Culture Crisis
ANTHROPOLOGY AND POLITICS IN ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA

Edited by Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson
Historically Australians have tended to imagine remote living Aboriginal people via two broad types of representation. The first pictures cultural difference in positive terms – hunter-gatherers with robust ceremonial and artistic traditions, who speak distinct languages and live off the land. The second views cultural difference negatively – it sees repugnant and savage practices, anti-modern tendencies, impoverished social outcasts. Both sets of stereotypes assert and assume remote Aboriginal people’s separation from wider Australia. While both have co-existed across the history of the nation, by and large it is the case that one kind of image has dominated in any particular era and broadly influenced the shape of public and policy attention to ‘the Aboriginal problem’. Since the mid-1990s we have been witnessing the steady re-ascendance of the negative stereotype. Notions of tradition, culture, community, self-determination
that framed attention to remote Aboriginal Australia through the 1970s and 1980s have been steadily displaced by a discourse of failure, suffering, violence. Images of vibrant culture – often mobilised through attention to the figure of the Aboriginal elder – have been destabilised by the spectre of child sexual and physical abuse. Peter Sutton, in *The Politics of Suffering*, attributes part of the current crisis in Indigenous policy-making to thirty years of progressive overcommitment to positive stereotypes, and proffers a new starting point for deliberations over the future of remote Aboriginal towns: the 3-year-old child. It is a compelling narrative, mobilised graphically and most effectively before Sutton by Noel Pearson, then by architects of the NT Intervention, and simultaneously by mainstream media to galvanise public support for a new policy approach. The spectre of a ‘national emergency’ in regard to the innocent/suffering Aboriginal child has an unparalleled potency in its capacity to cut through bogged-down political debate. Its essential moral rightness demands urgent action.

This newly re-emergent negative representation – as with its positive predecessor – falls far short of capturing the diverse complexity of Aboriginal circumstances. Fifteen years ago Marcia Langton brought analytical clarity to our understanding of the process by which ‘icons of Aboriginality’ are produced when she wrote that ‘the most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors’. Both representations position Aboriginal culture as an object that functions or fails according to its own logic, ignoring the cultural complexity of forms of postcolonial governance. In the most recent politics of representation, for example, a direct link has been made between the figure of the suffering child as a newly established icon of remote Aboriginality and the attribution of failure to the ‘experiment’ in self-determination. The logic is straightforward: if ‘self-determination’ is cast unambiguously as having been tried and failed, then Aboriginal people are to blame for their own demise. It follows that they are not capable of governing themselves – in this sense they are child-like. Similarly, the narrative of suffering is characterised as a form of self-harm, as something Aboriginal people have brought upon
themselves. In these ways of imagining remote Aboriginal Australia, ‘culture’ itself remains whole, untheorised, and ultimately something Aboriginal people need to be saved from, in the same way that children’s innocence must be protected. Paradoxically, in the moment it is killed off as an object worthy of our regard,^5^ culture is rescued from the need to give it any critical attention.

This essay considers the case of one community, the predominantly Warlpiri people of the township of Yuendumu, 300 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs, who have had a long and intense experience as both subjects and producers of media images. In particular it examines the recent attempt by Warlpiri people to shift the terms of their engagement with wider Australia, by inserting themselves into one of the most significant representational spaces of the nation: The Australian newspaper. Here I shall explore the points of disconnection between dominant representations of remote Aboriginal Australia and the complex and diverse ways Warlpiri choose to represent themselves. The final section of the essay moves briefly from the mediascape to the ground at Yuendumu, to observe how the new forms of governance introduced by the NT Intervention are being enacted. Underlying this discussion is a wider interest in considering the moral distinction Warlpiri make between distance and presence as two qualitatively different ways of knowing and forms of engagement between self and other.

In identifying the field of media representations as a crucial dimension of contemporary politics and identity construction, we should recall more specifically that the NT Intervention was itself triggered by a series of dramatic media events. NT Crown Prosecutor Nanette Rogers’ appearance on ABC TV’s Lateline program on 15 April 2006 was a key catalyst for the inquiry that led to the Little Children are Sacred report. The same program later aired the allegations that remote central Australian communities were preyed upon by paedophile rings.^6^ The Intervention’s mobilisation via the deployment of the army, and the media attention that followed, was, as Langton has observed, nothing if not ‘an obscene spectacle’ itself.^7^
The majority of Australians take hold of Aboriginal Australia primarily through media images. Yet the expanded reach and accessibility of communications technologies means that residents of metropolitan areas are not unique in having acquired the distinctly modern disposition of ‘distant observer’. For some decades now, remote living Aboriginal people have had access to the same world making ‘news’ as the rest of us. I became aware of this early on in my time at Yuendumu as a PhD student in the mid-1990s. During this period one of Yuendumu’s oldest men regularly sat outside the store on pension day with a billy can on his lap, appealing to his fellow countrymen and women to give to the ‘poor buggers starving in Africa’. A door-to-door collection undertaken within the same town for Community Aid Abroad elicited a characteristically Warlpiri response from one resident: he looked at the picture on the promotional leaflet and declared the woman in question had a ‘new blanket’ so clearly was not in need of his support. During an early conversation with a senior woman artist, I was told that Yuendumu Warlpiri were ‘lucky’, because by contrast with the homeless ‘poor buggers’ she had seen on the streets of New York, they had ‘everything’. This kind of awareness among Yuendumu people of their place within a global order is increasingly pervasive and fuels a new kind of reflexive consideration of their own circumstances and values.

Equally, Warlpiri people have ready access to the images and public debate through which wider Australia imagines them. Yuendumu has a long history of near constant attention from visiting journalists and filmmakers, and is renowned for its establishment of one of the earliest and most productive remote Aboriginal media associations in the country. In the early period of activity, videomakers at Warlpiri Media Association characterised what they were doing as ‘fighting fire with fire’. In conjunction with their non-Aboriginal collaborators they developed a contract that visiting media and filmmakers were required to sign, which aimed to secure some degree of control over the kinds of images that might be
produced in their town. Warlpiri people were consistently adamant that their ‘sorry camps’ be shielded from the view of visiting cameras. A concern for the privacy of those grieving for deceased loved ones was voiced as the main rationale, but there was more to it than this – sorry camps have a distinctly anti-modern aesthetic; situated on the edge of the town’s perimeter, a jumble of corrugated iron, wood and basic bedding, they most closely resemble the rudimentary shelters Warlpiri people occupied nomadically, prior to the establishment of settlements. Images of these camps are often used as ‘vision’ for news stories about the fourth world status of remote Aboriginal people – they entrench Warlpiri otherness on multiple levels.

I observed a number of incidents in the mid-1990s in which Warlpiri people were ‘shamed’ when local attempts at controlling media representations failed (which, of course, they often did) and graphic descriptions of their dilapidated and rubbish-strewn town were circulated in mainstream media. Once transformed into the images that grab the attention of the distant observer, Warlpiri people are embarrassed by the conditions that mark their way of living as different. A common response is to appeal for the people in question – politicians, journalists, commentators, others – to come and ‘sit down’ at Yuendumu and get to ‘really know’ Warlpiri people. What is implied in this appeal is that once on the ground in Warlpiri territory, the hierarchy of values will be reversed: visitors will encounter Warlpiri ways of being as a coherent system with its own explanatory force; an outcome they see as unable to be achieved via mediated encounters across distance.

But recognising this distinction between distance and presence as modes of knowing, and articulating their clear preference for the latter, does not preclude some Warlpiri people from participating with great regularity and relative enthusiasm in mediated engagements both among themselves and with wider Australia. In so doing they at times invoke contradictory impulses. For example, a one-time chair of the board of the Tanami Network video-conferencing organisation that operated out of Yuendumu in the 1990s commonly told visiting journalists that...
before the establishment of the network Warlpiri people had to travel all the time – the great thing video-conferencing had brought them was a decreased need to travel. This statement was not borne out in practice, as the celebrated Warlpiri program Bush Mechanics attests: Warlpiri love to travel. Yet spokespeople such as this man have no problem endorsing the techno-euphoric and evolutionist assumptions with which journalists and bureaucrats tended to frame their stories about ‘ancient culture’ meeting ‘the digital age’. Through such statements Warlpiri people seek to assure mainstream Australia that they can and will act in the manner they are expected as they embrace the great technological processes of modernity – they are all too aware of the resourcing implications that follow.

It is a measure of their depth of experience both as media subjects and producers that Warlpiri continue to contribute to political debate in the wider public domain; they have a sense of what is at stake in the production of representations. It is with this in mind that I now turn to consider a series of reports published in The Australian newspaper in late 2007.

‘Voices from the Heart’: Bridging the Distance?

Two months following the dramatic announcement of the NT Emergency Response Intervention, The Australian newspaper launched a special series of reports entitled ‘Voices from the Heart’. This series of six full-page stories, published fortnightly, canvassed the views and aspirations of Yuendumu’s residents on a wide range of topics. As described by Nicolas Rothwell in the lead essay that introduced the series, these reports were ‘prepared by the people of the community themselves: their own voices, their words and thoughts, unmediated’.12 Produced collaboratively with Reconciliation Australia, who initiated the series ‘so a continuing Aboriginal response to the progress of the commonwealth intervention could be available to national newspaper readers’, the Warlpiri Media Association served as the point of connection to ‘the community’ – with staff of
the organisation undertaking interviews that were then transcribed and published.

‘Voices from the Heart’ is a relatively unusual publishing project for Australia’s only national newspaper, which runs a tightly controlled editorial approach to Indigenous affairs. In her analysis of the more than 1200 stories published in this newspaper between 2000 and 2006 in which the terms ‘Indigenous’, ‘violence’ and ‘alcohol’ appear, Kerry McCallum deduced a clear pattern to the reportage: each story centred on the deviant behaviour of a small number of individuals but in each the event was ‘framed to represent a larger crisis in Indigenous Australia’; each story was characterised by calls on governments to act, and each story disappeared from the news pages almost as quickly as it appeared. ‘Voices from the Heart’, as we shall see, makes a different kind of contribution. Here I briefly consider just one of the six reports, on the themes of housing and home, published on 22 October 2007.

The report is laid out on a single page, as a series of five testimonies by named Warlpiri individuals. The first is by Ruth Napaljarri Stewart, ‘a senior woman’, who gave some of her interview in Warlpiri, which is printed above its English translation. In Warlpiri Ruth speaks of the way her people lived in the desert prior to settlement. She then moves from Warlpiri to broken English to speak about life in the town, interweaving Warlpiri terms throughout. Some of these terms are accompanied by a bracketed English translation. Ruth describes the process of making a humpy and windbreak, and the foods cooked and consumed in the pre-settlement era. She names the people living in her house with whom she ‘sits down’, and then reels off a list of things that are punku, ‘bad’ or ‘broken,’ in her house.

They should make new houses. Government don’t do it proper way – lawa ...
They just talk, only meetings. (I’d like my house to have) fan, carpets inside, yard, really good one, look at this yard, really rubbish one – make it good one. The Government can make houses too – new ones. And bathroom ngurrju and stove. That’s why we sleep outside, more better. Inside punku – too many cockroaches.
In Ruth’s testimony we see an interplay of two imperatives: she articulates the belief that houses and their upkeep are the responsibility of governments rather than residents; but she also invokes a larger historical frame for consideration: that houses have come with a radical shift in life, from nomadic bush to sedentary town. She contrasts then and now, with a reflective nod to ‘long time ago’ being ‘all right’ – ‘only foot walk, I was really good one on my legs, to do hunting’. Today, by contrast, Napaljarri’s family ‘just sit down’ with no car, and a broken house.

Harry Jones, a man who is not a town resident and lives on an excision on a nearby cattle station, tells his interviewer, ‘we don’t like to sit down around here Yuendumu ... we like the bush ...’ But after identifying himself as an outstation resident he quickly adds, ‘[we] always take ‘em all the kids [to Yuendumu] for school’. While Harry is not a Yuendumu resident he expresses strong views about houses in the town, and here he shifts speaking position to establish himself as an insider: ‘We – the community – want to be supported. We need a lot of new houses for Yuendumu because some houses are crowded – we’ve got to get new houses.’ Then he switches again to the position of observer:

Because they live in one house, they can’t fit too much family. They’re stuck, like, when all the dogs camping outside. That’s why they’re squashed – can’t fit in all the family ... We’ve got to live in outstation me and my wife, but all those kids – they’ve got to get those new houses.

There are a number of important elements to Harry’s testimony. Among other things, he illustrates the contingency of Warlpiri identification. The header for his story is ‘We need a lot of houses – we’ve got to get new houses’, but the main message he gets across is an alternative aspiration to town-based living, to live away from Yuendumu. Interestingly he presumes this preference not to be shared by his children – Harry Jones’s appeal for houses at Yuendumu is part of a process of imagining their future.

Then we have the testimony of the late J. Nungarrayi Egan, ‘a teacher at Yuendumu school of over 30 years’, who observes:
(We have) about six generations (living) in the one house. Ten adults and four babies ... that’s our way, our life ... It’s good for us because we always eat together and we’re brought up living together and eating together ...
Aboriginal people, we don’t leave our families and go and live in other communities ... The new changes make us worry and make us move. I will move to my outstation – to a better place to live.

Nungarrayi switches from the first person to position herself as observer of the collective: ‘that’s what they say if governments are really threatening to take over this remote community ... – they’ll start to walk out’.

Nungarrayi was among a cohort of Warlpiri people now in their fifties who grew up in a period when European and Warlpiri forms of education were relatively strongly enforced; a generation in the front-line when community-based forms of governance were introduced in the 1980s; a group who could be said to personify the notion of biculturalism. She invokes overcrowding not as a marker of disadvantage, but as a choice made by Warlpiri people to live in a distinctively Warlpiri way. Pointedly, she refers to the possibility that Warlpiri people might leave the town, retreat to place beyond the reach of the state, if their preferred ways of living come under threat. Nungarrayi’s testimony most clearly expresses what we might refer to as a rights/self-determination sentiment.

Ned Wilson, identified as a traditional owner for Yuendumu, describes a string of problems associated with housing:

we get a lot of rundown from media – they say we trash houses ... I reckon we’ve got the wrong people working at the wrong places. We’ve got to have blokes that are committed to helping Aboriginal people. Some people here, they’ve never been educated how to look after houses. They’re just pulled straight from a humpy to a house with no consultation ... we’ve still got a lot of family problems here, and if you build a house in a wrong area for so-and-so mob they’ll just wreck that house ... Ngurrea – this is our country this one. In Aboriginal law this ground is mine. I don’t want him (Government) to claim nothing here – I don’t go to his country over there next door and claim what I want – it won’t work. We’ve got our own beliefs. We like to go back to our country...

Ned draws together a confluence of factors – untrustworthy White workers, lack of community-based oversight, Warlpiri people being inexperienced...
in the ways of house-based residence, family feuds, alcohol-fuelled vandalism, and disrespectful government which fails to recognise the fundamental principles and moral co-ordinates of Warlpiri land tenure.

And finally, we turn to the testimony of Ned Hargraves, and the topic of private home ownership. Ned tells his interviewer, ‘I’ve got a place where I can call my home – my ngurra. Yuendumu is our ngurra and so are our outstations – our father’s father’s ngurra – home.’ He goes on to speak about Warlpiri people’s ‘very strong connection to land’. ‘I’m not happy’, he says, ‘about what the Government’s proposing for us – that we give our land away to Government to get, to run it.’ He invokes the Dreaming to establish a different principle to what he sees at work in the government’s agenda and the Australian dream of home ownership: ‘this Government has no idea of this land’. And just as the government fails to comprehend Warlpiri values, so too Ned articulates the lack of comprehension on the Warlpiri side:

We don’t know anything about mortgages ... if I don’t pay off my mortgage I might as well go and build a humpy, yujuku where I just don’t have to pay mortgage ... I think that buying mortgage is not really a good way of doing things with us because putting these sort of things into words that we don’t understand but that Government understands – it’s pretty hard. It’s like me saying something in Warlpiri to Mal Brough or someone – he wouldn’t understand a thing. That’s the same thing with us – we don’t understand you, with your ideas and the things that you want us to do, and the way that you want us to live. It just sucks mate!

Ned Hargraves refers to a distinctively Warlpiri set of values and, like others quoted here, emphasises this through ngurra – a term implying four levels or kinds of belonging: house, town, outstation, father’s country. What is being described here is a postcolonial, post-settlement social landscape in which multiple and contingent relationships to place are all regarded as ‘very important’. This is a way of figuring attachments to place that contrasts with both traditionalist notions of unchanging relationships between Aboriginal people and land, and more starkly with the capitalist notion of private home ownership. All of these reflections on housing reveal Warlpiri people’s propensity to mobility, to live multiply.
They also pointedly communicate an imagined capacity to sidestep state attempts to control them – to move to outstation, to humpy, to places and forms of residence that are imagined to be beyond the reach of government’s coercive intent.

Linguistic capital and the politics of being read

‘Voices from the Heart’ is a powerful illustration of the gulf that exists between simplistic representations and the complex and varied ways in which remote living Aboriginal people understand and represent themselves. The material considered here also reveals how problematic the construction of a ‘community view’ or ‘community consultation’ on matters of government policy can be. Here we have considered just one small piece of Warlpiri public engagement with post-Intervention circumstances. Perhaps paradoxically, for these people for whom English is spoken as a second, third or fourth language, debate over the relative merits of the Intervention between Yuendumu’s residents and an outspoken ex-resident based in Alice Springs is played out in globalised media space: snippets of commentary spoken to journalists find their way into diverse media outlets, in one case no less prominent than the *Wall Street Journal*, before being electronically bounced back to Central Australia to further agitate debate and division.

What might the ‘Voices from the Heart’ stories communicate to readers of *The Australian* who are unfamiliar with the modes of expression and co-ordinates of Warlpiri testimony? Paul Nadasday, reading Pierre Bourdieu’s work on linguistic interactions, observes that in order to make a successful foray into a particular linguistic field participants need to observe the formalities of that field. All speech acts are a product of the relationship between a person’s linguistic *habitus* – the way our understanding of our place in the world is constituted through language – and the linguistic field that constitutes their audience. Entering a field
without sufficient capital will not only result in failure to communicate, but also helps realise the symbolic power of the dominant classes and so reinforces existing forms of domination. ‘Every linguistic interaction’, suggests Nadasday, ‘both expresses and helps to reproduce a particular set of social and political relations’.19

Newspapers are primary communicative media for citizens of print literate societies. They are rooted in the origins of nation-states.20 By and large, apart from advertising, newspapers carry two kinds of writing: reportage and commentary, both with their particular conventional formats, concepts, structures, grammatical forms. When engaging with the press, politicians and other public figures demonstrate not just familiarity but also a capacity to master and indeed influence the production and reproduction of these discursive forms, deploying abstract language that is framed to appeal to a particular abstract body, the ‘Australian people’.

Conversely, a number of the Warlpiri narratives engage in what might be characterised as a form of discursive parochialism – they cite named individuals, places, Dreamings, concepts, as reference points that establish the meaningful parameters of a speaker’s testimony, but will be meaningless to readers unfamiliar with these contexts. Such localism indicates the moral co-ordinates of the Warlpiri universe, which finds its substance in specific relationships and particular places, and in *Jukurrpa*, the body of moral and cosmological knowledge that constitutes the Warlpiri law. Importantly, across the Warlpiri testimonies we can read not only differences of opinion, but something of the diverse ways in which Warlpiri people see their relationship to wider Australian society, a relationship that may be grasped differently depending on one’s generation, education and social standing in the Warlpiri community. While some interviewees can be read as addressing their views to fellow residents at Yuendumu, others appeal to an imagined ‘outside’ readership and consciously deploy the discourse of rights or self-determination in order to do so. Yet others, such as Ned Wilson, highlight the messy conjunction of Warlpiri and non-Aboriginal challenges to postcolonial development. These texts provide a sense of the complex intercultural lineaments of this community; they
illustrate Warlpiri people’s refusal to ‘just be other’. Whether they are likely to be read that way, however, is another matter altogether.

Rothwell’s suggestion that these published Warlpiri views are ‘unmediated’ is problematic on a number of grounds. Most obviously, it overlooks the profoundly mediating character of the printed word itself. Taking opinion expressed in one context and transposing it into print produces an effect that runs in parallel with the popular oscillating depictions of Aboriginality – on the page these variously contradictory and ungrammatical texts might be read as confirming public perceptions about ‘gaps’ and need for interventions. It is also worth noting McCallum’s finding that even when the newspaper readers she interviewed saw through the constructed and often negative terms of media reportage, ‘there was an overall tendency to narrate Indigenous people as problematic and as a source of risk to the community’. ‘Voices from the Heart’ injects a much-needed nuanced ‘view from the ground’ into the debates surrounding remote Aboriginal Australia. But its lack of narrative contextualisation, which is really what Rothwell is referring to — the kind of contextualisation that is a key dimension of standard newspaper reportage — means this ‘view’ is difficult for readers to apprehend.

**Cultural contradictions in a neoliberal era**

Let us move now from the mediascape to briefly consider how recent changes in policy and the associated politics of representation are experienced on the ground at Yuendumu.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s anthropologists working in remote central Australian towns observed the way Aboriginal people sought to understand their relationships with governments in the welfare era via a moral universe in which the state was understood as having responsibility to ‘look after’ them (regardless of how that understanding may have been undermined by experience) – hence the appeal to ‘government’ to
fix the housing problem, the rubbish problem, and so on. In this regard, the spectre of welfare being withdrawn altogether, or children being put to work picking up rubbish as punishment for failing to attend school, or of government dictating the constitution of households – all ideas that swirl in the current ether of fear and uncertainty – signals a historic shift.

Warlpiri people represented the self-determination era for themselves with a discourse of doing things ‘two ways’, a discourse that worked effectively in a number of senses. Among other things it established a sense that the principles at the heart of what it means to be Warlpiri were secure, and ‘culture’ was imagined as able to persist according to the unchanging logic of *jukurrpa*, the Dreaming, in the face of considerable change. Talk of doing things ‘two ways’ established the ground for a productive relationship between Warlpiri and European systems, with governmental processes and state agents characterised as ‘helping’, or trying to help (with significant exceptions). Hence through the 1990s Yuendumu could be witnessed as ‘trying’, with a reasonably optimistic focus on the complex realm of community making. Indeed, one of the reasons the NT Intervention is bewildering to Warlpiri people is that they have for some time been actively pursuing a number of its measures on their own terms: Yuendumu’s residents are renowned for having established the first Night Patrol in Central Australia as well as the first effective community-controlled program for dealing with youth substance misuse, along with other innovative youth-focused projects.

But the intercultural collaborations and working partnerships between Warlpiri and non-Aboriginal people that stood as a cornerstone of that era are no longer evident at Yuendumu. The conjunction of Intervention, the displacement by the NT government of community governance by regional shires and the scrapping of bilingual education have dealt a series of heavy blows to the sensibility of ‘trying’ in this town. The lack of understanding, the fear and mistrust articulated by Warlpiri people in the ‘Voices from the Heart’ stories belies a sense that something significant has shifted in their experience of governmental activity: the language, the concepts, the principles seem to have changed, a new ground is being
established which Warlpiri people are yet to fully grasp. They have a deep anxiety over what they imagine to be its ultimate aims and implications.

So how is the post-Intervention situation unfolding on the ground at Yuendumu? From one perspective it might be characterised as just ‘more state’, with Warlpiri people demoralised by their newly diminished involvement in the running of their own affairs and the refusal of government to hear their views. In this transition there is something resonant in Loïc Wacquant’s characterisation of the shift from what he describes as the ‘Nanny state’ of the Fordist–Keynesian era to the ‘Daddy state’ of neoliberalism – where the relative contraction of welfare is replaced by a new set of coercive instrumentalities. The new emphasis on duties over rights, sanctions over support, a stress on the obligations of citizenship and new methods for dealing firmly and coercively with the poor and marginalised characterise this new social landscape for Wacquant.27

The actions taken under the terms of the Intervention comprise just one strand of a series of recent major governmental moves to have impacted on Warlpiri people in complicated ways. The complexity of the situation struck me in the opening hours of arriving in the town in July 2009, when my friend Napanangka led me into the building that twelve months earlier had been the offices of the Community Government Council (since dissolved into the regional Central Desert Shire whose headquarters are based in Alice Springs) to say hello to her husband. Jupurrurla was seated at the desk in the office that was once reserved for the chairman of the community council. His smart new shirt declared his occupation to be ‘interpreter’ – a new position created specifically to help facilitate communication between ‘the community’ and the increased bureaucratic and governmental traffic that the Intervention mobilised (see Yasmine Musharbash’s essay, chapter 11).

As I reflected later on what had and had not changed in this town since my last visit I was struck by the double-edged contradiction of Jupurrurla’s new job: ‘interpreter’ occupying what was once the highest office of authority in the town; ‘interpreter’ employed to translate for a government that displayed no interest in hearing what Warlpiri people had to say.
Significantly, Jupurrurla saw no contradiction in taking on this role while simultaneously acting as a staunch critic of the Intervention. He shared the cynicism I heard widely articulated regarding the government’s intention to do anything productive on the ground at Yuendumu – people referred to the then government business manager appointed to mediate between the community and government as ngipiri (‘egg’) because many weeks after his appointment they were still waiting for him to come out of his shiny white shipping container to speak to them. Beyond this, Jupurrurla had much to say about the humiliation Aboriginal men like himself were suffering in light of the new politics of representation that tainted them all as child abusers and paedophiles. He spoke of a shift in sensibility he and others encountered on trips to Alice Springs, where Whites were more suspicious and hostile than was previously the case.

My friend Napanangka, Jupurrurla’s wife, also had a new job since my last visit – she was now employed by the Department of Family and Community Services as the community’s child protection officer. This couple, my friends, were the symbolic front-line, the very embodiment of the Intervention and its declared war on child abuse. Like her husband, Napanangka saw no contradiction in holding her job while being a vocal critic of the Intervention. Her job was to act as liaison between the department and Yuendumu children deemed to be ‘at risk’. At the time of our visit she told me there was only one child who fell into that category and the ‘risk’ had nothing to do with sexual assault.

**Conclusion**

Warlpiri people’s ideas of reasonable action and moral value run directly counter to the rationality of late capital and governmental processes. But as this essay has shown, increasingly Warlpiri experience cuts across and muddies this apparently stark divide. Governmental processes take hold not as abstractions but manifest themselves intimately, often enlisting Warlpiri people themselves and transforming in the process, so that
people may or may not see themselves as doing the work of the state. The ultimate quandary faced by these people in the present is well expressed by another friend in another ‘Voices from the Heart’ story:

It’s going to be very hard about the changes that are coming in – into our community. It is going to break us. How are we going to go about teaching our young kids about our cultural side? ... We need our kids and our great great grandkids to go out and to know where they came from, where they really came from, where their ancestors are from, which country, how they are connected to it ... Our dignity is going to be taken away and our rights. We are nothing then ... I hope whoever’s listening can support us because this is not right for us. Somebody should come and support us.29

Among other things, this invocation of rights, of cultural difference in positive terms, issues a clear statement of Warlpiri people’s desire to continue pursuing a life with its own distinctive moral co-ordinates. Yet significantly, the realisation of this aspiration is conceived as requiring outside support. From this perspective, threats to retreat to outstations are unlikely to have much purchase beyond the rhetorical level; Warlpiri ways of living are recognised as too inextricably bound up with the processes that constitute wider Australian society. Consequently, Warlpiri people continue to distinguish between policy that is good, supportive (‘looking after’) and coercive, negative (‘hard’). Warlpiri people’s engagement with the new politics of Aboriginal affairs is marked by their characteristic pragmatism. But as the intensity of their engagement suggests, they have a clear sense of what is at stake.

NOTES


6 Lateline, ABC TV, 16 May 2006.


19 Ibid., 5.


22 McCallum, News and local talk, 166.


24 This was canvassed in the national media as a suggestion by Yuendumu’s first appointed (and short-lived) government business manager; see for example Voices from the Heart, Australian, 10 September 2007, 14.