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## **‘Aurukun, we’re happy, strong people’: Aurukun kids projecting *life* into bad headlines**

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*Public discourse about remote Aboriginal communities tells a story of crisis. The Northern Territory Intervention and other events that have taken place in Aboriginal communities are portrayed as if the Aboriginal child is a docile, cowering, vulnerable body, which needs to be protected by the state. This story has become a narrative of dysfunction, which not only shapes how broader Australia engages with Indigenous life worlds, but also informs the environment in which Aboriginal people, and notably children, live. This essay explores a multimedia program held at Aurukun School, West Cape York, in which students produced their own films, which respond to the now monolithic representations of the Aboriginal child as a vulnerable or volatile body. The films demonstrate that these Aboriginal kids from Aurukun also experience themselves as exuberant bodies.*

### **Introduction**

The Aboriginal township of Aurukun, West Cape York, undoubtedly receives more than its share of bad press. The media reporting is typically negative and plays to predictable themes and expectations of crisis and social dysfunction, in which the Aboriginal body, individual and social, is stereotyped as moribund or monstrous. Not too long ago the historic Wik Native Title case put Aurukun on the international stage, and Wik people were briefly seen as historical and political agents (albeit a danger to ‘national’ interests). But for most that has all but been forgotten, subsumed by narratives of dysfunction, which are accompanied by disorientating images: the dishevelled, staggering, drunken, pregnant teenager or the lone, filthy toddler playing with empty beer bottles. It is too easy to conjure up these graphic, voyeuristic images—a pastiche of seemingly daily reporting about Aboriginal communities. In our media-saturated society the reported crisis in Indigenous communities has become a public spectacle of relentless horror (Langton 2008).

There are few issues that can induce anger and disgust like child neglect and sexual abuse, nor mobilize the general public to demand action. Cape York is not in the Northern Territory, however I write this paper in the shadow of the former Federal Coalition Government's continuing Northern Territory intervention: a national emergency advanced as a response to, what has become known as, the *Little Children are Sacred Report* (Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007). Child Abuse was the public justification for the Northern Territory intervention, and the symbol of the national emergency is the cowering child who must be rescued. As Melinda Hinkson asks, '[w]ho could argue with a plan to act with great urgency in response to Noel Pearson's image of the tiny child cowering in the corner?' (2007: 7). Whatever one's opinion (or confusion) about the intervention, it undoubtedly focused national attention on the social and health problems of Indigenous communities. It is, however, the reports of horrific violence and sexual abuse of children in remote communities that have ignited the media, and forced governments (in between blame shifting) to express outrage at the levels of violence and commit to action. Attention has largely focused on the Northern Territory, and to a lesser degree the Kimberley, however, in late 2007, the spotlight shifted to Aurukun. Soon after the release of the *Little Children are Sacred* report, there was a media frenzy and public outrage over nine young men and boys who had not received custodial sentences or criminal convictions despite being found guilty of the repeated sexual abuse of a ten-year old girl. The incident prompted calls for the national emergency to be extended to Aurukun. The unnamed and unseen boys and u slipped neatly, wordlessly, into the space reserved for the brutal Aboriginal male body.

While the reality behind these events is undoubtedly a tragedy for all concerned, it is not the only reality of life in Aurukun, or indeed of life for Aboriginal Australians. Aboriginal children and youth have deliberately and pointedly expressed alternatives to this now monolithic representation of dysfunction. This paper explores a multimedia program held at Koolkan Aurukun Campus, Western Cape College, in which students produced their own films. The multimedia project is a means for the students to express life from their perspective, and in so doing make something of their lived experience legible for themselves and others. The films demonstrate that Aboriginal children experience hope, joy, and delight, and that this manifests in their construction of the intelligent, exuberant body with an agency of its own.

### **The Aurukun Student Storytelling Project**

In June 2007, I flew to Aurukun to observe what I hoped would be a good news story. A place that is known for its social and health problems needs them. The Aurukun Student Storytelling Project was a three-month project designed and run by Community Prophets multimedia trainers to help motivate students to come to school and to

learn how to tell their stories through multimedia. One of the primary aims of Community Prophets is to empower marginalised youth to tell their stories (see [www.communityprophets.com](http://www.communityprophets.com)). David Vadiveloo, the founder and Director of Community Prophets, reiterated this message to the Aurukun students: 'Control this [television] and you control the message that goes out there into the world'. The project was initiated by Croc Festival—a Sydney based organization that runs a performing arts and educational festival for primary and high school students in regional and remote communities around Australia—and funded by the Telstra Foundation. Aurukun was chosen for the project due to its complex and long-term social problems and because many of its young people are disconnected from an education system, which, arguably, they perceive as both irrelevant and hostile to their needs (Schwab 2006). School attendance, outside of the multi-media project, rarely rises above 50 percent, literacy rates are poor and the average school leaving age is 13. The film project had clear goals: to improve the students' school attendance, self-confidence, numeracy and written and oral literacy. It also aimed to show the Aurukun community the benefits of education for their children and to improve the school-community-teacher relationship (Telstra Foundation 2008).

Led by the training team of professional filmmakers, musicians and an animator, fifty Aurukun school students learned how to make movies with digital cameras, sound equipment and animation software. The Aurukun students produced four films, three of which will be discussed in this paper. The children operated the camera and sound equipment and worked alongside the trainers in the editing process. The students had the opportunity to try the different mediums, and then decide what genre of film they would like to produce. Not surprisingly the boys were determined to create rap songs and videos. The senior girls aspired to make a film, and after workshopping ideas they decided to produce a documentary about being fifteen in Aurukun, both now and in the mission days. The junior girls were set on making a fictional film. All of the students had the opportunity to learn animation, and the finished films include animations created by students and teacher trainees. Those students who participated and made outstanding improvement in their school attendance were rewarded with the opportunity to travel to the Thursday Island Croc Festival where their films premiered in front of an audience of around 3,000 people (Telstra Foundation 2008). Although the initiative was localised to Aurukun, many of the goals correspond with the Queensland government's education strategy aimed at increasing the educational performance of young Indigenous students in Cape York and the Torres Strait (Queensland Department of Education and the Arts 2006). The project allowed the students to demonstrate their passion and reject a narrative of dysfunction by depicting and projecting dynamic, productive Aboriginal children's bodies.

### **'Three Friends'**

'Three Friends' is a fictional story produced by the junior girls—years six and seven. It is largely an animation interspersed with scenes featuring the film's producers and tells the story of how they outwit their mean boss-lady who in the end gets her comeuppance. The story begins with a radiating, verdant map of Australia, zooming into a pulsating, burnt orange spot named Aurukun. The child's crisp voiceover, with a distinctly regional accent, begins: 'One day in a small community called Aurukun near the tip of Australia three friends called Lillian, Claudia and Lisa ...'. Three twinkling, animated figures, a clash of hot pink, yellow, lime, teal and turquoise, with triangle bodies and stick arms and legs, beam from the screen. The scene cuts to the three girls sitting in the library with their head in their hands, faces hidden from the mean boss-lady. The grim faced boss stands threateningly over them, bullying, calling them lazy and demanding they collect shells for her. Frightened they scamper away. Outside, free from their boss' menace, they savour that it is 'another beautiful day in Aurukun'. Not a place of horror, poverty and neglect, as is readily reported.

The carefree, shiny animated characters jiggle across the bauxite red land, from which sprouts dainty white flowers and grows sturdy, bushy trees. The girls resolve a trip to the beach will provide a break from their tyrannical boss. They spot a snake, but bravely continue, fearing the wrath of the nasty boss-lady more than the snake. Contrasting with the stereotype of Aboriginal people, the girls are not completely at ease in the bush: they are vulnerable to snakes and crocodiles, but not quivering, defenceless bodies in need of protection. Like everybody in the bush they have to take care. However, unlike most people they have learned bush intelligence. The sun dazzles, splendid with life; they are small in the landscape; the glistening blue river laps peacefully at the shore. They delight as a kangaroo hops past. They don't present themselves as 'at one with the land', but in naming the animals they see—an emu and wild pig—they demonstrate an awareness that for a wider audience this would be an unusual day out. They hear a cry. Thinking at first that it might be a dog, Claudia then informs her friends that it's a hungry crocodile. Notably, the Aboriginal girls don't 'naturally' and 'intuitively' know what it is. The crocodile, animated like a bark painting, floats ominously by. They are momentarily frightened, but comfort one another, before Claudia assertively warns them that the shells are to be found on the other side of the croc infested river. Their fear of the boss-lady steels their determination to row across the dangerous waters. As they row back, the crocodile bites and sinks their boat. The voiceover reassures the audience that the girls don't panic; swiftly, out of the boat they swim to shore, only to realise, horrified, that they have left the shells behind. They are made sad and frightened by the prospect of returning empty handed to the nasty boss-lady. Back at the library, as the boss-lady looms over them, Claudia tries to rationally explain why they have returned without shells. In the face of the boss-lady's threats, Claudia hatches a clever plan to trick her into thinking they put the shells in the

cupboard. Despite the boss-lady's suspicions they beguilingly persist: with such sweet, innocent faces who could not trust them. When the boss-lady opens the cupboard door and leans in, they shove her in and lock the door. Successful and safe from the mean boss-lady, they go on their merry way and make beautiful necklaces to give to their friends.

'Three Friends' is an intercultural narrative, informed by Aboriginal culture but also invoking Hansel and Gretel. This playful film serves to remind Western 'outsiders' that the Aurukun kids' lives are not as exotic as might be assumed—notwithstanding the girls' altercation with the crocodile—for the film's narrative resonates with a familiar fairytale theme of kids triumphing in an adult world. Notably, the depiction of the map signals that the young female producers situate themselves as Australian. Too often Aboriginal stories are excluded from being 'Australian' stories. Claudia is a happy, trickster character: a familiar trope of the marginalised in which they resourcefully outwit tyrannical power. The girls depict themselves as robust, capable, brave, fun-loving children. The film has none of the residual darkness and anxiety that is a familiar element of fairytales. After doing away with their mean boss-lady, they rejoin *their* halcyon world of childhood friends: there isn't a lethargic, submissive body in sight.

### **'Fifteen'**

The senior girls, years eight to ten, produced a documentary about life as a fifteen-year-old girl in Aurukun, both now and in the mission days. They interviewed one another as well as older women, comparing and making connections between the generations. I watched a little of the making of the film, but at the time of writing it was not yet available because interviews in Wik Mungkun needed to be subtitled into English. In the absence of the finished, unnamed film, I will call it 'Fifteen'. Clearly, I cannot do a close reading of the film, but feel it is worth discussing because the girls' choice to produce this film is instructive. It is shot in traditional, talking-heads documentary style. The girls interviewed four or five senior women and filmed them preparing for and weaving baskets. In the interviews that I saw, the older women generously gave of their time, sitting on the grass in the school grounds or surrounded by pandanus at the back of the art centre, amid the comings and goings of family and children, recalling the mission days. The girls adhered professionally to the list of interview questions they wrote, taking turns as interviewer and photographer. When the students interviewed one another, they asked very similar questions to those they asked of the older women: what is it like to be fifteen in Aurukun; what do you like about Aurukun; what do you dislike? They were aware of the urgency that the older people feel about passing on their culture and history before it is lost, so the film project gave the girls an opportunity to learn from and retain some of the older women's knowledge. It also provided an insight into the mission days, which the girls said they knew little about, indicating that local history—highly important for self and

community understanding—is left unspoken both inside and outside the school.

The old women revealed to the girls that in the mission days they were under the strict care of the mission managers, Mr and Mrs MacKenzie. The mission system relied upon surveillance, and power being located in individuals—the missionaries—backed by (distant) state authority. In the mission days (or MacKenzie days, as they are referred to locally), children were separated from their parents and housed in single sex dormitories. However, I did not hear the older women detail to the girls the cruel treatment, for which William MacKenzie was notorious. Historian Geoff Wharton writes,

On occasions MacKenzie's rough justice—which included cutting off girls' hair for alleged impropriety, and chaining men to trees in cases of domestic violence—incurred criticism from visitors, particularly anthropologists. Ian Peinkinna, an Aurukun elder, recalled that MacKenzie was authoritarian, 'but he made a good man and woman out of that. He had discipline'. (2000: 245-246)

Within a few days of being in Aurukun I had been told stories of the MacKenzie days in which people were chained to trees, like mongrel dogs, and flogged and near starved. The old women demonstrated pride in their own robustness in surviving such brutality, and lamented that children nowadays did not attend school. During the interviews the older women told the girls that the mission days were hard, strict times in which their lives were controlled. But they also expressed nostalgia for a time when there was 'discipline', when kids went to school, had enough to eat and people 'knew how to behave'.

In *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault cautions that in the modern nation visibility is a trap (1977). It was by incarcerating the 'uncivilised' black body under the surveillance of missionaries and government officials that colonial authority exercised its controlling systems of power and knowledge to produce 'good' (albeit still black) non-citizens. The mission system itself, and the isolation from mainstream society, meant that power became located on a highly individualised level (Foucault 1977). Under Mrs MacKenzie's supervision the mission girls were always visible and their behaviour could be regulated and policed. From colonisation until the mid twentieth century, Indigenous people were governed by being objectified, classified, regulated, excluded, monitored and measured (Haebich 2000). In short, the government and missions maintained power over Indigenous people by bringing them into 'western logic', and thereby *knowing* them, and subjecting them to disciplinary institutions, such as schools, missions, dormitories and reserves (Foucault 1977). Here, their bodies were dominated, both overtly through traditional techniques such as corporal punishment and more subtly through enforced forms of *self-discipline*. Mr and Mrs Mackenzie were attempting to produce citizens capable of fulfilling church and government requirements and this meant preventing a 'return to uncivilised ways' through regulation and control. In this, the

MacKenzies' exhibited a mentality of governance that framed official policy towards Aboriginal people until the 1970s (and arguably, continues). While the mission days are over, the remoteness of townships such as Aurukun and the particular combination of government interference and neglect and the social injustice practiced upon Aboriginal people has resulted in the trap of visibility subsequently morphing into a trap of invisibility. In general, non-Indigenous Australians continue to be blinded by historical perceptions of Aboriginal people and thus fail to see or listen to how Aboriginal people experience their own lives. Without the means to self-representation the young people of Aurukun and Aboriginal children more generally will continue to be ensnared in what Marcia Langton calls the grotesque, Aboriginal reality-show (2008).

### **'Five Points on a Star'**

'Five Points on a Star' by The 5 Tribes Crew, is a rap video about the people of Aurukun trying to live together: 'like five points on a star, five tribes we are trying to live as one'. The lyrics are primarily sung in English, with a few lines of Wik Mungkan, left untranslated. Scattered through the clip are animations—most notably the Aboriginal flag—drawn by students and trainee teachers, and an animation of tens of blinking, black, smiling figures representing the five tribes of Aurukun living happily together. As the title rolls up, you hear the sounds of Aurukun's school grounds: a crow caw backed by a familiar but muted mix of kid's voices and play. A black animated crow dominates the screen: throughout the rap his call returns, steadying like an instrument of navigation. The opening shot is of self-assured and poised young men, fourteen-fifteen year olds, walking five abreast along a bauxite red dirt street. At their backs a semi-trailer turns; their presence renders it insignificant. There is something gentle, tender about these young men, which soothes and restores me. If the crow is the spirit of this rap song, honour is its timbre. Where in this film is the relentless stereotype of the young, male, black body: wasted, hysterical, drug addled; the menacing child offender; or split between passivity and explosions of violent rage? Why do life-affirming representations of young Aboriginal men have such little purchase in the mainstream? How do the overwhelming and relentless images and reports of violence, dysfunction and despair affect the lives of these young men? How do those narratives become written on their bodies?

Walking mischievously toward the camera, they rap: 'Like five points on a star, five tribes we are trying to live as one under the burning sun'. Aurukun is in the tropics, but the people are also subject to the unforgiving, harsh light and heat of intrusive government programs designed to discipline and normalise what is perceived to be the 'unruly' Aboriginal body (Slater 2005). The boys remind their audience of the colonial practice that forcibly removed Aboriginal people from their country and relocated them elsewhere. The people of Aurukun continue to live with the resulting social tension (Martin 1993). The

narrative in this film suggests that violent colonial practices enacted upon Aboriginal bodies, land and law, are denied and displaced upon the Aboriginal individual and social body. By contrast, the young men in this film appear as contradictions to the only available public images of young black men. They remind us of the range of viable identities—of alternative ways of being young, male and black that are evident and possible. They continue: 'Been here since day one, since the land begun' ... 'We're still young, we still know got to respect each other for community to grow'. They posit solutions; they are energetic and creative bodies.

There are playful close ups, as the camera is drawn into the boys' grinning faces and out again. With the bush as their background two boys sing, 'Aurukun our home in the bush, happy, strong people who don't like to get pushed around'. The taller boy stands protectively behind the smaller. They rap for the camera and ponder their responsibilities toward respect and cultural transmission: 'Maybe we got to try something new to make sure that the culture goes through to puk munyi [children] younger crew'. All the films indicate the kids are aware they inhabit a complex, intercultural world. Francesca Merlan, and others, have drawn attention to the social processes in which Indigenous people are required to engage with past cultural practices, rather than their present, lived experiences, to produce images of themselves in a discourse of traditionalism (1998: 232). Her concern is that 'traditional' culture can come to be seen as the 'sole set of resources which Aborigines have to meet change' (Merlan 1998: 233). The 5 Tribes Crew confidently assert that they are drawing upon the resources of the modern, intercultural world to meet contemporary challenges. The young men make it clear that they are proud of their heritage and living culture and see themselves as responsible for cultural maintenance. They are insisting that Aurukun people are agents of continuity *and* change.

The films stand in stark contrast to the prevalent images of despair and emptiness of Aboriginal youth and community. The representations counter the homogenising images of Aboriginal youth and community propagated in the mainstream media, but they also potentially clash with local cultural expectations of children and young people. Melinda Hinkson's work with Warlpiri youth has led her to suggest that multimedia provides new sites of expression for youth, which are relatively autonomous from the influence of older people. She asks 'whether radio is in fact helping to facilitate the emergence of a new kind of public sphere, one in which the voices of youth are finding new expression' (2004: 155). The emergence of a new public sphere, independent of older people, could create intergenerational conflict or distance. In this sense, multimedia projects might bear unforeseen and possibly unwanted ramifications for remote Indigenous community social fabrics (Southwood 2006: 45). Without dismissing Southwood's concerns, I would like to take up Hinkson's idea and suggest that young people making films in Aurukun are deploying those films as 'tools' for constituting themselves and their environment. On this point, and notwithstanding Foucault's primary

interest in western subjects and societies, his notion of care of the self is instructive. Care or technologies of the self are forms of knowledge, strategies or practices that:

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988: 18)

Foucault describes a performative process, whereby subjects make themselves legible to themselves and others, and in so doing construct competing ‘truths’ about their lives in relation to other ‘truths’ (1988: 18). Intentionally or otherwise, the young filmmakers are speaking back to the oppressive narrative of dysfunction that dominates mainstream representations of Aboriginal people. Their films thus provide a space for cross-cultural dialogue. In defining and generating ‘truths’ about their lives, taking responsibility for cultural transmission—in ‘trying something new so the community can grow’—the 5 Tribes Crew is contributing to the maintenance and invention of civil society—in Aurukun and beyond. The Aurukun filmmakers are self-actualising—they are creating themselves—demonstrating that they are imaginative, vital bodies from which *life* grows.

### **Rubbish Reporting**

When in Aurukun, I overheard one of the senior boys remark, ‘Outside they think we’re rubbish people’. His tone and his classmates’ response indicated that it angered them and they wanted ‘out there’ to learn otherwise. Although not surprising, it is painfully obvious, as teachers and trainers made clear to me, that the kids internalise the negative images and ideas about Aurukun: that it is a troubled and troubling place, and that little good comes from it. And they are right about how widespread these perceptions are. Usually when I mention Aurukun, if people know it at all, they assume it is a place without hope. The children are therefore subject to two-fold forms of oppression: the problems they confront in their daily lives and outsiders’ judgments of Aurukun. Moreover, the environment in which Aurukun kids live is not limited to West Cape York. Mainstream Australia and the public discourse of dysfunction are dominant components of the environment from which the young people’s identity is composed. The children of Aurukun are subject to overwhelmingly negative images of Aboriginality, and especially of their home. Through their films, the students articulate a different story of who they are, where they come from, and their connection to one another, their community and the world beyond. The films play a small role in alleviating the students’ sense of oppression: by providing a creative and technological outlet for the children to influence their immediate environment; by generating an alternative and self-authored discourse of what it means to live in Aurukun; and by engaging an audience outside of Aurukun and countering the one-dimensional response to Aurukun’s ‘dysfunction’. They express (self)

determination, joy and sensitivity; not volatility or inertia as the dominant discourse prescribes.

The Aurukun Student Storytelling Project is in a small way a good news story. There are many positives I could highlight: skills development; the building of self-esteem; knowledge transmission and retention of Wik culture and history; creativity and self-expression; and strengthened relationships. These are important objectives, but to achieve substantial change projects such as this need local control and ownership, as well as longevity, and to be just one component in a matrix of other initiatives that are embedded within the school and community.

Most immediately the films and the students attending Croc Festival made Aurukun buzz with excitement. This effect of the filmmaking project should not be overlooked. When I returned to Aurukun a few days before the Thursday Island Croc Festival, Chris, a teacher's assistant, told me the filmmakers had repeatedly watched the films. Most people had managed to view the films despite the limited copies, and the streets of Aurukun were humming with the songs' tunes. On the morning we flew to Horn Island (where we caught the ferry to Thursday Island), Chris was trying in vain to get last minute jobs done: he was repeatedly stopped by locals thrilled about the kids going to Croc Festival for the screening of their films. At the Aurukun airstrip delighted and proud parents and families gathered to farewell the travelling students. The kids, with their pillows tucked snugly under their arms, formed a neat line, waiting patiently at the gate for the pilot to walk them to the plane, before ascending the stairs and turning to receive their parents' love and pride. Most of the children would not have flown before. They were chatty with excitement, one or two needed reassurance from teachers that they were safe, but they all listened attentively to the air steward's instructions. As the plane took off and circled over Aurukun, we looked down to see parents still smiling, waving their children off on their journey. The kids reminded me of my own bush childhood: faces pressed to glass, fearlessly absorbing the ever-expanding world.

On the first night of the Thursday Island Croc Festival the Aurukun Students' films were presented. The shy filmmakers clung to one other, hiding themselves in the crowd. Only the most confident students mingled with strangers from other schools. Children from all over the Cape and across the Torres Strait Islands recognised kin, embracing one another with jokes and stories from home. If the Aurukun students didn't have first night jitters, I certainly did. The crowd rocked and sung along to the songs, and laughed at the right places. As the credits rolled there was resounding applause. The films are genuinely inspiring: demonstrating talent, dedication, passion, humour and a love of life. The teachers and staff accompanying the students were teary with pride, witnessing the kids' bloom with self-confidence as other kids from around the Cape and Torres Strait Islands acclaimed their films. Aurukun kids were dead

(excellent), the stars of Thursday Island Croc Festival. Kids sang their songs, greeting them with 'Aurukun, Aurukun, Aurukun'. It is no small thing to be received with respect and praise rather than shame.

There are so few alternatives to the one-dimensional media reports and government claims about so-called dysfunctional Aboriginal communities, so it is paramount that these kids have opportunities for self-representation. They are subject to overwhelming negative images of their life worlds, which inform their sense of self and cultural identity. What is made clear by the films is that the kids not only have something to say about their own lives, but they also have an awareness of the complexity of their environment and the contradictory social forces which inform their everyday. They are attempting to make themselves present in a media-saturated world that talks *about* Indigenous people not *to* them. Indigenous children and youth cannot just be *somebody* for others to worry about and make decisions for. In making the films the Aurukun students are participating in the important work of generating their vision(s) of Aurukun, and partaking in the important processes of identity and community formation; an identity and community that is extremely vulnerable to powerful outside forces. Through the films the kids of Aurukun, and other Aboriginal youth, receive positive and nuanced visions of themselves in a world that renders them absent or silent or only sees dysfunction. To these kids, Aurukun is not just a 'dysfunctional' remote community on the margins of Australia; it is home. The films interpellate viewers into the place and the *life* of the kids. And there is a need, especially in a time of panic about child sexual abuse and proposals to remove kids from their communities as a matter of urgency and desperation, to be reminded that Aboriginal children come from somewhere and are attached to bodies of knowledge, land and family. Storytelling is an invitation to make and renew forms of intimacy and interconnection.

I want to make it clear that I recognize that there are considerable social and geographic challenges in the Cape York region, and in no way think these should be avoided or minimised. However, the dominant discourse creates the impression that remote Indigenous communities are terminal places outside of rational, modern Australia. David Martin writes:

By characterizing the Aboriginal situation largely in terms of its manifest dysfunctional aspects, the *political* case is being established not only for addressing dysfunction/deficiency, but also for ignoring other aspects of people's lives, values, aspirations, etc. It is fundamental to recognize that transformation in people's lives and circumstances is essential, and that the process must involve working with the strengths, capacities, passions and commitments which people themselves have, even in the most difficult of circumstances, as the basis for sustainable change. (2006: 13)

The narrative of dysfunction suggests that the social body of remote Indigenous communities is moribund; no dialogue is required. In turn,

the new arrangements in Indigenous Affairs, instigated by the Howard government, are being deployed as if they are neutral when in fact they are not. They are reinforcing mainstream values. Mainstreaming, Kerry Arabena writes, reinforces new structures of belonging, away from cultural issues to work, sport and education, which purposefully downplays culture (2006: 46). To make the strongest case for mainstreaming it becomes necessary to ignore positive aspects of Indigenous people's lives, but in so doing, as Martin points out, the very basis for sustainable community development is disregarded. This destructive (and dysfunctional) impulse within contemporary Indigenous affairs needs to be identified as an element contributing to the problems Aboriginal communities face. To reiterate Martin's claims, Indigenous people are treated as if they are 'essentially empty vessels, if rather chipped and cracked ones, into which the new array of more socially functional values is to be poured' (Martin 2006: 2). What is observable over the history of Australian Indigenous affairs is that the state sees its role as not only intervening to supplement social disadvantage with more resources, but more specifically, that it must create, from scratch, a new social body for embedding these resources, maintaining and replicating them. If Aboriginal people and communities are not to be treated like empty vessels then they need to be recognised as having complex lives that are informed by distinct values and practices, and that they too are agents of change.

The Aurukun Student Storytelling Project is an important means of expressing life from children's perspectives and making meaning—for all of us. An awareness of how difficult some Indigenous people's lives are is long overdue. However, the overwhelming narrative of dysfunction, in which the 'cowering' Aboriginal child is represented as in need of protection from the oppressive influence of the 'unruly' Aboriginal social body, not only obscures the co-existent vitality, commitment and care, but it dictates the broader environment of engagement with Indigenous lives. We should not be fooled into thinking that fear for the safety of Indigenous women and children ensures that one remains connected to the people, as opposed to the media drama. So frightening are some of the images and reports coming out of Indigenous communities that concern blinded by fear, confusion, misinformation and a desire for solutions potentially diminishes a sense of a shared civic body. In mainstream media there are so few images and representations of *life* in Aboriginal communities. The roles are cast: victims, perpetrators and saviours. In this I would argue that the benefits of the Aurukun kids' films are not one-way. Enabling kids to tell their stories allows for the possibility of interconnections. Diminishing difficult lives to abstract, one-dimensional spectacles of suffering is yet another form of blindness and neglect. This practice evokes another meaning of 'remote living'—we are made too remote from one other.

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