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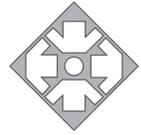
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# Separate worlds: A discourse analysis of mainstream and Aboriginal populist media accounts of the Northern Territory Emergency Response in 2007

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## Abstract

Critical commentary about the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) has included the claim that the media presented a simplistic and stereotyped image of Aboriginal communities at the time of its introduction in 2007, but to date there has been no systematic analysis to support this. This study addresses this research gap through a critical discourse analysis of reportage of the NTER in mainstream and Aboriginal populist print media. The findings reveal major differences in these accounts, with radically different propositions and normative assumptions. Mainstream media were overwhelmingly negative in their portrayal of remote Aboriginal communities, were silent about Aboriginal resistance and portrayed urgent Commonwealth intervention as necessary and heroic. The Aboriginal media provided contextualised accounts of the issues and focused intensely on the human rights implications of the intervention. The findings reveal a concerning racialised divide in representations of the issues facing remote Aboriginal communities in 2007 that helps to explain why the Australian public accepted policies that discriminated against Australia's First Nations peoples.

## Keywords

race, racial discrimination, race relations, welfare state

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The Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) represents the most radical government intervention in the lives of remote-living Aboriginal peoples since the 1960s. Introduced in 2007, it combines a major investment by the Australian state into Northern Territory (NT) Aboriginal communities with a range of regulatory measures designed to normalise and stabilise them (Altman and Hinkson, 2007). From the start, the disciplinary measures included within the NTER generated controversy. The government argued that drastic and urgent action was required to protect Aboriginal children. Opponents argued the intervention did little to address the causes of child abuse and neglect, that it was imposed without consultation and was discriminatory, requiring legislation that suspended the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Amnesty International, 2007; Calma, 2007). Within weeks of its announcement in June 2007, the implementation process began, and two months later legislation was rushed through Federal Parliament (AHRC, 2009). Although the NTER has been modified by the Labor government, it remains in place today.

The NTER's diminishment of Aboriginal human rights raises questions about Australia's status as a liberal democracy and the meaning of citizenship for Aboriginal peoples (Davis, 2007: 2; Stringer, 2007). Despite the human rights violations, opposition was largely limited to those with a professional or personal stake in the issues. This article argues that this public apathy was influenced by mainstream media representations of remote Aboriginal communities. We suggest that these constructed Aboriginal communities as inherently flawed, so that the imposition of white regimes of governance was the only solution, even if this meant the right to protection from racial discrimination was removed from some Aboriginal people. To support this claim we compare Aboriginal and mainstream populist print media constructions of the NTER at the time of its introduction. Our analysis shows that mainstream media consistently constructed all Aboriginal communities as places of violence and abuse, with the cause located in the deficits of Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal media contextualised problems of violence and abuse as occurring within only some Aboriginal communities, and linked the causes to the historical and sociopolitical legacy of the Australian state's engagement with its Aboriginal population.

## The NTER

Allegations of high levels of sexual abuse and neglect of Aboriginal children in remote communities had long been raised by Aboriginal people (Atkinson, 1999; Behrendt, 2005; McGlade, 2003; Stanley, Tomison and Pocock, 2003; Robertson, 2000), but the publication of the *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: Little Children Are Sacred* (LCAS) report (Wild and Anderson, 2007) led to widespread media coverage. One week after the release of this report of the NT's government's Inquiry into the Protection of Indigenous Children from Sexual Abuse, the Howard coalition government declared the situation in the NT a national emergency, which necessitated an 'Intervention strategy matched to the magnitude of the problem' (Brough, 2007). The NTER comprised 11 'emergency' measures to be implemented in 73 prescribed areas of the NT (Brough, 2007), including restrictions on alcohol and pornography, welfare quarantining of up to 50 percent of Centrelink payments linked to school attendance requirements, and other interventions, including compulsory health checks for children under the age of 16.

Government arguments for the NTER included the portrayal of Aboriginal communities as ‘failed’ societies (Brough, 2007), the result of an unsuccessful, ideologically motivated experiment in self-determination. Mal Brough, the then Minister for Families and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and a key architect of the NTER, stated, ‘communism didn’t work, collectivism didn’t work’ (cited in *The Age*, 2007). The government’s position was supported by some influential journalists and policy analysts (Albrechtsen, 2007; Hughes, 2007; Rothwell, 2007a, 2007b). Support for the NTER also came from some Aboriginal leaders, the most prominent of whom was Noel Pearson (2007), whose ideas on the debilitating impact of passive welfare informed many aspects of the NTER.

Opponents of the NTER were concerned to address living conditions on remote communities but argued there had been inadequate consultation and representation of Aboriginal people, and condemned it as a white paternalistic (Altman, 2007; Maddison, 2008) and discriminatory policy (Amnesty International, 2011; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009; Bauman, 2007). They pointed to the gap between the recommendations contained in the LCAS report (Wild and Anderson, 2007) and the NTER policies (Anderson, 2007; Behrendt, 2007; Hunter, 2008; Tait, 2007). These views were shared by some Aboriginal community organisations and leaders, including Tangentyere Council (2007) and Mick Dodson (2007).

## The role of the media

A common theme in critical commentary regarding the NTER is that the media contributed to a moral panic about violence and child abuse in Aboriginal communities. Moral panics are characterised by stereotyped media representations of a perceived ‘threat to societal values and interests’ presented by a ‘condition, episode, person or group of persons’ (Cohen, 1973: 1). A number of authors made the claim that, at the time of the introduction of the NTER, mainstream media provided a stereotyped, negative and oversimplified portrayal of Aboriginal communities, and portrayed the problems they faced as a threat to social order (APS, 2007; Baird, 2008; Brown and Brown, 2007; Dodson, 2007:22; Hunter, 2008; Pilger, 2008; Stringer, 2007; Watson, 2008). Brown and Brown describe how media reportage of the NTER was ‘awash with claims of “paedophile rings”, of a culture that “accepted and protected” the raping of children, [and] of “customary law being used as a shield to protect abusers”’. Baird (2008) linked media representations of the NTER to images of the child, suggesting the strength of the figure of the child served as a discursive resource that amounted to a form of ‘child fundamentalism’ which explained why the intervention ‘gained so much support among the mainstream Australian community’ (Baird, 2008: 294). Important as these arguments are, they have not yet been supported through systematic analysis of print media representations of Aboriginal communities in remote Australia affected by the NTER, and it is this research gap that this article seeks to address.

The media play a critical role in non-Aboriginal constructions of Indigeneity because it is through the media that most non-Aboriginal people learn about Aboriginal people (Elder, 2007). The limited contact that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal have with one another is well-established, with fewer than 10 percent of non-Aboriginal Australians mixing regularly with Aboriginal people. For most Australians, Aboriginal people are

not their neighbours, their workmates, their service providers or their friends (Walter et al., 2011). This separation is also to do with discourse, with non-Aboriginal representations of Aboriginal people derived predominantly from media constructions generated by non-Aboriginal people (Elder, 2007). The 2010 Reconciliation Barometer survey found that nearly 40 percent of non-Indigenous people learn about Indigenous people from the media (Stolper and Hammond, 2010: 39). This makes it a powerful influence on public opinion and policy direction, and highlights the need for critical interrogation.

Media analyses of Aboriginal issues have also focused almost exclusively on mainstream media (Banerjee and Osuri, 2000; Bullimore, 1999; Van Dijk, 1987), ignoring Indigenous media outlets such as the *Koori Mail* and the *National Indigenous Times*. Including Indigenous media in analysis of discourse provides an opportunity to reposition the normativity of mainstream representations of Indigeneity and give voice to Aboriginal constructions of Aboriginal issues.

## Whiteness theory

Our concern to decentre mainstream discourse representations of the NTER stems partly from our use of whiteness theory for this study. This approach views whiteness as a social construction in which Euro-Australian ethnic identity and cultural knowledge appear as raceless categories that invisibly afford privileges to Euro-Australians and legitimate certain ways of knowing, seeing and being Australian (Nicoll, 2004: 6). Frankenberg (1993) defines whiteness as a location, a standpoint and a set of cultural practices that affords white people 'race privilege'. It is 'a place from which white people look at [themselves], at others, and at society' and involves a 'set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed' (Frankenberg, 1993: 1). The racial hegemony of whiteness means the values and behaviours of Euro-Australian culture are experienced as normative and universal, forming the invisible standard against which all other values and behaviours are judged (Nicoll, 2004: 6). This gives rise to benefits that form a taken-for-granted, everyday reality (Bailey, 1998 cited in Pease, 2010: 112; McIntosh, 1988). Participation in the cultural normativity of whiteness can be understood as forming an aspect of the habitus as described by Bourdieu (1979: 170). It provides a 'matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions', causing individuals to view the world in a particular way (Bourdieu, 1977: 83, cited in Walter et al., 2011). As a socially acquired disposition, the white habitus brings with it little awareness of the privileges it brings, and little acknowledgement or understanding of the marginalisation experienced by those who do not possess it.

By focusing on the dominance of white social constructs, whiteness theory shifts attention from marginalised disadvantaged groups to the investigation of the behaviours and experiences of those that are dominant (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Frankenberg, 1993; Habibis and Walter, 2009). The focus is positioned on the power and privilege of the white Australian majority, rather than the perceived deficit of the black Aboriginal minority. This is helpful for a discourse analysis of media accounts of the NTER because the prevalence of Euro-Australian ideologies, values and perceptions in mainstream media, and the racially specific economic and social control inherent in the NTER, points to the implicit power of whiteness within Australian society. Through the

racialised assumption that the beliefs, behaviours and values of Euro-Australians are universal, white discourses reinforce these as the normative cultural space of Australia (Moreton-Robinson, 2009: 79).

## Methodology and methods used

This study adopts a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to identify the structuring principles of particular texts within media accounts of the NTER and their effects on constructions of Aboriginal populations affected by the NTER. The value of CDA is its concern with the everyday assumptions, discursive practices and ideological propositions embodied within media constructions (White, 2006: 173). This can reveal how language and discursive practices construct an idea of Indigeneity, and also permits analysis of underpinning assumptions shaping racialised constructions of Aboriginal Australia.

Eighty-two articles were collected for analysis. Data were coded according to the similarities and differences within the discourses. Two data sources were digital (the *Herald Sun* and the *Daily Telegraph*) and one was print (the *Koori Mail*). Boolean searches to retrieve digital articles used the following terms, or variants of them:

Aboriginal; Indigenous; Northern Territory Emergency Intervention/Response; remote community; child abuse; sexual perpetrators; little victims; Little Children are Sacred; Aboriginal policy; Race Discrimination Act.

The genres of the articles selected were reportage and editorial pieces. Opinion pieces were excluded<sup>1</sup> as far as possible because of the very large number in the *Koori Mail*, especially when contrasted with the few in the *Herald Sun* and the *Daily Telegraph*.

## Sample

The data comprised articles from the *Herald Sun*, *Daily Telegraph* and the *Koori Mail*. These outlets were chosen because they were all populist, targeting the ordinary Australian reader who consumes knowledge rather than those active in producing it. Two outlets were mainstream (*Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph*) and one was Aboriginal (*Koori Mail*) and all had the maximum audience reach of comparable outlets (see Table 1).

Two mainstream outlets were selected for analysis because the number of articles on the NTER appearing in the *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* was small. The three time intervals, June, July and August 2007 permitted investigation of the discourses across three distinct stages of the NTER: the announcement (June); the elaboration of the 11 emergency measures (July); and the passing of the legislation (August).

## Data analysis and interpretation

The number of articles in the *Koori Mail* was less than in the *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph*, probably due to its fortnightly publication. The *Koori Mail*'s reportage was more extensive in its coverage. An analysis of the distribution of the articles and their length is provided in Table 2.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of selected newspapers.

Newspaper title	Ownership	Publishing location	Publication	Total average readership
<i>Herald Sun</i>	News Corp.	Victoria	Daily: Mon–Sat	2,599,000*
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	News Corp.	NSW	Daily: Mon–Sat	1,803,000*
<i>Koori Mail</i>	Bunjum Co-op.; Buyinbin Inc.; Kurrachee Co-op.; Bundjalung Tribal Society; Nungera Co-op.	NSW	Fortnightly: Wednesday	90,000**

Source: \* Morgan (2011), \*\* *Koori Mail* (2011).

**Table 2.** NTER articles in selected media outlets, June–August 2007.

Newspaper	June (n)	July (n)	August (n)	Total (n)	Mean word count (n)
<i>Herald Sun</i>	19	9	1	<b>29</b>	<b>497</b>
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	19	7	1	<b>27</b>	<b>507</b>
<i>Koori Mail</i>	2	12	12	<b>26</b>	<b>705</b>

Textual analysis involved investigating the discursive practices, evident in articles on the NTER, including intertextuality, assumptions, co-locations of words, absences and silences. Intertextuality was defined as the inclusion of other voices and other texts within a text that can open up dialogue and explore differences between the texts (Fairclough, 2003: 41). The premise of the analysis is that texts make assumptions that ‘are of a particular significance [to] the ideological work of the texts’ (Fairclough, 2003: 61).

These assumptions are:

- existential assumptions about what exists
- propositional assumptions about what is, can, or will be
- value assumptions about what is good or desirable (Fairclough, 2003: 55).

## Findings

The analysis identified five major groups of discourses: ‘homogenising’, ‘justifying’, ‘blaming’, ‘distrusting’ and ‘contesting’. Within the justifying discourses there were two subsidiary discourses, children-at-risk discourses and supporting discourses. There were some articles in which more than one discourse was present, with overlap greatest between homogenising and justifying discourses, and between distrusting and contesting discourses. Table 3 presents the distribution of the main discourse within each of the 82 articles.

**Table 3.** Distribution of the main discourse within articles sampled.

Discourses	Herald Sun	Daily Telegraph	Koori Mail	Total (n)
Homogenising	10	9	1	<b>20</b>
Justifying	12	10	1	<b>23</b>
Blaming	4	2	4	<b>10</b>
Distrusting	1	4	10	<b>15</b>
Contesting	2	2	10	<b>14</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>82</b>

The focus of the reportage changed over the three months of the analysis, with different shifts in the discursive strategies underlying assumptions for each of the discourses. In June, when the NTER was announced, the discourses shared a common focus on the protection of Aboriginal children from alleged abuse. By July, as the detail of the emergency measures was revealed, the lens shifted to explore, support or contest them. By early July, discursive representations of abused Aboriginal children had all but disappeared from coverage of the NTER. The politicisation of the issue transcended reportage of the victimised Aboriginal child. Instead accounts predominantly focused on political justification or resistance to the policies and their legislation. The next sections outline the characteristics of each of the discursive categories.

### *Homogenising discourses*

Homogenising discourses were constructed by the absence of particular words in the coverage of the NTER. The lack of quantifying words such as ‘some’ when referring to Aboriginal children, and ‘alleged’ before reference to child sex abuse, and ‘remote’ before reference to communities, implied alleged sexual violation of Aboriginal children was an actuality and ubiquitous in all Aboriginal communities. Homogenising discourses were overwhelmingly utilised in the *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* throughout the study period. They appeared only once in the *Koori Mail*, immediately after the initial announcement of the findings of the LCAS report (Wild and Anderson, 2007).

The homogenising discourses were characterised by an absence of intertextuality, effectively closing the door to discursive differences. This homogenised Aboriginal communities and reportage of the NTER. The existential assumptions suggested that Aboriginal culture is a monoculture, that all Aboriginal communities were inherently dysfunctional, all Aboriginal adults were perpetrators and all Aboriginal children were victims. For example the *Herald Sun* reported that ‘Aboriginal children as young as three are falling victim to widespread sex abuse fuelled by alcohol, pornography and ignorance’ (Ravens, 2007). The *Daily Telegraph* suggested the intervention would ‘tackle the problem of sexual abuse and exploitation of children in Aboriginal communities’ (‘Action Howard had to take’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 2007a) and the *Koori Mail* asserted that ‘these bad things [child sex abuse] do happen in our communities – all of them not just in the Northern Territory’ (*Koori Mail*, 2007a: 20, original emphasis). Many discourses were not spatially situated in remote, urban, rural, state or Territory locations, which effectively dispersed allegations to Aboriginal communities throughout the country.

Propositional assumptions suggested that abuse and violence were intrinsic to Aboriginal culture and an inextricable part of life in all Aboriginal communities. The value assumptions triggered by words such as 'victim', 'sexual abuse' and 'exploitation' created a binary that all Aboriginal people were either licentious perpetrators or helpless victims. This pathologised Aboriginality and individualised the problems of abuse. There was no acknowledgement of the enduring legacy of historical dispossession, social and political marginalisation, and economic disadvantage.

The co-location of words such as 'decaying', 'dysfunctional' and 'continuing to collapse' preceding reference to Aboriginal communities depicted Aboriginal culture as universally problematic (Akerman, 2007; *Daily Telegraph*, 2007b; Farr, 2007; *Herald Sun*, 2007; *Koori Mail*, 2007c: 1, 7; McManus and Packham, 2007; Moriarty, 2007). The exclusion of white Australians from assertions such as 'child sex abuse was rampant in Aboriginal communities across Australia' (*Koori Mail*, 2007c: 7) implied that child sex abuse was an Aboriginal-specific problem. Even when universal claims about Aboriginal men were qualified by statements such as 'Aboriginal men have been targeted as if they were the only perpetrators of child sexual abuse in communities' (Coombs, 2007), the implication was that Aboriginal men as a collective were perpetrators but they were not the only perpetrators.

### *Justifying discourses*

Justifying discourses were prevalent in the *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* (see Table 3). These articulated support for the NTER and promoted white protective societal attitudes towards Aboriginal children. Justifying discourses appeared in two distinct modes: children-at-risk discourses and supporting discourses, and were consistently present in mainstream media throughout the period under analysis. Within the justifying discourses intertextuality did not open up dialogue because the 'voices' presented in the texts were dominated by two prominent Aboriginal identities, Noel Pearson and Sue Gordon. Both of these were strong advocates of the need for urgent intervention in remote Aboriginal communities and had close ties with the Howard government. Sue Gordon chaired the Howard government's NTER Taskforce and was instrumental in overseeing the implementation of the 11 'emergency measures' in 73 Aboriginal communities. Noel Pearson's arguments against passive welfare had resulted in the Howard government's support of a welfare reform trial in Hope Vale, Queensland, in May 2007. Through frequent, and almost exclusive, use of their statements, Gordon and Pearson represented the 'voice' of Aboriginal Australia. Other Aboriginal voices hardly appeared, including the opinions and concerns of Aboriginal women and Aboriginal leaders who challenged the intervention.

### *Children-at-risk discourses*

The children-at-risk discourses, through discursive tactics similar to those in homogenising discourses, portrayed all Aboriginal children as inherently at risk. Statements such as 'children are subjected to imminent abuse, abuse that takes place on a regular basis' (Farr, 2007), suggested that violence, neglect and sexual abuse were routine and

normalised components of Aboriginal childhood. The existential assumptions were that Aboriginal children needed protecting and their parents and communities were unable and/or unwilling to do this. Propositional assumptions suggested that white regimes of governance would protect the unprotected children. As in the justifying discourses, paternalism was a key concept. The *Herald Sun* reported that ‘the Intervention intends to restore law and order to communities – it seeks to identify and protect children at risk’ (Moriarty, 2007). The value assumption was that the NTER was a protective policy that ensured the protection of Aboriginal children from their parents, who were either neglectful for not protecting them, neglectful for abusing them, or both.

The constant juxtaposition of the words ‘Aboriginal children’ alongside words such as ‘terrified’, ‘vulnerable’, ‘sexually abused’, ‘neglected’, ‘protect’ and ‘help’, implied pejorative attitudes toward Aboriginal parents. Pearson’s depiction of ‘the terrified kid huddling in the corner when there’s a binge drinking party going on down the hall’ (*ABC Lateline*, 2007; Bantick, 2007) was widely quoted, adding to the notion that, as a social category, Aboriginal parents cared little about their children. There was no mention of the repeated efforts of Aboriginal women to establish services in their communities to address violence and child abuse. It was also the trigger for many value assumptions including the dubious moral worth of anyone who challenged the intervention. The discourses articulated bewilderment ‘that anybody would put the protection of children secondary to anything’ (Farr, 2007). Any challenge to the merits of the intervention was linked to accusations that the speaker, if Aboriginal had something to hide, or if non-Aboriginal was an idealistic bystander (Akerman, 2007; Farr, 2007; McManus, 2007). The *Daily Telegraph* reported Pearson’s complaint about ‘comfortable well-off urban natterers’, whose families were secure from drunken molestation. It ‘offended him that the people who were critical of the Intervention have children that sleep safe at night’ (Farr, 2007). The unspoken implication was that such things did not occur in white communities but were a unique feature of remote Aboriginal communities.

### Supporting discourses

Supporting discourses were most prevalent in the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Herald Sun* during July. These argued that white governance was needed to restore civility and moral order to remote Aboriginal communities in the NT. Intertextuality opened up the dialogue to include ‘voices’ of politicians and Aboriginal leaders, including opposition leader Kevin Rudd, Aboriginal leader, Noel Pearson and Magistrate Sue Gordon. What was ‘said’ in quotations and summaries varied little and invariably articulated support for the intervention. The *Herald Sun* claimed ‘it has been backed in principle by Labor leader Kevin Rudd, it was supported by Aboriginal leaders Noel Pearson and Warren Mundine, and the broad electorate has given it a tacit go-ahead’ (Farr, 2007). The emphasis on bipartisan and Aboriginal support constructed an image of national unity in response to a national emergency. This masked Aboriginal resistance to the intervention and served as a discursive device that enabled the intervention to be portrayed as the federal government’s ‘crusade’ to ‘protect’ Aboriginal children. It was ‘a rescue mission for which [the federal government] needed to be commended’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 2007a). The existential assumption integral to these discourses was the idea that the current crisis

in remote Aboriginal communities demonstrated the failings of Aboriginal morality, governance and self-determination. This had three effects. It suggested that the government's intervention was a necessity not a choice, that urgent and decisive action was required, and that this necessitated a national response. This shifted the moral ground to a point at which the immediate alleviation of harm to Aboriginal children became the higher good, and this justified measures that compromised Aboriginal human rights. The discourse portrayed the federal government as heroic for tackling the crisis, despite the difficulties this would inevitably entail.

An image of the authoritative parent administering tough love was prevalent throughout the supporting discourses. The propositional assumptions were that drastic measures taken by a committed white government offered the only hope for the protection of the nation's Aboriginal children. The *Herald Sun* (Moriarty, 2007) reported that 'only an Intervention by the Australian Government at the highest level ... can begin to alleviate the endemic dysfunction that has plagued our Indigenous families for at least two generations'. The use of the terms 'our', 'endemic dysfunction' and 'plagued' in this statement reveals the binary of the 'good', 'responsible' state and the diseased and incapable Aboriginal body. The government is constructed as having no choice *but* to intervene, because it is the ultimate responsible body and belongs to a higher moral order.

The use of words such as 'crusade', 'protect', and 'rescue mission' in relation to the intervention highlighted the value assumptions (Fairclough, 2003: 57) within the texts and implied that Aboriginal people needed rescuing by the white government due to their inherent deficit. Invariably absent from these discourses was the contextualisation of Aboriginal disadvantage, its structural and historical roots, and the effects on Aboriginal identity and sense of self-worth (Hunter, 2008; Wild and Anderson, 2007). The justifying discourses normalised remote-living Aboriginal children as victims. This representation, together with the construction of Aboriginal people as incapable of dealing with their problems, opponents of the intervention as complacent about the sexual abuse of Aboriginal children, and the lack of attention to the context of colonisation, disadvantage and social exclusion, enabled the Howard government to be perceived as *fixing* what was constructed as the inevitable and long-standing failure of remote Aboriginal communities.

### *Blaming discourses*

Blaming discourses held the NT government partially responsible for the perceived dysfunction in remote Aboriginal communities, and applauded the federal government for taking control of them. The NT government was depicted as not responding to the LCAS report with the necessary urgency required. These discourses were substantiated with quotes from statements made by NT Chief Minister Claire Martin. Ms Martin acknowledged that 'not enough [was] done to protect Indigenous children' (*Koori Mail*, 2007c: 1) and 'this [LCAS report] is a landmark report that will sadly expose the great pain and unhappiness of many people [and] ... it is clear not enough has been done to tackle the abuse of Aboriginal children' (*Koori Mail*, 2007c: 1).

Within these discourses intertextuality opened up the dialogue to include various 'voices', which highlighted the tension between NT and federal governments, and

inferred that the federal government had little choice but to intervene in light of the NT government's inertia. The *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* reported that: 'the PM was entitled to respond with drastic measures in the absence of a response from the Northern Territory Government'; 'the Territory Government was dithering over child sex abuse, he had no choice but to act' (*Herald Sun*, 2007) and:

We [the federal government] are doing this because we do not think the Territory has responded to the crisis affecting the children in the Territory and we believe that our responsibility to those children overrides any sensitivities of Commonwealth–Territory relations. (Howard, in McManus and Packham, 2007)

And; 'Commonwealth officials will effectively take over Indigenous affairs in the Northern Territory to protect children' (*Daily Telegraph*, 2007).

The existential and propositional assumptions underpinning these discourses were that only the federal government had the courage and capacity to deal with the magnitude of dysfunction in remote communities, and it would intervene regardless of the political tension this might cause. The value assumptions were that the NT government was remiss in its failure to address alleged child sexual abuse in its own backyard. The collocation of words such as 'dithering', 'no choice but to act', 'protect', 'crisis', 'responsibility' and 'drastic measures' triggered value assumptions and societal expectations about the need for urgent action by the federal government. The absence of attention to the political tensions between the NT and federal governments, and the history of conflicts over funding arrangements (see Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) released the federal government from acknowledging its own history of inertia in relation to Aboriginal affairs and the failure of past policies, enabling its portrayal as acting decisively in the national interest where the NT government had failed.

### *Distrusting discourses*

Distrusting discourses challenged the validity of the NTER and queried the 'real' intentions of the government. They appeared initially in early July exclusively in the *Koori Mail*. The president of the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association was cited stating that; 'As medical professionals we question the notion that you can treat poverty, dispossession, marginalisation and despair ... with interventions that further contribute to poverty, dispossession, marginalisation and despair' (*Koori Mail*, 2007d: 10). These discourses suggested the NTER was a mask to remove hard-won native title rights to allow private enterprise and the state access to outback lands. The Howard government was portrayed as 'orchestrating a land grab – a re-invasion under the guise of child protection' (Tyler cited in Coyne, 2007a: 9). Within a month of the announcement, as the full implications of the emergency measures became apparent, these discourses also appeared occasionally in the *Daily Telegraph* and once in the *Herald Sun*.

Underpinning these discourses were assumptions that Aboriginal lands, not Aboriginal children were the motivation for the intervention and that the Commonwealth was hiding behind a façade of social responsibility to control and assimilate Aboriginal people, rather than support their children. The co-location of words such as 'real' and

'mask' denoted distrust and the suspicion that the federal government was being disingenuous. Value assumptions triggered by words such as 'using child abuse', 'resume total control', 'take back control' and 'land grabs' indicated an understanding of the intervention as a ruse to acquire Aboriginal lands and control Aboriginal lives rather than action necessary to protect Aboriginal children or improve Aboriginal communities. The distrusting discourses described women and children 'fleeing to the sandhills' (Rehn, 2007), denoting a milieu of fear about the need to hide and protect children from government intrusion. The unspoken implication was that the stealing of land and the removal of children by the state had happened before, so why would it not occur again?

Intertextuality opened up the dialogue to include contentions that hidden motives for the intervention included the use of Aboriginal land for the dumping of nuclear waste or uranium mining (Coyne, 2007a: 9). The intervention was portrayed as heading in the direction of past assimilation policies that would subject Aboriginal people to racist and paternalistic regimes of governance and loss of self-determination. Suspicions that the NTER was politically motivated were dominant constructs. 'What Howard was doing today, yesterday, tomorrow was related to the impending election' (Carpenter cited in Coyne, 2007b: 10), not the protection of Aboriginal children. The Howard government was portrayed as not committed to long-term strategies for resolving living conditions on remote communities through provision of adequate services (*Koori Mail*, 2007e:12).

### Contesting discourses

Contesting discourses were largely utilised in the *Koori Mail* (see Table 3) and appeared in early July to August. These judged the intervention to be 'punitive, heavy-handed and a recipe for failure' (*Koori Mail*, 2007e: 12). During the development and legislating of the NTER, contesting discourses suggested the policies were impulsive, rushed and ignored the recommendations of the LCAS report (Wild and Anderson, 2007). The *Koori Mail* reported 'more than 40,000 Indigenous people in the Northern Territory will soon be subjected to tough new laws that have been widely criticised as rushed and racist' (Coyne, 2007c: 1).

The existential assumptions were that the NTER demonstrated the inherent racism of white Australia, while propositional assumptions suggested Aboriginal people must rally against the NTER to prevent the Commonwealth extending the intervention elsewhere. The value assumptions were that the NTER would erode Aboriginal culture by removing human rights and Aboriginal control, autonomy and choice. Aboriginal peoples were constructed as being collectively punished for the alleged actions of some. The effect would be to foster and deepen black disadvantage and reinforce white dominance. Intertextuality opened up dialogue from a range of arenas, including the Law Council of Australia, and Aboriginal lawyers and activists to articulate and substantiate opposition to the NTER.

Perceptions of double standards and discrimination were part of the contesting discourses:

How would they feel if their lives were to be fundamentally changed with 24 hours notice? Although of course, it would be unfathomable for them to be ever subjected to such a draconian act. (*Koori Mail*, 2007b: 20)

Implicit in this quote is a sense of separation between black and white Australia, and the status of Aboriginal people as a silenced minority. The quote constructs whiteness as blind to its dominance and discriminatory practice, and ignorant of its impact on Aboriginal communities. The discourse constructs an *us* and *them* dichotomy. White Australians can rely on societal mechanisms to protect their human rights, but black Australians cannot. The use of words such as 'they', 'their' and 'them' in Aboriginal reportage created the category of the white privileged 'Other', suggesting that this dialogical category has never been, and would never be, subjected to such intrusive, race-specific and hastily implemented legislation.

### Discussion: separate worlds

These findings suggest that in the three months following the announcement of the NTER, populist mainstream print reportage contributed to public acceptance of the NTER through discursive constructions of all remote Aboriginal communities as places where failures of Aboriginal self-governance, together with the ineptitude of the NT government, had resulted in their moral collapse, exposing children to a risk of harm such that the Commonwealth had little choice but to impose white moral order and governance. This was the message of the homogenising and justifying discourses which were overwhelmingly present in *The Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* with minimal presence in the *Koori Mail*. The oppositional, distrusting and contesting discourses present in the *Koori Mail* rarely appeared in mainstream media accounts. These emphasised both the strengths and weaknesses of Aboriginal communities and the variation between them. They highlighted the complex nature of problems and their roots in white government neglect, past and current trauma, structural disadvantage, and social and political marginalisation.

Discursive representations of Indigeneity were polarised through a range of binaries. Constructions of Aboriginal people in Aboriginal media accounts were that they were 'unfairly targeted', 'disadvantaged' and 'violated', 'victims' who were 'resilient' 'recipients of racism'. In mainstream accounts Aboriginal people were 'dysfunctional', 'violent' and 'desperate' 'perpetrators', who were 'morally reprehensible', 'complacent' and 'deserving of punishment'. The fleeting coverage of Aboriginal disadvantage in the *Herald Sun* and the *Daily Telegraph* was solely in the context of the NTER policies and legislation, not in the historical and enduring experience. Expressions of moral concern and regard were reserved for the 'innocent' Aboriginal child.

This divergence in representations of Indigeneity and remote Aboriginal communities points to an underlying separation between black and white Australia. Remote Aboriginal communities are characterised as much by engagement between black and white populations as they are by separation, but the analysis presented here confirms McDermott's portrayal of Australia as a place in which white ignorance and amnesia have created an 'Abo-Proof fence' (cited in Lawson, 2012). What is surprising about this finding is not

that this dichotomy exists but that it should be so powerful. Mainstream discourses almost exclusively utilised stories of Aboriginal dysfunction, neglect, corruption and sexual abuse in their account of remote Aboriginal communities. This created a climate of moral panic which conflated child abuse with Aboriginal culture, reinforcing pejorative stereotypes of a debased Aboriginal population. This pathologising silenced attention to comparable problems within any non-Aboriginal communities (see, for example, Hunter, 2008). Black culture, as inherently and universally dystopian, was implicitly contrasted with white culture, as inherently and consistently moral. Hier (2011: 528) argues that neoliberal governance both individualises and totalises responsibility, and in the homogenising and supporting discourses it was Indigeneity that threatened Australia's moral order. This perception 'unified society [to] act collectively and unilaterally on an otherwise powerless target' (Hier, 2011: 533).

Race and racialised assumptions operated on both sides. The *Koori Mail* drew attention to the discriminatory nature of the NTER, situating the discursive representations of Indigeneity in a realm of contestation and resistance to the social and political dominance of whiteness. Aboriginal people were constructed as defending their hard-won land and citizenship rights against excessive government control and an unjust, race-specific policy. This was conceived within a paradigm that contextualised the complexity of Australia's race relations through a black lens. The dichotomy of *us* and *them* was strong throughout the Aboriginal reportage, drawing attention to the perceived inherent privileges of being white, through the lived experience of being black. Aboriginal Australians in remote NT locations were represented as evaluating and observing the power of white policies, governance and ideologies, while white Australians were ignorant of the 'real' experiences, values and behaviours of Aboriginal individuals and families.

## Conclusion

The key concern of this article is to understand how a democratic nation could impose a radical program of control over Australian citizens with measures requiring the suspension of its own Racial Discrimination Act (Australian Government, 1975). Our findings show that populist mainstream media constructed remote-living Aboriginal Australians in a way that deemed their alterity to be so profound that they were undeserving of the right to be legally protected from racial discrimination. It is hard to imagine that an intervention equivalent to the NTER could have been imposed on Australian residents in the suburbs of Sydney or Adelaide, no matter how disadvantaged or concerning the issues.

The analysis of mainstream media has been limited to News Limited papers and it is possible that the inclusion of Fairfax Media's *Sydney Morning Herald* might have found a greater spread of discourses across Aboriginal and mainstream populist media. But the *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* have the highest penetration of print media in Australia and they are disturbing in the lack of compassion the discourses suggest white Australia has for the suffering within some Aboriginal communities. Accounts of problems were not accompanied by moral regard and concern for Aboriginal men and women. Compassion was limited to children but even here the objects of concern were deracialised as 'our' children whose vulnerability necessitated appropriation into the white moral order. There was no acknowledgement of the homeland movement's origins in Aboriginal

aspirations for self-determination and to establish places of healing and respite away from the damaging effects of the city. The simplistic portrayal of causes and remedies for the difficulties of life in some Aboriginal communities obscured the complexity of the issues and ignored the contribution of government neglect, disempowerment and low resources (see, for example, Stanley et al., 2003). The contrast with the Aboriginal discourses is deeply troubling and highlights the need to challenge media stereotypes and provide alternative discourses that provide realistic and nuanced accounts of the complexities and diversity of Aboriginal lives.

The LCAS report raised public awareness about problems within some remote Aboriginal communities and provided the Commonwealth with an opportunity to revitalise its relationship with Aboriginal people and to invest in the future of their children. But by attaching its investment to discriminatory policies, and in the absence of meaningful consultation, the Howard government confirmed the institutional and cultural power of white Australia over its First Nations peoples. The way the NTER was introduced now forms part of the collective memory of Aboriginal people, potentially adding to earlier damaging narratives of their engagement with the Australian state.

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