A DIFFERENT INEQUALITY

THE POLITICS OF DEBATE ABOUT REMOTE ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA

DIANE AUSTIN-BROOS

FOREWORD BY PROFESSOR FRED MYERS

'Does readers the important service of placing the debates about Indigenous policy—and Indigenous futures in remote Australia—into a theoretically coherent framework.'

'In an original and highly provocative critique, Diane Austin-Broos asks whether anthropologists' commitment to cultural difference, and failure to treat the residents of remote Aboriginal communities as historical subjects, blinded them to inequality created by the legal system and the state. This lucid and accessible genealogy of the divergent streams of recent anthropological thinking and debate is a must read for anybody with a serious interest in understanding the current conflicted views about remote Aboriginal futures.'

'Once more there is an Aboriginal "crisis", this time in Alice Springs as more members of remote communities move to overcrowded town camps. Where do we turn to understand better why this is happening and what should be done? Austin-Broos discusses why these questions have not been answered well by anthropologists, economists and opinion writers. She analyses the unsettled debate and polarization about policies for remote communities. This book is an important contribution. Ideas generate policy and we all have an interest in the way in which ideas are developed in our universities and think tanks. In this insightful and different book Austin-Broos challenges us all.'

Other titles by Diane Austin-Broos

*Arrernte Present, Arrernte Past: Invasion, violence and imagination in
Indigenous Central Australia*
Jamaica Genesis
Urban Life in Kingston, Jamaica
Australian Sociologies

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DIANE AUSTIN-BROOS

ALLEN&UNWIN

The Indigenous Australian population has altered fundamentally from one typical of the former
hunter-gatherer way of life to one that is very poor, marginalised, powerless and sedentarised.

Marcia Langton, The Shock of the New: A postcolonial dilemm
for Australianist anthropolo

Poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends; abov
all it is a relation between people. Poverty is a social status. As such it is the invention of civilizatior
It has grown with civilization [and] invidious distinction.

Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Econom*

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[Foreword](#)

It should be no secret to any reader that there is a crisis in Australia's remote Indigenous communities, a crisis of social suffering and failed expectations, and there is a crisis in thinking about these communities and their futures. When Diane Austin-Broos asked me to write a foreword for this book, I was hesitant—as an American living in the US—to step into the breach of the swirling controversies, unsure of my own position. I wish it were otherwise. In 1973, when I began my research in remote Australia, the great work of W.E.H. Stanner (1968) and C.D. Rowley (1972) seemed to promise a path to an exciting future for Indigenous communities.

The suffering in remote Australia is now, again, a national scandal. It is not new. What is newer is the fading of possibilities, the decline of expectations for the 'not-yet'. This flows from an exhaustion of paradigms of hope. When I began professional life as an anthropologist, in the early 1970s, the paradigm of 'assimilation' as a solution for what was called then 'the Aboriginal problem' had faded. Charles Rowley's famous study, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* (1972), had definitively illuminated the failure of 'assimilation' and the suffering of Aboriginal people on remote government settlements. He likened their depression and loss of hope—their 'pathology'—to the experience of inmates of 'total institutions'. Under the direction of the new Labor Government and Gough Whitlam, federal policy shifted to a focus on 'self-determination'. This was not, as some have tried to argue, driven by anthropological desires to sustain cultural ghettos, but followed a trend internationally for 'self-determination'. It was imagined that allowing people to develop and plan their own futures, and respecting their political autonomy, would provide them with the confidence and energy to make their own way in the world.

For whatever reasons, and there is profound disagreement about these, after nearly four decades the social situation in remote communities has not followed anyone's hopes. With the collapse of a dominant paradigm, ideological warfare has broken out in the ranks of analysts, critics and casual observers. Old allies have fallen out, and—especially among anthropologists—the moral anguish of political commitments is palpable. What answer do we have for the old Aboriginal Lutheran evangelist who observed to Basil Schild, a young Lutheran pastor and activist, that 'God like whitefella more better I reckon'? (Schild 2008)

Diane Austin-Broos's book attempts to square the circle, to find a space of discussion and debate in a field of great national importance and passionate ideological disagreement. In an era when it is widely recognised that social analysis cannot escape ideological frameworks, this is a daunting task. Austin-Broos does readers the important service of placing the debates about Indigenous policy—and Indigenous futures in remote Australia—into a theoretically coherent framework. In her analysis, the debates revolve around two paradigms of value that rehearse a well-known theoretical and political divide. The two paradigms are those of cultural difference and of economic inequality. As she writes

For some, remote Aboriginal life is a site of enduring and remarkable difference while for others, the hallmark of that same site is poverty and deep distress. Consequently, this book is not simply about inequality and difference but also the politics and policies that these issues have produced.

Austin-Broos is herself an Australian but unlike many who have specialised in the anthropology of Aboriginal people, she studied anthropology outside of the Anglo-Australian nexus (in the US) and she developed her distinguished reputation as a scholar of Caribbean life in societies dramatically reorganised by colonisation. For her, from this context, culture difference and political economy cannot be disentangled. What might this mean in an Australia milieu? Let me write from a personal perspective.

In 1981, the World Council of Churches visited Australia. As it happened, they visited the remote community of Papunya, in the Northern Territory, where I was living temporarily as an anthropologist in an Aboriginal camp, awaiting the return of an initiatory party. The initiation camp was in an area isolated from the main camp—next to the dump and its collection of old, rusting Holdens and Fords. I never met the Church visitors, but soon after, an article appeared in a national newspaper (as I remember), expressing their horror at the living conditions of Indigenous people at Papunya. For me, accustomed after many field trips to living in Aboriginal communities, the location in the dump as very different. The site had been chosen both for its isolation and because it had been cleared by bulldozers, leaving the wide and open space necessary for an initiation ceremony. In the dry desert sun, there was no smell of rotting garbage. The Yirkapiri (mourners) kin of the initiates were comfortable and life was proceeding quite amiably without intrusions.

In 1981, we were not yet met with the soaring rates of disease, mortality, violence, and—by reports—sexual abuse, but alcohol abuse was already common. Indeed, in 1981, because of the perception that living in large communities, in proximity to towns, made alcohol too accessible and brought people of different communities into violent conf lict, the Pintupi residents of Papunya and i close outstations made the most of their opportunities to return to their traditional country, at Warlungurru in the Kintore Ranges. In contrast to the current criticisms of 'homeland communities', discussed by Austin-Broos, the Pintupi move was, in the eyes of most people, a triumph—reversing the historical processes that had removed Pintupi people from their Western Desert homelands and brought them to more easily resourced but foreign traditional country. The move was documented no only in Pam Nathan and Dick Leichleitner Japanangka's *Settle Down Country* (1983) but also in the beautiful CAAMA documentary *Benny and the Dreamers* (1993). As I can testify as witness to these historical events, the Pintupi who struggled to regain their homelands with government support did s in order to gain greater autonomy politically and also to create space between themselves and the sources of alcohol that had been devastating their small population. 'Too many people have died,' they said.

Warlungurru was supported and legitimated by the desires of the elder members of the group to teach their young about their country and to hand on this knowledge of custodianship, to protect it from intrusion, and also to care better for the younger people. It was imagined that this remote community would be healthier, stronger, a basis for moving forth into the world. The wanted schools they wanted medical help; they wanted food. This was not simply a 'traditional community'. But, support for medical help was not forthcoming—as it conf licted with programs of the Northern Territory Health Service —and education depended on sympathetic local schoolteachers. In this crucible of self-determination, a particular vision developed at Warlungurru, articulated in 1988 in a series of teacher-education training programs as the necessity of the people '*lingkitu kanyintjaka ngurra*'—strongly holding their country. One hears it still.

Self-determination was supposed to be the basis of Aboriginal futures in remote Central Australia. Yet, a visit to Warlungurru in the present—as to many other Central Australian remote communities today—confronts those of us who return with the untimely death of many of our friends at ages significantly different from the white population of Australia. Many others, not necessarily obese or alcoholic, are 'on the machine'—regular attendees at the dialysis clinic. Too numerous to te are the names of those who have died in car crashes and rollovers, in violent drunken encounters or in other manner of misfortune. School attendance has declined dramatically. Many of the houses are in shocking states of disrepair, so much that one longs for the time when we all lived in tents. Obesity is more common than wellbeing. You hear that there aren't really many older people left to teach the younger. And there are now so many young people that the population is skewed. These are current realities.

Friends are happy to see a once familiar face; the styles of engagement are not radically differen from the past. These are still the people I knew. Acrylic painting has been a sensational economic an cultural success, providing recognition, respect and resources for many in the community. It is a flowering of culture in a difficult environment, one of the good things that have happened. Some people still look to the future with hope; some have been ordained as pastors, a few others advanced teacher training, but the fundamental administration is in the hands of White outsiders and the community is in some disarray. From one day to the next, you never know where to find people—so pronounced is the mobility that takes people hundreds of kilometres to town and back, to visit relatives elsewhere, to attend funerals. To follow the position of Indigenous intellectual and activist Marcia Langton (2010), the conditions of classical Indigenous life are no longer present—especially in the face of a demographic transformation that has so challenged the possibilities of cultural transmission.[1]

People are making do, and some might say that what I describe is the effect—or largely the effe —of cultural difference, the choice. Others look at the situation and see the necessity for a change, fo drastic measures to improve the health and wellbeing, and opportunities, for people born into such a community. To those of us who began our engagement with a profound suspicion of paternalism and of assimilation policy failures, such interventions seem impossible to think.

Where, then, do we stand? How are we to understand what we see—and what, indeed, do we see Austin-Broos lays out the range of positions that have been taken up in the wake of a radical collapse of the conventional paradigms. She is particularly concerned to outline the frameworks of anthropologists, the discipline perhaps most identified with remote communities and which has come under attack for failing to articulate the devastations in them.

On the whole, Austin-Broos writes, anthropologists have been more inclined to see the situation in remote Australia as a consequence of cultural differences and to portray the lack of material accumulation as a consequence of distinctive cultural values (on sharing, on obligations to kinship, commitment to living on the land, and so on). In this view, the observable lack of material wealth, jobs and work, then, is not necessarily itself a problem but is a bearable consequence of the significance of other values. For the most part, anthropologists have— or perhaps had not—seen the circumstances in remote communities as 'pathological'. The circumstances in the remote areas are to be seen as legitimate artifacts of 'self-determination'. Anthropologists who find the current condition to be 'pathological', such as Peter Sutton (2001, 2009a), are inclined to locate this pathology in the unsuitability of traditional culture in the contemporary context, and they have found 'self-determination' to be a failure. Those critics focused on economic inequality—mainly non-anthropologists—see violence, illness and sexual abuse as a salient condition in remote Australia and

attribute this to economic inequality. They aim to rectify this by a program of 'marketising' Indigenous society—in developing ways for Indigenous people to enter the workforce and to participate in or be integrated into mainstream society. The proposals have included repealing land rights, sequestering welfare payments and so on.

In reading this book, one will certainly have a better understanding of the positions taken up by various analysts, their strengths and weaknesses, and—to some extent—of their predilections for them. I would like to add a few of my own thoughts on anthropological—especially ethnographic—attentions to the local desires and intentions, and our implication in the paradigm of 'self-determination'.

Anthropologists working in the context of self-determination studied or analysed the ways in which Aboriginal people in remote communities defined or knew their world; the concepts of person power and place through which they distributed value. In this vein, for example, I studied the politics of the Pintupi people's engagement, trying to interpret and represent what people in these communities 'understood' of their situation and how they acted from that. I saw this as having consequences—the conf licts of their model of politics in enacting new rules for collective life.

Of course this was, and is, one source of disarray in contemporary communities, and many analysts have recognised the problems of such 'cultural' misarticulations. But when Austin-Broos examines the entanglement of difference and inequality she specifies something *else*, something that perhaps escapes the lens of local understanding. Crudely put, and in repeatedly criticising treatments of Indigenous social formations in remote communities as 'bounded' societies or cultures, Austin-Broos reinvigorates an approach that looks for broader, underlying—even global—forces that organi and reorganise societies themselves.[2] 'In reality,' she writes, 'there are no bounded cultures involved . . the maintenance of customary ways as they exist today relies on remote Aboriginal people graspin a secure position for themselves within the state and its economy. This is a process that creates conf lict within individuals and their communities—not simply between separate cultures.' Thus, the relevant parties to social interaction are not 'communities' but rather people, young and old, male an female, variously engaged and interested within community life and outside it. And as this approach implies, further along she insists that 'The connections between Fitzroy Crossing, Maningrida, Ntaria and Bourke need to be underlined, as well as the differences.' The significance of economy for remot communities, she maintains, has been insufficiently regarded in the struggles over 'cultural rights' and 'self-determination'.

This is not an accident. Yes, we can see, as one might say, that 'men'—and most particularly me —do not live by culture alone. There is—and has been—no work, no meaningful work in remote Australia since the advent of the self-determination policies, and foraging in the settled circumstance of Indigenous desert communities is not very productive. Is it surprising that alcohol-inspired intensifications of sociality are so attractive to people who find themselves with little in the way of making themselves relevant? In this, Marx may have astutely understood the importance of human beings defining themselves as *homo faber*, through practical labor. But as much as there is not work, so also are young Indigenous people unprepared for work in the market economy. Literacy, for example, has declined significantly in these communities. Here, Austin-Broos suggests, is room for a productive intervention.

In the light of much contentious debate about the Federal Government's Northern Territory Intervention, and also about the policy of self determination, Austin-Broos should be commended fo drawing attention to a central issue—of wellbeing perhaps—of work. For much of the self-determination period, remote communities did not have many opportunities for wage labor, economi

work. Their locational disadvantage ensured there would not be many opportunities, and it combined with Indigenous desires to remain on their land, near their kin, and to be involved with their cultural obligations. Initially, straight welfare payments provided the (insufficient) cash income that people needed for food and clothing. Somewhat later, this was replaced with Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP). Yet, it is probably fair to say there has not been much enthusiasm for work in these later generations. We understood it was not really meaningful culturally. Nor did young people approach education with the idea of working later.

One thing is clear, and painfully so. Our paradigms are collapsing. The once widely shared commitment to 'self-determination' or an emphasis on protecting indigenous rights as *the* solution to inequality and disempowerment has withered (but not necessarily endorsement of these rights as an inalienable human right). Anthropologists are now deeply divided among themselves about policy options, often along regional lines—northern Australia as a region that seems able to support a hybrid economy solution vs. Central Australia as a region without economic options; remote Australia vs. settled Australia on the importance of cultural difference vs. the hegemony of the State; neoliberal pro-integrationist policy writers who pathologise cultural difference vs. anthropologists who see room for particular Indigenous solutions.

Anthropologists have had long associations with the remote communities of Australia and deep knowledge of what life is like in those communities. I think few of us were under any illusions about the difficulties of life in these communities; the ravages of alcohol, the debilitating violence, the difficulties of leadership. We have been accused, collectively in recent years, of ignoring or whitewashing these difficulties, of neglecting the real lives of people in pursuit of a reified and romantic 'culture'. We have been accused of defending a 'traditional culture' that increasingly came to be pathologised in what has seemed to be unending articles in the popular press. If culture was not to be the 'solution', and the right to culture no longer the fundamental axis of Indigenous politics, the discourse of policy-makers turned back to models that resonated significantly with a worldwide turn to neoliberal economic principles. This is not what Austin-Broos's analysis recommends, not a wholesale abandonment of cultural difference and cultural value, but a reinscription—as it were—of culture and economy. Literate education and employment are the prescription, but she maintains that:

> Routes to literate education and employment need to address and not dismiss the cultural difference in communities, including an inclination not to migrate away from country on a permanent basis. This circumstance also reflects the need for a mix of policy, and not the polarisation that took place in the remote communities debate. If elements of tradition tie remote Aboriginal people to the local, their status as Australian citizens and market participants requires that some among them move beyond the local to negotiate a larger world and its economy as well as regional and national politics.

Diane Austin-Broos's book has the merit of focusing on the human capacities as well as the suffering of people in remote communities. Proposing that disadvantage be addressed through practical literacy education and opportunities to enter into the wage economy, 'to negotiate a larger world and its economy', without insisting on radical assimilation, recognises the historical agency of people in remote communities and the complex nature of contemporary identities, not singular but, as she says, 'multifaceted'.

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Remote Aboriginal Australia is one place where great beauty can be juxtaposed with seemingly endless grief. Such a situation allows ample scope for silences of one type or another about remote Aboriginal life as it is described in Australia's urban centres. This is a book about such silences and arguments not carried forward. Its focus is cultural difference and inequality as each bears on those who live remote—especially in the tropical north and in Central Australia. I treat cultural difference and inequality as facts that are given more or less weight according to the form and politics of the analysis involved. For some, remote Aboriginal life is a site of enduring and remarkable difference while for others, the hallmark of that same site is poverty and deep distress. Consequently, this book not simply about inequality and difference but also the politics and policies that these issues have produced. *A Different Inequality* describes some forms of recent and continuing disagreement. The touchstone for the book is the debate about remote communities that both preceded and followed the Northern Territory Intervention of 2007—a debate that began in earnest in the 1990s and continues to this day. I lead into this dispute with an account of another one within the universities. This was a postcolonial critique of anthropology that foreshadowed issues raised in the remote communities debate. My discussion thereby ranges across both an academic and a public policy domain. It concludes with the proposal that we need to reconcile two forms of politics—those of culture difference (or identity) and those aimed at pursuing equality for remote Aboriginal Australians. Cultural difference does not override socioeconomic disadvantage, but neither can that difference be ignored if the object is to lessen disadvantage in remote communities. Land rights, education and employment need to be addressed in concert—a proposal that is easy to write but not so easy to formulate in policy terms.

Disappointment with public debate created the impetus for this book. At the time of the Intervention, I had just completed another work based on many years of engagement with Western Arrernte (Aranda) people in Central Australia. My disquiet came from the Arrernte's circumstances and from the tenor of debate about their lives and other comparable lives in remote Australia. Uncharacteristic at the time, my unease was with both sides: with my colleagues in the universities and with the opinion writers and private think tanks that provided a competing view of remote communities. The polarisation of opinion was marked. Each side accused the other of ulterior motives. As the words f lew thick and fast, in my view they reflected real dilemmas in the analysis of a confronting human situation. I was led to think more broadly about universities and their approache to research among Indigenous Australians. I realised that if anthropology must change so too must some of the other disciplines involved. Yet in recent times, if the universities have not always served remote communities well, this is also true of an Australian polity that allows a crucial debate to be mired in prejudicial accounts of Aboriginal people. In the end, the loser is policy for remote communities, deprived of the scrutiny it deserves in the public domain.

While this book is a critical ref lection on anthropology, my own discipline, it also discusses the work of other academics and policy consultants who have written about inequality, poverty and cultural difference in remote Aboriginal Australia. As a result, the book is directed to an audience beyond anthropology and the universities. The range of material covered demonstrates the need to build a forum for discussion that can dissolve some current and quite unhelpful boundaries. I have tried to keep the language plain and as direct as possible although the discussion ranges from

traditional Aboriginal culture through 19th century debates about 'the Aborigines' to pressing issues of illness and unemployment today. This is a discussion of the contemporary circumstance of those who live remote. It also provides some perspective on the past in order to suggest how the present and its politics have been produced. Terminologically, I employ 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' to refer to group identities in the present. The terms are more and less inclusive. With regard to Aboriginal customary ways—specific elements of culture that are not shared with Torres Strait Islanders—I use the term 'Aboriginal'. This designation is especially pertinent when the discussion turns to the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* and its social corollary in a homelands movement that fostered outstation life. At other times, and especially in the course of my discussion of the postcolonial critique of anthropology, I use the term 'Indigenous Australians' to refer to both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. Finally, when I am referring to original peoples of the continent, rather than to an objectified identity, I use the term 'indigenous'. I have tried to keep my usage consistent.

Abbreviations

AA	Alcoholics Anonymous
AAS	Australian Anthropologial Society
AAAS	Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science
ABR	Aboriginal Benefits Reserve
ABT	Aboriginal Benefits Trust
ADC	Aboriginal Development Commission
AEDP	Aboriginal Employment Development Project
AFL	Australian Football League
ANU	Australian National University
ASSA	Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CAAMA	Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects
CIS	Centre for Independent Studies
CLC	Central Land Council
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CRC	COAG Reform Council
CYI	Cape York Institute
DAA	Department of Aboriginal Affairs
DATSIPD	Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development
DSS	Department of Social Security
FACS	Family and Community Support (NT government)
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission
MP	Member of Parliament
MRE	Mining Royalty Equivalents
NAC	National Aboriginal Conference
NACC	National Aboriginal Consultative Council
NLC	Northern Land Council
NIRA	National Indigenous Reform Agreement
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
NTAC	Northern Territory Aboriginal Council
OSICP	Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation (US)
SA	South Australia
SCRGSP	Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision
SIHIP	Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program

TGT	Territory Growth Towns
WA	Western Australia

Mathew's story

I met Mathew on my first trip to Ntaria, the site of the famous Hermannsburg Mission to Western Arrernte people in Central Australia. The town is located on Aboriginal land about 120 kilometres du west of Alice Springs. I had been in Ntaria for just a few months, starting fieldwork among Western Arrernte people. Normally I camped or lived in a caravan but at the time I had managed to borrow a house for a while (my young son had a broken arm). I was learning Western Arrernte using a small grammar compiled by the Lutheran mission and spending as much time as I could with an Arrernte woman who had become my teacher and guide. We travelled to her son's outstation and camped for days with just a mob of grandchildren and her late husband's aging next elder brother and his wife. All the other brothers were dead. These two old people told me stories about the mission and also, in the wife's case, what it was like to see the last senior and ritually active man in her father's line pass away. 'He just finished,' she said.

Mathew was related to these people although that hardly distinguished him given the very large network of relatives that each Arrernte person has. He was about twenty when we met, smart and lively and, I imagine, normally not inclined to speak to strange middle-aged women including white ones from the coast. I had seen him around Ntaria occasionally, mostly in the camp called 'middle east' with some of his brothers (his male siblings and the sons of his father's brothers). For a few day in each week, he worked across the Finke River at Tjuwanpa helping to construct the new outstation resource centre. One of his tasks was to drive the earthmover. I used to wave to him as we drove by o our way to country. Mathew came to see me to deliver a message from a relative. I drove a Toyota Hilux truck with a large tray and people used to line me up for lifts into Alice Springs. He wanted to confirm a trip for his relative and to ask if he could come along. As a young initiated man, he knew he would probably sit in front. I had bent to this delicacy among the Western Arrernte. Unless elderly women were coming, men sat in the front with me. In those days—things have changed so rapidly, really—hardly any Arrernte women around Ntaria drove a car. It was a male thing. When the cabin was full of men, I became almost a part of the truck I drove.

On that day, Mathew walked in and looked at my books. Previously I had worked for twenty year in the Caribbean and, in particular, on ghetto life in Kingston, Jamaica. I had always been interested in people in transition: from country to town, from high life to low life, seeking new religions, culture and class milieus, across established boundaries and borderlands. Hailing from a suburban family with a modest rural background, I was myself an in-betweener. I had brought the books with me in order to finish an article on Jamaica, maybe my last for a while. Mathew delivered his message in Arrernte, saw me struggle, translated into English, and then allowed me to respond in my own stumbling version of his language. He decided that English was the best way to go, and began to pick up various books and ask me what they were. He read out the titles of some. I explained my past research projects and remarked that I had lived 'in America' for a while. He rummaged through more books, read a sentence here and there, mouthed more titles and then, not looking up, suddenly said in English, 'Maybe you know Martin Luther King. Arrernte mob, that's what we need. Some fella like

Martin Luther King.' I told Mathew that I had never known Martin Luther King—killed before my tim ~~in the USA. However, I knew about him and I knew a bit about the mob from Africa who were taken to~~ *that part of the world as slaves. Mathew asked me if they still spoke 'language'. I said that they didn* *not the ones that I knew, although they did speak Kriol 'little bit same' as mobs up north and in the Kimberley. He nodded and a long silence followed. I think we exchanged remarks about Tjuwanpa an then he left.*

The next time I had occasion to speak to Mathew at any length—and those 'lengths' with Arrern men were always pretty short—I was driving him back from the Alice Springs jail after a three-month stint. It was about two years later. I knew his relatives a great deal better and I had been recruited to collect him because his family wanted Mathew taken directly to an outstation—away from Alice Springs, straight through Ntaria and out the other side, further west. He was slim and looking good: healthy. It had been his first time in the Big House and he was predictably sober; chastened as well a engaging in sobriety. Mathew told his mother and me that he would become a Lutheran pastor. He ha even brought a Bible from the jail and was flicking through it. He said he wouldn't drink anymore an would live on the outstation with his brothers. We laughed a lot and talked about names from the Bib for his recently born third child. I remember I put a Western Arrernte country-and-western tape in th cassette deck. We sang 'Hermannsburg Mountain' together. Then we all sang a hymn as well.

Things didn't last on the outstation, though, and Mathew had disengaged from Tjuwanpa. He pulled his CDEP pay and often went directly into Alice Springs. His wife began to follow him, leavin the children with relatives. Soon they were both drinkers, and fighting too. Jail visits became a regular feature of my trips. Sometimes I went inside, both to the security part, and also to the low-security shelters that look out over the Aussie rules football ground. The place where the prisoners meet their visitors could as well be a footy club barbecue area. Other times, depending on how many relatives I had brought, I stayed outside and chatted with an attendant. Mathew was only one of many young men that people I knew visited, and there were always kids to see their fathers and brothers, and sometimes the person who called the jail prior to the visit forgot to give my name. Without advance notice, visitors were not allowed inside.

Time passed and it became clear that Mathew's life was on that track. Mostly he went down for driving under the influence and without a licence. Sometimes he was disorderly but as the years passed he became so thin that he didn't have much strength to hit, except his wife, who left pretty quickly and went back to country. Of course there was much I didn't see and would not have been tol about. The only incident I did see concerned an argument linked to a payback. Mathew had taken off from Ntaria in a car—drunk and careering into Alice Springs with his eldest brother's unlicenced rifle. He was angry and ready to kill. An auntie who was about at the time went to the Ntaria constables and told them to call Alice Springs. They should set up a roadblock on Namatjira Drive ar stop him going into town. Mathew went down again, for a longer time.

Nonetheless, his family agrees that only relatives and the jail have kept Mathew alive. Relatives look after him and so does the jail, where the regular food and respites from alcohol put fat back on his bones. And it has been a life worth living. I have seen two of his sons with their brothers returning to Ntaria after their initiation ceremonies. I have seen more children born and noticed that, looking good or bad, Mathew generally is present at family events—not just funerals but baptisms and confirmations and barbecues at the outstation. If someone dies, he does 'sorry' too, at least for a while. The naming of his children, and projected marriages, maintain generational and regional ties. The latter involve people whose first language is an Arrernte dialect or a Luritja one, spoken by people to the immediate west and south of the Western Arrernte. It seems likely that Mathew's

grandchildren will continue in this path. Moreover, this enduring form of sociality extends into the ~~*urban milieu. We meet up in the Alice Springs mall, in his town camp, at the football and the hospital*~~ *or on someone's veranda in Ntaria.*

About nine years after I first met Mathew we visited in the security section of the jail. Mathew had been in a bit of trouble and there was also family consternation about a young relative who was jail for the first time. The young man was very depressed, in part caused by the sudden cessation of constant cannabis use. A lot of discussion took place about who to put him with and how to look after him and what to say to the jail staff. I was sitting half turned away from the animated crowd, looking at a wall. Suddenly, Mathew said to me above the hubbub, 'Diane, I'm doing adult literacy. Maybe I can read.' I told him that was great, and I nearly cried in frustration.[1]

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This book stems from my experience in Ntaria, and debates over many years concerning remote communities, especially in the Northern Territory (NT). It is not a book about Ntaria or about remote Indigenous life as such. It is not about the NT Intervention (2007), although that event bears on this discussion. The focus of the book—debates about remote Aboriginal Australia—draws on my knowledge of Ntaria and on my engagement with various proposals for people like Mathew: who he what he wants and chooses, and how his community should be run. These debates concern a population of possibly 80,000 people living in the remote parts of the NT and some states.[2] Writers also offer a figure of 120,000 Indigenous people, mainly Aboriginal people, living in remote and very remote Australia. In other words, the lives to which this book responds are led by quite a small proportion even of Indigenous Australians. Not many live remote and the Western Arrernte, who count as remote, are not nearly as remote as some. The numbers then are very small but, in policy terms, the issue is a big one.

For readers who follow public affairs, Mathew's story should bring few surprises. To put it bluntly, in the time I knew Mathew he became a remote Indigenous alcoholic. Everyone has read about a Mathew juxtaposed with a story on Aboriginal art (just to place the focus on hope and not despondency). But how many of us have thought about a life like his and how it bears on his relatives especially his wife and children, and his brothers and sisters. His mother died some years ago and his father when he was just a boy. How much do we know about such families, and how much do we really care? Let me make four observations. Mathew is culturally different from non-Indigenous Australians, and even pretty different from many other Indigenous Australians. Some are more traditional than Mathew. Many are much less traditional. Mathew's life has been one of unspectacula cultural difference. Yet for a range of reasons that I have signalled in my short description, Mathew would have found it difficult to leave his milieu at Ntaria. I think he was probably curious to leave when I first met him. From time to time, he had seen others leave because both women and men travelled out on church excursions, to land rights conventions, to DAA (Department of Aboriginal Affairs) or ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) meetings, to commercial consultations and the like. For a while, Mathew's father drove a car and the family travelled north. Nonetheless, for Mathew and many others, a foreign land began right outside Central Australia, and still does. He was curious about life elsewhere, but the how and why of getting there was difficult to negotiate due to limited education and cultural difference. Like the figures in *Samson and Delilah,* a feature film about Central Australia, the route from outstation to a fulfilling life seemed illusive for Mathew, if not closed.[3]

My second observation is that Mathew's life has been marred by alcohol. His passage into

alcohol dependence was chillingly swift. Between one year and a couple more Mathew seemed entirely gone, although he had relatives who seldom drank and others who had successfully availed themselves of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous). Moreover, it seems very clear that his passage into alcohol dependence was closely connected to things culturally Aboriginal. Even with post-Intervention income management, the consumption patterns of remote Aboriginal Australians and a gender order that subordinates women mean too much money is still left for grog. Again, it does seem that for young men drinking becomes an assertion of autonomy and even a competitive assertion. Freedom is performed among one's siblings and cousins and everyone can harass a mother or a wife. The intensity of kin relations seems to exacerbate the binge drinking, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, that is common throughout Australia. Furthermore, the dense network of relatives from Ntaria into Alice Springs that has kept Mathew alive has also kept him drinking. Conviviality among male kin seems to demand it, even of men who have led lives shaped by careers and achieved considerable distinction. No one is immune. The social–cultural and historical context and the emotional temper of Mathew and his consociates seem over-determining where grog is concerned.

Mathew should stop drinking and so should his hard-drinking relatives, and all the other hard-drinking people in the Western Arrernte mob. Yet that seems unlikely without some concomitant change in the form of life that the Western Arrernte lead—and this is my third point. Mathew is culturally different and his life has been marred by alcohol abuse. In addition, Mathew has also been disadvantaged with a dearth of options in education, in employment, and in the ability to travel for pleasure and curiosity's sake beyond his immediate domain. Owing to his cultural difference, and his country and kin commitments, Mathew has lived in a local context of second-rate services and very high unemployment. There are few commercial ventures in Ntaria and limited employment options in Alice Springs for Aboriginal people with poor education. Moreover, apart from the clinic, the Alice Springs hospital and an improving Ntaria School, services are at their best in the Alice Springs jail. In fact, it is a life-cycle stop for many young Western Arrernte men and an increasing number of women. Central Australia begins to look a little like a version of ghetto life in the United States, where burgeoning poverty and distress also bring criminalisation of the population—often described as the US 'ghetto–jail– complex. Where other late teen and post-teen Australian youth are in tertiary institutions, Western Arrernte are often in jail.[4] In sum, cultural difference is important in itself and also important because it has become a site of marked inequality.

Owing to distinctive patterns of sociality and consumption, remote Aboriginal people are often less tightly tied to continuing paid work than many other Australians. In conjunction with poor education and meagre employment opportunities, this difference brings a disengagement from lifestyle aspirations common elsewhere in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia. By virtue of the range of values in play, an experience similar to discouraged worker syndrome becomes more complex and widespread in communities. This situation would be unproblematic if cultural difference were in fact the sole cause. Aboriginal people including Mathew would go their own way and the incidence of substance abuse would be significantly less. But the issues are not so simple. In fact, remote Aboriginal people have a foot in two worlds, Aboriginal and European, that inform their local life. Along with poor services, this conf lict undermines aspiration, personal health and many local forms of authority. Governments, be they federal or state/territory ones, have responded poorly to this situation. A century of policy and practice has held remote Aboriginal people on the very margin of society in mission stations and the like. These have been attractive policies because they played to cultural difference in a way that masked the inequality of services. In the eyes of many Australians, these were indigenous people who required very little from mainstream society. More recently, the

1967 referendum enabled federal government to include Aboriginal people in the census and also legislate on their behalf. Yet people who live remote have little federal electoral significance, notwithstanding NT land rights. As a result, the inequality that cultural difference masks has endured and divided people like the Western Arrernte from other Australians, including other Aboriginal people who do not live remote. Mathew's life is as it is because of inequality and the cultural difference that makes that inequality natural in the eyes of many citizens. How many readers of this book have thought that employment is irrelevant to remote areas because 'they're traditional'; or perhaps that if those who live remote really want equality 'they should change'? But is it so easy for the Mathews of Australia either to live apart from the mainstream, or drop all their customary ways? The 'space' of difference, as Marshall Sahlins calls it, must be redefined to address this different inequality (see Sahlins 2000:494).

My final point is that Mathew, like other Arrernte, has experienced *all* these factors: the comfort and constraint of minority culture, the highs and lows of substance abuse, the boredom of disengagement from a working life, and the intermittent, often f lailing attempts to change things. Not surprisingly, this book is about cultural difference and inequality but also about the fact that neither critical nor policy debate has addressed the full range of issues involved. My proposal is that this failure can be traced in part to a failure in critical thought among anthropologists. But cognate disciplines are also involved, including history and Indigenous studies. I call them the 'humanistic social sciences'.[5] The silence of these disciplines concerning remote community distress left a space that was filled by opinion writers whose pronouncements were not always well informed. Their accounts underlined inequality in remote Aboriginal Australia but took little or no account of the cultural difference that makes that inequality hard to address. Concurrently, inf luential Aboriginal leaders, including Noel Pearson, turned their backs on academics, or at least on anthropologists. Consequently, there has been no searching critical debate, just policy camps doggedly defended. The outcome for the universities has been mentioned in a recent publication: Hinkson notes a new indifference to anthropology in policy circles that count (Hinkson 2010:12). How did it come to this?

Difference and inequality

Before I proceed, let me define two terms that are crucial to this book. The terms are ubiquitous in social science but in this context have a particular import.

As understood in anthropology, I take the concept of cultural difference to apply to a way of life, society or other bounded social milieu which can be modelled as a distinctive whole. Aboriginal culture, especially in its traditional form, has been modelled in this way and, as discussed in Chapter 2, numerous university texts and other tracts have been written about this 'other' or 'different' culture. Crucial to the understanding of this difference is a range of institutional forms including a hunter-gatherer economy, a specific cosmology and ritual forms (the Dreaming), and an elaborate kinship system, one role of which has been to facilitate the organisation of a regional life in the absence of centralised governance. This distinctive set of institutions was aided in its reproduction by a range of Aboriginal languages, only a small minority of which are still spoken today.

When one writes of Aboriginal cultural difference the reference is generally to elements of practice and belief, some of them implicit and some explicit, that can be linked more or less closely with this 'traditional' way of life. Importantly, these current elements of practice and thought have also been attenuated, changed and repositioned in the course of histories that have involved

encapsulation in the Australian state and marginalisation in its capitalist economy. Moreover, in this process quite new forms of specific practice and belief have been generated in accord with transformed elements of the past—for instance, new ways of understanding the 'spiritual' presence o antecedents in the land and of classifying relatives in response to contemporary life. New, specificall Aboriginal iconographies have been created, including both genres of fine Aboriginal art and the typ of graffiti found in remote communities today. Nonetheless, all these forms have some link with a historical experience grounded in that initial cultural difference and the impact on it of the state, modern capitalism and their associated institutions. Albeit in more diffuse and elusive ways, this cultural difference is patterned today just as it was in the past. In some degree, the difference in remote Aboriginal life therefore stands in contrast both to non-Indigenous life and the distant past of remote Aboriginal people. Still, that past is a touchstone for discerning the present.

The inequality in remote Aboriginal life with which this book is most concerned is a legacy of invasion and the history of European settlement. This is not to say that traditional indigenous societie had no inequalities. Clearly they did. By and large, women were unequal to men and younger generations were unequal to their elders. In terms of knowledge accumulation some men and women were ritually unequal to others of their gender. Some were clearly unequal in terms of strength, beauty, dexterity and motor skills, including those involved in dance, hunting and the like. Nonetheless, the specific inequality that bears on this discussion is that which began to unfold once Aboriginal Australians were encapsulated in a European-derived state and became increasingly positioned by a capitalist economy. By virtue of laws concerning citizenship, property and associatio —not to mention crimes and misdemeanours—Aboriginal people became encapsulated by the state. These laws were applied to them and enforced. Where economy is concerned, the expansion of capitalism meant the obliteration of hunter-gathering, or its attenuation and repositioning in almost a parts of the continent.

In short, the inequalities created by these factors of law and economy are the ones of interest here. Aboriginal people in particular lacked many citizen rights and still lack equality in terms of service deliveries deemed the right of all citizens. The unequal delivery of services, including education, housing and health, ramify in the domain of economy. Many remote Aboriginal youth are poorly equipped in terms of their capacity to find jobs of any sort in remote Australia today. Uneducated and often suffering the effects of poor health or substance abuse, their chances of economic success in rural and remote Australia are quite slim. A legal status that in the past facilitated policies that held remote Aboriginal people on the margins of capitalism has promoted poverty today. Moreover, held in this position as much by law as by cultural inclination, remote Aboriginal people have responded by building forms of practice and belief that make them feel at home in this world of state encapsulation and economic marginalisation. It is at this point that inequality and cultural difference intersect, each now intensely reactive to the other.

The change that has been the result of encapsulation has not been simply loss. New institutional forms responsive to Aboriginal experience have been created. Moreover, Aboriginal people have take on new capabilities as they have lost old ones—in language, technology, practical knowledge, ritual, and ways of organising social, political and economic life. Many would argue that in a literate, globa world these new capabilities are more valuable than those that have been lost. Be this as it may, the question remains whether or not remote Aboriginal people have had an opportunity equal to that of other citizens to own these new capacities and employ them fruitfully. If the answer to this question 'no', this may be because remote Aboriginal people are culturally disengaged from market society, o it may be that marginalisation has reduced their opportunities to engage. Alternatively, both these an

other reasons may explain the structural inequality of most Aboriginal people in Australian society today—unable to realise and explore all the forms of human capital that the state purports to offer them.[6]

In sum, to grasp the circumstance of remote Aboriginal people requires an understanding of both cultural difference and inequality. Mathew's life underlines this fact, which I pursue throughout this book. Two further points follow: first, with the advent of an Australian state, Aboriginal culture has always been something positioned within the state and in relation to a capitalist economy. This history of inequality—for that is what it is—has always been a factor bearing on the shape and extent of cultural difference. Aboriginal cultural difference—as it is known now, and in the past—has always been a difference interpreted through inequality. Second, the forms that this inequality take, including issues of service delivery and market capacities, are often exacerbated by neglect of relevant, mundane cultural difference; for example, how to get children to school when obligations to relatives call, and how to promote employment as an integral part of life even in remote locales. In short, Australian society and the state have been perennially disinclined to address Aboriginal inequality in the context of continuing cultural difference—a difficult and also an expensive enterprise. Rather, the proposal has been that if inequality is to be addressed, it can only be addressed by obliterating difference. Alternatively, some have suggested that so different are remote Aboriginal people that inequality as I have described it does not really amount to an experience of poverty as such.

This book has been shaped by just these issues and their impact on Mathew over time. My contention is that cultural difference does not override inequality or redefine it as experience. The prevalence of lifestyle disease, substance abuse and violence in communities attests to this. At the same time, inequality cannot be addressed except through the cultural difference of those who live remote. Routes to a good literate education and market capacities that facilitate employment, even from a remote base, should address and grapple with the cultural difference in communities. There is no simple route around the conflicts involved between institutions that derive from very different cultures (see Myers 1986:258–285). This is not to deny that Aboriginal people have hard choices to make. History is never fair. Nonetheless, the Australian electorate and the state have their own commitments to make on remote communities before Australia can describe itself as a fair and just society.

Two debates

The failure of anthropology and its cognate disciplines to address these issues convincingly created a space that was filled by others, some of whom were antagonistic to cultural difference. This process found its culmination in 2007 with the NT Intervention that brought a range of policy change to remote Aboriginal communities. Rather than extol or deplore the Intervention, the focus here is on the fact that academics were unable to divert it and were virtually silenced by it. Theirs was not the policy voice heard in spheres of government. Two debates, one within the universities and one in the public domain, throw some light on why this was so.

In the 1980s and 90s, some historians and some anthropologists launched a postcolonial critique of Australian anthropology. In essence, the proposal was that this anthropology did not attend to Indigenous people as historical agents; that is, as people who change, and who negotiate the orders of power with which they are confronted, especially as these are manifest in the state and its legal system. Australian anthropology lacked an analysis of the dynamics of British settlement and of

Indigenous people's fight against becoming subjects merely fashioned by the state. A variety of concerns informed this debate: the initial *fin de siècle* construction of the 'savage' in natural science, racism in Australian society; the authenticity that land rights conferred on only some Aboriginal people; and anthropology's preference for an abstracted social analysis that masked the 'blood and sweat and tears' of Aboriginal life. All the niceness in this normal science misrepresented both traditional society and the limits placed by the state on an Indigenous response to the exigencies that people faced. The debate about the Stolen Generations and those excluded from land rights—did they count as Aboriginal people?—gave a practical edge to this postcolonial critique. It was used to question the ahistorical portrait of hunter-gatherer Aboriginal people that still resided within anthropology.[7]

Though less remarked upon, the postcolonial critique also rested on the fact that, once encapsulated, Aboriginal people were subject to the dynamics of a capitalist economy, its market institutions and, by and large, its variable interest in regions where they remained the majority. The intersection of economy and law not only secured land for the Crown, but also at a later date determined the forms of marginalisation that various Aboriginal people would experience—as itinerant or seasonal workers, wards of state or welfare recipients. The dynamics of change that produced Indigenous political advance cannot be separated from this positioning that capitalism brought. Nor were these advances left uncontextualised when presented in histories of pastoralism, pearling and itinerant labour in the eastern and southern states. Yet for remote Aboriginal communities, the record is a patchy one.[8]

An early collection on the impact of mining, for instance, did not foster a genre of critical research either ethnographic or historical (see Berndt 1982). Most historians stayed away from cultural difference and the domain of the Land Rights Act. Most practitioners in the field of Indigenous studies were inclined to do the same, although the field has produced its own notable literature.[9] Notwithstanding important examples of genres mixed and boundaries crossed, the 'homeland' communities that grew in the wake of NT land rights have remained the bailiwick of anthropologists, their particular focus of research.[10] For this reason, it is significant that most anthropologists did not come to grips with two major postwar changes in remote Aboriginal conditions. These were the incorporation of Aboriginal people in an Australian welfare state *and* the rapid escalation of unemployment in rural and remote Australia.[11] Soaring unemployment came to remote Aboriginal communities in the context of bounded and highly local lives subsidised by the state. In these milieus, consumption has been organised through kinship networks which are resilient but also vulnerable now to manipulation by bullies who transgress old ways. At the same time, and with welfare ensconced, it is ties to country or locality rather than a working life that have sustained both status and identity. Importantly, this situation signals something in addition to a simple continuity of culture and location. The status confirmed through land rights and its valorisation of tradition also filled the gap that unemployment left (see Beckett 1988:9–15). Traditional ownership became the route along which most resources travelled, many in the form of government grants. As a result, some in communities became involved in a torrid resource politics to secure goods for their relatives (Austin-Broos 2003). Others unable to enter this contest have been involved in substance abuse and personal violence. Health has been a casualty as the epidemiology of remote communities came to resemble that of other indigenous peoples who have been marginalised (see Trovato 2001).

The tendency of anthropologists has been not to look too closely at these forms of change and distress. Consultancy reports commissioned on the homelands seldom brought critical ref lection on

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