

Paper appeared in *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2003

## **EUPHEMISM, BANALITY, PROPAGANDA**

### **Anthropology, public debate and Indigenous communities<sup>1</sup>**

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‘The absence of the Other from our Time has been his manner of presence in our discourse — as an object and victim’ (Fabian 1983 :154).

‘Anthropology seeks to understand; the law makes it possible to judge’ (Todorov 1999: 137).

Academics and other intellectuals often find themselves on the back foot in relation to matters that are the subject of public debate because the concepts, the framework and the moral assumptions that circulate in popular discussions are unacceptable. Not so Peter Sutton, whose keynote address at the Australian Anthropology Society conference in 2000 on violence in Indigenous communities was published, paraphrased and reproduced, and became an authoritative contribution to public debate.<sup>2</sup> I was surprised that no anthropological voices were heard protesting at his depiction of Indigenous social life or at what I saw as the regressive implications of his essay. Clearly Sutton’s outpouring of concern about the high levels of violence, homicides and suicides, and sexual violence against women and against children in Indigenous communities was widely shared with an

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<sup>1</sup> An early version of this paper was presented at the 2001 Double Edged Conference, Ourimbah, University of Newcastle. November 2001. I am grateful for comments received there and from Caroline Alcorso, Jeremy Becket, Ghassan Hage, Tess Lea, Francine Lorimer, Francesca Merlan, Barry Morris, Franca Tamisari, Alan Rumsey, Hal Wootten and from two anonymous referees.

<sup>2</sup> Originally entitled ‘Judging Traditions’, the paper was the Inaugural Berndt Foundation Biennial lecture delivered at the annual Australian Anthropology Society conference in Perth in September 2000. It was published as ‘The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Policy in Australia Since the Seventies’ in *Anthropological Forum* (2001). A summary appeared in *The Australian* (24-4-01), and detailed references in the *SMH* (26-4-01,) and *The Age* (23-6-01) and it circulated among public servants. Columnists referred to it and it has become a standard and authoritative source for any journalist who mentions Indigenous violence (eg. Financial Review 6<sup>th</sup> Dec 2002 p.8). Sutton has made previous excursions into an advisory role, once arguing that anthropologists were advocates who could enhance Aborigines’ ‘capacity to get on’ and to achieve ‘positive discrimination.’ (cf. Cowlishaw 1990; 1986:38).

apparently sympathetic public. Here I want to provide a critique of his essay, but one which also responds to those academic colleagues who have said ‘Oh yes, but he has a point’. If he has a point, what is it exactly? Further, does Australian anthropology have anything relevant to say about the alleged crisis in Aboriginal society today?

Sutton has two ‘points’ which have, I believe, some validity. The first, which has been made by many differently positioned authors over many years, is that social conditions in many Aboriginal communities are indeed dire.<sup>3</sup> I would also concede another point, that there is ‘euphemism, banality and propaganda’ (Sutton 2001: 145) in public discussion of Indigenous matters.<sup>4</sup> However, euphemism is partial, and an outpouring in the press of descriptions of abject, violent and miserable conditions in remote communities had begun before Sutton’s article appeared. The stereotype of ‘the drunken Aborigine’ (Langton 1997) has now been well and truly reinstalled in the public mind. Further, endless discussion and furious activity take place within the relevant government departments about the very problems Sutton wishes to bring to ‘public’ notice (Folds 2001; Lea 2001). Rather than changing the direction of public debate, Sutton could be seen as giving academic authority and respectability to a growing body of negative stereotypes. I will have more to say about public debate and policy below.

My main concern is with Sutton’s reproduction of the pathology model of Indigenous communities, a model that condemns the people concerned to remain the silent recipients of the ministrations of government officials. What kind of anthropology is it that tries to take up a governmental position, without taking first and primary account of what the recipients of governance have to say? If we cannot listen to what people say, then we had better not try to help them — and this is surely a general principle. I fear that public debate itself is a heavy burden on Indigenous consciousness. Aboriginal people are, in my experience, overwhelmed by the fact that they are already known to others, not as they experience themselves, but in the images, stereotypes and discourses which have made them known in

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<sup>3</sup> This ‘dire’ means different things in different analyses such as those of Pearson (2002), von Sturmer (1982), Etherington (2001), Robinson (1995), and Brady (1992), of which more later.

<sup>4</sup> Over a decade ago Eric Michaels complained of the euphemism in public debate: ‘The rule seems to be not merely that one never criticises a black; one never even discusses Aboriginal politics anymore. ... does self-determination now require an exemption from public dialogue?’ (Michaels 1990: 85). Liberal minded people’s fear of the rabid right leads them to a protective stance towards Aboriginal people. Other relevant conditions include disappointment with the 1970s progressive policies, shifts in public sympathy and priorities, and some Aboriginal gatekeepers who police debate

the public domain.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous individuals are weighed down by this body of public knowledge, as they struggle to contest, or to fit in with, the ideas and images of themselves which they meet every day. I feel a sense of nausea at the thought of contributing to this burdensome discourse, and at merging with the curious white gaze which depersonalises Aborigines even as it commiserates with them. Thus I am suggesting a comprehensively different approach to the realm of ‘public debate’ and to ‘social problems’, one based on an appreciation of what present conditions and social history mean to the people involved.

### **Absent Ethnography: Silent Suffering**

The voices of Aboriginal community members are distressingly absent from Sutton’s essay and from public debates where their social world is the object of scrutiny.<sup>6</sup> Instead we are given populist conceptions of culture as a fixed and homogeneous set of norms. While anathema to most contemporary anthropologists a few still speak of such entities as ‘classical social templates’, ‘old pre-colonial systems’, ‘ancient ways’ and ‘pre-existent’ practices (Sutton, 2001: fns 6 & 24. pp. 128, 134, 137).<sup>7</sup> Such a mechanistic view of culture erases the sensate, intelligent human beings who are experiencing and responding to their conditions of existence. It is not an easy task to systematically listen to the concerns of those whose prevailing meanings are other than those we, the readers, take for granted. I am not suggesting that members of a community speak an unambiguous truth about their conditions. But as anthropologists, we must take what people say *seriously* although not necessarily *literally*.

An example is the self-assessment of communities where ‘most residents in such places *see nothing worthy of much serious complaint about their conditions*. ... the self-rated health status of people in remote communities ... regularly emerges as predominantly

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<sup>5</sup> As Franz Fanon said ‘the other, the white man, ... had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories’ (Fanon 1986: 111).

<sup>6</sup> A few Indigenous individuals who must take the role of leaders and spokespersons, are forced to assume the immense responsibility of representation, and are expected to regularly voice ‘the Aboriginal point of view’

<sup>7</sup> In several places Sutton gropes briefly towards a more complex understanding of cultural dynamics, for instance confessing at one point that the complexity and ambiguity in ‘culture’ makes ‘cultural engineering an unpredictable and daunting venture’ (2001: 135), and referring to ‘a particular kind of culture located where Indigenous and non-indigenous societies intersect’ (2001: 134).

“good to excellent” ’ (Sutton 2001, fn.3 emphasis added).<sup>8</sup> To me this titbit of information provides a valuable glimpse of what the people Sutton is concerned with say about their own conditions, and it could provide a point of entry into the meanings generated in these social collectives, meanings that are strangely unfamiliar and even foreign to the way outsiders commonly view this ‘suffering’. Perhaps the denial of suffering is a means of parrying the prying eyes of outsiders; if so it reveals sensitivity and shame as a constituent element of these social conditions. But because this self-assessment is ‘utterly at odds medically with global ideas of reasonable levels of health’ and ‘has never been the basis of official health policy’, which is ‘as it should be’ (ibid), no more thought need be given to this sign of difference. An opportunity to think differently is lost.<sup>9</sup>

Calls to arms in the face of crisis usually refer to a generalised, public knowledge of suffering which we are all supposed to share based on representations generated in the public domain. However, because suffering is an experiential rather than an objective condition, the suffering subject needs to be recognised separately from the social conditions which generate suffering. It is true that in small populations of close-knit kin, high levels of conflict and crime have a community wide impact (Sutton 2001: 127). But images of communities suffused by unrelenting and all-pervasive violence and misery leave no room for a community’s own knowledge of itself and its struggles. Depictions from anthropologists (Sansom 2001), from the theatre (eg. Leah Purcell’s *Box the Pony*), and from television (eg. *Bush Mechanics* TV series) provide evidence of a level of social engagement with modernity that is erased in Sutton’s homogeneously miserable and

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<sup>8</sup> Lea discusses the great deal of energy expended by health department personnel trying to convince Aborigines that they *are* seriously and communally ill ( see also Brady 2001; 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Diane Smith has just published a review of Ralph Fold’s book *Crossed Purposes*, which is relevant to my arguments. Her anger at Fold’s lack of emphasis on Pintupi suffering blinds her to the challenge he poses to our certainties about the nature and reason for that suffering. She seems to agree with Fold’s account of Pintupi logic and interpretations, yet does not take them seriously as a challenge to the forms of governance Pintupi are faced with. Instead she belittles the book for some obvious weaknesses and for not dealing with the kinds of things CAEPR so assiduously ‘establishes’. That is, she does not appear to recognise the active role Pintupi people themselves might be playing in the problems of governance. Her suggestions about the culture and nature of governance are promising, but such an analysis requires more work and a candid, hard-headed and sympathetic approach to the world of bureaucracy and officialdom, such as is evident in the recent work of Tess Lea (2001, 2002).

desperate communities.<sup>10</sup> A complex and richly creative social domain can survive alongside a level of social disorder that might appear pathological to worried suburban dwellers (cf. Kelly 1997). Communities I know personally evince high levels of alcoholism and violence, yet the majority of individuals are not involved in destructive behaviour, and many display moral strength, positive sociality and an ironic humour — as indeed do some drinkers. Thus, social domains that could be described as disordered and destructive are always already more than this; suffering is not merely an empirical fact, but is experienced in particular ways and given specific meanings and explanations which the work of ethnographers can help bring to light (eg. Cowlshaw 2001).

If we listen to community people, distinctive diagnoses will be heard. To my knowledge, Murris of Bourke and Rembarrnga of Bulman often discuss and diagnose complaints of serious depravity, including irresponsible parents and violence towards children. The explanations proposed locally include banalities taken from populist debates, but there is also a sharp understanding of psychological conditions such as self-hatred, disgust and unresolved grief. Many Murri individuals are intensely aware of particular examples of anguish for which there is no outlet and no language except that of blame and horror. Derogation and harassment from outside exacerbate destructive practices, as do alcohol and gambling and the corruption of Aboriginal organisations. Local diagnoses are incomplete, but they provide crucial windows on the generation of violence and its inter-subjective permutations. These are not excuses or even explanations, but a critique of diagnoses which are oblivious of, for example, an Aboriginal person's dismayed response to a violent episode: 'A dark person is hurt very deeply from what went on back in the old days. They held inside of them for a long long time. It's not all the blame going onto Aboriginals.' This woman is used to 'all the blame going onto Aborigines' and sees the shame of that blame as contributing to the violence. Another woman joked, 'I wouldn't marry into that family and get a face like a busted-up camp-oven'. This bitter humour attests to the familiarity of violence, and even its acceptance as a common feature of domestic life, which is perhaps the most daunting aspects of these conditions for those engaged in trying to improve them (cf. Brady 1990).

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<sup>10</sup> Colin Tatz (2001), a concerned political scientist and social critic, also produced an unremittingly negative view of helpless and self-destructive communities, but we should expect something more from an ethnographer whose knowledge of particular communities is assumed to be more intimate and comprehensive.

My disagreement with Sutton is not about quantification. I am asserting that an empirically established statistically high level of violence and destructive behaviour gives no insight into community relations or the level and meaning of suffering. No sense of a way out **from within** can be offered without a grasp of the shared meanings within a community. Or at least a recognition that these meanings exist and must be bolstered if the community is to take control of itself, as has occurred to some extent and in some cases (Wright 1997).<sup>11</sup> The poets and authors whose depictions of a suffering Aboriginality have reverberated in Australia (eg. Fogarty 1995; Gilbert 1988; Johnson 1986) tell a story of active articulate responses, including rage, despair and triumphant survival. What the public debate about Indigenous communities needs is ethnographic insight, rather than Sutton's partial account of people who are silenced by their imputed suffering.

### **'Do something': Public debate and crisis**

There have been many passionate and deeply felt statements proposing that there is a crisis of drunkenness and violent disorder which, combined with the poor levels of health, and other indicators, demand that we, the public, but especially we, the scholars concerned with Aborigines, take note and advise policy makers to *do something*. But do scholars such as anthropologists know what to do? Observing and criticising the difficulties of awkward and ill-equipped government officials and institutional employees struggling to make things work in remote communities is one thing, but there is implicit arrogance in the assumption that, by virtue of an intimate knowledge of one or two Aboriginal communities and a body of concepts, theories and experience of cultural difference, academics have answers to policy questions, that is, questions of governance, funding, service provision, policing, provision of housing, infrastructure priorities, local government responsibility, community councils, education and health provision to Aboriginal communities. We would also do well to consider whether it is the 'policy' itself that creates or can solve the observable 'problems'.

It is often implied that public scrutiny of social problems has a healing effect, like the drying and healing of wounds with exposure to sunlight. The outpourings of media outrage in mid-2001, precipitated by accusations that the Chairman of ATSIC had committed rape, implied that a scandalous level of violence in Indigenous communities could be fixed with

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<sup>11</sup> As well as bad ones I continually hear of 'good news stories', community initiatives or programs that have been successful. In some cases these may be temporary gains, or simply be redemptive 'stories'. In many cases things simply continue with minor gains and losses and no radical change imagined locally.

the help of concerned public rhetoric and the goodwill of Australian citizens. But, to take the pathology metaphor further, if a wound is deep, such exposure can increase the pain, and turn the wound into a deeper more menacing abscess. As well, public goodwill has serious limits, and government action that follows scandalous revelations can be counter-productive. Contrary to what is often implied, images of depressed and depraved conditions in Aboriginal communities are both familiar and conventional. They are present in disavowed and disguised forms among urban liberals who would not be so crude and cruel as to admit to secret suspicions and imaginings, even when they recognise them. Aboriginal authors and artists from Kevin Gilbert to Tracey Moffatt have been dealing with this kind of phenomenon for many years.

Public debate also includes serious thinkers and activists such as Noel Pearson who is demanding that there be a more honest and engaged attention to the ‘alcohol epidemic’, ‘welfare poison’ and other destructive conditions in Cape York communities (Pearson 1999). Pearson has said his major enemies are ‘progressivists’, by which he means the sympathetic and pitying class who will not countenance anything that appears like a diminution of rights. Thus, the silences and hypocrisies in left liberal discourse which Sutton is targeting may indeed be as much a problem as the hostility, bad faith, conceptual shallowness and ignorance among writers of the populist right. These two apparently warring domains share discursive practices and a rhetoric of concern about Aborigines, but there is no overall agreement about the social processes involved, much less an affirmation of the same ‘problems’ or the same ‘solutions’.

Noel Pearson openly advocates a more coercive regime in relation to what he has defined as an alcohol epidemic at the heart of the devastation of Cape York communities. While his evidence stems from intimate local knowledge, it is not clear from his writings how far either his diagnosis or his solutions have emerged from, or are shared within, the communities. However, he is not merely giving advice to distant bureaucrats about some voiceless mob, but is engaged with the actual implementation of policies which will be realised in his own local community to whom he will have to answer. Thus, any critical response to Pearson’s work need to take account of how the changes he suggests are understood on the ground, and cannot rely merely on ideological convictions about the dangers of apparently coercive policies or the diminution of some abstract rights (Martin 2001).<sup>12</sup> For instance, the people ‘coerced’ by limiting the availability of liquor may be an

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unrepresentative minority. Wright says that the ‘misinformation’ that ‘everyone has a right to drink ... can drown out the rights of the silent majority who continue to suffer the effects of grog, non-stop’ (1997: x). Etherington says, ‘Aborigines in remote areas speak in favour of tighter controls over their own access to drink, often proposing race-based, or community based laws ... Local level Federal advocates could insist on liquor management systems that *paid attention to local community demands*’ (Etherington 2001: 97. emphasis added).

‘Euphemism’ and ‘sustaining fictions’ (Sutton 2001: 145, 128) are common when public policy arouses moral anxiety, and they certainly merit analysis. Conventions and orthodoxies put a particular gloss on disturbing social facts, shaping what can be admitted and what must be hidden (Taussig 1999). The spectre of the racist gaze is another factor that inhibits disclosure of conditions. Ways of managing public knowledge are social forms which cannot be simply blamed on ‘the left and indigenous activists’ (Sutton, 2001: 128) or on the moral and political failings of governments (Johns 2001; Tatz 1979).

What is known as ‘public debate’ about Indigenous issues, with its crude binarisms and simplistic morality, is misleading in many ways.<sup>13</sup> Discussion of conditions in ‘remote Aboriginal communities’ slips easily into talk about conditions in ‘the Aboriginal community’, that is, in some homogeneous domain of Indigenous people. The Aboriginal population thus becomes the silent object of the nation’s sorrowful gaze, evoking fervent responsive gestures bred from stories of the suffering of ‘Our Aborigines’. At the same time that accounts of dire conditions spread anxiety and confusion among a concerned public, criticism of self-determination policy is rising to a crescendo.

### **Failure of Self-Determination?**

I would argue that, like socialism, self-determination was never tried. What was intended in the 1970s was the replacement of paternalistic surveillance and control with a

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<sup>12</sup> One of the few who have engaged with Pearson’s work is Trevor Satour, who believes that Pearson’s persuasive explanations and solutions have immense appeal because governments need answers to irreconcilable and perplexing issues. But he says these solutions employ a ‘faintly fascist aesthetic’ (2001: 46), and that the eagerness to implement Pearson’s solutions has ignored the lack of local acquiescence. His accusation about racial separatism and his prevarication about whether or not there is a problem weaken Satour’s argument.

<sup>13</sup> It often consists of reactionary baiting of left liberals with strident opposition to native title and heritage recognition, and attacks on anthropologists and historians, to which the left responds with defensiveness and moral outrage.

more respectful and egalitarian relationship between Indigenous people and other Australians. The ideology of autonomous, self-regulating communities, which would manage their own entry into modernity, was based on the false idea that Indigenous people shared the visions, priorities and practices of the policy makers. What happened was that Indigenous communities became more dependent as a direct consequence of their being forced to adopt corporate identities and bureaucratic and democratic practices, as well as compete and account for the funds that enabled them to function as organisations. Thus it is not surprising to find widespread disillusionment with self-determination, both as practice and as ideology, and a resurgence of assimilationism, now conveniently renamed modernisation.<sup>14</sup>

In essence, self-determination could simply be seen as an expression of faith in democratic principles, a belief that people should have as much say as possible in how they are governed. However, what was never acknowledged is that other communities, poor ones especially, are never self-determining, and that such a regime would be inherently complex and difficult to establish. Now that the descriptive terminology for Indigenous issues is gradually shifting, it appears that the commitment to self-determination and the faith and hard work to make it a reality (cf. Wright 1997) is gradually eroding and the idea of local autonomy is being curtailed.<sup>15</sup> This is apparent in the present government's notion of 'practical reconciliation' and in the increasing mainstreaming of services, at least in NSW. But it is the crumbling of faith in the imagined ideal of naturally self regulating and harmonious communities that gives conservative views the appearance of providing a way forward.

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<sup>14</sup> The term assimilation came to have such demonic qualities that the notion of modernisation is being used as a euphemism for aspects of the same phenomenon. Of course the term modernisation has more significant usages, but one senior anthropologist, after explaining to me what was right about Roger Sandall's book (2001), objected to my asking if he was recommending assimilation. He said 'Gill, you will have to stop using that term. It is **modernisation** we are talking about.' Let me add that I do not regard assimilation as necessarily a demonic term or process, and nor do I believe it appropriate to condemn self-determination as a failure to be abandoned (Cowlshaw 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Given disastrous internal conflicts and organisational corruption, which partly resulted from the forced adoption of standard bureaucratic forms, some communities will welcome more regulation of Aboriginal organisations. However, this entails the recognition that 'self-determination' was something of a hoax, as one man in Bourke said, because the means to achieve it were not provided.

Some common misperceptions should be identified. Commentators often assert that self-determination was intended to re-legitimise Aboriginal culture or Aboriginal traditions and that this intention was based on various misconceptions. It has become an accepted view, propounded shrilly by the right (Partington 1996) but accepted more generally (Rowse 2000; Sutton 2001: 129), that Nuggett Coombs was largely responsible for the policy of self-determination and for convincing the Australian government that traditional cultures should be allowed to flourish.<sup>16</sup> In fact self-determination was not intended to re-establish traditional culture, although recognition and respect for Aboriginal culture was an ideological cornerstone which supposedly distinguished the new policy from assimilationism. Central to self-determination policy was the notion that Aboriginal **communities**, whatever their history, could decide their own priorities and trajectories communally. Given the history of these communities and the nature of funding and governance, such an idea appears rather preposterous.<sup>17</sup>

A crude version of the criticism of self-determination was articulated in a book by Roger Sandall (2001) along with a malicious attack on the discipline of anthropology. This publication, which like Sutton's talk gained a puzzling amount of publicity in the national press, asserted that cultures labelled indigenous, tribal or primitive, have been romanticised, nurtured and cultivated by misplaced government policies. Modern society is indubitably better than tribal society for everyone and in every way — any other view is romantic and hypocritical.<sup>18</sup> Positioning themselves as the true supporters of Indigenous people, a series of conservative writers have similarly argued that Aborigines want what all modern people want, that is equality and material well-being, hence to be the same as 'us' — perhaps with some emblematic 'cultural practices' remaining. Usage of modern artefacts is taken as proof

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<sup>16</sup> I recall that towards the end of an AIAS conference in 1986, Nuggett Coombs commented from the audience that, after listening to all these scholars, one would not know that Aboriginal people had been colonised, which indicates that he was then accusing others of omissions similar to those they now accuse him of. This is not to deny that Coombs was excessively sanguine about the capacity of remote communities to govern themselves in the prevailing conditions (Coombs 1982).

<sup>17</sup> Inexperienced and unskilled local Aboriginal communities had to set up organisations that mimicked those in the wider society. They were supposed to represent the community and had to take responsibility for million dollar budgets. Many such organisations continue to exist and have become an established, if sometimes disastrously unorthodox or deeply corrupt, part of modern conditions.

<sup>18</sup> Sandall's simplistic rendition of this old, standard conservative position is the latest in a series of widely publicised pieces from those who revel in criticising liberal intellectuals, especially anthropologists, for misguidedly leading Aborigines into a hopeless dead-end (Hirst 1994; Partington 1996; Sandall 2001).

of this desire and any resistance represents the bad faith of leaders or advisers who are repressing the real desires of the people.<sup>19</sup>

The attacks on self-determination can only appear valid because of what they leave out. There has been little examination of the complex, powerful ways in which the social lives of Aboriginal people are impinged upon, and indeed wedded to, the institutions which govern them through laws, representative organisations, funding processes and through powerful individual whitefellas and blackfellas, sanctioned, paid or authorised by the state. The ‘different’ society of Aborigines is not a space of a separate and autonomous ‘Aboriginal culture’ but a social arena of innumerable relationships, interactions, sharings and interchanges with the state and the nation, as well as internal complexity and heterogeneity.

Abstract images of silent, suffering Aboriginal people need to be replaced with rich accounts of personal and community experiences. Such accounts are available in many Indigenous autobiographies. Some detailed analyses are also available of the impact of self-determination on Indigenous communities, subjectivities and self-images. These increasingly show how prevailing forms of governance contribute to present community (mal)functioning.<sup>20</sup> But rather than examine such details, public debate continues to circulate images, stereotypes and explanations with little anchoring in any existential experience. Once we examine particular cases, explanations based on the idea of Indigenous peoples trapped in some traditional straight jacket, or on notions of ignorant or misguided state officials are replaced in favour of an emphasis on the morally and politically ambiguous cultural dynamics of the frontier with its shifting and intermingling cultural realities, priorities and relationships. Conservative critics of self-determination such as Sutton omit any recognition of the state’s broken promises, the moral weight of funded

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<sup>19</sup> Sandall’s book aroused strong feelings of outrage and scandal among many anthropologists, but it contains no challenging or original interpretations. John Morton exposed its shabbiness with ease in an article in *The Age* Newspaper DATE? The scandal lies in the book’s politics and in the generous publicity it received in the Australian press when its intellectual basis was so flimsy.

<sup>20</sup> (eg. Folds 2001; Loveday 1989; Rowse 1992; Sullivan 1986; Thiele 1982; Tonkinson & Howard 1990; Tyler 1994; von Sturmer 1982). More recently Toni Bauman (2001) has provided a valuable analysis of the impact of policy changes on personal and race relations in the Katherine area. Teresa Lea (2001) has begun to analyse the nature of the Northern Territory health bureaucracy, the role of policy within its practices and the cultural domain of the army of state officials whose lives are so closely entangled with service to Aboriginal communities. I have documented how the façade of self-determination was put in place in a way that betrayed its intention (Cowlshaw 1998).

programs, the sense of Aboriginal inferiority conveyed implicitly or explicitly by government officials and the sense of failure that so often accompanies Aborigines' interaction with institutions such as schools and hospitals. They also wipe pleasure, desire and intelligence from the Aboriginal and bureaucratic domains simultaneously, and create silence and passivity in the space where an energetic Aboriginality is being painfully constructed, sometimes with fury and destructive violence and sometimes with a huge effort and sagacity.

They also omit rage. Axel Honneth speaks of 'the constitutional dependence of human beings on the experience of recognition', arguing that when social subjects lack the experience of social approval, a space is made for the negative emotional reactions of shame and rage (Honneth, 1995: 136). If we factor rage into our understanding, that is a socially recognised anger, and a fury that has been fomenting over many years, perhaps more sense could be made of deplorable violence. This is not to do with blaming or absolving from blame, but rather with gaining a sense of how the violent, destructive and self-destructive acts that were thrust into the public view in mid 2001, have been generated.<sup>21</sup> I was alerted to the significance of anger, not just from observing its display, but through the comments of Indigenous organic intellectuals who have developed an understanding of the social and psychological generation of trauma. These responses call to mind Franz Fanon's outraged cry, 'What. When it was I who had every reason to hate, to despise, I was rejected?' (Fanon 1986: 115).

### **Policies and publics**

Public debate should not be confused with policy formation. In this case, those who call for more public debate seem oblivious of the fact that armies of state officials are engaged in responding to Indigenous conditions, with various degrees of sophistication and heartache similar to those demonstrated by academics and journalists. Contrary to Sutton's assertion that the work of scholars 'is rendered invisible' at 'the official and political level' (2001:142), the relevant government departments of health, education, juvenile justice, police and community services are swamped with literature — academic research, reports,

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<sup>21</sup> A Royal Commissioner into Aboriginal deaths in custody stated, 'Repeatedly ... I have had glimpses of normally controlled or suppressed anger, resentment and sense of injustice in Aboriginal people bursting out at unexpected and apparently inappropriate times. I am sure this suppressed anger is responsible for much violence and damage by Aboriginals, as much directed at themselves as at others' (Wootten 1991a: 261).

studies, policy and program initiatives — devoted to enumerating and finding answers to the problems of Aboriginal communities which are recognised as extreme and increasing (Lea 2001).<sup>22</sup> They commission research, develop new policy initiatives, participate in workshops, employ indigenous liaison officers and consult communities. They are acutely aware of their many failures to improve unacceptable conditions. According to Folds (Folds 2001), it is precisely the bureaucratic obligation to produce statistical equality which drives policy, and which blinds state officials to real desires and aspirations in remote Aboriginal communities.

The notion that ‘Policy revision must now go back to bedrock questions, with all bets off, if it is to respond meaningfully to this crisis’ (Sutton, 2001: 125), evokes a vision of ever helpful and responsive state officials with a common understanding of ‘the problems’ ready and able to sit around a table and rationally discuss what is to be done, and able, with corresponding ease, to effect practice through an improved rationality. Asking that bureaucrats engage in the ‘unpredictable and daunting venture’ (ibid, 135) of cultural engineering — which should be directed towards Aborigines’ culture (ibid.136-7) — is a formulation which shows no sense of the historically and culturally shaped world these bureaucrats inhabit. It envisages both academics and bureaucrats as rational, neutral and comprehensively benign outsiders to the Indigenous domain they try to govern.<sup>23</sup>

Despite a conventionally negative view of ‘bureaucracy’, and the lack of knowledge of policy formation, public commentators reproduce the homogenising generalities of bureaucratic language in a way that appeals to the governmental desire to find appropriate formulations and ‘calculated, reasoned prescriptions’ to reorganise and regulate the world (Foucault 1991 : 80). Elaborate think tanks operate for the precise purpose of providing words and arguments that can be turned into ‘policy’ ideas. Articles in the press are sometimes a valued resource to the staff of government Ministers who are constantly seeking the right wording to present to the public on contentious issues. Policy makers are desperate for solutions, or at least the appearance of improvement, and may, for instance,

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<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Tess Lea, whose Ph.D. research on the Aboriginal health bureaucracy provided me with invaluable insights and information about the cultural domain of bureaucratic procedures and practices in relation to the making and implementation of Aboriginal health policy.

<sup>23</sup> Sutton makes no very specific recommendations but says he has argued for ‘a more rigorous and less selective application of the law’ (2001:151). However, there is no indication of what this might mean in practice and no reference to the contrasting discourses of under and over policing of Aboriginal communities (Carrington & Morris 1991; Cowlshaw 1994; Cunneen 2001; Hogg 1988; Wootten 1991a).

welcome the chance to use some outside expert to authorise a relaxation of attempts to make self-determination work. Public servants are always already engaged in reformulating policies, and their entrenched practices and powerful understandings are always evolving and self-replicating even as they shift emphasis. That is, Sutton does not recognise that policy itself is a cultural construct. It is as if 'we' non-Aborigines (who know what's wrong) should be governing 'them' (who don't know what's wrong).

It is also 'policies' which are alleged to be 'artificially perpetuating outback ghettos,'<sup>24</sup> and which are seen to promote 'corporatism as against the pursuit of individual needs and aspirations' (Sutton 2001: 125-6). Communities are here deemed artificial while individual needs and aspirations are natural! The alternative to this 'artificial' perpetuation appears to be limiting 'Indigenous service delivery' and thus forcing people to move, breaking up communities to 'allow' the 'pursuit of individual needs and aspirations' (ibid). Johns is another who speaks of 'collectivism' as the problem, without evincing any knowledge of contemporary Aboriginal people or communities (2001). Profound family relationships and kin network are simply seen as barriers to the advancement of individuals. Such homages to individualism to the detriment of social ties are evidence of unexamined modernist priorities.

The possibility that the increase in governance since 1970 may have contributed independently to the deteriorating conditions and loss of moral authority in remote places was discussed by Lee Sackett who found 'government involvement – be it enlightened or reactionary – nestled at the heart of the Aborigines' problem' (Sackett 1991; Sutton 2001: 158). Ralph Folds provides detailed ethnographic evidence for the view that whitefellas make problems for blackfellas in remote places. He demonstrates, not the wrongs of 'policy', but the problems of 'programs', and documents the way Pintupi have deflected programs towards their own aspirations. Etherington also concludes that 'We have intruded into their lives a vast system, run mainly through meeting and committee procedures, yet without ensuring anyone knows the fundamental controlling mechanisms of these procedures' (2001: 81). More specifically he asserts that, 'there are always white people around of the type who will actually use physical force and threats to coerce Aboriginal behaviour' (ibid, 87), and that, 'Intelligent, gifted people [are] intimidated and controlled by some white person of such marginal competence as to be unemployable in the mainstream'

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<sup>24</sup> 'Outback ghettos' was a term coined by Brock (1993) to refer to the old missions, which may indeed be relevant as the crucibles of current conditions.

(ibid, 92). Residents of remote communities in my experience, frequently allude to the way white law changes, making it difficult to establish stable responses. The plethora of white staff, both in communities and engaged in more distant surveillance, is associated with increasing demands to comply with bureaucratic accounting, not only in the disbursement of funds but in all kinds of measures of well or ill-being, and in the organisation of community life (cf. Cowlshaw 1999; Folds 2001; Sullivan 1986). Sutton's use of the term *laissez faire* seems inappropriate even for the façade of self determination in a country where the wrath of the state can be brought to bear on a school teacher for accepting an invitation from the mothers of her pupils to paint up and join their *yawulyu* ceremony (Nicholls 2000). I am arguing that it is surely necessary to examine how community relations have been affected by the burdensome, confusing and changing policies of successive governments if we are to understand the prevalence of destructive violence.

### **Conditions and causes**

A view articulated in public debate is that 'colonial history' is not alone responsible for the distressing conditions in remote Aboriginal communities; 'culture' is also implicated. This argument proposes a false binarism, based on reified categories of 'history' and 'culture' which persists despite many efforts to develop more sophisticated accounts of modern Aboriginal societies.<sup>25</sup> It implies that 'factors' can be identified as either 'external' or 'social and cultural' and thus *that* 'culture' consists of a definable set of discrete practices to which blame can be variously attributed.<sup>26</sup> An examination of social practice reveals no neat division between 'internal', 'cultural' factors, and 'external forces.' If we see history and culture as alive within the same people, indeed, if history has produced culture, then we can no longer propose that Aboriginal people are mechanically reproducing some ancient tendency, but must recognise the social responses to changing conditions. The notion that some 'cultural factors' are 'ancient' and 'pre-existent' locates them outside the agency and intelligence of the people whose lives are being discussed. Not only does 'culture' become

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<sup>25</sup> Sutton asserts that 'Debates between scholars as to whether just recent history, or recent history plus ancient culture, underlies the lion's share of Indigenous suffering have gone on for some time, but I have to say I think those of the latter view have marshalled by far the more convincing arguments (2001: 158 fn 6) The only reference is to the psychologist, Joseph Reser, and I would be very curious to know which 'scholars' have entered into debate on such banal terms, in particular just which scholars have argued that '*just* recent history' caused the 'serious problems Indigenous people face'.

<sup>26</sup> Sutton's original title 'Judging Traditions' emphasised his argument that attributing blame for current conditions to specific traditions was an important task.

reified, but cultural factors are presented as a negative moral force that condemns the whole population to remaining outside its only chance for redemption. As Sutton puts it, 'dependency, the privileging of social capital over accumulation, political atomism, customary externalisation of blame and similar obstacles to autonomous progressive action can rest on some very deeply seated cultural conceptions of power, obligation, causality and economy' (2001: 135).<sup>27</sup>

The emphasis here is on the alleged 'obstacles to autonomous progressive action', which accompany dense, affective and extensive kinship ties, characteristics common in non-modern societies. These are precisely the ties which earlier government policies aimed at breaking with forced removals and relocations of families and children and in more subtle ways (Morris 1989). Further, engagement with the essential institutions and processes of a modern capitalist economy presents constant challenges to these ties. Their erosion appears natural to many but it is the focus of widespread mundane struggle, sometimes explicit but often taking disguised forms as aspects of modernity are resisted or embraced to varied degrees by individuals and communities. Even this wording is inadequate, as Indigenous people are modern, and have created specific forms of modernity which often include extended families, characteristic patterns of sociality and specific ties to country.<sup>28</sup>

Indigenous child rearing is one feature of the traditions practiced by Aborigines that are seen as inimical to modernisation (Sutton 2001: 155-6). There is indeed a well-attested tradition of what we anthropological observers (overwhelmingly modern, urban and white), have called indulgent child-rearing practices, a description which is essentially a comparison with other standardised practices. Maddock's reference to 'Brat Power' (2001: 160) reveals what would probably be a common reaction to autonomous, demanding children, but it is a judgement typifying a society that is 'profoundly hostile to children' (Greer 1985: 2). A superficial logic proposes that indulged children who are allowed a considerable degree of autonomy become social problems because they recognise no senior responsible authority, or they are undisciplined. Another interpretation would see the legitimation of desire as a foundation for a fully realised, *self*-disciplined human personality. This would merit a detailed exegesis, but suffice it to say here that I have

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<sup>27</sup> Sutton believes we should try to document how those for whom 'kinship has become a mostly private matter' (Sutton 2001: 156-7) attain something we might deem to be 'success'. Presumably such documentation would act as a model of how other Aborigines could divest themselves of burdensome kin obligations.

<sup>28</sup> For a collection of essays which detail and discuss such processes see Miller (1995).

observed an admirable autonomy among many Aboriginal children. It may get them into trouble in schools (Malin 1997), but perhaps an assertive autonomy can save an individual in cases where family life is difficult. This alternative interpretation is not intended to replace one cause and effect logic with another, but to warn against the foolishness of such simplifications.

I found both the reasoning and the scholarship behind Sutton's allegations of an unbroken tradition of Indigenous violence profoundly disturbing. He deploys archaeologists' broken skulls, and selected 19<sup>th</sup> century settler's observations as if to explain contemporary Indigenous violence as the same phenomenon as that is alleged to have prevail in ancient times.<sup>29</sup> The form and function of violence in colonial conditions is confused with those in an autonomous polity. There is no discussion of how the sustained experiences of state sanctioned violence towards bodies, families and social relationships may have itself produced violent responses. Our bourgeois sensibilities may well be shocked by interpersonal violence, but we would do well to recall that we are protected by a police force and an army, and that both these forces have had much to do with the domestication of Indigenous people. Fabian said: 'Tradition and modernity are not "opposed" (except semiotically) nor are they "in conflict."' All this is (bad) metaphorical talk. What are opposed, in conflict, in fact, locked in antagonistic struggle, are not the same societies at different stages of development, but different societies facing each other at the same Time' (Fabian 1983: 155). Explanations for current violence cannot ignore this antagonistic struggle.

### **Losing our place**

The notion that scandalous conditions exist in Aboriginal society operates to hide another scandal, and that is the sudden public discovery of difficulties and distress that have had a very long gestation. Blaming an undefined 'tradition' for which Aborigines are responsible, or 'policy' for which 'the bureaucracy' is responsible, allows commentators to bypass the small, scattered but significant body of literature which has documented and analysed the changing conditions in Indigenous societies as they experienced interaction

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<sup>29</sup> In a study of 'fighting behaviour' and fight stories at Erarnbie mission in the 1980s, Gaynor McDonald said that 'Wiradjuri people ... are not always able to determine or exercise sanctions and constraints in their preferred ways' (1988: 195), without any systematic examination of how 'their preferred ways' might have changed as massive sanctions and constraints were imposed and policed, including constraints on fighting.

with the nation-state and the entrenched inferior status which characterises Aborigines' position in Australia.<sup>30</sup> An understanding of what is happening in these communities now would be enhanced were the relevant *ethnographic* work documenting and interpreting the historical and cultural drama of the changes wrought among Indigenous peoples in the last two centuries to be amalgamated into an authoritative body of scholarship. Instead we have the desire to 'help Aborigines' institutionalised in CAEPR a body designed to produce 'useful knowledge' to governments.<sup>31</sup> Further, the missionary urge to 'help' blinds the virtuous paladin to his own motives and epistemological foundations. I have suggested above that the epistemological barriers to a better appreciation of Indigenous conditions include notions of unilinear trajectories through history, unified cultural domains and a false binarism which places Aboriginal culture in one basket and colonial history in another. These concepts are active barriers to better policy; *because* for instance, as Tess Lea observes, 'Professionals must tiptoe around a reified traditional culture and view all bad habits as introduced' (Lea 2002). I am suggesting that anthropology must take more responsibility for the concepts it has generated, rather than enter debates on policy as an innocent but expert outside authority.

Work on social change and Indigenous responses to governance have not been central to Australian anthropology. Indeed there has been a tendency to dismiss such work as somehow peripheral, superficial, romantic or misguided. In particular, what is known as 'the resistance model' is trivialised and dismissed with only the flimsiest attempts to come to grips with how the concept has been used in Australia, let alone its history in other bodies of literature. Few Aboriginalist scholars have referenced the body of critical anthropology which engaged with colonialism, from Fanon and Eric Wolf, though subaltern studies to Fabian and Ann Stoler, and only recently are anthropologists working in the north seeking theoretical frameworks for the ethnographic examination of 'change', 'colonial relations' or 'race relations' (eg. Austin-Broos 2001; Merlan 1998; Povinelli 1993). With important exceptions, anthropologists continue to focus on 'that which is distinctively Aboriginal' (Merlan 1998: 180), with 'outside influences' grappled with as some additional variable.

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<sup>30</sup> Some examples of this tradition are Berndt, 1962, Beckett 1965, Barwick 1972, Hamilton 1975, Collmann 1979. More recent studies that contain relevant ethnographic detail or interpretation include Beckett 1988, Brady 1992, Collmann 1988, Cowlishaw 1988, Merlan 1998, Michaels 1990, Morris 1989, Povinelli 1993, Sansom 1982. A large international literature on contemporary Indigenous conditions is also relevant.

<sup>31</sup> There is also an expansion of work on land claims and native title which has boosted an interest in traditional concerns while also demanding a reassessment of old models (cf. Pannell & Vachon 2001; Povinelli 1999; Sutton 1999).

The anthropologist's position in relation to modern Aboriginality has been addressed in the work of Morton (1998), who took it upon himself to admonish Andrew Lattas, Patrick Woolf and myself, for privileging a 'resistance model', and undermining the authority of anthropology. He asserts that this typifies a particular turn in the discipline of Aboriginal studies. I believe that Morton's attempt to bolster ethnographic authority as an indisputable good is a part of a turn towards a more conservative, timid and uncritical Australian anthropology. It is also in harmony with Sutton's unreflective position as a concerned humanist, and both would benefit from serious consideration of their speaking positions.<sup>32</sup> Morton says of me, 'She clearly accepts the view that Aboriginal people know best when it comes to matters of their own identity' (Morton 1998: 356). Well perhaps they [I] do, but even my earliest attempts to develop a more inclusive view of Aboriginality did not include anything as facile as this. What Morton misrepresents is the serious, if flawed, attempt by Lattas, Woolf and myself to come to grips with the contemporary politics of scholarship and with what Aborigines are saying. His purpose becomes clear when he finds a 'systematic process of denying ethnographic authority, even though that authority is, and has to be, covertly preserved' (ibid 357). That is, Morton complains that those who want to take Aborigines' self-representations seriously are undermining the authority of anthropology while still asserting their own.<sup>33</sup> He provides no alternative account of the politically sensitive arena of contemporary Aboriginality, but reproduces Tim Rowse's criticism of 'oppositional culture', implying that socially disruptive behaviour has little

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<sup>32</sup> Sutton's account of the Bell-Huggins dispute about whether 'rape is everybody's business', comes in an extended footnote where the issue is deemed one of moral responsibility rather than the question of how knowledge can transcend social positioning and the responsibility to reflect on one's own moral and epistemological assumptions (Moreton-Robinson 2000). Sutton lacks reflexivity, innocently observing that the rethinking of culture is not an easy matter 'especially if we (meaning Aborigines) are not in the habit of objectifying it' (2001: 156). In fact it is lack of attention to our conventional cultural baggage that renders anthropologists' analysis of governance unsatisfactory. David Martin's argument that a new source of moral authority is needed within Aboriginal communities pays no attention to the authority now being wielded by the state, an authority which often appears incoherent and irrational in remote places (Etherington 2001). The 'poor state' of Aboriginal community life is diagnosed as if it were generated and maintained in isolation from its conditions of existence (Martin 2001). Martin is employed at CAEPR

<sup>33</sup> Morton is reticent about his own conceptualisations of Aboriginality and about the source of ethnographic authority, although he knows the latter should be preserved. I would argue that while academics participate in an institutional authority, which allow us to build reputations and to publish and be heard, this condition may not be in harmony with the other source of our authority, which is our integrity as researchers and thinkers. Any recognised authority we acquire as members of academic or other institutions is surely secondary to that attendant on specific intellectual or ethnographic work that engages seriously with the world. A reliance on standard disciplinary orthodoxies would rapidly undermine an individual's authority.

social meaning — it is merely regressive and destructive, and therefore of no interest to ethnographers. This is the social pathology model again, which, among other things, fails to come to grips with the typifying images which even the most respectable and teetotal Aboriginal person meets and must relate to (Langton 1997). My conceptualisation of some characteristic orientations within an Aboriginal community as legitimate, organic and political responses to conditions of existence, was clearly disturbing.<sup>34</sup> Serious discussion of things that are deeply marked as disruptive or destructive appeared to evoke discomfort and dismissal among objectivist scholars. This is an example of what Hage has described as exiphobia, the fear of social explanation (Hage 2003: 140).

I believe projection and defensiveness have been apparent in the rejection of precisely the kind of anthropology that has tried to shed light on these conditions. In 1988 I published a study of race relations entitled *Black, White or Brindle* which explored the complex and contradictory relationships between white and black people in western NSW towns which are notorious for Indigenous depression and disorder. After Tim Rowse wrote two reviews (Rowse 1990a; Rowse 1990b) rejecting my interpretation of ‘oppositional culture’ and discovering what he believed was an essentialising move in the tail end of a footnote,<sup>35</sup> his criticisms were complacently repeated or referenced by a series of later writers including Anderson (1998); Morton (1998); Keen (1999); Robinson (1995); Merlan (2001), none of whom referred to my own and Lattas’ responses to Rowse and to other reviews (Cowlshaw 1993; Lattas 1993). Nor did they engage with the ethnographic evidence. More significant than Rowse’s criticism, which was part of a serious and largely positive review, is the way in which his critique has been used, not only to deny the usefulness of the concepts I was developing to deal with this troubled arena, but to refrain from any alternative interpretation. The regular parroting of Rowse’s criticism has indicated to me that these were arguments people **wanted** to dismiss for reasons quite outside their merits, and independent of empirical evidence.<sup>36</sup> Such reasons may always be lurking in the wings but

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<sup>34</sup> This may be the explanation for Merlan referring favourably to Rowse’s and Morton’s criticisms in her otherwise positive review of my 1999 book (Merlan 2001).

<sup>35</sup> I was said to have refused legitimacy to Aborigines who were not resistant or oppositional. In fact I was referring to the fact that the public renderings of the Aboriginal self and history had opened up a space for a vocal, local Aboriginal politics, but that the mass of Aboriginal people were outside that space. Thus, the public discourses of the political activists did not represent the complex everyday world of what I called ‘oppositional culture’.

<sup>36</sup> This desire is most obvious and curious in an article by Gary Robinson who set out all the things wrong with a notion of resistance, saying, ‘a concept of identity derived from resistance *alone* would be an empty, inauthentic one’ (1997:123 emphasis added). He gives no indication of who holds such a view though Rowse’s

these made a new orthodoxy out of Rowse's critique. They were also personally distressing, as I was trying to depict the deep dilemmas and often painful plight of people who remain important to me. One colleague has been urging me for many years to accept that these communities are simply pathological examples of a 'culture of poverty'.

My own criticism of *Black, White or Brindle* is somewhat different. The book was not primarily a study of Aboriginality, but of the relationship between the races as evident in Bourke in the 1980s. Although none of the critics were so bold as to offer a defence of the whitefellas depicted there, I suspect that some wanted to. And well they might. The major weakness of that work is, paradoxically, what the critics missed, that is, insufficient attention to the complexities and ambiguities of whitefellas' racialised practices. Despite my efforts not to rely on the moral failings of rural whites, I believe the work allowed readers to cling to the common-sense view that in rural Australia whites are rednecks, people of loathsome opinions, quite different from us enlightened urban dwellers. While the work tried to counter the view that racism was irrational prejudice located in the minds of racist individuals, my own sense of the injustices of the past and the present dominated the interpretation and did not adequately represent the moral and political complexity of these conditions.

Anthropologists are understandably anxious that their special expertise in the domain of classical Aboriginal traditions should not be overlooked among the plethora of post-colonial studies of the conditions of indigenous peoples, and perhaps the defence of Aboriginal classicism is a way of defending their position. Kapferer speaks of 'a sense of loss among anthropologists of the relatively distinct project of anthropology' (Kapferer 2000: 183). The upsurge of reactionary criticism may have exacerbated the apprehension that anthropology's authority in relation to Aboriginal culture will dissolve if identifiable cultural boundaries are lost. It may be fear that we are losing our object of analysis that is giving rise to signs of anthropological anxiety, projection and defensiveness which in turn may explain a reluctance to engage in analysis and cultural critique of white society in this era of risk and destabilisation. Thus anthropologists may be projecting onto others their own plight of being unable to deviate from traditional practices.

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critique of my work is referenced. However, this opening salvo appears to contradict the interpretive thrust of the rest of the article which I found myself in agreement with, and which indeed is one I would recommend as a corrective to the vacuousness of much current public debate

### **Alternatives, aesthetics and organic intellectuals**

There is an alternative to the language of crisis, which does not take the social analyst's task to be one of governance but rather, the documentation and interpretation of cultural dynamics. Those anthropologists who are concerned with the existential, material, political and symbolic conditions of Aborigines in Australia, could turn their ethnographic gaze onto white society, to a **cultural** analysis of the institutions which manage indigenous people and to the 'cultural borderlands', the arenas of interaction and interchange between Indigenous people and whitefellas. This dynamic relationship is, I believe, the key to understanding what is happening in Indigenous communities. I have mentioned the minor ethnographic tradition which tried to overcome the epistemological separation of contemporary issues from studies of (usually traditional) culture by bringing to life the phenomenological world of Aboriginal experience and imaginings and which always struggled for legitimacy and recognition within the discipline.<sup>37</sup> These works do not 'blame colonialism', or 'blame the state' and precludes 'blaming Aboriginal traditions'. They show social life as relational and processual, rather than autonomous and static. If there is social pathology in what such work reveals, it is in the relationship between white and black citizens.<sup>38</sup> Etherington, who speaks from long and intimate knowledge of 'the most threatened people in Australia: the remote Aboriginal minority' (Etherington 2001) paints a damning picture of the governance of remote communities and a total absence of anything that could properly be called self-determination. He speaks of a rational but destructive dependency wherein 'Typically, a community has a number of organisations run by powerful white people hiding behind a token committee of Aboriginal people .... intimidated by and hopelessly underqualified by comparison with the mainstream' (ibid: 78). His conclusion is that, 'Our ignorance of their culture does not disadvantage us: their ignorance of ours is killing them' (ibid: 79).

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<sup>37</sup> This intellectual gulf was established early in Australian anthropology. What struck Barry Morris about Elkin's 1940 fieldnotes was that 'the first two pages covered a number of complaints from Aboriginal people in Kempsey about having land taken away, kids taken etc. The notes then proceeded with an inquiry into religion and kinship. While the issues up front were the concerns of the people, the rest were Elkin's anthropological concerns and the two issues seemed to be mutually exclusive' (pers. com). Beckett says that the AIAS in the 1960s tended 'to regard anything involving Aboriginal relations with the majority society as 'policy' ' (Beckett 2001: 96-7)

<sup>38</sup> Aimee Cesaire, Franz Fanon and others argued from their own experience that colonial society was pathological in the way it systematically depersonalised and dehumanised colonial subjects (Macey 2000: 160).

Ethnography's intellectual strength is through participation, and anthropologists routinely participate in 'doubly occupied spaces', that is spaces where contrasting and competing social meanings exist side by side (Stewart 1996: p.). Rather than revive the pre-1960s practice of offering advice to governments (Cowlshaw 1990)<sup>39</sup> anthropologists may be better occupied in depicting the realities of new forms of modernity (Austin-Broos 2001) the struggles to make sense of the required forms of Aboriginality (Bauman 2001) and continuing violent relations with police (Morris 2001). At the very least we can record counter-narratives and alternative viewpoints which emerge from communities, or become conduits for Indigenous voices which present quite different analyses of contemporary conditions in Australia. It is the dearth of public knowledge of the varied regional and marginal places where Aboriginality is being lived out and reinvented which leaves the space for bleak stories to be told away from public scrutiny, and for distance, despair and dismay to prevail against knowing other things. Here I will briefly mention some specific examples of alternative approaches to domains deemed depressed or distressed.

Basil Sansom's depiction of the life at *The Camp at Wallaby Cross* (1980) among what are known in Darwin as 'long grass people', brilliantly subverts discourses of deprivation by presenting readers with the cultural dynamics, preoccupations and 'sensory inscription' (Feldman 1994: 415), of that social domain. The anxieties and hand-wringing of good Darwin citizens, and the police attempts to control this 'public nuisance', are rendered irrelevant to the rich social lives within the camp. From a quite different perspective, Ralph Folds, in *Crossed Purposes* (2001), documents the way policy actually works on the ground. He has taught for thirteen years in Walungurru, a remote community that on the surface appears to white visitors as a site of extreme deprivation. Yet Folds presents Walungurru, not as a deficit or dependent society, but as a group of men and women who are responding in systematic, rational ways to the conditions in which they are placed. He shows how authority and obligation work in a way that continues to mystify the white state officials and service providers after many years of program failure. The misunderstandings, including his own, are deep seated and cultural; social responsibility is interpreted in quite contradictory ways. Folds shows that 'Pintupi remain willing to participate in programs without disputing their aims, [because] they are able to fulfil some of their real needs,

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<sup>39</sup> After some decades when most anthropologists eschewed engagement with governments and policy, this role was revived and institutionalised in the 1980s and 90s, both in land claims work and in the establishment of an agency for the express purpose of providing expert information and analysis for governments and to promote rational debate on matters pertaining to Aboriginal policy. It is called the Centre for Aboriginal Political and Economic Research (CAPER) and it employs a substantial number of anthropologists.

despite the repeated failure of the programs in official terms' (p. 144). This may not be a profound book for anthropologists but if we want to debate policy, Folds could teach us all a lesson.<sup>40</sup>

There is another alternative approach, which begins by recognising that statistical evidence of poor everything is not necessarily proof of all-encompassing misery or social pathology. Robin Kelly's book on ghetto culture in the USA, entitled *Yo Momma's Dysfunctional* includes a devastating critique of the solemn functionalist analyses of ghetto culture. Of lives that are relentlessly and sympathetically considered oppressed, Kelly asserts, 'Our dysfunctionality fascinates; it is alluring' (Kelly 1997: 3-4). Kelly provides an alternative frame of reference, saying, 'we have to acknowledge the artistry, the fun, and gamesmanship that continues to exist, if not thrive, in a world marked by survival and struggle' (ibid, 4). '[W]hat might be at stake here are aesthetics, style, and visceral pleasures' (ibid, 9). That is, he insists that lives in what is homogenised as 'the ghetto' are as rich and complex as anywhere else. He adds that, 'As the global economy grows the terrain of culture becomes even more crucial as a terrain of struggle' (ibid, 9). Kathleen Stewart is another whose work could inspire a different kind of approach. She tracks a 'dense social imaginary through stories of traumas, apparitions, encounters and eccentricities' in West Virginia which is 'a nervous, overstuffed, insistent place on the margins, and in the interstices and at the centre of 'America'.' (Stewart 1996: 6,7). Aborigines are also, in a sense, at the centre of Australia's national imagination, and they are thus the focus of extreme forms of national anxiety. Yet it is notable that exciting current work analysing the national imaginary (Gelder & Jacobs 1998; Hage 1998; Rutherford 2000) is not matched by an equivalent exploration and documentation of social life at the peripheries with which the nation is obsessed.

My own alternative interpretations have benefited from all of the above as I participate in a world 'which my Aboriginal friends took for granted but which my white readers would find shocking, while I hung uncertainly between the two', as Jeremy Beckett said thirty five years ago (Beckett 1965). In relation to his work in Palestine, Swedenburg says how 'impossible it is to convey the everyday normality of the violence' so that 'one usually shies away from speaking about the horror, since most people respond with looks of shocked disbelief and exaggerated compassion' and rarely connect this state of being with their own lives (Swedenburg 1995 :34). In Australia, the familiar gulf between the

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<sup>40</sup> Folds often draws on the work of the anthropologist Fred Myers (1991).

ethnographic experience and the ethnographer's usual social world is exacerbated by the moral divide between Indigenous community life and bourgeois sensibility and anxiety. Research is not immune from the nation's preoccupation with Aboriginal people as moral and political problems and the ethnographer's own sense of anxiety, fear and sympathy may temporarily block access to local meanings. But with time and a degree of intimacy, knowledge does emerge of the wisdom, wit and wickedness of Aboriginal people as well as their complex and fraught relationship with rural whitefellas who are also condemned unheard. I discovered in the supposedly depraved and distressed Indigenous spaces of Bourke a social world of ironic humour and satirical performance, and a site of counter-discourses to white hegemony. The imagined identities of whitefellas and blackfellas are closely intertwined with the rivalries between them in a particular social space which each claims as their own. This racialised realm with its mean strivings and generous humour, its complex and colourful sensory reality and the moral ambiguities of its relationships, includes everyday ordinary violence at a level unfamiliar to me, yet which carries social implications and meanings that are far from pathological (Cowlshaw 2001).

### **Finally ...**

When I am told of a case of sexual molestation of an infant I experience rage and helplessness, not as an anthropologist, but as an ordinary friend or acquaintance. I am tempted to do violence to the perpetrator, but am restrained by fear. I have a myriad of uncertainties. Is it true? Would it be believed? Would public exposure achieve an end to the crime and appropriate punishment? I have no sympathy with him, but his pathetic struggle and continuing failure to become a fully operant person burdens my ethnographic imagination. The grandmother tells me the child is alright, but I protect her, and perhaps myself, by not pressing my enquiries and swallowing my anxieties. There are many such circumstances where authoritarian government policies might seem a blessed relief from helpless and personal moral uncertainty, but there are good reasons for their being eschewed. Who will police the banning of alcohol? Are irresponsible parents who do not provide a safe environment for their children to lose them? What would stop 'safe houses' from becoming children's prisons?<sup>41</sup> In some places at least, partial answers to these questions have been worked out locally in response to specific needs, and such answers

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<sup>41</sup> Some Aborigines in Bourke argue strongly that child-endowment and school grant payments should be made conditional on the parents showing responsibility for their children. Thus the ethnographer's world is not sealed off from the institutions of governance.

need support and more attention and emulation. That is, there are better and worse policies in place already and those who want to advise on policy would be well to inform themselves of what they are rather than allow their moral outrage to flourish in the luxury of distance. We can do better than pretend to be able to change the world by entering debates whose terms are such that they cannot 'solve' any problem outside their own articulation.

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