties: the History of a Political Anomaly* (University of California Press, 1994); Blanca Tovías, 'Diplomacy and Contestation before and after the 1870 Massacre of Amskapi Pikuni' (2013) 60(2) *Ethnohistory* 269; John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: the Origins of Australian Aboriginal Activism* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007); Judy Iseke-Barnes, 'Living and Writing Indigenous Spiritual Resistance' (2003) 24(3) *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 211.

⁴ Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell, *The Norbert Elias Reader* (Blackwell, 1998) 1.

⁵ *Ibid* 223.

III CALLS FOR A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF PETITIONING

A national framework of petitioning can make available knowledge of First Australian resistance to colonisation, destabilising and decolonising colonist misrepresentation of First Australian experiences. Assembling First Australian evidence of resistance through the narrative that often accompanies a petition enables meaningful dialogue to emerge. Further, an appropriate understanding of the act of petitioning to achieve social justice adds to the growing interest in comparative world accounts. It can contribute to the global awareness of First Australian political involvement by locating First Australian petitioning rights within the broader transnational understanding of First Nations' rights. There is already some recognition of First Australian political action through petitions, particularly those well-known petitions that influenced the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, such as the Yirrkala petition (1963). However, there are hundreds of less notable petitions. Even these less familiar petitions requesting plain and simple outcomes make a public statement and, in doing so, form a continuity of First Australian resistance to colonial governance and policy. The details of these less recognisable petitions equally confirm and inform the finer points regarding the extent and continuation of First Australian political representation and are therefore worthy of further investigation.

In acknowledging the wide-ranging scope of First Australian activity through the sphere of petitioning, one can attain a new understanding of First Australian self-determination. In recasting First Australian petitioning as an articulation of self-determination rather than as a failure to overturn colonialism, an appropriate and up-to-the-minute account of First Australian activity is feasible. It gives voice to First Australian political and social organisation, and provides new insights into the people who drove and continue to drive the process of change.

IV FIRST AUSTRALIAN PETITIONING: AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

The process of petitioning is an ancient fundamental right. Traditionally, individuals, groups, or a person representing the aggrieved group presented petitions to royalty and to the House of Commons. First Australians quickly learned the value of pursuing this legal option, having petitioned numerous authorities since the early days of colonisation. Some of the earliest First Australian petitions were presented to various

authorities in New South Wales between 1800 and 1831. Petitions have also been presented to the Parliament of Australia for redress of grievances and as a request for action. Interest in research exploring the extent of petitioning in the European setting is not yet reflected in the Australian context.⁶ However, my preliminary study of First Australian petitioning in each Australian state suggests that there was strong political enterprise through petitioning.

Described as a popular form of political participation in Australia, original petitions are an accessible primary resource containing details about the development of Australian society.⁷ Petitions are a manifestation of informal politics; they incorporate the practice of ordinary citizens in influencing government decision-making. Although First Australians were not formally recognised as citizens until 1967, they nevertheless voiced their opinions through the right to petition. To illustrate, the first petition presented to the Western Australian Legislative Assembly was tabled on 24 February 1891.⁸ The Larrakia community of the Northern Territory, in 1972, presented a petition to Princess Margaret calling for political representation and land rights. Since 2008 there have been 140 petitions presented to Parliament annually. In spite of the long and varied history of petitioning in Australia, the field remains under-explored.⁹

In Corbett's article about Australian parliamentary petitions as an untapped source, she draws attention to the petition 'as an important and underutilised primary historical resource', stating that 'there has been very little written about petitions in the Australian political science arena'.¹⁰ While it would be useful to know what proportion of these petitions was First Australian-driven, such an extensive account is beyond the scope of this article. There has, however, been some research into First Nations transnational communities, political expression,¹¹ and political mobilisation.¹² For example, one study

⁶ Mark Ormrod, Linne Mooney and Gwilym Dodd, *The Writing of Petitions in Later Medieval England* (8 April 2014) Manuscript Studies in an Interoperable Digital Environment <<http://www.stanford.edu/group/dmstech/cgi-bin/drupal/node/43>>.

⁷ Niamh Corbett, 'Parliamentary Petitions: an Untapped Library Resource' (2013) 60(3) *Australian Library Journal* 218, 222.

⁸ *Ibid* 222.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 223.

¹¹ de Costa, above n 3.

¹² Maynard, above n 3.

examined a campaign of First Australian letter writing and subsequent petition to the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines in 1913.¹³

The absence of research into the world of First Australian petitions and the constant quest for self-determined outcomes indicates strong potential for a broad national study. Although petitions are sometimes identified as forms of resistance through interpretations of First Australians citizenship and rights, there is currently no wide-ranging account that encompasses First Australian-driven petitioning in its entirety throughout Australia's history. Petitions contain details of the disruption and contestation of the normative arrangement, and so open up the way for a renegotiation and the consequent restructuring of Australia's legislative procedure.

V SEEING PAST PETITIONS AS SYMBOLIC RELICS

The way we interpret petitions is important. In the process of reconsidering petitions as inclusive of a narrative of First Australian political engagement, it is possible to shift the emphasis from failure to overturn colonialism to the more accurate reading of the articulation of legal and political self-determination and rights. Recent research has effectively examined settler sovereignty,¹⁴ settler law, and imperialism.¹⁵ According to de Costa, appellants have achieved worldwide attention through petitioning. He explains, 'every petition is an interaction of the identity of the petitioner and the authority being petitioned and provides the opportunity for the presentation of a moral order'.¹⁶ In addition, First Australian scholars are in favour of employing decolonising processes to better recognise alternative discourses.¹⁷ First Australian narratives and

¹³ Victoria Haskins, 'Give to Us the People We Would Love To Be Amongst Us': The Aboriginal Campaign against Caroline Bulmer's Eviction from Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station, 1913-14' [2008] (7) *Provenance Journal of Public Record Office Victoria* <<http://prov.vic.gov.au/publications/provenance/provenance2008/give-to-us-the-people>>.

¹⁴ Lisa Ford, *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and First Australian People in America and Australia, 1788-1836* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Lisa Ford and Tim Rowse (eds), *Between Indigenous and Settler Governance* (Routledge, 2013).

¹⁶ de Costa, above n 3, 670.

¹⁷ See, eg, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Zed Books, 1999); Karen Martin, 'Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing: A Theoretical Framework and Methods for Indigenous and Indigenist Research' (2003) 76 *Journal of Australian Studies* 203; Lester-Irabinna Rigney, 'Internationalization of an Indigenous Anticolonial Cultural Critique of Research Methodologies: A Guide to Indigenist Research Methodology and its Principles' (1999) 14(2) *Wicazo Sa Review* 109; Dennis Foley, 'Indigenous Epistemology and Indigenous Standpoint Theory' (2003) 22(1) *Social Alternatives* 44; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Aboriginal Women and Feminism* (University of Queensland Press, 2000); Terri Janke, *Writing up Indigenous Research: Authorship, Copyright and Indigenous Knowledge Systems* (Terri Janke & Company, 2009)

decolonisation processes are also strongly advocated in studies of crime and justice.¹⁸ Without a doubt, petitions are an invaluable record of First Australian long-standing efforts to achieve social justice. They represent an important resource containing details of First Australian peoples' interests, form a record of their political requests, and often articulate the more personal details of their lived realities.

First Australian petitions in the broader Australian community are sometimes perceived as symbolic relics, artefacts, or works of art. They are not primarily regarded as ongoing records of First Australian resistance to colonisation. Several exhibitions highlighting the national importance of specific petitions have drawn great public interest in First Australian rights. For example, in 2007 a Victorian exhibition, *And your petitioners humbly pray: 150 years of petitions in Victoria*, reflected a range of social concerns through petitions. Similarly, a performance project entitled *Minutes of Evidence*, arising from the Coranderrk petition (1886), is still in its development phase.¹⁹ In 2013, the inaugural Coranderrk festival commemorated the 150th anniversary of the founding of the original Coranderrk station, celebrating the petitioning started by William Barak and the other signatories. The Larrakia petition, discussed below, was displayed in the exhibition *Memory of a Nation* from January 2007 and further featured in *Your Memento*.²⁰ Well-known petitions are gaining more recognition through museum displays and online retrospectives. The new and expanded *Collaborating for First Australian Rights* website refers to 'collaboration between black and white activists' and the initiation of campaigns 'to include First Australians as members of Australian society with rights to vote and rights to benefits'.²¹ Such exhibitions demonstrate a keen public interest in the process of petitioning and in the contents of petitions. While certain petitions are revered in displays and exhibitions, or symbolically recognised in festivals, there is no comprehensive account of the agency involved in First Australian nation-wide petitioning, or of the enduring First Australian story of the resistance to colonisation through petitioning.

<<http://terrijanke.com.au/index.php/writing-up-indigenous/>>; Judy Iseke-Barnes, 'Pedagogies for Decolonizing' (2008) 31(1) *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 123.

¹⁸ Harry Blagg, *Crime, Aboriginality and the Decolonization of Justice* (Hawkins Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Ilbijerri Theatre Company, *The Project* (2013) *Minutes of Evidence* <<http://minutesofevidence.com>>.

²⁰ National Archives of Australia, *Gwalwa Daraniki: Land Rights Struggle on Record* (3 June 2011) *Your Memento* <<http://yourmemento.naa.gov.au/2011/06/gwalwa-daraniki-land-rights-struggle-on-record>>.

²¹ National Museum of Australia, *Organisations* (16 April 2014) *Collaborating for Indigenous Rights* <www.Indigenous.net.au/organisations.asp>.

VI THE ROLE OF PETITIONS IN THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN NARRATIVE

The usefulness of petitions is in their wide-ranging and close narration of First Australian political events. They are often presented in response to State administrative control of First Australian communities, and they are an important record of the culmination of campaigns of political dispute. Petitioning campaigns also bring to light episodes of cross-cultural collaboration on issues of land and governance.²² The social activity and direct action that is necessary in the preparation of a petition, as well as the enactment involved in the process of presenting the petition itself, is a complex multipart expression of ongoing First Australian resistance to the outcomes of colonisation. Petitions are the symbolic representation of the unacceptable position of First Australian standing in Australian society and demonstrate the continuity and persistence of First Australian communities in asserting their rights. Through the act of petitioning, First Australian peoples not only communicate their concerns about their collective future and assert the right to manage their own affairs, they also demonstrate resilience, authority, and agency.

Early First Australian writing is recognised as a 'tool of resistance'.²³ The act of petitioning sometimes involves the symbolic recognition of an authority that can act on the petitioner's behalf. Bennelong's letter, written in 1796, demonstrates involvement in what Penny van Toorn refers to as 'complex cultural and socio-political dynamics',²⁴ and exemplifies a 'struggle to negotiate a position in two social orders simultaneously'.²⁵ In a letter to Mr and Mrs Phillips, Bennelong requested 'two pairs of shoes, two pairs of stockings and some handkerchiefs' that he later traded.²⁶

A significant number of similar requests took the form of petitions. Some of these were presented during the early interval of 1825–1831 in New South Wales. In the absence of land rights, First Australian petitioners were no longer able to hunt for the skins to keep warm and petitions for blankets were formulated. For example, Kurnell landholder John Connell's petition to Captain Dumaresq to receive General Darling's blanket donation, to

²² Haskins, above n 13.

²³ Penny van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006) 59.

²⁴ *Ibid* 56.

²⁵ *Ibid* 63.

²⁶ *Ibid* 63–9.

be given to Bolgobrough and his wife Maria of Botany Bay. The petition set out Bolgobrough's request as follows:

The bearer Bolgobrough is chief of Botany Bay, William and Ann is his brother [sic] and generally reside at the south Side of Botany Bay. They and their tribe are come to Sydney for his Excellency General Darling's benevolent donation of blankets for the ensuing winter.²⁷

First Australian petitions were not always conciliatory in attitude. While carefully following the mandatory protocols, petitions often contain details of extreme discontent and in this regard they serve as symbols of open opposition to the power of the state. They express deep dissatisfaction on a broad range of concerns in connection with years of violence, dislocation from land, and religious control of culture. For example, petitions were used to oppose rocket bomb testing in central Australia,²⁸ advocate land rights, seek compensation for land loss, seek political rights, and petition the United Nations for land rights,²⁹ control of sacred sites, and the removal of state-imposed artificial national barriers.³⁰

First Australian petitions often record matters of governance. They sometimes request coronial inquests and commissions into First Australian deaths in custody and draw national and international attention to a range of social and political concerns. Community-driven petitions are still presented by the Redfern community to carry out a coronial inquest into the death of Thomas James Hickey.³¹ Recently, the popularity of petitioning has increased as a result of growth in communication and information

²⁷ State Library of New South Wales, *Petition from John Connell to Captain Dumaresq recommending Aborigines of Botany Bay to receive General Darling's donation of blankets, 1825-1831* <<http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/item/itemDetailPaged.aspx?itemID=893645>>.

²⁸ *Personal Papers of Prime Minister Chifley Correspondence 'B', Part 1 [Bacon Curers' Association of Queensland - N Bayliss, includes representations from H C Baggs relating to manufacture of starch from Burrawang palm, Municipality of Balmain, Bardon Progress Association, S Barton, various Bathurst organisations, petition from Kew Tramway Depot relating to basic wage, Australian Student Christian Movement petition relating to aborigines and rocket bomb testing in central Australia]*, National Archives of Australia <<http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=1516335&isAv=N>>.

²⁹ *Petition to United Nations by Aborigines*, National Archives of Australia <<http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx>>.

³⁰ Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, 8 September 1977, 1 (James Keeffe).

³¹ New South Wales, *Response by the Hon. Greg Smith - to petition lodged 26 February 2013 - Death of T.J. and Aboriginal deaths in custody*, Parl Paper No 25 (2013) <<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/la/latabdoc.nsf/0/CD1AD9CB6669D063CA257B41001967F>>.

technologies. One such example is the online national petition, signed by thousands of Australians for the release of Rosie Anne Fulton from imprisonment.³²

The petitions referred to above are an illustration only of the kinds of petitions that are presented on a broad range of issues, largely for self-determined outcomes and redress of grievances. In taking a specific focus on First Australian petitions, research can effectively explore the ways in which notions of justice are invoked and confronted, and can establish innovative ways of thinking about contemporary forms of fundamental justice. Early First Australian petitions contain many powerful narratives. Researching the petitions that record evidence of the details of such resistance and the assertion of rights can enable meaningful dialogue to emerge, recover important details of First Australian agency, and destabilise colonial misrepresentation of First Australians' involvement in political events.

In 2013 Australia commemorated the 50th anniversary of the *Yirrkala Bark Petitions 1963 (Cth)* by the Yolgnu of Yirrkala in eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.³³ The Yirrkala Bark Petitions articulate a process by which First Australian communities sought to maintain their traditional identities. In a supplication to Parliament, these petitions establish that land was not relinquished but was taken by government officials without permission. In earlier petitions, William Barak had challenged colonial powers through the petition at Coranderrk. Barak organised a protest walk, leading 22 men for 60 kilometres from Coranderrk to Parliament House to meet with Premier Berry.

Petitions were not only presented for the lofty political purpose of obtaining sweeping constitutional change. A high number of petitions were organised to bring about changes that appear insignificant. However, the act of invoking potential change and realising the appellant's aims meant a great deal in terms of improving the daily lives of the petitioners. Although petitions requesting boots or blankets may not, on the surface appear to be particularly significant in political terms, they are nevertheless an important contribution to the articulation of First Australian rights and resistance to colonisation. At the very least, they are constant reminders of First Australian

³² Tony Jones, 'NT Has No Authority to Hold Rosie Anne' *ABC* (online), 13 March 2014 <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-03-13/nt-has-no-authority-to-hold-rosie-anne/5319990>>.

³³ Museum of Australian Democracy, *Yirrkala Bark Petitions 1963 (Cth)* <<http://foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-104.html>>.

denunciation of colonisation. Further research of those petitions that contain details of real-world objectives has the potential to add to knowledge of First Australian lived realities. Moreover, it can contribute to the transnational context of First Nations rights engagement, political organisation, and petitioning, which provides the broad international context for theorising and contextualising petitioning as resistance to colonial rule.

A The Larrakia Petition

While stressing variations in First Australian petitioning, the perspective offered here underlines the fact that it was the influence of tireless campaigning and frequent political and legal struggles that produced self-determined outcomes. One example of the many variations of active engagement undertaken by appellants can be found in the Larrakia struggle for land rights. The Larrakia petition was an important precursor to the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, and was prepared by the traditional owners of the city of Darwin — the Larrakia people. It demonstrates the efforts made by the Larrakia people in the ongoing struggle to achieve recognition of their land rights. Although it is not as well recognised as some of the more celebrated petitions, it is nevertheless a significant example of the political pressure exerted to achieve land rights and political representation by the Larrakia people. The petition is strongly representative of the kinds of action that precipitated many of the positive outcomes. Petition documents are revealing of the protests that took place to gain national recognition in support of land rights between 1971–1976 — crucial years leading up to the formulation of the Act.

The first petition was sent to the McMahon government in March 1972 to establish a commission for the negotiation of a treaty. The bid was not successful. Despite this setback, a second petition was prepared, receiving national support from 1000 First Australians. The unwavering disposition of the petitioners and the assertive content of the petition was a direct response to Prime Minister McMahon's rejection of the request for treaties. A gathering of Larrakia people produced the petition in the document *Gwalwa Daranaki* ('this is our land'). The account of the appeal for land rights appears below:

We, the undersigned, wish to express [sic] our support for the following appeal being made on behalf of the Larrakia Tribe of Darwin by the Aboriginal people of

Australia. Gwalwa Daranaki. This is our land. The British settlers took our land. No treaties were signed with the Tribes. Today we are refugees. Refugees in the country of our ancestors. We live in refugee camps without land, without employment, without justice. The British Crown signed treaties with the Maoris in New Zealand and the Indians in North America. We appeal to the Queen to help us, the Aboriginal people of Australia. We need land rights and political representation now.³⁴

The Larrakia petition was described as a being 'over eleven feet long'.³⁵ Its great proportions were the symbolic representation of the extent of national feelings of support for the Larrakia claims. The petition, containing 1000 First Australian signatures, was sent to Aboriginal Government House with a letter signed by Robert Secretary, Fred Fogarty, David Daniels, Peter Mundine, and Harry Adam on 17 October 1972. The letter was addressed to the Queen and was stamped by the private secretary's office at Buckingham Palace on 3 November 1972. It requested acceptance of the petition signed by 'one thousand Aboriginal people of Australia'.³⁶ The petitioners intended to present the petition to Princess Margaret during her visit in Darwin in October 1972. The accompanying letter communicated the dramatic circumstances involved and particularised the long delay they encountered in presenting the petition.

The letter referred to the violent 'scuffle' that took place during police intervention and stated that the appellants felt embarrassed that the petition was torn during this process.³⁷ It expressed open feelings of sorrow at the absence of a royal response. The petitioners wrote: 'our last hope was to try and break through the many police that always stood between us and the Royal visitors'.³⁸ The voices of the petitioners are clearly discernible when speaking of police intervention; the way the petition is worded highlights the struggle petitioners faced in trying to break through police barricades. It also communicated the value they placed on self-representation and the desire to have personal contact with the Princess, giving details of the frustration they felt in being prevented from placing the petition in Princess Margaret's hands. They wrote:

³⁴ *Petition to HM The Queen from the Larrakia/Larrakia people regarding land rights for presentation during HRH The Princess Margaret's visit to Darwin*, National Archives of Australia <<http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=8120201&isAv=N>>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

We waited for twenty-four hours to give our petition to the Princess. We wanted her to know the truth about the Aboriginal people of Australia. We gave a note to one of the Royal Aides telling Princess Margaret that we wished to present a petition. There was no reply.³⁹

While the petition records the details of the turbulent circumstances in which it was presented, further documents disclose the culmination of feelings of discontent. They record details of the extent of the barracking and political organisation that was required to get the petition to the point of presentation. For example, the thoughts, requests, attitudes of members of the community, and strong feelings of the petition-bearers were clearly expressed in the *Bunji* newsletter (used to keep the broader community up-to-date on the ongoing process of complaint). According to the newsletter, besides the petition, there was also a request for a treaty, referred to as the 'Larrakia Treaty' that was presented to 'Judge Woodward' [sic] on 2 June 1973.⁴⁰

As with the Larrakia petition discussed above, letters of complaint that contain long, detailed, and original narratives often complement petitions concerning contested events. An analysis of these accompanying documents can be helpful in forming both an intimate and broad national portrait of the extent of petitioning in Australia. Those areas in which there are consistent and protracted situations of petitioning can be explored to uncover the social, economic, and political circumstances existed to provoke the petition. The rich archival information relating to petitioning makes possible an in-depth investigation from *within* the world of the petitioners, which is somewhat rare in colonial documents referring to First Australians. State archives in Australia contain a broad range of petitions and petitioner's letters of supplication and request. Further analysis of these letters from the collections of records about First Australian peoples can add much to the social context of petitioning. An intense archival study of petitions can contribute to a far-reaching global investigation of First Nation legal and political organisation. A range of petitions and records speak to the socio-legal contexts of supplicants, recording the incidences of social change that came about through First Australian petitioning practices. This information can make a significant contribution to the global understanding of First Nations transnational politics, and the use of petitions

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

as tools of negotiation, intervention, and disruption that seek inclusion in the social order and appeal to national notions of social justice.

VII WHY PETITIONS? A CALL FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Most studies of political rights and calls for citizenship emphasise First Australian activism of the twentieth-century. An in-depth analysis of petitions can emphasise the political articulation of First Australian petitioners against colonisation over the last 200 years. Other lines of inquiry could address the circumstances that drove individuals to orchestrate petitions, identifying who was involved in presenting petitions, observing comparisons between states, developing interest in petitions that were successful in achieving their aims, and locating “hotspots” or waves of petitioning within particular timeframes. Research into these and similar questions can increase Australia’s knowledge of our social and political development. A thorough investigation of First Australian petitions also holds comparative potential for informing similar studies of First Nations’ petitions in Canada, the USA, and New Zealand.

Unlike most colonial documentary sources, manuscripts that record the processes involved in petitioning place First Australian aspirants centre-stage. If for no other reason, this alone makes petitions a worthy source of investigation. An investigation of petitioning can examine the many hundreds of manuscripts of petitions in a comparison of Australian states to understand the distribution of petitioning across Australia. Further research and analytical investigation setting out the scope of the campaigns that initiated and drove Indigenous petitions and petitioning is necessary. It will determine the distinctive socio-legal and political context of both the individual and assemblage of First Australian voices contained in the creation of the petitions within an appropriate social and geopolitical context that will differ from state to state. Research could identify the underlying social, economic and, political dynamics that drove the process of petitioning in each state in Australia, as well as reflect upon any potential circumstances of collaboration in cross-cultural interpersonal relations.

While some early petitions may be regarded as an endorsement of the legitimacy of the power being appealed to, the agency contained within them enabled the means for First Australian negotiation and representation. Petitions are representative of power

relations, political identities, and the desire for First Australian geopolitical self-determination.

VIII CONCLUSION

First Australian petitions stand apart from other primary colonial sources of information in that they contain the actual voices and narratives of the petitioners. There is a danger that they will be regulated to the past as a subset of collaboration without due consideration as political, legal, and historical records of resistance to colonisation. This is true even as, and perhaps partly because, better-known First Australian petitions are today emblematically celebrated as icons or artefacts.

By providing a preliminary exposition of First Australian petitioning, this article has sought to justify further exploration into the significance of petitions as ongoing resistance to colonial rule, and as an example of First Australian assertions of the rights of self-determination. Whether petitioning for boots, blankets, policy change, or for political recognition, petitions evince a record of First Australians' efforts to campaign consistently since colonisation for self-determined outcomes.

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