



Visions and Violence of Policy

**An ethnography of Indigenous Affairs bureaucratic reform
in the Northern Territory of Australia**

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This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged. I declare my previously published works are:

Michel, T. (2018). The Lifeblood of the Cyborg: Or, the shared organism of a modern energy corporation and a small Northern Territory town. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 45 (November 2018), 224-234.

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Table of Contents

WARNING: This thesis contains images of Indigenous people who may now be deceased.

Chapter One: Introduction – Visions and Violence	5
PART ONE: PALIMPSESTS	40
Chapter Two: Translations of Self-Determination	44
Chapter Three: The Killing of Johannes Noltenius	80
PART TWO: VIOLENCE	100
Chapter Four: The Violence of Naming	105
Chapter Five: Open Roads, Locked Gates	127
PART THREE: AXIOMATICS	161
Chapter Six: ‘5000 is a nice round number’	167
Chapter Seven: Cyborg Wadeye	203
Conclusion: Connections and Disconnections	238
Appendix A: Research Interview Methodologies and Statistics	243
Appendix B: Empirical analysis of scale economies for the Northern Territory’s rural-remote local government sector, before and after the 2008 council amalgamation reform	265
Bibliography	290

Chapter One:

Introduction – Visions and Violence

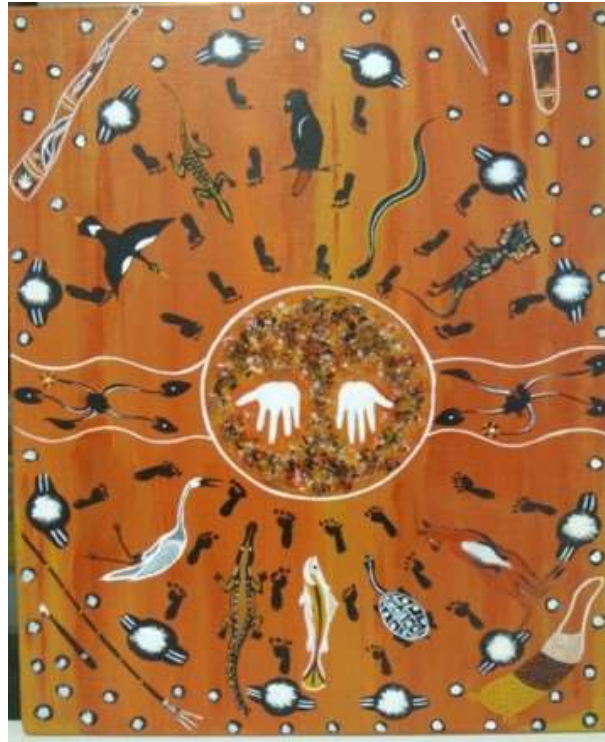


Figure 1.1: Timothy Dumoo's artwork (2008). Reproduced with permission from the artist.

The Painting

At first glance, the conflict about Timothy Dumoo's painting is not much of a story. Even naming the episode as a 'conflict' may infuse it with too much drama – if we can call what happened an event, it was certainly minor, more like a *non-event* (Berlant, 2007: 758-759; Povinelli, 2011: 3-15). The artefact of the painting itself (Figure 1.1 above) is an unreliable reference point for beginning this story: it was never well known, and may have now disappeared from sight and memory altogether. Yet grappling with its uncertain status is key to this thesis.

For some years the painting hung in the foyer of the Victoria Daly Shire Council offices in the Northern Territory (NT) town of Katherine. This particular shire council had emerged out of a contentious amalgamation reform of the NT's local government sector in 2008, whereby

fifty-three rural, Indigenous-majority community councils were forcibly amalgamated into eight regional shire organisations. The painting had been chosen as the winner of the new organisation's logo competition. In and of itself this did not make it remarkable. The display of Indigenous-style art has become a familiar pastiche of corporate Australia, mimicked in outback places like Katherine. The canvas was neither large nor imposing. If you had ever had chanced to visit to the council's front counter, you could be forgiven for overlooking it. And in the vagaries of the Northern Territory's local government policy, the host organisation for the artwork has since been restructured into two new regional councils. From 2014, Victoria Daly Shire Council no longer exists in its original form, nor does its logo. The winning entry of this now defunct organisation's logo design competition has become an entirely forgettable relic.

A forgotten painting and the associated discarded corporate logo may seem an odd narrative launch for an ethnography of bureaucracy in the Northern Territory. Yet the ambiguous boundaries and meanings of this event provides insights into the politics surrounding the 2008 shires reform, and the "doing" of government policy in Australia's Indigenous affairs arena more generally. It also reveals the key methodological approach of this thesis. My investigation avoids constructing significant points of a policy's history through rational representations of its "major events" (such as dates marking legislative change, statistical measures of institutional functionality, constructed episodes of crisis, and so forth). Instead, this thesis offers a more decentred and indeterminate approach that focuses on "minor events", where policy is intertwined in complex social, institutional and historical settings (Vike, 2002). The narratives of major events that nonetheless dominate bureaucratic understandings of the 2008 shires reform are neither accepted as matter-of-fact nor ignored in my thesis. Instead, these claims on truth are treated as expressions of social power relations: as a site where bureaucratic actors claim cultural, ideological and moral leadership over a policy domain, but where this leadership is always at risk of challenges, contestations and subversions (Gramsci, 1988: 189-200).

By early 2008, many of the weighty decisions concerning key aspects of the NT's sweeping local government reform had already been made by the Minister and his bureaucratic

advisors (including the new structures, boundaries, budgets, service delivery responsibilities and senior management staff for the new local government entities). But as part of its community engagement and consultation strategy, the NT Government had established “Shire Transition Committees” in each region. These advisory committees met monthly, were comprised of representatives from each community in the prospective shires, and had such matters as corporate mission statements, shire ward names and so forth delegated to their deliberations. One such sanctioned initiative taken by the Victoria Daly Shire Transition Committee was to open a logo competition to the public, with a prize purse of \$1,000 to the entry which best represented the new shire.



Figure 1.2: Timothy Dumoo. Photo: Unattributed (circa 2003).

Dumoo, an established artist from the township of Wadeye and an active councillor of the local Thamarrurr Council, was one of the few entrants in the competition. In terms of artistic skill and composition, his submission was the standout. The following is the explanatory text he included with the painting:

The picture painted on the canvas tells a story of the twelve different tribal groups representing their homeland and communities. The twelve councillors will walk together with their right foot forward for a better future... with their culture and totems inside their body and their mind on working for the people back at their communities. Working along with the Federal Government and new Shire.

At the centre of it all is the Shire welcoming councillors with open hands and listening to the councillors' problems. Back at the homelands and communities the people wait for good news from the Shire. (VDSC, 2008: 1)

When I first read this text in early 2008, I found it remarkable. Given the widespread antagonism against the incoming shires, Dumoo's statement conveyed a rare conciliatory message towards the new governance arrangements and the goals of liberalism more generally. He envisaged the common ideal of a 'better future', in which Indigenous Australians could retain their distinct culture and still engage constructively with the Australian state. Yet there was also a subtle analysis of power in the painting too. As Dumoo described it, 'at the centre of it all is the Shire welcoming councillors with [white] open hands and listening to the councillors' problems.'

Did this idealistic text reflect the beliefs of the artist? Was it a subtle criticism of yet another intervention by government into Indigenous community governance? Or was it simply crafted to improve his chances of winning the competition? In any case, it was no surprise when in May 2008 the Shire Transition Committee chose him as the winner.



Figure 1.3: Victoria Daly Shire Council logo (circa 2008).

Yet the shire’s newsletter announcing Dumoo’s prize hinted at impending conflict. It stated: ‘As agreed with the artist, the artwork will be simplified and turned into designs for the Victoria Daly Shire’s new logos’ (VDSC, 2008: 1). This was indeed the process: the painting was passed on to a professional graphic design company, who drafted a number of designs suitable for corporate letterheads, signs and uniforms. The outcome was functional, slick and bold – yet symbolically and fundamentally quite disconnected from the original painting (see Figure 1.3).

From my recollection, the artist was angry and disappointed with the final logo product. Gone were the footprints, the animal totems, and the finer details of the painting, with its original meaning modified beyond recognition. Dumoo demanded the logo design be changed. This was refused by the shire’s senior management staff on functional grounds: the design had to be simplified to enable its reproduction on letterheads, signs and other corporate branding. They also stressed to the artist that the artwork had effectively been purchased through the award of the prize money, and was now the intellectual property of the shire. Through time and attrition the conflict eventually dissipated without resolution: the shire kept its corporate logo design, and Timothy Dumoo remained the dissatisfied winner of \$1,000.

This story is inconclusive, it may not have been reliably told, and I may not have accurately captured the sentiments and communications of all the protagonists during the heat of the conflict. Nevertheless, my narration around Timothy Dumoo's painting here suggests common policymaking dynamics along the governmental fringes of settler-colonial Australia. On display are unequal social power relations between bureaucracy and the targets of policy, fraught intercultural relationships in which good intentions are disrupted by misunderstandings, and a dominant discourse of market economy-based logics in which social interactions easily become commodified.

Minor Events

It is worth highlighting that a perspective focusing on minor events is a deliberate departure from the more conventional approach of constructing a "major events" narrative of policy action. I argue the construction of major events dominates the state's own sense-making of its agency through instrumental processes including delimitation of policy domains, categorisation of actors, generation of statistical facts, creation of crises, and the formulation of solutions that support a chosen interpretation of events (Althaus, Bridgman, & Davis, 2013: 5-12; Bacchi, 2009: 1-2; Wedel, Shore, Feldman, & Lathrop, 2005: 30-32). How policymakers establish major events in a policy domain and how these relate to visions of future action, are key objects of enquiry for this thesis. Created major events often work as hegemonic claims on statistical truth and expertise (or in Deleuzian terms, the establishment of territory) over a policy area, and may be carefully crafted by their narrators *post hoc* to bring singular certainty to a situation (Roe, 1994). Importantly, this approach appeals to the deeply-held "rational choice" assumption that policy expresses government's logical and contained pursuit of its objectives. It also synthesises economic and business management frameworks into its understanding of policy; for example, in regards to considerations of production, the constraints of scarcity, and policy improvement techniques such as the Continuous Improvement Cycle (see for example Goetsch & Davis, 2016). Lastly it often contains a temporal orientation to the future, insofar that the construction of an (often crisis-laden) present serves as a guide for future solutions.

A major event logic has dominated state interpretations of the NT's 2008 local government amalgamations. Official narratives of the reform delimit it as an instrumental change of institutional structures, whereby small rural community councils with majority Indigenous populations were structurally amalgamated into larger regional shires.¹ Related to this was the construction by policymakers of "crisis": despite widespread local support for the community council system, key decision-makers in government perceived council amalgamations as a necessary solution to the sector's chronic problems of administrative dysfunction, lack of scale economies and poor service delivery. When the Labor Party's then Northern Territory Minister for Local Government Elliot McAdam announced the reform in late 2006, he cited a statistic recently produced by his department which categorised fifty per cent of community councils as either 'high risk' or dysfunctional' to emphasise the urgent need for future change:

It will become increasingly difficult for small, poorly resourced councils to live up to [growing] administrative, governance and service delivery expectations It is time to take action ... to fix these structural problems. It's time to provide some long-term certainty about the future of rural and remote communities and the types of services they can expect as citizens of the Northern Territory.

¹ For the purposes of simplicity, I shall refer to the Northern Territory's rural local government organisations that existed prior to July 2008 as 'community councils', and the organisations that were established from 1 July 2008 as 'shire councils'. This nomenclature is convenient, but not entirely accurate - which is testament to the bureaucratic complexities and organisational instability in the sector. 'Community councils' went by names such as 'Community Government Council', 'Association Council', 'Regional Council' 'Association Incorporated' and so forth, which reflected four legally distinct pathways of incorporation for local government bodies in the NT. The first and legally most straightforward pathway applied to municipal councils and the community government councils (CGCs) incorporated under the NT's *Local Government Act*. A second avenue of incorporation was as an association under the NT's *Associations Incorporations Act*. Third, the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act* enabled incorporation under federal legislation. Lastly, special purpose towns were given their own special legislative allowance (which applied to Jabiru Town Council which was amalgamated into the West Arnhem Shire Council, as well as the mining and tourist towns of Nhulunbuy, Alyangula and Yulara). The last three of these four types of incorporation were granted recognition as local government bodies through gazetted Ministerial declarations pursuant to the NT *Local Government Grants Commission Act* and the federal *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act*, with reference to the *Interpretations Act*. Further, other 'Aboriginal Corporations' in the NT did (and do still) provide selected local government services in Indigenous homelands, outstations and small communities. (Michel, Gerritsen, & Thynne, 2010: 7-8).

It is evident from research undertaken on the sustainability of local governments in other jurisdictions that a shire of less than 5000 people would struggle to be sustainable in the long term. We need to make strong decisions sooner rather than later if we are to maintain the viability of bush communities and of local government in the Territory. (McAdam, 2006)

Since the 2008 reform there have been two sets of official evaluation reviews of this policy reform, both of which continued with an instrumental focus on creating major events to understand the process. One group of reports was authored by the private consultancy firm Deloitte, and relied on quantitative research methods to evaluate the financial sustainability of the sector (Deloitte, 2012, 2013). The Deloitte reports into the shire council sector's 'financial sustainability' relied on comparable performance measures such as financial ratios (Deloitte, 2012: 17-18), which in turn were based on an earlier national study of local government financial sustainability conducted by a private audit consultancy (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2006). Their reports were targeted specifically at senior bureaucratic managers, and concluded with long lists of recommendations to further improve the sector's financial performance in the coming years. Another review was produced internally by the Northern Territory Government in 2013, and applied qualitative methods to explore governance-related issues (NTG, 2013). Similar to the Deloitte reports, it tightly frames the scope of its research by defining 'exclusions' for consideration (such as all other policy reform initiatives that overlapped with the shires reform, including the 2007 *Northern Territory Emergency Response*,² changes to public housing and reforms to the Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP), a key program for Indigenous employment and works projects targeted at rural and regional Indigenous communities) (NTG, 2013: 3). This report did seek views of community residents regarding shire governance structures, however respondents were presented with two options only for

² The *Northern Territory Emergency Response*, colloquially known as "the Intervention", was a set of program initiatives launched unilaterally by the Australian Government in June 2007 that coincided with the final planning stages of the NT's shires reform process. It involved, *inter alia*, the rapid introduction of radical welfare reforms, compulsory five-year leases over townships on Indigenous land, widespread alcohol and pornography restrictions, increased policing, compulsory health checks for children, and the suspension of the *Racial Discrimination Act*. Although the Intervention did have some adherents amongst Indigenous Territorians, in the NT's Indigenous-majority communities (where it had the most effect) this set of policies were widely unpopular (Billings, 2010).

future action, set by the NT Parliament's contemporaneous policy priorities (NTG, 2013: 3-4).

Each of these reviews of the shires reform deftly addressed issues that were considered pertinent by policymakers at the time. However, therein lies the limitations of these bodies of research. Both reports narrowly confined themselves to pre-determined terms of reference, were products of specific political phases, and remained of marginal relevance to all but a handful of technocratic insiders. The Deloitte reports in particular reflected the dominant corporate values of this consultancy firm, by conforming to market-oriented measures of efficiency and effectiveness (Mitchell and Sikka, 2005: 5-7). The limited framings of imagined policy futures in them highlight their role in maintaining hegemonic policymaking processes. For example, there is no interrogation of broader social power relations that underpinned the shires reform. Notably, the format and language of both texts are quite dull and technocratic, which works as its own source of authority insofar that it deflects critical scrutiny. I consider these reports' delimitations and dullness to be hidden forms of bureaucratic violence, a term which I discuss at length in this thesis. Suffice to say, in my analysis I am not emulating these reports, either methodologically, analytically or stylistically.

An alternate approach to studying a policy reform would be to interpret bureaucratic rationalisations as obscuring an agenda of political dominance (Ball, 1993: 14-16; Lea, 2014a; Mitchell, 2002; Morphy, 2008; Rose, 2006; Shore & Wright, 2011; Sullivan, 2009: 64-66; Wedel et al, 2005: 32-34). From this perspective, the 2008 shires reform can be interpreted as an extension of bureaucratic authority over the Northern Territory's local government sector, to the detriment of more community-based governance structures. This is a common counter-narrative in the academic literature pertaining to the contemporary Indigenous affairs policy arena in Australia more generally. Proponents of this analysis have critiqued the shires reform as part of a generational shift towards an age of authoritarian neo-assimilation, marked *inter alia* by the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 2005, the introduction of the *Northern Territory Emergency Response* in 2007, and the reform of CDEP (Altman & Hinkson, 2007; Behrendt, 2005; Hunt,

2008; Jordan & Altman, 2016; Morphy, 2008; Peterson, 2013a; Sanders, 2008, 2011; Smith, 2008; Sullivan, 2011). The political scientist Will Sanders, for instance, perceives the establishment of the erstwhile community councils as 'greatly informed' by the principle of self-determination, which expressed a 'great respect for localism and even for distinctive Aboriginal cultural contributions' (Sanders, 2011: 13). He critiques the shires reform as a new form of authoritarian policy whereby Indigenous people were positioned as needing 'to be guided and directed, or even overridden... rather than engaged with and respected' (Sanders, 2011: 14).

This analysis of the shires reform has not been confined to oppositionist academics. Similar perspectives were offered by many residents of the Roper Gulf and Victoria Daly shire council areas who were interviewed as part of this research. These responses below are indicative of the widespread antagonism and sense of political disenfranchisement brought about by the new shires:

[It was along] with the [Australian Government's Federal] Intervention all of a sudden. They didn't communicate with the community... It was like invasion day again. We were scared thinking of the Stolen Generation again and wanted to run and hide... It's communication! There's a lack of communication between government and us because their law changes every now and then. Our law stays the same, it never changes. (Interview 21 December, 2010)

The government's always been making changes and we just work with it. But this time there's nothing good to work with, we can't work with it. There's no positives. The community was not perfect before but the shire with the [2007 Federal] Intervention has made it worse. The shire's left a void in the community and it really, really hurts us. Being disempowered we can't do anything that we used to. (Interview 25 February, 2010)

I argue that an analysis which stays with recognising the power relations at work in policy processes is a valuable perspective, yet it suffers the same fate of constructing a narrative defined by major events and crises. There tends to be an over-reliance on historical, social and political meta-structures (such as through the categorisation of an institutional reform

to a specific policy era), in which bureaucracy becomes a monolithic entity defined by generational shifts in ideology. The agency of the remedial targets of state intervention – in this case, Indigenous people – are downplayed, as is their influence in shaping the social life of a policy reform. This removes much of the social complexity of policy reform, and discounts the instabilities and messiness involved in the translation of policy into practice (Mosse, 2004: 641-644). This approach also shares commonalities with the normative tendencies of instrumental analyses, insofar that their critiques are imbued with their own alternative prescriptions for better policy.

My contribution to the discussion around the 2008 shires reform will attempt to move beyond both an instrumental evaluation of policy and a simple critical understanding of policy as a reflection of social power structures. Instead I apply a cultural-ethnographic focus on minor events, and a conceptualisation of the shires reform as a layer in a larger policy “assemblage”. This allows for a more open-ended analysis of the complexities of a policy reform process in an intercultural setting, with blurred boundaries between intrinsic and extrinsic forces. My thesis thus assembles some minor stories of other agential forces in policy: the hostile Indigenous community resident, a pastoral property map, rebellious cyborgs, cows, rivers, distance, dirt.

This focus on the minor event can disrupt bureaucratic claims on naturalised truths. I contend that it is in the minor, mundane, largely overlooked events where patterns of behaviour, ingrained values, epistemic habits and social power relations are often readily revealed (Stoler, 2009: chap 1). Much of policy’s translation from and into practice is through minor events, and this is where the messiness, inconsistencies and inequalities of the policy process can be excavated. A focus on the minor opens new possibilities and ways to challenge a dominant paradigm (Bogue, 2011). Deleuze and Guattari emphasise the revolutionary potential of the minor, and in their work *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, they characterise minor literature as fundamentally political, of collective value, and as the deterritorialisation of language (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986 [1975]: 16-18). My focus on minor events in this thesis is an attempt to emulate this approach: to explore the radical potential

of scholarship through the disruption of hegemonic meanings, names and categories, and to transform policy's dominant narratives into something contested, unreliable and strange.

Assemblages

The concept of assemblage, a term borrowed from the original works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, is a useful tool for this mode of analysis. Deleuze and Guattari understand an assemblage not as a discrete and contained entity with an ordered number of parts, but as a networked multiplicity that is constantly undergoing a process of *becoming assembled* (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 1-22; McGregor Wise, 2011). The Deleuzian scholar John MacGregor Wise speaks of assemblages as elements of qualities, lines and speeds rather than objects (MacGregor Wise, 2011: 92). This works against the conceptualisation of historical events, organisations or subjectivities as unitary and singular. Instead, the concept of assemblage points to the tensions between organisation and change, structure and flux. To speak of a policy assemblage shifts the focus from a contained number of specific events, and treats it as interconnected flows of agency with indeterminate boundaries. To illustrate the epistemological distinction between these two perspectives, Deleuze and Guattari apply the metaphors of a tree and a rhizome. The plotted point of a major event conceptually resembles a tree, with its conceit of segmented unity and hierarchical ordering.

Alternatively, the indeterminacy of running lines is akin to a rhizome, an unstable form of inter-being that links differences and works as a type of 'multiple-which-becomes' (Badiou, 2007: 39; Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 5-24). This perspective emphasises the dynamic interconnectedness of matters and clusters of relatedness.

Of lasting analytical significance is Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of power that is conveyed by the assemblage. They identify what they call axes of 'machinic assemblages' (that relate to systems of matter, things and actions) and 'collective assemblages of enunciation' (that refer to language and discourse, or 'regimes of signs') as functionally intrinsic to each other (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 6; McGregor Wise, 2011: 92-94). An assemblage is 'the "holding together" of heterogeneous elements' of discourses and matter, akin to creating a territory (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 376-377). This process

of binding heterogeneous elements together, or “territorialisation” (a term Deleuze and Guattari use often), is a power struggle in which forces attempt to dominate through ‘coding’, ‘recoding’ and establishing control (Deleuze & Guattari, 1996 [1972]: 419). Assemblages can be thought of as regulated patterns of social action in which words and things are shaped, and bodies thereby transformed (Bogue, 2011: 132). For example, Deleuze and Guattari think of language as a type of heterogeneous reality, and a site of ongoing political conflict. ‘There is no mother tongue,’ they state, ‘only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 6). In this thesis I treat government policy similarly, as a contentious and imperfectly cohesive assemblage in which political forces lay claim to territory (Shore & Wright, 2011). Government bureaucracy’s penchant for the statistic is one such instance of a numeric form of language that establishes control, as ‘codes that mark access to information’ and that assert authority over populations (Deleuze, 1992: 5).

Yet these processes of territorialisation are being constantly disrupted by agencies of deterritorialisation, or rhizomatic ‘lines of flight’ from the assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986 [1975]: 16; 2013 [1987]: chap 1; 238-242; 386-389; McGregor Wise, 2011: 94). These constant flows of transformation, subversion and resistance (or ‘decoding’, in the language of Deleuze and Guattari) give the assemblage its dynamic complexity and unpredictability: ‘A territory is always en route to an at least potential deterritorialization, even though the new assemblage may operate a reterritorialization It is as though forces of deterritorialization affected the territory itself ’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 378; 380).

A Study of Power

Herein is the link to my focus on the minor event as part of my ethnographic study of bureaucracy and the enactments of policy. This deterritorialising approach is not whimsical, but reflects its own unique study of power. One practical definition of majorities and minorities relates to their relative positioning within social power relations. Bureaucracies, which have become the dominant form of human organisation in the modern world (Hodson, Martin, Lopez, & Roscigno, 2012: 257), are an obvious example of a “majoritarian”

social force. This extends to the political position of actors in state bureaucracies, or the government employees, managers, professional consultants and elected officials who breathe conviction, authority and life into government policy. The discretionary power these actors wield in distributing material resources is one source of their domination. Perhaps a more significant source is their discursive power: the intangible authority to name, categorise, plan and instil a commonsensical 'truth regime' for society (Foucault, 1980: 131-133). The rendering of a body of knowledge to the status of "truth" does more than to position it as hierarchically superior to other alternative knowledges. It naturalises its hegemonic position, and makes any political contentiousness around it invisible.

The most powerful truth expressed through policy is the acceptance of capitalism as modernity's unquestioned and naturalised social order. The capitalist trope of the market, for example, has become the standard for good, effective government: a fundamental reference point for public policy and what Michel Foucault refers to as government's pre-eminent 'site of veridiction' (Foucault, 2008 [1979]: 32). The market has become policy's imagined go-to mechanism for goods and services to be allocated, for capital (machines), labour (humans) and land (the biosphere) to be productively coordinated, for "viable" economies to be enacted, and for other policy problems (such as unemployment and material disparities) to be solved. There is a self-fulfilling, circular logic to this: a well-functioning capitalist market economy is both enabled by and a model for efficient government policy. The state not only looks to, but also plays an integral role in encoding and regulating capitalist social relations. For example, the circulation of money arbitrates exchange-value functions (Taussig, 1997: 130-133). The state's enforcement of property law, territorial rights and taxation enables particular modes of trade, patterns of wealth to accumulate, and power relations to be codified. Importantly for the themes of this thesis, education and training programs and other state policy interventions help instil market-oriented rationalities and behaviours. In short, the state and capitalism are immanently symbiotic; imaginations of the market and the very hegemonic position of capitalism require the agency of the state (Foucault, 2008 [1979]: 27-33). This positioning of contemporary social (and bureaucratic) realities into a hegemonic order is what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as a 'capitalist axiomatic' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 507-550). As they state,

‘capitalism forms with a general axiomatic of decoded flows. "Capital is a right, or, to be more precise, a relation of production that is manifested as a right, and as such it is independent of the concrete form that it cloaks at each moment of its productive function.'" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 527). As will be discussed at length throughout my thesis, the acceptance of capitalist relations of production as a “right” or unquestioned truth permeates modern policy-making in profound and pervasive ways.

Positioning the Researcher

Although I am attempting to apply new ethnographic insights into the study of modern bureaucratic cultures, I am entering into conversation with a growing scholarly canon that critically analyses bureaucratic cultures. This includes Australian intellectuals such as Tess Lea (2008, 2012, 2014b; Lea & Pholeros, 2010), Tim Rowse (1995, 1998, 2000), Patrick Sullivan (2005a, 2005b, 2008, 2009, 2011), Emma Kowal (2012, 2015) and Jeff Collmann (1988), *inter alia*, whose works have generally focused on the social complexities of government interventions into Indigenous life-worlds in rural Australia. The thematic scope of the international scholars I draw on is broader, ranging for example from David Mosse and Akhil Gupta’s studies of Indian state’s development projects (Gupta, 2012; Mosse, 2004, 2006), Ann Laura Stoler’s archival analysis of documents from the 19th century Dutch East Indies colonial administration (Stoler, 2007, 2009); Paul Nadasdy’s ethnography of the relationship between the Canadian nation-state and Indigenous communities in the Yukon (Nadasdy, 2003), Tania Murray Li’s critique of the culture of improvement within the Indonesian state (Murray Li, 2007), to other more generalist or theoretical work (Hansen & Stepputat, 2001; Herzfeld, 1992; Hodson et al., 2012; Mitchell, 1991, 2002; ; Sharma & Gupta, 2006; Wedel et al., 2005, Graeber, 2012; Vike, 2018). The commonality of these works is their investigations of the anthropological nuances of bureaucratic action – how state policies are imagined, designed, justified, translated, avoided and enacted by the agents and targets of policy alike.

More particularly, my own research aims to build on themes these scholars have already explored. For instance Laura Ann Stoler, in her book *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, explicitly writes a minor history of nineteenth-

century colonial rule in Dutch East Indies. Through her studies of the shifts and contradictions of social classification rules in the colony's administrative archives, she disrupts any pretence of a consistent bureaucratic rationality at work (Stoler, 2009). David Mosse's ethnography of a rural development project in contemporary India follows a similar analytical vein. In his journal article "Is Good Policy Unimplementable? Reflections on the Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice", he uses the social theorist Michel de Certeau (de Certeau, 1984) to explore the everyday practice of policy, and the relationship 'between the "monotheistic privilege" of dominant policy models and the "polytheism" of scattered practices surviving below' (Mosse, 2004: 645). Tess Lea's career-long study of bureaucratic culture in the Indigenous affairs policy arena of the Northern Territory is also a sustained disruption of the taken-for-granted logics of policymaking (Lea, 2008, 2012, 2014; Lea & Pholeros, 2010). The anthropocentric 'telos of progress' (Lea, 2015: 4) that dominates policy is critiqued in Lea's article "What has water got to do with it? Indigenous public housing and Australian settler-colonial relations". With clear parallels to the Deleuzian concept of assemblage, she introduces the term 'policy ecology', an analytical approach she defines as 'the ecology of the policy environments themselves and the variegated connections that stem from and flow through the alive, inhabited worlds that policy is entering into' (Lea, 2015: 1; see also Bennett, 2010: chap 1, chap 7; Mosse, 2004: 664; Vike, 2018: 23). As an analytical variant to the Deleuzian assemblage, my own study of the 2008 shires reform in the Northern Territory applies a policy ecology approach, in which I investigate the obvious and not-so-obvious forces that have shaped this policy process.

One fundamental aspect of the scholarly works listed above that I attempt to emulate is their political positioning. These authors generally do not position themselves as the problem-solving intelligentsia of the state, nor do they conform to the orthodox academic habit of intellectually adopting – and performing a mastery of – subaltern or marginalised social groups (the poor, the Indigenous, the delinquent, the Amazonian tribe, the remedial subjects of policy, et cetera). Instead, these scholars have targeted the powerful experts and policymakers for analysis, or those who are normally positioned to codify, classify and generate remedial solutions for subordinate *others*. These scholars have heeded Laura Nader's original call to the field of social sciences to 'study up' and 'to get behind the

facelessness of a bureaucratic society ... directing the everyday aspects of our lives' (Nader, 1972: 288).

This unconventional 'study up' approach must also precipitate self-reflection for the scholarly researcher who, similar to the policymaker, also customarily claims authority over knowledge and is commonly positioned under the rubric of "expert" (Moreton-Robinson, 2004; Spivak, 1988: 275). Eduardo Vivieros de Castro, in his problematic to anthropology, posits that the field often claims epistemological authority over the "native" by presuming the native has a natural relationship to her culture, whereas the anthropologist reserves the privilege to interpret this relationship: 'explaining and interpreting, translating and introducing, textualizing and contextualizing, justifying and signifying native meanings are all jobs of the anthropologist... the anthropologist's meaning is form; the native's is matter' (Vivieros de Castro, 2013: 475). Vivieros de Castro then turns this dynamic on its head, and provocatively asks:

What if we refuse to give this kind of strategic advantage to the anthropologist's discourse over that of the native? What would happen if the native's discourse were to operate within the discourse of the anthropologist in a way that produced reciprocal knowledge effects upon it?... It is said that to translate is to betray. But what happens when the translator decides to betray his own tongue? (Vivieros de Castro, 2013: 475)

My own research project is an attempt to address de Castro's provocation. Rather than adopting the tongue of the bureaucratic expert as the discourse of analysis, I am analysing bureaucratic discourse itself. In short, policy-making experts and bureaucratic organisations are the native tribes I am studying (and perhaps betraying). Through a process of self-reflexive ethnography, I am externalising my own experiences as a bureaucratic insider and offering my own involvement as a participant in my research field up for critique. From 2007 to 2009 I was employed by the Northern Territory Government as a "development coordinator", responsible for implementing the transition of eight community councils into the Victoria Daly Shire Council. I was then employed from 2010 to 2013 by the Roper Gulf Shire Council in senior management positions. I treat these professional experiences as academic research material, but have no pretence of my abilities to provide distanced

objectivity, let alone mastery over them. During these tenures I made dear friends and bitter enemies; I forged a career path and had my values fundamentally challenged; I learnt much and resolved little. I am not attempting to draw tidy conclusions from my involvement in this reform. Instead I have aimed to maintain a critically self-reflexive position that excavates the contradictory strangeness of my own lived experiences, as a well-intentioned bureaucrat participating in a deeply unpopular policy reform.

Elements of Convention

In my study of bureaucratic cultures in the NT's local government sector, some of the research methods I employ are conventional. These include extensive use of interviews, field observations, and quantitative data collection and analysis. In part, this research labour also has conventional aims: to offer a robust empirical perspective on the outcomes of the 2008 shires reform. Approximately 831 local residents of the Roper Gulf and Victoria Daly shire councils and 60 shire management staff, Northern Territory Government officers and elected officials were formally interviewed and surveyed between 2009 and 2016 by myself and Julie-Ann Bassinder. (See Appendix A for further details on the approach and methodologies applied). The interview questions for both these cohorts were aimed at assessing social attitudes towards the new shires, and what the perceived outcomes of the 2008 reform have been. (For example, one question from the local residents' questionnaire was: 'What is the biggest change you have seen in your community (good or bad) since the Shire started?' A question from the government managers' interview script was: 'Where do you see the Northern Territory's local government sector in ten years' time?'). Likewise, the community residents' survey was aimed at evaluating service delivery standards, with questions grouped into seven service areas and response options structured by an ordinal scale. The findings of this qualitative research are critical, insofar as they provide clear evidence of the trenchant unpopularity of the shires reform amongst affected residents. However, while I draw on the interview transcripts, the questions posed for both the interviews and the survey did not depart from majoritarian research in themselves. The research questions in part speak to a managerial agenda of monitoring, controlling and regulating organisational threats, and the critical attitudes expressed by interview participants can be readily co-opted into a justification for self-perpetuating policy

intervention and “remedial improvement” (Lea, 2008: x; 2015; see for example NTG, 2013: 1-3). In this regard, I do not deploy the findings of the interviews and surveys to make recommendations to policy. The practice of “remedial” research that instinctively makes recommendations to policy, and the cultural forces that underpin the deep-seated sense of entitlement, are themselves important aspects of my analysis. Instead, I interlace various quotes from these interviews throughout the thesis, to enrich and disrupt any attempts at a singular analytical perspective of the shires reform process.

Another key empirical question considered by this thesis is whether the amalgamations led to economies of scale. As Minister McAdam’s quote on page 7 of this introductory chapter reveals (discussed in detail in *Chapter Six: ‘5,000 is a nice round number’*), the achievement of scale-based cost savings was a key justification for the 2008 reform. Yet as the financial data I collected from the sector during the period 2005 to 2013 clearly demonstrates, there is no empirical evidence of cost efficiencies achieved by the sector since July 2008. On the contrary, there are indications of *diseconomies* of scale. One crude measure of an organisation’s financial efficiency that I consider is its capacity to achieve operating surpluses. According to this indicator, the new regional shires have performed poorly. Their sum average operating surplus ratio was minus 11 per cent for the period 2010-2013, compared to a ratio of minus 5.3 per cent for the previous community councils in the period 2005-2008 of minus 5.3 per cent (see figure 1.4; Michel, 2015: 105-106). There is also evidence of a significant increase in expenditure on administration in the sector since the 2008 reform, both in per capita terms and in proportion to total spending (see figure 1.5).

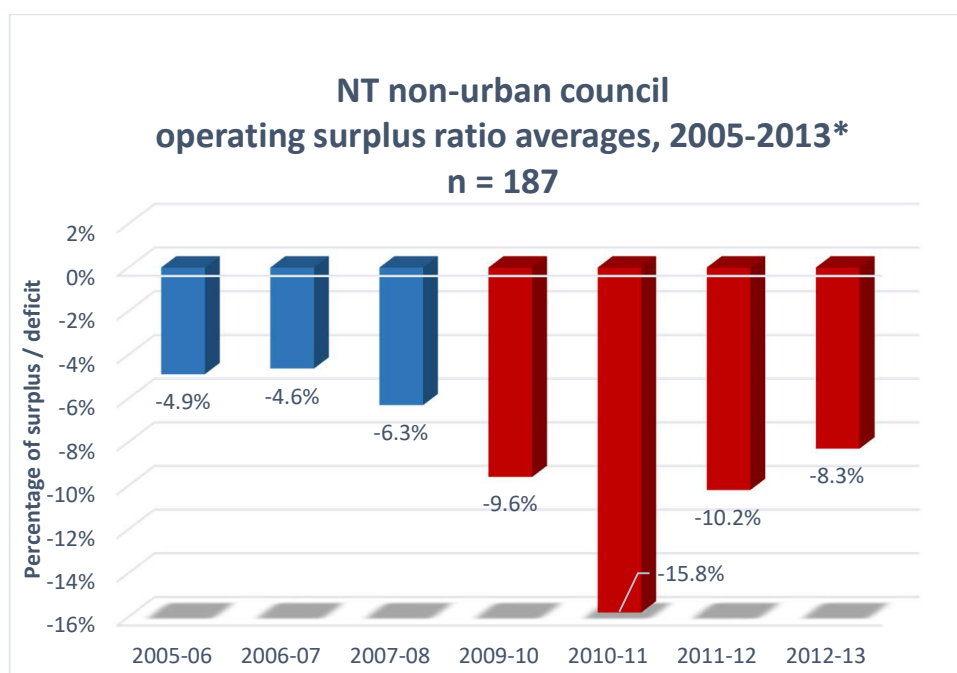


Figure 1.4: Comparison of average operating surplus ratios for non-urban councils in the Northern Territory between 2005-2008 (pre-reform community councils, coloured blue) and 2010-2013 (post-reform shire councils, coloured red). * Note: 2005-08 figures for community councils (n = 155) calculated directly from councils' annual financial statements. 2009-13 figures for shire councils (n = 32) sourced from Deloitte (2013).

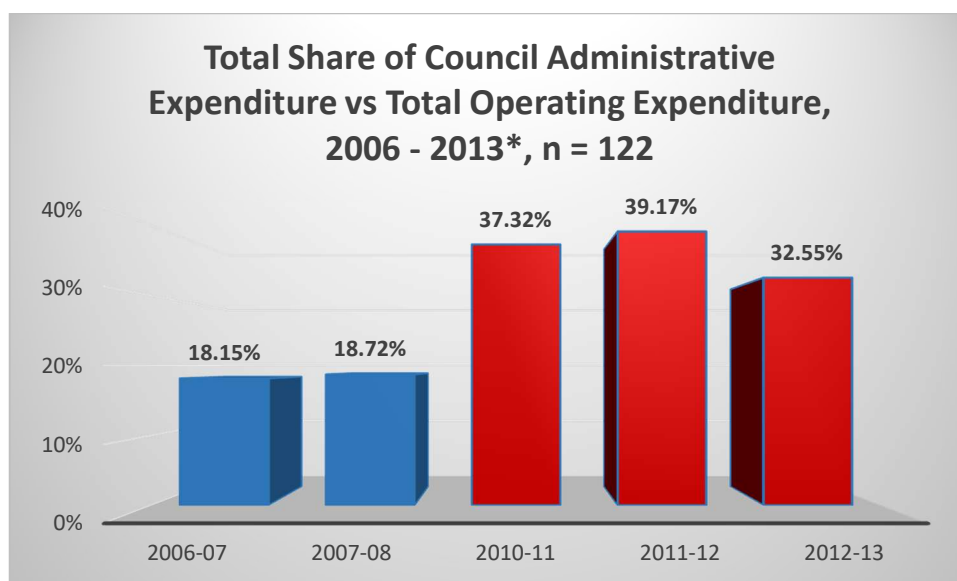


Figure 1.5: Comparison of average council expenditure on administration functions (General Public Services Expenditure) for non-urban councils in the Northern Territory between 2006-2008 (pre-reform community councils, n = 98, coloured blue) and 2010-2013 (post-reform shire councils, n = 24, coloured red). * Note: 2006-07 and 2007-08 expenditure figures excludes Marngarr, Milingimbi and Umbakumba Council data due to lack of availability. For Alpururulam, Anmatjere and Nganmariyanga Councils, financial data was unavailable for one of the 2006-07 and 2007-08 periods.

Appendix B offers a more robust statistical investigation for the period 2005 to 2013, including bivariate correlation analyses and independent sample t-tests that use financial and demographic data to compare the financial performance of the community council and shire council sectors. The empirical conclusions that can be drawn from these tests is that there is no evidence of a positive relationship between scale and cost efficiency for the Northern Territory's rural local government sector. In other words, larger regional structures in themselves have not led to a financially more efficient or sustainable local government sector in the Northern Territory.

My empirical falsification of the economies of scale justification for local government amalgamations is an important finding, but it is not an analytical endpoint. In my critical ethnography of minor events, I treat this information as scaffolding in my project of "othering": to critically expose the contradictions of the dominant narratives surrounding the 2008 shires reform, to destabilise the bureaucratic common sense that framed it, and to render the majoritarian perspective on policy reform as *strange*.

The Othering of Economism

In Chapter Six I explore in detail why the overwhelming majority of bureaucratic managers remained ardently convinced (as evidenced by their interview responses) that the new regional shires have achieved economies of scale – despite a complete lack of any empirical evidence to support this claim. To understand this phenomenon, I argue that economies of scale must be analysed not as a refutable theory (which, statistically, it can be, as I demonstrate in Appendix B), but as a component of a discursive regime that operates to establish "expert" bureaucratic authority over social and ecological spaces. The term I use to describe this discursive regime is "economism", which I contend is the dominant episteme amongst policy experts. By economism I mean an epistemological framework (or, in Deleuzian terms, an axis of enunciation) by which social realities are primarily interpreted, explained and remediated through logics informed by capitalist economics. Importantly, this

historically situates public policy as a management technology of modern techno-capitalism and links it to material forces (or as a machinic assemblage). This closely relates to Deleuze and Guattari's 'capitalist axiomatic' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 507-550).

"Economies of scale" is but one truth within the assemblage of economism. Other economic tropes that are commonly treated as uncontested truths in policy include "accountability", "openness" and "transparency" (see also Chapter 5: *Open Roads, Locked Gates*). Similarly, there are often unproblematised calls for the state to minimise the meddling and "red tape" that impede market exchanges.³ Likewise, the private-sector firm has become the model of choice for many state organisations (including the NT's local government sector), and the practice of state functions being contracted out to private corporations and businesses has become a global phenomenon.

The Strangeness of Statistics

Linked to economic rationalities is bureaucracy's privileged treatment of statistical forms of knowledge. As detailed in Chapter Four: *The Violence of Naming*, quantitative information (related to finance, population, geography and so forth) has become, in the words of Ian Hacking, an integral 'part of the technology of power in a modern state' (Hacking, 1991: 181). With their air of concrete measurability, commensurable accountability and scientific authority, statistics can become impervious to scrutiny and elevated to a type of naturalised "truth-maker" in policy arenas (Cullenberg, Amariglio, & Ruccio, 2001: 26-29; Gupta, 2012: 154-159; Miller & Power, 2013: 559; Neu, 2003: 193-194; 199; Rose, 2006: 152-156; Woodward, 2009: 195). Elizabeth Povinelli writes of statistics as an important technique in the process of what she coins 'eventualisation', whereby 'ordinary, chronic and cruddy' minor events can be rendered into major crisis-events that necessitate policy intervention (Povinelli, 2011: 13-15). A statistically-expressed "evidence base" has thus become virtually a pre-requisite for the justification of any modern-day

³ For examples of market-oriented policy discourses that specifically relate to northern Australia, see the Australian Government's wide-scoping *Our North, Our Future: White Paper on Developing Northern Australia* (2015: 4-7, 59), and a review of Indigenous employment policy by mining magnate Andrew "Twiggy" Forrest titled *The Forrest Review: Creating Parity* (A. Forrest, 2014: viii, 47, 120, 130, 148-9, 153).

policy reform, and contentious policy positions are frequently bolstered and defended with statistical “facts”. In short, the creation of a major event for policy generally relies on statistics (Bowker & Leigh Star, 2000; Foucault, 1994 [1970]: chap 5; Graeber, 2012: 119; Hansen & Stepputat, 2001: 10-12; Herzfeld, 1992: 52; 67-69; Wedel et al., 2005: 33; 37-38).

Relatedly, statistics is a key tool of classification for policy, through which normative binary categories such as Indigenous / non-Indigenous, functional / dysfunctional, urban / remote are defined and realised. Examples abound of the strategic invocations of binarised statistics in Australia’s Indigenous affairs policymaking arena (see COAG, 2008; SCRGSP, 2014). One instance drawn from the 2008 shires reform process is the above-quoted “fact” reported by the Minister that 50 per cent of the previous community councils were either ‘high risk’ or dysfunctional’. As I discuss in Chapter Four, this “50 per cent dysfunctional” statistic in particular has its own genealogy, and its production can be described as an act of cultural creativity.

Visions of Modern Policy

In my study of bureaucratic culture, the *visions* of bureaucracy are an important theme, or how the rationality of modern policy is infused with hope and imagination. A component of this is modern government’s distinct temporal orientation towards the future, linked to deeper tendencies within modernity that define it as a culture of progress, innovation and change (Driscoll, 2010: chap 1). Michel Foucault wrote of modernity as more of an attitude than historical period, marked by a break with tradition and a discontinuity with time (Foucault, 1984: 39). Similarly, Marshall Berman wrote of the related dynamic of modernisation as a ‘maelstrom’ of social processes that ‘keep it in a state of perpetual becoming’ (Berman, 1988: 16). This modern culture of dynamic progress permeates the values and practices of bureaucracy, in which strategic planning, reform initiatives and future development goals serve as something akin to a creative life-force (Weszkalnys, 2017).

In Australia's contemporary settler-colonial social context, bureaucracy's modernist impetus often finds expression as a juxtaposition against perceived Indigenous conservatism. Although the colonial governments' past language about 'civilising the natives' (see for example Searcy, 1909 [1984]; Willshire, 1896) is now decidedly passé, bureaucracy in Australia still tends to (favourably) contrast its rational, future-oriented planning culture against the imagined anarchic, past-fixated, tradition-bound values of the Indigenous policy subject (Lea, 2012: 115; see also Lea & Pholeros, 2010; Neu, 2003). I argue this cultural tendency can even be traced in the aesthetic transformation of a painting depicting Indigenous totems into a slick local government corporate logo.

In the setting of Australia and the Northern Territory, there are many other policy artefacts that reflect a future imaginary of improvement. Consider the following policy titles: *Our North, Our Future: White Paper on Developing Northern Australia*, a recently-released Australian Government blueprint for the economic modernisation of northern Australia (Australian Government, 2015); or *Fit for the Future: A Roadmap for Stronger, Smarter Councils* – the New South Wales Government's own recent manifesto for local government amalgamations (NSW OLG, 2014). Then there's *Territory 2030 - Fresh Ideas, Real Results*, a twenty-year strategic plan for the Northern Territory published shortly after the 2008 shires reform (NTG, 2008). Related to the 2008 shires reform in particular, there are also ample traces of a future-oriented culture of progress. First and foremost is its fundamental condition of being a policy reform, a wholesale institutional transformation aspirationally aimed at improving governance and operational arrangements in the local government sector. In Minister McAdam's initial justification of the reform, he mentioned the burgeoning (and necessarily future-oriented) expectations placed on the local government sector, before stating that 'it will become increasingly difficult for small, poorly resourced councils to live up to these administrative, governance and service delivery expectations.' The future tense of the verb needs highlighting. He ended with a motivational plan for a better future: 'It's time to provide some long-term certainty *about the future* of rural and

remote communities and the types of services they can expect' (McAdam, 2006, emphasis added).⁴

As I explore at length in Part I of this thesis, titled *Palimpsests*, an oft-observed sub-text of a future imaginary is its sense-making of the past. In other words, creating an imaginative territory for policy is framed by curated memory. In his genealogy of modern scientific thought, *The Order of Things*, Foucault provocatively asks, 'what is it impossible to think, and what kind of impossibility are we faced with here?' (Foucault, 1994 [1970]: xv). These questions around the boundaries of epistemological possibility are linked to the politics of remembering and forgetting. Perspectives that privilege a forward-looking temporal orientation (which I argue prevails in modern government) favour a tendency to discount – effectively forget – past events. My thesis challenges these temporal assumptions of modern government by offering minor narratives of the historical period that framed the 2008 shires reform. Chapter Two: *Translations of Self-Determination*, contextualises this reform by offering a local history of settlement and state intervention in the Indigenous-majority township of Ngukurr, from the establishment of the Roper River Mission in 1908 until the amalgamation of Yugul Mangi Community Government Council with the Roper Gulf Shire Council. This chapter aims to disrupt romanticised narratives of progress and the "self-determination" era in Indigenous affairs policy – the period from the 1970s to the 2000s celebrated by many academics, commentators and activists as a golden age of political autonomy for Indigenous Territorians (Altman & Hinkson, 2007; Hunt, 2008; Morphy, 2008; Sanders, 2008, 2011; Smith, 2008). My alternative narrative places the self-determination era within a longer continuum of settler-colonial dominance, in which the sedentarisation, subjectification and commodification of Indigenous life-worlds have been persistent objectives of the state. However there have been persistent pockets of local autonomy and

⁴ Another example of future-oriented bias in the 2008 shires reform process relates to Deloitte's 2012 evaluation review of the sector's financial sustainability (Deloitte, 2012). This report was a voluminous 462 pages long, with a supplementary 26-page addendum published in 2013 (Deloitte, 2013). Much of the reports' focus was on the shire councils' current financial positions, however large sections of the 2012 report in particular were devoted entirely to future-oriented recommendations (Deloitte, 2012: 13-14; 57-100). Although these reviews were published only a short while after the replacement of the community council system by the shire councils, there was almost no mention of these previous organisations, let alone an historical analysis of past organisational structures or funding arrangements. In effect, the sector's institutional past was left outside the scope of these reviews.

agency – deterritorialisations away from the hegemonic policy assemblage. Chapter Three: *The Killing of Johannes Noltenius* uses the minor event of an unsettling ward name suggestion in a 2007 planning meeting for the Victoria Daly Shire Council to trace how memories of colonial violence and dispossession from the Northern Territory's early colonial times continue to shape political conflict in unpredictable ways.

Policy as Violence

Part of a minor approach to scholarly work is to subvert dominant practices of naming, categorising and defining through the establishment of subversive new meanings. This applies to my use of the term “violence” to interpret bureaucratic practices. Within its conventional definition, violence is a type of contained major event: an explicit act of aggressive conflict, a physical attack, an acrimonious spectacle. Here I twist its meaning to bring attention to how everyday, arbitrary, minor bureaucratic events – the statistical categorisation of council dysfunction, a funding agreement's terms and conditions, the creation of a statistic – can also be understood as acts of violence, despite their apparent banality (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 14; Neu, 2003; Stoler, 2009: 7).

I want to avoid deploying this term as a type of moral adjudication over policy. Instead I offer bureaucratic violence as a disrupting tool of critique to offer a new line of analysis. As Theodor Adorno writes, critique involves the exposure of ‘constellations of power’ rather than a judgement of them (in Butler, 2004 [2001]: 305). I aim to highlight how bureaucracy's exercises of power (including through its habits, cultural assumption and claims on truth) in Australia's Indigenous affairs policy arena are not so much a legacy of erstwhile violent settler-colonial power relations, but an integral continuance of these relations.

In my ethnographic setting of northern Australia, an easy narrative would be to dichotomise bureaucratic violence along the divisions of racial identity: a conflict between the European settler-colonial state and the original Indigenous inhabitants of the land. In the intercultural field of the shire councils, this dichotomy certainly resonates. Organisational hierarchies, especially in the workplace, were often characterised by Indigenous / non-Indigenous disparities. The readily apparent antagonism and lack of popular support for the shires

reform were arguably reinforced by racial divisions (CLC, 2010; NTG, 2013: 1; Peterson, 2013a). It is plausible that a rural Indigenous voter backlash against this reform was the principle cause of the Labor Government's loss of power in the 2012 NT Legislative Assembly elections, whereby the then opposition Country Liberal Party (CLP) was able to secure unprecedented victories in four Indigenous-majority rural electorates, in part by tapping into popular discontent through a negative campaign that labelled the shires as 'toxic' (ABC, 2011; Johnstone, 2012; Sanders, 2012a). In the interviews we conducted, open hostility against the new shires was at times explicitly expressed along racial lines, as reflected in the statements of two Ngukurr residents in the Roper Gulf shire council area:

They came and invaded this community... No consulting with us, [they] just took everything the [community] council used to own... We're not strong enough, not standing up for our rights enough. It's supporting the white folk, not the community... White people want to change our ways. Since missionaries been doing it ever since. Terrible, how would you feel? Shire's doing that too. (Interviews 6-7 December, 2010)

Likewise, some senior policymakers recognised racial divisions as a source of policy conflict (although there wasn't a unanimity of interpretations). In select interviews with key players within the shire amalgamation process, I raised the criticism that the shires reform was 'a white government solution imposed on black communities, which has worked against the idea of Aboriginal self-determination', and asked interviewees for their reaction to that statement. The former Minister Elliot McAdam judged the criticism to be 'bullshit, absolute bullshit' (McAdam, 2010).⁵ But another senior NT Government bureaucrat gave this candid reply:

⁵ McAdam's more fulsome response was:

I say that's bullshit, absolute bullshit... Go back to the 1970s when the Commonwealth Government started pumping in all the money. So they set up all these associations under the *NT Associations Act* or the *Commonwealth Act*. They were white fella-imposed models! But it was designed from an administrative, management purpose. It had nothing to do with imposing on the cultural obligations or sensitivities. People do that quite well.... Forget about the other stuff which you and I got no reason to be involved in. You know what I'm talking about, Indigenous business, black fella business stuff. It can still be done, still carried out within this [shire council] framework. (McAdam, 2010)

Well it's white money, isn't it? In the main. And I think those footing the bills have got some prerogative to outline what their expectations are, along the path of the recipients. Now in terms of a white government, well it was a black Minister [for Local Government], and a significant number of black members of caucus if not the [Northern Territory Legislative Assembly's] Cabinet. So it's a bit of a long bow to pull. But I don't think it's realistic to put a proposition that the money is untied and should have been there to construct whatever structures they liked around. I think there's a prerogative for those providing funds to lay down some ground rules for what their expectations are. (Interview 28 June, 2010)

I contend this statement above is an expression of bureaucratic violence, insofar that it offers a rationale for coercive action. Race is an important aspect of the power relations that enable this violence, and of the politics of difference in Australia more generally. My thesis aims to bring out the complexities of bureaucratic violence, the nuances of how the shires operate as intercultural spaces, and to disrupt a straightforward black - white political divide.

Tying the reform to an Indigenous preference or otherwise does little to understand its racial politics. During my professional tenure with Roper Gulf Shire Council, the Chief Executive Officer and a key career mentor for me was a local Indigenous man. Most elected shire councillors, who nominally hold political authority over the shire organisations, are Indigenous representatives of their communities. (For example Timothy Dumoo, the artist who won and then fell into conflict over Victoria Daly Shire Council's logo competition, became a shire councillor in 2008. From my observations he constructively engaged in governing the shire for the duration of his term.) In the Barkly Shire, the first elected President was Rosalie Kunoth-Monks OAM, a high-profile Indigenous activist and early critic of the shires reform; she was succeeded by Barb Shaw, another prominent Indigenous leader who was also formerly critical of the abolition of community councils (ABC, 2010).⁶

⁶ The involvement of local Indigenous residents with their shire councils is however inconsistent and weak in many regions. The anthropologist Nicholas Peterson, in an article on community governance in Yuendumu, identified deep-seated political disengagement of local residents from the Central Desert Shire Council (Peterson, 2013a: 341), an observation that was corroborated by the findings of the Central Land Council's study into Central Australian community governance outcomes since the shires reform (CLC, 2010: 54-58). Further, in a sign that the majority-Indigenous population of the newly-formed Victoria Daly Regional Council

During the initial implementation of the shires reform itself, the respected Indigenous leader and current Senator for Western Australia Patrick Dodson was chosen to chair the Northern Territory's Local Government Advisory Board from 2006 to 2008. Second to only the Minister himself, Dodson played a key role in publicly advocating for the reform. And finally the Minister for Local Government during the reform period was Elliot McAdam, an Indigenous man born in the small community of Elliott and a long-term resident of the outback NT town of Tennant Creek. Since 1973, McAdam has devoted most of his professional life working for Indigenous community organisations. He is still active in local politics – and remains a staunch advocate of the shires reform (McAdam, 2010).⁷

Whether these liberal representations of Indigeneity serve to challenge or reinforce bureaucratic violence is an ambiguous question (Hinkson, 2010; O'Malley, 1996; Povinelli, 2010). I don't attempt to resolve these ambiguities, but rather highlight how racial identity adds to the multiplicity and complexity of a policy assemblage, and complicates an analysis of the 2008 shires reform. Racial dichotomies are also of limited use in understanding the circulation of bureaucratic power and the violent expressions of bureaucratic imaginations. For example, one example of violence in the future imaginary of policy was the frequent claim by policymakers (both black and white) of not only the desirability, but also the *inevitability* of the shires reform. When I interviewed (the Indigenous) former Minister McAdam in 2010 about his retrospective judgements of the shires reform, he declared: 'I'm still convinced to this day that there was no other alternative... What I do know is that I don't lose any sleep [over the reform], I never did' (McAdam, 2010). I later spoke with a (non-Indigenous) former senior NT Government official who was a key architect of the

have abandoned the organisation as a legitimate representative body, the current composition of its elected council is now dominated by non-Indigenous residents (VDRC, 2016: 7-8).

⁷ McAdam resigned from his ministerial position in February 2008, only months before the shires reform deadline, after a late cabinet decision of the Henderson Labor Government to exclude the proposed Top End Shire Council from the amalgamation process (ABC, 2008). As McAdam later clarified, his resignation was in protest against the perceived preferential treatment given to vocal non-Indigenous interests in the Top End Shire area who were agitating against the reform (McAdam, 2010). An indication of the continued popularity and respect McAdam garners is the results for the Barkly electorate in the 2016 Northern Territory Legislative Assembly elections. McAdam was a last-minute inclusion on the ballot paper, and did little advertising of his candidature. Irrespectively, he won 27 per cent of the first preference votes; after distribution of preferences he finished second with 1260 votes, behind only the Australian Labor Party's Gerry McCarthy on 1736 votes (NTEC, 2016)

shires policy, and asked him if he agreed with McAdam's conclusion there was no alternative to the reform. He responded:

Absolutely, absolutely. *There was no alternative*, and the scary part for the Minister and I, as the senior bureaucrat at that stage, was once we had taken the decisions there was actually no way back... There was very significant money that was won in the process that we put into the bush and if you dismantled that, it would just very quickly dissipate to nothing. (Interview 24 April, 2015; emphasis added)

Rather than trying to impose a racial dichotomy onto this phenomenon, of greater interest is how a contentious and historically contingent policy reform can be transformed into a singular, violent necessity. To analyse this I adopt David Graeber's concept of a gap in 'interpretative labour' between bureaucratic actors and the subordinate targets of policy (Graeber, 2012). As we have already seen, NT Government officers and shire management staff generally held complacent or upbeat views and assumed good faith in the 2008 shires reform process, whereas many shire residents expressed hostilities, negative suspicions and imaginative mistrust of the policy change. Similarly, I explore how bureaucratic definitions of "dysfunction", "crisis", "Indigenous", "non-Indigenous", "accountability" and "corruption" work to delimit the scope of policy action. As previously alluded to, the creation of statistical evidence is a key tool in the production process of bureaucratic violence. Statistics concretise crisis-events and help define the "normal" that render bureaucratic decisions more impervious to criticism.

The Violence of Mining Corporations

A number of multinational resource extraction corporations were operating in the regions of my ethnographic research. Conventionally, these mining operations are treated as distinct and separate from the local government amalgamation reform. However, I argue there are interrelated themes in organisational governance practices. In Chapter Five: *Open Roads, Locked Gates* and Chapter Seven: *Cyborg Wadeye*, I focus in particular on the Italian-based company Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi's (ENI's) Blacktip gas project in the Victoria-Daly region, and Glencore's MacArthur River Mine in the Roper Gulf region, to explore how policy's framing of large-scale capitalist industrial projects reflect broader social power relations.

To relate this specifically to the experience of the 2008 shires reform, I compare how accountability regimes are unevenly applied to the so-called “public” and “private” sectors. In many respects the bureaucratic motivations for the 2008 shires reform can be interpreted as primarily a transformation of public sector organisational accountability structures: the previous community councils were deemed to be weakly administered, and the sector experienced chronic problems with asset management and financial reporting functions (McAdam, 2006; Scarvelis, 2008). Structural change was construed as the solution for the sector’s corporate governance shortcomings. The reform did result in much tighter asset monitoring and control practices, improved compliance with funding program reporting, and more transparent financial management procedures (Deloitte, 2013: 20; Michel, 2015: 103-106; Michel & Taylor, 2012: 488; NTGC, 2014: 43). However, these changes were far from cost-neutral, and much effort and many resources were devoted specifically at improving accountability practices.⁸

In contrast, the mining industry in the Northern Territory is governed by relatively impervious accountability regimes. These include opaque and low-revenue taxation frameworks, government subsidisation programs that are hidden from public scrutiny, and a lax regulatory environment that strongly favours the mining sector’s interests (Everingham, 2016; Howey, 2010: 62-75; Young, 2010: 9-14). In my analysis, the practices that are held accountable are as important as what is excluded from consideration; accountability does not always work as a check on power, but as an extension of bureaucratic violence.

⁸ The financial costs of the 2008 shires reform are difficult to accurately quantify, but totalled tens of millions of dollars in direct costs for the Northern Territory and Australian Governments, and many millions of dollars more in indirect costs. By 2006 there were staffing resources in the NT Government’s Local Government Department devoted specifically to the reform, and these increased throughout 2007 and 2008. In April 2007 the then NT Minister for Local Government McAdam announced \$9.9 million of ‘additional’ funding to assist with the establishment of the new Shires (McAdam, 2007b). In April 2008 an extra \$5 million was announced, and the new Minister Rob Knight declared the NT Government would deliver ‘a total of \$27 million to assist the eight new shires with their establishment and running costs’ (Knight, 2008). Many other government departments and the local government sector itself would have incurred indirect costs as part of the reform’s implementation.

The Cyborg Assemblage

One avenue of analysing the interconnectedness of a local government policy reform and the activities of a mining corporation is, again, to apply the concept of the assemblage. Interpreting the discrepant accountability requirements governing each sphere as more symbiotic than divergent leads to different analytical paths about the social power relations underpinning policy. One metaphorical image I apply to explore this symbiotic relationship of public policy and the modern corporation is the cyborg. The tensions and connections within the cyborg organism is explored in Chapter Seven: *Cyborg Wadeye*, which uses as its setting the highly automated network of offshore drilling wells, processing facilities and pipelines of the Blacktip gas project that operate around the seething, marginalised town of Wadeye.

I treat the cyborg as more than a blended creature of human and machine, establishing it as a more fundamental rationality – even as the dominant ontology of our modern age. Philip Mirowski writes of the cyborg as a temporally-specific, technology-driven mutation of contemporary capitalism, wherein machines and computers have colonised mind and body, and altered the epistemological and ontological fabric of societies. The computer is a key enabler of connections, with the computer understood here not just as the physical device of metals, plastics and microchips, but an agent noun: the being who computes, the paradigm of information processing that links the animate and inanimate (Mirowski, 2002: 11-18). The conceptual blending of human and machine, as symbiosis of subject and object, relates to Heidegger's concept of the 'techne', whereby technology is understood as the process of (human) subjects 'revealing' the instrumentalities of objects through their use (Heidegger, 1977; Weick, 1999: 135-136). In this sense the cyborg become more than organic-mechanical hybridity *per se*, but a mode of thought defined by the information flows that constitute and enable this hybridity.

Conceptualising the cyborg as a modern-day mode of thought, or even ontology of contemporary capitalism (Haraway, 2006 [1985]: 117) links my particular ethnographic example with broader social forces. Yet the cyborg is not an all-encompassing, universalising theory, but rather a multiplicitous, globalising concept that simultaneously embodies economic development and neglect, innovation and redundancy, networks and exclusions.

In this sense the Blacktip gas project is a cyborgian assemblage, as is the modern corporation on a grander scale. Less obviously, the Indigenous resident of Wadeye, as the abject object of policy remediation, can also be conceptualised as a (mutant, imperfect, aspirational) cyborg.

Therein lies the linking role for government policy in reinforcing cyborgian rationalities: by influencing individual behaviour change towards more reflexive, market-oriented computational patterns. Employment and training-related programs, education services, public housing tenancy policies and so forth can thus be understood as forces of cyborgian hegemony. These pressures of cyborgian conformity enacted through policy can occur without reference to larger structural constraints: as policy's remedial target, Indigenous people may still be expected to become "job ready", even if there are no "real jobs" available. I argue that these forces are not necessarily contradictory. As I discuss more thoroughly in Chapter Seven, welfare dependency can be taken not as a scourge, but as a productive outcome of government policy – a method of managing redundancy through acquiescence.

Yet as Deleuze and Guattari repeat, the territorialisation of the assemblage is always countermanded by forces of deterritorialisation, or 'lines of flight' from the hegemonic cluster (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 2-12; 321-325). In this vein, Donna Haraway understands the cyborg not simply as capitalism's end-game colonisation of the body by computer, but as a partial and imperfect metaphor that holds the potential for 'some very fruitful couplings... [with] the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation' (Haraway, 2006 [1985]: 118; 127-128). The cyborg thus becomes a political project within the 'deadly game' of the modern world, offering 'transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work' (Haraway, 2006 [1985]: 121; 128). The Indigenous members of Wadeye's heavy metal gangs are presented in Chapter Seven as an ethnographic application of this concept of the transformative, mutating cyborg: a troublesome rebellious energising against dominant policy strategies, and an adaptation of cyborgian agency into something more unpredictable and disruptive. Yet to reiterate: the cyborg has analytical applicability in my thesis beyond the example of ENI's Blacktip project and Wadeye's gangs. More broadly,

it serves as a tool for understanding political formations within modern techno-capitalism. It is a pathway for identifying social formations that may otherwise remain obscured, and the possible alternatives that mutations of the cyborg may create.

The Visions and Violence of Policy

Applying the decentring imagery of the cyborg may seem incongruous with an analysis of a local government reform process. In response, I argue that the deliberate blurring of thematic lines offers a more robust analytical approach than the artificial separation of themes. For instance, the workings of a globally connected, technologically advanced capitalist system have deep and important effects on the realm of government policy. Although the cyborg may be questioned regarding its conceptual suitability, I conversely claim it is more misleading and simplistic to leave out the cyborg (or another such tool to understand contemporary techno-capitalism) and treat the Northern Territory's 2008 shires reform as a discrete government policy event, separate from broader socio-technical phenomena. I contend the blurring of thematic lines offers a more robust analytical approach.

Thus I attempt to draw together seemingly disparate forces in the policy process – a speech announcing the 2008 shires reform, a cyborgian car wreck, the bland authority of statistics, the bureaucratic culture of 'no alternative', the transformation of a painting into a corporate logo, and so on – to offer a rigorous alternative analysis of the "doing" of policy. The scholarly result is (unapologetically) more a pastiche rather than a singular topical unit; one that is deliberately presented in layers. The chapters have common overlapping themes, and there are cohesive empirical arguments that are developed throughout. However there is also disjuncture and non-linear elements, interspersed with evocative stories, vignettes and histories. On both instrumental and conceptual levels, the notion of the assemblage has strongly influenced the content and structure of this thesis.

The "assemblage" approach firstly works to disrupt conventional research based on the construction of evidence, by opening my work to new possibilities of criticism and interpretation. This may encourage alternative methods of scholarly enquiry that move

beyond the mindset of empirical falsification. More importantly, the concept of assemblage and its connections with an ecological analysis of policy (Lea, 2015; Mosse, 2004) works as a challenge to hegemonic power. I claim this on the basis that attempts to categorise, quantify and contain interpretations of social phenomena (through for instance statistical evidence, expressions of rigid ideological perspectives, statements like there is “no alternative” to policy action) all work at establishing a dominant practice of policy – and reinforcing existing power formations. In its stead, an “assemblage” approach that focuses on the social and ecological complexities of the policy process is a disruptive line of flight from the certainty of conventional policy truths. This act of disruption can offer subversive new avenues for thinking about policy, and also creative new avenues for doing policy.

PART ONE

PALIMPSESTS

I was one of the Workers, with a capital - you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet. She talked about "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways," till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit.

Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (1902: 19)

Located on the western bank of Katherine River on the outskirts of town, the Katherine Town Council's Civic Centre is a sensible, brick building that is easily visible from the main road to Darwin. The centre projects a common-sense functionality and sturdiness: it has already survived two major floods, yet gives the appearance it hasn't changed much at all since its construction in 1982. The well-tended lawn and shady trees surrounding the complex give it an air of emulative order and tranquillity, juxtaposed by the wild savannah scrub beyond the fence line, and the unkempt appearance of the Indigenous housing estate of Kalano to its rear.

Inside the Civic Centre are the Council Chambers, a large room that exudes a northern outback town's pride and practicality. Light wood panelling covers the walls; plaques commemorating civic awards hang in neat rows close to World War Two paraphernalia. Flags stand in the corner, and fluorescent lighting pours from overhead. Portrait paintings of former mayors adorn one wall, prominently featuring receding hairlines, fleshy jowls and white faces – exclusively white faces. The portrait taking pride of place is a fading, aged photo of a young and bright Queen Elizabeth the Second, placed at a respectful height on the wall immediately behind the mayoral chair.

This was the incongruous setting for many of the Victoria Daly Shire Transition Committee meetings, in which a select group of mainly Indigenous representatives from the smaller communities west of Katherine would gather monthly to hear the government's council amalgamation plans. The committee had symbolic import, a gesture from the NT Government 'that we are flexible and consult widely and thoroughly' (McAdam, 2006). My job at the time involved coordinating and attending each of these meetings, so I was well-placed to observe the group's dynamics.

Despite my early enthusiasm and earnestness in supporting the committee, it became an increasingly troubling space. People like me and other government officers did most of the

talking; the Indigenous committee members (whose communities would soon be affected by the reform) mostly observed silently, with what I perceived as an amount of scepticism, even mistrust. Open conflict was rare, but would unexpectedly appear. At one meeting a representative arrived on the second morning reeking of alcohol, uncommonly loquacious and with slurred speech. There were hints of embarrassment from others in the room about his public act of drunkenness. In contrast, he conveyed defiance, and wanted to debate. At one point the man rose in the middle of a scheduled agenda item and, unprompted, gave a remarkably eloquent speech about the effects of white man and government on his people.

Other conflicts arose more surreptitiously. At the September 2007 meeting, ward names were on the agenda. As was the custom, the item was introduced by a speech from one of my NT Government colleagues. A facilitated discussion led to committee members providing draft ward names to the government minute-takers. Most suggestions were predictable: Timber Creek Ward for the Timber Creek area or Walangeri Ward for the Yarralin area, to match the name of the outgoing community council. The Kalkarindji representative nominated Rangiri, in memory of one of the leaders of the Wave Hill walk-off. However the suggestion from the Indigenous representative of Nauiyu in the Daly River area resonated differently: Noltenius, an obviously European name. I recall the Nauiyu representative being questioned as to the name's origin, but she appeared unaware and had no information to provide the meeting. It was left at that, the suggestion was duly noted by the minute takers, and after further discussions on the topic, the agenda moved on to a presentation by visiting Australian Government officers (DLGHS, 2007a).

Two months later and the committee was meeting again in the Katherine Town Council Chambers. It was now the pre-monsoon "build up" season, and I remember the languidly oppressive heat seeping into the civic centre's air-conditioned environment. Ward names appeared on the agenda again. Deadlines were pressing, and government officers now required finalisation of this item.

At this meeting a representative of non-Indigenous residents living around Nauiyu was also in attendance, and he was immediately vocal when the ward name suggestions were raised. Noltenius was not fully supported by residents in his ward, he stated. It was the name of a European man killed by a local Indigenous tribe in the area many years ago, and some residents found its suggestion as a ward title offensive. The Indigenous representative from the area, visibly discomposed, interjected with a prepared alternative: Milngin, which was explained as a name for the country that had meaning for the entire Daly River region surrounding Nauiyu. This new suggestion was received favourably, duly noted in the minutes, and the meeting proceeded to the next agenda item (DLGHS, 2007b).

I made note of the word: Noltenius. It was a name I hadn't heard of – Dutch? German? – and I didn't know the circumstances of this man's death. I also had no clear idea who or what was behind its nomination as a shire ward name. To criticise the loss of the local community council at the hands of white government? As a provocative reminder of summary local justice against European incursions? Or something else, more indeterminate? In the midst of the meeting's mundane minutiae, this act was confounding. Regardless of the hidden motivations and messages, one thing was certain: there were people in Nauiyu who remembered the killing of Noltenius, and wanted others to remember it too.

Chapter Two: Translations of Self-Determination



Figure 2.1: Ngukurr General Store (Photo sourced from Wild Geese Building Group, 2013)

In this chapter I present a century-long historiography of local government in the Indigenous-majority township of Ngukurr (300 kilometres east of Katherine), emphasising the connections between early colonial periods and contemporary governmental formations in the Top End. I place the 2008 shires reform within a longer continuum of the liberal colonial process, whereby modern governmental technologies (such as the establishment of sedentary settlements, the introduction of cash and welfare economies, the creation of 'community', and the formation of local government institutions) have been steadily introduced since the early 1900s. However, in line with an assemblage theory of power, I argue settler-colonial domination has never been absolute, and the lived translation of government policy into practice in places like Ngukurr has met with pockets of local autonomy, resistance and accommodation.

This genealogical approach to analysing policy opens alternative perspectives on the *doing* of government in contested intercultural spaces (Vike, 2002: 59), and challenges epoch-defined interpretations of history. Specifically, I disrupt the presentation of the celebrated

“self-determination era” in Indigenous policy from the 1970s to the 2000s as a period of genuine self-rule for Indigenous Territorians. Further, an analysis of continuities allows an understanding of the 2008 shires reform as more than an immediate conflict over government-funded resources. By contextualising the existence of local council institutions within an intergenerational conflict around community governance and power, I introduce the concept of bureaucratic administration as a continuance of settler violence in other forms. This challenges the dominant discourse of the shires reform as a reaction against community council “maladministration” and “corruption”.

Arguing for a genealogical perspective on the 2008 shires reform

The 2008 shires reform was commonly justified in policymaking circles in future-oriented functionalist terms, as a necessary modification to how local government assets, funding and services would be managed at a community level. Conflicts surrounding the policy change were accordingly portrayed as flowing from the contested distribution of resources and governing powers, allowing the 2008 reform to be framed as an improvement of the efficiency and effectiveness of the local government sector. Minister McAdam insistently portrayed the previous community council sector as ‘high risk’ or dysfunctional’: the NT local government sector needed to change to meet burgeoning expectations related to administration, governance and service delivery (McAdam, 2006). Another key bureaucratic leader described the failure of community councils as due to poor governance, and highlighted an imperative for the sector to move to a more professional administrative environment (Scarvelis, 2008). And the Northern Territory Government, in their only significant internal evaluation of the 2008 reform, focused on service delivery outcomes, specifically excluding more complex issues from consideration (NTG, 2013: 3-12).

In much of the existing academic literature on the 2008 shires reform, the instrumental analysis favoured by bureaucratic actors is given a critical reading. Instead of positioning this policy event as a debate about resource distribution, the corpus of critical academic literature commonly incorporates the shires reform into a certain modus of historical narrative arc: the violent first decades of settler-colonial contact in the Northern Territory firstly gave way to a more solicitous era of missionary settlements for local Indigenous

people. Then from the 1960s the state gradually superseded the mission with “Self-Determination” era policies (replete with expanded Indigenous land rights, community development initiatives and then community council institutions from the 1980s). This narrative holds that state policies have most recently shifted to more authoritarian, centrally-controlled government programs and institutions, including the amalgamation of the NT’s community councils (such as Ngukurr’s Yugul Mangi Community Government Council) into regional shire structures (see Altman & Hinkson, 2007; Hunt, 2008; Morphy, 2008; Sanders, 2009; Sanders, 2011; Smith, 2008).

For instance, Will Sanders, a scholar who has written prominently on this topic, describes recent policy developments in Indigenous affairs as a ‘generational revolution’ marked by ‘a significant ideological swing to the right’ (Sanders, 2008: 187-188). Sanders positions the establishment of the erstwhile community council sector as greatly informed by the principles of choice, self-determination and respect for localism, in contrast to the contemporary policy age guided by an authoritarian ‘guardianship’ principle for Indigenous people, and the ‘lure of the grand plan, with its neat administrative rationality’ (Sanders, 2011: 13). Within this framework, he critiques the 2008 shires reform as

a change which discarded as failures the ideas and organizational creations of a generation of public administrators, ministers and policy thinkers who had slowly built and encouraged the previous remote area councils since the late 1970s... it was a change which relied anew on the idea that remote area Indigenous people needed to be guided and directed, or even overridden, in their choices relating to matters such as council scale, rather than engaged with and respected. (Sanders, 2011: 14)

Through a historiography of community governance in Ngukurr from 1908 to 2008, this chapter offers an alternative analysis of current tensions over governance reform in the NT’s local government sector, as a continuance of violence in other forms. I start from the premise that narratives focusing on generational shifts in policy detract from a critical consideration of the cumulative transformations in Indigenous cultural spaces since European colonisation. Rather than drawing out the distinct ideological predilections of individual policy actors, I argue it is more insightful to explore lines of continuity in the lived

practice of modern government in places like Ngukurr. This perspective emphasises the ongoing technologies of liberal governmentality, and how they have been applied over time. From this view, the identification of policies as part of the “self-determination” era is one such technology, and part of the enduring mythos of liberalism. As Elizabeth Povinelli writes, tropes such as “self-determination” are an expression of liberal governmentality’s fantasy tension between the free, self-authorising ‘autological subject’, and the external ‘genealogical society’ that threatens to control the self (Povinelli, 2006: chap 1; 2011: 3-13; Povinelli & Turcot DiFruscia, 2012: 79-81). This fantasy perspective positions Indigenous affairs policies from the 1970s as facilitating local autonomy, whereby Indigenous communities were enabled to increasingly take charge of their own affairs. Their failure to do so successfully authorises paternalism in the present.

Alternatively, I use an examination of local government in Ngukurr to reveal the internal contractions of liberal governmentality whereby the Commonwealth Government tightly governed decision-making and resourcing for the settlement, despite rhetoric to the contrary: freedom and self-determination were promoted, but government intervention into all spheres of life rapidly increased; more responsibilities were devolved, however there was more and more centralised brokerage and translation; more Indigenous-targeted services and programs were created, yet more externally-defined accountability controls on funding were instilled; local commercial enterprises were encouraged, while steady injections of cash and welfare undermined economic autarky (Collmann, 1988-25; Loveday, 1989: 20-21; 28-29; Rowse, 1995: 3-18; Wolfe, 1989: 44-45). Paradoxically, the Age of Self-Determination also became the Age of Audit for Indigenous Australia.

These conflicting aims of liberal governmentality expose an inherently unequal political dynamic in places like Ngukurr, and are an expression of what I term bureaucratic violence, whereby the institutional enforcement of rules and norms establishes structures of coercion (Graeber, 2012: 105-112). This dynamic directly led to local capacity problems that were to become a running institutional weakness for community councils, and set the context for contemporary policy reforms such as the 2008 NT amalgamations.

European arrival in the Roper Region

Although a few small groups of European explorers had passed through the Northern Territory's Roper River region before the 1870s, from that point on Europeans began settling and industrialising in significant numbers. The first livestock droving party passed through the region in 1871, with more to follow (see also Chapter 3). During the construction of the Australian Overland Telegraph Line to the west, the Roper River became a supply corridor, and a depot store was established at Roper Bar. Soon thereafter the region was surveyed by government authorities, leading to the establishment of the first large-scale, state-sanctioned pastoral stations: Elsey in 1882, followed shortly by Red Lilly Lagoon, Valley of Springs and Hodgson Downs, cumulatively covering tens of thousands of square kilometres of the region's most fertile territory. Between 1878 and 1885 an estimated 200,000 head of cattle and 10,000 horses were moved through the area, on their way to populating pastoral leases throughout the Top End (Bern, 1974: 70-76; Powell, 1996: 83-91; Roberts, 2005: 66-67).

Thus in little over a decade, European incursions had thoroughly disrupted the lives of Roper River region's Indigenous peoples, patterns of territorial mobility were restricted, ceremonial renewal was sundered, and economies of hunting and gathering were curtailed. To adapt and survive, they were rapidly compelled to adapt strategies of resistance, accommodation and subversion towards the European settler population. Some chose physical confrontation. In 1875, local Indigenous men attacked three telegraph workers at Roper Bar. Police subsequently launched an expedition of punitive killings and terror in the area (Roberts, 2005: 115-122). This reprisal killing was not an isolated event: in similar circumstances, other nearby massacres of Indigenous people occurred on Hodgson Downs station and Arafura station, and as the following chapter details, in the Daly River area.⁹

⁹ After government authorities reported in 1884 of hostile aggression and extensive cattle spearing perpetrated by local Indigenous people on the newly established Hodgson Downs station, a Native Police force was relocated to nearby Mount McMinn. It consisted of eight armed officers, whose primary task was to 'do the greatest amount of good for the settlers' (quoted in Roberts 2005: 156). Oral histories report this police

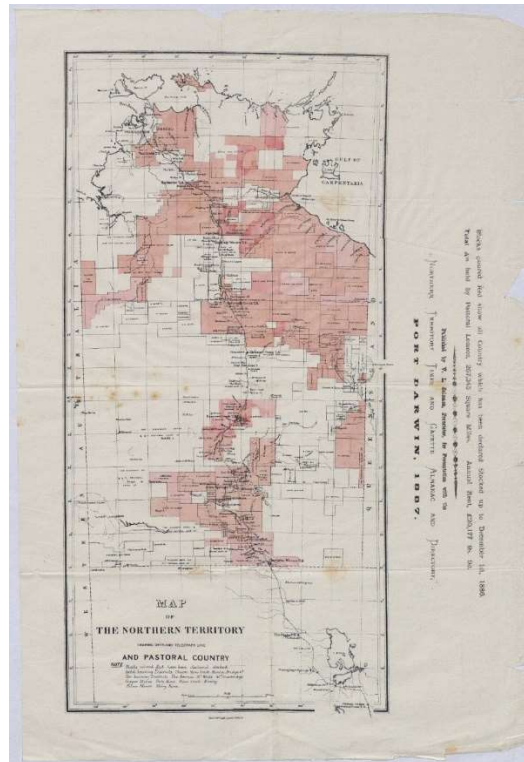


Figure 2.2: Early map of pastoral holdings in the Northern Territory (South Australia Surveyor-General's Office, 1887).

Many other local Indigenous people eschewed physical violence, some by deliberately avoiding contact with the settler population altogether (see for example Gunn, 1908 [1990]: chap 8; Powell, 1996: 113; Roberts, 2005: 158; see also chapter 3 of this thesis). Important for the theme of this chapter, others chose to settle, trading a life of risky uncertainty for the hope of sedentary security under European patronage.

The earliest modern settlements

By the 1890s there were already some semi-permanent Indigenous camps around the peripheries of those pastoral station properties that offered refuge and work (Bern, 1974:

force was responsible for the killings of numerous Indigenous people, including women and children. These attacks reportedly led to reprisal assaults and killings of European pastoralists by the local Indigenous people, and further violent retaliation from the European population (Roberts 2005: 156-161). One of the most notorious episodes occurred between 1903 and 1908, after the establishment of the vast Arafura station that bordered the Wilton and Roper Rivers. During this period, the owners of Arafura station (who also owned Elsey and Hodgson Downs stations at the time) employed two gangs of up to fourteen men each whose sole task was to “remove” the Indigenous population from their employers’ pastoral lease holdings. These men were ordered to kill Indigenous people on sight, which resulted in hundreds of murders over these five years (Powell 1996: 113; Roberts 2005: 153-155).

70; Gleeson & Richards, 1985: 8-14; Powell, 1996: 117-118). However the first modern Indigenous settlement in the region that was deliberately planned by external authorities was the Roper River Mission, established in 1908 by the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS).

Roper River Mission's supply of safe refuge for the local Indigenous populations did not equate to an offer of peaceful independence. An explicit founding goal of the Mission was to culturally transform Indigenous culture, by providing European-oriented 'civilising and Christian influences' (The Advertiser, 1909b), and 'cleaner habits and more regular modes of life' (Bendigo Advertiser, 1910: 2). The mission's daily activities thus centred around regimented routines of manual labour, English-language education and spiritual guidance for adults and children alike (Dickson, 2015: 73-78; Joynt, 1918; O'Donnell, 2007: 97-103). More instrumentally, the mission represented a potentially more effective governmental strategy for displacement of the local Indigenous people, in turn allowing unimpeded development of the pastoral and mining industries in the mission's hinterland. The political valency of this function of the mission was not lost on the Church's hierarchy. For instance the Bishop of North Queensland Rev. Dr. Frodsham stated in 1906: 'the formation of an efficient mission [on the Roper River] will materially lessen any danger to life or property that may exist from the presence of wild blacks in the neighbourhood of the settlement' (The Advertiser, 1906: 10). The provision of this governing technology afforded the Anglican Church crucial patronage from the government authorities, including the permission to excise a land parcel for the mission.

Significantly, from the outset the missionaries envisaged the Roper River Mission as *settlement*. Socio-economically it was imagined as an autarkic unit, capable of sustaining its residents through Christian work ethic, routine and industrial food production. Traditional food economies were eschewed, and small-scale agriculture and community gardens were key missionary projects. Other institutions of sedentary "civilised" life were constructed

forthwith: a school, storage hut, staff housing, fenced paddocks and basic dwellings for the local population (O'Donnell, 2007: 81-93).

It should be noted that despite the missionaries' efforts to "civilise" the local Indigenous population and contain them in a European-style settlement, their successes remained limited. Testimonial accounts (see for example Lockwood, 1980 [1961]: 133-4) do give credence to the mission's early function as a sanctuary from physical violence, corroborated by the rapid influx of residents: by 1910, less than two years after its establishment, there were reports of a stable Indigenous population of 70 at the mission from the Marra, Ngalakgan, Alawa, Warndarrang and Ngandi language groups, and as many as 200 during peak periods (Bendigo Advertiser, 1910: 2; Dickson, 2015: 49; 63; The Advertiser, 1909a: 7; 1909b: 5). However, there were also reports of serious disputes between the early residents and the missionaries from 1910 to 1912 and again in 1932, causing many people to leave the mission. This exodus was reinforced by the abatement of physical conflict with nearby pastoralists from the 1910s (Bern, 1974: 80-84).

Rationing as governing technology

An important aspect of governmental technology introduced from the 1890s onwards was rationing. The regular distribution of foodstuffs and other basic goods to local Indigenous populations was perhaps the key policy during the early contact period for encouraging sedentarisation, and it assisted in interactions between settler and Indigenous populations becoming more conflict, habitual and manageable (Rowse, 1998: 3-7). Rations also became conflated by the authorities as payment in kind for labour, as a forerunner of wage labour systems. For example, the Northern Territory's then Chief Protector of Natives, Professor Baldwin Spencer strongly praised the Roper River Mission for providing rations to only those Indigenous residents who worked, and explicitly spoke of the mission's provision of food and supplies as an important strategy to help Indigenous people 'lose the longing for a nomadic life' (quoted in O'Donnell, 2007: 92).

However the exchange of rations did not ensure shared meanings. The tutelary, economic logic of the European donors that imagined their provision of rations as an exchange for labour services may have often been at odds with the Indigenous recipients' interpretation of the exchange. For local people, traditional social exchanges had not been based on market-based logics, but by networks of reciprocity and kinship that mediated the distribution of resources (Austin-Broos, 2003; Myers, 1991: chaps 4 & 6; O'Donnell, 2007: 53-67; Peterson, 2013b). Many recipients may have accepted the rations for their material benefit only, without any sense of an ongoing debt or desire for further involvement with the settler population (Collmann, 1988: 1-8). The words of one Indigenous man who during this period lived intermittently at the Maranboy tin mine (situated northwest of Ngukurr) reveals some of the ambiguity of the role of rations:

Oh, I bin work little while, and I go back longa my daddy and my mother, to bush [away from the settlement]. And we bin sit down, might be, one year. Missing tobacco again. He tobacco in Maranboy. Oh, might be I go back again. Back again, yeah Maranboy... Yeah, oh like it, tobacco and tea, like that, you know, because bush, sometimes I get [no] breakfast, sometimes three day no tucker [food] in the bush, that's why I bin thinking, "Oh I have to go back again Maranboy". Every day that breakfast tucker! Every day that dinner time tucker. Right, we bin stay here altogether. (quoted in Smith, 2004: 28)



Figure 2.3: Children lined up for breakfast at Roper River Mission (no date). Originally sourced from the CMS Hart collection, Darwin (Edmonds, 2007).

This man's statement demonstrates on one level the simple material appeal of rationed food (along with the addictive allure of tobacco). Disrupted local food economies may have also contributed to the periodic scarcity of food from hunting and gathering, as indicated by his statement that 'sometimes three day no tucker in the bush'. These factors alone drew him to the Maranboy settlement. However there is no mention of ongoing permanence of employment or loyalty to the ration providers, nor of a moral need to exchange anything (his labour for example) for the rations: he worked for a 'little while', then headed 'to bush' to live with his family for a long while (perhaps 'one year'). His loyalty to his employers may have been compromised by the income inequality alluded to in his statement: it appears that he received tobacco, tea and meals only for his labour. Historical accounts record that any wages he may have received would have been allocated to a government-controlled trust fund (C. Smith, 2004: 25). European miners in contrast could expect to directly receive relatively generous cash wages or shares of the mining profits (Gleeson & Richards, 1985: 19-20; Powell, 1996:167-168).¹⁰

The anthropologist Franscesca Merlan notes that over time, sites such as Maranboy (and plausibly Ngukurr) became important social gathering points for local Indigenous people, and places of increasingly rich sociality and ceremony. These settlements played a role in maintaining autonomous social networks, and the presence of European settlers (and their rations) may have been of subordinate importance (Merlan, 1998: 87-88; 94-95; see also Gleeson & Richards, 1985: 21-22).

In wider structural terms, the presence of rations also highlighted a fundamental weakness in the European settlers' visions of local autarkic production. In practice, The Roper River Mission (as well as similar settlements throughout the Top End) never came close to achieving economic self-sufficiency, and crop failures were common (O'Donnell, 2007: 111). Instead, the sustenance of its residents was maintained through the distribution of (mainly

¹⁰ A Northern Territory government official in 1916 wrote of the income inequality between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous workforces in the Northern Territory as an advantage, even economic necessity: "their [the Aborigines'] services are practically indispensable. In a country where white labour is generally unreliable and expensive, the presence of these docile, cheap, cheerful, loyal people alone makes life tolerable... Their services are of the highest value.' Quoted in Gleeson and Richards (1985): 49.

externally sourced) rations, freighted in from elsewhere in the continent. The patchy reliability of external supply chains further undermined the power of rationing. Especially in the mission's early years, imported supplies were delivered sporadically; budgetary pressures on the Church in the early 1930s led to further scarcity of food rations (Bern, 1974: 82). The anthropologist Rosemary O'Donnell contends that supplies of rations were insufficient enough in this period that the mission relied for its survival on the hunting and food gathering of the local Indigenous population (O'Donnell, 2007: 111-112).

Paradoxically, the sedentary pressures of the rationing system was an early first connection with modern economic mobility for the local Indigenous population. Many staple items – for instance flour, sugar, tea, textiles, tobacco – were produced thousands of kilometres away, even internationally. Seditism of people relied on mobility of goods and services. Their regular transport to locations such as Ngukurr remains a remarkable logistical effort. A rationing system also presupposed a network of human administration responsible for procurement, distribution and allocation. In their own small way, the regular hand-outs of flour and tobacco established a lasting rationale for a transient, relatively mobile non-Indigenous workforce, upheld by a network of transport and trade. This was a precursor for the establishment of a cash-based welfare service industry in Ngukurr in the decades to come, and the new accusations of dependency these foster.

The Arrival of Cash

A flood in January 1940 destroyed the original Roper River settlement, and led to its relocation to the present-day site of Ngukurr. An event of more enduring significance was the Second World War and the ensuing troop build-up in the Northern Territory from 1941. This period is marked by a rapid co-option of local Indigenous people into the cash economy and national welfare administration systems (Collmann, 1988: 12; Gleeson & Richards, 1985: 13).

During this period, some Indigenous people from the Roper River area found waged employment with the Australian Defence Force (Forrest & Forrest, 2012: 110). The

exigencies of a world war reportedly improved employment conditions for the Indigenous workforce, which were 'more relaxed and favourable than on the [Roper River] Mission' (Bern, 1974: 90).¹¹ Yet a description of this period as a time of growing economic equality and autonomy for Indigenous people in the Roper River area is misleading. World War Two compelled many Ngukurr residents to be involuntarily integrated into the industrial war machine, and to be placed directly under Commonwealth Government administrative control (including as interned labour residing in containment camps) (Powell, 1996: 186-188).¹² I therefore interpret this period not as the nascence of local Indigenous self-determination, but instead as a transition to new and more effective liberal governing technologies, including the transfer of governmental patronage from missionaries to the state.

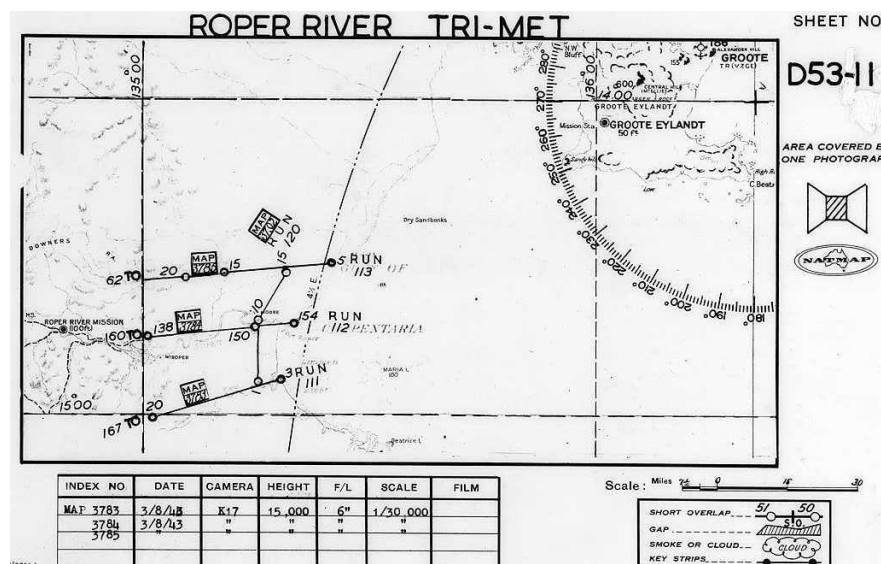


Figure 2.4: WWII-era aerial mapping diagram in the Roper River Mission area (Commonwealth of Australia, 1943)

¹¹ Approximately 600 to 700 Indigenous Territorians were directly employed and paid wages by the Australian Defence Force between 1942 and 1945, with countless others providing labour in coastal patrol and reconnaissance work and other tasks that assisted the war effort. Mataranka became a focus of activity in the larger Roper River region: the Native Affairs Branch relocated its office there from Darwin, there was a large Army base and workshop, and major construction works were carried out on the Stuart Highway (the main north-south road in the Northern Territory) from this site (Alcorta 1991: 37-41, Forrest and Forrest 2012: 110). Indigenous labour played an important role in these operations, and the Mataranka camp had an estimated Indigenous population of 650 from 'dozens of tribes' during this time (Alcorta 1991: 37).

¹² The stated policy of the Commonwealth authorities at the time was to relocate 'full-blooded Aborigines' to containment camps where possible (Alcorta 1991: 37). Although Roper River Mission continued its activities during the war, there were many disruptions and forced movements for the Indigenous people of the region. Forrest and Forrest (2012: 77) for example reported that schoolchildren from Roper River were evacuated to Sydney. For an account of the personal experience of Roper River Mission resident Gerry Blitner during World War Two, see Alcorta (1991): 64-65.

After the end of the Second World War in 1945, life on the Roper River Mission returned to a semblance of pre-war conditions. However the Commonwealth Government remained committed to centralise administration of its Indigenous subjects, and to supplant any welfare relationship this population had with non-state entities (Collmann, 1988: 12-16). By the early 1950s, the Roper River missionaries were attracting criticism from state representatives for their lack of progress in modernising the lives of their Indigenous residents, including through the lack of payment of cash wages. A Welfare Branch report from 1951 highlighted the cultural aspect of this policy. It stated that a wages system was not solely (or even primarily) intended as an efficient means of paying for labour inputs into production, but rather as a means of instilling a new, commodified *mode of thinking*:

No wages are paid at the Mission and there is no trade store for the sale or barter of useful articles to the natives. ... Several natives on the Mission show promise in stock-work ... and ... mechanical work, but little incentive is offered them. It is essential that a simple wages system be introduced and a trade store ... [so] the natives will have [the] opportunity to learn the use of money and earn and purchase useful articles to improve their standard of living. (quoted in O'Donnell, 2007: 129)

Some local Indigenous residents had likely already “learnt the use of money” through their exposure to the barter economy of the cattle and mining runs of earlier times, or from their employment with the military from 1942 to 1945, and may have expressly resented the return to food rations. In any case, wage payments were introduced by the Roper River missionaries in late 1951, and the Commonwealth Government increased its direct intervention in the settlement, initially through the funding of minor capital works projects and Indigenous dwelling upgrades. By 1957, the ration system had been completely abolished, in favour of a system of set wages and training allowances. Concurrently, a provisions store that accepted cash sales was opened (O'Donnell, 2007: 130-131).

In 1960, another monetising set of policies was introduced: Roper River residents began indirectly receiving “social services benefits” paid to the mission administration. By 1965, government-funded welfare payments were being paid directly to the Indigenous

beneficiaries, firmly establishing a nascent cash-based welfare economy. Welfare pensions soon became available to dozens of local residents. Additionally, the Commonwealth Welfare Branch began taking direct responsibility for employing most of the local Indigenous workforce (Bern, 1974: 39-45). This coincided with a decrease in Indigenous employment in the pastoral industry from the late 1960s, resulting in some Indigenous families previously living on pastoral stations relocating more permanently to Ngukurr in search of income (Dickson, 2015: 99-100; Jebb, 2002; Powell, 1996: 205-206).¹³



Figure 2.5: Inside a Ngukurr school classroom
 ("Aboriginal children in classroom", Roper River Mission, 1968)

¹³ One explanation of the decline in Indigenous employment in the Northern Territory's pastoral industry in this period was the legislation introduced in 1968 that mandated equal pay levels for Indigenous and non-Indigenous pastoral workers (Dickson 2015: 99-100, Bern 1974: 122). This perspective has been challenged on a number of aspects. Jebb (2002: 297-305) argues that the increased access to welfare payments from the 1950s undermined the power of food and tobacco rations wielded by station managers over their Indigenous workforce. She also makes the point that the pastoral industry was structurally never able to employ a significant proportion of the remote Indigenous labour force (Jebb 2002: 305). The agricultural economist J.H. Kelly (1966) made the same point more boldly, and blamed the long-term malaise of the industry on poor infrastructural support, oligopolistic control over the industry by wealthy absentee leaseholders, inadequate improvements of holdings, and entrenched exploitation and the lack of encouragement of professional training for Indigenous stock workers. Kelly described the treatment of the Indigenous pastoral workforce as 'near-slave conditions' (Kelly, 1966: 123) and itself a source of underdevelopment, because the exploitative conditions failed to encourage the professionalisation of the workforce (Kelly 1966: chap 8). He summarised, 'the history of a century of occupancy of the cattle lands of the remote regions of northern Australia is largely one of primitive animal husbandry; of inefficient, low-investment production on low rental, inadequately improved leaseholds; of an outmoded open-range system of cattle grazing in some parts to the lasting detriment of the native pasturage and vegetation through overgrazing' (Kelly 1966: 20.) From this perspective, legislative changes in favour of wage equality cannot be regarded as a primary cause of low Indigenous participation in the industry from the late 1960s.

Increased state intervention had other tangible and intangible effects on the Ngukurr settlement. This firstly included the official relegation of administrative power away from the Christian missionaries: from 1968, after protracted negotiations over three years, the Anglican Church ceded management of all secular affairs to the Commonwealth Government, and the settlement's name was changed from Roper River to Ngukurr (Bern, 1974: chap 3). This local change reflected a rapid expansion of the Commonwealth Government's direct management of Indigenous affairs in the Northern Territory more generally. By the early 1970s there were twenty government-administered Indigenous settlements there (Powell, 1996: 204).

Ngukurr's built environment also began to take on the appearance of a modern town. By the early 1970s the settlement had a growing stock of government-funded public infrastructure, including a modern health clinic and school (in which Indigenous language use was banned from the classrooms (Dickson, 2015: 79-83). A general store now provided a reliable source of food and provisions. Suburban-style residential housing fabricated with modern industrial materials began to be built for Indigenous residents from the late 1960s, and by the mid-1970s there were 36 modern dwellings (Bern, 1974: 36-37; McRae-Williams, 2008: 19-20) (Bern, 1974: 36; McRae-Williams, 2008: 19-20).

Government services expanded, and with it non-Indigenous workforce numbers also grew – who exclusively held all the management positions in the settlement in this period. Besides the Government Superintendent, there were dozens of other non-Indigenous staff in Ngukurr by the early 1970s, including ten teachers, a mechanic, carpenter, hygiene supervisor, office clerk, cattle project manager, and “community development” staff, all employed by the Northern Territory Welfare Branch (Bern, 1974: 37-40).

These policy changes were all having profound effects on the township's socio-geography. Improved physical amenities, but in particular cash wages and welfare program structures further encouraged sedentary living practices. Although some local Indigenous people still spent extended periods of time outside Ngukurr, an estimated 350 residents now lived in

the settlement more or less permanently (Bern, 1974: 37-39; 87; Dickson, 2015: 86-103; Taylor et al., 2000: 11; 14-15; Turner, 1986: 107). The anthropologist John Bern bluntly stated that by then, the economy of Ngukurr had become 'entirely dependent on the Government' (Bern, 1974: 39). The community shop was reportedly the main point of cash expenditure and the main source of sustenance (Bern, 1974: 59). Likewise, traditional food subsistence had been rendered a marginal economic activity. Bern estimated that in this period hunting and gathering was generally undertaken by less than twenty per cent of households in any given week, and generally only on the weekends. Preluding the species loss of contemporary times, he gloomily concluded that 'the area is no longer rich in game and many an excursion returns empty handed' (Bern, 1974: 45).

"Self-Determination" as governing technology

The increases in state intervention and financial largesse in places like Ngukurr coincided with the rise of national policies aiming to normalise Indigenous Australians compared to mainstream Australia. By 1965 equal voting rights had been granted in every jurisdiction in Australia. This was followed by the celebrated national referendum of 1967 that conferred expanded administrative powers to the Australian government, including a capacity to incorporate Indigenous people in national census collections.¹⁴ Following the federal election of the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972, advocates of "Indigenous rights" arguably gained more prominent policy authority within the Commonwealth bureaucracy. The language of "assimilation" gave way to more inclusive terms such as "integration", "citizenship" and "self-determination". Political autonomy and socioeconomic equality for Indigenous Australians became explicit goals of government (Collmann, 1988: 16-17; McRae-Williams, 2008; Sanders, 2009; C. Smith, 2004: 105).

¹⁴ Coming into force on 1 January 1901, the Australian Constitution included a variety of discriminatory clauses. Section 127 made it unlawful to include Aboriginal natives when counting the number of people in the Commonwealth; while Section 25 ruled that a state's disqualification of a race from voting meant that peoples of that race were not to be counted as part of the state's population in determining the number of representatives it could have at a federal level. The 1967 referendum marked a shift away from this structural discrimination.

An iconic policy leader of this time was the (non-Indigenous) Commonwealth bureaucrat Dr H.C. (Nugget) Coombs, a former governor of the Reserve Bank of Australia who maintained an active interest in social justice issues throughout his career. This led to an increasing engagement with Indigenous affairs politics, culminating in his appointment as chairman of the influential Council for Aboriginal Affairs (CAA) in 1968. Coombs was pivotally involved in the drafting of the 1976 *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory)* and was a key advocate for community-based Indigenous employment policies that eventually became the vast CDEP program.¹⁵

Coombs exemplifies many of the good intentions, ideological assumptions and contradictions of policymakers in the Indigenous “self-determination” era. He interpreted the 1967 referendum as the event which would give progressive policymakers ‘the moral authority required to expand the Commonwealth’s role in Aboriginal affairs and implement a major programme of reform’ (quoted in Rowse, 2000: 20; 26-27). He magnanimously defined the purpose of the CAA as to:

...strengthen the sense of Aboriginal Australians as a distinctive group within our society with a distinctive contribution to make to the quality of national life... [Aboriginal people should] study and experiment in ways by which their own traditional social organisation can best be adapted to enable them to meet the problems of the modern world while preserving continuity with the past. (Quoted in Rowse, 2000: 9)

¹⁵ Although Coombs and the CAA recommended against the Whitlam Government’s establishment of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) in 1973, he continued to assert significant political influence over the sector’s policies. After resigning from the CAA in 1976, Coombs convened the Aboriginal Treaty Committee, as part of an attempt to garner support for an official treaty with Indigenous Australians (Partington, 1996; Rowse, 2000, 2002; Sanders, 2012b). Through these endeavours and other philanthropic work, Coombs became a figure of public considerable public reverence: public buildings bear his name, memorial lectures are held in his honour, and a certain nostalgia has defined his legacy as the enlightened bureaucratic champion of the Indigenous self-determination era (Rowse, 2002). Until his death in 1997, he held a number of esteemed honorary positions including Chancellor of the Australian National University (ANU) from 1968 to 1976, Visiting Fellow of ANU from 1976 to 1996, and Australian of the Year in 1972 (ANU Reporter, 1997; Obituaries Australia, 2015).

Yet Coombs' stature casts an ambivalent shadow, not least for the question of why an account of a non-Indigenous senior bureaucrat is even necessary in a history of the Indigenous self-determination era. One glaring contradiction in his advocacy for Indigenous self-determination was the composition of the CAA itself. This peak advisory body comprised three members only, all of whom were non-Indigenous men: Coombs, career bureaucrat Barrie Dexter, and anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner. Of these three, only Stanner had a record of living with Indigenous Australians for any significant amount of time (Partington, 1996: 53-54; Rowse, 2002: chap 1). The CAA's decisions inevitably relied heavily on the subjective judgements and ideologies of these three men. This was a situation which the prominent Indigenous public servant Charles Perkins described at the time as 'absolutely disgusting... These three white men made all the decisions and still do. They thought they knew what was good for Aborigines' (Perkins, 1975: 172).

In Coomb's definition of the CAA's charter, a certain instrumental logic of governmentality can be detected. He advocates the application of Indigenous decision-making and social organisation as tools for Indigenous people to 'meet the problems of the modern world', and to contribute to 'the quality of national life'. In this sense Indigenous knowledge could be treated by a liberal-minded bureaucracy as a new type of data, codified to instil more resilient, more progressive, more acceptably familiar – in short, *better* – forms of governing (Nadasdy, 2003; O'Malley, 1996; Rowse, 2002, 2005). O'Malley referred to this technology as 'Indigenous governance' which co-opts and imbricates potential forms of resistance into a system of autonomous, 'community-based' rule. As O'Malley writes,

Such forms [of indigenous governance] are more likely to appear (to rulers and ruled) as the expression of individuals or groups rather than impositions from without. Thus, one of the particular attractions of the language of 'community' in advanced liberalism is precisely that it locates rule in the everyday, voluntary interactions or commonalities of interest of private individuals. (O'Malley, 1996: 313)

Coombs' definition of the CAA also reveals other epistemological continuities within the Indigenous affairs policy arena, particularly his constructed differentiation of Indigenous

culture. His binary othering of the Indigenous ‘traditional social organisation’ from the ‘modern world’ draws on its own form of intellectual and bureaucratic imagination. Indeed by the late 1960s in Australia, deeply transformative intercultural contact had already been experienced for generations, with profound linguistic, economic, demographic, intellectual, political and socio-geographic effects for Indigenous Australians (Collmann, 1988: 1-4; Cowlshaw, 1999: 5-9; Cowlshaw, Kowal, & Lea, 2006: 3-6; Dickson, 2015: chap 2; Merlan, 1998: 1-9; 150). To emphasise the continuity of contemporary Indigenous culture with an imagined world prior to contact with European settlers was very much a laboured construct (Povinelli, 1993: 1-5). Yet this construction was a key step in the process of ‘strategic normativity’, whereby hegemonic cultural resources are mobilised to define, and in turn remediate a targeted cultural grouping (Bennett, 1998: 91-92). The increased reliance on the idea of ‘traditional’ Indigenous governance systems also provided a rationale for ongoing bureaucratic efforts in intervention, translation and brokerage (Collmann, 1988: 16; Mosse, 2004: 647).¹⁶



Figure 2.6: Products for sale at the Ngukurr General Store, October 2015. Photos courtesy of J. Bassinder.

In practice, irrespective of the Commonwealth Government’s promotion of autonomous structures and self-determination principles, there still remained tight prescriptions over local decision-making and the financial, infrastructure and staffing resources for settlements such as Ngukurr (Collmann, 1988-25; Loveday, 1989: 20-21; 28-29; Rowse, 1995: 3-18;

¹⁶ This othering of Indigenous culture and population has continued to be a life-force for Indigenous Affairs policy, and is readily apparent in normalising policy interventions such as the *Northern Territory Emergency Response*, *Closing the Gap* and the *Indigenous Advancement Strategy*, *inter alia*. The constructed traditional Indigenous other has also been co-opted in creative ways by capitalist market forces, including through the arts and cultural tourism industries. For a specific historical example from the Northern Territory local government setting of the role for anthropology in marrying modern policy exigencies with a constructed traditional Indigene, see Turner (1986). For a more recent manifesto of Indigenous othering from a policy intellectual perspective, see Dillon & Westbury (2007).

Wolfe, 1989: 44-45). Importantly for the themes explored later in this thesis, the ostensible increases in local autonomy coincided with the widespread introduction of auditing technologies for Indigenous Australia.¹⁷ Accountability to the relevant funding agencies rapidly became a key administrative function for Indigenous organisations, and live-in bookkeeping and administrative staff (generally non-Indigenous outsiders) were soon essential professional positions in many Indigenous communities, including Ngukurr (Taylor et al., 2000: 11). The ambiguities of this balancing act between autonomy and accountability are reflected in a Commonwealth Government document from 1974, which stated:

It is important that Aboriginal communities should have as much autonomy as possible in running their own affairs. They should receive, *without having to account for them except by way of audit*, the necessary funds to cover all administration and other normal recurrent expenditures. Only major decisions involving the expenditure of public monies should have to be approved by outside authority... In the final analysis *there must be some accountability by Aborigines for their use of lands*, natural resources and public monies... Public monies must not be wasted or misappropriated (Aboriginal Land Rights Commission, 1974: 11, emphasis added).

New community governance in Ngukurr

From the late 1960s, as a reflection of the Indigenous “self-determination” policy trend, the first representative governance bodies were introduced to Ngukurr. These new structures initially included council structures for the church, school and cattle station, and the Roper River Citizens’ Club (which had responsibility for managing the general store and entertainment activities for the settlement). In response to the legal and administrative requirements of the funding influx into Ngukurr, other local organisations were established through incorporation (such as the Yugul Cattle Company, an outstation resource centre, and eventually the Ngukurr Township Association Council which replaced the Station

¹⁷ Even the 1967 referendum, which has been apocryphally heralded as the advent of full citizenship and equality for Australia’s Indigenous people, can be interpreted as the introduction of more effective auditing practices. The legalistic substance of the 1967 referendum was an amendment of Constitutional law with primarily administrative effect, which enabled the Commonwealth Government to collect census data and claim legal jurisdiction over all Indigenous Australians (AEC, 2006; Rowse, 2000: 20; Sanders, 2008: 188).

Council) (Gerritsen, 1982: 17-22; O'Donnell, 2007: chap 5; Taylor, Bern, & Senior, 2000: 11-12).

John Bern's ethnographic work in Ngukurr from 1970 to 1971 highlights some of the early shortcomings and coerciveness of these "community governance" structures in Ngukurr. The Roper River Citizens' Club and the Church, School and Station Councils were all imposed by state authorities, were modelled on representative bodies from mainstream Australia, and were expected to govern over an idealised version of the township's new institutions. Each served a similar ideological function: to instil a sense of civic responsibility amongst the settlement's residents, and to forge an identity for Ngukurr as a more unitary *community* of citizens (as a composite re-creation of the linguistically and culturally diverse clan groups who had sought refuge from earlier colonial incursions) (Bern, 1974: chap 1 and chap 5; Loveday, 1989; O'Donnell, 2007: 169-170; Smith, 1989).

For all the pretences of appearing as mainstream institutions of civic autonomy, these council bodies had very curtailed functions and authority.¹⁸ The Church Council, headed by the Chaplain, was responsible for maintaining the chapel and fundraising for the church and it did not intervene in other matters in the settlement. The School Council was established by teachers as an avenue to raise extra funds for the school and special educational projects only. It aimed to involve parents in these activities, but participation was sporadic and by 1971 it was defunct (Bern, 1974: 154-155). The Station Council, formed in 1962 by the missionaries, most closely functioned as the antecedent to a local government council, and consisted of eight Indigenous residents and eight non-Indigenous staff members. Initially the Station Council was entrusted with advising on budgeting and community policy. However it wasn't invited to participate in the crucial negotiations between the Mission's management and the Commonwealth Government regarding the handover of service delivery responsibilities. After the handover in 1968, the secular authorities established their control by appointing a Government Superintendent to manage local service delivery.

¹⁸ The arguable exception was the Roper River Citizens' Club, which had some discretionary powers over the general store's resources. However this entity was also plagued by limited information flows between the store's non-Indigenous management and its governing committee. In 1970 the store was declared insolvent, which reportedly came as a shock to Indigenous community residents (see Bern, 1974: 169-172).

This appointment further eroded the authority of the Station Council: bureaucratic protocol stipulated the Superintendent was to take direction from his superiors in Darwin, and the local Council was not given any official administrative status (Bern, 1974: 163-167). As Bern writes, by 1970 the body lost even the limited political clout it once had and became 'an established forum for the Village spokesmen to be seen to be representing, and for the staff to be seen to be concerned' (Bern, 1974: 165).

Notably, participation by local Indigenous residents in the various representative councils was infrequent and often non-existent (Bern, 1974: 153-164). This reticence to participate in civic institutions may have been due to their limited authority. Alternatively, it can be interpreted as a subversion of the imposed pathways to "self-determination": Instead of bestowing authority to these new governance structures, kinship relations and Indigenous rituals remained key influences that governed sociality, including those related to marriage, family ties and ceremonial obligations (Bern, 1974: 45-58; 108-120; O'Donnell, 2007: 78; 197-198).

Kinship relationality also continued to be a key factor in economic behaviour, especially the distribution of cash income. This influenced workplace relations and undermined the market-exchange logic of a commodity-based economy. Writing about the Central Arrente people of Central Australia (with commonalities with Indigenous residents of Ngukurr), Diane Austin-Broos describes the kin-based redefinition of cash and commodities as 'a major buffer against the encompassing order of the nation-state... [whereby they] are renewing their difference, rather than losing it, although in ways that are conflict ridden and difficult to negotiate' (Austin-Broos, 2003: 119). Practices of what has been labelled 'demand sharing' (Peterson, 2013b) were widespread, including the distribution of income to relatives on pay day (Bern, 1974: 59). Bern also writes extensively on card game gambling in Ngukurr in the 1970s, a social ritual that involved cash income being frequently exchanged, lent and borrowed between players during each playing session. This pastime was an act of cultural autonomy, insofar that it socialised cash reserves within the settlement (Bern, 1974: 60-62). Similarly, in a more contemporary study of intercultural understandings of work in Ngukurr, McRae-Williams and Gerritsen emphasise that although

non-Indigenous outsiders generally have had hierarchical authority over local Indigenous employees in the Ngukurr workforce, patterns of Indigenous tenure and engagement in the work environment have been primarily governed not by market-based logics, but by kinship-based loyalties (McRae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010: 8-10).

Occasionally these practices of subverting governmental forces erupted into outright conflict and rebellion. Ngukurr's industrial strike of 1970 is the most dramatic example: between 9 March and 6 April most of the Indigenous workforce in Ngukurr didn't attend work, and for the first two weeks most children didn't attend school. The catalyst was a dispute between government and local residents concerning land control, economic autonomy, and local frustration in the lack of material improvement since the government's takeover in 1968. Residents had been demanding a land lease be granted over a 320 square kilometre area of the Arnhem Land reserve to assist them develop small-scale cattle, hunting and food gathering enterprises for local consumption. Yet the Commonwealth Government refused to grant the land transfer or to provide grant funding for establishment of the enterprises, arguing instead that larger-scale pastoral industrialisation would be more conducive to the community's economic development. Authorities went further in February 1970 by placing a ban on cattle-mustering in the Arnhem Land reserve. This decree provoked much anger in the settlement, and catalysed strike action. Soon the strike demands broadened to include more political autonomy, control over the permit system, improved local amenities and housing, and better services and education (Bern 1974: chap 7; O'Donnell 2007:162-163, 174-178).

In terms of immediate material benefits or tangible political gains, this industrial action did not end in success.¹⁹ However the strike arguably served as motivation for more ambitious demands for Indigenous land rights in the region. In 1971, after years of bitter contestation, a 2,000 square mile pastoral lease in south east Arnhem Land was granted to the Yugul

¹⁹ Although strike delegations were sent to Darwin and Canberra in March 1970, the government effectively ignored their demands and began openly questioning the legitimacy of the strikers. As days mounted into weeks, state officials cut all communication with the strikers. Faced with no effective economic bargaining position, internal divisiveness and government's imperviousness to their claims, the strikers were unable to have any of their demands immediately met. By April 1970, workplace and school attendance had returned to normal.

Cattle Company, an enterprise owned by Ngukurr residents. In 1976 Indigenous authority over land increased significantly after the passage of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* (ALRA), which allowed Indigenous groups to claim inalienable title over vast tracts of land in the Northern Territory. This Commonwealth Act required the establishment of Indigenous Land Councils, politically assertive statutory entities with responsibilities for negotiating mining and other industry access to Indigenous land, for identifying traditional owners out of the dislocations of previous decades, and for pursuing claims through the court process (Altman & Dillon, 1988: 126-134). ALRA's political consequences have been ambiguous, insofar that the legislation effectively regulates property rights according to market-oriented rationalities, has transformed Indigenous cultural relationships with country, and has become a source of much local conflict (Altman, 2009; Merlan, 1997; O'Donnell, 2007: 64-65; Stead, 1997). However the newly legislated powers did provide Indigenous people with more authority and financial benefit from land development than previously (Ah Kit, 2003a; Altman & Dillon, 1988; Bern, 1989). In the Ngukurr region specifically, successful land claims resulted in tens of thousands of square kilometres of land reverting to altered forms of Indigenous control²⁰ – but also further integration into market economic forces, through land development pressures for commercial and industrial enterprises.

The Northern Territory Government: a new governance player

This was the political landscape inherited in 1978, when the Northern Territory was granted self-government and the newly formed Northern Territory Government claimed jurisdictional responsibility over many services in its Indigenous settlements (Heatley, 1990: 120).²¹ The expanding government services and expenditure in Indigenous-majority settlements without any standardised governing bodies was an unsatisfactory set of arrangements for the Northern Territory Government, in part because of emerging

²⁰ These include the Yutpundji-Djindiwirritj (Roper Bar), Kewulyi (Roper Valley), Urapunga, Alawa-Ngandji (Cox River), Marra, Elsey and Lower Roper River land claims, on behalf of the Ngalakgan, Alawa, Warndarrang, Nunggubuyu, Marra and Mangarrayi people. (See links to the land claim documents at Ngukurr Language Centre, 2015).

²¹ In 1911 jurisdictional responsibility for the Northern Territory was passed from South Australia to the Commonwealth Government, who governed it by distance until 1978; when it governed through the mediating device of the Northern Territory government, which it accorded state-like powers but not the independence of a full state. In this way, the NT government is akin to large indigenous organisation.

jurisdictional rivalry and political inequality between the Northern Territory and Commonwealth Governments (Phegan, 1989: 95-102).

The introduction of local government institutions was the NT Government's favoured governance solution. By 1979, the NT Legislative Assembly had passed the *NT Local Government Act 1978*, which uniquely included flexible provisions for Community Government Council structures that were targeted at majority-Indigenous settlements such as Ngukurr (Office of Information, 1979; Wolfe, 1989: xii-xv). From the mid-1980s the NT Government began a more concerted strategy to establish Community Government Councils, through amendments to the *NT Local Government Act*, special provisions for "community government" structures, and targeted public relations campaigns.²² The new legislation was rationalised not only as a more effective mode of government service delivery in the Territory's smaller population centres, but also as important for the development of *community* itself (Communications Branch, 1987 (?); DCD, 1985; Turner, 1986: 162-167).²³

²² This promotion included frequent 'consultation' visits to Indigenous settlements by NT Department of Community Development staff, the production of pamphlets, videos and other publications, and bipartisan political advocacy from NT Members of Parliament (Communications Branch, 1987 (?); DCD, 1985; Mowbray, 1989; Turner, 1986; Wolfe, 1989: chaps 3 and 5). Indigenous Territorians were subject to a barrage of official messages in support of Community Government Councils: they were touted as a form of local government 'less complicated' than municipal governments (DCD, 1985), and they would provide economic development, practical steps to self-determination, and more equitable access to services (NLC, 1989; Wolfe, 1989). One government-sanctioned anthropological study boldly concluded that traditional Aboriginal culture 'was inherently a Municipal culture', and therefore Community Government was 'a means to resolving much of the disruption Aboriginal people are experiencing in their traditional culture as a result of European contact' (Turner, 1986: 9-11). A promotional video from the mid-1980s documenting the establishment of Community Government in Wallace Rockhole and Pularumpi demonstrates some of the more demagogic tactics used in government's communication efforts. Images focus on scenic views of the settlements, local people engaged in work, and interviews with local Indigenous leaders. The narrative voice-overs included lines such as:

Fifteen years of hard work has paid off for this community... With a CGC [Community Government Council] Wallace Rockhole can do things the way they want to... Local government councils can make their own by-laws or rules which will help your community to be a better place... The Government wants people to manage their own affairs. It wants to give power from Darwin to the people. With Community Government, the Aboriginal way can become part of Northern Territory law. You do not have to change your ways. Community Government is a way to self-management. (Communications Branch, 1987 (?))

²³ For example, the first NT Minister responsible for local government was titled Minister for Community Development. Similar monikers for the ministership and relevant department have continued until recently (see Office of Information, 1979).

The Act was immediately controversial, at local and intergovernmental levels. Similar legislation had been enacted by the Commonwealth Government in 1978 under the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act*, and there were intergovernmental tensions around jurisdictional validity and functional delineation (Heatley, 1990: 120-121). Although Community Government Schemes enabled by the NT *Local Government Act* allowed for each community to influence (within a bound framework) its governance structures and constitution, the legislation also enshrined hierarchical accountability structures and gave the Northern Territory Minister explicit authority to dismiss councils and dictate their functions (Office of Information, 1979; Wolfe, 1989: 44-45). The newly formed Aboriginal Land Councils perceived the Act as a threat, partly because of its ambiguous authority over Indigenous lands, and partly due to existing antagonisms and mistrust between the Land Councils and the conservative, non-Indigenous dominated Country Liberal Party (CLP) that controlled the NT Parliament (Carment, 2007: 53-64; Mowbray, 1986: chaps 1-2; Sanders, 1995: 20-21; Wolfe, 1989: 38-39).²⁴ Further, the CLP Government had adopted more reactionary language in the promotion of this new model for Indigenous community governance: the rhetoric of “self-determination” that was popularised under the Federal Whitlam Government was replaced with a discourse around “self-management”, the Indigenisation of council workforces, and improvement of town services (Everingham, 1980; Sanders, 1982).

Importantly though, the introduction of Community Government Council structures wasn't by decree, but instead required a modicum of community consent. And despite the

²⁴ The political tensions between Indigenous Territorians and the CLP Government most often converged around authority over land. Along with the mining industry, the CLP were early opponents of the Commonwealth's ALRA legislation. All land claims made under ALRA and many under subsequent Native Title legislation were contested by the CLP-led NT Government and various public statements and symbolic acts by CLP leaders further inflamed tensions. For example, the then Minister for Lands Marshall Perron (who later became Chief Minister) declared in 1979 that the mooted Heritage Act (designed to safeguard Indigenous sacred sites) was a threat to economic development. Perron later sought to repeal parts of ALRA, claimed native title legislation would be a 'dangerous precedent', and in 1993 stated that Indigenous culture was hundreds of years behind European culture. Under the leadership of Ian Tuxworth from 1984 to 1986, the NT Government also waged a campaign of opposition to the Commonwealth's preferred Indigenous land rights model; in October 1985, Tuxworth symbolically boycotted a ceremony at Uluru to transfer the ownership of the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park back to traditional owners (Carment, 2007: 4-56).

promotional efforts of the Northern Territory Government, Indigenous “community” residents were slow to adopt the new community government structures.²⁵ This early reticence towards the new governance structures may have been a reaction to the intergovernmental squabbles, policy vagaries, perceived institutional inequalities inherent in the new legislation, and mistrust many Indigenous Territorians now had for the Northern Territory Government. Alternatively, the slow uptake also demonstrated a form of political agency and autonomy in the NT’s Indigenous polity, and an implicit rejection of externally-imposed notions of a unitary community. By the 1970s, Indigenous groups were in a position to refuse the introduction of local government – not as a passive, nihilistic act of resistance, but because other existing modes of interaction (or non-interaction) with government may have been deemed more beneficial, more comprehensible and familiar, or more in line with local interests (Gerritsen, 1982: 31).

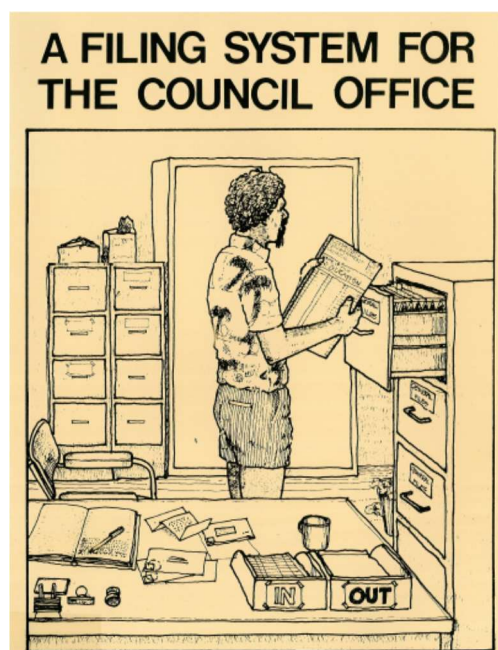


*Figure 2.7: Northern Territory Government educational material for community councils.
(Professional Services Branch, 1982)*

²⁵ Between 1979 and 1984, only four settlements had decided to establish Community Government Councils: Lajamanu (in 1980), Angurugu (1982), Milikapiti (1983) and Pularumpi (1984) (Turner, 1986: 26-27).

The protracted establishment of Yugul Mangi Community Government Council

The early 1980s was a pivotal phase in the incorporation of the Territory's Indigenous polity into the project of modern liberalism, albeit not necessarily by grand design or with predictable outcomes. In Ngukurr it was another period of increased government intervention and expenditure, more visits by government field officers, and an expanding scope of government-funded services (even without a legislated local government body yet in existence). It was also a time when Indigenous residents were becoming increasingly attuned to maximising their collective interest and autonomy through bureaucratic manipulation. Rolf Gerritsen, in an ethnographic study of intercultural power structures in Ngukurr in the early 1980s, reports that some Indigenous leaders now claimed to 'own' the 'ceremony of whitefella business', and were given priority in extracting resources from less experienced government field officers (Gerritsen, 1982: 25; see also Collmann, 1988: 4-7; Myers, 1991: 272-275; Sanders, 2006). In the competition to control access to coveted resources, two dominant clans emerged in Ngukurr, who began claiming duopoly powers over leadership positions. The Ngukurr Township Association Council's chairman position, for example, was intermittently transferred between the senior men of two family groups (Gerritsen, 1982: 22; Taylor et al., 2000: 11). Thus incorporated representative bodies were becoming a field of intercultural alliance between government authorities and a newly institutionalising local political elite. This helped form a degree of institutional stability and interdependence, and enabled a historically unprecedented level of government intervention.

Yet this tacit alliance wasn't necessarily premised on a mutuality of interests, nor on liberal concepts of "community" and civic responsibility. Practices such as purchasing and using motor vehicles without government approval, selling of grant-funded equipment, overspending budgets, employing too many staff, providing loans to favoured individuals and other discretionary decision-making over resources were becoming commonplace within the Ngukurr Township Association Council by the early 1980s (Gerritsen, 1982: 17). These actions can be interpreted as direct matching of the western institutional form (with its nepotistic practices and ordained corruption) or as practical expressions of self-determination, a type of kin-focused political autonomy, and a key strategy in local leaders'

maintenance of their authority (Gerritsen, 1982; NLC, 1989: 14; Wolfe, 1989: 75-77). However, state officials mainly viewed these practices with reproach and indignation, as examples of improper and even corrupt use of resources (see for example Oakes, 1982: 33-34).

For many years internal debate waged in Ngukurr about whether or not to adopt a Community Government structure. The main contentious issue appeared to be for whom and how a centralised hierarchical organisation would benefit. Internecine conflict centred on worries that a handful of senior men from two clans would continue to dominate, and even have their powers increased through the establishment of a formal council. Other community organisations, women, subordinate clan groups, outstation residents and traditional landowners feared marginalisation (O'Donnell, 2007: 51; Taylor et al., 2000: 11). Some expressed concern about the influence a non-Indigenous Town Clerk position would carry (Turner, 1986: 44). Significantly, these concerns display how tenuous and marginal the liberal notion of “community” continued to be in Ngukurr at the time, highlighting the lack of an overarching sense of centralised unity in the settlement.

Yet by May 1988 the Yugul Mangi Community Government Council had been established in Ngukurr. This achievement alone was an act of considerable ingenuity and compromise. Firstly the support of the local political elite was bolstered through promises of more state funding and resources, including the relatively lucrative CDEP program, which commenced in Ngukurr five weeks after the establishment of its Community Government Council (Sanders, 1993: 8). The council governance structure was carefully shaped to address the fears of excessive concentration of power, and to allow for broad representation: seven tribal constituencies were formed from which two councillors each were appointed (O'Donnell, 2007: 48; Phegan, 1989: 92; Taylor et al., 2000: 11). Even the name “Yugul Mangi”, a term that refers to a group who had earlier lived in the area, was derived to

signify the constructed unity of a people of Ngukurr (McRae-Williams, 2008: 22; Taylor et al., 2000: 12).²⁶

For all that it was an invented structure, the new Yugul Mangi governance model did not represent a radical upheaval of the local power structures. Taylor, Bern et al characterise the period of its emergence as one of political continuity, with senior men from two clans maintaining their dominance on the Yugul Mangi Council. In line with past patterns of management personnel in the settlement, the Council's Town Clerk position was filled exclusively by non-Indigenous outsiders, arrangements which became a source of ongoing governance tension:

While this [Town Clerk] position has been subject to [Yugul Mangi] Council authority, the Council has in turn often been heavily dependent on the Town Clerk's expertise and accordingly has afforded the position a large measure of independent control of Council's budgets and priorities. (Taylor et al., 2000: 11)

As discussed further below, the independent power of the Town Clerk position was augmented from 1991, when one individual began a fateful eleven-year tenure.

²⁶ Yugul Mangi was not a governance model transplanted from tradition, but a reactive local compromise to the exigencies of modern government and concentrated settlement. Many other names of modern Indigenous governance models in the Northern Territory convey similar unification intents. For example 'Thamarrurr' is a title that has been used in modern times by a number of Indigenous organisations in the Wadeye / Port Keats area (another former missionary settlement on the Northern Territory's northwest coast). Derived from the local *Murrinh-patha* language, it means 'coming together to work as one people' and is generally understood to represent an inter-tribal governance model that comprises membership from twenty clan groups in the region (see Ivory, 2005).

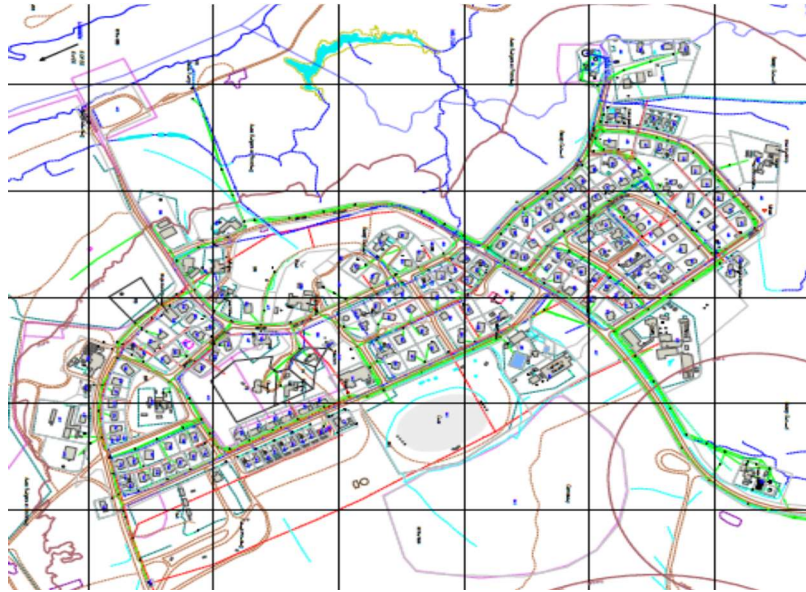


Figure 2.8: Served Land Availability Program (SLAP) map for Ngukurr (2014).

The Community Government + development corporation model

Concurrently, in contrast to bureaucratic promises that Community Government Councils would be ‘less complicated’ organisations than their municipal counterparts (DCD, 1985), the state rapidly expanded its interventions through these new councils, and their functions and budgets quickly multiplied. Already by the late 1980s, many had responsibilities far beyond urban-based councils, including services as disparate as public housing, commercial operations, job training and employment programs, and unemployment assistance management (Phegan, 1989: 92). This revenue was sourced from a plethora of government agencies and funding streams, each with their own functional expectations and labyrinthine accountability requirements.

Another institutional by-product of this Indigenous “self-determination” era was the widespread establishment of Indigenous development corporations and commercial enterprises, promoted as a pathway to capitalist-oriented autonomy. In line with these trends, there was an increase in commercial activities sponsored by the Yugul Mangi Council, in particular those of the Yugul Mangi Clan Development Pty Ltd. Formed in the mid-1990s, this enterprise traded as Air Ngukurr, and primarily delivered air passenger and

freight services throughout the Top End with an eventual fleet of nineteen aircraft. As befitting an airline service of this scale, its operations entailed significant capital investment, complex administrative controls, and ongoing staffing, insurance and maintenance costs. Yugul Mangi Council's Town Clerk became Air Ngukurr's Chief Executive Officer, the company's directors were also Yugul Mangi councillors, and the Council retained a forty per cent ownership share (Toohey, 2002a).



Figure 2.9: A government vehicle on the road from Ngukurr to Mataranka. Photo: Michel (2011).

In one regard this period was the age of maturation for Indigenous “self-determination” in Ngukurr. Local Indigenous leaders had consolidated their control over the local government council, and had effectively expanded their interests into lucrative niche business enterprises. Many local people had secured employment with council or through CDEP, or at least derived some income through welfare payments. Local Indigenous people may not have been employed in the executive management roles of the council, however the long tenure of one individual in the Town Clerk position from 1991 to 2002 brought stability and experience to Yugul Mangi's administration. And the resources provided for council operations continued to increase: by the 2005-06 financial year for instance, Yugul Mangi Council's total operating revenue was just under \$8.5 million, equivalent to an impressive \$4,500 for each of the estimated 1900 residents in the Council's jurisdiction (NTGC, 2006:

24; YMCGC, 2007: 17). Residents' access to resources, including motor vehicles and even air transport, was at historically unprecedented levels. The Council also began receiving mainstream recognition of its progress: in 2000-1 it won a Menzies Housing Award, a high commendation in the CDEP Large Community Awards, and even two Tidy Town awards for its litter reduction efforts (O'Donnell, 2007: 46).

Yet these perspectives overlook Ngukurr residents' deepening economic dependence on the state, with virtually all employment and income in the settlement derived from government sources. This structural inequality itself limited the exercise of local autonomy, and foreshadowed intercultural conflict over notions of accountability and authority over Council. Interrelated with the operational expansion of Yugul Mangi Council during this period were a plethora of serious governance and financial management issues, which in turn provided a rationale for increased monitoring and intervention by the regulatory authorities. Whereas increasing revenue meant Council had ever more capacity to deliver services and offer employment, most of its funding continued to be tied grants from the Australian and Northern Territory Governments. For example, in 2005-06 the Council received almost 95 per cent of its total operating revenue, or \$7.94 million, from government grants (YMCGC, 2007). These grants were sourced from dozens of separate government agencies, each with their own compliance and reporting requirements, which entailed relatively onerous and complex administrative tasks. Yugul Mangi wasn't meeting these accountability requirements, and the council was in a near-perpetual state of breaches with the Northern Territory Government local government compliance unit and other government departments (DLGHS, 2005).

These reporting breaches, coupled with policy exigencies in Canberra and Darwin, engendered a vicious cycle of grant funding volatility: revenue for Yugul Mangi Council regularly fluctuated by hundreds of thousands, even millions, of dollars between financial years. This in turn led to planning and operational challenges, which created further administrative problems and grant reporting difficulties. Workforce management was an especially onerous issue: employee costs regularly represented almost half of the Council's

operating expenses, and the clan-sponsored councillors were loath to reduce staffing budgets when revenue diminished. This became a major contributor to frequent operating deficits for the organisation (Michel & Taylor, 2012; YMC GC, 2007, 2008a). The concentration of power in a clan-based duopoly caused other operational conflicts, including reportedly the collapse of the CDEP program in 1992 and a disruptive overhaul of the Council's governance structure in 1997 to a more representative 'administrative clan system' (O'Donnell, 2007: 48).

Yugul Mangi's commercial operations offered a certain reprieve from the patterns of government intervention and onerous accountability requirements experienced through the Council. Unlike Council's government-controlled grants revenue, as a commercial operation, the income of Air Ngukurr was subject to only minimal reporting requirements and provided Ngukurr's political elite with a degree of autonomy over its use, quarantined from state monitoring. It also served to reinforce local kin-based hierarchies: the enterprise was structured so that sixty per cent of its shares were held by five clan leaders, who had discretionary power over how the company's wealth was distributed (Toohey, 2002a).

However Air Ngukurr's close governance and administrative relationship with Yugul Mangi Council (including the Council Town Clerk's simultaneous role as the company's Chief Executive Officer and the councillors' roles as company directors) presented many corporate conflicts of interest. A practice of unencumbering Council funds through the subsidisation of Air Ngukurr soon became the standard *modus operandi*. Not long after Air Ngukurr began operations, government regulatory authorities began suspecting the entities were engaged in gross misconduct and fraudulent activities. The events culminated dramatically: in 2002 the NT Department of Community Development suspended the Council and placed it under administration. Media reports at the time alleged at least \$200,000 had been improperly transferred from the Council to Air Ngukurr; the Town Clerk was described as 'authoritarian' and nepotistic; and the Indigenous councillors were disparagingly referred to in the media as the 'sugar mob' (Hinde, 2003; Toohey, 2002c). Soon thereafter, the Town Clerk resigned and Air Ngukurr ceased operations. The NT Minister for Local Government subsequently

appointed a commissioner to conduct a formal inquiry into the affairs of the Council. The commission's report in February 2003 identified improper activities related to financial transactions, vehicle usage, travel and accommodation allowance claims, nepotistic hiring practices, and other abuses of grant-funded programs to subsidise the company's operations. Yugul Mangi Council was summarily dismissed by the Minister, who then referred the matter to the police and taxation authorities (Ah Kit, 2003b, 2003c; Hinde, 2003; Toohey, 2002a, 2002b).

From 2003 until the amalgamation reform of 2008, Yugul Mangi Council was unable to re-establish institutional stability. Although a new Town Clerk was appointed in late 2002, the Council remained under NT Government administration until December 2003 when elections for a new Council were held. By mid-2004 the replacement Town Clerk had departed, reportedly after he was seriously assaulted during a dispute with a resident over the use of a Council vehicle. Over the next four years the Town Clerk position was held by five different individuals, with prolonged vacancy gaps between their appointments. The lack of managerial continuity led to operational instability and further breaches in its legislative reporting requirements. Its financial performance was also dire: in the financial years 2005-06, 2006-07 and 2007-08, the Council incurred operating deficits that averaged over \$1 million per year (YMC GC, 2007, 2008a).

The transition to the shires reform

Given the government's interventions and its financial instability, Yugul Mangi Council's role as a conduit for kin-based autonomy and authority was severely curtailed. Even so, the amalgamation in 2008 of the Yugul Mangi Council into the Roper Gulf Shire Council was deeply unpopular in Ngukurr. When we interviewed residents in 2010 and again in 2012, resentment towards the newly formed shire was nearly universal. Many comments alluded to a loss of power and autonomy. For instance:

Now we feel blind. We don't have any power in making decisions.

[The shire is] not good, they don't want us to get to where they are. It's about time we run it.

[The community] is broken because communication is not there, elders have no power. [People] don't know where to run to now. The spirit is broken. (Interviews 6-7 December, 2010)

Taken in isolation, these comments support the interpretation of the 2008 shires reform as a generational shift in community governance arrangements and a polarising policy event: community residents felt the reform was an erosion of autonomy whereas, as later chapters discuss, bureaucratic actors largely perceived the 2008 reform as an improvement in accountability. Alternatively, this chapter has positioned this event within a genealogy of settler-colonial governmentality, within which liberalism's construction of the autological subject were imbricated with deepening patterns of state hegemony and control (Povinelli, 2006: chap 1; 2011: 3-13). This provides a different perspective on the past promotion of "self-determination" policies and the establishment of community government councils – not as distinct from the contemporary era of the 2008 shires reform, but as a continuum of governmental intervention in new forms. A genealogical analysis that focuses on governmental continuities allows us to more readily understand the following comments made by community residents, when they were asked for their reflections on what had changed since the shire reform:

No, [nothing]. I've been living here 28 years, nothing changed. (Interview 6 December, 2010)

Nothing much, fuck all to be honest. Only thing changes is the sticker on the car. (Interview 28 February, 2010)

Chapter Three:

The Killing of Johannes Noltenius

This chapter engages with the politics of remembering and forgetting, and how the recording of past events help constitute modern-day assemblages of power. The now obscure events of the murder of four European miners near Daly River in 1884 and the retaliatory massacres of the Woolwonga tribe are presented here as an ambiguous case of how the inclusions and exclusions of historical memory can attain their own political agency. The extreme violence in the Northern Territory during early European settlement from the 1870s is often omitted in official efforts at remembering this period. However, the traces of violence and dispossession cannot be entirely erased. They continue to shape political conflict and modern-day technologies of government in settler-colonial Australia.

The dominant remembering of the early days of European settlement is sometimes challenged in unexpected ways. The provocative proposal in 2007 by Nauiyu residents to name their Victoria Daly Shire ward name “Noltenius” thrust this near-forgotten murder into an anachronistic contemporary setting. More recently, direct descendants of the Woolwonga tribe were successful in having a memorial plaque of the 1884 massacre of their people installed at the abandoned township of Burrundie. This small plaque disrupts the dominant version of history on display in the nearby town of Pine Creek, where the past relics of the township’s early mining industry and railway overshadow any mention of conflict with the local Indigenous peoples. The effects of such acts on modern-day power assemblages are presented here as ambiguous: does the Woolwonga memorial plaque disrupt hegemonic narratives of history, or are they readily contained and absorbed by modern technologies of government?



Figure 3.1: Machinery on display in Miners Park, Pine Creek. Photo: Michel (2017).



Figures 3.2: Pine Creek historical precinct. Photos: Michel (2017).

The Past in the Present

Elizabeth Povinelli has argued ‘no discussion of the past is ever limited to the past... conversation is always about the present social situation’ (Povinelli, 1993: 120). This marks history as a contested space, and invites the question: how does modern policy remember the past, and what do these acts of remembering reveal about present-day politics? In an age where the state is preoccupied with forward-looking development initiatives, infrastructure projects and strategic plans, the past can be relegated to a quaint relic, outside the scope of bureaucratic consideration. Yet these acts of forgetting are imperfect; modern bureaucracy constantly reaches into the past to inform its values, habits and decisions. To use a metaphor, policy is scribed on a palimpsest. And the past has a way of

being unruly, with the capacity for unsettling the smooth calculated workings of modern government.

On the well-engineered Stuart Highway, about 200 kilometres south of Darwin is the small town of Pine Creek. If you're in a rush you needn't visit it, as the highway now bypasses the township. Yet the road signage and tourist websites promote the settlement as 'Historic Pine Creek', so it can be tempting to stop in. After the turn-off the tropical savannah gives way to manicured lawns, a few shops and houses, and the "historical precinct". There you'll find a manicured past, paying homage to the Age of the Machine. The "Miners Park" contains numerous pieces of old mining machinery from the goldfields in and around the town that were developed from the 1870s. Next to it is the Railway Station Museum housed in the original station building from the 1880s, with a restored steam locomotive from the era on permanent display. Nearby is the National Trust Museum, which houses an exhibition on the Overland Telegraph Line that was built between 1870 and 1872, once a cutting-edge infrastructure project that enabled rapid communication between Australia and the rest of the world (Highway Traveller, 2016; SMH, 2004). These attractions provide an official history of pioneering infrastructure and technological change, a straightforward chronicle of some of the earliest industrial developments in the Northern Territory. Yet since 2014, some kilometres out of town near the out-of-the-way Mount Wells Road, a small item unsettles this sanitised version of the past. A plaque stands at the old Burrundie railway site that commemorates the 1884 genocidal massacre of the Woolwonga people.

Technologies of Government

Three defining aspects of modern liberal government, according to the Foucauldian scholar Nikolas Rose, are the management of knowledge and truth, the contained exercise of free will, and the ability to govern from a distance (Rose, 2006: 147-150). For Rose, knowledge (produced by academia and schools, in government departments and in the media) is an integral site of governing, insofar that it is through these institutions that truth is produced, circulated, accumulated, authorised and realised. This is where expert "know-how" is created to tame unruly subjects and 'to make government possible and to make

government better' (Rose, 2006: 149). This complements government's allowance of constrained freedom, and the creation of self-governing individuals who don't require direct regulation. As Rose writes, the national goals of good government should meld with 'the voluntarily assumed obligations of free individuals to make the most of their own existence by conducting their life responsibly' (2006: 150). A final aspect is the ability of government to execute 'action at a distance', or as he explains, 'the translation of thought and action from a "centre of calculation" into a diversity of locales dispersed across a territory – translation in the sense of a movement from one place to another' (Rose, 2006: 148).

The first indirect incursion, in 1824, of British colonialism into Woolwonga lands contained elements of each of these three aspects of modern liberal government. It was a small act, almost innocuous, and completely hidden from the Woolwonga people themselves: the drawing of a border on a map. The cartographic lines were produced far away in London without any first-hand experience of the local terrains. What motivated the British authorities was an urgent need to create a truth, a *fait accompli*. After the establishment of the Fort Dundas military outpost on present-day Melville Island, the British Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, Earl Bathurst, decreed this settlement must fall within the territories of the Australian colony; and for such a decree to be legally true, cartographic claims were needed. The 129°E longitude geographic coordinate was chosen as the new west-reaching border (Powell, 1996: 2). This line still defines the border between Western Australia and the Northern Territory (and today marks the western boundary of the Victoria Daly Shire).

Other *in absentia* territorial claims followed. In 1834 the British Parliament's *South Australia Act* defined the new colony's southern border at the 26°S latitude, chosen because it neatly divided the continent in half. By 1862, through persistent petitioning of the British Colonial Office by the Queensland colony, its western border was set at 138°E longitude (Powell, 1996: 3). Thus before Europeans had even established a permanent settlement there, the present-day borders of the Northern Territory had been set and the British colonial government had established legal claim over these territories.

The modern multinational corporation would soon arrive – again, initially unbeknownst to local populations. In June 1863, through persistent lobbying, the South Australian Government was granted permission by the British Government to annex the Northern Territory, and by November of that year the legal framework for colonisation was formalised through the *Northern Territory Act*. The distribution of land titles followed thereafter, and more lines were drawn on maps: on 1 March 1864 land sale opportunities were opened to the public in London and Adelaide, and soon the first 250,000 acres were sold. The London-based North Australia Company acquired 328 of the 781 allotments. Other land claims were bought up in Adelaide by wealthy investors, including politicians and government ministers (Powell, 1996: 73).

The early settlers

After the military and maps came the cattle and miners. Although distance and practical difficulties hampered immediate European settlement, in 1869 another military camp at present-day Darwin was established, sparking the commencement of the Overland Telegraph Line. Due to the discovery of gold during the telegraph line's construction, the Pine Creek area became amongst the first mining zones in the Top End, and by the mid-1880s the town had a largely itinerant population of over 2,000 (Sydney Morning Herald, 2004). From the late 1870s the pastoral industry began establishing itself in the area, buoyed by earlier optimistic reports of fertile and suitable lands (see South Australian Register, 1862, 1863). Alfred Giles, on contract from an Adelaide businessman, was the first to stock a Top End station when he drove sheep and cattle in 1878-9 to Springvale Station, about 90 kilometres south of Pine Creek. Shortly thereafter, James Warby and then Nat Buchanan arrived at Glencoe Station from the east with hundreds of stock cattle. Crucially for the industry's development, Buchanan also succeeded in establishing the Coast Track, a relatively reliable stock route through the Gulf country from northern Queensland. Coupled with a drastic reduction in pastoral lease rent rates by the South Australian Government in 1881, these favourable conditions led to a rush of activity and population. Over a few short years until 1885, an estimated 200,000 cattle, 10,000 horses and numerous bullock-wagons were transported overland on the Coast Track. In the Roper Gulf region alone, fourteen

pastoral stations were established and stocked between 1881 and 1885, and together with other large stations further west, such as Wave Hill, Victoria River Downs and Auvergne (Buchanan, 1933; Powell, 1996: chap 5; Roberts, 2005: 66-67).

Police forces were the first official representatives of the state in the region; however, notwithstanding the Pine Creek police camp established in 1873, their presence was thin and dispersed (Bridgman, 2008; Roberts, 2005: 156; Sydney Morning Herald, 2004). For this reason, the early pastoralists and other European settlers acted as independent representatives of government, charged with carrying out functions normally reserved for the state, such as: establishing pastoral property lease rights granted by the South Australian administration; surveying the newly claimed territories; setting up transport routes, supply depots and other modern industrial requirements; and – most crucially – upholding and enforcing juridical authority over local Indigenous subjects.

The Lionisation of the Northern Territory's Pioneers

As reflected in Pine Creek's historical precinct today, this early period of settlement has dominantly been defined as an iconic pioneering era in the Northern Territory. Early drovers and pastoralists such as Patrick and Michael Durack, John Costello, D'Arcy Uhr as well as Buchanan, Giles and many others continue to be lionised in museums, historical records and through the names of many Top End city suburbs, streets and civic venues. Biographical records depict these early settlers (almost exclusively men) as being extremely tough, tenacious and possessive of extraordinary physical and mental endurance. Many were from humble backgrounds and had relatives with convict pasts. Migrants from Ireland were well represented (such as the Durack, Costello and Buchanan families), who had direct experiences with privation and hardship, including during the infamous Potato Famine. For them, the Northern Territory represented a new frontier of development, an escape from the class rigidities of old Europe, and the promised freedoms of a liberal governmental system. The underlying ethos was that these territories offered men of sufficient skill,

competitive spirit, perseverance and resourcefulness the opportunity for prosperity and independence (Buchanan, 1933; Costello, 1930; Day, 2001: 92; Durack, 2008 [1959]).²⁷



Figure 3.3: Wall display, Pine Creek National Trust Museum. Photo: Michel (2017).

Yet these historical accounts are significant as much for what they include as what they exclude. From a less idyllic perspective, this period can also be characterised as an era of conflict and civil war, with the early settlers treating local Indigenous populations harshly or, at best, heedlessly. Land, resources, labour and sexual partners were appropriated as desired, and many of the newcomers demonstrated a willingness to employ violence, even genocidal practices to those ends. Local Indigenous people, in turn, often engaged in retaliatory violence, albeit with less advanced weaponry (Powell, 1996; Roberts, 2005; Rose, 1991).

The results of early European settlement were disastrous for the affected Indigenous populations. In the Gulf Country region alone (which loosely approximates the area of present-day Roper Gulf Shire), there is evidence of over 50 massacres between 1872 and 1916 occurring on most of the district's pastoral stations, and suggestions many other mass killings went unrecorded (Roberts, 2005: 140-142). Across the entire mining and pastoral

²⁷ Note that although towns like Pine Creek had a majority-Chinese population in the 1870s, direct historical accounts of their experiences are scarce.

frontier of the Northern Territory, from the 1870s until 1910, an estimated 3000 Indigenous people died violently (Roberts, 2009). The Wilangarra tribe, whose lands were near Borrooloola, was extinct by the early 1900s; the nearby Ngarnji, Binbingka, Gudanji and Wombaya tribes were decimated, all largely as a result of violent contact with European settlers (Roberts, 2005: 184-185). In the Victoria River region (the southern portion of present-day Victoria Daly Shire), similar patterns of violence and death occurred, including the extinctions of the Karangpurru and Nyiwanawu tribes (Rose, 1991: chapters 8 and 12). Additionally, increased rates of starvation, the introduction of smallpox, sexually transmitted infections, alcohol and other drugs, and other foreign diseases contributed to a population collapse: of an estimated Indigenous population of 50,000 in the Northern Territory before European contact, by 1911 the approximate figure had fallen to 23,500 (Heatley, 1979: 132).

Beyond the impersonal statistical account of this era of mass death, it should also be remembered that by the early 1880s, many Indigenous people in the region would have already had direct or indirect experience with settler violence (Powell, 1996; Reynolds, 1981; Rose, 1991). This was an age of terror, and a local's unexpected encounter with Europeans may have understandably provoked feelings of mortal fear. Barnabas Gabarla Roberts, an Alawa man born around 1894 south of Pine Creek, offered this chilling account of his childhood memories:

White people hunt us out from there, shootim people like kangaroo, like bird. Oh, terrible days we used to had. We never walk around much amongst the plain country or ground. We used to [go] up la hill alla time to save our life. Our old people, you know, used to take us away from plain or river or billabong. Only night time they used to run down to get the lily (lilyseed). Alla young men you know, can't go day time, frighten for white people. Too many murderers went about killing native. (Roberts, 2005: 158)

This was a dangerous era, and death was a constant threat for the settler population as well. Those early European interlopers who chose to accept the risks of settling the Northern Territory certainly required resolve and tenacity. In this regard they were bolstered by the cultural chauvinism of many non-Indigenous Australians at the time. Views of the

superiority of the British Empire, Christian values and European models of development were widely accepted. Narratives of settler exploits explicitly portrayed the self-perception they were agents of government, spreading progress, civilisation and British imperial interests. For example, Gordon Buchanan, writing in 1933 of his parents Nat and Katherine, dedicated his book to his parents' gallantry and other fellow settlers 'who faced dangers with fortitude and courage, carrying the flag of Empire into the unknown open spaces of this continent... [and] gave the best years of life to the opening up of the Great Outback' (Buchanan, 1933: vii-viii). Alfred Searcy, a government official stationed in Port Darwin from 1882, recalled 'an almost unlimited area of country suitable, and not to be beaten in the world, for cattle and horse breeding... untold wealth concealed in this new land' and postulated: 'If the settlement had been made by any other nation, I expect it would only have supplied another evidence of the fact that the Anglo-Saxons are the only people who can colonise successfully' (Searcy, 1909 [1984]: 2-5).

This 'heroic and inevitable' civilisational mission gained its valence from a contrast with a savage and uncivilised other (the Indigenous population of the Top End) whose dispossession and colonisation could therewith be easily justified along a racist and cultural basis. Historical accounts abound of Indigenous people being referred to pejoratively as 'niggers', 'wild natives', 'lubras', 'boys', 'gins' and so forth by the colonisers. George Goyder, South Australia's Surveyor-General, devout Christian and the founder of Darwin in 1869, referred to Indigenous people as 'these miserable specimens of humanity' (in Powell, 1996: 78), in contrast to the righteous agents of European colonisation.

Christian morality lent gravitas and certainty to these attitudes. A speech made by Presbyterian clergyman J.D. Lang in 1856 to a Moreton Bay Friends of the Aborigines exemplifies this:

God in making the earth never intended it should be occupied by men so incapable of appreciating its resources as the Aborigines of Australia. The white man had indeed, only carried out the intentions of the Creator in coming and settling down in the territory of the natives. God's first command to man was 'Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth.'

Now that the Aborigines had not done, and therefore it was no fault in taking the land of which they were previously the possessors. (Quoted in Day, 2001: 75)

These cultural values provided the framework for the widespread acceptance amongst the early settlers that the violent treatment of Indigenous people was a reasonable, necessary and even *inevitable* element of establishing modern government. Gordon Buchanan for instance commented: 'the letter of the law was often ignored in favour of summary justice... imprisonment for cattle-killing was quite impracticable; and if no punishment were inflicted it would have been impossible to settle the country' (quoted in Powell, 1996: 115). Another of his contemporary settlers stated, 'there is no way of settling in this colony except by means of the great and only civilizer of the natives, the Snider rifle' (quoted in Rose, 1991: 32). The government officer Alfred Searcy wrote of the frontier violence: 'Thus it will ever be in developing a new country where the aborigines are at all hostile, and where there is no recognised authority to deal with them' (Searcy, 1909 [1984]: 174). And a correspondent for the *Adelaide Observer* writing in 1886 applied a Christian moral logic to the brutality:

When our sable brethren have learned that their white brothers are their masters, and have become sufficiently civilized to respect white men's lives and property, will be time enough to introduce Bible civilisation. Until the natives can be brought to see that the white man's rule is for their benefit now and hereafter, we must expect that they will resist invasion and have to be taught by sad experience that they must have charity, suffer long, and be kind. (in Roberts, 2005: 147-148)

Yet in the midst of this landscape of death and terror, there were also patterns of connection and interdependence being forged between Indigenous and Europeans. It should be mentioned that Christian missionaries, who largely abhorred the violent acts of the European settler population, began by the 1880s to play an influential role in settlement policies and practices (Reid, 1990: chap 10; Reynolds, 1981: 188-192). And increasingly, Indigenous labour became a necessary input in the nascent development of colonial industry. This labour input particularly included Indigenous women and girls, who were often forcibly and even voluntarily engaged (and sometimes traded for money and other goods) to perform domestic duties, mustering work and to serve as concubines (Powell,

1996: 108; 141; Roberts, 2005: 260-266; Rose, 1991: chap 5; Searcy, 1909 [1984]: 213). The attitudes of the pioneer woman Alice Duncan-Kemp reflected the increasingly common patterns of (albeit unequal) accommodation and reliance. Duncan-Kemp wrote of the decision by Kate Bancroft Miller's family in 1896 to leave their property in a populated region to move to the Mulligan River area, close to the Northern Territory border. Miller's friends had warned:

"Don't go out there, the blacks are very bad". Kate replied: "We are going because the blacks are there. If it had not been for the blacks we could never have run our property successfully. They were our saviours". Kate was right. The blacks were, and still are, the saviours of the lonely bush where lie the scattered homes of white women with young children. We cannot do without the aborigines; they are necessary to the economy of outback Australia. When they go we will lose something fine and splendid; the very Soul of Old Australia which speaks to us through its beautiful legends and the solemn chants of its corroboree music. (Quoted in Gregory & Johnston, 2004: 11)

These conflictual social forces in the Northern Territory during this time – the headlong establishment of capitalist economic structures; the rapid influx of European pastoralists, miners and government officials; the disruption of Indigenous social and economic practices; the increasing connections and interdependence of the Indigenous and settler populations; the widespread occurrences of violence; and all interwoven by the establishment of modern liberal government – were all factors in the life and death of Johannes Lebrecht Noltenius, and the ensuing massacre of the Woolwonga.

The Killing of Noltenius

Likely of German descent, Johannes Noltenius had family ties in Adelaide but had travelled to the Northern Territory in 1872 at the age of forty-one, as second-in-charge of an expedition to the newly discovered goldfields around the Yam Creek area close to Pine Creek. Most miners involved in this early rush had left by the mid-1870s, but Noltenius remained employed in the Northern Territory's fledgling mining industry for the next twelve years. He attained a degree of social standing during this time, including the position of Justice of the Peace. Records make mention of him as a prominent and popular member of

the small Top End settler community. In 1883 he and some business partners discovered copper in the Daly River area on Malak Malak country, close to the present-day settlement of Nauiyu and some distance west of Pine Creek. By 1884 he had commenced a commercial mining enterprise on-site with a small party of four other Europeans named Henry Houschildt, John Landers, Thomas Schollert and Henry Roberts (Australian Heritage Places Inventory, 2014; Noltenius, 1878; Parsons, 1884; South Australian Register, 1884).

There are mixed accounts of how this party of five Europeans conducted themselves while on the mine site in 1884. John L. Parsons, speaking from the position of Northern Territory Government Resident and 'confident [in being] in possession of the facts', wrote a report tabled in the South Australian Legislative Council in November 1884 that posthumously portrayed the miners in highly magnanimous terms. He describe them as:

...poor fellows, [who] have fallen victims to overkindness, overconfidence, and the want of that wary distrust of the blacks... At the Copper camp the mining party were so kind to the blacks, were so liberal in their gifts of food, tobacco, and other things—not liquor, as they had none—were so confident in the goodwill of the blacks they lent them guns to shoot game for them... There was no lubra [Indigenous female] wronged, there was no cruelty to blackfellows. They were murdered for loot, for plunder, for "tucker," the constant sight of which excited an irresistible passion to possess it and to eat it. (Parsons, 1884: 13)

Other accounts, including those of local Catholic missionaries, portray a less noble image and contend these men had committed rape and other forms of violence against local Indigenous women. This, it was alleged, was a prime motivator for the violent attack that befell the mining party on 3 September 1884 (Catholic Diocese of Darwin, 2014; Lea, 2014b: 127).

On that morning, Houschildt was absent from the mine site, having left on a reconnaissance trip around Rum Jungle some three weeks prior. However Noltenius, Landers and Roberts were working on the face of the lode, while Schollert, the cook, was attending to duties in the camp kitchen. Without notice, Landers and Roberts were attacked with spears and picks by two groups of Indigenous men. Noltenius saw the attacks and tried escaping through a

cutting towards the camp and their cache of rifles but was speared before reaching safety. Roberts, who was presumably left for dead, was able to regain consciousness and retrieve the party's rifles from the camp store, at which point the Indigenous aggressors fled. Roberts then extracted spears from Landers and Noltenius, and discovered Schollert's dead body in the kitchen. Soon thereafter, Landers, Noltenius and Roberts left the mine site by foot in the direction of nearby Glencoe Station. However Landers could only travel a short distance before collapsing and perishing; Noltenius managed some kilometres further, before he himself collapsed and died next to a billabong. Roberts eventually reached Glencoe Station as the sole survivor of the party: it was soon discovered that Houschildt had also been murdered soon after leaving the mine site in mid-August (Parsons, 1884; Reid, 1990: chap 8).

The murders were reported on 7 September to Corporal George Montagu, head of police at the Yam Creek minefields, who rode to the Daly River mine site with officer James Foster Smith and the goldfields surgeon Dr Percy Wood to investigate. *En route* more police troopers met them, and they subsequently detained an Indigenous informant and found Houschildt's body partially buried in a sandbank along a creek.

The Wave of Reprisals

Soon enough, Montagu's small party commenced reprisal raids on Indigenous camps along the Daly River, attacking at least two groups during this first expedition, with an indeterminate number of Indigenous casualties. From later accounts, it appears that the basis for targeting these groups was because they were 'known' to be members of the Woolwonga tribe, who were now collectively held responsible for the Noltenius party's murders (Morice, 1885c). By 25 September, Montagu's party had returned to its Yam Creek base, and had learned that a local group of European settlers led by a Mr Masson had formed and was planning additional punitive raids in the region. Meanwhile, another small group of European teamsters for the goldfields was allegedly attacked in the area on 27 September, possibly in retaliation for the Montagu party's raids. There were no Europeans casualties in this assault, but a number of Indigenous men killed (Reid, 1990: 100-103). This sense of beleaguerment of the European population was arguably a useful political tool to

justify further actions against the local Indigenous population. (Doubts were later raised about the allegations, including speculation that the teamster party, rather than being victims, had instead constructed a pretext to attack a local Indigenous camp without provocation (Morice, 1885a)).

In Palmerston, the Northern Territory's Police Inspector Paul Foelsche, informed of the Daly River mine murders, had travelled by steamboat inland on the Daly River to meet Montagu's party. During their journey upstream, Foelsche came across five local Indigenous tribesmen, who through a ruse were arrested then transported back to Port Darwin and later charged with the murders of Noltenius and the other miners. Government Resident Parsons pressured for a quick trial and, in the case of a guilty verdict, a public execution of the perpetrators at the sites of the murders to serve as a deterrent. Three of the accused were eventually convicted of murder (Reid, 1990: 99-105; Smith, 1885).

Regardless of Foelsche's arrests of the purported murderers along the Daly River in mid-September, punitive expeditions by Europeans continued. The police troopers Wilson and Summers appeared to have killed at least five Indigenous people around Rum Jungle before 30 September, and then burnt their bodies. A retaliatory party of civilians, headed by a Phil Saunders, set out westwards from around Rum Jungle towards Daly River, with the outcomes unrecorded. Another party of seventeen European civilians and two Indigenous people from outside the area, led by the former Queensland Native Police Officer Augustus Lucannus, split into three separate groups and conducted a number of attacks on Indigenous people in the area, reportedly resulting in many 'dispersals' – a common euphemism for killing (Roberts, 2005: 126-127). Notably, Government Resident Parsons approved the provisioning of these civilian parties with government-funded rations (including ammunition), but agreed they should not come under police command. Constable Montagu himself rode with his troopers along the Mary and MacKinlay Rivers to Mount Wells, where they came across at least two Indigenous camps and killed a number of people, reportedly as many as twenty-seven, but possibly more (Reid, 1990: 100-109; South Australian Register, 1886).

Details of this indiscriminate violence were not widely known amongst the European population in Darwin and interstate at the time. However this could not suppress all outside scrutiny, and voices of opposition to the massacres are to be found in the historical archives. This includes testimonial accounts of the former trooper James Foster Smith, who had accompanied Constable Montagu on the Daly River expedition. Upon resigning in disgust at the conduct of his fellow police officers, he publicly accused Montagu's party of unprovoked massacres during the expedition along the MacKinlay River, and Police Inspector Foelsche and Government Resident Parsons of a cover-up (Smith, 1885). Another prominent critic of the government's conduct during these events was Dr Robert Morice, Northern Territory's colonial surgeon and official Protector of Aborigines in 1884. Morice was summarily dismissed from his positions in late 1884 after a disagreement with Government Resident Parsons over the treatment of the Indigenous detainees accused of the Daly River mine murders (Beresford, 1885). In a conflict played out in South Australia's and Northern Territory's newspaper columns, Morice accused the government of deceit and sponsoring massacres. In one letter to a newspaper he mutedly declared:

It is difficult to say how many natives have been killed altogether for the Daly River outrage; but from all I have learned from different sources, I should say not less than 150, a great part of these women and children... Some may call this justice; others may say that it is not exactly right. (Morice, 1885a)

Constable Montagu was also later criticised for not making any serious attempt to detain any Indigenous suspects. This perception was not helped by the 1885 tabling in South Australian Parliament of Montagu's official report on police expeditions in September and October 1884, which contained cold-blooded allusions to reprisal killings. Public interest and condemnation of the Northern Territory Government's actions grew, and influential groups such as the Aborigines' Friends Association in South Australia began pressuring for an official inquiry (South Australian Register, 1885a, 1885b).

However within the Northern Territory, official opinion amongst the settler population appears to have remained steadfastly supportive of police actions. Government Resident Parsons stressed in written reports that the Northern Territory's settler community

...never “lost its head.”... There was no clamour for wholesale slaughter and reprisals... No rage of revenge had been shown, but simply the desire to teach the natives that they cannot perpetrate outrages of that kind on the whites with impunity. (Parsons, 1884)

The *Northern Territory Times* wavered between denial and jingoistic approval of the violent police actions. In December 1885 its editors defended these acts, and also wrote of the importance of a citizen’s autonomous sense of ‘duty’ as a technology of liberal government:

Where our southern chicken-hearted friends see anything in [Montagu’s official] report to call for their howls of indignation, we fail to see. Our plain opinion of it is that it is the honest report of an honest man sent out to perform a difficult and thankless duty... we can truthfully say that [Montagu] is a cautious, zealous, energetic man who would be the last to exceed what he thought was his proper course of action, or to permit any indiscriminate slaughter. (Northern Territory Times and Gazette, 1885)

A month later, the same newspaper again wrote:

For our part, every iota of the Corporal's [Montagu’s] report was true, we should uphold his action as the only rational method of dealing with bloodthirsty savages, in spite of all the arguments of the Aborigines' Friends' Association, Dr. Morice, James Foster Smith, or the S. A. Register. (Northern Territory Times and Gazette, 1886)

The Government did accede to hold an inquiry based in Palmerston, but the investigative board’s membership virtually determined its findings from the outset. The appointed chairman was A.P. Baines, who had participated in one of the punitive parties led by Saunders. Other board members included: Police Inspector Foelsche’s son-in-law; Dr Percy Wood, the former goldfields surgeon and acquaintance of Montagu, who had subsequently been promoted to colonial surgeon after the dismissal of Morice; a Mr McMinn, an architect comfortably salaried by the government; and a Mr Hillson, a bank manager with ties to the Government Resident Parsons. The inquiry was conducted confidentially, and only took evidence from police constables involved. It did not include critical evidence from Dr Morice or former trooper Smith (Reid, 1990: 112).

In early 1886 the board of inquiry released its findings. 'In conclusion,' they wrote, 'the Board wish to state that they are unanimously of opinion that the natives were treated with leniency, and that there is no evidence to show that slaughter or cruelty was practised by the police.' Regarding the allegations of violent excesses during the investigations, the board stated

...that a grossly exaggerated view has been taken of what took place between the police and the natives both at the Daly and Mary Rivers... it is only fair to assume that the [South Australian] Register has been deceived. Government officers whose positions call upon them to discharge difficult and responsible duties are, it will be universally admitted, entitled at least to be heard before they are held up to obloquy and execration as being guilty parties to "brutal murders." (quoted in South Australian Register, 1886)

And with the conclusions of the inquiry, the event faded from the public record.

The Remembering and Forgetting of Events

It is noteworthy that in the written archives and the later historiographical accounts of these events, the European characters in this drama – Montagu, Foelsche, Smith, Morice and of course Noltenius – are given names and identities (Beresford, 1885; Morice, 1885a, 1885b, 1885c; Northern Territory Times and Gazette, 1886; Powell, 1996; Reid, 1990; Roberts, 2005, 2009; South Australian Register, 1886). The Indigenous characters remain hidden, their identities shrouded by terms like 'natives', 'blacks' and 'Aborigines'. There is no clear record that the Woolwonga tribe was effectively exterminated during the reprisal killings. The massacres were almost entirely successful in the act of forgetting.

Yet conflicting realities of the past have the capacity for unsettling official versions of it. Forgotten memories can be remembered. A remarkable turn of history occurred some 125 years later. In 2010 an archival researcher stumbled across a census document from 1899 that recorded details of a woman named Jennie, identified as a member of the Woolwonga tribe and the mother of May, who took the surname Crawford from her European

pastoralist father (Purtill, 2014). This small detail, of a single survivor of the tribe, enabled Jennie's descendants to be traced to the present day. A Woolwonga Committee was established in 2010, and more family members were contacted. The central demand of the committee was recognition that the Woolwonga were not extinct and could not be forgotten. This led to a request to the Australian Government for a memorial plaque to be erected, in commemoration of the atrocities committed against the Woolwonga people.

Gillian Cowlshaw warned of the pitfalls for the historian in 'rediscovering' massacres and other traumatic, turbulent events. Examining the Daly River miners' murders and the ensuing massacres is an ambiguous method for understanding modern intercultural relations in the Northern Territory, and carries the risk that interpretations may be written to suit the audience's own moral requirements. Cowlshaw writes, 'When the past is made a parable of injustice and cruelty, living memories and inherited stories are flattened and homogenised' (Cowlshaw, 2006: 135). Even so, for the direct descendants of the Woolwonga people, the installation of the memorial plaque in Burrundie may have been a cathartic recognition of past atrocities (Purtill, 2014). Similar to the provocative proposal to name a shire ward after one of the miners murdered in 1884, a memorial plaque is an attempt to remind the public that the colonisation of Australia's north was not benign, peaceful nor uniformly beneficial. The feminist scholar bell hooks wrote of the political importance of struggling against forgetting:

Thinking again about space and location, I heard the statement "our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting"; a politicization of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as once it was, a kind of useless act, from that remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present. (hooks, 2004: 155)

Yet, as Cowlshaw's warning reminds us, the Woolwonga massacre memorial plaque may also be interpreted as a subtle device of effective liberal government, an artefact that reinforces rather than undermines hegemonic power assemblages. The plaque does represent a flattening of events, in both the literal and figurative senses. The massacre occurred over 130 years in the past, long enough ago for direct connections to the actors

involved to have faded, and for the events to become anodyne. Contemporary representatives of government can distance themselves from the atrocities, and can instrumentalise the moral and political space afforded by the commemoration. At the unveiling of the plaque in September 2014, the Federal Senator for the Northern Territory Nigel Scullion was invited to give the keynote speech. Scullion, a member of the conservative Country Liberal Party, is currently the Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs and was an unwavering proponent of the *Northern Territory Emergency Response Act* in 2007. His speech that day appealed to the moral commonalities of the group in attendance: 'What happened then [in 1884] was appalling then and appals us now,' he conferred. '[This plaque] ensures that this history is put right'. He then easily segued this moral claim into the government's contemporary political agenda:

Today, as we acknowledge and remember these awful events together, we take another step towards reconciliation... The Government knows all that Indigenous culture has to offer. We will support Indigenous Australians to both maintain their culture, and participate in the economic and social life of the nation. This is why the Government is working with Aboriginal people to get children into school, adults into work, and make communities safer. But, unlike in 1884, or 1954 with the Stolen Generations, it is not a punitive improvement measure. We are going to do this with you, not to you... [This] is about changing community attitudes and expectations from the ground up, not from the Government down. Our justice comes in practical forms like providing the opportunity for economic growth and the necessary conditions to flourish as a community. (Scullion, 2014a)

The Minister's transfer of agency onto the state's subjects (marked by statements like 'we are going to do this with you, not to you' and '[this] is about changing community attitudes and expectations from the ground up, not from the Government down') neatly expresses a key technology of liberalism: the dispersal of governmental responsibility onto free-willed individuals. It also serves to effectively contain and co-opt the events of the 1884 massacre. After the unveiling of the plaque, the only presented avenue of action was reconciliation. Minister Scullion ended his speech with the morally conclusive statement: 'Thanks to everyone for coming all the way out here today... Thank you for taking the time to help heal the wounds' (Scullion, 2014a).

This moral containment of past atrocities – the governmental management of remembering – is perhaps a more effective tool than the wilful denial of these events. The state has paid its respects, those who demanded a commemoration have one, and from now ‘the wounds can heal’. This works to preclude more unpredictable challenges to dominant power relations, and tacitly permits an ongoing forgetting of unsavoury past events. For instance, I expected the 2014 commemoration of the Woolwonga massacre to have been a reasonably significant event, at least for local residents in Pine Creek. Yet when I travelled there in 2017 on field work, nobody in the town I met knew of it. I stopped in at the shire council office and neither the (non-Indigenous) administration officer nor the local manager (one of whom was a long-term resident of Pine Creek) knew of the memorial plaque. Instead, they googled it to find out if I had the correct place. More remarkably, when I visited the National Trust Museum, the (non-Indigenous) curator (likewise a Pine Creek resident of many years) didn’t recall the commemoration event in 2014 nor had any awareness of the memorial plaque. Surrounded by artefacts of a simpler version of the town’s history, she seemed uninterested and dismissive of my enquiries (field notes, 4 July 2017). Although many Indigenous residents of nearby Nauiyu knew full well about the massacre, and despite the actions of descendants of the Woolwonga people to mark the events of 1884, the town residents of Pine Creek could continue forgetting.

PART TWO

VIOLENCE

But here's the thing... [T]he reason for this public ignorance is not secrecy. Despite the [Taxation Department]'s well-documented paranoia and aversion to publicity, secrecy here had nothing to do with it. The real reason... is that the whole subject of tax policy and administration is dull. Massively, spectacularly dull. It is impossible to overstate the importance of this feature...

One of the great and terrible PR discoveries in modern democracy... is that if sensitive issues of governance can be made sufficiently dull and arcane, there will be no need for officials to hide or dissemble, because no one not directly involved will pay enough attention to cause trouble.

No one will pay attention because no one will be interested, because, more or less a priori, of these issues' monumental dullness.

David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (2012: 83-84).

When my work schedule was busy busy busy, and time my most precious commodity, visiting a place like Nganmarriyanga, a small community east of Wadeye, could be an unsettling experience. I tried to slow down, but my pace was all wrong. The seasons may have been languidly changing around me, the generational dramas of life and death may have been playing out, yet I was much more concerned with whether I could get an internet connection, how up to date the council's asset register was, if the unsealed access road would remain dry. My life was governed by deadlines within deadlines. These gave me purpose, plenty to do – but my relationship with time moved me through the community rather than within it. For a local family sitting in the shade waiting for the sun to cool down, how clearly aligned with other blow-ins my hurried movements in and out of the council office must have appeared! As a non-descript junior Northern Territory Government officer, I was surely marked as a familiar passer-by, an 'owner of no soil' (Dalley, 2015: 38-39). For me, Nganmarriyanga worked as a relational non-place (Augé, 1992): a modern bureaucratic work arena on which I left no individual traces, a community where I doubt I am remembered.

Yet my fleeting presence in Nganmarriyanga did not mean my actions had no lasting institutional effect. My role there as "Development Coordinator", responsible for assisting with the amalgamation of this small community's council, was hardly innocuous. The duties entailed communicating to the community's elected council, staff and any interested residents all details of the reform I could offer. It also included collating all corporate information of the council's operations I could find, including staff counts, service delivery profiles, asset lists, financial records, and so forth. I engaged earnestly with this work, and took seriously the policy parameters of the reform: no job losses and no loss of services. To ensure this occurred, much localised knowledge needed careful documenting. Yet it remained clear to me most local residents were at best suspicious of me. After all, as an agent of government, I was there to abolish their community council, a popular organisation that, however imperfectly, had represented a form of local autonomy for decades.

So as I drove into the community on a day early in 2008, past the cattle yards, the shop and into the faux-suburban landscape grafted onto the savannah plain, I felt a slight unease. Slowing my NT Government-issue four wheel drive vehicle down, I scanned for people I recognised. Ahead was the council office, my destination. I rolled my vehicle around the side of the council building and parked, bracing myself for the potential blend of conflict and forced conviviality still to come.

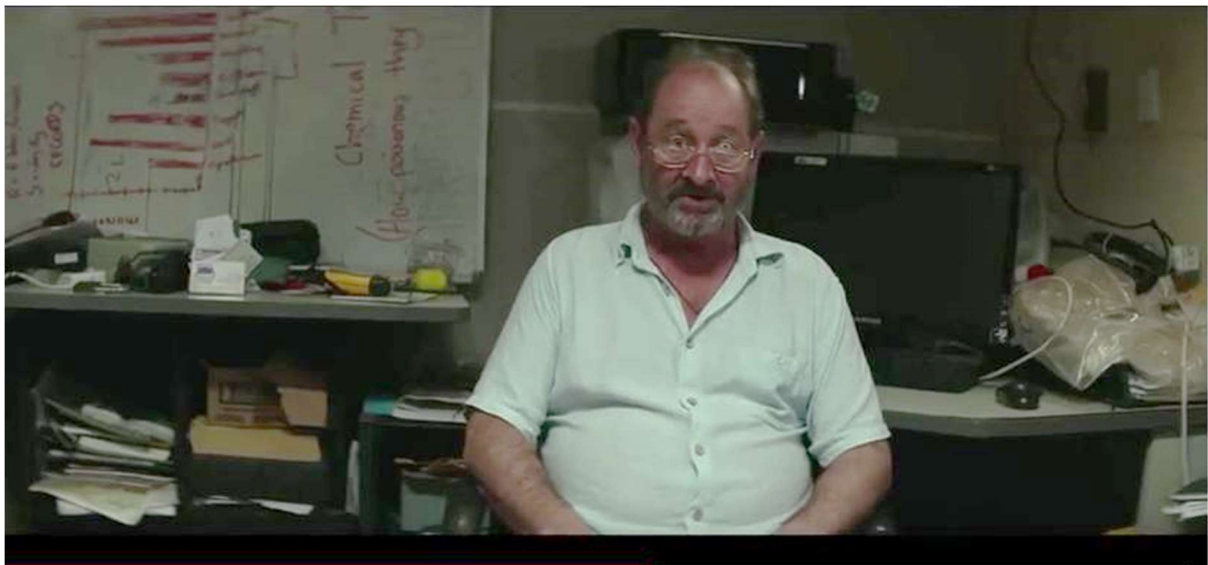


Figure 4.1: Fictional representation of a council town clerk, from the film *Charlie's Country*.
Source: de Heer (2013).

I was due to meet with the council's town clerk, whose integrity I had no reason to question. In my dealings with him he appeared genuinely well-intentioned, honest, and willing to disclose any and all corporate information. Whether he was an able administrator was another matter: he had been there less than twelve months, his professional background was in a manual trade, and I quietly considered him underqualified for the volume of financial management and administrative duties tasked to him. The aesthetics of the town clerk's workplace increased my misgivings. Like the rest of the council building, his office was disorganised and dirty, and any available desk space was piled high with random documents, packages, computer devices and dust. Regardless, when I stepped into the council building I was genuinely relieved to see the town clerk in his office – his presence was going to greatly streamline the completion of my day's tasks.

My relief quickly turned to dismay when I saw another visitor in the town clerk's office: the council chairman, a known source of political conflict for me, not technical information. This man had established a certain notoriety amongst my bureaucratic colleagues. He was the patriarch of the community's dominant clan, and seemed to govern the council more as a fiefdom than an elected body. Not only was he the council chairman, he also held a salaried position as the council's "cultural liaison officer" – a sinecure with no position description, no clear role and no set hours. This man had also assumed a controlling interest in the community store, and apparently profited from free groceries and cash receipts on demand. One story circulating amongst government officers was that he had recently destroyed two council four-wheel drive vehicles on rowdy hunting and bull-catching trips, but the vehicles had both been quickly replaced. He also had a reputation for having his requests for vehicle fuel, council resources, even housing allocation fulfilled. The council chairman's acquisitiveness had gone unchecked for many years, and for me it had become a prime example of why the old community council system was being abolished: to overhaul local rent-seeking fiefdoms like this, and replace them with accountable, rules-based governance structures. He and I both knew that the shires reform was going to materially disadvantage him – and I was fine with that. There was discernible tension between us.

I greeted both the town clerk and chairman with a polite handshake and nod. Immediately the chairman asked to speak with me outside. Once we were out of earshot, he turned and quite bluntly asked me to help procure 'one or two motor vehicles from the incoming shire for local staff – not even four-wheel drives, maybe just Toyota Hiluxes. As I recall, I smiled wryly at him, no longer shocked or unprepared for such a request. Although he had a commanding physical presence, I felt only mildly intimidated; I was also no longer receptive to playing the role of the pliable young 'white fella' who could provide easy access to government resources (Collmann, 1988: chap 1; Gerritsen, 1982: 25-29; Mahood, 2012: 29). More than anything, I was impatient, even intolerant of his request, and had no desire to facilitate it.

I was however tactful enough to avoid rejecting his demand outright and instead dispatched it using the more subtle tools, the tools I now feel are those of bureaucratic violence: I calmly explained to him that as an NT Government officer I had no control over the incoming shire's procurement decisions. If he did want new motor vehicles for his community, he would have to approach the incoming shire council after the pending election in October, but it would have to be planned and budgeted for. In a few short sentences I had deflected any individual agency I could exercise in his request, and installed multiple obstacles requiring financial literacy, procedural patience and bureaucratic navigation skills. After this short conversation I returned to the council office, finished my day's administrative tasks, got into my late-model, NT Government-issued four-wheel drive Toyota vehicle, and drove away. I never heard about the council chairman's request again.

The episode played on my mind, and I wondered about the chairman's other possible motivations beyond acquisitive self-interest. I also questioned my own reflexive reaction, including my presumption of moral authority to deflect his request. Was I defending my employer's rules? The interests of the citizen-taxpayer? The public good? What did I know about his interests, of whom or what he was looking after, or even why?

Chapter Four:

The violence of naming

Within bureaucratic circles, the 2008 shires reform was widely perceived as a rational, even necessary solution to many intractable (and statistically measureable) flaws with the previous community council system. This chapter develops a counter argument, depicting the 2008 reform as an example of bureaucratic violence. From this analysis, the violence of the reform was displayed firstly by bureaucracy's naming of "dysfunction" and "crisis-events" for the community council sector. Secondly, its violence was manifested in the gap in "interpretative labour" between bureaucrats and their policy referents in understanding the motivations and outcomes of the reform. Statistical evidence is presented as a key tool in the production and reinforcement of bureaucratic violence and unequal power relations. Statistics substantiated the crisis-events that precipitated the reform, they shaped the solutions to the community council sector's dysfunction, and they worked as a 'visible secret' that marks the gaps in interpretational labour that underpinned this policy change.

An interpretation of the 2008 shires reform process as an act of bureaucratic violence is not intended as polemic. I intend it to open new analytical avenues. Importantly, it provokes an understanding of this policy reform as part of an assemblage of power, rather than an instrumental (and necessary) policy response to practical issues. This radically recasts how reform outcomes can be assessed. Instead of evaluating the 2008 shires reform according to functional criteria (such as changes in service delivery outputs) and in artificial isolation from other historical processes, an analysis of the power inequalities underpinning this reform compel a consideration of broader social issues at play.

A conversation with shire management

During the course of this research project, in March 2010 I met with a senior shire manager to discuss his experiences of the 2008 shires reform. He was one of 60 government officials I formally interviewed between 2010 and 2016, and in many regards he was a typical

participant, in particular for the senior management staff cohort: white, male, middle-aged, tertiary educated, with a professional background and many years' experience in the local government sector.²⁸ He demonstrated respectable qualities: a long-standing engagement with Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, and a rough-edged commitment to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. His good intentions were not borne of ignorant idealism: he had years of hands-on experience living and working in remote Indigenous communities, in places most other Australians only saw in media reports. But like many management-level staff in the sector at the time, including me, he had materially and professionally benefited from the shires reform, and had a degree of self-interest in defending the new organisations.

In the interview, this respondent expressed broad support of the shire reform's implementation and its outcomes, and was firmly convinced that amalgamations would lead to economies of scale (see Chapter Five). He was also largely disparaging of 'the way previous councils used to operate', and described many Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory as 'dysfunctional'. He shared these attitudes with my overall interview group. When I queried why he thought Indigenous communities were dysfunctional, he elaborated:

Because they are. Do you mean what are the symptoms of dysfunction? I think just looking at it from a social aspect or whether it's an economic perspective... If you look at the social aspects, when you've got the high level of unemployment, high levels of substance abuse, high level of kids not attending school, when the Australian Government has found it necessary to implement school nutrition programs so that kids actually get fed at school, I think they are all things that indicate to me that there's a high level of dysfunction....

When I questioned him about his shire's relations with residents, his response was also typical: he was upbeat, categorised the popular discontent towards the shires as a minority

²⁸ Of the 60 interview participants in this cohort of elected shire councillors, an NT Government Member of Parliament, NT Government officers, Australian Government officers and shire management staff, 32 were identified as non-Indigenous males, 18 as Indigenous males, 7 as non-Indigenous females and 3 as Indigenous females.

opinion, and rationalised any resistance as a 'normal reaction' to change that would abate over time:

I believe it's [the relationship is] getting better. I think there was a bit of hostility at first. I think there's still areas where it's still hostile... But I actually think that the hostility is coming from a small local minority rather than coming from the general populace. I think most don't even notice that there's been a change. I think that most of the people would have been wary of change, I think it's a normal reaction to the forces of change and I think they're probably still a bit cautious of that, but I think that will improve over the years. I don't know that generally the relationship is so bad or that what we do affects them so much that eventually you'll be OK. And of course, people are inherently distrustful of government as well, so any reform by government, there's a little bit of scepticism, but I think long-term we'll be fine.

I asked him to identify the critical issues faced by his shire, and he nominated governance training and the education of elected councillors in understanding their proper role:

I think they [elected councillors] interfere in areas they shouldn't and they don't take any responsibility in areas they should. I think it's a combination of naivety on their behalf, I think they still live in the way previous councils used to operate... and I don't think they really understand what local government is supposed to be... I don't think currently the councils are mature enough to make [executive staffing] decisions. I don't think that they've had enough training, I think that they don't by and large understand what their role is, their responsibilities are...

Whether we like it or not, the system of governance in Australia is based on the Westminster system and I think there needs to be some education amongst the Indigenous communities about that system and how it works. And representation and rights and all that, rather than what I've seen generally of appointments based on families, based on where you were born, whether you're the oldest son or not.

These responses suggest a fairly nuanced knowledge of local political dynamics and decision-making processes, produced by ongoing communications with residents and elected councillors; and a myopia about systems of inherited wealth, and kith-kin based

company structures in the mainstream economy. Yet when I asked this manager about his own personal relationship with shire residents, he replied:

I don't know that I really have one. I can probably count on one hand the interactions I've had with residents. I don't really see that as my job. My job's behind the scenes. You know the Shire Services Managers and the Customer Services Officers are having those relationships and I think mine is to support them in what their roles are. I think the interaction I have had with Shire residents has generally been pretty good. I think there've been a number of people that haven't liked what I have had to say, you know what the rules are and how they've changed, and all that sort of stuff, but I think they've accepted what I've said. (Interview 17 March, 2010)

The opinions expressed by this senior shire manager were entirely normal attitudes for his social cohort; variations of these statements were reiterated frequently in my discussions with other senior executive management staff. In summary, as I did with the Council Chairman, he readily assumes the authority to label Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory as socially 'dysfunctional', and presupposed this as a rationale for government intervention ('when the Australian Government has found it necessary to implement school nutrition programs so that kids actually get fed at school, I think they are all things that indicate to me that there's a high level of dysfunction'). Through his sanguine perception of residents' attitudes towards the shires reform ('I think most [residents] don't even notice that there's been a change... I think long-term we'll be fine'), he displays limited effort in imagining politically weaker viewpoints – or what David Graeber calls a gap in 'interpretative labour' (Graeber, 2012: 115-116). And throughout his statements he deploys unspecified statistical evidence as a tactic to bolster his arguments ('the high level of unemployment... [indicate] a high level of dysfunction'; and 'the hostility is coming from a small local minority rather than coming from the general populace'). Good intentions to one side, I argue these statements exemplify a culture of bureaucratic violence, and reveal the unequal social power relations underpinning the reform.



Figure 4.2: Australian Defence Force personnel taking part in the Northern Territory Emergency Response operations in 2007. Source: ABC television news image (ABC, 2007).

My use here of the term violence is unconventional. Violence is commonly understood as a dramatic spectacle, a mode of agency that is ‘catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime’ (Povinelli, 2011: 132). In its more obvious forms, such as an act of aggressive conflict, a physical attack or wilful damage to property, there is a cinematic quality to violence that mark it as a major event, demanding some form of ethical response from its participants and audience. Here I use an alternative, ontologically unsettling definition of violence that traces its minor, unspectacular forms. These modes of violence constitute what Elizabeth Povinelli coins the ‘quasi-event’: occurrences that are ‘ordinary, chronic and cruddy’ (Povinelli, 2011: 13). They don’t have the status of an event, but a perennial quality that permeate everyday life and opportunity. In this sense, violent forces can be situated in everyday bureaucratic practices: a regulatory department’s categorisation of local council performance, a committee’s review of a funding methodology, or a bureaucracy’s collective creation of a statistic. The blandness of these processes may lend them an air of innocuousness, and not acts of violence *per se*. Yet they are premised on hierarchical power relations that can have material effect. Naming an entire community as “dysfunctional”, for example, is an act of constituting categories, defining rules and setting priorities, all with reference to an imputed norm. Processes of inclusion through naming relates to processes of exclusion through indifference. David Graeber writes that the near-impervious

hierarchies of public administration in relation to their (mundane but powerful) acts of categorisation 'invariably tend to create the kinds of wilful blindness we normally associate with bureaucratic procedures' (Graeber, 2012: 112). As Michael Herzfeld similarly comments, routinised bureaucratic inaction towards anomalies or uncertainties can create zones of exclusion that systematically disadvantage the social "other" (Herzfeld, 1992: 33; 49-68). Acts of exclusion, including those performed by doing nothing, are an expression of power, insofar as they imply the capacity to withhold resources, impose privation, and even incarcerate bodies (Graeber, 2012: 112-116; Gupta, 2012: 5-35). I describe all these phenomena as bureaucratic violence.²⁹

From this viewpoint, the 2008 shires reform was one layer of a violent assemblage of governmentality in the rural majority-Indigenous communities of the Northern Territory. In this setting the state retains near-monopoly control over income provision, community services, public health services, housing, infrastructure and property regulation and algorithms of surveillance within welfare rationing systems, policing and fines. The imposition of disruptive and fundamentally coercive policy reforms (such as the Federal Intervention and the abolition of CDEP) are regular events. The experiences of the Stolen Generations³⁰ government policy remain a lived memory for many; and Indigenous imprisonment rates are over seventeen times higher than for the non-Indigenous population (ABS, 2014; Altman & Hinkson, 2007; Ireland, Wulili Narjic, Belton, & Kildea, 2011). Identifying bureaucratic action as a form of violence is therefore not a radical step, but an acknowledgement of the everyday practices, obstacles and aggression that government imposes on Indigenous Australia in mundane and ubiquitous ways. In this

²⁹ David Graeber and Akhil Gupta, *inter alia*, use the term 'structural violence' (Graeber, 2012; Gupta, 2012). However to more directly position this force in the functioning of state administration, I refer to this force as "bureaucratic violence". This definition overlaps with Graeber's and Gupta's term, insofar that it relates to the violence enacts by state bureaucratic institutions and structures.

³⁰ The term "Stolen Generations" refers to a policy program from the late 1800s to the 1960s that led to the coercive removal of Indigenous children from their families. These policies were carried out by the Australian and State Governments across Australia, and in some jurisdictions led to an estimated one in three Indigenous children being taken into state or foster family custody. For the report *Bringing Them Home*, produced by the national inquiry into the legacy of Australia's Stolen Generations policy, see HREOC (1997).

context, the violence of the 2008 shires reform was not extraordinary but very ordinary, part of a recurring experiential pattern of 'same shit, different day' (Lea, 2012: 117).

The power of naming

Ian Hacking, in his work *Historical Ontology*, gives an unconventional interpretation of one of the book's key terms. He defines ontologies as referring to 'what comes into existence with the historical dynamics of naming' (Hacking, 2002: 26, see also Foucault, 1994 [1970]: 125-145). This highlights the deep significance Hacking bestows on giving names, and how states of existence are framed by the categories and labels that structure our realities. Related to bureaucratic culture more specifically, Michael Herzfeld calls the practice of 'categorisation' a key element in the imposition of bureaucratic power: how social phenomena are classified and how anomalies are defined are important expressions of rationality for state administrations, creating and reinforcing broader social formations (Herzfeld, 1992: 52-68). David Graeber similarly describes bureaucratic knowledge as premised on 'schematisation', which necessarily ignores many subtleties of social reality. 'Whether it's a matter of forms, rules, statistics, or questionnaires', he writes, 'it is always a matter of simplification' (Graeber, 2012: 119). Like Herzfeld, Graeber gives weight to the social power of the bureaucratic category, but in line with the Foucauldian conceptualisation of biopower, he also considers the bureaucratic category as a form of bodily colonisation. He writes that 'bodies, subjects – even truth itself – all become the products of administrative discourse... [S]tate bureaucracies end up shaping the parameters of human existence in ways far more intimate than anything Weber might have imagined' (Graeber, 2012: 111).

Somewhat differently, in her study of shifting administrative ontologies during Dutch colonial rule in Indonesia, Laura Ann Stoler links the process of bureaucratic taxonomisation to the role of public administration in 'directing affective judgements... [and] educating the proper distribution of sentiments and desires' (Stoler, 2009: 69). This becomes more than the power to name social dysfunction; it is also the power to direct sympathy and conjure crisis on the basis of this naming.

This power of naming to direct and authorise official actions complements Povinelli's concept of 'eventualisation', or the (majoritarian) creation of events by which 'discourse makes objects appear' (Povinelli, 2011: 14-15). Bureaucracy plays a pivotal social role in the process of eventualisation, insofar that it does much to define and publicly communicate the socially *normal*, and therefore how (non-normal) eventfulness and crisis are distributed. For example, Akhil Gupta calls the term 'the poor' a categorical creation of the state (Gupta, 2012: 77) that enables a multitude of state interventions. Similarly in Australia, a quintessential act of bureaucratic categorisation is the naming of "Indigenous" (which closely relates to its agential motivator "Indigenous dysfunction / disadvantage"). This has become a key category that fundamentally justifies governmental programs, fiscal distributions and strategic purposes. The Australian Government's Indigenous affairs policy slogan "Closing the Gap" is a succinct illustration: the categorical identification of an anomaly (the socioeconomic "gap" between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians) is coupled with a war-cry for remedial engagement ("let's close it") (see COAG, 2008; Macklin, 2010; Scullion, 2014b, Kowal, 2015: 3-7, 109-117).

Statistics are a key type of bureaucratic information that structures naming. Within bureaucracies, statistics are more than an information tool, but also a hegemonic discourse: they represent an ideal of measurable, quantifiable objectivity, and are the quintessential embodiment of bureaucratic rationality. As Michel Foucault reminds us, the precise etymological definition of "statistics" is the science of the state (Foucault, 2007 [1978]: 100-101). This form of information is generally accepted within bureaucracy as a rational, if somewhat imperfect, order of truth, a body of knowledge that may be challenged and refined – but is still revered because of its performative effects. And statistics often work most powerfully when they are publicly disseminated. Through the quasi-transparent disclosure of often impenetrable information, statistics can work as a 'public secret' (Taussig, 1997: 144-145; 1999: 6-7): a device that, through revealing without accessible comprehensibility, reinforces unequal power relations between bureaucracy and the populace.

Povinelli identified statistics as a key device in event creation, insofar that they have the power to 'transform the borders, qualities, scale, and agency of quasi-events into self-evident eventfulness' (Povinelli, 2011: 153). This statistical creation of "events" is frequently applied to the chronic, mundane poverty experienced in Australia's Indigenous domain (Povinelli, 2011: 153). In this country's Indigenous affairs policy arena, the scope for bureaucratic intervention into Indigenous "dysfunction" and "disadvantage" is only afforded by the contours of statistical definition (see for example CGC, 2015; COAG, 2008; SCRGSP, 2014).

The statistical creation of a crisis-event: measuring dysfunction

The power of naming were manifested in various ways during the 2008 shires reform. As noted, a key policymaking justification for the reform was its categorisation of the community council sector as 'dysfunctional', structurally flawed and prone to 'crisis' (McAdam, 2006; Scarvelis, 2008). Despite the historical, social and political complexities that have framed Indigenous community governance in the Northern Territory and contributed to destabilising the NT's community government council sector (as discussed in the previous chapters),³¹ the naming of the previous community council sector as broadly dysfunctional provided a simple version of reality that ascribed the sector's woes to internal factors and structural flaws.

A key naming event in the shires reform was the Minister's announcement at a 2006 local government conference that '50 per cent' of councils were 'high risk' or 'dysfunctional' (McAdam, 2006). Through iteration in policymaking circles, the "50 per cent dysfunctional" statistic (and variants thereof) gained gravitas and acceptance as an urgent rationale for amalgamation (see Scarvelis, 2008). Despite its presentation as a simple empirical truth, this statistic has its own history of creation. Between the years 2002 to 2006, much effort within

³¹ And also, *inter alia*, in Powell, 1996: 202-212; Gerritsen, 2010a; Kelly, 1966; McRae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010; Dillon & Westbury, 2007: chap 6; Gerritsen, 2010b; Michel & Taylor, 2012; Sanders, 1990; Collmann, 1988; Cowlshaw, 1999; Merlan, 1998; Sullivan, 2005b.

the Department of Local Government was invested in being able to provide the Minister with a purportedly objective, reliable and authoritative quantum of dysfunction. However the evaluative methodology that underpinned the metric was fundamentally subjective and unverifiable, and the final results were determined more or less arbitrarily by a handful of departmental officers.

The NT Department of Local Government commenced a 'Risk Assessment' process in 2003, whereby each community council would be visited and evaluated annually by departmental "community development officers". These officials were responsible for rating each council as 'A – Low Risk', 'B – Moderate Risk', 'C – High Risk', and 'D – Dysfunctional' under four different categories of council functions. Although each report was then submitted with supporting comments for managerial support and director approval, there was no indication of a standardised measure of risk (DCDSCA, 2003; DLGHS, 2005). The comments recorded in many risk assessment reports I read indicated a degree of bias based on officers' personal rapport and opinion of councils' management staff.³²

Despite its empirical dubiousness, the "50 per cent dysfunctional" statistic expressed a more fundamental power: of the deeply-assumed authority of the evaluators to classify council performance, and enact a framework of hierarchically-driven, one-way accountability (Sullivan, 2008; 2009: 60-67). This mindset was reflected in the statement of a key bureaucrat involved in the early planning stages of the reform. When I asked him about McAdam's categorisation of 50 per cent of councils as 'high risk' or 'dysfunctional', his

³² For example, in the report on one council from 2003, under 'Executive Management' the comments read: '[X] is the Clerk and has been so for the last 18 months. He is not a qualified clerk, but is Ministerially approved. He is considered focused and visionary, as well as strong willed.' The council received an 'A' rating (Low Risk) under this category. In a report on another council from the same year, the comments under the category 'Executive Management' read: 'Administration is reasonably efficient... Council is very small... and is therefore administratively simple. [Acting] Council Clerk does not appear to have a good grasp of how local government is intended to work or its service potential... Possible that many issues are determined at this executive level without appropriate level of input from Council.' The council received a 'C' rating ('High Risk') (DCDSCA, 2003). There are arguably close similarities in the first Council Clerk's 'focused', 'visionary' and 'strong-willed' management style, and the second Council Clerk's reported inclination to make decisions without an appropriate level of input from the elected council. It is therefore difficult to gauge the rationale for the difference in 'Executive Management' scores between these two councils.

response didn't question the validity of this figure *per se*, but reflexively supported its hierarchically evaluative approach: 'I don't know how he came to that statistic, but it certainly resonates with me. I recall vividly having to [often] deal with... insolvencies or the funding defaults in councils' (Interview 5 June, 2016). He continued with his own statistical representations:

At any one time, five to ten per cent of those [councils] were in serious financial difficulty ... either insolvent or approaching insolvency. But the key element for me was that when you took a 10-year or 15-year perspective, 80 or 90 per cent of those Community Governments at one point... hit rock-bottom, or had to be rescued. That led me to consider that structurally the system was totally – the word in my mind is not appropriate to put on tape – totally not fit for purpose. Why do I say that? Because every time one of those councils hit rock-bottom, an administrator is put in, services stop, the whole governance of the local community becomes shot, so the whole community goes backwards. (Interview 5 June, 2016)

Thus through this administrative exercise of naming through compounding statistics, all the ingredients of a crisis-event requiring urgent bureaucratic intervention are constructed. A subordinate institution was deemed to have inherently flawed structures and weak administration, a statistical artefact provided impenetrable evidence of dysfunction, an aerial backdrop of statistical indicators documented socioeconomic disadvantage for the target population, and policymakers alone displayed the political will and maturity to enact change. Through such framing of the sector's dysfunction, council amalgamations became the obvious solution for the sector's woes. The weaknesses of small-scale structures would be overcome by regionalised up-scaling and the attraction of more professionalised management staff. Other more complex political factors affecting the sector's past shortcomings could remain quarantined from consideration.

Another statistical creation of a crisis-event: inventing a funding shortfall

Consider another example of crisis-event creation, this one relating to the distribution of untied general purpose and local roads funding to councils through the Northern Territory Grants Commission (NTGC), an 'independent' statutory authority that is responsible for

administering the distribution of roads and untied general purpose grant funding to the NT's local government sector (NTGC, 2008: 7-13). A problem repeatedly expressed by senior policy makers was that under a new funding distribution methodology adopted by the NTGC, the smaller community councils would be disadvantaged. Minister McAdam stated in 2006:

... the Grants Commission has advised me that with the full roll-out of the new methodology, about 20 councils could end up on the minimum grant by 2008-09. This is also a stark reminder that there are serious structural problems in the present system of local government in the bush. (McAdam, 2006)

Another interview participant recalled that in the lead-up to the amalgamation reform the NTGC Chairman had written to the Minister for Local Government to highlight that many existing community councils

... were so small, meaning no matter how low you would make the cost adjustors on the needs distribution basis, you still wouldn't get them above the line of minimum grant... No matter how loaded up you created the cost adjustors for that place, the population was so low as to not get them a beneficial outcome. So when you start to look at the inescapable costs – what are you going to pay for a CEO, what are you going to pay for an office, electricity, accounting and bookkeeping – ... often they exceeded the amount you were going to get through the Grants Commission process. (Interview 28 June, 2010)

These statements present the independence of Grants Commission and the non-negotiability of the new funding distribution methodology as given, and frame the situation as a looming exogenously-imposed crisis to which small community councils need to react (by acquiescing to structural amalgamations). References to statistical facts and formulas ('cost adjustors on the needs distribution basis'; 'about 20 councils could end up on the minimum grant by 2008-09') added a sense of distanced authoritativeness to the funding methodology.

Yet these statements conceal the political manipulation behind the methodology review. Importantly, the Grants Commission's membership has long been dominated by former and current senior NT Government executive staff who had direct involvement in the regulation and strategic planning of the local government sector. This included the NTGC Chairman (incumbent from 2002 until the date of publication), who was formerly director of the department's local government division, and a long-serving advisor to the Minister for Local Government. The long tenure of the NTGC Chairman likely augmented his direct influence in the funding methodology review, a gradual process that was deliberately paced over many years (NTGC, 2008: 13). In short, the individual NTGC members who influenced the adoption of a funding methodology disadvantageous to smaller councils were also the same individuals who were involved with strategically planning the 2008 amalgamations reform. Given bureaucratic actors' dominance over the commission and the exhaustively long duration of the funding methodology review process, it is difficult to imagine non-bureaucratic actors had any material influence over the review's outcomes (for example, by implementing a methodology that favoured smaller, remote councils).

By 2008, the NTGC's new funding regime became another statistically-generated crisis-event, along with the categorisation of widespread dysfunction amongst community councils. These "events" gave bureaucratic actors compelling justification to push through the reform, irrespective of the unpopularity and coerciveness of the amalgamations policy. Indeed by this stage, structural amalgamations had become accepted as the obvious solution within the bureaucracy, to the point that other possible courses of action were no longer contemplated. These acts of crisis-event creation through a series of non-eventful decisions, categorisations and assumptions, had now effectively created the remarkable situation in which 'there was no other alternative' to reform (McAdam, 2010).

Management's interpretative labour: trust, openness and complacency

Another manifestation of bureaucratic violence here was the gap in interpretative labour (Graeber, 2012), or the lopsided functioning of imagination between bureaucrats and their policy referents in understanding the motivations and outcomes of the reform. Actors who

had more power generally assumed good faith in the process, claimed (often nonchalantly) a deep understanding of the situation on the ground, and made limited effort in understanding the sentiments of their remedial targets. As David Graeber comments, 'those relying on the fear of force are not obliged to engage in a lot of interpretative labor, and thus, generally speaking, do not' (Graeber, 2012: 115-116). Conversely, residents affected by the reform commonly expressed hostilities, negative suspicions and a lack of knowledge about the policy change. This often manifested itself as creative mistrust, expressed through imaginations of widespread theft and lying committed by senior bureaucrats.

Shire management staff interviewed for this thesis described their relationships with community residents generally positively and upbeat. They commonly assumed a sense of openness and understanding, and downplayed any sentiments of negativity from, shire residents. The senior shire manager quoted at length earlier in this chapter characterised his shire's relations with residents as 'getting better', with hostility coming only from 'a small local minority', because 'most [residents] don't even notice that there's been a change'. He confidently concluded 'there's a little bit of scepticism [amongst residents], but I think long-term we'll be fine', yet later admitted he did not know any one in particular (Interview 17 March, 2010). This buoyant appraisal was shared by another senior shire manager I interviewed. When I asked her about the strengths of the shires, she responded:

I would like to think its biggest strength is its footprint in the region, its connection to community, and its strategic objectives, mainly the local jobs for local people. I do think that the [shire's] main theme and main value is around what is best for community. There's some deep-rooted values that I think are not articulated that much, but I do think there is a bit of heart in the council and caring for what's right for community. (Interview 5 September, 2014)

When I interviewed shire managers and NT Government officers about the issue of trust during the reform process, many stated they had personally been able to overcome misunderstandings and had established trustful relationships with residents. One NT

Government officer involved in implementing the reform (who later went on to a senior management position in a shire) commented:

I think [we did establish trust]. That evidenced by the fact that I still have those relationships with people today. I think that people didn't trust us to start with... because they thought that they were going to take over land and management of country and take over that whole governance responsibility of [traditional landowners]. But when we identified this was about service delivery, not about taking over land ... once we were able to separate those two playing fields, I think most people got on side. And whenever there was a cultural issue, people were engaged, so you know, I think, I think we did pretty good. (Interview 16 March (#1), 2010)

Similarly, another NT Government officer judged that his own individual agency had established trust, and over time decreased the 'scepticism' many residents felt towards the reform: 'I thought the communities were sceptical to start off with. They were unsure... They were sceptical of the process, they were sceptical of the Shire. But as far as being a person delivering the message, I think they trusted us' (Interview 2 March, 2010).

Residents' interpretative labour: confusion, mistrust and imagination

These perceptions of openness and acceptance were in marked contrast to the prevailing sentiments of local residents not employed within the bureaucracy. Feelings of confusion, dispossession, mistrust and outright hostility were common themes, across all communities and all years covered by this research project (see also CLC, 2010; Michel, 2015; Peterson, 2013a; Sanders, 2012a). Typical interview responses included:

We don't like the Shire. It's been like pulling down [the community]. They just came here and changed everything. (Interview 10 December, 2009)

The shire has come in, like a big rock falling on us, just bang. (Interview 28 February, 2010)

They came and invaded this community... [We were given] no chance, no consulting with us, [shire] just took everything the council used to own. (Interviews 6-7 December, 2010)

Not happy with Shire... We don't like one of them people... They're telling us what to do, twisting it. I don't think they want to listen. (Interview 17 February, 2011)

We never seen anything good since the Shire came in. (Interview 25 June, 2011)

I don't really know what [the shire] means, people don't explain it, or what they're going to do. I don't know really.... [But] a lot of big shots come out here with lots of empty promises. (Interview 1 February, 2011)

It was like invasion day again... There's a lack of communication between government and us, because their law changes every now and then... I don't like shire, that's my feelings. I just hate them. (Interview 25 February, 2010)

In these statements there are obvious expressions of antagonism, and the shires are generally treated as an external, distant and untrustworthy entity. Many respondents frequently referred to the shire as 'they' – even when the interview participants were themselves elected councillors or shire employees. Related to the distance and otherness of the shire is a prevailing sense of confusion and miscommunication ('It was like invasion day'; 'I don't really know what [the shire] means, people don't explain it'; 'like a big rock falling on us, just bang'; and 'their law changes every now and then').

My interpretation of these expressions is that, far from apathy or indifference, many statements contained a visible element of interpretative labour: there were imaginations of hidden information and exclusive power networks, of individual pressure points. One group of interview participants in Wadeye, for instance, metaphorically referred to the shire headquarters in Katherine (450 kilometres distant) as an 'ivory tower' (Interview 5 March, 2010). A Ngukurr resident described his community as 'like puppets on a string... Everything the shire makes, it's all happening up there like [in] Canberra, Darwin mob just tell the community' (Interview 6 December, 2010). Another Ngukurr resident described the shire's decision-making process as such:

Since shire hasn't been negotiating with us and not keeping promise, not with the people. Taking over, telling us what to do. They should use our ideas, our own ideas for our own children. We don't need nobody telling us what to do... [We have] not much power because

[we] got to see man in the office [the Shire Services Manager], then he goes to town [to the shire head office in Katherine] and then Canberra I think. (Interview 6 December, 2010)

Consistent with these imaginations of abstracted decision-making hierarchies within the shire, some interviewees perceived the shire institution as riddled with 'secrets' and 'lies'. One interview participant from Nganmarriyanga stated, 'sometimes shire go to big meeting, they don't tell us what's going on, they keep it secret from us. It's been pretty tough going on here' (Interview 17 February, 2011). Or in Nauiyu: 'We can talk to them and tell them and get a promise, but promises don't happen... They're having secret meetings – we don't know' (Interview 25 February, 2010).

These admissions of ignorance and imagined conspiracies are remarkable when juxtaposed with bureaucratic actors' confident assumptions of overall relaxed understanding. I argue these perceived gaps of knowledge are significant as expressions of inequality. As Michael Taussig writes, 'the clumsy hybrid of power/knowledge comes at last into meaningful focus, it being not that knowledge is power but rather that active not-knowing makes it so' (Taussig, 1999: 6-7). The unknown becomes open ground for the labours of imaginative interpretation, which render the meanings of hidden information more voluminous, more indefinite – and more powerful – than the original. Georg Simmel writes:

Before the unknown, man's [sic] natural impulse to idealize and his natural fearfulness cooperate toward the same goal: to intensify the unknown through imagination, and to pay attention to it with an emphasis that is not usually accorded to patent reality. (in Wolff, 1950: 333)

Secrecy, in turn, is a violently creative extension of knowledge inequalities: a type of imagined betrayal, with detrimental effects on social relationships, even when the purported concealer remains unaware of the secret. As Deleuze and Guattari argue,

... the secret as content is superseded by a perception of the secret, which is no less secret than the secret. It matters little what the goal is, and whether the aim of the perception is a denunciation, final divulging, or disclosure... The secret, as secret, must now acquire its own

form. The secret is elevated from a finite content to the infinite form of secrecy. (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 334-336)

The public secret of financial statistics

Statistics were a key form of information produced and distributed by bureaucratic actors throughout the 2008 shires reform, both as colloquial accounts and as gleaned mathematical estimations. In my professional positions in local government between 2007 and 2013, statistical information (in the forms of shire service delivery plans, budgets, annual financial statements and so forth) was always a key output. Such information was commonly accepted by my colleagues as a valid, rational and empirically-driven interpretation of data – a higher order of truth that was never fundamentally questioned. Importantly, most of this information was “open” to the public: there are generally ample volumes of details on council finances, workforce structures and strategic planning publicly available on council websites and office front counters. Similarly, shire management staff are obliged to provide regular flows of statistical reports to elected councillors, including annual budgets and monthly reports on councils’ financial position. From my own professional experience as a finance manager for a shire, much corporate value was placed on the “transparency” of this information, and management generally followed an “open book” approach. Although it was acknowledged this information could be difficult for some to decipher, the task of an accountable bureaucrat like myself became one of enlightenment: the unveiling of truth through education and appropriate communication tactics.

Yet despite their open availability, I argue that financial statistics are the quintessential visible secret. Whereas this form of information may be readily comprehensible to a senior shire manager, this may contrast sharply with outsider recipients of the information, for whom the technical conventions of financial reporting (such as the use of reporting periods, credits and debits, and the distinctions between income statements, balance sheets, cash flow statements, budget versus actual operating results, forward estimates and accrual accounts, and so forth) can render it confusing and ambiguous (see also Miller & Power,

2013). Further, figures presented in public financial reports are often highly summarised, derived from layers of secondary figures, and difficult for even an informed insider to interrogate. For those with a practiced eye, acts of statistical summation inhibit meaningful disclosure.

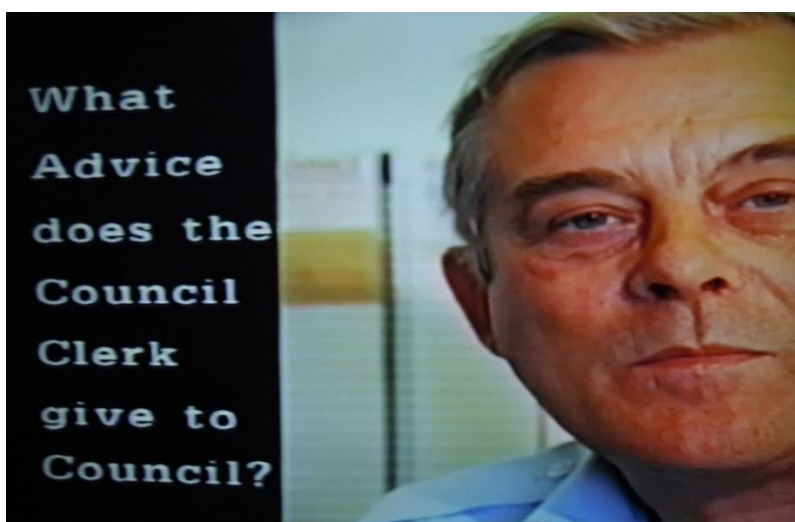


Figure 4.3: Excerpt of video transcript - [Textbox: 'What advice does the Council Clerk give to Council?'] 'A lot of the advice is that I give to them is complying with accountancy regulations, the spending of money, sticking within the budget functions that we laid out at the beginning of the financial year.... 'They'll sometimes seek advice from me as to the Acts of Parliament, and we can look them up and determine what the advice would be and I think they're really grateful for the advice they get... The budget is displayed continuously up in our council office. It's all displayed on the board so that all the councillors know what the budget is per annum, and throughout the year we can talk about it, and they only have to look up at the notice board and they can see whether they are sticking within the budget specifications.' (LGITAB, 1995)

This disconnect is compounded in intercultural contexts such as the Northern Territory's shire council sector, where many councillors and residents may not have English as their first language, and for whom financial numeracy may be of subordinate cultural importance. Despite this communicative barrier, financial information in this setting is often provided in the forms of spreadsheets and formal English-language written reports, and delivered in formalised meetings with bureaucratically-set protocols of communication, such as minutes and times slots for speaking (CLC, 2010: 7-8; Michel, 2015: 108; Smith, 2008).

These factors combined to create a discursive safe zone during the shires reform, in which bureaucracy's knowledge-based power was privileged and reinforced. In contrast, shire residents and elected councillors regularly displayed suspicion and mistrust towards statistical (especially financial) information provided by the shires and the Northern Territory Government. Imaginations of exploitation and theft were widespread, unmitigated by the open provision of financial information. For example, one Nauiyu resident stated, 'they sent people from outside to teach, but I think they just come in to take our money or something like that because they [the shires] don't really care about anything else' (Interview 25 February, 2010). Two interview participants from Wadeye, when asked what they thought of when they heard the word 'shire', responded: 'it makes us think of dishonesty. And what we lost with them as well – we lost a lot. Because they [the shires] had no money... I read only a couple of minutes from meetings, and I'm lost about how much money is getting spent' (Interview 5 March, 2010). A group of Kalkarindji residents declared:

We were the healthiest community that rolled over to the shire, the biggest bucket of money, and we got ripped off real good. We had about \$2.4 million to spend, we put together a big wish list and didn't get nothing back... They took it all... And now we've lost more of our assets. (Interview 28 February, 2010).

This disconnect between bureaucratic actors' perceptions of openness and local residents' perceptions of secrecy and mystification can be understood in terms of the *content* of information being disclosed, as distinct from the *representations* of disclosure themselves. Therein lies the paradox of visible secrets: how open and accessible information can simultaneously function as closed when they are obstructed by layers of culturally-exclusive knowledge. Empirical rigour and "transparency" is not an anecdote to this gap.³³ As Deleuze

³³ For example, contrary to the Kalkarindji residents' statement quoted above, in comparative financial terms their council was not a remarkably 'healthy' organisation, and their claims their council 'got ripped off real good' can easily be dismissed on empirical grounds. The Daguragu CGC's 2008 audited financial statements revealed combined operating results for the two years prior to the 2008 reform that totalled \$3.65 million in deficit, reflecting operating expenses that were about 40 per cent greater than operating revenues (Daguragu CGC, 2008: 4). The cash reserves transferred from Daguragu CGC to Victoria Daly Shire amounted to \$4.56 million (not \$2.4 million), and although this was the largest nominal cash transfer from all the amalgamated councils in Victoria Daly Shire, Daguragu CGC had been the second-largest council in budget terms. Likewise, its transfer of non-current assets was proportionately not the largest compared to the other amalgamated

and Guattari write: 'Some people can talk, hide nothing, not lie: they are secret by transparency, as impenetrable as water, in truth incomprehensible' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 338-339).

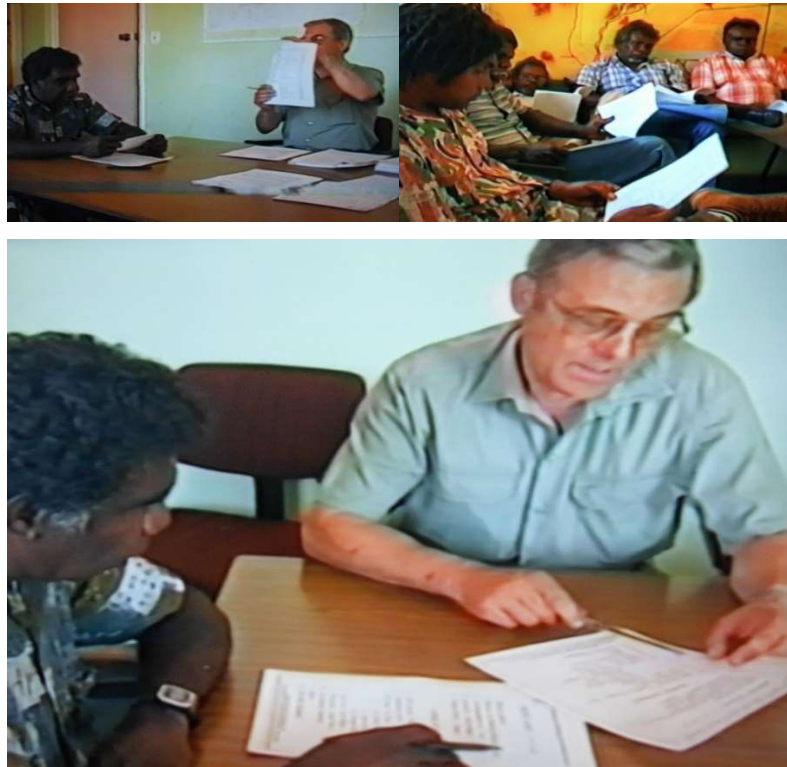


Figure 4.4: Excerpt of video transcript - [Council Clerk holds up document at meeting table, room full of Aboriginal councillors looking quietly at documents.] 'This is a list of income and expenditure since the last meeting. Um... I take it you've all had a look at it. If there's anything we need to talk about, we can. If not, perhaps we go to a mover and seconder [inaudible]... OK.' (LGITAB, 1995)

This dynamic is reflective of a culture that extends far beyond the confines of a shire council's meeting room, and hints at the sources of power of the modern state. The financial statistic reinforces the bureaucrat's hierarchical authority as both the possessor and necessary interpreter of that knowledge; it requires the alchemy of the bureaucratic expert to create and interpret it, and by virtue of its impenetrability, it is able to retain its violent capacity as 'secret'. In his book *The Magic of the State*, Michael Taussig analyses the modern state's use of macroeconomic statistics as a type of sacred secrecy:

councils (VDSC, 2009: 40). In conjunction with Daguragu CGC's large operating deficits in 2006-08, the small non-current asset transfer reflected, in financial management terms, a poor asset management regime.

It's not just that these major economic indicators are based in part on inspired and not so inspired guess-work, and in part on deliberate lies. More important still is the enormously revealing fact that simply because they bear the imprimatur of the modern state, such figures are accorded a knock-around practical status they in no way deserve – and more important than secrecy and deliberate deceit in this regard, which at least gesture towards the familiar fantasy of a reassuringly real and motivated order of somebody or some thing, after all, conspiring behind the facade, far more important than this is the truly sacred secrecy achieved through either the denial of secrecy or, stronger still, the claim that there is secrecy when, in fact, the real official secret is that there is none. With this latter masterful stroke, the performance of hidden innerness is called into play and the state of the whole assured sublime status.' (Taussig, 1997: 144-145)

Statistics as a public secret is thus revealed as a key tool of bureaucratic expertise, the source of its capacity for administrative violence – a body of knowledge that, through its transparent disclosure of impenetrable information, can create and reinforce unequal power relations between bureaucracy and the populace. This argument is furthered in the next chapter, where I analyse the culture of accountability regimes in the state which also rely heavily on statistical information. In particular, I disrupt the largely unquestioned deployment by bureaucracy of terms like “accountability” and “corruption”, and demonstrate there is more arbitrariness and contradictions in the practices of statistically-based accountability than is often acknowledged.

Chapter Five

Open Roads, Locked Gates

Closely linked with policymakers' naming of the Northern Territory's community council system as dysfunctional and in crisis, a key bureaucratic goal of the 2008 shires reform was to improve the local government sector's "accountability" and mitigate "corruption". Better accounting practices for the sector were envisaged as a tool not only for enhanced organisational efficiency, but also for moral renewal and an avenue for broader economic development. For the bureaucratic actors involved, this lent the reform a sense of morally righteous impetus (despite its trenchant unpopularity).

In this chapter I disrupt the moral certitude of this new accountability regime by drawing attention to the patrimonialism, arbitrariness and privilege which characterise how the rules of accountability are implemented. This impacts on how organisations such as the shires are hierarchically structured, and how coveted commodities such as motor vehicles are governed. I argue that how external entities such as the McArthur River Mine, a large zinc, lead and silver mining operation near the town of Borroloola in Roper Gulf Shire, are subject to accountability regimes demonstrate how accounting practices are not a check on but an expression of power.

The light of accountability, the slur of corruption

Corruption, conventionally understood as the abuse of public office or resources for private gain (Harrison, 2007: 673; Hough, 2013: 2-3; Shore & Haller, 2005: 2), is a term that affectively stretches far beyond a narrow, technical definition. More than the contravention of rule or law, corruption exudes opprobrium. Buchan and Hill describe the term as carrying 'a moral weight that almost defies definition... [It] is more than simply a wrong, a crime or an error of judgement because it also embodies a dynamic quality. Corruption implies a loss, decay or degeneracy' (Buchan & Hill, 2014: 5). Dan Hough comments that '[b]eing encouraged to fight corruption is now so self-evidently a 'good thing' that it is incorporated

either directly or indirectly into virtually all national and international public policy discourse' (Hough, 2013: 20). In short, to label an act as "corrupt" is an example of naming in its most explicitly political form. Combined with the material power of the state, the discourse of "fighting corruption", alongside its positive counterparts of "promoting accountability and good governance" can have many tangible effects on the functions of governmentality (Gupta, 1995: 388): they help to codify bureaucratic hierarchies, structure government departments, and instil auditing practices and resources into everyday operations.

However, arguably its more cogent power is its influence in how the state is imagined. The meanings attached to corruption and accountability are key elements in the social constitution of the state and its citizenry, and in the culturally-defined public versus private dualism (Shore & Haller, 2005: 4-5). Instilling accountability into public institutions, for instance, can be linked to idealised conceptualisations of the state as a distinct, impartial entity, governed by fixed rules of conduct (Gupta, 2012: 92; 105-106; Verkaaik, 2001: 349). This conceptualisation enables the state's project of promoting "transparency", which implies the existence of surreptitious forces that may have a corruptible influence on an otherwise benevolent system (Shore & Haller, 2005: 11-12). Accountability, in this sense, has a moral-symbolic purpose of lending legitimacy to state agency: it works as an impetus for any policy reform that aims to allay hidden elements of corruption, understood as a form of moral decay (both within government institutions and in broader society). In this sense, accounting acts as the morality of public sector management (Strathern, 2000).

Yet the strength of the state's war against corruption is derived from more than moral legitimisation. There is also a functional element to fighting corruption, as a strategy for combatting organisational and economic inefficiency. Corruption is commonly assumed to be wasteful, and concepts of accountability are commonly conflated with market-oriented tropes of "opening up" communities for "development". Dan Hough, in his book on the ascendant anti-corruption focus of powerful public organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), writes of the dominant narrative within governments that corruption stifles economic development. Conversely, the promotion of

institutional “good governance” is widely perceived as a key ingredient for market-based economic growth, and market structures can in turn promote a culture of transparency and accountability more generally (Hough, 2013: 6-26). This political framing of the role of accountability helps explain its compelling force in modern organisational practice; while reinforcing a founding assumption that some countries, institutions and cultures have good governance, others need to acquire it, by giving up their corrupt ways. Its appeal lies not only in its moral righteousness and promotion of institutional efficiency, but its elevation of certain administrative apparatuses as, *a priori*, not corrupt.

There are other important, often overlooked elements of the “doing” of accountability. The most ubiquitous modern form of the practice of accountability is through the (aptly named) professional discipline of accounting, widely accepted as the legitimate practice of verification for the modern organisation (Power, 1997: 14). With its focus on the translation of organisational life into finance-based statistical information, accounting has become a highly specialised area of expertise requiring many years of training, mastery of a technically complex and arcane field, full of technological particularities that have created a bulwark of impenetrability – and dullness – around it.

This impenetrable dullness has become its own source of authority; helping to inure the everyday, arcane tedium of accounting procedures from critical scrutiny (Felski, 1999: 15), with its technocratic complexity serving to create distance between accounting systems and the subjects of accountability (De Certeau, 1984: xiii). This has enabled accounting as a body of knowledge to create what Miller and Power describe as a ‘facticity’, whereby accounting ‘appears objective and unchallengeable, beyond the fray of politics or mere opinion’ (Miller & Power, 2013: 559).

However, beneath its appearances of innocuous objectivity, there are explicitly political roles played by accounting. Miller and Power interpret this field of knowledge as

perhaps the most powerful system of representation for social and economic life today... [It] increasingly provides the dominant narrative of market rationality within organizations, among organizations, and at a societal level. (Miller & Power, 2013: 557-558).

In Foucauldian terms, the functions of accounting become a dense transfer point for organisational power relations (Foucault, 1978: 103). This has vast implications for organisational hierarchies and the authority of accountability “professionals” within these hierarchies. Similar to a medical doctor’s diagnostic power over the physical body (Mol, 2002: 9), the financial management professional often holds primary accounting authority within an organisational body. It is, after all, the accountant who *enacts* accountability.

Intrinsic to its maintenance of hierarchies is what Miller and Power describe as the ‘subjectivising’ force of accounting, or its ability to subject the self (be it an organisation, group or individual) into a monitored, calculable and ultimately self-calculating unit (Miller & Power, 2013: 586-587). One of accounting’s primary organisational functions is to disperse and impose commensurable rules and procedures onto individual and social subjects; it therefore has a central role in constituting power relations within these organisations. These functions have implications beyond an organisation’s administrative structures, and relate more broadly to liberalism’s technologies of governing at a distance: accounting works as a practical translation of governmental strategies from ‘centres of calculation’ into dispersed locales and units (Foucault, 1979: 12; Murray Li, 2007: 4-7; Rose, 2006: 148-149).

This political aspect of accounting highlights its capacity to have contested and arbitrary applications far removed from impartiality. As Laura Ann Stoler writes, we should not expect a void of political agency in the assertion of bureaucratic rules related to accounting. Instead, accounting practices can be understood as the highest expression of bureaucratic power, and at the vanguard in defending bureaucratic position and privilege (Stoler, 2009: 64). Espeland and Stevens also point out the obscured cultural assumptions and power relations expressed through an organisation’s commensuration processes (such as

accounting), and argue that these can work to establish legitimacy and political benefit for some organisational players at the expense and exclusion of others (Espeland & Stevens, 1998: 314-316). On a broader social level, Mitchell and Sikka argue the profession of accounting, and in particular the practices of the largest accounting and auditing firms, is premised on a market-oriented, tax-avoidance rationality that fundamentally seeks to further the interests of the capitalist classes (Mitchell and Sikka 2011). In this sense, accounting is not a check on power, but an expression of it.

The moral impetus for improving accountability

In Australia's Indigenous affairs policy arena, narratives around corruption and accountability are frequently applied to justify the state's deepening of accounting systems. The Australian Government's *Northern Territory National Emergency Response*, or 'the Intervention', is one prominent example: the policy program was premised on a discourse of moral degeneration in the NT's Indigenous communities that necessitated a drastic increase in public accountability – to be enacted by the Australian Government.³⁴

Although the Northern Territory's 2008 shires reform was distinct from the Intervention in that it focused its remediating efforts on local government institutions, there were discursive commonalities in the imagined role for the state as an agent of anti-corruption. In

³⁴ During the second reading speech before parliament of the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill 2007*, then Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs Mal Brough commended the legislation as 'all about the safety and well-being of children':

When confronted with a failed society where basic standards of law and order and behaviour have broken down and where women and children are unsafe, how should we respond? Do we respond with more of what we have done in the past? Or do we radically change direction with an intervention strategy matched to the magnitude of the problem?... With clear evidence that the Northern Territory Government was not able to protect these children adequately, the Howard Government decided that it was now time to intervene and declare an emergency situation and use the Territories Power available under the Constitution to make laws for the Northern Territory... These communities are not thriving; some are in desperate circumstances that have led to the tragedy of widespread child abuse... We will not accept that the major urban centres in the Northern Territory continue for another 30 years to be fringed by ghettos where Indigenous people receive second or third class local government services... The Australian public want to see real change and are willing to put their shoulder to the wheel when they feel that finally they can help to improve the lot of their fellow Australian citizens – the first Australians. (Brough, 2007)

a later justification of the shires reform, former Minister McAdam labelled the pre-amalgamation era as 'the bad old days where incompetence reigned supreme', and construed the reforming state as a tool for individualised moral agency: 'If you're fair dinkum ... you ask yourself the question: can I tolerate this? Can I allow this to happen?...[As a Minister] I wasn't prepared to sit back and allow what goes on around me to continue into the future' (McAdam, 2010).

The non-Indigenous executive staff of these community councils were often singled out for opprobrium. For example, one of the NT Government's key architects of the amalgamations publicly attributed the failures of the community council sector to their inability 'to deliver good governance'. In order to improve,

[t]he power of the misfits, missionaries and mercenaries who have dominated the administrative landscape of community government in the Northern Territory since self-government, [councils] needs to give over to a [more professional] leadership environment.(Scarvelis, 2008)

Reflecting the sense of secrecy local residents would later attribute to the replacement shires, one NT Government officer commented that the operations of the previous community councils were indefensible, because 'who knows what [they were] doing. Their reports to the public or their business plan and their financial reports were also unknown to the wider world, including government in some cases' (Interview 16 March (#1), 2010).

A more muted narrative in bureaucratic circles concerned local Indigenous leaders regularly using local government bodies to misappropriate public funds and engage in nepotistic practices. Most incidents received minimal media attention, perhaps because of the difficulties of detection and other political sensitivities.³⁵ Yet these acts of transgression

³⁵ One notable exception was Melbourne Age journalist Russell Skelton's coverage of the allegedly corrupt governance practices of the Papunya Community Government Council and in particular the local Indigenous powerbroker Alison Anderson, which culminated in the book *King Brown Country: the betrayal of Papunya* (Skelton, 2010). As detailed in Chapter Two of this thesis, the events leading to the dismissal of Yugul Mangi Community Government Council in 2003 also received some local media attention, in which local Indigenous

were regular fare for the regulatory government department, of which the Monitoring and Compliance Unit was incessantly engaged in probity investigations.

This corporate focus on non-compliance easily created a sense of systemic malfeasance. One senior department official spoke of a cluster of councils 'where the [non-Indigenous] CEO and the [Indigenous] chairperson of the council and that person's family benefited from that arrangement in a way that I would consider to be corrupt,' highlighting the conduct of Yugul Mangi, Ntaria, Galiwinku and Thamarrurr councils as examples (Interview 26 August, 2015). His high-ranking colleague described the community government council system as one of 'endemic corruption', and remarked:

The old model of local government was based on, in my view, a few very powerful [Indigenous] people from some powerful families accumulating ninety per cent of the benefit and the rest of the community really struggling to get anything out of it.... I saw the process of how some reasonably decent [non-Indigenous] men and women were compromised by important people on Indigenous communities to the point where they had two choices: either participate in the collusion, which in effect was fraudulent and corrupt, or stand up to that and find that they're pushed out of the community very quickly. (Interview 24 April, 2015)

The 2008 reform thus took on proportions larger than a structural reorganisation of local government services. It became a type of moral renewal of the state, a cleansing out of corrupted pollutants within the local government sector.³⁶ Interpretations of the reform as

councillors were referred to as the 'sugar mob', as a derogatory reference to their self-interested financial decision-making (Hinde, 2003; Toohey, 2002a, 2002c). However in the Yugul Mangi case, media focus was arguably on the conduct of the non-Indigenous town clerk Lyn Mott and other outsiders, which reinforced the 'predatory white fella' typology.

³⁶ One tactic of the NT Government aimed, I argue, at claiming the moral high ground of the shires reform was the appointment of Pat Dodson as chairman of the Local Government Advisory Board (LGAB). Dodson, formerly a Catholic priest, chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, and Commissioner into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, is a high-profile Indigenous leader in northern Australia and widely respected for his calm, patrician demeanour. The LGAB was the peak consultation body for the reform, and as its chairman, Dodson attended numerous public meetings and featured in many media reports. This made him a prominent public face of the reform. Where Minister McAdam was the policy's political leader, Dodson became its *moral* leader. For a policy reform that proved to be highly contentious, he was an excellent branding choice. In 2016, Dodson was elected to the Australian Parliament as a West Australian senator for the Australian Labor Party.

renewal were prevalent throughout bureaucratic circles. When asked what the main motivation for the shires reform was, one NT Government official stated it was 'to revolutionise service delivery in the bush [and to develop a] governance structure and service delivery model that would be more accountable and transparent' (Interview 16 March (#1), 2010). Another senior shire manager who had previously worked as a town clerk for a community council, described the new shire system as:

Oh way better, way better. Way higher level of accountability and transparency... Our effectiveness has improved a hell of a lot as well. Working with the Community Government Council with little controls in place, it was... [pause] I virtually went to a council that had no policies and procedures, no record management. It was in the red, things like that. (interview 11 September, 2014)

Accountability as a development imperative

This renewal of institutional accountability also contained imaginations of a new era of economic development and "openness". In the Australian Government's recent landmark policy document *Our North, Our Future: White Paper on Developing Northern Australia*, improved governance and accountability is explicitly linked to economic growth. The document states that

good governance is critical to reducing business uncertainty and costs, and attracting investment to the north... Businesses bring with them high standards of accountability and management — more private investment should therefore improve governance in the north. (Australian Government, 2015: 10; 116)

This historical positioning of institutional accountability interconnected with market-based development was also discernible in the NT Government's strategic planning behind the 2008 shires reform. One senior NT Government official stated the overarching aim was to:

change some of the local government structures, as much as looking at the larger regional development... In my mind what we've put in place is mainly structural reform and it's going to take another brave thinker to get to the stage where some of the social reform and the

dynamics of community development within those communities [are reformed]. (Interview 24 April, 2015)

Similarly, former Minister McAdam commented in 2010 that he personally didn't like the term 'shire' as the descriptor of the model, because 'it should be seen as regional economic development model'. He emphasised:

Bear in mind there's a whole new framework in place in terms of revenue-raising which didn't exist out in the bush communities before. I'm talking about... mining companies, horticultural development... There'll be immense development opportunities going forward in all the bush communities. Some [mining and horticulture projects] are going to be brought forward. (McAdam, 2010)

In my ethnographic case, these imagined effects of more accountability – as a tool for moral renewal, improved organisational efficiency, and as an avenue for lucrative economic development – lent the 2008 shires reform an air of common sense and moral righteousness within bureaucratic circles. It was impossible for bureaucratic staff engaged with the reform to be completely oblivious to the vocal resistance against amalgamations. However the rationale in favour of the reform enabled any opposition to be readily dismissed as morally misplaced, simple rent-seeking, short term, or ultimately futile. This prevailing bureaucratic culture affected my own professional conduct as an NT Government officer. It was also soon to propel me into my next professional position, as senior manager within a shire council, centrally responsible for translating values of accountability into organisational practice.

An open road

In 2010, I was approached to apply for the finance manager position of a new shire. A gate had been opened for me. The position of finance manager wasn't a role I had coveted, but I had skills and experience that made me suitable, and as a well-paid position in management it would be a lucrative career step. There were other motivations: I knew the shire was

having difficulty filling the position, and insiders had informed me the organisation's financial management systems were poorly run. This posed an enticing professional – even moral – challenge for me, related to the modernist allure of fostering better government (N. Rose, 2006: 149). I rationalised that if this new shire was ever going to harness the benefits of *better* governance structures, harness more government funding and deliver on their developmental goals of improving services and increasing jobs, then their financial accounting systems would urgently need to improve.

So I threw myself and was thrown into the role of finance manager. With little initiation, I became responsible for spearheading the organisation's deepened transformation into a more accountable, calculable and standardised entity. My work was definitively guided by one clear corporate goal, reiterated frequently by my CEO and the elected council: to achieve a clean annual financial audit within a set deadline. Beneath this corporate meta-objective was a plethora of urgent ancillary tasks, all layered by mundane technical detail. Besides the onerous consolidation of a new business system and the remediation of the council's budgeting, bank reconciliation, accounts payable and accounts receivable processes, finance staff were responsible for implementing new procurement and purchasing rules, controls on mobile phone and internet usage, stocktakes of plant and inventory, internal allocation protocols, a revamped chart of accounts, more formalised reporting hierarchies, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Did I shape the needs of the accounts, or did they shape me (Steiner, 1989: 75-78; Weick, 1999: 135-136; Vike, 2002: 58)?

For many people within the organisation (for most people in fact, including the CEO and elected council), the technicality of these accounting procedures were largely impenetrable. Some of this can be attributed to the inherently confusing conventions of financial reporting for any lay audience (Miller & Power, 2013). But there were other factors. As noted, the financial reports published by the finance department (including the audited annual financial statements) were generally derived from layers of secondary figures, and the summarised reports were difficult for even an informed insider to interrogate. The technical

detail of the shire's accounting practices produced more than obfuscation. It also produced boredom – dull, mind-numbing boredom.

These insights apply well to the dynamics of the shires reform process. Notwithstanding the singular event on 1 July 2008 of the replacement of community councils with regional councils, much of the more significant organisational transformation occurred in the months and years thereafter, and related mainly to changes in administrative rules and accounting procedures. Many of these changes received limited attention because of their technicality and dullness. Irrespective of this limited engagement, everyone within management, on the elected council, and in the funding agencies still wanted the appearance of tighter accountability and a clean financial audit – on time and without qualifications.

As the finance manager, these expectations of a clean audit led to a high-pressure work environment for me, exacerbated by the organisational chaos I worked within. When I started my tenure, the shire's accounts were in worse order than I had anticipated, due in part to a flawed implementation of the business management system software (Deloitte, 2012: 94). Many government funding grants had been left unacquitted for years; the bank reconciliation was months behind; the accounts payable and accounts receivable records were in disarray; budgeting processes were virtually non-existent; morale in the finance department was low, and staff turnover was high. These and other issues entailed a seemingly never-ending task list which, I soon realised, would take months, even years of remedial work and forward planning.

The overbearing, hectic work schedule largely displaced my capacities to critically engage with the job. Amidst the steady stream of solving organisational problems related to 'how much', 'when' and 'how', little time was left over to question 'why'. This absence of reflection in my daily routine was its own source of ethnographic richness; how people make sense of an organisation is all the more revealing when they reflexively 'act their way into their values' (Weick, 2001: 96), and when epistemological practices become ontological

habits. In his exploration of Heidegger's concept of 'thrownness' (Geworfenheit), Karl Weick writes:

Living forward is a blend of thrownness, making do, journeys stitched together by faith, presumptions, expectations, alertness, and actions – all of which may amount to something, although we will know for sure what that something may be only when it is too late to do much about it. Unsettled, emergent, contingent living forward contrasts sharply with our backward-oriented theoretical propositions that depict that living as settled, causally connected, and coherent after the fact. (Weick, 1999: 135)



Figure 5.1: 'Munanga [white people] like chooks with their heads cut off. Running round in circles, here, there, everywhere, playing at being busy' (McRae-Williams, 2008: 188).
Artwork: J. Green (2014) 'Whitefellas work like white ants'. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

These factors – a heavy workload in the finance department that mitigated critical reflection, the technical dullness of accounting tasks, and the reflexive acceptance of financial reporting as the legitimate measure of accountability for the organisation – all served to concentrate a significant amount of authority and autonomy into the role of finance manager. Much of my work was performed with no oversight. I was sometimes uncomfortable with, but just as often accustomed to my hierarchical position and the degree of individual authority I was afforded. Such authority was easy enough to rationalise because it was bound by rules too. Legislation imposed reporting requirements that

regulated my daily work tasks, officials from funding agencies did often closely check the acquittals of their grant programs, and the shire did receive visits from financial auditors twice a year. I also deliberately acted with professional integrity and openness, and followed the organisation's rules to the letter – a subjectivisation of myself to any potential scrutiny. Paradoxically, my daily work practices (often spent in front of a computer screen, with limited human contact) enabled me to more easily construe my role in imposing more internal rules and regulation as *nothing personal*. After all, rules are rules, and they were intended to establish commensurability across the organisation, not individual discrimination.

However my attempt to keep professional distance from interpersonal conflict was only sporadically successful. During my tenure, the organisation was in a state of flux, and many rules were being newly enforced. By definition, these rules were largely aimed at changing human conduct (including the prevention of theft and fraud). As time went on, I became directly involved in at least half a dozen people having their employment terminated, and some contractors losing a lot of work. Through my involvement in these conflicts (many of which were performed openly, and intended for the audience of staff or the broader community), I was implicated in creating working definitions of both accountability and corruption for the shire.

Upon reflection, there were also slippages in this commensuration process, and instances of arbitrariness in my conduct: pride-filled grudges and emotions of revenge could sometimes play a role in how aggressively I pursued different rule breaches. In one case a staff member was able to escape serious consequences for false travel allowance claims, and was allowed to resign quietly after agreeing to reimburse the overpayments. I bided my time and gathered information on her, and months later I was instrumental in sending her to gaol for 10 months for a related incident of fraud.³⁷ In another case, I pursued a former director-

³⁷ In early 2011 Nicole Susan Hoffmann was employed by Roper Gulf Shire Council as a Sport and Recreation Officer. Within a few months, finance department staff detected a number of suspicious travel allowance claims. An internal investigation led to her termination of employment and an undertaking by Ms Hoffmann to repay excess travel allowance payments. During a further background check, it was discovered that she had a

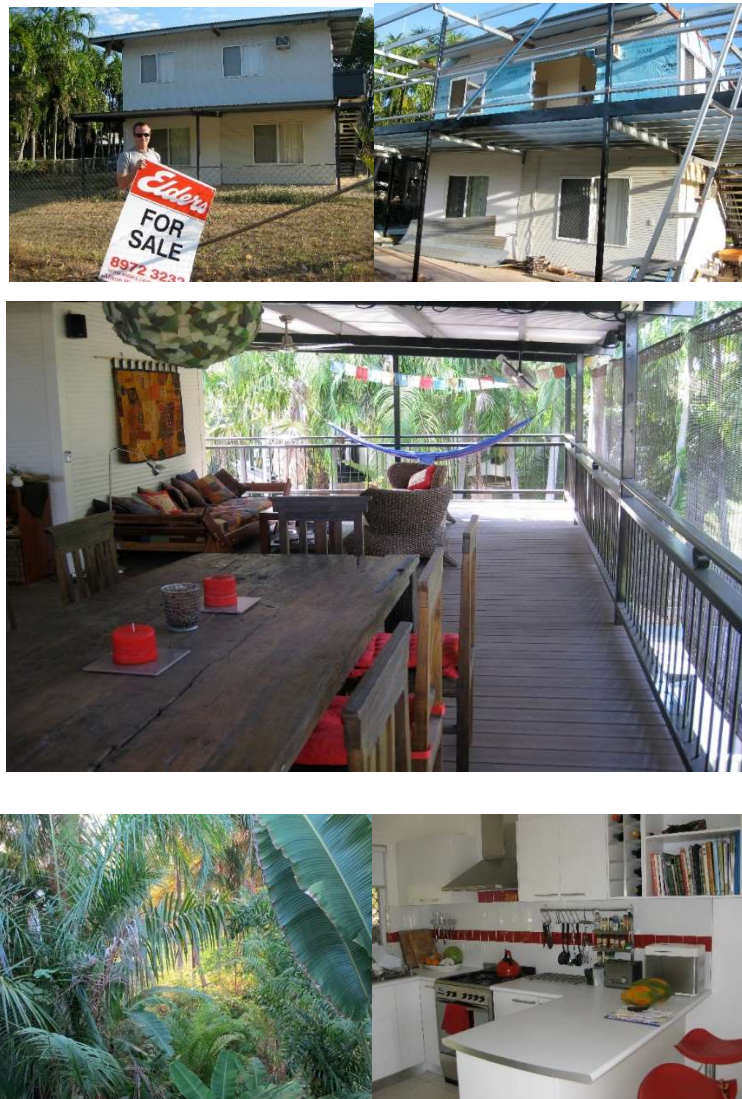
level executive whom I suspected of corrupt behaviour and fraud; after he resigned from his position with the shire and began retaliating personally, I began employing more deliberate, calculated, career-ruining methods, employing against him all the tools of administrative violence I had at my disposal. This included reporting him to the Australian Tax Office for income tax misrepresentation, sullyng his reputation amongst staff and professional communities, instigating an investigation by the Northern Territory Government into his involvement in a contract tendering process, and eventually reporting him to police for suspicious purchasing activities.³⁸

There was also an element of personal benefit that I derived from the conflict, chaos and contention that prevailed in Roper Gulf Shire in the period early after its establishment. During my tenure I always enjoyed a comfortable salary and conditions – as I discovered, being a skilled agent in the ‘anti-corruption industry’ (Hough, 2013: 20) does have its own rewards. As a direct result of said senior manager’s hurried departure from the shire, another gate opened for me, and I was able to fill the vacancy he created. This afforded me

prior criminal conviction related to a similar case of fraudulent travel allowance claims during her employment with the Northern Territory Government in Alice Springs. This conviction had been concealed from Roper Gulf Shire Council at the time of employment by Ms Hoffmann’s production of a falsified criminal history check document. She had subsequently submitted a similar falsified document to her next prospective employer. I reported this matter to police, who sought prosecution on this and on an unrelated matter regarding jewellery theft. In December 2012 she was sentenced by the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory to imprisonment for a non-parole period of ten months (SCNT, 2012).

³⁸ Conscientious work of the shire’s finance department staff later uncovered what appeared to be a *prima facie* case of deliberate fraud and theft committed by this senior manager (named Ronald Hunter): a cleverly concealed purchase of a pre-fabricated kitchen worth approximately \$7,000 that appeared to be used in renovations on his family home. I presented this information to police as evidence for a criminal case against him. It was later revealed he was concurrently committing a larger-scale crime of ‘obtaining benefit by deception’ at his new place of employment: after leaving Roper Gulf Shire Council in late 2012, he became employed as the General Manager of the Demed Association, a small Indigenous outstation services organisation based in West Arnhem Land. During his employment the Association received a \$300,000 grant from the Australian Government for the purpose of purchasing two demountable buildings for installation in Oenpelli. In November 2012 Mr Hunter employed his former associate Stephen Stearnes to the position of Operations Manager. In collusion with Mr Stearnes he defrauded the Australian Government grant by supplying the demountable buildings at an inflated price through a company (Ludanmae Pty Ltd) controlled by Mr Stearnes. It was later estimated the two unlawfully benefited about \$130,000 from this transaction. This deception was soon uncovered, and in June 2015 the Northern Territory Supreme Court sentenced Mr Stearnes to four years imprisonment, with a two-year non-parole period. Ronald Hunter escaped prosecution, most likely by emigrating to Thailand in December 2012 soon after he received the illegal payments from Ludanmae Pty Ltd (SCNT, 2015).

a promotion to a director-level position, and with it a generous six-figure salary, private use of an executive-level vehicle, and other accoutrements. As Hodson et al wrote about their ethnographic study of organisations in chaotic flux: 'these moments of organizational life are both reflective of and conduits for personal agency and power, particularly for the most powerful organizational actors' (Hodson, Martin, Lopez, & Roscigno, 2012: 265).



Figures 5.2: The author's home purchase and renovations in Katherine, Northern Territory. By the way, do you like what we did with the place? Photo: Michel (2010).

Motor vehicles and power relations

My own personal experience ascending the shire's corporate hierarchy is one demonstration of accounting's potential as a tool of privilege. A more general example of

this potentiality, and the power relations at work within accounting regimes, was the management of motor vehicles within the new shires. During the shift in accountability procedures after the shires reform, councils' vehicle policies were a key focus. This in itself is not surprising: motor vehicles have become embedded so deeply into modern socialities that many humans are now utterly dependent on these machines. Cars are now more than highly coveted commodities, but an example of a modern cyborgian way of life.

This applies in contemporary Australian Indigenous life, particularly in geographically remote settings where mobility carries extra practical importance. The tyranny of distances in these regions, which makes non-motorised travel arduous and impractical, is coupled with proportionately low personal incomes for many living in these areas. These material factors alone have increased the relative scarcity and value of motorised transport.³⁹ Many scholars have commented on the unique cultural importance of motor vehicles in rural Indigenous communities, where these assets work as central nodes in local networks of distribution, sharing and reciprocity relationships (Altman & Hinkson, 2007: 181-182; Myers, 1988: 53-54; Redmond, 2006: 99).⁴⁰ Altman and Hinkson point out that in a contemporary context the motor vehicle is not only a key mediatory tool for Indigenous interactions with Australia's settler-colonial society, but has also facilitated connections with (often faraway) customary homelands and extended kinship groupings. It has also enabled modern adaptations of specific cultural practices such as hunting, fishing and artisanal production (exacerbated by the depletion of lands surrounding settlements, which entails these economic practices becoming more vehicle-dependent). This can render the motor vehicle, they argue, as an instrument of social intensification, rather than modern atomisation (Altman & Hinkson, 2007: 197; see also Redmond, 2006: 95).

³⁹ Bruno Spandonide, as part of the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's Transport Futures project, highlights the lack of access to motorised transport as a particularly acute contributor to socioeconomic disadvantage in Australia's rural Indigenous communities. He identifies much higher transport costs as a share of median income, high levels of negative 'externalities' and 'more intense socio-economic forms of exclusion' due to unaffordable or ineffective transport options in remote Australia (Spandonide, 2014: v-vi).

⁴⁰ In his article 'Burning the truck and holding the country' about the social life of objects for the Pintupi people in central Australia, Fred Myers comments that in this setting 'to have a car, one might say, is to find out how many relatives one has' (Myers, 1988: 61)

These culturally specific, non-market valorisations hint at the intercultural tensions and misunderstandings surrounding the use of government-funded “community vehicles” in the Northern Territory’s Indigenous-majority settlements. As Redmond writes, disputes over these assets often reveal

an incommensurability between local notions of ordered distribution of resources through particular pathways of kin, and a social welfare ethic deriving from European social theories of an imagined “primitive communalism” amongst Aborigines. (Redmond, 2006: 99)

This has led to the motor vehicle becoming a key field of intercultural contestation and tension in this setting. Local government, as the primary owner of publicly-funded vehicles in many Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, has become an institutional nexus point for these disputes – exacerbated by the change in governance culture following the amalgamations reform.

The administrations of many community councils that preceded the shires had reputations for relatively informal controls over motor vehicle procurement and use, contingent upon the rules enforced by incumbent town clerks (see for example Skelton, 2010; Toohey, 2002c). Barbara Shaw, a prominent Indigenous activist and politician from the Alice Springs region describes council-owned vehicles under the previous community council system as ‘the main transport in getting people to and from, if they needed healthcare... [or] to attend educational programs and visit their children in schools’. However since the changeover from community councils to the new shires in 2008, Shaw laments that community residents are finding it much more difficult to access these assets and ‘people are having to walk long distances into town’. These barriers are exacerbated by welfare quarantining introduced under the Intervention, which had reduced the affordability of other transport options such as taxis (ABC, 2010).

Her sentiments were widely shared by Victoria Daly and Roper Gulf Shire residents who were interviewed during this research. One group of Nauiyu residents stated:

The old council used to get us into town... It was better before especially at Christmas, we all used to throw money in for the bus hire. Now with Shire that's been stopped. It's really hard now... It's 500 dollars one way by minibus into town, but Shire won't help us. (Interview 25 February, 2010)

An interview participant in Bulman said he thought the old council was better than the shire 'because old one [council] used to help people with shopping, give them lift... look after outstations better. We had vehicle to take kids, have fun playing basketball and shop... Now all that been taken away' (Interview 8 July, 2011). A Kalkarindji resident complained that under the previous council 'we had a big bus, a community bus. But shire took it over and [now] get hard with bus and trucks' (Interview 28 February, 2010).

These sentiments contrasted sharply with the views expressed by many of the interviewed Northern Territory Government officials and shire management staff. For example, one shire director remarked that since the 2008 reform:

The good times are finished. You don't get a Toyota to come to town to do your shopping. You don't grab a Toyota to go to Top Springs [a local roadhouse] to get grog. You actually need a current NT driver's license to drive a vehicle and you also need a NT driver's licence if you want to be employed by the shire. That's covered under the Code of Practice. (Interview 22 March, 2010)

Another shire director commented on the perceived improvements in governance and financial management since 2008, because shire councillors and local board members now 'understand how we [the shire] are with sustainability, and ... given some fairly hefty [budgetary] responsibilities [they are able to] make some good and wise decisions on that pot of money'. He qualified this by stating: 'I would just hope that... they don't fall back and ask for silly things like [Toyota] land cruisers and boats, because that will create friction if that sort of idea came to the table with council' (Interview 8 September, 2014).

These statements represent common sentiments of the shire management staff who were interviewed for this project, and reflect the political shift in accountability regimes after the reform. Both statements discredited past patterns of more reciprocity-based distribution of motor vehicle use, and implicitly associated the 'good times' under the previous community council system with widespread corrupt behaviour. Issues surrounding the chronic scarcity of motorised transport in many of the shire communities, coupled with householder poverty, were ignored. These statements by management staff also clearly favoured the change to more formal and bureaucratically arbitrated practices (whereby formal 'Codes of Practice' and council meetings stewarded by management staff shaped organisational governance).

It is worth noting that both the directors quoted above who supported tightened restrictions on community use of council vehicles were (like me) employed under contracts that provided for their private use of council vehicles, including all fuel costs. The vehicle model *de rigeur* for senior shire management staff was the four wheel drive Toyota Prado GX, an executive-level vehicle with a purchase price well over \$65,000 when fully fitted out (Toyota, 2017).



Figure 5.3: A shire senior management's Toyota Prado GX vehicle. Photo: Michel (2011).

The power relations underpinning these organisational policies were not lost on some shire residents. One Barunga resident commented that

when Roper Gulf [shire council] came in [they] took everything, workshop, tools, vehicles, they took everything away. Roper Gulf are asking us to pay fees to use vehicles and they're supposed to help us! ... I hardly see Shire, they come and go with new vehicles. (Interview 22 December, 2010).

A group of Kalkarindji locals facetiously described the reform as 'a good change' – for the private vehicle dealership in the regional town of Katherine: 'They're [the shire is] keeping Toyota in business. They got thirty-seven cars in Katherine, but we can't get a grader.' They further stated: 'That loader – that's been here since [1992]... And if you go to our head office, you see flash cars, with radio, tinted windows, spotlights, mags... The new shire staff, they're laughing. They got new mutika [motor vehicles]' (Interview 28 February, 2010).

In my experience, these grievances have been effectively ignored by management's vehicle policy frameworks in all shires; in bureaucratic circles, it is considered matter-of-fact that employment contracts for senior management staff provide for private use of executive-level vehicles. Conversely, more stringent controls on vehicle usage for general staff has been treated as a key component of improved financial accountability for the shires. During my own tenure as finance manager and then director within a shire, I was deeply implicated in these processes, and had a pivotal role in establishing a tighter rule regime for general use of vehicles. This included vehicle maintenance schedules, an asset replacement program, plus the introduction of driver log books and an electronic monitoring system for fuel usage, which allowed finance department staff to monitor the fuel costs of individual vehicles in real time. In subtle, scarcely visible ways, these procedures contributed to the violent defence by administration of management's many privileges.

Locked gates

Whereas the shire's finance department was given much discretionary power to implement internal accountability frameworks, there were rigid limitations to our influence over external rules regimes. Some gates remained locked. Despite my best efforts, one gate the council was never able to breach related to property rates, the only taxation facility for local government in Australia. As part of the legislation that enabled the establishment of the shires, the Northern Territory's Minister for Local Government retains authority to set the rates charged to mining interests. In practice this "conditional rating" clause has led to very low council taxes being levied on mining operations, and a tightly constrained ability for councils to raise untied revenue.

Figure 5.4: Mining rates revenues for NT shire councils, 2015-16

Council name	Total Mining Rates Revenue (\$)	Total Revenue (\$)	Share of Mining Rates Revenue to Total Revenue
Barkly	2,559	24,539,000	0.01%
Central Desert	9,117	36,216,575	0.03%
Victoria Daly	10,578	20,345,733	0.05%
Tiwi Islands	0	10,981,901	0%
West Arnhem	9,894	23,198,420	0.04%
MacDonnell	27,755	45,840,726	0.06%
East Arnhem	43,818	47,520,767	0.09%
Roper Gulf	38,750	40,410,634	0.10%
West Daly	0	14,045,110	0%

Sources: individual data collection from shire councils; shire annual financial statements 2015-16

In 2015, Roper Gulf Shire Council's revenue from mining rates was about \$38,000, or less than 0.1 per cent of total income (see Figure 5.4). The Council's position was that this rate level was arbitrarily low, and totally out of synch with mining rates policies in other states.⁴¹ As a result, finance staff were directed to petition the Northern Territory Government to increase mining rates. Yet in order to do so, staff were required to follow a formal procedure and submit an official 'Ratings Proposal' to the Minister for Local Government

⁴¹ In an exercise carried out by Roper Gulf Regional Council (RGRC) staff in 2013, it was estimated that if the rates policies of selected councils were allowed to be adopted by RGRC it would result in the council's indicative mining rates revenue of \$29,000 to increase to: \$608,000 (if compared to Mount Isa City Council, Queensland); \$881,000 (Shire of Roebourne, Western Australia) and \$1,147,000 (City of Kalgoorlie, Western Australia) (RGRC, 2015).

four months prior to the rating year, replete with economic impact modelling, a history of the council's revenue and rating regimes, proof of a community consultation process, and other supporting documentation (LGANT, 2012: 27-28). While I was working for Roper Gulf Shire Council, we followed this fairly cumbersome, months-long procedure – twice.

The responses received by council to this application were a type of non-response, a form of banal, slow-moving administrative violence (Neu, 2003). Since 2008 the Minister's rates declaration has been a virtual replication of the previous year, without any discernible consideration of councils' individual rating proposals (Northern Territory of Australia, 2015, 2016).⁴² The gates have remained locked on this one, there is no public or parliamentary debate being had, I could not march into a police station with a dossier to prove malfeasance, and taxes on the mining sector have been kept at a tokenistic minimum.

When I interviewed one former senior NT Government official on whether he thought the current conditional rating arrangements for the mining industry are 'equitable', he gave the following response:

Equity is an interesting term. And one that is somewhat dependent on where you're standing, whether you're a mining company, pastoralist⁴³ or a shire council. Conditional rating was simply a compromise to get the reform past what was emerging as a significant campaign by pastoralists and mining companies against the reforms... And unfortunately in the end it became a compromise so whittled down that although the pastoralists and mining companies basically gave up their protest, but delivered very little to local governments in terms of rate revenue. Is it inequitable or equitable?... If you have the perspective that local government is a service that you pay for through your rates then it's probably not inequitable because the mining companies and the pastoralists can say they don't get any services... So from that perspective it's not inequitable. Obviously, if you look at the broader

⁴² The methodology in the Northern Territory for setting rates on mining leases has been to multiply an 'assessed value' of the lease (based on land area) by a 'differential rate'. In 2015-16 the 'assessed value' was deemed to be 20 times the annual rent of \$20 per hectare, or \$400 per hectare (regardless of the lease's earning potential), and the 'differential rate' was set by the Minister at 0.0034. (In 2008-09 the 'differential rate' was 0.00284). As way of example, the rates liability for a 1000-hectare mining lease operating in 2015-16 would equal $1000 * 20 * 20 * 0.0034 = \$1,360$.

⁴³ Pastoral leases are also conditionally rated in the Northern Territory, with a different methodology than for mining leases.

picture and say the delivery of local services are of benefit to the community as a whole and that everyone should make a contribution to the provision of those services, whether they receive them or not, then yes, it is inequitable. (Interview 26 August, 2015)

When I asked another former NT Government official the same question, he was less evasive and opined that ‘mining companies ought to pay their fair share of rates... I think they should increase, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they don’t.’ He explained his lack of optimism as such: ‘Business is privileged in the NT, that’s a structural issue... It’s a huge question as to why that is, but I certainly don’t defend it. But... I know from observing it from close at hand that it is just very hard to shift those things in the Territory’ (Interview 5 June, 2016).

The accountability regime for McArthur River Mine

The practice of granting arbitrary privilege to business interests, especially mining, has long been an established government policy setting in the Northern Territory. This includes privileges provided to the McArthur River Mine (MRM) near the town of Borroloola, the major mining interest in the local government area I worked for. MRM is currently owned by the multinational corporation Glencore, and is situated on the second largest zinc resource anywhere on the planet. It also contains significant deposits of lead and silver.⁴⁴

Without access to the Glencore’s internal financial information, it is difficult to accurately state the mine’s current profitability. (The company is not obliged to publicly report the earnings from its individual operations, so it doesn’t.⁴⁵) However based on a calculation of

⁴⁴ As an enticement to future mine developers, when the deposit was discovered in 1955 it was named ‘Here’s Your Chance’. There is a reported 194 million tonnes of extractable resources on site, and Glencore expects mining operations to continue until at least 2027 (Glencore, 2016a).

⁴⁵ In 2015 I directly requested information from Glencore on total annual earnings generated by the mine. The response I received stated that the mine only reported earnings aggregated by commodity. In its stead, I was forwarded a privately commissioned consultancy report produced by AEC Group that assessed the economic impact of MRM (AEC Group, 2015). This chosen period of analysis was 2014-15, a time of peak employment and expenditure at MRM (due to a large-scale construction project on-site aimed at expanding the mine to an open-cut operation). The consultancy report did not mention the mine’s earnings or profitability levels, but instead focused on optimistically portraying MRM’s economic impacts for the Northern Territory economy by

figures presented separately in Glencore's 2015 Annual Report, the mine earned an estimated AUS\$864 million in revenue in 2014-15 (Glencore, 2015a: 44; 187).⁴⁶

Notwithstanding the accuracy of these estimates, MRM is a large and lucrative mining operation, even by the standards of a multinational minerals extraction corporation (Howey, 2010: 62). In contrast, the amount of local government rates levied on McArthur River Mine in 2014-15 was \$16,929, or about 0.002 per cent of the mine's estimated annual revenues (RGRC, 2014). This amount was the maximum allowed to be charged under the conditional rating regime imposed on councils by the Northern Territory Government.

The decreed low council rate levels are only one small component of the NT Government's support for MRM's operations. When an underground mine on the site was first proposed in 1992, the Northern Territory's then Country Liberal Party Chief Minister Marshall Perron set the tone for blanket patrimonial support for the project when he declared: 'We believe having a marginal mine [at McArthur River] paying no royalty [tax to the Northern Territory Government] is preferable to no mine at all' (in ABC, 2006). The Commonwealth Government also intervened to fast-track its approval (Young, 2010: 8). Later that year, in the face of legal uncertainty for the project due to the Federal High Court's landmark Mabo decision on Indigenous land title claims, the Northern Territory Government hurriedly enacted the *McArthur River Project Agreement Ratification Act 1992 (NT)*, which effectively

using an Input-Output (I-O) multiplier approach. Due to the lack of detail on how the financial figures were derived it is difficult to interrogate the report's findings, but the tone was glowing: a contribution of \$321.1 million to the Northern Territory's Gross State Product, and the creation of 1,702 direct and indirect jobs (AEC Group, 2015: 4). The only 'potential' negative impacts mentioned were possible increases in labour wage levels and pricing for other inputs due to higher demand, and the euphemistically-worded 'changes in the health and wellbeing of workers and residents' (AEC Group, 2015: 5-6). Despite the lack of methodological detail, the report has likely overstated the local economic benefits of the mine. There is no mention of the impacts of a largely 'fly in – fly out' workforce, or of the negligible taxes paid locally. Further, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has criticised the use of I-O multipliers, as '[w]hile their ease of use makes I-O multipliers a popular tool for economic impact analysis, they are based on limiting assumptions that results in multipliers being a biased estimator of the benefits or costs of a project'. One of the limitations highlighted by the ABS is that these multipliers 'are not applicable for [economically] small regions' (such as the Gulf region of the Northern Territory) due to relatively shallow linkages (ABS, 2016).

⁴⁶ This figure is derived from multiplying the 2015 physical output of MRM reported on page 187 of Glencore's 2015 Annual Report with the average commodity prices and currency exchange rate average for 2015 listed on page 44. Note that the 2014-15 period was considered by Glencore to be a downbeat year for profitability; the company's total adjusted earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation (EBITDA) was 38 per cent lower than 2014, down to \$5.3 billion. A global downturn in commodity prices led Glencore to 'dramatically reduce production at... McArthur River' (Glencore, 2015a: 42; 49; 54).

guaranteed ‘that the underground mine could go ahead without any legal requirement for MRM to negotiate with native title holders about cultural, environmental and other concerns’ (Howey, 2010: 63).

In 2003, in conjunction with Glencore’s acquisition (via its sister company Xstrata) of MRM, the mine operators announced plans for an expansion to open-cut mining.⁴⁷ Some residents and most NT elected politicians were strongly in favour of the proposal: it was argued it would vastly increase production potential, and was envisaged to bring in more money and development for the town of Borroloola and the Northern Territory. But the development would lead to significant ecological disruption – including the diversion of 5.5 kilometres of McArthur River and two smaller creeks, and today, detrimental effects on ground water and local fish, turtle, dugong and bird populations (ABC, 2006; Bardon, 2018).

These risks and benefits – and the social power relations behind their uneven distribution – set the stage for an acrimonious development approval process. Harry Lansen, a senior Gurdanji man with sacred responsibilities for the land of the mine site, reflected the sentiments of many locals when he declared in 2003: ‘If they’re going to make it a big river down there, big dam, they’re going to kill me, my spirit’s still there you know, my song and my spirit’ (quoted in Howey, 2010: 61). In 2006 the Northern Territory’s Environmental Protection Authority, in its assessment of MRM’s draft environmental impact statement, declared it had serious concerns with the proposal and recommended it not proceed. The NT’s then Environment Minister Marion Scrymgour acted on this advice and rejected MRM’s development application (Howey, 2010: 68-69; Young, 2010: 9).

The parliamentary leadership’s reaction to her rejection was swift: the NT Labor Minister for Mines Kon Vatskalis and Chief Minister Clare Martin quickly issued statements in support of the development, and facilitated the submission of a revised proposal. Even the

⁴⁷ In order to diversify from purely marketing and trading of resource assets, Glencore acquired a stake in the mining company Xstrata in 1990 (Glencore, 2016g). By the time Glencore finally subsumed the company in the completion of a corporate merger in 2013, it already owned 34 per cent of Xstrata (Scott, 2013).

Commonwealth Prime Minister John Howard publicly intervened to encourage approval of the development. By late 2006 the NT and Australian Governments approved MRM's fast-tracked amended proposal, even though documented environmental concerns remained and the full details of the development amendments were not publicly released (Howey, 2010: 70-71).

Many traditional land owners strongly opposed these actions by the NT Government and, with the assistance of the Northern Land Council, challenged the development in the Northern Territory Supreme Court. Against the odds, in April 2007 the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the plaintiffs and declared the NT Government's approval of the expansion invalid. However, the legal victory was short-lived: only a few days later, the NT Government simply changed the laws, by making special provisions to pass the *McArthur River Project Amendment (Ratification of Mining Authorities) Act* that enabled MRM's mining management plans to be retrospectively valid (Howey, 2010: 71-75; Young, 2010: 11-14). Further legal challenges and community protests to halt the proposal all failed, arbitrary privilege prevailed, and the MRM open-cut project was eventually completed (ABC, 2014a; Glencore, 2015a: 54; Young, 2010: 14-15).

On Glencore's website and in its promotional material, much is made of the positive economic and social benefits of the newly expanded MRM. Jobs are a big focus: regular updates on employment levels at the mine are not provided, but corporate documents report many hundreds of positions.⁴⁸ The mine's target of 20 per cent Indigenous employment is given special emphasis on the website, with local 'good news' employment stories featuring prominently (see also Glencore, 2015b: 3). The MRM Community Benefits Trust, comprising at least four local Indigenous Board Directors, is another publicity boon: since 2007 the Trust has delivered \$1.35 million per annum to community initiatives and programs in and around Borroloola (Glencore, 2014a: 10; 2014b: 15-16; 2015c: 19; 2016b).

⁴⁸ Glencore reported expenditure of \$42.3 million in 2010-11 and \$64.1 million in 2011-12 in employee wages and benefits at MRM. In 2014-15, during the peak open-cut construction period, a private consultancy report calculated direct and indirect employment effects of '1,702 FTE jobs (including 700 direct FTE jobs and 76... direct positions for indigenous Australians)' (AEC Group, 2015: 4-5).



Figures 5.5: Image (on left) from McArthur River Mining webpage 'A word from the community'. Caption: 'If the mine wasn't there they would all just be sitting down in Borroloola. When people are working it makes them feel proud.' Ronnie's Story, (Glencore, 2016c); Image (on right) from McArthur River Mining webpage 'Local jobs drive change'. Caption: 'It was a dream for me to come to MRM and get a good job.' Frazer's story, (Glencore, 2016d).

These representations belie the unequal distributional effects, ongoing conflicts and weak accountability practices surrounding the mine. Although MRM is undoubtedly the largest employer in the local region, workforce numbers follow trends in international commodities markets and are prone to volatile fluctuations.⁴⁹ Consistent with corporate structures across the minerals extraction industry, Glencore's operating costs are not driven by expenditure on employment. In 2015 the company reported less than six per cent of its global revenues were spent on personnel costs.⁵⁰ In relative terms, the benefits paid to the labour force from Glencore's operations are marginal. This dynamic holds for MRM, where employee costs are not a significant share of total operational earnings (AEC Group, 2015; Glencore, 2015a: 44; 187).

Despite the manufactured image of plentiful employment of local Indigenous people, demographic data suggests the mine is more of a developmental enclave: at the 2011 Census only eleven people out of a population of 926 in the nearby town of Borroloola were reported as employed in metal ore mining (ABS, 2013a). Most MRM workers are 'fly-in fly-out' (FIFO) and depart the mine site on regular scheduled flights between Darwin and

⁴⁹ In December 2008 Xstrata cut back production at MRM and dismissed 206 workers on short notice (Young, 2010: 15); In 2014-2015 Glencore again decided to 'dramatically reduce production at [] McArthur River... in light of current low commodity prices' (Glencore, 2015a: 49; 54).

⁵⁰ Glencore's 2015 financial statements report personnel costs (including salaries, wages, social security, other personnel costs, and share-based payments) of \$US5,287 million for its direct operations and \$US4,344 million for its consolidated industrial subsidiaries. Reported revenues for this period were \$US170,497 million (Glencore, 2015a: 110; 154).

MRM's private airport. Many local residents may have been discouraged from employment by MRM's intensive work roster, whereby most staff are required to work twelve-hour shifts and reside on-site at the mine's residential village for periods of up to fourteen consecutive days (Glencore, 2016e). This practical circumvention of the local workforce from employment follows recent industrial relations trends in Australia's mining industry more generally, in which companies such as Glencore have increasingly relied on the more flexible use of non-unionised FIFO contractor staff (Bowden & Barry, 2015: 64-67).

The MRM Community Benefits Trust is also not as altruistic in purpose as represented by Glencore. The mine was reportedly forced by the NT Government to establish the trust fund as a condition of approval for the open-cut expansion project (Young, 2010: 17). \$32 million of payments over twenty-one years were originally earmarked for the trust fund (Young, 2010: 17), but this appears to have been negotiated down to \$10.4 million of obligatory funding over eight years (Glencore, 2015c: 19; 2016b). With its close involvement in the administration of the trust, MRM management has influence over the projects funded. Preference is given to vocational training and business enterprise development funding, which indirectly benefits the mine's workforce recruitment requirements.⁵¹ Funding for other high-profile causes with maximum public relations value, such as sporting activities and performing arts, have often been favoured.⁵² Further, it is likely MRM's expenditure on the trust would have been treated as a tax deduction, thus minimising Glencore's tax liabilities.

⁵¹ A 2015 article in MRM's corporate magazine *Memorandum* claimed that of the \$10.4 million of grants awarded over eight years, about \$5 million were for 'Enterprise and job creation' and about \$2 million for 'education' (Glencore, 2015c: 19)

⁵² For example, a local Aussie Rules Football (AFL) program has received significant funding, as have performing arts initiatives, a local songbook and the community swimming pool (Glencore, 2014a: 10; 2015c: 19).



*Figure 5.6: Artwork by Borroloola artist Jacky Green (2013) 'Fly In and Fuck Off'.
Reproduced with permission from the artist.*

Minimising and obscuring its tax liabilities is something MRM and its later owner Glencore have proven particularly adept at. Over its total operational life, it is likely MRM has received more net subsidies and benefits than it has paid in taxation to the Northern Territory Government. Subsequent to former Chief Minister Marshall Perron's expressed support for the mine early in its establishment, MRM was able to avoid royalty payments to the Northern Territory Government from the mid-1990s until 2007 (due in part to an anomalously favourable taxation framework, whereby mining interests pay royalties based on profits rather than revenue) (Young, 2010: 17). Its current tax rate to the Northern Territory Government likely remains far below one per cent of operational revenues (Glencore, 2015d). Leaked Northern Territory Treasury information in 2006 revealed a secret arrangement whereby the mine was receiving five million dollars a year in electricity subsidies. These subsidies continue, the details of which are not on public record (ABC, 2006; Howey, 2010: 72; Young, 2010: 12). Citing commercial-in-confidence, MRM management and the NT Government have also consistently refused to release details of the environmental bond for the mine (an amount held in trust to cover the post-production clean-up costs of the mine site). This lack of public scrutiny has prompted fears that the

bond may be inadequate for the real costs of rehabilitation, which news sources have estimated to be as high as \$1 billion (Everingham, 2016).

Beyond the Northern Territory, current MRM owner Glencore has an established international reputation for financial opacity, lack of accountability and aggressive tax minimisation. A 2012 article in the journal *Foreign Policy* called the corporation ‘famously secretive’, one that had become ‘fabulously wealthy’ by operating in legally opaque environments and ‘building walls made of shell corporations, complex partnerships, and offshore accounts to obscure transactions; and working with shady intermediaries who help the company... curry favor with the corrupt, resource-rich regimes’ (Silverstein, 2012: 55). Glencore’s global corporate structure specifically discourages oversight: the company is registered in Jersey and has headquarters in Switzerland (Glencore, 2015a: 201), both of which are jurisdictions with favourable limitations on corporate disclosure.⁵³ Consistent with the conventional practice of other corporations, Glencore engages accounting and auditing firms to assist in structuring its operations according to a tax-avoidance logic (Mitchell and Sikka 2011). This has led it to establish a web of associated companies in low-tax or no-tax jurisdictions such as Bermuda, Singapore, Cayman Islands, Barbados, Kazakhstan and the Republic of Congo (Khadem, 2015).⁵⁴ The deft use of these entities have enabled Glencore to minimise its tax liabilities by shifting profits offshore via complex ‘related-party

⁵³ Glencore’s 2015 Annual Report admits that ‘as a Jersey registered company headquartered in Switzerland, Glencore is not subject to the UK’s remuneration reporting regime’ and states that although it is committed to ‘operating transparently and responsibly’, legally it is only required to have its ‘financial statements comply with the Companies (Jersey) Law’. It further states Glencore ‘has granted third party indemnities to each of its Directors against any liability that attaches to them in defending proceedings brought against them, to the extent permitted by Jersey Law’ (Glencore, 2015a: 14; 91; 96; 98)

⁵⁴ Financial journalist Michael West, in his investigations into Glencore’s tax liabilities in Australia, wrote: ‘Figuring out the company’s real financial position is, for a journalist, the sporting equivalent of getting to a World Cup final... Near the head of the newly restructured, labyrinthine maze of corporate entities are the consolidated financial statements of Glencore Operations Australia Pty Ltd. This is not the head of the snake, however. Its parent is Glencore Queensland Ltd, whose parent in turn is Glencore Investment Holdings Australia Ltd. Then there is Glencore Investment Pty Ltd, then – what appears to be the head entity in Australia – wait for it ... the exquisitely-named GHP 104 160 689 Pty Ltd. This enigmatic entity is in turn owned by a Glencore International Investments Ltd, domiciled in Bermuda. The really tricky thing about this tortuous structure is that the entity at the bottom – Glencore Operations, which still ranks higher than another hundred entities or so – produces the “consolidated accounts” for the group. Yet the head of the “tax consolidated” group is Glencore Investment; another three steps higher but still not at the top. So it is impossible to get a true picture of the group’s tax position as usual... And as the Australian Securities & Investments Commission (ASIC) doesn’t make Glencore file “general purpose” financial statements, but rather allows a company which controls \$US35 billion in assets to be deemed a “small company”, meaning it can produce skimpy financial reports devoid of vital information about the likes of related party transactions with the mothership overseas, not to mention revenue figures’ (West, 2015).

transactions', leading to claims in the financial media that the company paid virtually no Australian federal taxes on \$15 billion of income over three years (Khadem, 2015; Latimer, 2015; West, 2014). These practices have led to recent attempts at closer scrutiny of the company by an Australian Federal Senate inquiry into corporate tax avoidance (SERC, 2015) and audits by the Australian Taxation Office.

However, although Glencore admits that it has been 'unable to file a single Australian group tax return due to various incorporated joint ventures (especially in our coal business) and other shareholdings' (Glencore, 2016g)⁵⁵, the company has vehemently denied any wrongdoing. On its corporate webpage titled 'Tax Transparency in Australia' the company adamantly defends its contributions to the Australian economy, and tersely states they 'comply with all our tax and financial reporting obligations in Australia' (Glencore, 2016f). Glencore has devoted substantial resources to legally disputing the Taxation Office's rulings on its outstanding tax liabilities, on the basis of alternative interpretations of taxation law (Latimer, 2015).



Figure 5.7: 'Large smoke plumes rise from McArthur River Mine's waste rock pile' (Bardon, 2014a).

⁵⁵ On this webpage Glencore lists the following Australian subsidiaries with annual gross revenues of \$100 million or more: AZSA Holdings Pty Ltd, Clermont Coal Mines Ltd, GHP 104 160 689 Pty Ltd, Glencore Australia Investment Holdings Pty Ltd, Glencore Investment Pty Limited, Oakbridge Pty Limited, Resource Pacific Holdings Pty Ltd and Ulan Coal Mines Limited (Glencore, 2016f).

Irrespective of these opacities over taxation and corporate governance, mining operations at McArthur River continue apace. Production levels have increased, along with evidence of rising ecological damage. The most visible effect has been a smouldering fire on the mine site that burned out of control for over a year. The fire started in early 2014 when reactive material in a waste rock pile spontaneously combusted, leading to a constant emission of large smoke plumes (Bardon, 2014b). The company has conceded that sulphur dioxide was being released by the fire, and it required mine employees working in the plume's vicinity to carry respirators and personal monitors for toxin levels (Glencore, 2014c: 10). Independent experts highlighted that the underlying concern with the smoke plume was the added risk of acid poisoning in the area's waterways. This risk was corroborated in 2014 by an independent environmental report that found ninety per cent of fish tested at a creek near the mine had 'dangerously high levels of lead' (Dunlevie & Daly, 2014). Many locals now fear the effects of heavy metal toxins in the river and creeks. Gudanji traditional owner Asman Rory called McArthur River 'the lifeblood of our community', but 'I am worried about the acid and pollution. I don't fish here anymore because of that reason' (quoted in Dunlevie & Daly, 2014).

MRM has downplayed the significance of the fire by declaring it 'a natural process' that is being 'effectively managed' by the company through new dumping methods (Glencore, 2014c: 10). Glencore has also chosen to internally manage the accountability measures of its pollution, through its own on-site water and air monitoring procedures (Glencore, 2017a). These procedures have allowed MRM to publicly state that 'all our [air] monitoring shows there is no risk to the health of the community in Borroloola or at publicly accessible points like the MRM airport... and water quality monitoring at our compliance point downstream shows no evidence of metals' (Glencore, 2014c: 10).

Community protests against the mining operations have continued, without much practical effect (ABC, 2014a; Daley, 2015). The gates have all been locked, and there is now a sense of futility amongst the opponents of the mine. For example David James Harvey, a Yanyuwa

man, stated to the media in 2014: ‘Our generation and our grandfathers been fighting for this country to keep it together now they’ve come and destroyed this country’ (quoted in Bardon, 2014b). Local artist and prominent political activist Jacky Green commented: “With mining companies, all in their mind is that they get in there and they dig the land up. Get all the money they need and they’re gone. They don’t care about what the damage is’ (quoted in McQuire, 2015).



Figure 5.8: Artwork by Borroloola artist Jacky Green (2013) ‘Same Story, settlers - miners’. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

In the accountability regime governing this mine, it is difficult to discern a consistent rules-based rationality that is subject to unerring legal and financial probity standards. This does not imply accountability chaos have ruled MRM; to the contrary, its operations appear to have always been conducted lawfully. Yet the law has been an arbitrary and unstable model of accountability for this mining project. On at least four occasions (in 1992, 1993 and 2007) when MRM operations risked being unlawful, lawmakers simply changed the relevant legislation (Howey, 2010: 63; 74-75; Northern Territory of Australia, 2007: 30; Young, 2010: 8; 13). Glencore seems to comply with all its taxation and financial reporting requirements in Australia, however much effort has been made create a corporate structure that obscures its earnings and aggressively minimises its contributions to public finances. Legal disputes with the Australian Taxation Office over its taxation liabilities are part of its *modus operandi*.

Despite its minimal impact on local employment and economic development for the town of Borroloola, Glencore has succeeded in running a viable mining operation at MRM; the fact of viability alone works as a political bulwark against scrutiny and criticism, and allows the mine to be championed as an agent of development and creator of employment. MRM also meets the minimum regulatory requirements for environmental protection set by government, even though the 5.5 kilometre-long diversion of the McArthur River and the mine's ongoing contamination of air, soil and water will necessarily have unpredictable long-term consequences on the local ecosystem. In this setting, it is difficult to conclude that MRM's accounting systems have brought accountability and visibility to its operations. Instead, putting it simply, they function as a mode of power.

Rules as expressions of power

In their critique of the Weberian model of bureaucratic rationality, Hodson et al saliently argue that bureaucratic rules often act 'as facades to cover actual operations' (Hodson et al., 2012: 257). This analysis can apply more generally to how accountability regimes often function in practice. An examination of the operations of both the Northern Territory's local government sector and the McArthur River Mine demonstrate that the innocuous dullness and technical impenetrability of an organisation's accounting procedures and bureaucratic rules belie broader social power relations at work. Beneath the representational certainty of terms such as accountability, transparency and corruption lies heterotopic instabilities (Foucault, 1994 [1970]: 127-130), arbitrariness, and slippages in policy's moral claims on promoting 'good' governance and 'improved' accountability. In this sense, accountability regimes function as key sites of bureaucratic violence, and as an important technology in preserving and reinforcing social power relations.

PART THREE

AXIOMATICS

In other words, it is the natural mechanism of the market and the formation of a natural price that enables us to falsify and verify governmental practice when, on the basis of these elements, we examine what government does, the measures it takes, and the rules it imposes. In this sense, inasmuch as it enables production, need, supply, demand, value, and price, etcetera, to be linked together through exchange, the market constitutes a site of veridiction, I mean a site of verification-falsification for governmental practice. Consequently, the market determines that good government is no longer simply government that functions according to justice. The market determines that a good government is no longer quite simply one that is just. The market now means that to be good government, government has to function according to truth.

Michel Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-79 (2008 [1979]): 32.



Figure 6.1: Macassan beach. Photo: Michel (2012).

My family's history is one of wanderings, spread over continents. But in an odd locational continuum, the Gove Peninsula in the Northern Territory's East Arnhem Land binds us together. On the coast just south of Nhulunbuy is Macassan Beach, in times past the site of a seasonal camp for itinerant trepang collectors from Sulawesi in Indonesia. Here is where the ashes of both my maternal grandparents are scattered. They too were itinerants. Their choice of final resting in this far-flung place appeals to a romantic tale of intrepid adventure, of finally finding home. But there is little of romantic provenance nor grand moral purpose in their connection to Macassan Beach. Instead, it has been part of northern Australia's thinner, uglier age of industrialism. Machines and jobs brought them there, as they did my mother and father.



Figure 6.2: My grandfather (on right), beach around Nhulunbuy. Photo circa 1966.

My maternal grandparents first travelled to East Arnhem Land from South Australia in the early 1960s, an age when much of the road north was still dirt. My grandfather had work with the European Launch Development Organisation (ELDO), an international space program with a rocket launch site in Woomera, South Australia. Of all places, the down range tracking station was built on a small clearing cut from the scrub deep in East Arnhem Land. This operation somehow kept my grandparents there for years, and they were around to witness the beginnings of Nabalco's Gove bauxite mine nearby. Soon there were jobs aplenty at the mine. First my aunt travelled there to work as a nurse; my mother came next, escaping her high-school matriculation. She found work doing office administration for the mining company.



Figure 6.3: My mother (at centre), Nabalco mining corporation worksite around Nhulunbuy. Photo circa 1969.

My father's journey to the mine had been longer. He was born poor—but, even worse, he was born in a German city in 1943, the wrong place at a very bad time. He survived it, and in his twenties he escaped abroad in search of adventure and class mobility. Like many other Europeans with blue-collar trades, he easily found work in the remote corners of Australia – Mount Tom Price in Western Australia, Paraburdoo, and Gove up north. At Nabalco's Gove mine he fixed big machines. His motto of engagement with these places was to work hard, work harder, and work where the Aussies didn't want to work.



Figure 6.4: My father (on left), Nabalco mining corporation mess hall. Photo circa 1968.

From the stories I've been told over the years, daily life for itinerant workers in those early days was mainly about getting your hours up, dealing with the heat, and making as much money as you could. During the construction phase the standard working week stretched sixty hours. At knock-off time the main pastime seemed to be drinking. A lot of drinking. Sometimes fishing trips were organised, but it sounded like these seemed to generally include a lot of drinking too.



Figure 6.5: My aunt (at centre), beach around Nhulunbuy. Photo circa 1967.

Parallel to the Gove miner's work life, there was much local political conflict over the mine. The Commonwealth Government strongly supported the development, and had given construction the green light by unilaterally granting Nabalco a mining lease. But the Yolngu people, on whose traditional lands the mineral deposit lay, were largely opposed. In 1963 Yolngu leaders presented the celebrated "Bark Petitions" to the Australian House of Representatives, as a list of claims to the Commonwealth Government of their sovereign traditional rights over Yolngu lands. This proceeded to the Milirrpum vs Nabalco Pty Ltd legal case, a litigation which laid bare the power dynamics at play: after years before the courts, in 1971 a judge ruled the Yolngu could not halt mining operations on their traditional lands. In any case, by this stage the mine was well established, and minerals extraction had already commenced.

These political disputes remained peripheral to the daily lives of the mine's itinerant workers. My parents remember only fleeting contact with the Yolngu. Daily routines were segregated, and there were limited opportunities for interaction. But there was one story of contact that lingered in my parents' memories: the bulldozing of a sacred banyan tree during construction of a road for the mining town.



Figure 6.6: Yolgnu ceremony, around Nhulunbuy. Photo circa 1967.

This banyan tree was associated with the Wuyal ancestral spirit, the creator of the Nhulunbuy hill. Its killing was sacrilege to the Yolngu and provoked deep anger – some locals were ready to spear those responsible to death (Egan, 1997: 243-244). But as my parents recalled it, among the mine workers the incident gained the status of a dirty joke. As it went, the driver of the bulldozer that killed the Wuyal tree is our family friend, also a German, someone I have broken bread with. The last time I met him I mentioned the killing of the tree in passing, but without probing. I silently wondered what happened on that day. Was a case of wanton violence? An act of creative destruction? Calculated orders from the boss? Or just a miscalculated movement of the machine? I never asked him these questions, though. For what purpose? To invent a singular answer to this act of the bulldozer?

Chapter Six:

'5000 is a nice round number'



Figure 6.7: *Scaled Movement*, artwork courtesy of Marnie Ford (2016).

Before, during and after the Northern Territory Government's 2008 shires amalgamation reform, the achievement of scale-related cost efficiencies was a key justification for the structural change. Importantly, the "economies of scale" term was seldom questioned or critically examined by policymakers. Instead, it functioned as an accepted truth, and serves as a pre-eminent artefact of bureaucratic *common sense* around the merits of applying capitalist production logics to the realm of public policy. Yet there was, and is, no body of research or convincing theoretical grounds upon which to base the claim that the council amalgamations would lead to greater cost efficiencies. Further, through an empirical evaluation of the outcomes of this reform process, there is no evidence the new shires have achieved economies of scale.

To understand this contradictory phenomenon, I conduct and move beyond an exercise of empirical falsification to argue that economies of scale must be analysed discursively, as an axiomatic of capitalism that conforms with widely accepted market-oriented logics. Like the spectre of accountability it is a phrase which does cultural work. This chapter first examines the genealogy of the economies of scale concept, to explore the slippages and inconsistencies between a powerful formal economic theory and its application in practice along the peripheries of public policy – including its appearance as a common sense political tool during the shire policy reform. Related to this is my analysis of the rise of “economism” and the reliance on statistics-based discourses in policy, and how this belief system has come to be the epistemological essence of the public policy expert.

This chapter contends that enabling cost efficiencies *per se* was not the motivating justification for the 2008 reform. Rather, the economies of scale justification was compelling in bureaucratic circles because of its discursive and aesthetic appeal, operating as an irrefutable statement within an economistic truth regime. Whether the statistical evidence presented in favour of economies of scale was empirically robust was largely irrelevant; mattering more was the *performance* of accountability and efficiency through the use of economistic discourse. Policymakers’ deployment of economistic logics also serve a political function, insofar as it establishes bureaucratic authority over social institutions and spaces. This is consistent with the case of the 2008 shires reform, which can be interpreted as a process that worked, *in primis*, to centralise bureaucratic control over the Northern Territory’s local government sector.

Economies of scale in the 2008 shires reform

The notion of “economies of scale”, a relatively straightforward concept borrowed from the field of economics, is also an example of a created bureaucratic truth. It holds that per output unit costs of production for an economic entity (such as a local government organisation) may be minimised through an increase in production scale. As will be

discussed here, there are nuanced qualifications to this concept and how it has been developed in formal economic theory. However in crude terms, this idea holds that “bigger is better” – or if not better, then at least potentially more economically efficient.

During my six years of ethnographic research in the Northern Territory’s local government bureaucracy, the term “economies of scale” became an increasingly prominent artefact of study. In the early stages of the shires reform process, the Northern Territory’s Local Government Minister invoked it as a key statistically-justified guideline for the sector’s future structures. At the announcement of the reform in Alice Springs in October 2006, Minister McAdam declared:

It is evident from research undertaken on the sustainability of local governments in other jurisdictions that a shire of less than 5000 people would struggle to be sustainable in the long term... Regional shire councils will include... the long-term sustainability and viability of communities. (McAdam, 2006)

This 5,000 population threshold, with its appeal to a scale economies logic, played a key performative role in the 2008 reform. In my interactions with bureaucratic actors – in structured interviews, government reports, and informal conversations alike – this statistic was stated again and again as a fact, in different permutations and translations. Even so, the meanings applied to the concept that underpinned this statistical argument were not fixed or stable. Importantly, it became as a polysemic term, adaptable to suit the political arguments of shifting circumstance and purpose. At times it continued to occupy the authoritative grounds of scientific economic theory, but more often it was dispatched in passing as a common-sensical trope, in order to close debate. It functioned as what Tess Lea describes as a ‘hardworking’ term, institutional words that form part of a forceful, deceptively conclusive style of discourse (Lea, 2008: 40). As Lea writes, phrases such as economies of scale:

must work hard, first as statements that declare the competence of their formulators at the time of their co-performed emergence; and then, if accepted for inclusion [in administrative

documents], as words which must additionally survive later sets of judgement by successfully performing in new settings. (Lea, 2008: 40)

To repeat from the outset: there is no empirical evidence of increased economies of scale in the NT's local government sector as a result of the 2008 shires reform (see Appendix B for supporting data). As will be established, council amalgamations did not lead to organisational cost efficiencies. To the contrary, there is much clearer evidence of *diseconomies of scale*. In the years I analysed, the amalgamated sector was more prone to financial operating deficits than its community council predecessors, and it now spends an increased share of its total expenditure on administration, governance and management functions. In empirical terms, the economies of scale justification for reform is a fantasy.

This contradiction between discursive certainty and empirical evidence is what makes this policy artefact particularly worthy of analysis. I isolate three factors to interpret why the concept of economies of scale nonetheless became a *truth*: its conformity to a dominant discursive regime; its appeal to epistemological aesthetics; and its reinforcement of bureaucratic authority. First, the economies of scale concept conforms to a discursive regime, one I label "economism", which dominates Australian policymaking arenas. Economism describes a discursive regime whereby social realities are interpreted, explained and solved through a rationality based on economic relations and market-oriented constructs. Second is the concept's closely related aesthetic appeal. The argument has a certain technocratic elegance that is underpinned by its reliance on statistical and mathematical simplicity. Lastly is its functional utility: when applied in practice, the concept works to reinforce bureaucratic authority and to uphold existing social power relations.

These factors elevated the "economies of scale" concept to become a form of economic-oriented common sense, or a product of what Deleuze and Guattari call the constitution of a capitalist axiomatic. This is when the functioning of a market society and capitalist relations of production become 'not theoretical propositions, or ideological formulas, but operative statements' that are rendered as natural truths (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 537; see

also chap 13). The capitalist axiomatic is similar to what Mary Poovey refers to as an 'epistemological unit', or a prism through which knowledge is reflected (Poovey, 1998: 4-6). In this setting, the state becomes a key technology not only for the maintenance of existing social relations, but also the dissemination of economistic rationalities which naturalise capitalist relations as necessary and beneficial.

Genealogies

One avenue for understanding the hegemonic force of economism in modern policy is to trace the genealogy of a concept like economies of scale. The economic effects of scale are not a modern theoretical invention. As a generic description of the mercantilist benefits accrued by extending territorial domination, the concept of scale economies is arguably as old as the impulse to accumulate private property, and of imperialism itself.⁵⁶ Yet its modern definition and cultural power is intrinsically linked with the rise of capitalism and the establishment of classical economic theory.

Economies of scale in its modern iteration is linked with the rise of capitalist industrialisation, and the output growth of Europe's manufacturing industry in particular. Adam Smith, a professor at the University of Glasgow and the high doyen of modern capitalist economic theory, was the first to offer a systematic theorisation of economies of scale and their advantages. His seminal 1776 treatise *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* included long passages extolling the virtues of capital specialisation and the division of labour, particularly in manufacturing industries (Smith, 2015 [1776]: 9-14), the practice which has led to 'the greatest improvement in the productive powers of

⁵⁶ Karl Marx for example argued that ruling class interests, even before the era of industrial capitalism, used the economies of scale concept as a justification to increase concentration of ownership over productive resources. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* he wrote:

As for large landed property, its defenders have always sophistically identified the economic advantages offered by large-scale agriculture with large-scale landed property, as if it were not precisely as a result of the abolition of property that this advantage, for one thing, received its greatest possible extension, and, for another, only then would be of social benefit. (Marx, 2012 [1844]: 79).

labour, and the greatest part of skill, dexterity, and judgment with which it is anywhere directed' (Smith, 2015 [1776]: 9).

The ongoing influence of Smith's theories in modern policy are difficult to exaggerate.⁵⁷ This may partly be to the historical timing of his work: his advocacy for capitalist market expansionism presaged a rapid growth in modern industrial modes of production, unprecedented capital accumulation and technological advancement, firstly in Britain, then around the world (Harvey, 1982: chap 6; Landes, 2003; Rosenfeld, 1982: chap 1).⁵⁸ Politically, Smith's works dovetailed well with the interests of the ascendant capitalist class. And his theorisations on labour and capital specialisation, trade, price formation, consumer demand and the 'invisible hand' as a self-guiding mechanism for economic order lay the foundations for generations of academic inquiry. This not least included the pursuit of a General Equilibrium Theory, long a central preoccupation of the economics discipline, aimed at predicting the simultaneous equilibrium of goods and money markets (Haakonssen & Winch, 2006: 373; Sandmo, 2016; Sen, 2016: 283-4). In short, Smith's writings are now widely regarded as the incunabulum of 'classical' economic theory, and have established an air of veneration, even *truth* amongst political, economic and academic elites (Brown, 1994: 1; Haakonssen & Winch, 2006; Jenkins, 1948; Sandmo, 2016; Sen, 2016: 281).

⁵⁷ In his (admittedly fawning) editorial introduction to an abridged *Wealth of Nations* 1948 edition, Arthur Hugh Jenkins wrote: 'The publication of the book in 1776, as innumerable writers have agreed, was an event comparable in importance to the Declaration of Independence in the same year. With the exception of the books of the Bible, and possibly the Koran, no single literary work has so powerfully affected the thoughts and lives of so many people, directly or indirectly... [The book] was to literally change the world' (Jenkins, 1948: 9-10).

⁵⁸ In the introduction to chapter three of *The Wealth of Nations*, titled "'That the Division of Labour is limited by the Extent of the Market'", Smith expresses an anecdotal rationale for expansionary market capitalism: 'As it is the power of exchanging that gives occasion to the division of labour, so the extent of this division must always be limited by the extent of that power, or, in other words, by the extent of the market. When the market is very small, no person can have any encouragement to dedicate himself entirely to one employment.... [A nail maker in a small country town] at the rate of a thousand nails a day, and three hundred working days in the year, will make three hundred thousand nails in the year. But in such a situation it would be impossible to dispose of one thousand, that is, of one day's work in the year. As by means of water-carriage, a more extensive market is opened to every sort of industry than what land-carriage alone can afford it...' (A. Smith, 2015 [1776]: 18)

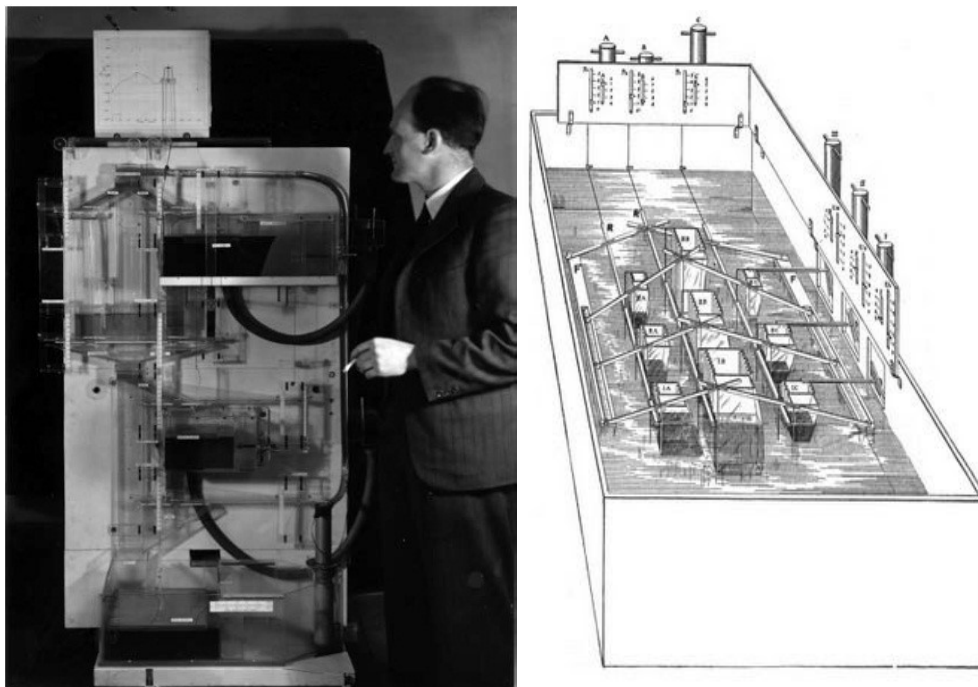
Notwithstanding the general canonisation of Adam Smith, the understandings of his works has not been static. I emphasise here a hermeneutical approach to their *translation*, as an ongoing process of social negotiation and political contestation (Backhouse, Dudley-Evans, & Henderson, 1993: 4-5). His writings have been subject to much critique over time (including from seminal social philosophers such as Karl Marx and Max Weber⁵⁹). Due to their influence over the material interests of the capitalist class, contemporary interpretations of his theories have not remained consistent, and they have been regularly instrumentalised for specific political agendas (see for example Adam Smith Institute, 2016). Vivienne Brown compellingly argues that Adam Smith's scholarship should not be read as unequivocal advocacy of laissez-faire capitalism. She writes:

... the celebrated view of Smith as primarily an economist – and a dogmatic free market economist at that – appears as a gross caricature; the picture that emerges of Smith is more sceptical, philosophical, and politically focused, and the enthusiasm with which he welcomes the transition to a society based on trade and manufactures is tinged with a more dispassionate recognition of the losses as well as the benefits deriving from commercial society.' (Brown, 1994: 1)

Around the end of the nineteenth century, at which time economics had established itself as a distinct academic discipline in Europe, a significant re-interpretation of Smith's works began. Centred around eminent professors Alfred Marshall (of Cambridge University), Irving Fisher (of Yale University), Leon Walras (University of Lausanne) and William Stanley Jevons (of University College, London and then Owen's College, Manchester), the field of economics began adopting more mathematically-derived methods of inquiry (Fisher, 1997; Maas, 2005; Marshall, 1961 [1890]; Walras, 2005 [1898]). This formalist turn, dubbed the 'Marginalist' or 'Neoclassical' Revolution, was in part an attempt to establish economics as a

⁵⁹ Much of Karl Marx's writings (volume I of *Capital*, for instance) work as a critical rejoinder to Adam Smith's theories (Marx, 2017 [1887]: Book 1). Max Weber critiqued the capitalist impetus to achieve economies of scale differently, as 'the regular reproduction of capital, involving its continual investment and reinvestment for the end of economic efficiency... [as] associated with an outlook of a very specific kind: the continual accumulation of wealth for its own sake, rather than for the material rewards that it can serve to bring' (Weber, 1976 [1905]: 53).

positivist 'science', a discipline that strove for predictive authority and the uncovering of universal social truths (Reisman, 1990: chap 5).⁶⁰



Figures 6.8: (From left) Bill Phillips' MONIAC hydraulic economy machine, circa 1949 (Source: Hawke, 2013); Irving Fisher's Price Determination Machine, circa 1891 (Source: Taylor, 2012).

The natural sciences, especially physics and mechanics, were clearly emulated in this formalist turn. Irving Fisher and a later prominent economist Bill Phillips went as far as constructing elaborate hydraulic devices to model equilibrial macroeconomic outcomes such as national income and aggregate price determination (see Figures 6.8 above). Beneath these technical models of market-clearing equilibria lay philosophical connotations of social stability and natural order.⁶¹ Alfred Marshall in particular worked on formalising Smith's

⁶⁰ The epithet 'Marginalist Revolution' was used to indicate this movement's preoccupation with the calculations of marginal dynamics, for example an additional unit increase or decrease in production costs, consumer utility, et cetera. These were deemed to be important matters of mathematical inquiry because they offered predictive solutions to the optimal scale of firms' productions, pricing, wages, profits, and other factors related to economic equilibria.

⁶¹ Alfred Marshall clearly perceived the role of economics as being to scientifically identify natural truths. The epigraph on the cover page of his seminal work *Principles of Economics* was 'Natura non facit saltum', a Latin phrase translated as 'nature does not make jumps', an axiom originally taken from the field of natural scientific philosophy. Later in the book Marshall wrote, '...there is no such margin in the analysis itself: if two people

theories on production and cost functions, including the formal modelling of economies of scale. In his magnum opus *Principles of Economics*, one whole chapter was devoted to outlining the theoretical benefits and costs of production on a large scale – again, with special focus given to the manufacturing industries (Marshall, 1961 [1890]: chap XI). The listed benefits accrued by firms with larger scale production included: increased purchasing power, less input wastage, more resources for ‘making experiments’ (or research and development of technology), better-organised buying and selling, the ability to attract and develop a better-skilled workforce, and the ‘economy of machinery’ (which related to the relative affordability of more efficient machinery, and to the ability to spread the fixed costs of machinery across a larger production base) (Marshall, 1961 [1890]: 278-284).

The legacies of economic formalism

The Neoclassical Revolution as an economic school of thought has a dubious legacy, and its theories arguably no longer represent orthodoxy in the economics field. Its mechanical understandings of economic activity (visually represented by Phillips’ MONIAC hydraulic economy machine, and Fisher’s Price Determination Machine, as shown in Figure 6.8, are now considered passé and are largely dismissed as overly reductionist (Mirowski, 2002: 6-11). Faced with world events that didn’t confirm to its predictions (for example the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression), many economists (most notably John Maynard Keynes) injected new theories which were critical revisions of neoclassicism’s assumptions related to market equilibria. The school’s production-related theories have also become less significant, linked to its shift of theoretical focus away from production and onto exchange as the basis for understanding economic activity. This has matched the rise of the corporation – rather than the factory – as the pre-eminent economic entity.⁶²

differ with regard to that, they cannot both be right. And the progress of the science may be expected gradually to establish this analysis on an impregnable basis.’ (Marshall, 1961 [1890]: 53).

⁶² As Deleuze polemically wrote, capitalism is arguably not even focused on production anymore, but rather on the management of finance, services and marketing. Under these configurations corporations don’t even really own production, but govern networks of stockholders (Deleuze, 1992: 3-5). Markets in this sense have come to be not primarily a means for distributing production, but for exchanging and processing information. This computational role of the market is the basis for Mirowski’s understanding of orthodox economics as a cyborg science (Mirowski, 2002: chap 1; chap 8).

Marshallian-era neoclassical economics does not explain any of these contemporary dynamics well.

However, besides their establishment of the machine as a rational economic agent (Mirowski, 2002: 9-11), the lasting influence of the early neoclassical economists was their establishment of a 'scientific paradigm', or a knowledge community defined by a shared belief in systematised scientific methodologies as the most appropriate pathway for establishing causative (and universalistic) social relationships (Haas, 1989: 384-385; Kuhn, 1996: 2-7).⁶³ The use of scientific logic frameworks, statistical semiotics and mathematical modelling became a key part of the *performance* of economics and helped establish an air of indisputability around this new academic discipline. As a complement to the scientification of classical economics, the canonisation of Adam Smith's works functions as a fundament of "truth" for the field, and provides a quasi-spiritual foundation to its technical developments.

The performance of economics as a *science* was to have significant effect on the discursive authority of this discipline. Firstly, the privileging of the mathematically elegant apprehension of social "facts" allowed economics to establish borders around its field of "expert" knowledge, thereby limiting the scope of critical inquiry (Backhouse, 2010: 4; Cullenberg et al., 2001: 26-29; Swales, 1993). This is reflected in how the discipline is now

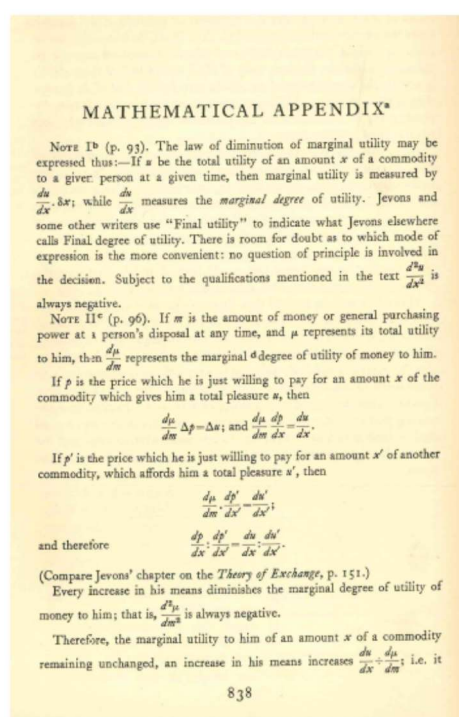
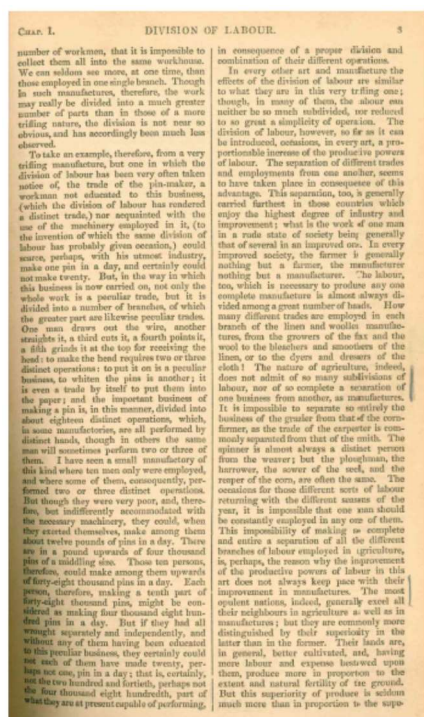
⁶³ For example the theories of John Maynard Keynes have been widely heralded to have caused a 'Keynesian Revolution' in economic thought, however claims of a revolutionary methodology are dubious. Although he was critical of neoclassicism's penchant for static general equilibrium, Keynes was a proponent of a systematised theory of 'partial' or dynamic equilibria: he is given credit for the theoretical establishment of the IS-LM model, a key macroeconomic equilibrium theory predicting the interactions between goods markets and money markets. Similar to Marshall, he clearly envisaged the work of an economist as creating theories that best reflected a universal (albeit shifting) economic reality. For example, his seminal work is tellingly titled *A General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. He also once described economics as 'a science of thinking in terms of models joined to the art of choosing models which are relevant to the contemporary world. It is compelled to be this, because, unlike the typical natural science, the material to which it is applied is, in too many respects, not homogeneous through time. The object of a model is to segregate the semi-permanent or relatively constant factors from those which are transitory or fluctuating so as to develop a logical way of thinking about the latter, and of understanding the time sequences to which they give rise in particular cases.' Quoted in Lawlor (2006: 5).

widely taught in university lectures and textbooks: formalist methodologies, authoritative language and mathematical models are all privileged, all of which deter critical questioning (Swales, 1993: 224). Beyond the classroom, the formalisation trend has been marked in recent decades by the rise of sub-disciplines within economics such as econometrics and ‘computational economics’, whose use of statistical data has been facilitated by ever more powerful computerisation of data collection and analysis (Mirowski, 2002: chap 1). These trends are reflected in the most prestigious academic journals in the discipline (such as the Royal Economic Society’s *Economic Journal*, the Journal of the Econometric Society *Econometrica*, and the Society for the Advancement of Economic Theory’s *Economic Theory*). In these journals, for an article to be considered fit for publication, correct methodology (such as the use of statistical proofs, mathematical equations and graphs) is expected to be applied to the correct mode of problem, in conversation with the correct corpus of established theorists.⁶⁴

Beyond the territorialisation of “expert” economic knowledge, the process of mathematical formalisation in the field of economics was crucial in a discursive sense. It enabled the field to position itself not only as one paradigm (of many) for understanding the world, but as a regime of scientific truth. Vivienne Brown refers to this period as a ‘process of canonisation’ (Brown, 1993: 65-70); while Swales calls it a phenomenon of ‘facticity’, whereby fact is produced through the reification and codification of formally modelled statements (Swales, 1993: 223-224). Mathematics and applied statistics played a crucial role in this process. As Michel Foucault wrote:

It is with mathematics, in any case, that the human sciences maintain the clearest, the most untroubled, and, as it were, the most transparent relations: indeed, the recourse to mathematics, in one form or another, has always been the simplest way of providing positive knowledge about man with a scientific style, form and justification. (Foucault, 1994 [1970]: 351)

⁶⁴ For three random contemporary examples of the importance in orthodox economics publications of mathematical modelling (and the ongoing focus on the concept of a general social equilibrium), see Alger & Weibull (2013); Araujo (2014); and Berg, Pinger & Schoch (2016). The peer-reviewed article by Alger and Weibull is particularly striking: it is an earnest and confident attempt to mathematically model the ‘evolutionarily stable’ relationship between human self-interest and morality!



Figures 6.9: (From left) Image of Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* passage explaining economies of scale, circa 1776; Marshall’s mathematical explanation of marginal utility in *Principles of Economics*, circa 1890.

The aesthetic performance of truth

There is an aesthetic element to this mathematisation, insofar that any semiotic system must be stylistically appealing and authoritative in order for it to act as a bond for social groupings. This is what I refer to as the *performative* role of mathematics and statistics. The philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote of the importance of aesthetic judgement (as opposed to contested empirical knowledge) in the construction of common sense and an ‘ideal norm’ (Kant, 1990 [1790]: 58-60). Steven Shapin, in his book *A Social History of Truth*, writes of this phenomenon as a type of ‘epistemological decorum’, which he describes as

the expectation that knowledge will be evaluated according to its appropriate place in practical cultural and social action,,, [T]he skill of doing the proper thing in the proper setting [has] informed the assessment of knowledge-claims as well as the evaluation of social conduct. (Shapin, 1994: xxix)

Yet beneath an aesthetic veneer, Foucault also reminds us of the connections between the production of (mathematised) social truths and expressions of power. Similar to Antonio Gramsci's emphasis on the importance of discursively claiming "common sense" in the establishment of hegemonic rule (Gramsci, 1988: 347-348), Foucault writes of the establishment of truth not as a revelation of essential facts, but about the reproduction of accepted knowledge as a type of social domination (Foucault, 1994 [1970]: chap 5). Truth doesn't function outside relations of power; rather, the exercise of power is immanent in the establishment, consolidation and maintenance of a "truthful" discourse that moves beyond ideology into the realm of uncontested communication (Foucault, 1980: 115-119; 131). As he writes,

we are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands, of which it has need, in order to function: we *must* speak the truth; we are constrained or condemned to confess or to discover the truth. Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth: it institutionalises, professionalises and rewards its pursuit. (Foucault, 1980: 93)

I argue that economism has become the hegemonic aesthetic in the public policy arena, and the bedrock of contemporary bureaucratic common sense. Of course, its significance is more than aesthetic: with its reliance on market-oriented tropes and logics, the widespread adoption of an economistic truth regime by state bureaucracies is inextricably intertwined with the functioning of capitalism and its existing gendered, class-biased power relations. This occurs irrespective of whether the truth claims are based on weak logics or flawed empirics. On a functional level, symbolic economic management and the modern state have become wholly symbiotic. The state doesn't merely regulate the visible economy, but upholds and sustains the truths necessary for the economy to exist. Its arbitration of exchange-value (through money circulation) (Taussig, 1997: 130-133), the enforcement of property law, territorial rights and taxation enables particular modes of trade and patterns of wealth to accumulate, and power relations to be codified. In short, without the state there would be no market, and licit capitalism would cease to function as the dominant economic ontology (Foucault, 2008 [1979]: 27-33). Thus any separation of the state from the (aesthetically influenced) production of economic knowledge is contrived; the role of the state defines the constitution of economic knowledge. There is a circular logic to this: a

well-functioning market economy is both enabled by and a model for efficient policy. This reveals the deep symbiosis in modern state bureaucracies' adoption of economistic truth regimes, but also hints at how the values and assumptions underpinning economism are rarely problematised, and are easily rendered invisible.

This symbiosis of capitalism, the state and economistic truth regimes is neatly exemplified by “economies of scale”, a conceptual abstraction whose veracity is nonetheless generally accepted within policy. Economies of scale conforms to an economistic logic insofar that it is a mathematised concept deeply premised on a market-oriented aesthetic. Implicit therein is the capitalist firm as the modelled social entity, with assumptions of established markets for its output as well as markets stably regulating its inputs (labour, land and capital) into production. The model's conceptualisation of costs (and, as a corollary, value) is necessarily defined by excluding ‘externalities’ (all that isn't marketised) from consideration, and ultimately rests on a purely pecuniary, exchange-based derivative. The inherent aim of the model is to achieve optimal scale (its own version of equilibrium), a point of production at which average costs are minimised. Yet the temporal dynamism of the model allows for, even encapsulates the capitalist impetus for growth: if more technological advancements are harnessed, if inputs can be applied more efficiently, if industry-wide synergies are realised, if the supply chain is streamlined, the optimal production scale of the firm may continue to expand. Regardless of whether it conforms to any operational reality for a given organisation, there is a performative elegance in this representation of how the organisation *ought* to function. Perhaps instead of describing it as a canon of epistemological common sense, “economies of scale” can be said to resonate with a common *sensibility* within bureaucracy: as a *beautiful* axiom with practical applicability (Lee & Lloyd, 2005).

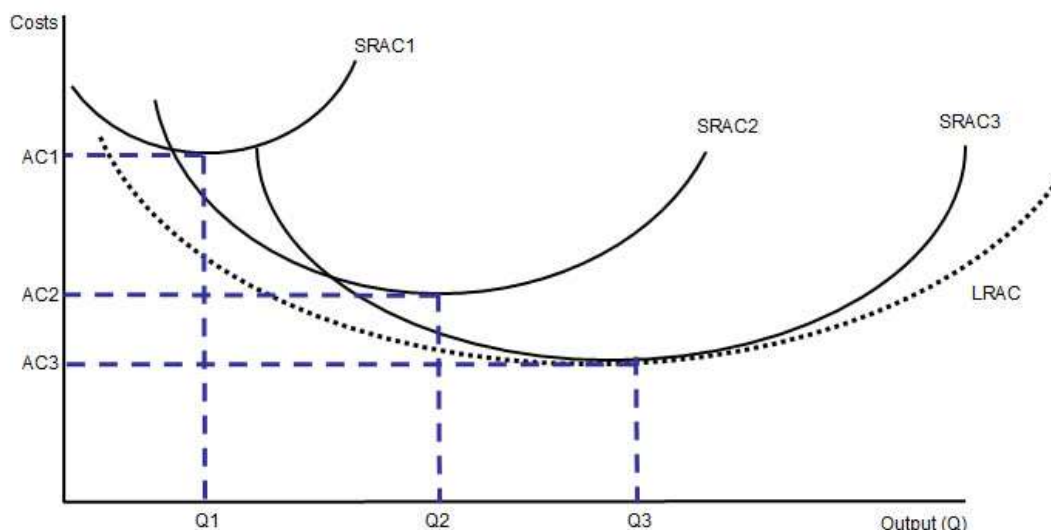


Figure 6.10: Graphical interpretation of the economies of scale concept, including short-run and long-run temporality. AC = Average cost. Q = Quantity. SRAC = Short run average cost. LRAC = Long run average cost. Source: <http://economicsgceopastanswers.blogspot.com.au/2014/09/long-run-costs-economies-diseconomies.html>

Economism and the Australian state

One obvious measure of the influence of economics and economic logics on the modern Australian state is their structural effects. Legions of graduates in the fields of economics, commerce and accounting commence employment every year in the public sector. Enrolments in graduate-level business degrees has increased exponentially in the last fifty years (Yeaple, 2012), and a Master of Business Administration (MBA) qualification has become a virtual prerequisite for a position in senior public sector management (including in the Northern Territory's local government sector). Treasuries and Departments of Finance are now central agencies within all government bureaucracies, and command near-veto power over policy decisions. Economistically-focused private consultancies (such as PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Deloitte, Access Economics, KPMG and Ernst & Young) are increasingly contracted to intervene in the strategic planning, evaluation and review of public policy within narrow market-oriented rationalities (Mitchell and Sikka, 2005: 5-7; 2011; see for example Deloitte, 2012; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2006).

Yet a mechanistic focus on these structural factors vastly understates the epistemological influence of economism in the public policy arena, and its discursive and aesthetic power in distributing an understanding of capitalism – or how an economistic worldview has established itself as common sense in policymaking circles. One expression of this discursive power is the dominant language used in policy, and the liberal presence of economistic tropes such as “efficiency”, “effectiveness”, “sustainability”, “open”, “productivity” and “the market” in many key policy texts. The beneficial potential of these terms have, I argue, become so widely accepted in bureaucracies that they are rarely problematised or given technical definition. Their application is not a process of critical decision-making, but of reflexively reiterating the language of common sense.

To demonstrate through textual analysis the pervasiveness of an economistic discourse in the Australian state’s policymaking logic, I have chosen the Australian Government’s influential 2015 report *Our North, Our Future: White Paper on Developing Northern Australia*. I focus on this text in particular because of its role as a central reference point for all government policy in northern Australia. It is an overarching policy document which engages with a vast scope of policy areas (including employment, education, health, land tenure, water and natural resource management, trade and investment, infrastructure, agriculture and biodiversity) (Australian Government, 2015: I-II). It also boldly proclaims its importance: the document positions itself as the Government’s pre-eminent blueprint for the region’s economic future, claiming ‘it should be the first, and last, White Paper for the north’ (Australian Government, 2015: 1).

There is an economistic aesthetic applied throughout the 2015 *White Paper*, with regularly repeated imagery of frugal planning, cost minimisation, statistical measurability and capitalist efficiency. In this 200-page report, the term ‘market’ is used 126 times, ‘sustainable’ or ‘sustainability’ are applied in 51 instances, ‘private sector’ 36 times, and ‘free’ or ‘freehold’ 40 times, each time without any technical definition or qualification

(Australian Government, 2015).⁶⁵ They are accepted *prima facie*, on the basis of their common sense appeal.

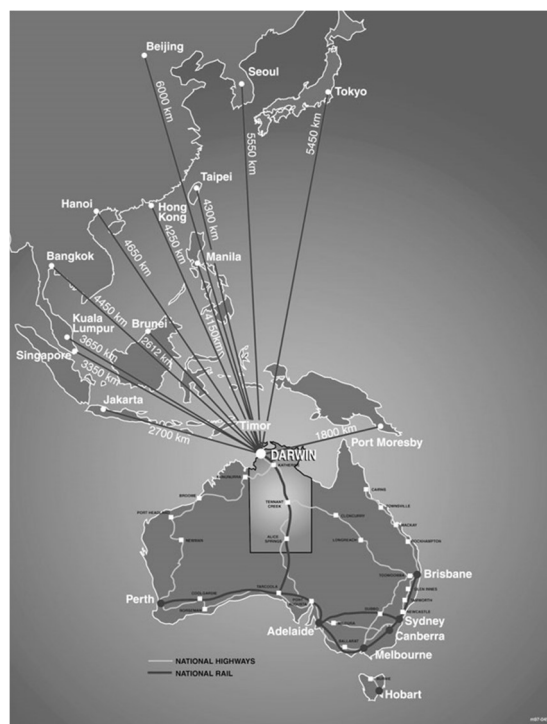


Figure 6.11: 'Strategic Location Map'. Source: Darwin Port (2016), <https://www.darwinport.com.au/maps>

The *White Paper* also invokes the economies of scale concept. The document acknowledges that the vast geography, small human population concentrations, harsh climates and flood-prone ecologies of northern Australia make it 'difficult to capture economies of scale'. However these impracticalities are discarded in a sleight of technological hubris, with the optimistic conclusion that 'these barriers are not insurmountable. Existing and planned infrastructure projects in the north provide examples of how these challenges [of scale economies] can be overcome through new technologies and innovations' (Australian Government, 2015: 84). The report goes on to recommend increased investment in the construction and upgrading of northern Australia's roads, ports, pipelines and remote

⁶⁵ Another contemporary report focused on northern Australia, *The Forrest Review: Creating Parity*, is similarly saturated with economic tropes: in this 244-page document, 'market' is used in 123 instances, the 'private sector' 91 times, and the terms 'free' or 'freehold' in 53 instances (A. Forrest, 2014). In contrast, the term 'sovereignty' is not part of its vocabulary, and is not mentioned once.

airstrips to improve the functioning of the north's economy (Australian Government, 2015: 8-9; 84-100).⁶⁶

The elixir of economies of scale for Australian local government

Similar to the logic expressed in the 2015 *White Paper*, policymakers and bureaucratic actors involved in Australia's local government sector have long adhered to a scale-based optimism. The notion that larger council organisations will achieve greater cost efficiencies has become a generally accepted truth in this arena, and has shaped an amalgamations-friendly policy trend for the past generation. Between 1991 and 2012, the number of local government councils in Australia have been reduced by fiat from 826 to 545, a reduction of over 50 per cent (Fogarty & Muger, 2013: 302; see also Tiley & Dollery, 2010).⁶⁷ A key official justification in each of these reforms has been that cost efficiencies and improved financial sustainability will be gained by larger-scale council organisations (Beattie & Fraser, 2007; Beed & Moriarty, 1987: 119-124; Byrnes & Dollery, 2002; Deloitte Access Economics, 2011: 11-12; 18-22; Local Government Boundary Reform Board, 1998: i-viii; appendix N; NSW OLG, 2014; QLGR, 2007: 38-9; 73; Sansom, Munro, & Inglis, 2013: 70-78; Victoria Local Government Commission, 1986). For example, PriceWaterhouseCooper's landmark report *National Financial Sustainability Study of Local Government*, commissioned by the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA), sanguinely stated that 'structural reforms have been adopted by councils in order to provide more cost-effective local services', but advised that 'further voluntary amalgamations may achieve further efficiency improvements'. The report singled out Australia's rural local government sector as being particularly prone to financial sustainability difficulties, and recommended: 'Amalgamating

⁶⁶ An important related point is that the optimistic subordination of geography and ecology by infrastructure and technology is premised on another axiom of modern techno-capitalism, namely the perpetual abundance of cheap carbon-based energy (IEA, 2015: chaps 1-3). This leaves the fundamental problem of dwindling carbon fuel resources being unable to meet future demand growth (IEA, 2015: 143-150; Lerch, 2010; Whipple, 2010) largely ignored. This in turn obviates questions of whether large-scale regional organisations may be particularly vulnerable to future energy supply volatility, and more prone to input-induced *diseconomies* of scale.

⁶⁷ This count comprises council numbers in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia. The Northern Territory and the external territories Cocos Island and Christmas Island jurisdictions have been excluded.

these small rural councils, while improving the general financial health of councils... must be accompanied by other reforms to increase efficiency and effectiveness' (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2006: 75-76).⁶⁸

Similarly, the Australian Government's Productivity Commission, in its 2005 *Review of National Competition Policy Reforms*, recommended that 'in parts of Australia, further council amalgamations and/or shared service provision arrangements would allow for greater realisation of economies of scale and lead to considerable cost savings' (Productivity Commission 2005: 293).

This rationality has also been on display in the Northern Territory's policymaking circles for decades. As early as 1989 (before the majority of Community Councils had even been established) a Department of Local Government senior bureaucrat hinted at future amalgamations by declaring: 'There is evidence supporting the claim that larger [local government] authorities have the advantage of economies of scale in the provision of municipal services... [Larger councils] can achieve significant decreases in unit costs of some services' (Phegan, 1989: 86-87). In 1999 another senior director in the Department of Local Government publicly stated that

most current councils are unable to obtain economies of scale in administration and, as a result, communities forego [sic] services that might otherwise be funded so that they can employ administrative staff. This, in itself, is a significant reason for reform. (Coles, 1999)

In the same year Loraine Braham, the Minister for Local Government in the Country Liberal Party (CLP) Government, referred NT Parliament to a 'necessary' national reform agenda

⁶⁸ This argument is somewhat contradicted in the same report; elsewhere the PriceWaterhouseCoopers consultants state, 'for many rural and remote communities, the large distance between councils can be a significant impediment to increasing regional service delivery. While structural reforms through amalgamations are necessary in some instances, each potential amalgamation needs to be assessed carefully to avoid the risk of simply creating large inefficient councils' (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2006: 73). For another example of consultants' duplicity on this topic, see (Robertson, 2016).

whose focus had been ‘on reforming councils to achieve economies of scale as well as efficiency, effectiveness and accountability’. She declared the NT Government’s position was that there should be fewer councils in the Territory, and that councils with less than 2000 residents (rather than the subsequent threshold of 5000 residents) would ‘encounter greater difficulties in maintaining adequate levels of administration and service delivery over the long term than those with larger populations’ (Braham, 1999).

After the election of the Martin Labor Government in 2001, the position on the efficiency benefits of amalgamations remained consistent. When the new Minister for Local Government Jack Ah Kit launched the Labor Government’s *Building Stronger Regions – Stronger Futures* policy in 2003 (which in part encouraged the voluntary establishment of regional authorities to replace single-settlement Community Government Councils) he provocatively commented:

Service delivery at the level of the individual community is not just stupid on the basis of cost efficiency or economic rationalism, it is just plain silly in cultural terms... Financial savings and the achievement of economies of scale... are relevant issues to consider... [as one strategy] to strengthen the fundamental rights of Indigenous Territorians. (Ah Kit, 2003d)

Minister Ah Kit’s advocacy in particular demonstrates that the perceived benefits of economies of scale extended beyond institutional efficiency to include broader capitalist economic development of Australia’s north, and even moralistic goals regarding ‘the fundamental rights of Indigenous Territorians’. The next Local Government Minister Elliot McAdam expressed a similar development-focused opinion. In an interview I held with him in 2010, he stated that the shires should be seen primarily as a ‘regional economic development model’ and spoke of the ‘immense development opportunities’ for mining and agriculture due to the establishment of more efficient regional council organisations (see also Australian Government, 2015: 85; McAdam, 2010).

In the aftermath of the 2008 amalgamations, many bureaucrats involved with the reform continued to cite the attainment of economies of scale as a key achievement. In 65 interviews I conducted from 2010 to 2015 with Northern Territory Government and shire management staff, most interviewees readily stated that per unit cost savings had been achieved. (Only two interviewees rejected the veracity of this assertion.) In this sample of interview transcripts below, the responses highlight the common conception that administrative “fixed overhead” costs can be spread more efficiently over larger organisations:

We’ve achieved some economies of scale... In the end I think there are going to be cost savings as you eliminate all of these small alternate structures into one big cohesive thing that can do things regionally rather than on a pocket handkerchief basis... I think [improved cost efficiency is] an inevitable outcome, given that you can reduce the overheads.
(Interview 28 June, 2010)

[Q: What was the main motivator for the reform?] Economic Rationalism... Bigger, better, make the dollars go further you know... It had to come I suppose, because everyone else has gone the same way. Just seems to be the way to go now. And there's more sense in going that way too. Especially when you consider you have 65 different administrations, and now you're down to eight. (Interview 16 March (#2), 2010)

[Q: Do you believe the Council has achieved economies of scale since 2008?] In some respects, yes... particularly around financial processing and things like that, where we've got half a dozen finance staff now, whereas in the Community Government Council days each Council had one or two finance staff... I think there are some economies of scale there.
(Interview 11 September, 2014)

Although the 2008 amalgamation process was trenchantly unpopular amongst residents, and despite a lack of any empirical evidence of scale economies, a remarkably large number of government officials I interviewed strongly advocated further amalgamations. For example:

From a [corporate services] perspective, yes we have got economies of scale... I think it should be taken further. I was only talking last week about East Arnhem and West Arnhem [shire councils] should be joined. I think there's more room to make the council a bit bigger, get better economies of scale. (Interview 8 September, 2014)

I think [Katherine Town Council, Roper Gulf Shire and Victoria Daly Shire] will amalgamate before the turn of the decade, before 2020... The whole potential of that was identified in the early stages of the reform, and it was one of the options put up when the boundary discussion was being had. I think a lot of the non-Indigenous network were very keen to get it done right here, right now, yes we can do it... When our Shires are running fairly well, you'll find amalgamation within the next decade... I think the Big Rivers region is conducive to that amalgamation. I don't think any of them [the councils] are going to get any smaller. They can't possibly economically do that. (Interview 16 March (#1), 2010)

Advocacy of further amalgamations was also expressed by the consultancy firm Deloitte in their 2012 review of the sector's post-reform financial sustainability. In the report the Deloitte firm stated:

There is an argument that further amalgamation should be considered, particularly where Councils have head offices in the same towns or where smaller Councils are not achieving economies of scale. A number of the remedial actions proposed in Section 4 of this report would enable improved efficiencies and economies of scale if implemented. (Deloitte, 2012: 13)⁶⁹

⁶⁹ In 2012 the Country Liberal Party (CLP) was elected to government on a platform to review the amalgamated shire system, and by 2014 Northern Territory Parliament had passed various amendments to the Local Government Act, including the de-amalgamation of the Victoria Daly Shire. Amongst the senior bureaucrats I interviewed afterwards, all expressed negative opinions towards this change. For instance, when asked to list the strengths and weaknesses of the Victoria-Daly de-amalgamation process, one senior shire manager responded:

Economies of Scale for number one. There's no economies of scale... I think there's all sorts of destabilising things. And I actually see that they will become defunct and either [another shire] will pick them up or Katherine Town Council will. I think [the remainder Victoria Daly Shire] is in a very weak position. And I worry about West Daly... They're going to be the poor cousins in the soup. And we're only going to get bigger and better. (Interview 9 September, 2014)

Other bureaucratic actors whom I interviewed also openly conflated “economies of scale” with their perceptions of other outcomes (such as improved performance- and administrative-related goals). For instance, when I asked senior management staff whether they believed the shires had achieved economies of scale, two responses were:

Yes. I do... Say for example the annual reports of the councils... There were many councils prior to the reforms that just failed to do annual reports and when they did, they were grossly inadequate. I mean, that's just one example. The sort of administration systems that councils have been able to access in order to be able to report and track what they do is a practical example of the economies of scale. (Interview 26 August, 2015)

Absolutely and I don't think we'll ever be able to do that as a smaller organisation... I can now look at my roads budget... and I know damn well I'll be spending [the full amount] on roads... Couldn't do that before. (Interview 9 September, 2014)

In all these statements the “economies of scale” term is deployed forcefully as part of a common sense argument in favour council amalgamation. Whether the position is technically valid or even internally consistent becomes largely irrelevant. Instead, the term’s strength is sourced from its aesthetic, frequent repetition and flexible polysemy. “Economies of scale” carries with it the vague authoritativeness bestowed by an economic discourse, yet its unfixed meaning renders it semiotically more agile and difficult to critique (Lea, 2008: 40-46). This semiotic power and agility greatly bolstered the momentum of the 2008 reform – regardless of any empirical evidence that larger councils would actually lead to scale-based efficiencies.

Cracks in the empirical edifice

Many arguments have been expressed to explain why economies of scale should hold in the local government sector. Merging smaller councils into larger regional bodies conceivably allows the organisation’s fixed costs (such as those related to corporate office space, information technology, executive management and so forth) to be spread out over a larger operation. Larger organisational units can also be imagined to reduce administrative

duplication, enable the recruitment of more skilled and productive staff, lead to more effective use of capital equipment (such as civil works plant and machinery), strengthen the organisation's purchasing power, and in general allow for improved financial control of the external environment. The pooling of corporate services (such as payroll, human resources and financial management functions) have been especially singled out as an opportunity for cost efficiencies (Andrews & Boyne, 2009: 741; Deloitte, 2012: 13; 64; 153; Drew, Kortt, & Dollery, 2014: 635; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2006: 120-122; Productivity Commission, 2005: 293; Reese, 2004: 595-600).

However in practice, despite its powerful genealogy and apparently impenetrable logic, the economies of scale theory offers only tenuous predictions of the optimal scale for local government institutions. Ongoing international research indicates there is no convincing evidence that larger-scale local government entities are more cost-efficient than smaller-scale councils (Allan, 2003; Andrews & Boyne, 2009; Byrnes & Dollery, 2002; Dollery & Fleming, 2006; Dollery, Wallis, & Akimov, 2010; Drew, Kortt, & Dollery, 2014; Fogarty & Mugera, 2013; Reese, 2004; Ting, Dollery, & Villano, 2014). Local government functions, especially in rural and regional settings with low population densities and limited alternative government service providers, have been demonstrated to be too distinct and complex for the closed-model assumptions of the economies of scale theory to hold.

There are a number of conceptual arguments for why economies of scale may *not* be achieved for local government organisations, especially in non-urban settings such as the Northern Territory's rural-remote sector. In the first instance, how local government production has been conceptualised in policymaking circles may have fundamentally misconstrued the question of scale optimality. Measuring the production of a single-output manufacturing firm (such as Adam Smith's example of a pin factory) is one thing; measuring the productive output of a council (for example, a regional sports and recreation service) is quite another.

The most common proxy measure of a council's production scale is resident population (as indicated by Minister McAdam's pronouncement of a minimum threshold of 5,000 residents for local government 'sustainability' to be achieved) (Dollery, Byrnes, & Crase, 2008: 167-168; McAdam, 2006). Yet, again, there is no particular rigour to this measure, nor to the figure of 5,000 residents as an efficiency threshold (except its aesthetically-derived magic of round-number certainty). Another potential output measure is total expenditure, however both population and expenditure variables have only an indirect and spurious link to the relationship between scale, production and cost of local government services; at best they are proxy (and flawed) measures of service output (Andrews & Boyne, 2009: 756; Drew et al., 2014: 634-635; 649; Ting, Dollery, & Villano, 2014: 2905).

Other factors conceivably have a more direct link with local government service delivery cost, including the mix and quality of services, the demands of intergovernmental funding agencies, socio-demographic characteristics of residents, and other local political considerations (Andrews & Boyne, 2009: 739; 749; Reese, 2004: 595; Ting, Dollery, & Villano 2014: 2905). In an empirical study of the New South Wales local government sector, Drew, Kortt and Dollery suggest population *density* is a more important cost driver than population *size* (Drew et al., 2014). This argument is especially pertinent in the Northern Territory setting, where the regional shires created by the 2008 amalgamation reform cover vast geographic areas with sparse human populations.⁷⁰ Coupled with rural Northern Territory's dispersed, low-density population is the region's isolation from other major population centres. Geographic distance is compounded by other ecological factors such as a harsh climate and regular seasonal monsoonal flooding in coastal regions, which all serve to complicate logistics and add to transport, energy and procurement costs (Dollery, Wallis, & Akimov, 2010: 25). They also lead to what the Commonwealth Grants Commission refers to as the issue of 'indivisibility of labour', whereby services are compelled to be provided at more small-scale service delivery points than would be considered in larger urban settings

⁷⁰ For example, by socio-geographic measures Roper Gulf Shire represents a typical non-urban regional council in the Northern Territory. Roper Gulf Shire's jurisdiction covers 185,176 square kilometres (a larger land mass than England and Wales combined). At the 2011 Census its population was reported as 6,121 residents, equivalent to roughly one resident per 30 square kilometres.

(CGC, 2015: 498). These factors may all significantly inhibit scale economies (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2006: 73; Productivity Commission, 2008: xxxvii; 281).

Even without potential energy cost increases, service coordination and governance is conceivably more costly for regionalised local government organisations. These factors are not insignificant for the NT's regional shires: regional program managers and executive management staff are expected to frequently travel to service delivery centres across their respective shires, and sometimes to attend regional meetings and intergovernmental events in Darwin, Alice Springs and even faraway Canberra. Similarly, elected regional councillors representing wards from across each shire are generally expected to meet face-to-face monthly or bi-monthly. These movements all entail additional allowance and accommodation costs, and often expensive journeys over hundreds of kilometres by road vehicles or (especially during the monsoonal season) chartered air flights. For the previous smaller-scale and localised community councils, many of these coordination and governance costs were minimal.

The labour-intensive mode of production for many local government services in the Northern Territory is another factor that may preclude economies of scale being achieved. Locally-delivered functions such as aged care, sport and recreation, front counter services, child care, youth services and so forth, are based on interpersonal contact time, with limited reliance on capital inputs. This limits the opportunities for input specialisation and scale-related efficiencies (Dollery & Fleming, 2006: 275; Drew et al., 2014: 635; 644-645).

Further, one factor that can drive costs higher in larger organisations is the increase in wages and salary costs, particularly for the executive management cohort. Conventional theory states that an expansion of an organisation's operations can lead to more efficient specialisation of labour, potential reductions in staffing, and therefore cost savings. A counter-argument is that larger bureaucracies may alternately lead to administrative congestion, and better allow for bureaucratic self-interest to prevail (in the form of salary

increases for an elite cadre) (Andrews & Boyne, 2009: 742-744). Laura Reese comments that wage and salary equalisation between merging councils generally trends upwards not downwards, in a phenomenon she colloquially describes this as ‘higher tides float all boats’ (Reese, 2004: 607; see also Dollery & Fleming, 2006: 273). Likewise, during the Northern Territory amalgamation reform process I observed what I call the “Prado effect”: corresponding with the growth in size and complexity of the local government organisations was a corresponding increase in the number and remuneration level of management staff.⁷¹ Salary levels at the Chief Executive Officer and director level in particular have risen disproportionately since pre-2008 levels, strongly suggesting an increase in internal inequality of wages and salaries.⁷² This phenomenon has also been identified during private-sector corporate merger and acquisition processes (Anderson, Becher, & Campbell, 2004; Bliss & Rosen, 2001; Grinstein & Hribar, 2003; Kraekel & Mueller, 2015).

Lastly, another factor which may undermine the ability of amalgamated organisations to achieve economies of scale is the (often understated) costs of restructuring. The introduction of standardised business and asset management systems, revised operating procedures, new contractual arrangements, upgraded facilities and so forth, all incur additional costs. Additionally, bureaucracies and elected officials often invest extra labour in planning and implementing amalgamation changes. Almost by definition, if the aim of larger councils is to alter dysfunctional practices, the replacement systems will incur extra costs. Any marginal improvements in cost efficiencies from scale increases may therefore be nullified by these start-up costs for years to come (Dollery & Fleming, 2006: 273). For example in Laura Reese’s study of the merger of twelve Canadian local government councils to create the greater City of Ottawa council, the projected savings over three years were

⁷¹ The term ‘Prado’ refers to the Toyota Prado, an executive-class four wheel drive vehicle that has become part of the standard employment package for many senior managers in the Northern Territory shire councils.

⁷² In 2011, media sources released the details of one NT shire executive manager’s pay rise: after two years at the helm of the MacDonnell Shire, CEO Graham Taylor was awarded a salary package increase from \$255,623 to \$356,216 per annum. As reported by the Melbourne newspaper *The Age*, this remuneration level ‘put him on a par with the Prime Minister’, and was many times more generous than the salary packages of community council CEOs prior to 2008. The newspaper also reported that Taylor’s contract was extended without an independent performance review (Skelton, 2011).

\$70 million; however the estimated transitional costs of amalgamation were \$189 million (Reese, 2004: 601).⁷³

Along with these conceptual arguments, empirical research has undermined the credibility of the link between cost savings and increased scale in local government. In an overview published in 2002 of the studies conducted in Australia on this topic, Byrnes and Dollery remark that 'existing research evidence on economies of scale in local government is limited and varies in its conclusions on the benefits of population size' (Byrnes & Dollery, 2002: 391). They conclude: 'The lack of rigorous evidence of significant economies of scale in municipal service provision casts considerable doubt on using this as the basis for amalgamations' (Byrnes & Dollery, 2002: 405). An earlier study by Soul found a weak but positive statistical relationship between population size and the 'economic performance' of councils in New South Wales (Soul, 2000). However a more recent investigation of the same jurisdiction by Drew et al found that any statistical evidence of scale-correlated cost efficiencies disappeared when councils were grouped by population density categories; their research concluded that 'there is no reason to believe that local government amalgamation in NSW will result in cost savings' (Drew et al., 2014: 633). In a study of local government efficiencies in Western Australia in the period 2009 to 2010, Fogarty and Mugeru found evidence of decreasing returns to scale in some councils, and increasing returns to scale in others (Fogarty & Mugeru, 2013).

Internationally, a study of local governments in Malaysia by Ting et al found no statistical relationship between per unit administrative costs and population or staff size of councils (Ting, Dollery, & Villano, 2014). Conversely Andrews and Boyne, in their study of England's local council sector, report a significant correlation between corporate services costs and population size. However they question whether population accurately captured the

⁷³ In the Northern Territory example, in April 2007 the then NT Minister for Local Government McAdam announced \$9.9 million of 'additional' shire establishment funding, (McAdam, 2007b), and the next Minister Rob Knight announced another \$5 million of funding in April 2008 for a declared 'total of \$27 million' for the shires' establishment and operational costs (Knight, 2008). The indirect costs to bureaucracy and to local government councils during the restructuring implementation phase were likely to have amounted to tens of millions of dollars more.

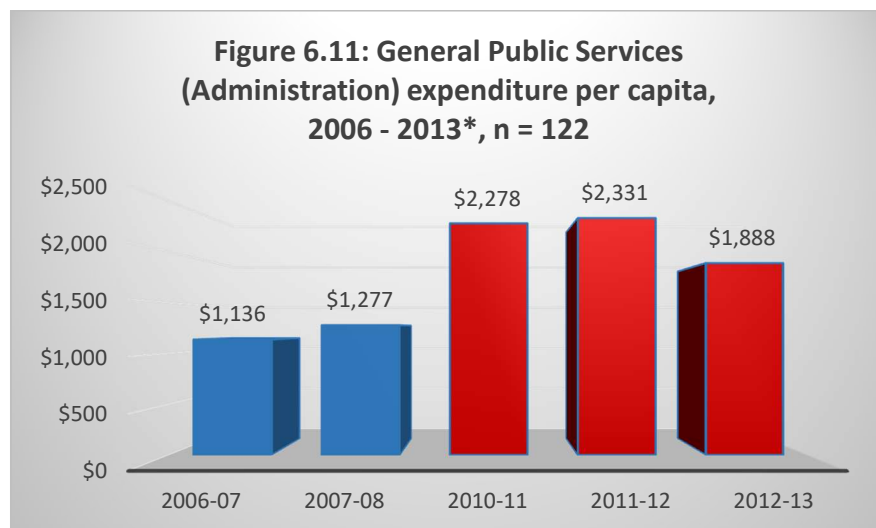
relationship between cost and scale, and qualify their results with the caveat that service standards or other aspects of performance may be reduced by decreasing expenditure on administration (Andrews & Boyne, 2009: 753-756). Reese, in her study of the Canadian local government sector, highlights that external forces (such as intergovernmental funding relations and larger economic trends) often negated any effects of amalgamations (Reese, 2004: 597-598). She wryly concludes that 'for most citizens, governmental reorganization produces the same governance on a different day' (Reese, 2004: 595). Percy Allan summarises:

Almost all the international research on whether size matters in local government comes to the same conclusion — bigger councils are less economical and less locally responsive. The public's suspicion about amalgamations is not ill conceived, it is supported by hard data. (Allan, 2003: 76)

The weak predictability of organisational size on cost efficiency highlighted in these studies is also corroborated by my own empirical findings for the Northern Territory sector. As detailed in Appendix B of this thesis, there is evidence of *diseconomies* of scale for the rural councils since their amalgamation into regional shires in 2008. In other words, empirical results suggest the post-2008 regional shires are markedly *less* cost-efficient than the previous community councils.

One measure of the sector's financial efficiency is a comparison of the net operating expenditure of the new regional shires with the previous community councils. If economies of scale hold, one could expect improved economic performance from the larger organisations and an increased propensity to achieve operating surpluses. However on this measure, the shires have experienced poor results: the average operating surplus ratio for the period 2010-13 was minus 11.0 per cent (Deloitte, 2013: 9), compared to an average operating surplus ratio for community councils in the period 2005-08 of minus 5.3 per cent (Michel, 2015: 106). Thus the proportional size of operating deficits in the sector has more than doubled between these periods.

Some specialised literature suggests that consolidating administrative and corporate services is one of the few opportunities for rural-remote local governments to capture economies of scale (see for example Deloitte, 2012: 153; Dollery et al., 2010: 37). Again however, the empirical evidence from the Northern Territory does not corroborate this argument. In a comparative measure of councils' spending on 'General Public Services' (which includes administration expenditure)⁷⁴, the pre-reform community councils annually spent on average \$1207 per capita in nominal terms, or 18.4 per cent of total operating expenditure between 2006 and 2008. Comparatively, in the period 2010 to 2013, the new regional shires annually spent an average of \$2166 per capita in nominal terms on 'General Public Services', or 36.3 per cent of total operating expenditure. (See figure 6.11 below.)



* 2006-07 and 2007-08 expenditure figures exclude Marrgarr, Milingimbi and Umbakumba Council data due to lack of availability. For Alpururulam, Anmatjere and Nganmarriyanga Councils, financial data was unavailable for one of the 2006-07 and 2007-08 periods.

As detailed in Appendix B of this thesis, an independent samples t-test found that the mean share of general public services expenditure (GPSE) compared to total operating expenditure for community councils ($\bar{X}$ = 0.222, s = 0.120) was lower than the mean share

⁷⁴ All local government bodies in Australia are required to annually report expenditure by standardised classification to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 'General Public Services' is one such function, which the ABS defines as including 'administration, support, regulation, research, and operation of general public services. General public services include legislative and executive affairs, financial and fiscal affairs, external affairs, general research and general services' (ABS, 2008: 7).

of GPSE for shire councils ($\bar{X}$ = 0.361, s = 0.108). This t-test found the difference between means to be significant, $t(120) = 5.20$, $p < 0.001$, 95% Confidence Interval for the mean difference (0.086, 0.193).⁷⁵ Further, Pearson's r correlation coefficient analysis indicates a weak but *positive* relationship between councils' relative share of GPSE versus resident population size, $r = 0.171$, $n = 122$, $p = 0.03$ (one-tailed), R^2 linear = 0.029, R^2 quadratic = 0.203. The statistical evidence does not support the hypothesis that the larger regional shires have been administratively more cost-efficient than their smaller community council counterparts.

To what end?

The absence of any empirical evidence in favour of economies of scale in the NT's local government sector necessitates alternative explanations of why it was such a powerful argument in the 2008 reform. Returning to Foucault's fundamental question of power that asks who is served by a certain discourse (Foucault, 1980: 115), I argue that the belief in economies of scale, and the widespread acceptance of economistic truths more generally, should be analysed on the basis of its political functionality. Regardless of empirical veracity, economistic truths tend to lend authority to the policy "expert" by deflecting wider social criticism of policy decisions and therefore providing a policy reform with political impetus (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015; Cullenberg, Amariglio, & Ruccio, 2001; Mitchell, 2002; Shapin, 1994; Shore & Wright, 2011).

More specifically related to my ethnographic setting, those whose political interests benefitted from the NT's amalgamations reform firstly included the bureaucratic actors within the state funding agencies and regulatory departments, whose authority and operational penetration into the local government sector was enhanced by the restructure. A second group who were clear material beneficiaries were senior management staff within

⁷⁵ Note the calculations of average spending on administration present marginally different results. The scores presented in figure 6.11 are based on the sum total GPSE and sum total operating expenditure for the sector in each financial year. In the results reported of the independent samples t-test above, the scores for GPSE share of total operating expenditure were inputted for each council individually, and the mean of these individual results were then calculated.

local government. As discussed above, this new tranche of senior executive-level positions were able to obtain remuneration packages far above any offered under the previous community council system.

In this sense, the justification of the 2008 shires reform through the application of the “economies of scale” argument can be deemed functionally successful, insofar as it politically contributed to enabling the reform to eventuate. Further, regardless of whether or not any cost efficiencies were realised through the shires reform (which, based on the economies of scale rationale, was to be the expected outcome), the reform can be deemed successful by bureaucracy because it achieved the ‘system goals’ of increased administrative order and conformity to funding agencies’ rules (Mosse, 2004: 653-659; Stoler, 2009: 57-64). A key failing of the previous community council sector as articulated by policymakers was its shortcomings in relation to bureaucratic accountability measures, and the imperfect control that funding agencies could exercise over the sector. Since the amalgamations, the bureaucracy’s control and authority over the sector strengthened significantly. This development has been referred to in optimistic terms by a group of local government scholars as an improvement in the ‘strategic capacity’ of the sector (Aulich, Sansom, & McKinlay, 2014); more critically, it can be interpreted as a process of enhanced mimicry of accepted and expected bureaucratic practices.

However in a climate privileging evidence-based policy and statistical support for all public decisions, the system goals of more ‘strategic capacity’ and enhanced bureaucratic mimicry alone are not compelling political arguments for an unpopular policy reform. The political instinct of the NT’s Local Government Minister at the time instructed him to establish the case for the 2008 amalgamations reform on a “solid” statistic. This was the basis for Minister McAdam’s authoritative pronouncement in 2006 that a minimum 5,000 residents was needed to ensure council sustainability (McAdam, 2006). However, as with the application of the “economies of scale” argument more generally, there was once again no empirical rigour to this statistic. As I will demonstrate in the next section, the invocation of

an efficiency threshold of 5,000 residents is first and foremost a demonstration of creative political performance.

The performativity of a statistic

I was working in the Northern Territory Department of Local Government around the time of McAdam's 2006 speech, and within the bureaucracy it quickly became apparent that the 5,000 resident population threshold was to be a key criterion of the planned restructure.⁷⁶ This statement captured my interest: the minister linked it with 'research conducted interstate', which lent an air of evidence-based probity to his assertion. But who conducted this research, and where could I find it? I made enquiries around the department and searched the computer files, but could find nothing internally. If there was a body of research done somewhere, nobody was forthcoming with details, and if they did exist, the documents were being kept confidential. My recollection was that there was no open discussion, let alone debate, regarding how this figure was derived.

From 2010 I started individually interviewing each of the senior policymakers who had been directly responsible for the formulation of the 5,000 resident structural threshold. When I quizzed former Minister McAdam on the figure he stated:

Well, I mean the department, the agency went through a fairly comprehensive research development stage and of course there were a number of options put up to Cabinet over a period of time. This whole exercise took something like 18 months to get through Cabinet. It was scrutinised, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Ideally we would've liked to have a greater population base per region, per shire... Ideally it would have been better to have 15 to 20,000. But the facts of life are that at that point in time it was on advice received... the population wasn't there... In the end, they were the facts, round about 5,000 or thereabouts, so that was it. (McAdam, 2010)

⁷⁶ By 30 January 2007, less than four months after Minister McAdam's announcement of the amalgamation plans and before the Local Government Advisory Board (the reform's peak consultative body) had its first sitting, McAdam announced by fiat the number of councils and the structural boundaries for the sector post-2008. Most of the proposed new regional shires did indeed have populations of more than 5,000 residents (McAdam, 2007a).

When I asked a select group of senior NT Government managers involved in the 'research development stage' that led to the establishment of the 5,000 resident threshold, some admitted ignorance but expressed faith in the rigour of the process:

I'm not sure... I know that [others in the department] did some sort of economic projections about the viability, and some of our towns I don't think are viable without that other group or population around them. So, yeah, I think 5,000 is adequate. (Interview 16 March (#1), 2010)

It's probably something to put to [another interview participant] because he was responsible for a lot of that data gathering assessment process. But I think from memory it was through looking at interstate models, and... testing the minimum amount you were going to get to determine how much you needed to keep your head above water. And 5,000, it might have been five or five and a half I think... We needed more people to be better. (Interview 28 June, 2010)

When pressed on the 5,000 population figure, one senior official linked it to bureaucratic commensurability and justified the threshold by comparing it to average council sizes interstate:

In terms of where you come out with viable numbers, even with 5,000 the number is significantly less than the average you'll find around state jurisdictions which I think Australia-wide comes in at about 16,000. (Interview 28 June, 2010)

Another senior department official indirectly conceded that the 5,000 population threshold was not formulated through outside empirical evidence:

Yeah... there wasn't a mathematical formula to get to that point, and a lot of it was based on looking at where population centres were... We started to see a pattern of around 5,000 around those centres so that's where the spokes and wheels sort of concept started to be developed. So it was more looking at the realities of size in small sub-regional centres and start joining those and what do you need to actually need to create something that you could service... And the pattern was about 5,000. That was the pattern that evolved. So it

was more on that sort of context, the capacity to service by a single provider. (Interview 24 April, 2015)

A former senior director in the department who was identified by his cohort as playing a disproportionately key role in the research process also deflected discussion of what (or whether) empirical evidence from interstate informed the decision to set the 5,000 population threshold. He responded that deliberations were ‘a much more sophisticated process’:

I recall being one of those difficult people in the department when the Minister's Office or one of the other arms of the Department, when they said "give us simple things to say", then saying "Well, it's not that simple". So, I always felt uncomfortable about claims such as 5,000 being sustainable. So I shall preface my comments by saying that I was never comfortable with those simple assertions. Obviously there are many things that you have to take into account: the size of the delivery area, the particular geographical circumstances... your relative proximity to major centre, the distance between certain major service delivery points... the number of rateable properties within an area is an extraordinarily important part of financial viability. The reliability or certainty that you have in regard to your funding from Commonwealth and Territory Governments is probably the most important aspect of viability... So in a way, the figure of 5,000 per council was really a product of a much more sophisticated process. So, when looking at all of the factors as to what actually might work, when the various options were drawn up, there wasn't an area that had less than 5,000 people. So it wasn't like "OK, let's make it 5,000 people and divide remote NT by that number". There was a whole process of taking all these things into account, we then looked at what came out the other end and the smaller areas were about 5,000 people. Does that make sense? (Interview 26 August, 2015)

Or, as one senior shire manager succinctly concluded: ‘5,000 is a nice round number’ (Interview 18 November, 2010).

Beyond Disruption

This chapter has attempted to disrupt the reliability of some “truths” that are taken for

granted and hold so much power in the policymaking process. My focus has been on the term “economies of scale”: beyond its authoritative veneer it lent in the 2008 shires reform context, it has been exposed here as a shaky *a priori* belief, a routinised, collectively endorsed policy prescription that was accepted without any empirical rigour (Lea, 2012: 119).

However this process of critical disruption extends beyond the narrow “economies of scale” example from my ethnographic setting, and applies to a broader mode of economic thinking that has become the basis of policymaking common sense more generally. One strength of economism as a mode of knowledge has been its scientific appearance: a robust rationality that is underpinned by empirical evidence and statistical verifiability. Yet if the robustness and empirical certainty of economism is undermined, it leaves unsettling analytical implications. It compels us to recast our understanding of the policymaking cycle towards a more unstable and culturally-driven dynamic, within which certain political actors are privileged. It also forces us to analyse epistemological tradition less as a rigorous accumulation of knowledge, and more as a repository of habit, aesthetic and performance. And finally, for the purposes of this thesis, this analytical disruption reveals the limitations of empirical evaluation as the mode of scholarly enquiry, and the necessity of alternative lines of critical cultural analysis.

These analytical lessons are extended in the following chapter, in which the brittle certainty of policymaking logics (in this case, as applied to Indigenous employment, training and economic development policy) is grafted on to the socio-political realities of a multinational energy industry development. The setting is the Indigenous-majority community of Wadeye and the discreet, parallel presence of the nearby Blacktip gas drilling platform, processing plant and pipeline. This next chapter also returns to a briefly introduced character to this thesis: the cyborg. This creature is presented more literally than figuratively, as a very material expression of the workings of contemporary techno-capitalism. It operates as a tool for understanding the synergies and disconnections of modern socio-economic forces, and their symbiotic interplay with policy.

Chapter Seven: Cyborg Wadeye



Figure 7.1: The Blacktip gas well platform, in the Timor Sea. Source: Monsta Cranes (2012).

Skirting around the marginalised, Indigenous-majority town of Wadeye on the Northern Territory's northwest coast is the Blacktip gas project: a highly automated network of offshore drilling wells, processing facilities and pipelines that are primarily owned and operated by the Italian-based energy multinational Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI). I use this setting to situate policy narratives focusing on “economic development” within the larger setting of transnational techno-capitalism, exploring how the symbiotic forces of development and neglect, innovation and redundancy, connections and exclusions all overlap with the contemporary practices of modern government.

Rather than economic truth-narratives of “development” or critical counter-narratives of “exploitation”, I apply Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the assemblage as an alternative lens for understanding the Blacktip gas project. This allows the project to be analysed as part of a complex network that expresses broader social power relations under

contemporary capitalism. I extend this analysis to suggest the image of the cyborg as a modern-day assemblage. The cyborg here symbolises the techno-capitalist blending of human and machine, the colonisation of mind and body by computer, the dominant logic of corporations and government. In this sense, the cyborg is an embodied, alternative truth – a new way to materially conceptualise the interconnected workings of modern techno-capitalism with policy.

Beyond categories of class and race, the cyborg also allows us to imagine processes of growth, redundancy and marginalisation as connected. A precariously employed contractor on the Blacktip project and a jobless resident of Wadeye who is being trained to be “work-ready” may have more in common than is often imagined. In this policy context, welfare dependency is not a scourge but a productive governmental outcome, a method of managing redundancy through acquiescence. The members of Wadeye’s heavy metal gangs are presented here as a troublesome rebellion against these dominant policy strategies, and a transformation of cyborgian agency into something more dangerous and unpredictable.

The Blacktip being

Even though it is one of the most important energy infrastructures in Australia’s Top End, ENI’s Blacktip gas project is in many respects an entirely inconspicuous entity. First is its physical near-invisibility. The giant steel legs of the gas wellhead platform stand about 110km offshore in the Timor Sea, completely out of sight from the beaches on the mainland. Once the drilling well extracts natural gas from the ocean floor below, it is pumped through an underwater pipe to an onshore processing plant at Yelcherr. This facility is separated from the town of Wadeye by bushland, a restricted access road, and security fencing – so there is no real opportunity for an average town resident to see it. From there the fuel flows onwards into a vast pipeline network which, apart from the occasional glimpses one gets along the road between Wadeye and Darwin, is an infrastructure that is mostly out of sight and easy to forget. The gas delivered by these pipelines fuels the electricity generation for Darwin, Alice Springs and elsewhere in Australia’s Top End.

Blacktip is also operationally inconspicuous. Based on industry standards, annual extraction rates from this gas field are not particularly high, and the comparative size of the product's end market is limited (ENI, 2009: 44). In ENI's corporate publications little mention is made of its Australian operations, let alone the Blacktip project (see for example ENI, 2016a). As is *de rigueur* in energy industry circles, the corporation makes much of its commitment to "sustainability", and prominently promotes its social and environmental investments (ENI, 2017a, 2017b). Yet this is irrespective of the direct impact ENI's operations have on carbon fuel dependence and climate change – an unsettling issue that is largely avoided for discussion by the corporation (Granjou, Walker, & Salazar, 2017: 6-9). The details of the Blacktip project's supply arrangements with the NT Government's Power and Water Corporation are also invisible, hidden by commercial-in-confidence rules. However the business-friendly local taxation regime it operates under (Gerritsen, 2010a: 20-30; Howey, 2010: 72; Cleary, 2011) and its twenty-five year binding supply contracts should ensure that the project will quietly generate hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue for the company.⁷⁷

ENI itself can be described as an unremarkable energy corporation. The company is a relatively sizeable player in the global petroleum extraction industry, and it does command the influential support of the Italian state. However its influence is dwarfed by industry giants such as Exxon Mobil, PetroChina and Chevron (Financial Times, 2015). ENI is structured typically, and like most other multinational corporate entities it is difficult to describe it as a singular unit: it is a publicly-listed corporation, bound by overlapping international legal codes, with shareholders dispersed around the globe (ENI, 2016b). Typically again, can Blacktip even be described as an ENI project? Many contractors and sub-

⁷⁷ Although the terms and conditions of the gas purchase contract between ENI and the Northern Territory's Power and Water Corporation (PWC) are kept commercial-in-confidence, some of its financial details are provided in the notes to the financial statements of the PWC's annual reports. At the end of June 2015, PWC reported future gas purchase commitments of \$3,864 million, to which the report states: 'Gas purchase commitments include take-or-pay obligations under a 25-year gas sale agreement with Eni Australia B.V., the first supply of which commenced in the 2009-10 financial year'. In June 2014, PWC reported gas purchase commitments of \$4,061 million, or an approximate \$197 million run-down of gas purchase commitments in the 2014-15 financial year. It is not made clear what other commitments this may include additional to the contract with ENI. Further, gas transportation expenditure commitments (including for pipeline transport) amounted to \$1,322 million at end June 2015 (PAWC, 2015: 91).

contractors were involved in its construction; another consortium owns and manages the pipeline. Deleuze writes that the power of corporations has shifted due to a focus away from production *per se*, in favour of the management of finance, services, marketing and public relations. Under these governing configurations, corporations don't essentially own discrete entities of production, but instead work as an exchange network of financial interests (Deleuze, 1992: 3-5). In this sense the corporation can be interpreted as an interconnected organism without strict spatial, human or technological boundaries.

Another altogether ordinary aspect of ENI's Blacktip gas project is its capital-intensive, highly automated *modus operandi*. The Blacktip well facility itself is entirely robotic. Humans seldom visit (Offshore-technology.com, 2015). Similarly, the onshore pipeline infrastructure is monitored from a computer control room in Darwin (APA Group, 2014). At the Yelcherr processing plant, human staff members are minimal. Even during the project's booming construction phase from 2007 to 2009, work was contracted and further sub-contracted out to niche engineering firms, ultra-specialised capital equipment (largely manufactured overseas) was used, and the workforce was flexible, tech-savvy and fleeting. Few local jobs were created. This is all standard for the industry. In short, the system is a showcase of modern industrial achievement: rationally designed as a networked automaton, with minimal human input required only for monitoring, system maintenance, facility security and contingencies (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000: 300-302).

I treat the ordinariness of Blacktip, and its inconspicuousness, as its own hegemonic force: it lends the structure and practice of operations an air of inevitability, cordoned off from outside scrutiny. As Susan Wright and Cris Shore write, 'the most effective forms of domination are often those that go undetected' (Shore & Wright, 2011: 9). How can one confront and challenge something that one cannot, is not, entitled to see (Berlant, 2007: 258-259; Haraway, 2004; Mitchell, 2002: 10-15)? As I will also discuss here, Blacktip – and the modern energy industry corporation more generally – is an expression of modern, interconnected social power relations. In other words, it is the quintessential cyborg assemblage.

The Town of Wadeye

Only a few kilometres away from this network of industrial automation is the remote town of Wadeye, a socially marginalised community of almost 3000 residents and the largest population centre in the Victoria Daly Shire. The visible poverty, unemployment and housing overcrowding of Wadeye attract their share of intermittent national media attention as a site of Indigenous disadvantage *in extremis* (perhaps aided by the community's easy access via regular scheduled flights from Darwin) (see for example Hope, 2015; Rothwell, 2009; Whittaker, 2007).



Figure 7.2: Then Prime Minister John Howard visiting Wadeye in 2005. Photo: Glenn Campbell.
Source: (Fyfe & Nader, 2006)

Linked to the town's marginality has been the proliferation of youth gangs over the years. Government "experts" have identified over a dozen distinct gang groupings, and membership numbers likely in the hundreds (Cunningham et al., 2013: 1). Names are taken from heavy metal and pop groups such as the Judas Priests, Evil Warriors, Fear Factory, the German Boys, the Kylie Girls and Madonna Mob (Cunningham et al., 2013; VICE, 2009). The presence in Wadeye of these gangs has become difficult to ignore: alongside obvious graffiti

tags and the display of gang-related icons, the sporadic feuding and rioting between rival groups can become acutely visible to even the itinerant outsider (VICE, 2009).⁷⁸

With the rise of the Wadeye gang phenomenon has come an increase in attention and analysis from media, academics and the state. One dominant reaction is to treat the matter as a simple law-and-order issue, requiring more policing and authoritarian measures against juvenile delinquency (see for example Murdoch, 2006; Whittaker, 2007). Other quasi-journalist reportages sensationalise the town's poverty and treat the heavy metal-themed gangs as a cultural curio object (VICE, 2009). Other more nuanced academic work identify elements of tribal-related social support afforded by gang membership, but emphasise criminology-influenced remedial strategies (including vocational training and employment opportunities) to curb the gang-related dysfunction (Cunningham et al., 2013). Other works are in the conventional vein of anthropological paternalism, quaintly concluding that gang networks reflect customary kinship groupings that 'show strong continuity with traditional Aboriginal social organisation' (Mansfield, 2013: 154).



Figure 7.3: Wadeye gang youth, as represented in The Age Newspaper. Photo: Terry Trewin. Source: (Murdoch, 2006). Image reproduced under fair use of copyright.

⁷⁸ I was in town twice when large-scale rioting between rival gangs occurred. During the first experience I feared for my safety, and I spent most of it locked away in my accommodation unit. The second experience was more depressing when I realised the violence was largely internecine; at one stage I ventured out to walk my dog, and it was clear I wasn't a target of the rioters.

Linked to this attention is Wadeye's role as a policy laboratory: the township has been the site for many bureaucratic studies and trials of government program interventions (including a high-profile Council of Australian Governments (COAG) trial from 2003 to 2006).⁷⁹ It also receives sporadic visits from government Ministers, including frequent stop-overs from then Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough during his planning and implementation of the Federal Intervention from 2006 to 2007 (Crabb, 2007; Gray, 2006; Taylor & Dermody, 2009). Minister Brough was a relatively frequent visitor to Wadeye during a peak in gang-related conflict, and he used public meetings to address gang members directly in threatening, authoritarian terms. For example, during one visit he said:

No ganja [marijuana], no petrol, nothing. That means not you, not you, none of the adults. Which means we can sometimes bring the sniffer dogs through... There's rubbish everywhere. It just shows we're not proud of the place we live in, and you want me to spend more money? (quoted in Whittaker, 2007)

In another instance he used a similar tone: 'I'm the man from Canberra. I control the bloody money that comes in here for Centrelink ... If you boys go over the hill tonight to fight those guys, I will cut your money off. Do you fucking well understand what I'm saying?' (quoted in Bryant, 2013).

Development and "Real Jobs": hegemonic narratives around Blacktip

In contrast to the remediating focus directed at the Wadeye gang phenomenon, the Blacktip gas project has received scant, largely uncritical, attention from the media, academia and government. Unlike Macarthur River Mine, at the time of the project's commencement, the Northern Territory Government's environment and social impact assessment process passed without fanfare, and full approval for the project was granted (OEH NTG, 2005).

⁷⁹ The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is an intergovernmental forum whose peak body is comprised of the Premiers and Chief Ministers of all Australia's states and territories, and is chaired by the Australian Prime Minister. COAG serves to set overarching strategic policy directions for all state entities in Australia. This has extended to the Indigenous affairs policy arena: in 2008 the forum ratified the landmark National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap) (COAG, 2008).

When there has been critical discussion of the project in the media, it has generally been brief and has focused on functional issues such as supply disruptions (see for example ABC, 2014b). One of the few public documents on Blacktip, published in a gas industry journal (and authored by ENI management staff) is unequivocally upbeat and proclaims the project ‘will provide energy security in the next two and a half decades ... [and] will be a significant catalyst for development in the NT’ (Kernaghan, 2008: 274). And while there are local pockets of criticism directed at the practices of the mining and energy industry more generally, these viewpoints are routinely marginalised in public discourse (see Chapter 5).⁸⁰

As ENI management point out in the above quote, having a stable local fuel source for electricity generation would have been one motivation for NT policymakers to support the Blacktip project (notwithstanding that other energy solutions are always available, the long-term supply contracts between ENI and the NT Government provide limited scope for exploring less carbon-intensive alternatives (Granjou, Walker, & Salazar, 2017: 6-9).) I argue another key factor is Blacktip’s conformity to the ideal model of economic development for northern Australia, in which a privately-owned, industrially advanced corporation invests in local infrastructure and jobs. Variants of a pro “economic development” rationality have become hegemonic in government policy circles in northern Australia (Altman, 2009; Scambary, 2013), with projects such as Blacktip widely imagined not only as a path to future prosperity (Granjou Walker, & Salazar, 2017: 5-6) but also as the practical solution for overcoming Indigenous disadvantage (Ah Kit, 2003d; Dillon & Westbury, 2007; Forrest, 2014; NTG, 2017). A key aspect of this pro-development truth creation is an imagination of how the “market” and private business entities are common-sensical enablers of development. The discursive fetishisation of the power of the “market” (read business interests) in “developing” a territory is apparent in many key policy texts (see for example

⁸⁰ For example during the attempt in 2001 by the Labor Party to claim NT parliamentary power after many decades of conservative Country Liberal Party rule, the leader Clare Martin was at pains to run a business-friendly campaign. At one stage this resulted in Martin demoting Ministerial candidate and popular Indigenous politician Jack Ah Kit after he made statements critical of mining companies operating in the Territory (Carment, 2007: 71-75).

Australian Government, 2015; Forrest, 2014; OEA, 2009)⁸¹, and is succinctly expressed in the Australian Government's 2015 *White Paper*:

Business is far better placed [than government] to understand the risks and rewards from northern economic development With the right policies ... The north will be an exemplar of sustainable development Key enabling infrastructure will create greenfield supply chains across agriculture, aquaculture and previously stranded energy and minerals resources. This will serve as the catalyst for new large scale projects in the key investment priority areas. (Australian Government, 2015: 2-4)

In accordance with this market-oriented imaginative work, a central appeal of Blacktip for policymakers was ENI's pledge of private sector-generated income flows, training and work opportunities – in short, the alluring provision of “real jobs” to local Indigenous residents. Like amalgamated shires offering economies of scale, this offered a straightforward, market-oriented solution to how Indigenous socioeconomic disadvantage should best be overcome in practice, in particular in an area of high unemployment and low industrial development: simply through more Indigenous engagement with the labour market.

“Real jobs” (read private-sector waged employment) is a common trope used in the sphere of Indigenous employment and training policy, the salutary benefits being widely accepted across party political lines. For example, the current Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion has stated before Parliament: ‘*Real jobs* are the only way to end disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians... Our First Australians deserve better’ (Scullion, 2014c, italics added). Alan Tudge, former Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister (with jurisdiction over Indigenous Affairs) labelled employment ‘the motor of reconciliation. People who are employed tend to have better health, housing and general well-being. We must lift the indigenous employment rate to address our nation’s greatest social inequity’ (Tudge, 2014). Former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in his landmark

⁸¹ As mentioned in chapter 6, the Australian Government’s seminal 2015 report *Our North, Our Future: White Paper on Developing Northern Australia* uses the term ‘market’ 126 times within its 200 pages; *The Forrest Review: Creating Parity* similarly uses the term ‘market’ *ad nauseum* (123 instances) (A. Forrest, 2014).

Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples speech before parliament in 2008, highlighted the creation of more employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians as a key practical element of the reconciliation process, and set a target 'within a decade to halve the widening gap in literacy, numeracy and employment outcomes and opportunities for Indigenous Australians' (Rudd, 2008). And Mal Brough, the former Coalition Government's Indigenous Affairs Minister, likewise placed emphasis on "real jobs" and a "real economy" as policy tools to overcome social dysfunction. In his parliamentary speech justifying the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill* in 2007, Brough declared:

Unemployment and welfare dependency may not cause [child] abuse, but a *viable economy and real job prospects* make education meaningful and point to a life beyond abuse and despair. Currently, there are too few jobs in these communities and land tenure arrangements work against developing *a real economy*. (Brough, 2007, italics added)

The language used by politicians is also reflected in the bureaucratic discourse around Indigenous employment policy, as expressed through market-oriented policy texts and in the justifications for contemporary policy reforms (in particular the recent transformation of the CDEP scheme (Jordan & Altman, 2016: chaps 1-2)). An evaluative report of CDEP in 2009 framed the scheme's objectives as 'preparing participants for mainstream employment... establishing and maintaining linkages to mainstream employment programs to promote job outcomes; [and] incubating businesses to become viable'. The report concluded that the Australian Government's expressed policy focus on 'labour market adjustment' would be best assisted 'when [CDEP] is focussed on the labour market, rather than internally on supporting the local community (OEA, 2009: 6-7)'. More recently, an influential review in 2014 of existing Indigenous employment programs commissioned by the Australian Government and penned by mining magnate Andrew 'Twiggy' Forrest, framed 'the huge disparity in employment of Indigenous Australians and other Australians' as 'the nation's most glaring failure' (Forrest, 2014: 1). The report's recommendations were steadfastly market-focused: 'We must use the power of the market and business incentives to deliver the jobs to eliminate disparity... *only employers and the market can deliver real jobs*' (Forrest, 2014: viii; 5, italics added). In similar language, the Australian Government's 2015

White Paper identified ‘getting remote unemployed to work in *real jobs*... where the majority of jobseekers are Indigenous’ as a key strategic goal of government (Australian Government, 2015: 109, italics added). To this end, the *White Paper* called for ‘a more flexible labour market system in the north... [that] will allow businesses to bargain over wages and conditions specific to their business needs, as well as encourage increased investment, more jobs and income growth’ (Australian Government, 2015: 9).

Beyond imagining market structures as the device to deliver “real jobs”, remediating individuals’ behaviour is a uniting theme. This is especially apparent in the Indigenous employment policy arena, in which the targets of policy often diverge markedly in their behaviours from mainstream social norms. Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion (speaking about school attendance rates and its effects on labour market participation) outlined this role for policy: ‘We have fundamental structural and attitudinal problems to change... [to enable Indigenous participation] in future economic developments’ (Scullion, 2013). The former Labor Government’s Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin wrote of the importance of ‘helping to rebuild *positive social norms* [for Indigenous people] that underpin daily routines like going to school and work’ (Macklin, 2010: 1, italics added). The language extolling behaviour change was even more explicit in the report *The Forrest Review: Creating Parity*:

We already have massive levers we have not yet used to end the disparity—the power of the market, enforcing [school] truancy laws and changing our attitudes to expect and demand more for first Australians... Only first Australians themselves can make the necessary lifestyle changes... In a nutshell, it’s time to end the paternalism, to expect able first Australians to stand on their own feet and become independent (Forrest, 2014: 3, 5).

This individualisation of responsibility for employment and economic development was also expressed directly regarding the Blacktip project and its effects on Wadeye. ENI Australia’s external relations and communications manager confidently delimited multinational corporations’ capacity to foster local economic development:

The people and organisations that live and work in a region are responsible for the social and economic development of that region, as a part of that community. Some contributions can be made by resource developers, however it is up to the people themselves, the individuals and the families in any community to choose and then pursue their individual and collective destiny. Others cannot do it for them. (Kernaghan, 2008: 271)

These statements shift focus from structural considerations, and set policy up as a type of individualised 'morality play' (Lea, 2012: 110) in which the state plays a key role in setting a moral community for the economy (Harvey, 2005: 82-84). Elizabeth Povinelli writes of the creation and maintenance of individualised economic responsibility, or what she coins the 'autological subject', as a core governmental technology of liberalism. Povinelli defines the 'autological subject' as 'the recursive ideology of the subject of freedom, the subject that chooses her life' but is simultaneously expected to "freely" make choices that conform with a market-oriented rationality (Povinelli, 2011; Povinelli & Turcot DiFruscia, 2012: 82).

Yet the statements also prompt questions of why these morality narratives work, for whom, and for what material effect. One practical outcome is that if a contentious policy reform (for example the 2008 shires reform) or a proposed industrial development (such as the establishment of a new gas facility and pipeline) can justify itself in terms of the creation of "real jobs", it is lent an almost irrepressible moral and practical impetus.⁸² Another effect is that if joblessness, poverty and social dislocation in a place like Wadeye can be framed as

⁸² A key justification of the 2008 local government reform was the ability of the shires to create more employment positions (through increased grant funding) than the previous community councils. As a 2013 NT Government report into regional governance emphasised: 'Between 2008 and 2012 the number of jobs in local government [shire] councils increased from 1657 to 2518, with the number of Aboriginal employees in the shire councils (1780) now greater than the total number of employees (both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal) in the former community government councils in 2008' (NTG, 2013: 4) These employment gains have been frequently invoked by government leaders as a moral rationale for the reform. For instance, in a 2010 interview with the former NT Minister for Local Government Eliot McAdam, stated:

Things weren't changing, things weren't happening. People weren't being trained, people weren't being given jobs...And you ask yourself the question, how long do you sit back and allow this to happen?... I think you will find under this new model that there's probably [a lot of] jobs being created, real jobs... And over time, you'll find that apprentices, plumbers, painters, electricians, essential service workers will come out of this... The point I'm trying to make is, that if anything that can be done through the local government reform in terms of employment and proper training, if we can achieve this, that would just make it so much better for people out there. (McAdam, 2010)

essentially attitudinal and caused by irrational individual decision-making, this becomes grounds for ever deeper bureaucratic interventions into individual behaviours (Hansen & Stepputat, 2001: 23-29; Lea, 2014a). In Australia's Indigenous affairs policy arena, these interventions are displayed constantly by the plethora of targeted youth services, education and training initiatives, "work-ready" and "life skills" programs, juvenile correction interventions, and so forth (Jordan & Altman, 2016; Sanders, 2008).

ENI's 'community investment strategy' in Wadeye

Due in part to policy's discursive focus on "real jobs", the mining sector in northern Australia devotes substantial public relations efforts towards local employment initiatives (see for example Glencore, 2014d, 2015b, 2016d and chapter 5 of this thesis). ENI's operations of the Blacktip project are no different (ENI, 2009; 2017a). During Blacktip peak construction phase from 2006 to 2009, ENI came to an agreement with the Australian and Northern Territory Governments to adopt an 'Australian Industry Participation Plan', aimed at promoting the use of local contractors and labour forces (ENI, 2009). In Wadeye this initiative manifested itself through a prominent vocational training program that operated out of the training centre in the main street. It was there that participants (mainly men) gathered regularly and prominently, with some local participants actually gaining employment on the construction project, in labouring and civil works capacities.

However, ENI also deployed other strategies, or a targeted 'community investment strategy', in corporate parlance (ENI, 2017a), to ensure local acceptance of its Blacktip project. First was the institution of royalty payments. Due to the location of the onshore gas processing facility and much of the pipeline on the Daly River / Port Keats Aboriginal Land Trust, the Northern Land Council had become involved in negotiating land use terms between the corporation and traditional landowners. An agreement was achieved by 2006, and according to industry sources and anecdotal accounts, this resulted in relatively generous income flows for select traditional landowners (Kernaghan, 2008: 279, 281).



Figure 7.4: Wadeye high school recipients of the ENI-funded 2008 SchoolsNet prize of a trip to Italy. Photo by Glenn Campbell. Source: Murdoch (2008).

Another important aspect was the web of grants and community programs ENI supported. This funding largesse appears to have reached its zenith in 2008, when the project was at its most visible locally: ENI reported community investments totalling 312,129 euros that funded environmental health projects, an annual Wadeye Festival, the Murrinh-patha language centre, and the local Australian Rules Football (AFL) competition. In ostentatious fashion, Wadeye's Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School was even awarded a prize by ENI within the Schoolnet Project, which resulted in an entire class receiving a one-week trip to the Basilicata region of Italy (ENI, 2009).

In preparation for the amalgamation of the local Thamarrurr Council into the Victoria Daly Shire, I started visiting Wadeye regularly in 2007 (around the Blacktip project's peak construction phase). I followed ENI's activities with much interest and as much as I could gather, a vague sense of optimism and acceptance was widely felt by local residents towards Blacktip. Besides one discussion at the Thamarrurr Council meeting expressing concerns about the number of trees cleared for the pipeline corridor, I never encountered overt signs of opposition to Blacktip. These fleeting observations were corroborated by the consultancy firm ImpaxSIA and by ENI's External Relations and Communications Unit, who both reported that local attitudes towards the Blacktip project were generally positive

(ImpaxSIA Consulting, 2004: 27; Kernaghan, 2008: 271-2; 277). The ‘community investment strategy’ and the allure of local jobs seemed to have had their desired political effect.

Of course, the glaring absurdity of the situation in Wadeye is that even with lucrative, long-term and reliably profitable industrial developments close by, the private sector has been incapable of providing sufficient “real jobs” to Wadeye’s residents. The Blacktip gas project will easily generate hundreds of millions of dollars of wealth in its lifespan. Yet ten years on since Blacktip’s construction, the project’s earnings are now being largely dispersed to ENI’s global shareholders. The handful of short-term local employment positions it generated have long since dissipated; besides a few on-site maintenance and security staff at the Yelcherr processing plant, management of the infrastructure network has become almost fully automated. Royalty payments from the project to some important local families do continue, and limited support for the local land management rangers program is still provided (albeit related to rehabilitation of the company’s own industrial activities on Yelcherr Beach) (ENI, 2017c). These notwithstanding, funding for local community investment strategy initiatives has otherwise dried up. With operations running smoothly and human involvement in Blacktip minimised, ENI’s gaze has now shifted elsewhere. Its corporate aim now appears to keep a low profile locally.



Figure 7.5: Residential house in Wadeye. Photo: Michel (circa 2007).

Based on my own subjective experiences in Wadeye, there were many positive aspects to the community. The Thamarrurr Council was active and dynamic, conducting all meetings mainly in the Murrinh-patha language. Many Wadeye residents were engaged with the school, health clinic, arts centre and other local institutions. A community spirit was detectable. Yet it was also hard to overlook the signs of social discontent in the town. Despite its natural beauty and some friendly, decent people I met during my time there, to me the prevailing mood in the place seemed sullen, seething. The 'quasi-event' of poverty was constantly on display, 'ordinary, chronic and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden and sublime' (Povinelli, 2011: 13). Much of the housing was chronically overcrowded and appeared dilapidated; money and paid employment were obviously scarce. Two local residents described life in Wadeye to me as such:

The major thing here is boredom. There's a lot of locals walking around, without work People give up and lose interest. We're moving nowhere, going nowhere. I don't see any of my family or friends working. I'm meant to be a role model for this community. How many people, locals, actually have jobs? It'd be interesting to see how many people are actually working. (Interview 5 March, 2010)

Many people in Wadeye seemed to cope with the drudgery of poverty by just 'getting by, and living on' (Berlant, 2007: 759). From my own cultural perspective, the prevailing pace of the town was languid. But there was also an edge of volatility and violence, with signs of low-level rebellion against the prevailing order. Public infrastructure got damaged regularly; graffiti was everywhere. An animosity towards governmental authorities was only thinly below the surface.⁸³ For instance, one group of local residents stated:

The government saying the people don't want to look for job... but people do work hard here... No, [the Government] made promises but I thinks don't really happen... Never been

⁸³ When working for NT Government I typically travelled to Wadeye in a white Toyota Landcruiser, a vehicle make and model that is immediately identifiable as government fleet. On my very first trip I had parked my Landcruiser outside my accommodation. Whilst unpacking I noticed smoke from outside, and discovered a passer-by had lit a grassfire under my vehicle. A water hose was close by, and with a local neighbour I was able to put out the fire before any lasting damage was done to the Landcruiser.

changed [things aren't changing], just more white people, doesn't give a chance for Aboriginal people to honour this land. (Interview 4 February, 2011)

Other signs of self-destructive violence were on display. Although Wadeye was a “dry” community with alcohol consumption banned (except for outsider permit holders), there was a social club 80 kilometres away in Peppimenarti that served beer. Alcohol-fuelled road trips were common enough, and the Port Keats Road, the main dirt road to Darwin with Peppimenarti along the way, was littered with the wrecks of drunken vehicle accidents.



Figure 7.6: Wrecked car on Port Keats Road. Photo: Michel (circa 2007).

The assemblage as an understanding of power

To interpret the functioning of the Blacktip project and its connection with Wadeye, Michael Watts' phrase 'petro-violence' could be applied. He uses the term to describe the modern-day carbon energy industry as a system that crudely expresses geopolitical power, in which local points of production generally work as extractive enclaves that are interlinked by exploitative infrastructures (Watts, 2001). Similar criticisms focused on the exploitative practices of the mining and energy industries have been expressed locally in the Northern Territory (Carment, 2007: 71-72; Howey, 2010; Scambary, 2013; Young, 2010); local political scientist Rolf Gerritsen for example has described the NT's resource extraction sector as part of a 'Third-World style dual economy', in which pockets of high-tech industry are

situated in areas of underdevelopment (Gerritsen, 2010a: 23). These core-periphery analyses invite an understanding of the Blacktip project as structurally bifurcated from the town of Wadeye.

I want to place a different analytical emphasis: rather than excluded from the Blacktip project, the town of Wadeye and its residents are symbiotic to it, and have been unavoidably implicated into the functioning and policy frameworks that underpin it. A method of analysing these symbiotic but unequal social formations that I have been using throughout this thesis is through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the assemblage which can be understood as a hegemonic cluster that draws together heterogeneous elements of discourses and matter (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 6; McGregor Wise, 2011: 92-94). The assemblage allows us to think of corporations, energy industrial projects, human communities and other groupings not as discrete and contained entities with an ordered number of parts, but as networked multiplicities (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 1-22).

This process of clustering heterogeneous elements together, or 'territorialisation', is a power struggle in which forces attempt to dominate through 'coding', 'recoding' and establishing regulated patterns of social action (Bogue, 2011: 132; Deleuze & Guattari, 1996 [1972]: 419; Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 376-377). This is a dynamic process (McGregor Wise, 2011: 92), with groupings constantly becoming assembled or unassembled, with tensions between organisation and change, order and flux (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 1-22; McGregor Wise, 2011). Thus the formations of assemblages are being constantly destabilised by forces of deterritorialisation, or 'lines of flight' from the assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986 [1975]: 16; 2013 [1987]: chap 1; 238-242; 386-389; McGregor Wise, 2011: 94). These constant flows of transformation, subversion and resistance (or 'decoding', in the language of Deleuze and Guattari) give the assemblage its dynamic complexity – and opens up revolutionary possibilities (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 378; 380).

As an analytical extension, I suggest the term “cyborg” to represent a key assemblage of modern-day capitalism. In line with the concept of the assemblage as a networked multiplicity, the cyborg is a hybrid organism that allows an alternative understanding of the modern corporation, its interplay with public policy, and even how that relates to the heavy metal gangs of Wadeye.

The cyborg as modern assemblage

An easy conceptualisation of the cyborg is a blending of dichotomies: a creature of human and machine. To develop this analytical metaphor with reference to the thinking of Donna Haraway (Haraway, 2006 [1985]) and Philip Mirowski (Mirowski, 2002), the cyborg can be more complexly thought of as the colonisation of mind and body by the computer, even the hegemonic rationality of the modern age. The term “computer” is applied here not only materially as a physical instrument, but as an ontological agent noun: the computational being, the paradigm of information processing that links the organic with the mechanical (Mirowski, 2002: 11-18). This symbiosis relates to the Heideggerian concept of the ‘*techne*’: blending of subject and object, with technology as the process of (human) subjects ‘revealing’ the instrumentalities of objects through their application (Heidegger, 1977; Weick, 1999: 135-136). In this sense the cyborg become more than a physical human-machine hybridity, and emerges as a way of understanding an ontology defined by the information flows that constitute and enable this hybridity.

Thinking of the cyborg as a techno-human information processor hints at how this being has avoided critical scrutiny: it is often situated beyond ideology into a realm of depoliticised information: an optimised techno-human ontology linked to the modernist era of progress, improvement, *better thinking*. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote:

We may trust "mechanical" means of calculating or counting more than our memories.

Why? -- Need it be like this? I may have miscounted, but the machine, once constructed by us in such-and-such a way, cannot have miscounted. Must I adopt this point of view? --

"Well, experience has taught us that calculating by machine is more trustworthy than by

memory. It has taught us that our life goes smoother when we calculate by machines."
(Wittgenstein, 1978: 212-213)⁸⁴

Industrial developments such as ENI's Blacktip project, with its blending of high-tech infrastructure, computer monitoring and human management, are straightforward examples of cyborg assemblages. So too is the modern corporation, with its incorporation of informational networks. Deleuze sees the corporation (rather than say the factory) as the pre-eminent economic entity of the modern age, and as a key site for the transformation of contemporary social relations and the establishment of 'ultrarapid forms of free-floating control' (Deleuze, 1992: 4). He conceptualises the corporation not as an entity that commands material production *per se*, but instead that primarily has management authority over finance, services, marketing and public relations. As I discussed in Chapter 5, under these governing configurations, corporations work as an exchange network of financial interests rather than owning production (Deleuze, 1992: 3-5). To return to my ethnographic example, ENI and its involvement in the Blacktip project conceptually works as a cyborgian network. ENI's operations and ownership are structured globally (ENI, 2016b). Its mode of decision-making rationality is profit-driven, but is likely to be based more on computer-generated algorithms than purely human shareholder interests. Its mode of operations is also a web: many contracted and sub-contracted firms were engaged in the construction of the Blacktip facilities, and another corporate consortium owns and manages the pipeline (Offshore-technology.com, 2015). The ongoing governance of the project, including environmental regulation and contractual obligations, blurs between the state and the corporation. ENI is nothing like a singular, closed unit, nor do its operations have strict spatial or human boundaries. It is a quintessential cyborg assemblage.

The rarified institution of the labour market is perhaps a less obvious cyborg entity, but I base this on understanding the cyborg as a mode of rationality. As discussed at length in chapter 6, the "market" has become a central reference point for government policy and its

⁸⁴ Wittgenstein immediately went on to cast doubt on this modernist certainty, by stating: 'But must smoothness necessarily be our ideal (must it be our ideal to have everything wrapped in cellophane)?' (Wittgenstein, 1978: 213).

pre-eminent 'site of veridiction' (Foucault, 2008 [1979]: 32). The market has become completely naturalised, as the taken-for-granted mechanism for goods and services to be traded; for capital (machines), labour (humans) and land (the biosphere) to be productively coordinated; for 'viable' economies to be enacted; and for other policy problems (such as unemployment and material disparities) to be solved. The naturalness of the market's 'telling of the truth' also bestows this institution with other magical powers, namely: it takes on the computational logic of a quasi-sentient entity with problem-solving abilities. This is linked to the market's role as a nexus of information exchange and communication. Philip Mirowski writes of the market as a fundamental modern entity of computation, a primary coordinator of information between cyborg agents, and an automaton for coordinating exchanges and utilities. Therein lies his rationale in describing economics as a cyborg science: the economy is no longer construed as the structured allocation of scarce resources to given ends, but as networks of economic entities who function as information processors (Mirowski, 2002: 235-237). This is reflected in the thinking of the prominent neoliberal thinker Friedrich Hayek, who places information processing as the key problem for a 'rational economic order' to grapple with, in particular the ongoing issue of dispersed and incomplete information: 'The economic problem of society is thus not merely a problem of how to allocate "given" resources', he writes, 'it is a problem of the utilization of knowledge which is not given to anyone in its totality' (Hayek, 1945: 519-520).

This computational role, as a networked processor of information within contemporary techno-capitalism, is what constitutes the market as a cyborg assemblage. Yet the market as cyborg is not a discrete entity, and is incomplete without a network of humans to imagine and rationalise it. As Hayek identifies, this is premised on the hopeful assumption that the human processes information rationally, as a market-oriented automaton. This human element affords the market both a future-oriented potentiality – and an exoneration of imminent failures and limitations due to incomplete information and imperfect knowledge (See also Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000: 298-302). The imagined well-functioning market economy may be endowed with magical capacities, however in practice these abilities are constantly threatened and undermined by information imperfections, state interference and human deficiencies. Improvements to the cyborg are always necessary.

Cyborgian Wadeye

Often embedded in narratives around “economic development” is the assumption that places like Wadeye are backwaters of modern economic activity, in which any industrial development should be welcome. This is linked to deep-seated beliefs in settler-colonial culture around the bifurcated primitiveness of Indigenous peoples (Povinelli, 1993: chaps 1-2; Vivieros de Castro, 2013) and the assumed inevitability of modern “progress” (Berman, 1988; Lea, 2015). As previously discussed, this rationality has propelled government policy related to ENI’s Blacktip project, and has afforded it all practical support from the state.

An analytical alternative is to understand the community of Wadeye and its residents as not at all separate from modern cyborg capitalism, but intrinsically intertwined with it. One obvious site of this interconnection is the very physical presence of the Blacktip project. Its extractive infrastructure may be out of sight offshore and hidden behind locked gates, but it has still shaped (and is being shaped by) the land and sea. As Granjou *et al* write, we should acknowledge ‘shared *futurities* of nature-culture entanglements’ (Granjou, Walker, & Salazar, 2017: 9). One Wadeye resident expressed this entanglement in racialised terms, however his statement can also be read as a comment on the incursions of contemporary techno-capitalism into Indigenous life-worlds:

We black fellas are like the land. We have always been here, we are part of our country.

White man and government is like water: it runs through our country, and sometimes brings good things, but sometimes it floods and destroys the country. But good or bad, that water always leaves a mark. (Field notes, 7 November 2007)



Figure 7.7: Blacktip's Yelcherr gas processing plant (on left) and the town of Wadeye (on right).
Source: Google Earth (2016). Image reproduced under fair use of copyright.

As implied in this quote, another interconnection between the place of Wadeye and the cyborg age is government policy, in particular the plethora of state interventions aimed at changing individual behaviours. Based on my experiences in Wadeye and in Indigenous-majority communities elsewhere in the Northern Territory, I found it remarkable how much governmental effort was directed into education, training and employment initiatives, which generally apply labour market logics as the central reference point (see for example OEA, 2009). The overarching goal of these interventions into the Indigene is “work-readiness”: to improve the policy targets’ processing of labour market-oriented information, to make them better modern *computers* of their projected interests – better *cyborgs*.

As previously mentioned, mass local employment was never delivered by the project, and investment in community programs was short term. This can be understood as evidence of a deep dissonance between the material reality of projects such as Blacktip and the dominant promissory rationales embedded within pro-extraction policymaking, or alternatively as a moral and political failure of ENI's Blacktip project. I suggest the outcome is something more matter-of-fact: that ENI is *not trying* to correct the human redundancies constituted by this project. Instead, these redundancies are symbiotic with the company's desired flexibility and efficiency. To achieve optimality, not all territories and peoples implicated into a development need to be productively applied. Not each appendage of the cyborg need be in

use for the organism to thrive. Within an innovative techno-capitalist economy, some redundancy is productive, even necessary. In this sense, the aims of ENI's local engagement and its 'community investment strategy' may best be understood not as community development, but as community containment.

Herein lies a clear synergy of interests with government policy: the maintenance of acquiescent redundancy. For a time, policy's response to the structural absence of sufficient "real jobs" was CDEP (Jordan & Altman, 2016). For many years, Wadeye's CDEP works and employment program was the community's primary source of waged income. Yet over the past decade the state's employment policies have been marked by uncoordinated, contradictory pressures: the spike of funding and related increase in local employment positions that resulted from the 2007 Intervention and the 2008 shires reform was offset by the rundown and lower participation rates in the CDEP program (Gerritsen, 2010b: 77; Michel, 2015: 111-112; NTG, 2013: 4); contemporary iterations of CDEP (firstly the Remote Jobs in Communities Program (RJCP) in 2013, then the Community Development Programme (CDP) from 2015) concurrently focused back on to idealised 'market-oriented' rationalities (Blakeman, 2016: 230-238; Jordan & Altman, 2016; OEA, 2009: 7).⁸⁵

One salient element of the latest RJCP and CDP programs, alongside changes to other Centrelink-administered unemployment benefit schemes (such as income quarantining and the introduction of the Basics Card), has been the introduction of more stringent eligibility requirements and participation rules. These reforms have no robust cost-saving logic, and have generally been expensive to implement and deliver.⁸⁶ I posit they can be better understood as the deeper instilment of cyborg rationality: as steps to ensure more 'job-ready' behaviour among participants, with the added disciplining effects of more labouring

⁸⁵ This cited 2009 review of CDEP by the Australian Government's Office of Evaluation and Audit includes market-centric phrases such as: 'the evaluation considered that CDEP can best assist labour market adjustment when it is focussed on the labour market, rather than internally on supporting the local community'. However it contradicts its advice elsewhere in the report, by admitting 'there are limited opportunities in most of the labour markets in which CDEP operates' (OEA, 2009: 6-7).

⁸⁶ For example, independent research conducted by the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) in 2012 reported that income quarantining incurred an estimated \$6000 in administrative costs per welfare recipient, or approximately 40 per cent of a participant's yearly benefits of \$15,000 (ACOSS, 2012).

efforts and unpredictable income flows for participants (Jordan & Altman, 2016; McRae-Williams, 2010).⁸⁷

The lived contradictions of policy's edification of "job readiness" coupled with a lack of jobs was readily apparent at a local level. One resident of a similarly affected community bleakly commented that since recent employment policy reforms, 'nothing has changed, and nothing may not change. They said this year we're going to get a lot of jobs, but then we hear from them "we can only employ ten to fifteen people"' (Interview 28 February, 2010). Another group of residents highlighted the Kafkaesque absurdity of navigating the contemporary employment policy landscape:

People are really traumatised when the shire and Intervention came in together. Everyone was lost for words really... It's horrible, CDEP back in the days was good, now [you must go through] Centrelink then Jobfind [a job services provider], but it doesn't work that way... Just back and forth. If they don't have an interview with Jobfind they just take them off [welfare] but there's not enough jobs. But CDEP used to work for everyone, now it's all income managed. (Interview 22 February, 2011)

The vexatious efforts required from participants in remaining eligible for welfare can be easily glossed over as bureaucratic irrationality, evidence of the chaos when ideology-based policy is translated into practice (Hodson et al., 2012). Alternatively, I interpret this busyness imposed on the job-ready welfare recipient as something more productive and deliberate: as a management technology of acquiescence, whereby welfare dependence is not a moral scourge but a necessary lifeway for many. This applies especially to the environs around an automated industrial project such as the Blacktip facility, whereby the project's cutting-edge automation must involve normalising a status of precariousness (read 'flexibility') for the local workforce (Harvey, 2005: 75). In the setting of Wadeye, neither ENI nor the Australian state wants an end to welfare dependency there. Instead, a more productive outcome is the

⁸⁷ The increase in disciplinary measures in these programs have occurred irrespective of any evidence these have led to an increase in the uptake of 'real jobs'. One empirical attempt to test the policy wisdom of reforming CDEP and its variants into a pathway into mainstream employment strongly suggests that official measures of unemployment in affected areas has risen, along with increased socioeconomic dislocation and stress (Hunter, 2016).

managed redundancy of the local labour pool – as long as it's acquiescent and predictable redundancy.

A less obvious technology to promote acquiescent redundancy is displacement. In 2007, the Northern Territory's mining industry was booming, and the landscape around Wadeye was abuzz with construction workers and machinery from outside. Ten years on and the humans and machines involved in building Blacktip have long departed. From a management perspective, transitioning Blacktip's human labour force to redundancy was straightforward. When construction work finished, contracts simply ended, people were transported away, and any potential social conflict was dispersed.

The production model of ENI and its other sub-contractors is in line with the capital-intensive, "workforce flexibility" structure of the energy and mining sector in general, in which employment-related costs readily fluctuate and are generally less than ten per cent of the industry's total expenditure.⁸⁸ The machines and money of this industry have been successful in establishing their autonomy from the interests of labour, and operate in a system that 'treats people as a source of inefficiency' (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000: 301; 318-319). A downturn in global mineral ore markets since 2013 has led to many mining projects in the Northern Territory closing or slowing production, and employment in the industry has collapsed (Curtain, 2016; Glencore, 2015a: 49; 54). This labour market volatility has been smoothed over by the regional effects of Japanese corporation INPEX's Ichthys gas mega-project near Darwin. However as of 2018 construction on Ichthys was nearing completion, and this US\$34 billion project is expected to generate only a few hundred long-term employment positions (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017; Purtill, 2015).

⁸⁸ ENI no longer publish information in their annual financial statements related to employee costs, however in the 2010 Annual Report the company reported €4.785 billion of 'payroll and related costs', compared to net sales from operations of €98.523 billion, or less than 5 per cent of net sales revenue (ENI, 2010). This proportion is in line with employment-related expenditure of Glencore, another multinational mining corporation operating in the region. Glencore's 2015 financial statements report personnel costs of \$US5,287 million for its direct operations and \$US4,344 million for its consolidated industrial subsidiaries, compared to \$US170,497 million of reported revenues (Glencore, 2015a: 110; 154).

The detrimental human effects of these industrial patterns, such as higher rates of mental health problems and suicide amongst the workforce (James, 2015; O'Connor, 2015) tend to be easily individualised and dispersed: industrial relations in this sector are increasingly dominated by casual employment contracts and intensive Fly In Fly Out (FIFO) working arrangements that tend to undermine workplace communality and trade union membership (see for example Bowden & Barry, 2015; Glencore, 2017b). As Donna Haraway writes, workers in the age of the cyborg are now 'made extremely vulnerable, able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labour force; seen less as workers than as servers' (Haraway, 2006 [1985]: 133).

In this setting of a disciplinarian and precarious employment and welfare regime, the presence of royalty payments, community program grants and some state-funded jobs and services can be read as complementary mollifying strategy. This governing rationality is expressed in a surprisingly blunt statement on the AFL Northern Territory's website, related to ENI's community investment grants: 'The primary objective of ENI's support of AFL NT's activities in Wadeye is mitigation of the risk that the [Blacktip] Project causes significant increases in vandalism and theft, leading to rises in negative youth engagement with the police and the justice system' (AFL NT, 2015). This is a startling admission of corporate and governmental paranoia: that perhaps the automated, cordoned operations of the Blacktip structure may cause *increases* in resentment and delinquency, rather than improved social cohesion through economic development.

Because of my work, I sporadically spent many months in Wadeye from 2007 to 2009. Did I fully comprehend the social setting I was in? Like most other (mainly non-Indigenous) outsiders coming into the community for work, my time there was piecemeal and transitory, and I claim no special insights or expertise over people and place. Admittedly, a few outsiders I met did integrate, learned the local Murrinh-patha language well, had become like family with local clans, and gained some insider knowledge (see for example Ford & McCormack, 2005; Ivory, 2005). Notwithstanding morally competitive claims to the contrary (Jordan, 2005: 139-147), they were in my mind a very small minority, and they didn't include

me. I remained a stranger, a familiar passer-by during my stints there, and I hazard my experience was similar to most other visitors (and not dissimilar to Blacktip's FIFO workforce). The defensive protection of cultural and linguistic affinity was manifest in many ways. One aspect was the fairly rigid segregation of Wadeye's domestic and cultural spaces. The worlds of outsider 'white fellas' and local 'black fellas' would merge at work and through chats on the street. But it was apparent local residents closed off many other spheres of contact, and in my experience interactions outside the workplace were limited. Local zones of autonomy were guarded.⁸⁹



Figure 7.8: Wadeye. Photo: Michel (circa 2007).

I keenly sensed the precariousness of my individual presence in Wadeye, but also the framing of my *Dasein* there, my set role in a deeper social genealogy (Farrell Krell, 1977: 19-25; Heidegger, 1978: 60-68). Justified by good intentions, adventure or career opportunity,

⁸⁹ Mary Ellen Jordan, in her ethnography of life as an itinerant 'white fella' in the Northern Territory township of Maningrida, similarly identified a pattern of informal segregation: 'It didn't feel like one community, but rather two different communities living in the same place... The division wasn't one of animosity, just of foreignness' (Jordan, 2005: 53).

there are reasons enough for outsiders to find themselves working in Wadeye as agents of government policy: there are roads to maintain, housing repairs and maintenance, rubbish collection, a health clinic, a school, a swimming pool to manage – maybe even a research study to undertake. Yet each of these tasks is framed by politics of difference and inequality, and function as a ‘dense transfer point’ (Foucault, 1978: 103) of cyborgian power relations. The outsider will likely have a workforce whose capacity needs building, whose skills need to be trained. Local jobs for local people may be a key motivating mantra. But whatever language the outsider’s position is cloaked in – manager, supervisor, team leader, facilitator – the common role is as ‘white boss’, in a modern continuum of settler-colonial relations (Cowlshaw, 1999; Dalley, 2015; Gerritsen, 1982; Jordan, 2005; Mahood, 2012; McRae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010). The scene is set for the transmission of dominant cyborg logics around work culture.

However these cyborg power relations are not strictly hierarchical, but also circulatory. As Foucault wrote, individuals ‘are not only its inert or consenting target [of power]; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application’ (Foucault, 1980: 98). Local acts of ‘absorbed coping’ (Weick, 1999: 135) abounded in Wadeye, including accommodation, covert subversion and overt rebellion. One coping strategy was manifested through the existence of a local political elite, a small network of patriarchs who tended to benefit most from royalty payments and government funding largesse (see also chapter 2). The practices of these men disrupted the facile notion of cyborg politics as externally-imposed hierarchies. To illustrate: at a full Thamarrurr Council meeting I attended early on, with male representatives from the twenty-two local tribes present, I stated I was honoured to be working in Wadeye and declared that I very much wished to learn some Murrinh-patha language while I was there. One local leader, entirely conversant in the modern language of money and a primary beneficiary of Blacktip’s royalty payments, responded loudly in English: “Well, that’s gonna cost you!” This was greeted by raucous laughter from the council. Sharply humbled, it was made apparent to me that as a junior officer of the NT Government, my status in this group of elders was largely relegated to a functional utility (Gerritsen, 1982: 25-27; 31; Mahood,

2012), and there was little local interest in providing cultural education to yet another itinerant outsider.

The Unruly Cyborg: The Heavy Metal Gangs of Wadeye

This analysis of modern corporations, markets and even Indigenous-majority communities as cyborg assemblages risks deterministically portraying the cyborg as an impervious structure, inherently embedded in contemporary techno-capitalism. This ignores the organic unpredictability of the cyborg, and the indeterminacy of its revolutionary potentiality. To reiterate Deleuze and Guattari's analysis, the territorialisation of the assemblage is always countermanded by forces of deterritorialisation or 'lines of flight' from the hegemonic cluster (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 2-12; 321-325). Donna Haraway similarly understands the cyborg not simply as capitalism's end-game colonisation of the body by computer, but as a partial and imperfect metaphor that holds the potential for 'some very fruitful couplings... [with] the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation' (Haraway, 2006 [1985]: 118; 127-128). The cyborg thus becomes a political project within the 'deadly game' of the modern world, 'about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work' (Haraway, 2006 [1985]: 121; 128). In short, the cyborg is a creature that may outlive capitalism.



Figure 7.9: Car wreck on Port Keats Road. Photo: Michel (circa 2008).

I tentatively offer the heavy metal youth gangs of Wadeye as one example of the radical reinvention of the cyborg. Instead of understanding these gangs as a remedial target for policy or a cultural curio, I want to draw attention to their rebellious reinvention of cyborg rationality. This comes at the risk of romanticising the agency of these gangs. There is deep ambiguity as to whether gang members' prevalent drug and alcohol abuse, violence (including gendered violence against women) and conflicts with police should be read as a counter-hegemonic project of rebellion, or as actions that reinforce the hegemonic power structures. (After all, a handful of full-time police officers in situ, a ready reserve of police to be called in, and a prison complex in Darwin are sufficient to contain the power of Wadeye's gangs.) And the drunken vehicle wrecks along Port Keats Road serve as monuments of cyborgian self-destruction.

Yet the unhinged rebelliousness of these groups (however imperfect in its political outcomes) can be read as its own claim of independence, an expression of brazen survival and refusal of passive victimhood (Rosas, 2012). It can be destructive and futile but still a rejection. For instance, Jeff Collmann, writing about the drinking culture of the town camps around Alice Springs, interpreted alcohol as a tool to maintain social relationships and networks of credit, but also as a tactic to gain autonomy from the interventionist state (Collmann, 1988: 6; chap 6).



Figure 7.10: Car wreck on Port Keats Road. Photo: Michel (circa 2008).

Another example of youth rebellion against the cyborgian rationalities of policy was the widespread non-compliance and disengagement from the wave of program reforms related to CDEP changes, the Intervention and the local government amalgamations. Often this included a withdrawal by young people from waged employment positions with the new shires. One resident commented, 'now there's some people who have pulled out of jobs. People who did jobs got confused, so they pulled out from jobs' (Interview 10 December, 2009). Others stated: 'no one wants to work for shire' (Interview 25 June, 2011) and similarly: 'a lot don't want to work for shire, [they'd] rather get the dole... I work for the shire, they pay me, but really I work for them [the elders, my people]' (Interview 30 March, 2010). In Wadeye one local commented, 'I know the shire was trying to put on as many people as possible, but people are saying I'll never take the job from a white fella' (Interview 5 March, 2010).



Figure 7.11: Judas Priest album cover. Source: (Rock Music Forever, 2017).
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Behind the apparent futility of impoverished individuals withdrawing their labour from waged employment, Friedrich Nietzsche identified a compelling rationale that propels such acts. He wrote, 'while every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is "outside," what is "different" what is "not itself"; and *this* No is its creative deed' (Nietzsche, 1887 [1989]: 36).



Figure 7.12: Graffiti in Wadeye. Photo: Michel (circa 2008).

The symbology of the Wadeye gangs is a reflection of this disaffected agency. Rather than traditional tribal totems, the gangs most commonly use reinvented cyborg images as their iconography: heavy-metal guitars, piston-pumping machines, the modern Antichrist, steel phoenixes. This can be interpreted not as a straightforward rejection of cyborg rationality, but as a dangerous mutation of it (Haraway, 2006 [1985], 121). Going for a walk one day with my dog, I discovered graffiti tagged (I believe) by the Evil Warriors, one of the main gangs. At the centre of the tag was a swastika, symbol of the Nazi war machine (and because of my own ancestry, an immediately offensive image). Whatever meaning was given to the swastika, an anti-authoritarian cyborg anger seemed lurking. Gilberto Rosas, in his ethnography of marginalised youth living along the Mexico – United States border, identified similar tendencies amongst the ‘ratas’ or ‘tunnel kids’ he studied. He described these young people as

... bad subjects with little to lose and much to gain from exercising their own violence and engaging in reviled practices... These youths exercised racialized, entrepreneurial violence and pathology that placed them outside of discourses of victimhood. In doing so, they exhibited a complex, circumscribed, delinquent agency and a vexing political discourse, one that many will refuse to hear. (Rosas, 2012: 131)⁹⁰

⁹⁰ During his ethnography, Rosas asked a number of young men why they inhaled paint. One responded: ‘[I inhale paint] because I like it... It pisses people off. I like to piss off the women [who work at Mi Nueva Casa],

Conclusion

This chapter analyses industrial developments such as Blacktip as a cyborg assemblage that is constitutive of broader social power relations. The embodied metaphor of the cyborg offers a method for understanding seemingly disparate social phenomena – an energy industry project, the social marginalisation of a nearby Indigenous community, government’s training and employment policy, the presence of youth gangs, a global multinational corporation – as intrinsically interconnected and symbiotic.

Yet I do not attempt to present the cyborg as a totalising theory, and there are dangers in projecting cyborgian ontology as a universal mode of being. As I learnt from my time in Wadeye, many local residents may perceive a cyborg identity as a colonising concept, bifurcated from other living ecologies and in conflict with the reality of their own life-worlds. It also hinted at connections with kin and country that remain unmanageable by modern timeclock machines, out of the reach of cyborgian ontology. This comment was also a reminder that the cyborg is an anthropocentric derivative, and has difficulty capturing sentient activity beyond the human-technological blend. An over-reliance on the cyborg metaphor and its biopolitical connotations may allow other forms of non-human and non-sentient existence and agency to slip from view.⁹¹ After all, irrespective of cyborg agency, there will one day be an end to the Blacktip project and its infrastructure: the trees, ants and monsoon rains will slowly wreak creative destruction on the pipeline; eventually a

Grupo Beta [the special Mexican police force], and the green chilies [the US Border Patrol]. It frustrates them.’ (Rosas, 2012: 117)

⁹¹ The latest works of Elizabeth Povinelli, for example, provide an original analysis of late liberalism through a critique of Foucauldian concepts of biopower. She contends that ‘Western ontologies are covert biontologies’ (Povinelli, 2016: 5). She introduces the term ‘geontology’ to explore liberalism’s regulation and sequestration of life and non-life. She argues that the introduction of the now *au courant* concept of the Anthropocene marked ‘the moment when human existence became the determinate form of planetary existence... rather than merely the fact that humans affect their environment’ (Povinelli, 2016: 9), but has now begun to upend the organisation of critical social inquiry to incorporate thinking about non-life. Geontology, however, in turn conceptually upends this anew by enabling a critical analysis of the Anthropocene’s invocation of the ‘Carbon Imaginary of finitude’, its fixation on the event of death, and the potential crisis of (human) extinction (Povinelli, 2013; 2016: 15-18). Povinelli thus calls for a more open-ended analysis of all forms of existence (including beyond cyborg existence) and how their governance is (or isn’t) incorporated into late liberal governmentality.

cyclone, an earthquake or rust will sever the legs of the platform well, and it will sink. This may not occur within a time frame measured by ENI's annual financial statements or the NT Government's glossy-paged strategic plans. But, sure as time, it will occur. And my Wadeye neighbour was probably aware of this better than me.

However the cyborg as an application of the Deleuzian concept of the assemblage serves as an analytical tool for understanding the interconnectedness of social phenomena within modern techno-capitalism, and for destabilising the oft-unquestioned benefits of energy projects such as Blacktip. The cyborg is also a pathway for identifying social commonalities and allegiances that may otherwise remain obscured, and the possible alternatives humans may create through mutations of the cyborg. The decentring and disruptive imagery of the cyborg brings us closer to an ecological analysis of policy, in which conventional approaches to understanding government and policy reform appear inadequate. There is nothing inevitable about how the Blacktip project operates, nor how policy supports its operations locally. To paraphrase Donna Haraway, there are creative and dangerous alternatives to the status quo, and the hegemonic status of the corporation and modern policy may yet cede territory to other social alternatives.

Conclusion:

Connections and Disconnections

In 2010 I interviewed a local resident in Wadeye, a former neighbour with whom I'd been friendly when I had stayed there previously for work. Perhaps because of our existing rapport, he was extra loquacious, and the conversation ranged far beyond my script of questions. At one point he made the off-hand comment, 'We don't wait for time; time can wait for us' (5 March 2010).

I remembered reacting to his comment with a jolt of incomprehension. In a few short words he had expressed a perspective on temporality that was totally unfamiliar to me, challenging my thinking about progress and the march of time, and succinctly revealing very different ontologies between us.

In many regards my thesis has been an exploration of these ontological differences – between the bureaucrats who create and deploy policy decisions, and the target populations who live through these decisions. In particular this work has attempted to disrupt the taken-for-granted positioning of public policy as a remedial, empirically-driven edifice, and instead analysed policy from the lens of the assemblage: as a social ecology within an existing set of power relations, which privileges certain versions and aspects of knowledge (Mosse 2004; Bennett 2010; Lea 2015; Vike 2018).

An analysis of power is the context for understanding bureaucratic action as an expression of a "majoritarian" culture. The connection of bureaucracy to majoritarian culture firstly reflects that bureaucracy has become the hegemonic unit of social organisation in our contemporary age (Hodson et al, 2012: 257) and the policies created by bureaucratic structures are a key determiner in how material resources are distributed around the world.

More fundamentally, I associate policy with a majoritarian culture to highlight how policy works as a producer of truths: it asserts the power to name and categorise social phenomena, to create events and even crises, and to hierarchically order how these events and crises are responded to (Bacchi, 2009). In subtle and overt ways, these claims help to create a dominant discourse of social reality.

One key aspect of how policy works as a producer of truths stems from bureaucracy's largely unquestioned authority to create "major" social events, through a process that Povinelli labels 'eventualisation' (Povinelli 2011: 4-15). Through technologies such as statistical measurement, economistic language and moralistic narratives, policy-makers exert much labour in transforming instances of everyday life into crisis-events requiring action. Within this process, policy (and the bureaucratic actors who create, deploy and uphold policy regimes) are positioned as corrective forces with the necessary solutions to overcome the identified problems. In my ethnographic setting of the 2008 shires reform, a key demonstration of this phenomenon was the Minister's claims that fifty per cent of community councils were categorically 'high risk' or 'dysfunctional' (McAdam, 2006). Small administrative scale was singled out as a key factor for this dysfunction. Experts involved in the reform repeatedly told me that structural amalgamations would achieve economies of scale and increased administrative effectiveness – and there was in fact 'no other alternative' to this solution (see McAdam, 2010; Interview 24 April, 2015).

This ethnographic example also reflects the broader social power relations underpinning public policy, and displays the visions and violence of bureaucracy contained within the policy-making process. The vision of policy experts here created a future-oriented, economistically-driven perspective on social reality, through the authoritative claims that amalgamated councils *will be* [future tense] more cost-efficient and effective. I described the act of imposing this vision as bureaucratic violence, because it is underpinned by a hierarchical ordering of what social phenomena are worth measuring, and what knowledge should be prioritised in these acts of measurement. A key aspect of this violence stems from what is excluded from consideration as much as what is included. In the case of the

2008 shires reform, the matter-of-fact ordering of the policy problem (small-scale councils) and its “inevitable” solution (structural amalgamations) was indirectly shaped by what was left out from problem-solving focus (for example the overarching intergovernmental policy framework, legacies of settler-colonial relations, or even the operations of the mining industry in the remote regions of the Northern Territory). The social context of the state’s ordering of priorities relates to Deleuze and Guattari’s term ‘capitalist axiomatic’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 507-531), whereby the capitalist market system and its naturalised relations of production are taken as the self-evident reference point for policy (see also Foucault, 2008 [1979]: 32-34). Accountability regimes that benignly function within this social context don’t operate as a check on bureaucratic violence, but an extension thereof.

Yet this thesis is also an attempt to move beyond a structural critique of policy, and to explore the instabilities and organic uncertainties inherent in the policymaking process. For example, despite the widespread conviction amongst bureaucratic actors that council amalgamations in the Northern Territory achieved economies of scale, there is stronger empirical evidence that the sector has experienced *diseconomies* of scale, or increased cost inefficiency. The lack of empirical proof in this case, coupled with public scepticism towards the general validity of the economies of scale argument (Allan, 2003), may work to disrupt bureaucratic authority in this arena in uncertain ways. Likewise, the deep-seated support amongst bureaucratic actors for the 2008 shires reform was not transferred to the residents most directly affected. As corroborated through my fieldwork findings, the shires reform was deeply unpopular amongst Indigenous residents during its implementation, and the new shires continue to be widely perceived with suspicion, disengagement and mistrust. Of course, this displayed lack of trust within Indigenous communities towards a new government policy did not start with the 2008 shires reform, but reflects a long-standing tension between Australia’s Indigenous affairs policy agenda and Indigenous communities. Gillian Cowlshaw, writing earlier on a similar setting, commented:

The great “we” of the authoritative, well-meaning, and comparatively powerful experts is being urged to find answers to what the same “we” has defined as the problems. But we

need to face the possibility that there may not be answers, or not the kind of answers we envisage... Rejecting our proffered solutions to their problems could be seen as a way in which Indigenous people assert their autonomy from the state's suffocating solicitude. (Cowlshaw, 2003: 111)

Cowlshaw's words remain relevant. Even so, in this thesis I have attempted to destabilise any tidy "bureaucracy versus Indigenous" dichotomies, by exploring the blurred lines of state authority and the messy *doing* of government policy that transcends racial divides. My interviews with actors such as the influential Elliot McAdam (then Minister for Local Government and an Indigenous man currently residing in Tennant Creek) and other powerful Indigenous people currently working within shire or NT Government bureaucracies highlight that the state is not a straightforward vessel of non-Indigenous colonisation. Instead I apply Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the multi-layered assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987]: 1-22; McGregor Wise, 2011) to understand the workings of Indigenous affairs policy: a social ecology of forces that draws in, transforms, defines and antagonises what it is to be "Indigenous" in contemporary Australia.

To adapt another Deleuzian term, my critique of the majoritarian culture of policymaking reflects an application of a "minor" approach to analysing policy. A minor approach works as an alternative to a majoritarian understanding of policy, insofar that it moves focus away from the singular events and truths created by dominant bureaucratic discourse. Instead, the analytical gaze is shifted to small, mundane, seemingly inconsequential occurrences that often reveal the habits, values and power relations that underpin the social life of policy. Within this analytical framework, constructed events such as on 1 July, 2008 (the key date when the shires were formally established as local government bodies) or the NT Local Government Minister's speech in October 2006 (when he announced the shires reform) become less significant, or 'deterritorialised' from dominant power assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986 [1975]: 16-18). This deterritorialisation opens up other unconventional targets of analysis: a painting that was rendered into a corporate logo, the bulldozing of a sacred tree, conflict around the naming of a shire ward, the mundane steps of creating a statistic, or the image of a cyborg to understand contemporary techno-capitalism.

Linked to drawing out the complex messiness of policy is an inevitable process of self-reflective ethnography, whereby the social positioning and ontology of the researcher becomes its own research material. I may still find it difficult to think of time waiting for me, but I can more readily pose the open-ended question: what has made it impossible for me to think of this possibility?

APPENDIX A:

Research interview methodologies and statistics

This appendix builds on the information and analyses originally presented as a conference paper at the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government's (ACELG's) 3rd National Local Government Researchers' Forum, held in June 2013 at the University of Adelaide, South Australia (Michel & Bassinder, 2013).

Synopsis

As part of this PhD research project, between 2009 and 2016 Julie-ann Bassinder and I conducted interviews and surveys with 831 participants identified as local residents in the Roper Gulf and Victoria Daly shire areas, and 60 participants identified as shire management staff, Northern Territory Government officers and elected officials (either former members from the Northern Territory Parliament or elected shire councilors). This appendix provides details on the dates and locations of these interviews, lays out the methods and approaches applied to this component of the research, and offers a justification for why these approaches were taken.

Background

The 2008 local government amalgamation reform represented a significant overhaul of service delivery, community governance and local decision-making structures in the Northern Territory's Indigenous-majority, rural-remote communities. We identified that structured academic research into the prevailing perceptions of this reform was pertinent and pressing. Academic interest on this reform process had been piecemeal (Peterson, 2013a; Sanders, 2011; D. Smith, 2008), and was largely usurped by focus on the Australian Government's 2007 "Intervention" (see for example Altman & Hinkson, 2007; Altman & Russell, 2012). Yet in government circles the 2008 shires reform was given much importance, and official promises and expectations around improved service delivery were high (McAdam 2007a). There were also many indications the reform was deeply unpopular

amongst affected residents (Smith 2008; Central and Northern Land Councils 2009; Henderson 2009). This provoked many research questions for us: How satisfied were residents with local government services and the new shires? What perceived effects was the reform having on community governance and a sense of control over local government organisations? Would levels of community satisfaction change over time? And most importantly for my own line of research, how did the social positions of interview participants affect their perspectives on the previous community council sector and the 2008 shires reform?

Interview- and survey-based information-gathering into local government council performance and resident satisfaction is an established line of research in Australia, and has been an ascendant tool of Australian local government management in recent times. Influential intergovernmental forums such as the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), along with most state governments, have actively encouraged performance measurement strategies and initiatives in the local government sector (Worthington and Dollery 2007).

In Victoria for example, the State Government's Department of Planning and Community Development has supported implementation of a large-scale community satisfaction survey project, which has been carried out annually in amended forms since 2001. In 2012, there were 29,384 participants surveyed, with each respondent completing a standard and comparable survey questionnaire (JWS Research 2012a). Similar projects have been pursued in other jurisdictions (for example, in South Australia through the Local Government Association and State Government (Local Government Association of South Australia 2009).

Worthington and Dollery have linked the rise of survey-based performance measurement in local government with broader microeconomic reforms throughout the Australian government sectors from the 1980s, and argue that application of positivist performance measurement tools in local government (such as standardised, large-sample resident

satisfaction surveys) have become construed as ‘fundamental to any economy concerned with the accountability, transparency, efficiency and effectiveness of [public] institutions’ (Worthington and Dollery 2007: 4). This approach has informed research methods that have included large-scale random sampling, computer-assisted phone interviews, tightly scripted questionnaires, and the quantitative interpretation of responses (JWS Research 2012a; JWS Research 2012b).

We identified these conventional methods as being highly problematic for the purposes of the ethnographic research aims of this thesis, particularly when applied to research conducted in rural-remote Indigenous-majority communities in the Northern Territory.

First, many Indigenous interview participants who were residents in the Victoria Daly and Roper Gulf Shire regions do not speak English as their first language. Indigenous populations in rural and remote regions of Australia generally experience socioeconomic disadvantage which may marginalise and estrange them from mainstream Australian society. These include more restricted access to resources and services, and poorer educational, employment, social and health outcomes. Historically, contact with colonial-settler influences has been replete with negative encounters. These negative encounters have extended to contact with researchers in contemporary times: Indigenous Australians are commonly given the subordinate role of research subjects in the process, their communities have often been heavily researched over time, and they are able to claim that little tangible benefits have accrued for them from their involvement (Eckermann et al., 2010; Martin, 2003; Rigney, 1997; Smith, 2012). Linda Tuhiwai Smith explicitly links conventional positivist research approaches when applied to an Indigenous cultural context as a form of European colonialism, and urges the act of research to be consciously positioned within ‘a much larger historical, political and cultural context’ (Smith 2012: 6). In her words:

It becomes so taken for granted that many researchers simply assume that they as individuals embody this ideal [of benefitting mankind] and are natural representatives of it when they work with other communities. Indigenous peoples across the world have other

stories to tell which not only question the assumed nature of those ideals and the practices that they generate, but also serve to tell an alternative story... (Smith 2012: 2)

These considerations led to our rejection of a positivist social research approach for this project, including applying conventional methods such as standard, numeric-scale surveys as the primary source of knowledge-gathering. A critical analysis of our own social position and authority as external researchers thus became a paramount concern in choosing our research methodologies (Eckermann et al. 2010; Smith 2012).

Cultural Safety and Indigenist Research Methodology provided many guiding principles for the fieldwork component of this research project. These principles seek to promote Indigenous cultural safety and embed research within Indigenous knowledge structures. This was attempted through the privileging the Indigenous voice and Indigenous perspectives, recognising the historical, cultural and social contexts that an intercultural research project is positioned in, and seeking to minimise power imbalances between the non-Indigenous research and the Indigenous research participant (Dodson 1995; Rigney 1997; Dodson 2000; West 2000; Martin 2003; Walter 2005; Arbon 2008; Dudgeon 2008; Eckermann, Dowd et al. 2010; Ford 2010; Smith 2012). Attempting to adhere to this approach had a number of practical implications for the methodologies and tools we applied to the resident-based interviews and surveys between 2009 and 2013. However, it should be noted that the research project was never entirely participatory or community-driven: I had already made the decision to research this policy reform process, and my presence as a researcher in my chosen field was still an act of imposition.

Methods

The interview and survey component of this project commencing in 2009 with the formulation of draft questions for interviews and surveys, and a critical review of different initiatives and methods for researching community satisfaction with local government services in other Australian jurisdictions. I decided at an early stage to divide research

participants into two cohorts, with distinct sets of interview questions. The first larger group was to consist of shire residents who did not hold management-level positions in local government or for other government agencies. The second cohort was to consist of Northern Territory Government officers, shire management staff, elected officials and other government representatives who were professionally involved in the 2008 shires reform.

Another early methodological decision was to keep the responses of all research participants confidential. The rationale behind this was to allow all participants, regardless of position, to speak without fear of retribution or direct practical consequence. (Many residents we interviewed, for example, were also shire council employees. Any critical views about the shire they may have expressed could feasibly have jeopardised their employment status if the shire's management staff were made aware.) This entailed having transcripts of interviews de-identified and securely stored, and rendering all quotes anonymous in this thesis and related publications. The one exception to this was the transcripts of interviews with the former Northern Territory Minister for Local Government Elliot McAdam, whose views on the 2008 shires reform are already on the public record. Mr McAdam also expressed his consent to have himself identified in his interview transcripts.

From mid-2009, I began trialing and reviewing the research questions for both of these cohorts. Input and feedback was solicited from elected shire councils, local government management staff and Northern Territory Government officials in the first instance. One result of these early consultations was the selection of Victoria Daly and Roper Gulf Shire Councils as the two participating local government bodies.

In the early trial phase (in particular during the first round of interviews and surveys in Numbulwar in December 2009) the practical content and structure of the research tools were subject to amendment based on participants' feedback. (However, even after this trial phase, some minor amendments to the interview scripts were made between interview rounds.)

In early 2010 Julie-ann Bassinder began working on the project as a co-interviewer. In July 2010 I commenced work for Roper Gulf Shire Council, and from that point we considered it ethically inappropriate for me to be conducting any interviews. Thus for the period July 2010 to end 2013, Julie-ann Bassinder independently conducted all interview and survey work. All interviews recorded between 2014 and 2016 were conducted by myself.

Cohort 1: Interviews and surveys with shire residents

Between 2009 and 2013, we conducted interviews with about 831 adult residents of the Victoria Daly and Roper Gulf Shires. As indicated in Table AA.1, this represented 11 per cent of the total estimated adult population of these two shire areas according the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2011 Census data. However this figure is approximate, as there were a small number of participants who were interviewed more than once over subsequent years. This figure also does not represent the total number of interviews conducted, as many participants were interviewed in groups.

We deliberately chose not to conduct any interviews or surveys via telephone, due to unreliable household telephone services, English language barriers and other inhibiting cultural factors. In its place, we conducted all participant-based research in-person in their resident communities. We generally spent between two and four days per interview round in each community. Participants were interviewed either as individuals or in small groups at the discretion of participants, with emphasis being placed on making the setting as safe and comfortable as possible for participants. Only adults were approached to participate in the research. In most cases, only one researcher was present for each interview. Participation was kept confidential from shire management staff and if necessary from others, requiring us to have a sensitivity to community politics. Accessible and culturally safe locations were chosen for interviews, such as in front of the community store or in an open public area. All participants, however, were given the opportunity to choose the location of the interview to ensure their control over privacy, cultural safety, support, legitimacy and authority. The

researcher only approached participants' private dwellings if invited and respected community protocols such as approaching, where possible, the "correct" person for permission to proceed with interviews in the community. Further, if a funeral or other cultural ceremony was occurring in a community, or any other social-political community sentiment that demanded space and privacy, as a rule we postponed our visit.

Language interpreters were also budgeted for and used to a limited extent. Notably, however, most participants (and interpreters) seemed reluctant to use this facility for this research project. We surmised this observed reluctance may have stemmed from a number of factors, including: the contentious nature of the subject matter (and participants' desire to keep their responses confidential); local political sensitivities; gender, generational and authority differences between participant and interpreter; clan and family divisions; relationships of avoidance; and participants' pride in their English language skills. It may also be that the available language interpreters introduced new relationship complications which we were not made aware of. This can be interpreted as one of the challenges of working in cross-cultural environments. Applying an ethic of inclusiveness does not erase the networks of affiliation and enmity that may be present in the social setting being researched.

However, we consciously did not want to discriminate on who participated in the research based on English language fluency. In order to compensate for the lack of language interpreter use, concerted attempts and revisions were made to the format and language content of the research tools, with the aim of making them easily comprehensible to most participants. Further, as participants were given control to manage the interview process, many chose to participate in the interviews in groups, thus surrounding themselves with supportive family and kinship relations, and collectivised English language skills. This had some positive effects on the research. Firstly if one participant's English language skills were weaker than others in the group, a group interview format allowed peers to effectively interpret and translate that participant's responses.⁹² Secondly, it allowed for some

⁹² In certain individual interviews, participants called on other community members outside the interview to translate or validate their responses to the researcher. This can also be interpreted as a positive sign of participants seeking control over the interview process.

participants to participate who might otherwise have not felt comfortable or confident enough being interviewed one-on-one by a non-Indigenous researcher. Thirdly, a group interview format served to subtly alter the power dynamic in the interview: the Indigenous participants were in the majority, and would often shape and direct communication on their own terms. We often experienced groups conducting extended conversations in Indigenous languages before formulating an English-language response.

Two distinct research tools were applied, as components of a mixed-method approach (Bryman, 2008: 610-623). The first was a list of approximately ten flexible, open-ended questions that were aimed at exploring participants' perceptions about the shires, how decision-making in their community had changed due to local government reform, and their perspective on the shires as a new political institution. Most questions were open-ended, allowing participants to raise issues or opinions as they saw fit. For example, one of the opening questions was: 'When you hear the word shire, what do you think of?' This allowed participants to start with as broad or as narrow a response as desired, and re-create the question according to the participants' own reality and set of priorities. It also set the dynamic of the researcher as listener and the participant as knowledge holder. Some participants even embraced the control of the interview from the outset, and did not wait for questions. Instead, the interview was commenced by instructions on what the participant perceived to be the important issues and information the researcher should know on the topic.

The second research tool was a survey on service delivery, with questions grouped into seven service areas and response options structured by an ordinal scale. In order to promote research validity, comparability and the benefits of iteration, the format and content of this tool has remained standardised and relatively unchanged over the lifetime of the research project. This has enabled opportunities for more statistical-based research enquiries to be undertaken, such as t-test experiments on whether levels of satisfaction with local government services have improved significantly over time since the reform. However, in order to remove any potential abstraction or confusion with the use of a

numeric scale, textual tags were used for each of the scale's digits, and the numbers were not mentioned. A score of very bad was interpreted as = 1, bad = 2, OK = 3, good = 4 and very good = 5.⁹³

The use of a scale-based survey tool was partly a pragmatic decision, based on local government management's requests for quantifiable data on their councils' performance. However, it opened another more structured pathway for participants to inform us about what services were performing well in their community and what services needed improving. This tool was also a way to focus discussion on what shires were presently doing, and to elicit information on participants' more immediate and tangible experiences with shires' operations. Further, it helped distinguish between attitudes towards local government services versus the more problematic and contentious issues surrounding community governance. However, we contend that sole use of this survey tool without being coupled with a more exploratory and inductive research tool would have been too deductive to be either a meaningful or a culturally safe and ethical tool in this research setting.

Each interview and survey took between approximately 30 minutes and one hour to conduct, based on the level of detail the participant wanted to communicate. To compensate for the time and information imparted by the participants, we made the decision to remunerate participants 20 dollars per interview. This was a somewhat contentious action, and provoked extra deliberation during our universities' human research ethics committee's evaluation of the research project. These concerns were based around the risk that financial compensation of participants may undermine the integrity and reliability of the interview process. However for ethical and practical considerations, we

⁹³ Adjustments were made at the time of interview to allow for different socio-linguistic interpretations of the term 'bad', due to a perceived reluctance amongst some participants to use the term. One participant explained that to say something is 'bad' means it is to be feared like a bad and unchangeable spirit. This meaning obviously had different connotations than what we intended in the services survey scale. This problem of divergent meanings was mitigated through the substitution of the terms 'very bad' and 'bad' with 'really not good' or 'not good', which some participants seemed to be much more comfortable using to judge service standards.

maintain that participant remuneration has been a sound component of the project's research tools. We contend that a small act of financial compensation for participants was a respectful acknowledgement that a professional transaction was taking place. A small financial payment also conveyed the message that the time, information and knowledge imparted by the participant were important, respected and valuable. Over the life of this project, we received some financial recompense and support for our labours (from university institutions and government organisations). While we could not offer stable income streams for participants, we considered it fair that participants should receive a proportionately similar per diem.

Practically, financial remuneration of participants also meant a much more effective fieldwork research process than was likely without any remuneration. We required little effort or time to recruit participants, and interviews could generally be intensively conducted over the entire course of a working day. During a two- or three-day visit to a community we were therefore able to collect a reasonable sample with minimal difficulty. Arguably, it also lessened the risk of non-sampling error by mitigating non-response bias. In other words, providing financial remuneration provided a motivation to participate which arguably improved the randomness of sampling and minimised the potential effect of the 'squeaky wheel sampling syndrome', whereby a strongly opinionated minority with time availability would be more motivated to participate in the project, thereby skewing results.

An important final step in the project's research methods was to report back the results of the research to the affected communities, shire staff and elected shire councils. This occurred through presentations to council meetings, follow-up meetings with management staff, and where possible, meetings with local boards, committees or interested individual residents in participating communities. The data was presented mainly verbally and through visual presentations, with supporting documentation made available. This aspect of the project was an important feature in the principles of Action Research and culturally safe Indigenist Research as a cyclical learning process: by providing research participants with a final summary of the information and knowledge gained from the project, it allowed these

groups to reflect and instrumentalise the findings for their own strategic or learning purposes.

Table AA.1: Interview participation counts 2009 – 2013, shire council residents

Round 1: 2009 - 2010		
	Victoria Daly Shire	Roper Gulf Shire
Dates of interviews:	Jan – Apr 2010	Dec 2009
Localities / towns:	10	1
Participant count.	151	26
Round 2: 2010 - 2011		
	Victoria Daly Shire	Roper Gulf Shire
Dates of interviews:	Feb 2011	Dec 2010-Jul 2011
Localities / towns:	16*	10
Participant count.	138	174
Round 3: 2012 - 2013		
	Victoria Daly Shire	Roper Gulf Shire
Dates of interviews:	May 2012	May – June 2013
Localities / towns:	16*	9
Participant count.	170	172
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	459	372
2011 Census Data		
	Victoria Daly Shire	Roper Gulf Shire
Estimated total adult population (18 years or older)**	3,612	3,898
Estimated total Indigenous population**	79.2%	81.8%

*This includes outstations and homelands.

**Based on 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data (ABS, 2013b, 2013c).

Another important participant group and target audience for the research findings was senior management in the two participating shires. This group has been responsible for providing in-kind support including travel expenses, logistical and operational assistance to the research work. This group was also treated as a key potential facilitator in implementing any changes that may be advocated by community participants during the research process. However, we also recognised there was a power imbalance between shire residents who participated in the research, and senior shire management staff who had an interest in knowing the responses of these interviews. To simultaneously address senior management's information requests, respect the sensitivity of the information provided by interview participants, and uphold the ethical integrity of our research project, we insisted on maintaining autonomy over the interview process and format, and ensuring the confidentiality of interview participants at all times.

The localities and towns covered by this research project included:

Victoria Daly Shire – Kalkarindji, Daguragu, Nganmarriyanga, Peppimenarti, Pine Creek, Kybrook Farm, Timber Creek, Wadeye, Yarralin, Bulla, Amanbidji, Gilwi, Pigeon Hole and other surrounding homelands and outstations.

Roper Gulf Shire – Barunga, Beswick, Borroloola, Bulman, Jilkminggan, Manyallaluk, Mataranka, Ngukurr, Minyerri, Urapunga and other surrounding homelands and outstations.

Cohort 2: Interviews with government officers and management staff

Between 2010 and 2016, we conducted 63 separate interviews with 60 individuals who we identified as shire management staff, Northern Territory Government officers, elected government officials or management staff of other organisations. These individuals were chosen because they all had direct or indirect professional involvement with the 2008 shires reform. Table AA.2 provides details on the number of interviews conducted per year, and the professional positions of interview participants.

All interview questions were open-ended. We did use a standard interview question template for this cohort, however the questionnaire was amended according to particular perspectives and experiences of the participant. We also often resorted to unscripted and ad-hoc questions, as a follow-up to participants' responses. All interviews of this cohort were conducted confidentially, either in the participants' workplace or place of residence. One interview in 2015 was conducted via skype. Due to their positions as paid employees of government agencies or other organisations (most often in management roles), it was not considered appropriate, professionally ethical or financially pertinent to remunerate these interview participants.

Table AA.2: Interview participation rates 2010 – 2016, Government officers and management staff

Year of Interviews, Count	
2010	46
2011	9
2014	5
2015	2
2016	1
TOTAL	63
Position held by interview participants, Count	
NT Government staff	15
Shire management staff	26
Australian Government staff	4
Shire elected councillor	11
Management staff - other	3
NT Government elected official	1
TOTAL	60

Presentation of Findings

Besides in this thesis, excerpts of the interview transcripts collected during this fieldwork have been used in my other published works (Michel, 2015, 2016; Michel & Taylor, 2012). We have also made efforts to report back findings to the participating communities and individuals. This included in a round of community visits in 2010, 2011 and 2017. I also presented the preliminary findings in various conference and workshop settings, including in public presentations in the Northern Territory (in Darwin, Alice Springs and Katherine) in 2010, 2014 and 2017.

When the research results were reported back to shire elected officials, management staff or shire residents via community-based local boards, the audiences were generally very receptive.⁹⁴ In certain instances, where findings suggested criticisms, the data was closely scrutinised and we interrogated at length about their findings. Both Victoria Daly and Roper Gulf Shire Councils (to varying degrees) also chose to incorporate the results of the research into their strategic and operational planning.

It should be noted that some residents' responses to the feedback were critical and pessimistic. Many didn't question the veracity of the reported results and findings, but remained frustrated by the lack of a clear plan of action to instrumentalise their information for change, or that the criticisms expressed about the new shire structure were not being adequately addressed.

Regardless of these efforts to inform all participants of the research findings, the methods used in this research did not strictly adhere to the principles of Action Research and

⁹⁴ However, because much of the content was often overtly negative towards the shires, it was observed that the information did at times cause some vexation and indignation amongst Shire elected leaders and management staff especially.

Indigenist Research. David Selener describes the role of research within an Action Research framework as

a process through which members of an oppressed group or community identify a problem, collect and analyse information, and act upon the problem in order to find solutions and to promote social and political transformation (quoted in Reason & Bradbury, 2006: 1).

By this definition, our project fell short of this role. We were and remain non-Indigenous outsiders in the Indigenous-majority communities that were our research sites. Although participants were able to engage in the research by controlling the content and priorities expressed during interviews, they were not directly involved in setting the research agenda or timeframe, or interpreting and distributing the findings. Fieldwork visits to participating communities remained relatively fleeting that, in isolation, arguably did not support the development of longer-term relationships between researchers and participants.⁹⁵ The feedback process was done pragmatically and on occasion within a limited timeframe, and we did not involve themselves in fomenting politically transformational action based on the research's findings.⁹⁶ It is therefore debatable whether the project participants truly became transformative agents of change through their involvement with the research, or whether they merely played the role of respected informants.

⁹⁵ However, the repeated visits over three years by one of us in particular, and the sharing of sometimes intimate and sensitive stories have led to some trust-based and long-term relationships developing beyond the scope of the research project.

⁹⁶ For a discussion of the tensions between political action, advocacy and the researcher that is common in Action Research-inspired projects, see Holcombe (2008).

COHORT 1 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY QUESTIONS (2010 version)

Introductory question:

1. Do you know who the councillor(s) is in your Shire ward?

Transition questions

2. When you hear the word 'Shire', what do you think of?
3. Have core local government services (rubbish, local roads, parks and gardens, etc) changed since the Shire started?
4. Do you think there have been more jobs and training opportunities created for Indigenous people since the Shire formed?
5. How good do you think the Shire staff are at listening to the issues in your community and getting things done?
6. Do you feel like you and your community find out enough about the decisions made by the shire and the shire council?
7. Was the old council before the Shire better at making decisions for your community than the new Shire council? Why / why not?

Key / End Questions

8. What is the biggest change you have seen in your community (good or bad) since the Shire started?
9. Do you think the new Shire has made your community stronger or weaker?
10. How could things change to make your community stronger?
11. How long do you think the Shire will survive?

Local Government Survey Framework, 2013

Topic: Services

Community:

Group:

Completion date:

Evaluator:

Standard Interval Scale

Very Bad		1
Bad		2
OK		3
Good		4
Very Good		5

<u>Category</u>	<u>Sub-Group</u>	<u>Evaluation Question</u>	<u>Average Score</u>	<u>Comments</u>
Local Roads and related infrastructure	Roads	How good are the local roads inside your community? Could you explain why?		
	Drainage	How good is the drainage in your community? (When it rains, does the water stay around a long time?)		
	Street Lighting	How good is the street lighting in your community at night? Are there enough?		
	Street signage and traffic safety	How good are the traffic safety and road signs in your community?		
	Pedestrian Safety	How good is pedestrian safety? Why?		
Waste Management	Rubbish removal	How good is the rubbish collection from the bin outside your house?		
	Litter pick-up	How good is the Council and community at picking up litter around your community?		
	Landfill	How good is the rubbish dump taken care of?		
Housing Repairs and Maintenance	Housing standard	How good is the house you live in?		
	Housing Repairs and Maintenance	If something in your house is getting old or something is broken, how good is the council at fixing it or putting in a new one?		

	Housing Program	Do you think SIHIP/Housing mob have done a good job?		
		Did you get a new house or a refurbishment?		
<i>Parks, Reserves and Open Spaces</i>	Parks and Reserves	How good are the parks and reserves in your community?		
	Playgrounds	How good are the playgrounds in your community?		
	Sports Oval	How good is the sports oval?		
<i>CDEP</i>	CDEP (delivered in only 6 communities)	How good is CDEP? How could it improve?		
<i>Animal Welfare and Control</i>	Domestic animals	How good is the dog control in your community? (cats?)		
	Feral animals and livestock	How good is the feral animal and livestock control in your community?		
<i>Other Community Services</i>	Sport and Rec	How good are the sport and rec activities in your community? What could make it better?		
	Night Patrol	How good is the night patrol in your community? What could make it better?		
	Youth Services	How good is the Youth Engagement and Programs? What would make it better?		
	Aged Care	How good is the aged care service in your community? What could make it better?		

	Child Care	How good is the child care service in your community? What could make it better?		
	Library Services	How good is the library service in your community? What could make it better?		
	RIBS	How good is RIBS program? What would make it better?		
	Cultural activities	If the Council helps out with cultural activities, how good does it help out? What could make it better?		
Governance	Local Boards	Do you know about the Local Board? How good is the Local Board? Are they working?		
Overall	Overall	Altogether, how good do you think the shire services are in your community?		
Other Government Departments	Overall	How good do you think the other government departments are doing?		

COHORT 2 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: Senior Executive Northern Territory Government managers (2014 version)

1. In what capacity were you involved with the Northern Territory local government reform process in 2008?
2. What prior experience did you have working in the local government and / or Indigenous community development sectors?
3. Now that it has been over six years since the establishment of regionalised local government in the Northern Territory, how would you judge the outcomes of the 2008 reform?
4. What do you consider to be the non-urban local government sector's biggest strengths in the Northern Territory? Biggest weaknesses?
5. In the lead-up to the reform, the Minister [for Local Government] and the Department [of Local Government, Housing and Sport] publicly argued that to be viable over the long term, councils need a population base of 5000 or more. How was this threshold figure arrived at?
6. In your opinion, does this rationale still hold?
7. Do you think economies of scale have been achieved in the NT's non-urban local government sector compared to prior to the reform in 2008?
8. During the Northern Territory Parliamentary election campaign in 2012, the Member for Braitling and now Chief Minister referred to shires as 'toxic'. What's your reaction to this labelling?
9. After their election in 2012, the Country Liberal Government made some changes to local government policy and legislation. What do you think has been the practical effects of these changes?
10. Victoria Daly Shire is now undergoing the process of being de-amalgamated. What strengths and weaknesses do you see in this change?
11. Would you consider the local government sector to be under financial stress? If so, what are the main contributing factors?

12. Recently the Land Councils negotiated lease payments to be made by local governments operating buildings and infrastructure on Aboriginal land. How would you describe this process, and do you consider the outcome to be fair and reasonable?
13. If you had your time again in 2008, would you do anything differently?
14. Where do you see the Northern Territory's local government sector in 10 years' time?

Appendix B:

Empirical analysis of scale economies for the Northern Territory's rural-remote local government sector, before and after the 2008 council amalgamation reform

This appendix uses various statistical tests to investigate the hypothesis that there is a positive correlation between the cost efficiency of local government councils (in particular administrative cost efficiency) and the scale of these councils. This hypothesis reflects the predictions of the economies of scale theorem, a microeconomic concept related to the production function of firms (see Figure AB.1 for a graphical representation). This theorem holds that if a firm expands its production of a given output, the increased production scale will lead to lower input costs per unit of output. (This downward average cost movement is represented on the LRAC line in Figure AB.1 between 0 output quantity and Q3 output quantity on the horizontal axis.) Lower input costs per unit will continue as production increases over the long run, until a point of constant economies of scale is met (represented by the point AC3:Q3 on the LRAC line in Figure AB.1). If production scale is increased beyond this point (greater than Q3 output quantity on the horizontal axis in Figure AB.1), then diseconomies of scale have been met, or higher input costs per unit of output.

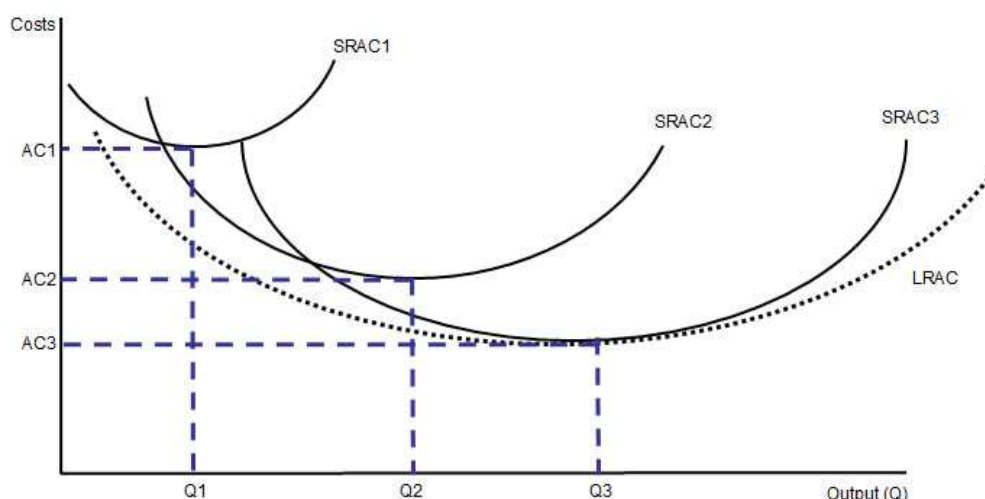


Figure AB.1: Graphical interpretation of the economies of scale concept, including short-run and long-run temporality. AC = Average cost. Q = Quantity. SRAC = Short run average cost. LRAC = Long run average cost.

Source: <http://economicsgceopastanswers.blogspot.com.au/2014/09/long-run-costs-economies-diseconomies.html>

The statistical tests used here will be as follows:

Figure AB.2

Statistical Test	Variable 1 (type)	Variable 2 (type)	Research Hypothesis
1) Independent samples t-test	General Public Services Expenditure (GPSE) share of total operating expenditure (metric)	Council grouping: Shire or Community Council (categorical)	There is a significant difference between shire councils and community councils in the GPSE share of a council's total operating expenditure
2) Independent samples t-test	Operating surplus ratio (metric)	Council grouping: Shire or Community Council (categorical)	There is a significant difference between shire councils and community councils in their operating surplus ratios
3) Pearson's correlation coefficient (Pearson's <i>r</i>)	General Public Services Expenditure (GPSE) share of total operating expenditure (metric)	Square root of resident population count per council (metric)	There is a negative linear / significant quadratic relationship between councils' proportionate expenditure on administration and their respective resident population size
4) Pearson's correlation coefficient (Pearson's <i>r</i>)	Operating surplus ratio (metric)	Square root of total revenue per council (metric)	There is a positive linear / significant quadratic relationship between councils' operating surplus ratio and their respective total revenue size

The sample size for the first three tests was 122, and 121 for statistical test 4). The sample data is comprised of financial ratio results collected for the periods 2006-07 and 2007-08 (prior to the amalgamation reform) from the annual financial reports of the following community councils:

Aherrenge	Jilkminggan	Ramingining
Ali Curung	Kaltukatjara	Tapatjatatjaka
Alpururulam	Kunbarllanjna	Tennant Creek
Amoonguna	Lajamanu	Thamarrurr
Angurugu	Ltyentye Apurte	Timber Creek
Anmatjere	Maningrida	Tiwi Islands
Aputula	Mataranka	Urapuntja
Areyonga	Minjilang	Walangeri Ngumpinku
Arltarlpilta	Naiyu Nambiyu	Walungurru
Borrooloola	Nganmarriyanga	Warruwi
Daguragu	Ntaria	Watiyawanu
Elliott	Numbulwar	Yirrkala
Galiwinku	Nyirranggulung	Yuelamu
Gapuwiyak	Nyrripi	Yuendumu
Ikuntji	Papunya	Yugul Mangi
Imanpa	Peppimenarti	
Jabiru	Pine Creek	

There were not adequate financial statements available for Marngarr, Milingimbi and Umbakumba councils for both the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 periods, therefore they were excluded from the sample. There was no data for Wallace Rockhole council in 2006-07 and it was subsequently placed under the administration of Katherine Town Council, therefore it was excluded from the sample. There was no data for Nganmarriyanga council in 2006-07, therefore the financial results from 2007-08 were used for both periods. There was no data for Alpururulum, Anmatjere and Ltyentye Apurte councils in 2007-08, therefore the financial results from 2006-07 were used for both periods.

Financial ratio results for the periods 2010-2011, 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 (after the amalgamation reform) were collected from the annual financial reports of the following shire councils:

Barkly	MacDonnell	Victoria Daly
Central Desert	Roper Gulf	West Arnhem
East Arnhem	Tiwi Islands	

For statistical test 3) and 4), separate measures of scale were chosen as independent variables to reflect that the production scale for local government can be understood both as a function of overall service population (Dollery, Byrnes, & Crase, 2008: 167-168; McAdam, 2006), and as a function of total revenue or expenditure on local government services (Andrews & Boyne, 2009: 756; Drew et al., 2014: 634-635; 649; Ting, Dollery, & Villano, 2014: 2905; see also Drew, Kortt, & Dollery, 2015: 5-6).

The dependent variable used in statistical tests 1) and 3) is councils' administrative expenditure. This has been selected for testing to reflect the common argument that scale economies for local government organisations are most likely to be achieved when larger councils are able to pool administrative and corporate services, including financial management, payroll and human resources functions (Andrews & Boyne, 2009: 741; DeLoitte, 2012: 13; 64; 153; Drew, Kortt, & Dollery, 2014: 635; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2006: 120-122; Productivity Commission, 2005: 293; Reese, 2004: 595-600). In order to allow for easier comparison, administrative expenditure is calculated as a proportion of total operating expenditure (Andrews & Boyne, 2009: 746).

Population figures for each community council in the period 2006-08 were sourced from the estimates made by the Northern Territory Grants Commission for 2007-08 (NTGC, 2007: 26-27). Population figures for the shire councils in the period 2010-13 were sourced from Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2011 Census data (ABS, 2012).

Administrative costs are sourced from councils' figures in their annual financial statements of 'General Public Services' expenditure (GPSE), a standardised classification of expenditure set by the Australian Bureau of Statistics which all local government bodies in Australia are obliged to report. The 'General Public Services' functions of councils are defined as including 'administration, support, regulation, research, and operation of general public services. General public services include legislative and executive affairs, financial and fiscal affairs, external affairs, general research and general services' (ABS, 2008: 7).

For measures of operating expenditure used to compare councils' share of GPSE, depreciation expenses were excluded. This allowed a closer comparison of the proportion of real operating expenditure spent on administration, rather than including asset-related accounting costs.

As an alternative measure of cost efficiency, operating surplus ratios are used as the dependent variable in tests 2) and 4). The operating surplus ratio is calculated here by firstly subtracting councils' total operating expenses from their total operating revenues, as reported in their annual financial statements. The operating surplus is then divided by total operating revenue to derive a ratio score. Note that I include capital grants revenue in my calculations of operating revenue. This is in response to an issue identified by Drew, Grant and Campbell (2016: 11) regarding the classification of operating expenses and operating revenues in local governments' financial reporting. Depreciation costs are conventionally treated in accrual accounting as operating expenses, whereas capital grants are commonly treated as separate to operating revenue. This may result in an overstatement of operating deficits for councils, especially those more reliant on capital grant funding. In the financial statements of community councils from 2006-2008 there was also the related issue of inconsistent classification of operating expenses and operating revenue between councils. My solution for the statistical tests related to operating surplus ratios is to include all capital grants and operating grants as operating revenue, and to include all depreciation expenses as operating expenditure.

Statistical test 1): Independent samples t-test

Research hypothesis: There is a significant difference between shire councils and community councils in the GPSE share of a council's total operating expenditure.

In this sample of 98 community councils and 24 shire councils, the average share of GPSE compared to total operating expenditure of community councils ($\bar{X} = 0.222$, $s = 0.120$) was lower than the average share of GPSE compared to total operating expenditure of shire councils ($\bar{X} = 0.361$, $s = 0.108$) (see figure AB.3).⁹⁷ A Levene's Test for Equality of Variances found: $F = 1.052$, $p = 0.307$ (see figure AB.4). Because the observed p -value of the F test was greater than 0.05, equal variances between the groupings are assumed and the first row of results in the table presented in figure AB.4 are used for an independent samples t -test. This t -test found the difference between means to be significant, $t(120) = 5.20$, $p < 0.001$, 95% Confidence Interval for the mean difference (0.086, 0.193). Because the 95% Confidence Interval of the difference between the two sample means does not include 0, this entails that 0 is not a plausible value for the difference between the two means (see figure AB.4). The null hypothesis is rejected and it is concluded the GPSE share of total operating expenditure was significantly higher for shire councils in the period 2010 to 2013 compared to the GPSE share of total operating expenditure for community councils in the period 2006 to 2008.

⁹⁷ Note these results for the mean GPSE shares of total operating expenditure differ from the results presented on pages 19-20 and 192 of this thesis. This is because the other results were calculated on the basis of sum total GPSE and sum total operating expenditure for the sector in each financial year. In the independent samples t -test above, the results for GPSE share of total operating expenditure were inputted for each council individually, and the mean of these individual results were then calculated.

Figure AB.3:

Group Statistics					
	Council Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
GPSE share vs Tot Op Exp	CC	98	.222	.120	.012
	SHIRE	24	.361	.108	.022

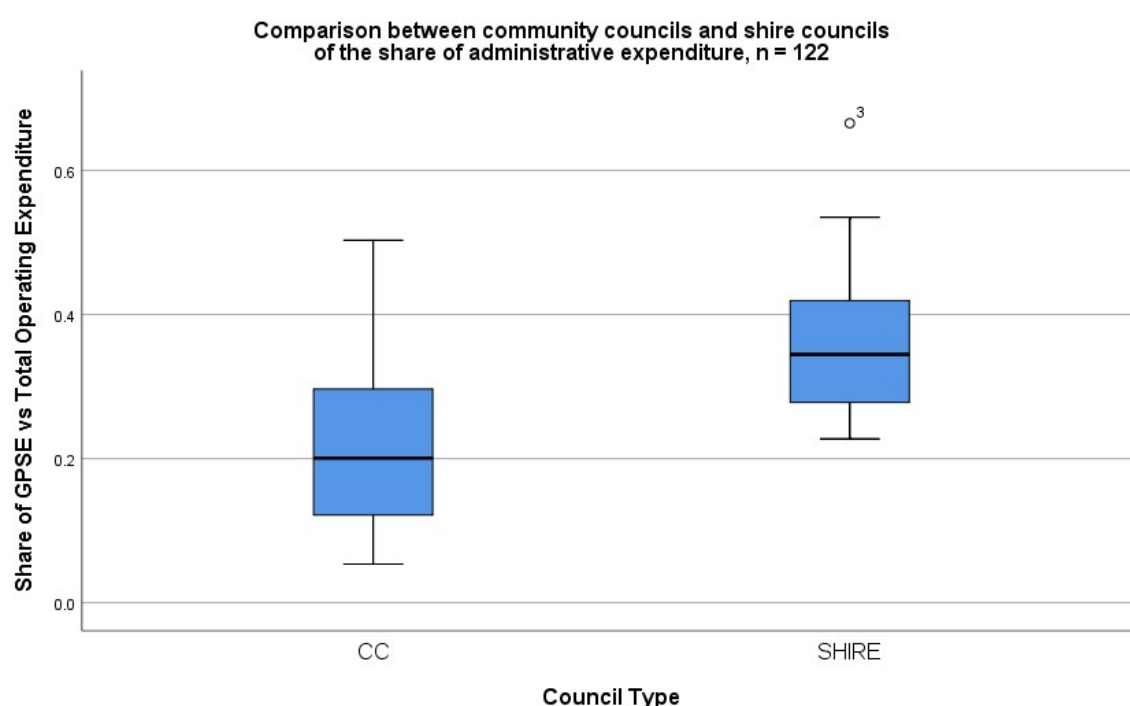
Figure AB.4:

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
GPSE share vs Tot Op Exp	Equal variances assumed	1.052	.307	5.20	120	.000	.140	.0268	.086	.193
	Equal variances not assumed			5.52	37.97	.000	.140	.025	.088	.191

The boxplots in figure AB.5 offer a visual comparison between the two council types (CC = community council, SHIRE = shire council) of the spreads in results for GPSE share of total operating expenditure. The blue boxes show the interquartile range, or the spread of the middle 50 per cent of scores for each grouping. The medians are displayed by the thick horizontal lines within the boxes. The lines (or whiskers) that extend on either side of the boxes capture the remaining range of scores for each council type. This graph indicates a significant difference in the range of scores between the two council types; the median result for the shire council grouping is greater than the upper level of the interquartile range for the community council grouping. This graph also shows one outlier (the point labelled “3”, which indicates a score that lies outside 1.5 interquartile ranges from one end of the box. In this sample, the outlier score is for Barkly shire council in 2011-12, which reported an

extraordinary \$17,809,775 of General Public Services Expenditure (minus depreciation) out of a total \$26,762,160 operating expenses, or 67 per cent (Barkly Shire Council, 2012: 67). This result was in the context of corporate instability for that council during the period, which included the failed implementation of new accounting software, the resignation of the CEO, and the temporary placement of the council under Northern Territory Government administration.

Figure AB.5



Statistical test 2): Independent samples t-test

Research hypothesis: There is a significant difference between shire councils and community councils in their operating surplus ratios.

In this sample of 98 community councils and 24 shire councils, the average operating surplus ratio of community councils ($\bar{X}$ = -0.021, s = 0.218) was closer to surplus (a score above 0) than the average operating surplus ratio of shire councils ($\bar{X}$ = -0.055, s = 0.108) (see figure AB.6).⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Similar to the results in Statistical Test 1), the mean operating surplus ratio differ from the results presented on pages 19-20 of this thesis. This is because the other results were calculated on the basis of sum total

Figure AB.6

Group Statistics					
	Council_Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Op_Surplus_Ratio	CC	98	-.021	.218	.022
	SHIRE	24	-.055	.090	.018

A Levene's Test for Equality of Variances found: $F = 6.626$, $p = 0.011$ (see figure AB.7).

Because the observed p-value of the F test was less than 0.05, equal variances between the groupings cannot be assumed and the second row of results in the table presented in figure AB.7 are used for an independent samples t-test. This t-test found the difference in means to not be significant, $t(91.387) = 1.180$, $p = 0.241$, 95% Confidence Interval for the mean difference (-0.023, 0.091). Because the 95% Confidence Interval of the difference between the two sample means includes 0, this entails that 0 is a plausible value for the difference between the two means (see figure AB.7).

Figure AB.7

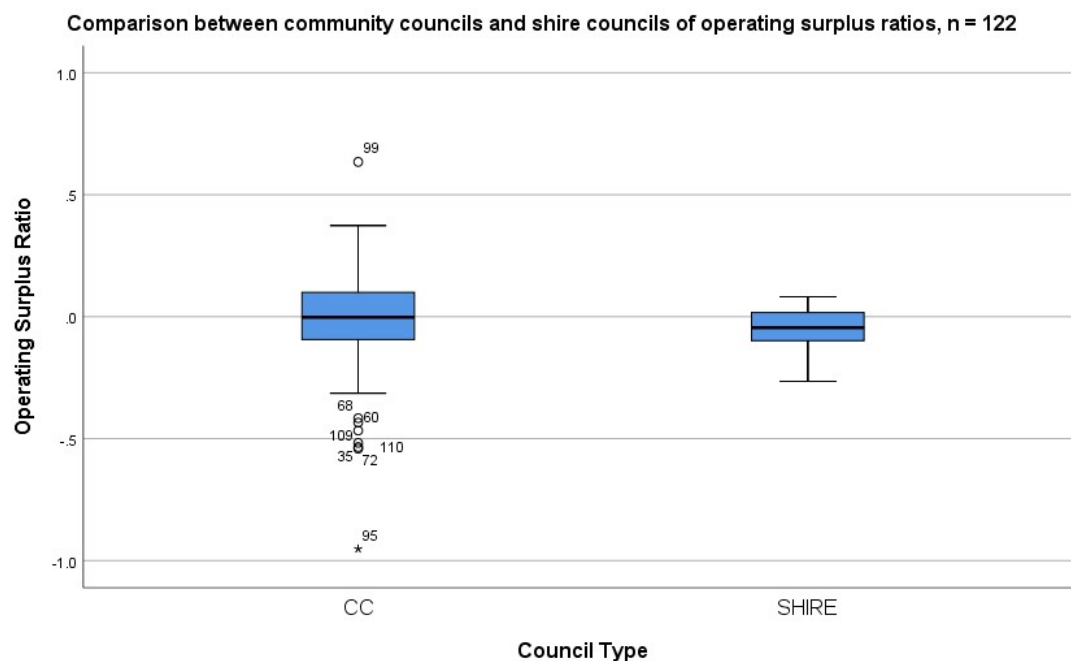
Independent Samples Test									
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper
Op_Surplus_Ratio	Equal variances assumed	6.626	.011	.744	120	.458	.034	.046	-.056 .124
	Equal variances not assumed			1.180	91.387	.241	.034	.029	-.023 .091

Comparison of the boxplots displayed in figure AB.8 do indicate some difference in operating surplus ratios between the community councils and shire councils grouping.

operating surplus ratio for the sector in each financial year. In the independent samples t-test above, the results for operating surplus ratios were inputted for each council individually, and the mean of these individual results were then calculated.

However, a wide spread of scores for the community council grouping is evident, including a large number of outliers. This indicates the community council sector was more prone to wider fluctuations in financial operating results than the shire councils in the periods under consideration. The null hypothesis is not rejected and the research hypothesis is not supported.

Figure AB.8



Statistical test 3): Pearson's correlation coefficient (Pearson's *r*)

Research hypothesis: There is a negative linear / significant quadratic relationship between councils' proportionate expenditure on administration and their respective resident population size.

An assumption of the Pearson's *r* test is that the variables are normally distributed. Both variables were tested for normal distribution, with the results shown in figures AB.9 – AB.15. Because of the large sample size, it is more useful in this case to visually examine the graphs rather than rely on the statistics in figure AB.9 for analysis of normality.

Figures AB.10, AB.11 and AB.12 clearly indicate a non-normal distribution of councils' population size in the sample of 122. There is evidence of positive skewness, and figure AB.12 shows many outliers at the upper end of the distribution. This positively skewed distribution is to be expected, because of the distinct difference in average resident population size between community councils and shire councils.

Figure AB.9

Statistics		2007-08 Population Size	GPSE share vs Total Operating Expenditure
N	Valid	122	122
	Missing	0	0
Mean		1732.05	.249
Median		752.00	.237
Mode		2659	.065 ^a
Std. Deviation		1994.636	.130
Variance		3978572.675	.017
Skewness		1.449	.568
Std. Error of Skewness		.219	.219
Kurtosis		.763	-.231
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.435	.435
Range		6453	.6120

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

Figure AB.10

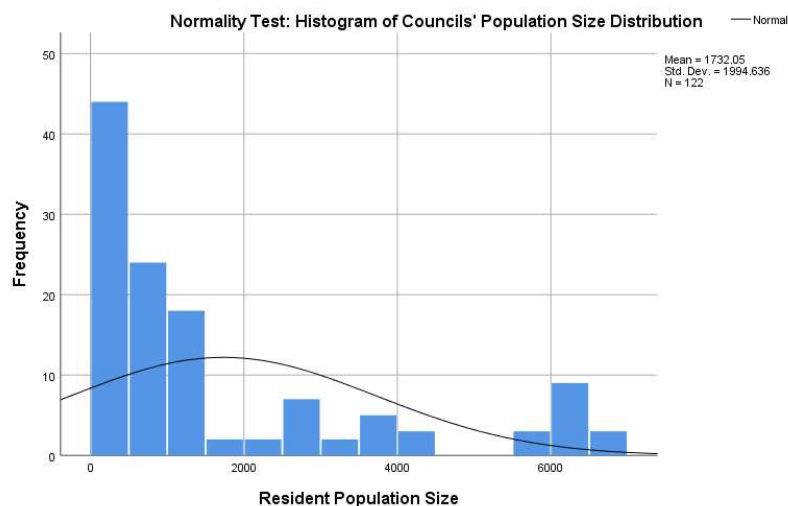


Figure AB.11

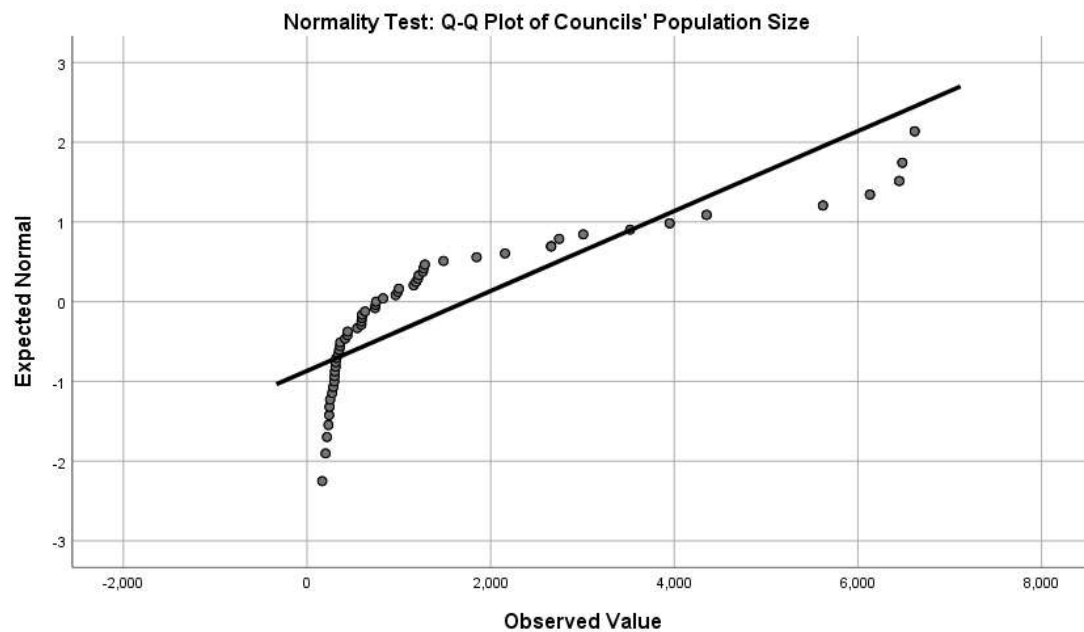
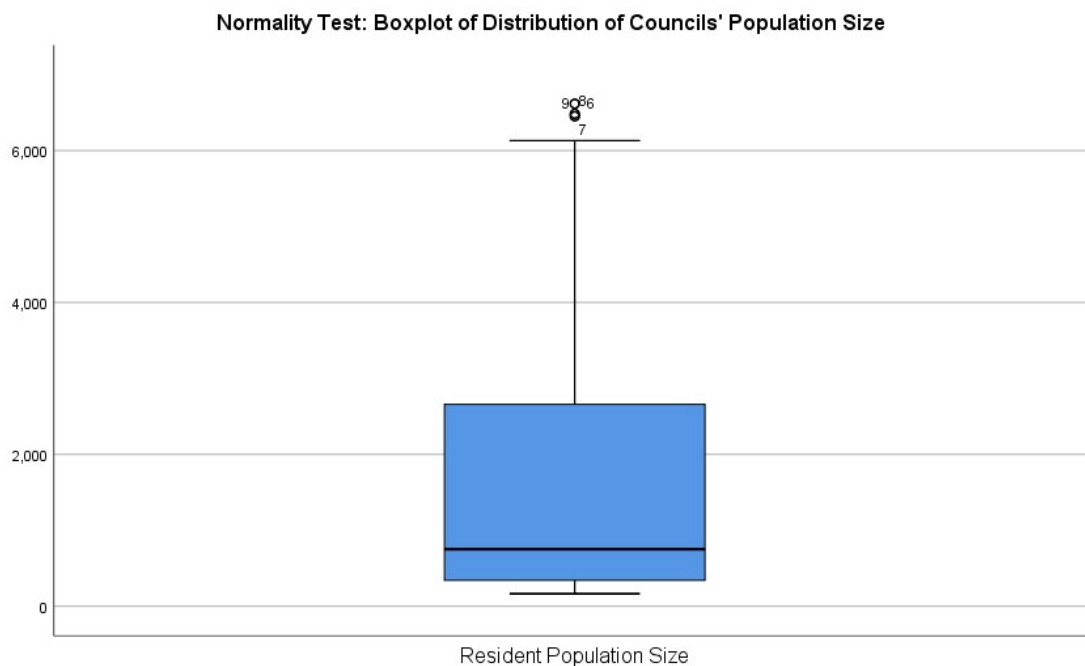


Figure AB.12



The normality tests for the distribution of councils' GPSE vs total operating expenditure, as visually represented in figures AB.13, AB.14 and AB.15 indicate a normal distribution. However, an outlier is evident in each of these graphs (ie the point marked '3' in figure AB.15). This is the result for Barkly Shire Council in 2011-12.

Figure AB.13

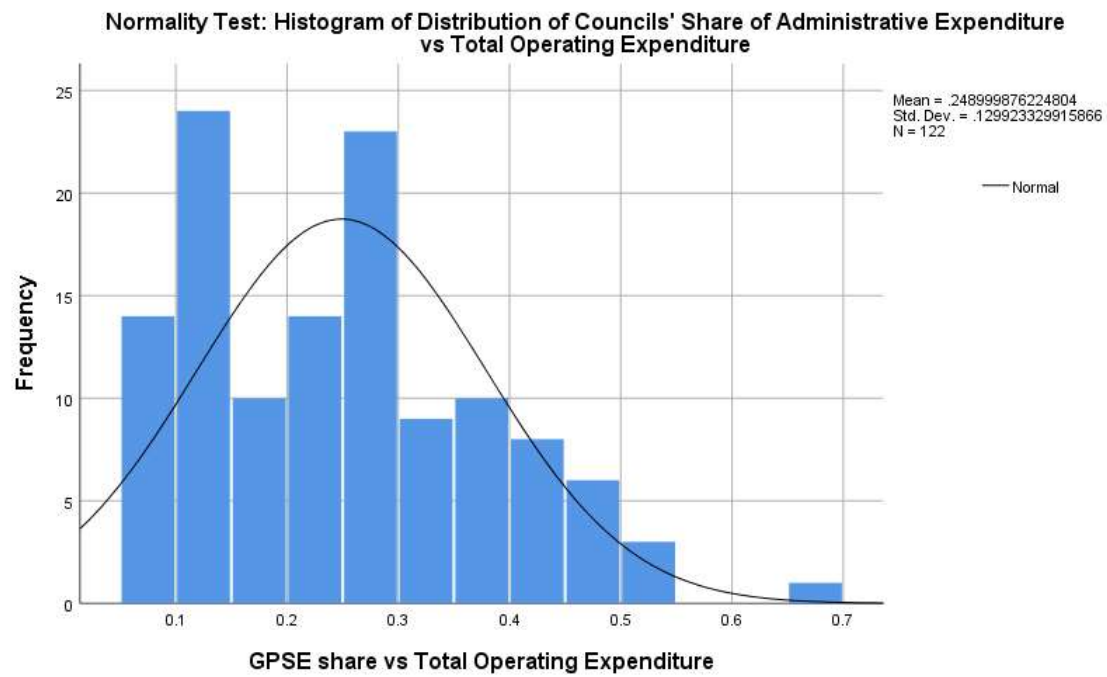


Figure AB.14

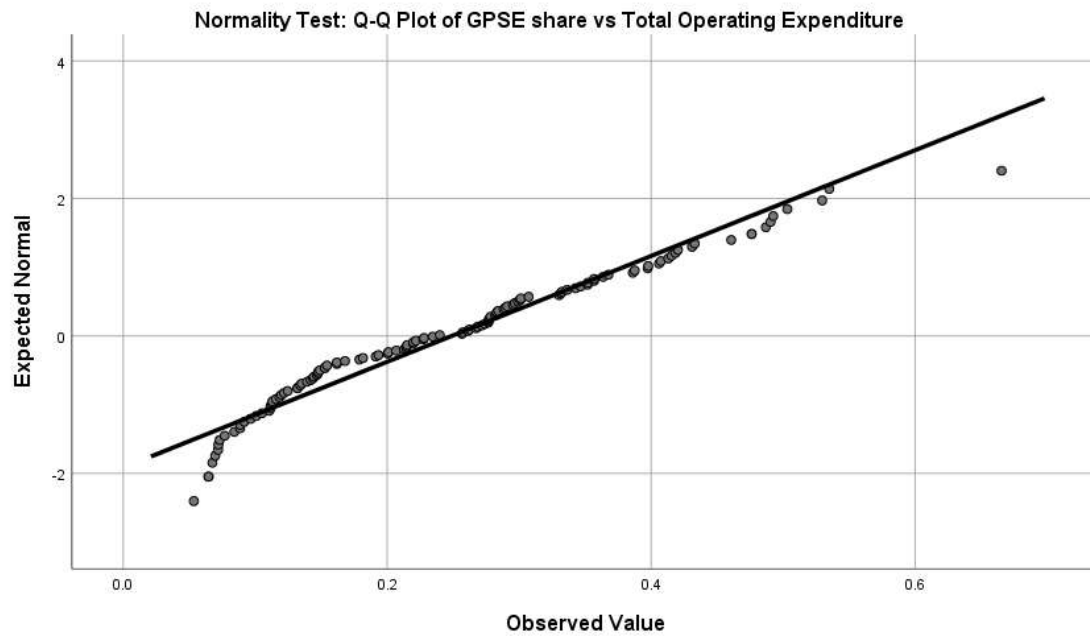
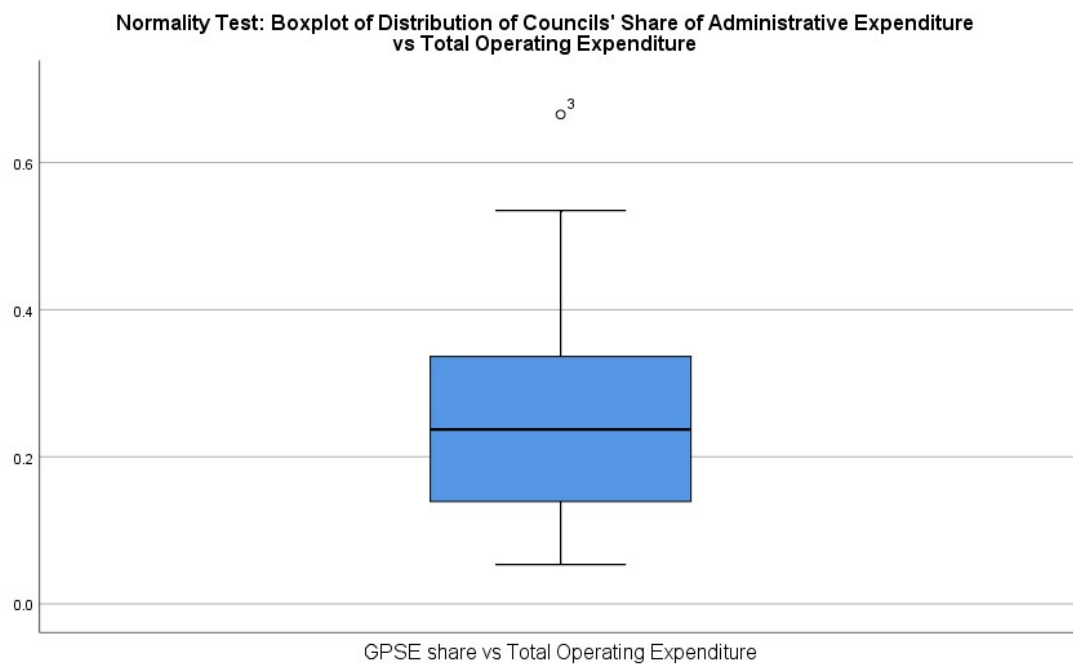


Figure AB.15



The non-normal distribution of the resident population data requires a transformation of the data in order to draw statistical inferences from it (for example the Pearson's correlation coefficient). Due to the moderately strong positive skewness of the distribution, the chosen transformation is Log_{ex} (commonly referred to as LN). The figures AB.16, AB.17 and AB.18 indicate that the transformation of the population variable data has rendered it a normal distribution (although some mild positive skewness is still observable).

Figure AB.16

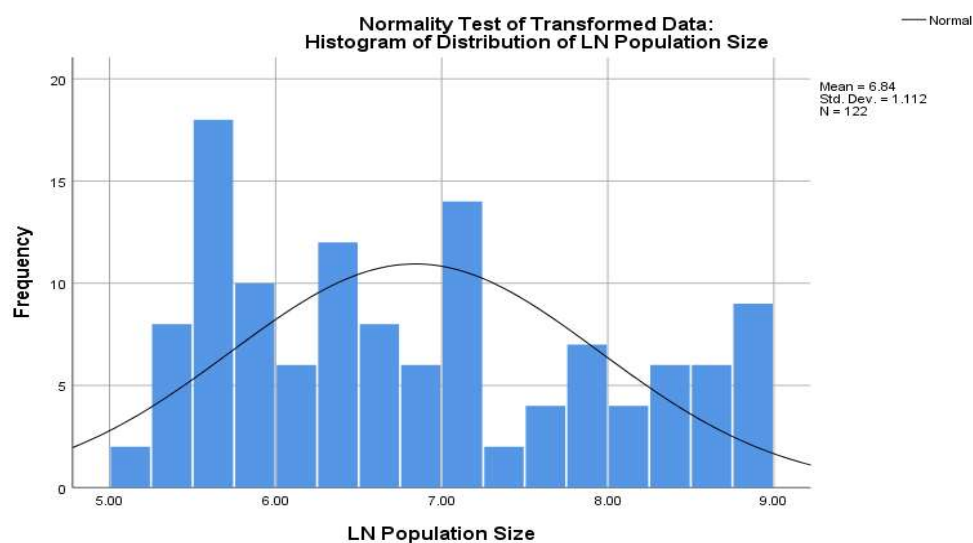


Figure AB.17

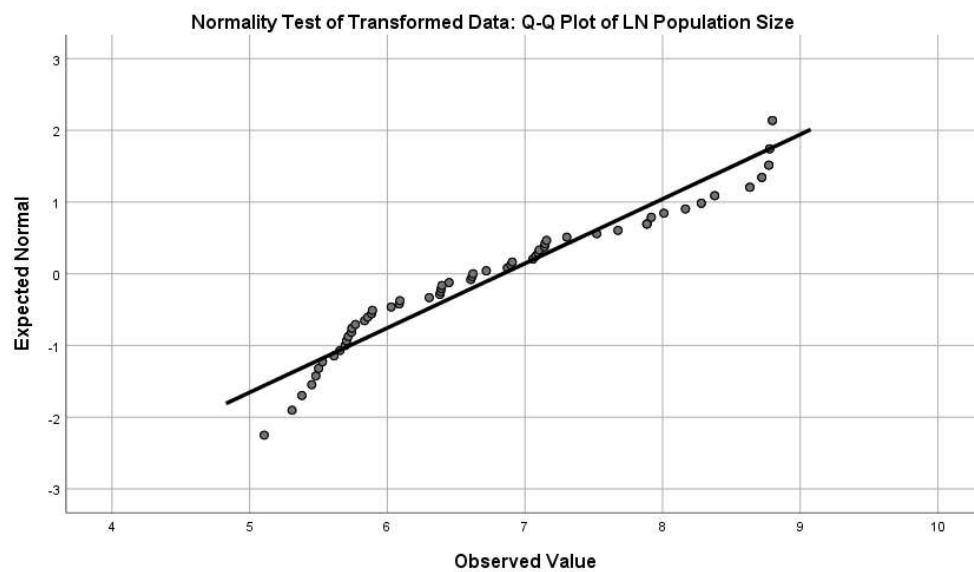
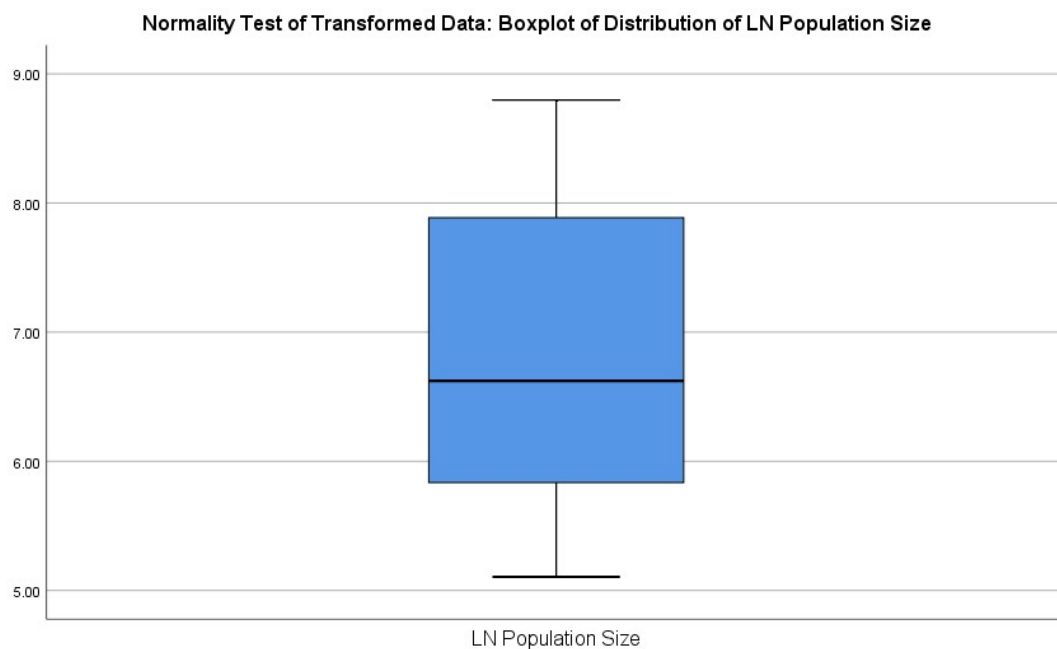


Figure AB.18



The transformed population variable (LN population size) and the untransformed scores for GPSE share of total operating expenditure are then tested to determine if there is a statistically significant value of Pearson's r . This is a one-tailed (or unidirectional) test

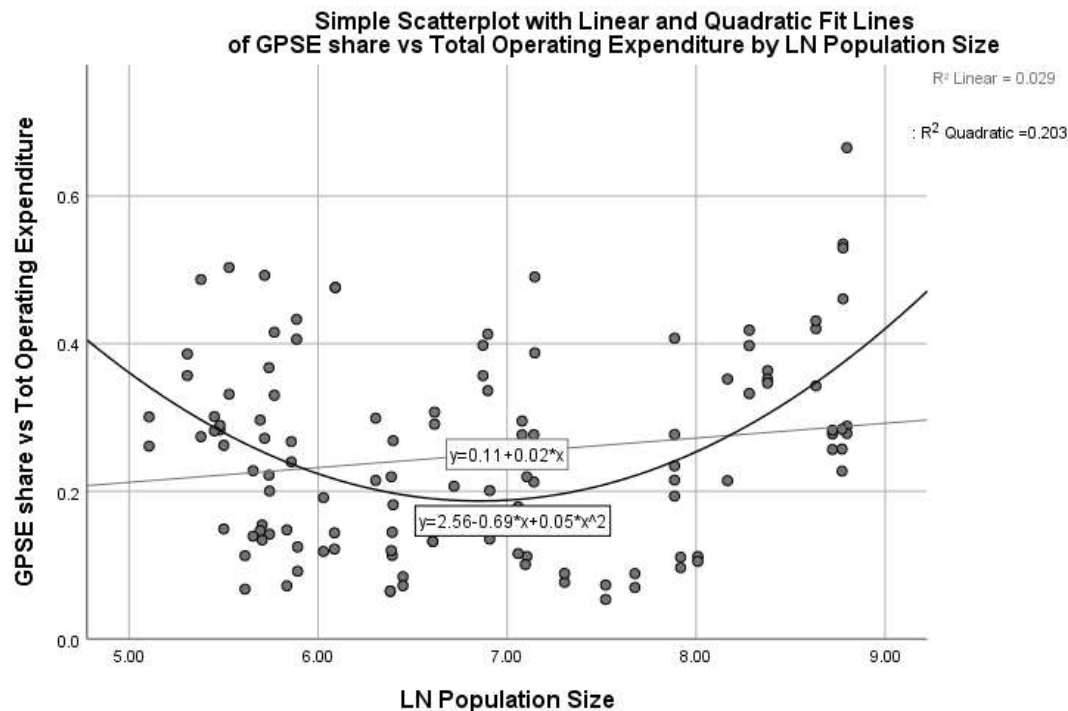
because the hypothesis seeks to determine if there is a negative relationship between councils' proportionate expenditure on administration and their respective resident population size, or in other words if local government organisations have proportionately more cost-efficient administrative functions if their scale increases. The results of the Pearson's r statistical test are given in figures AB.19 and AB.20, which find there is a significant but weak *positive* relationship between the two variables, $r = 0.171$, $n = 122$, $p = 0.03$ (one-tailed) (see figure AB.19). The scatterplot diagram in figure AB.20 plots the distribution of correlations with both linear and quadratic regression fit lines. This diagram also reports the the r -squared statistic (or the coefficient of determination), which is a measure of how close the data lies to the regression fit lines. R^2 linear = 0.029, which indicates that 2.9 per cent of the variability in the share of administrative expenditure of total operating expenditure is shared with the variability of LN population size. R^2 quadratic = 0.203 provides a better fit than the linear score, and indicates a convex quadratic equation explains 20.3 per cent of the shared variability of the two variables. However, note that the population data has already been "flattened" by the log transformation, thereby affecting the quadratic relationship. Figure AB.20 also indicates the minimum point of the parabola lies in the middle of the range of LN population size, which suggests the shire councils would be experiencing diseconomies of scale. The research hypothesis is therefore rejected, and this statistical test does not demonstrate a relationship of proportional decreases in administrative expenditure when council scale increases.

Figure AB.19

Correlations			
		GPSE share vs Tot Op Exp	LN_PopSize
GPSE share vs Tot Op Exp	Pearson Correlation	1	.171*
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.030
	N	122	122
LN_PopSize	Pearson Correlation	.171*	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.030	
	N	122	122

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

Figure AB.20



Statistical test 4): Pearson's correlation coefficient (Pearson's r)

Research hypothesis: There is a positive linear / significant quadratic relationship between councils' operating surplus ratio and their respective total revenue size.

Both variables were tested for normal distribution, with the results shown in figures AB.21 – AB.27. Because of the large sample size, it is more useful in this case to visually examine the graphs rather than rely on the statistics in figure AB.9 for analysis of normality.

In the analysis of the distribution of operating surplus ratios, there is evidence of leptokurtic distribution. This is firstly evidenced by the "pointy" distribution of scores in the histogram (see figure AB.22), or the clustering of many scores tightly around the mean. The boxplot in figure AB.24 provides further evidence of positive kurtosis, with many outliers shown above and below the boxplot (which indicates a narrow interquartile range).

Figure AB.21

		Statistics	
		Operating Surplus Ratio	Total Revenue
N	Valid	122	122
	Missing	0	0
Mean		-.028	10709272.98
Median		-.0175	4934473.00
Std. Deviation		.200	12156950.263
Variance		.040	1477914397007 09.440
Skewness		-.941	1.375
Std. Error of Skewness		.219	.219
Kurtosis		4.210	.554
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.435	.435
Range		1.586	45803615

Figure AB.22

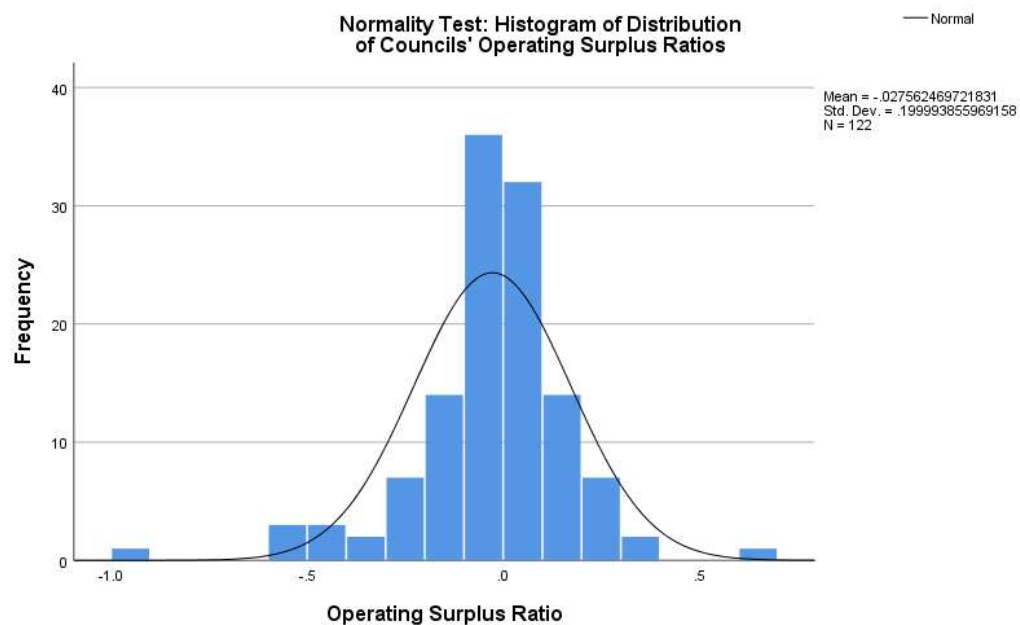


Figure AB.23

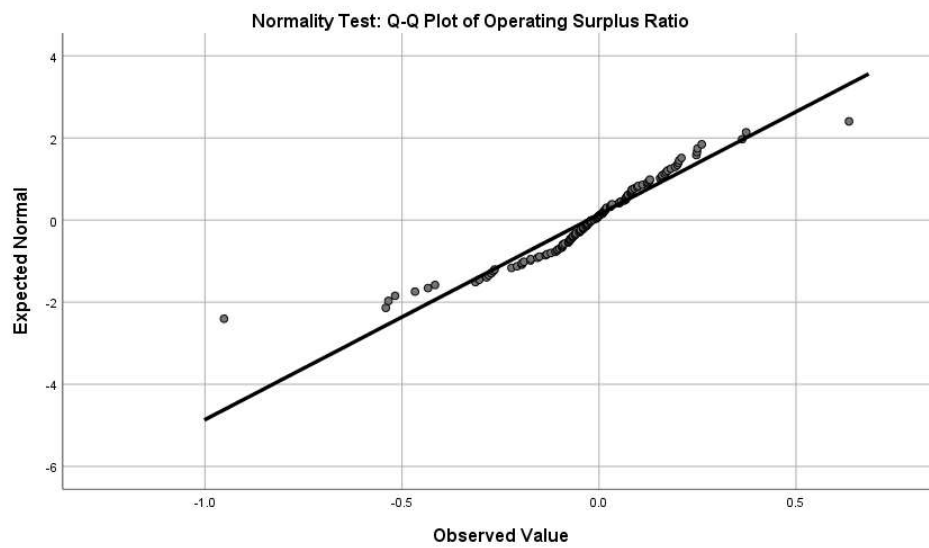
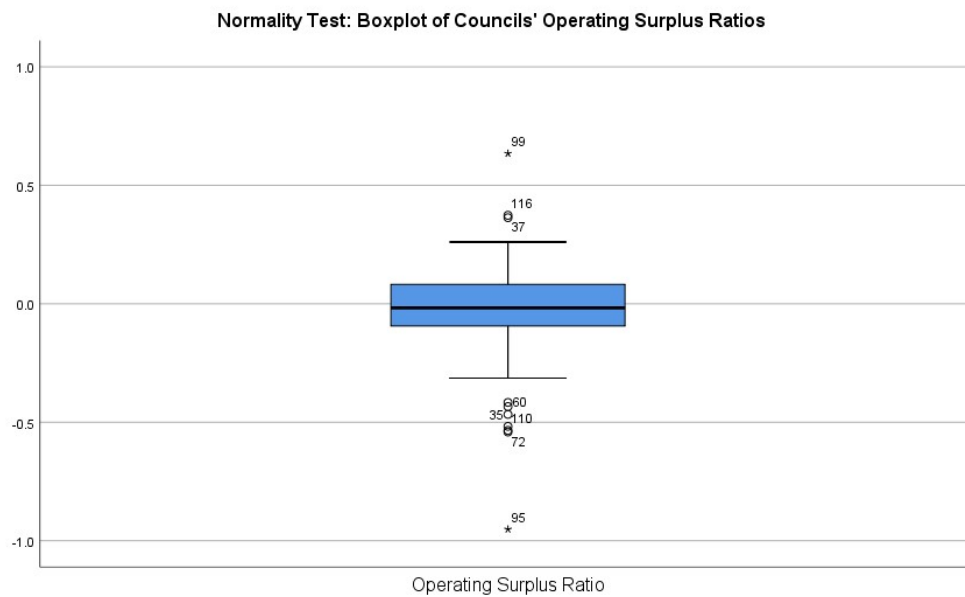


Figure AB.24



An analysis of the distribution of scores for councils' total revenue through examination of figures AB.25, AB.26 and AB.27 indicates positive skewness. This is clearly evident in the histogram in figure AB.25, with the distribution of scores clustered around the lower range of the x-axis.

Figure AB.25

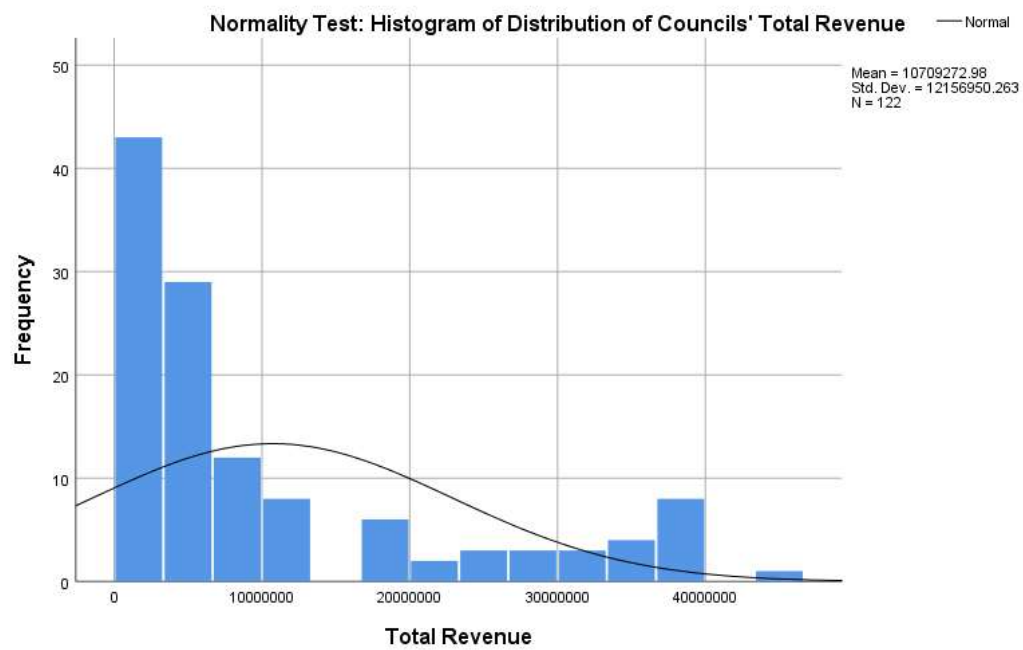


Figure AB.26

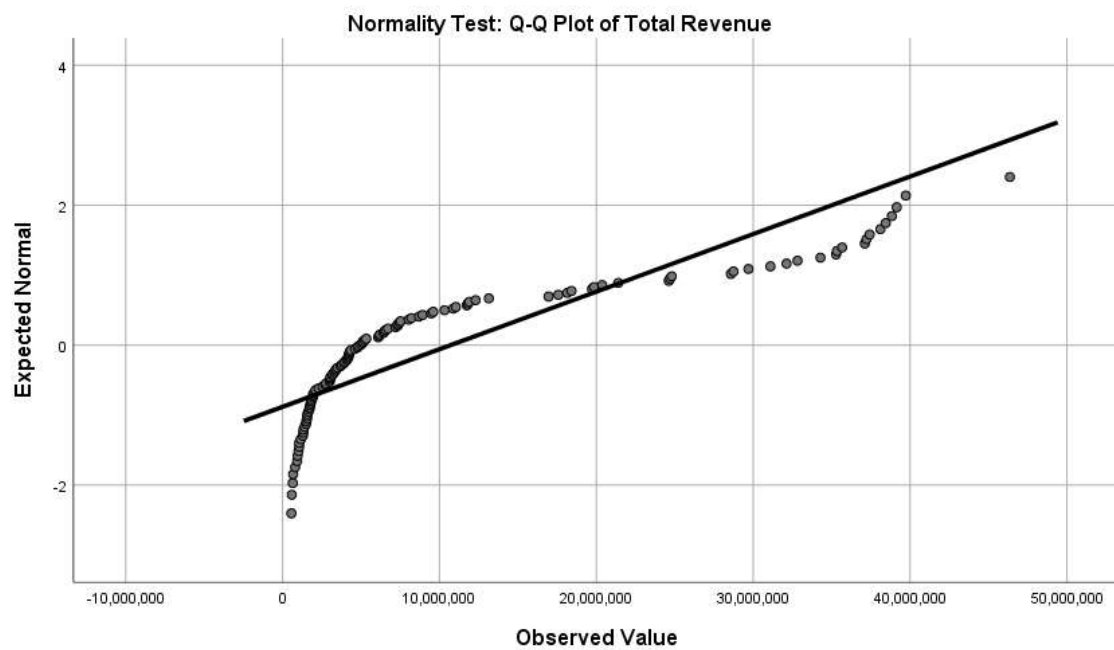
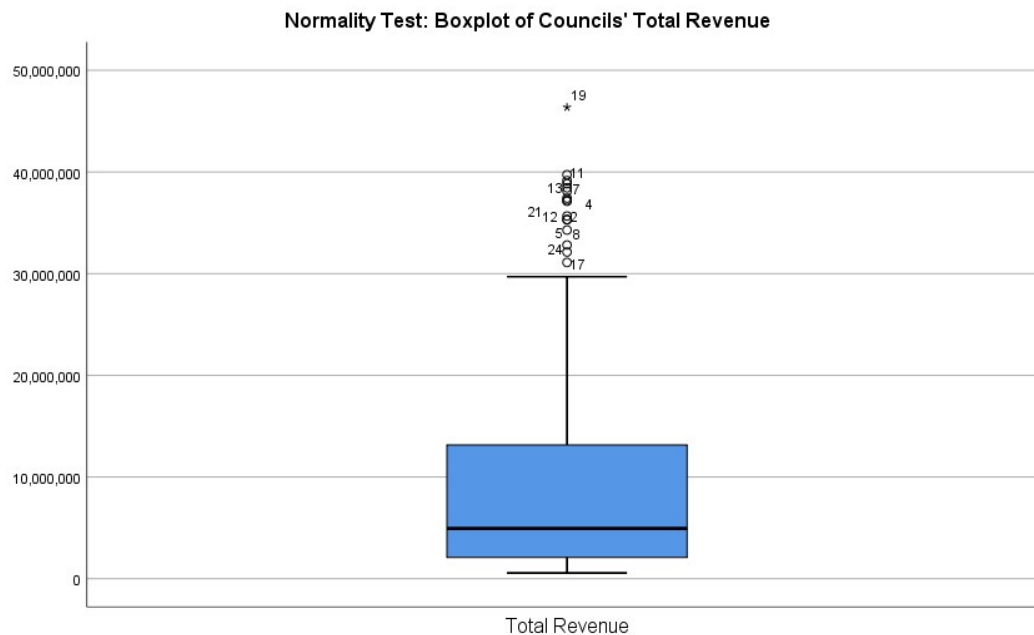
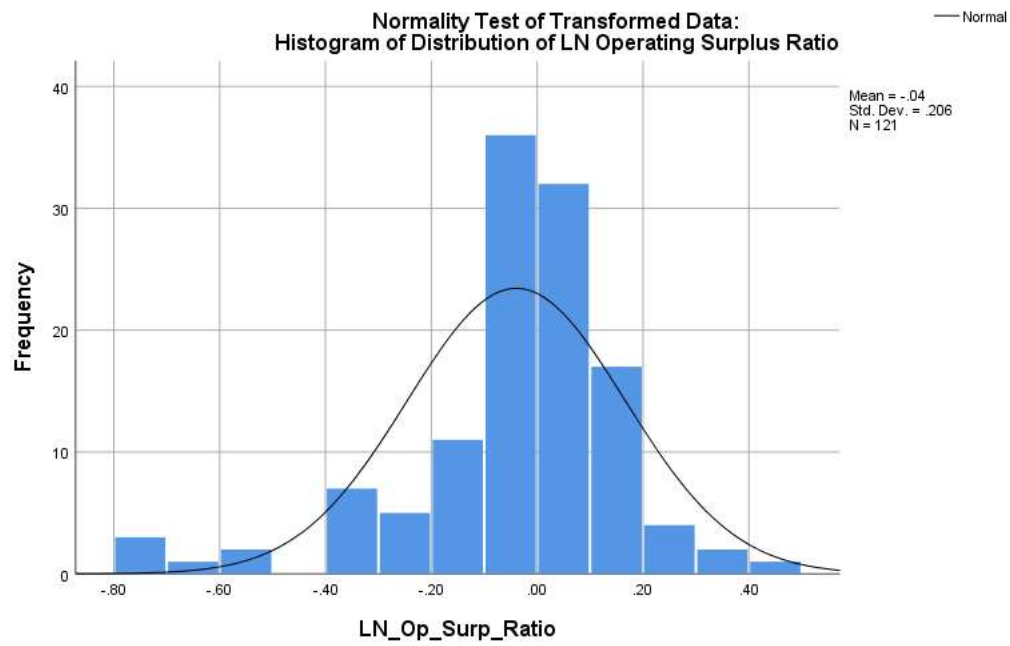


Figure AB.27

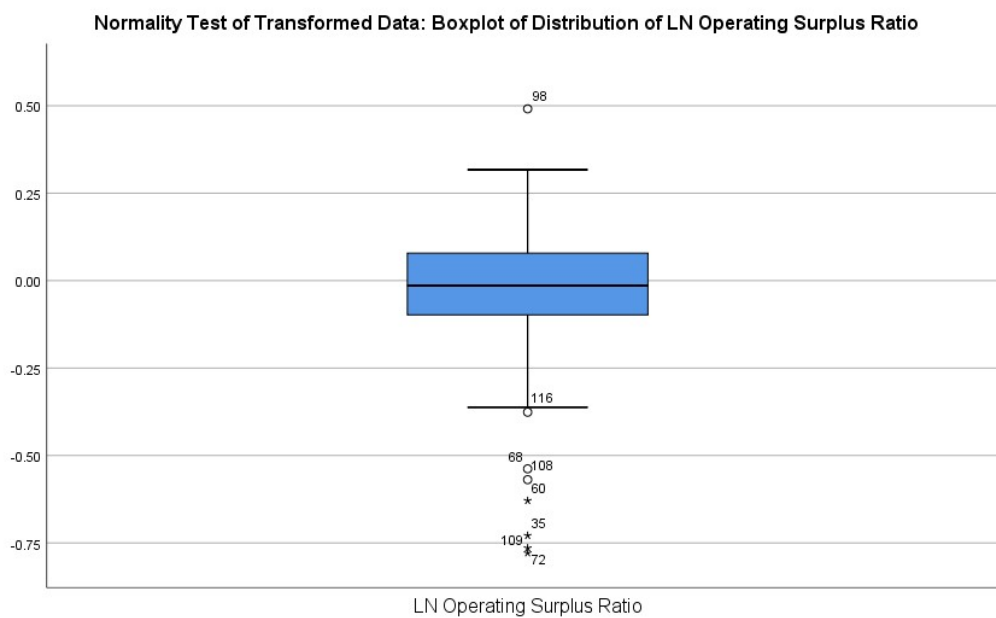


The results of these tests of normality require transformations of the data in order to conduct the Pearson's r statistical test. Again, the chosen transformation is $\text{Log}_e x$ (commonly referred to as LN). Due to one outlier that confounded results of the transformation computation, this outlier (Imanpa Community Council Incorporated, with an operating surplus ratio of -0.95) was excluded from the test. The results of the data transformation for the operating surplus ratio (which included an addition of 1 in order to enable log calculation) shown in figures AB.28 and AB.29 suggest a distribution approaching normal. However, the boxplot diagram in figure AB.29 shows a large number of outliers. Figure AB.30, a histogram of the transformed data for councils' total revenue, indicates a movement towards normality compared to the distribution of the untransformed data, and the boxplot in figure AB.31 shows no outliers for this distribution. However, the histogram in AB.30 does not appear to represent a normal distribution.

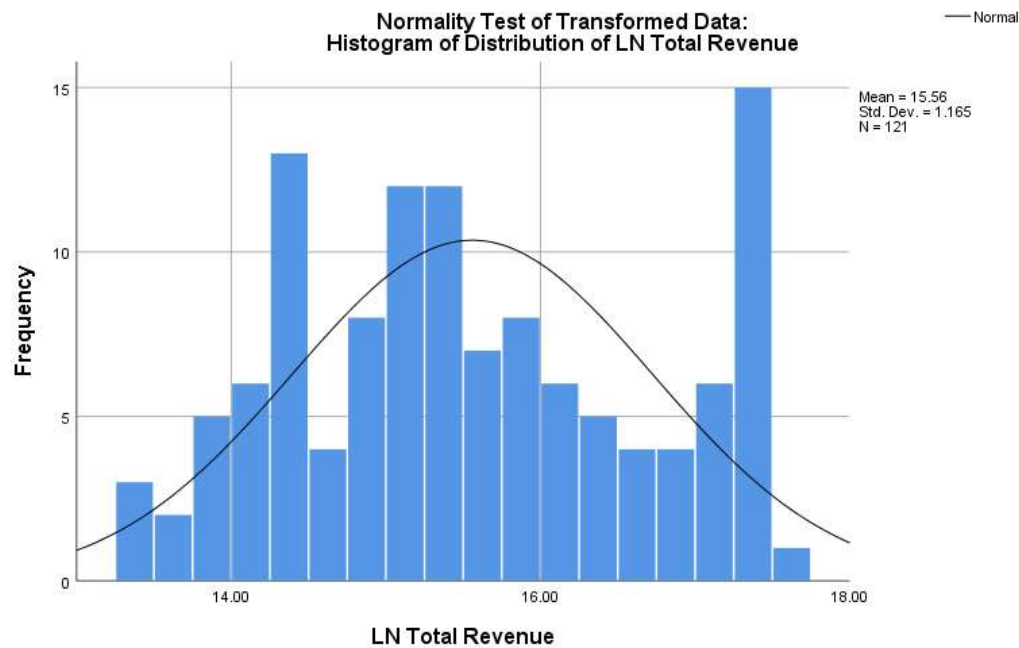
AB.28



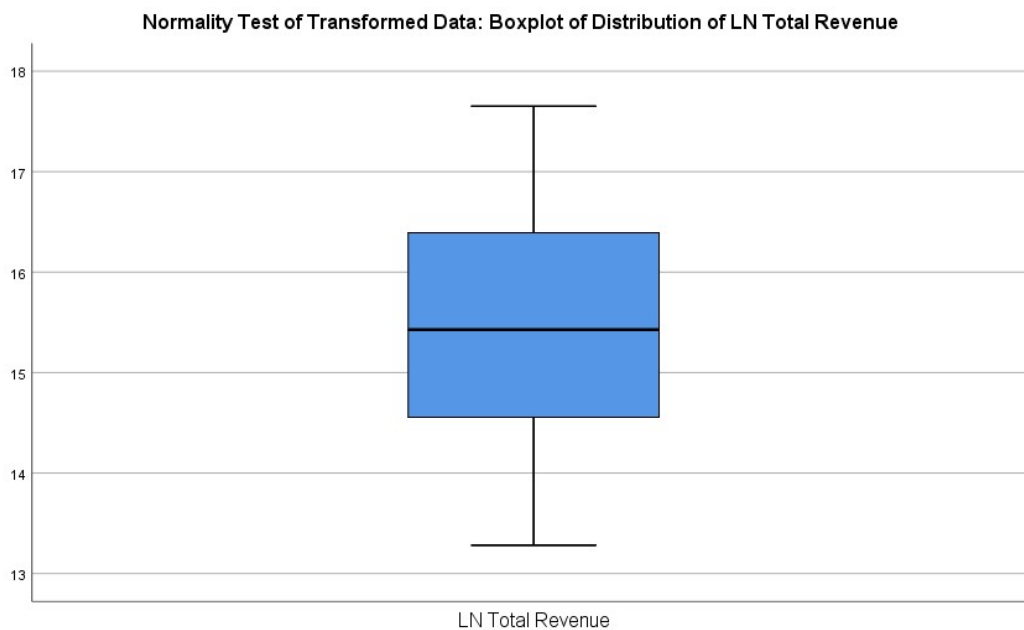
AB.29



AB.30



AB.31



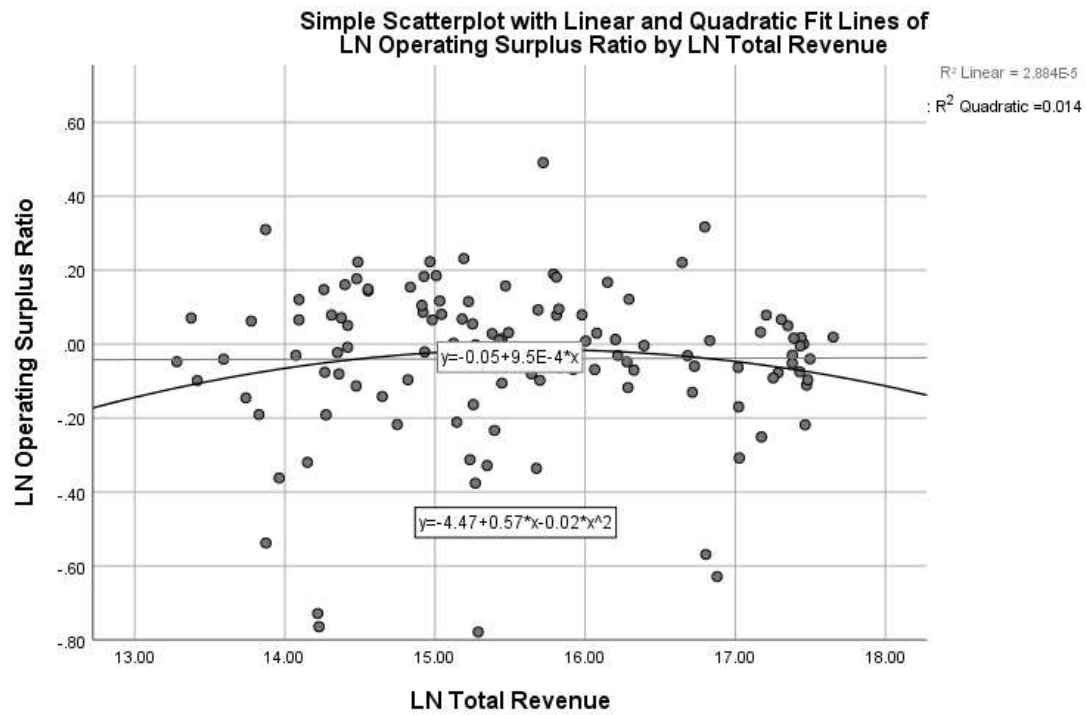
With these qualifications in mind of the normality of the transformed data distribution, the LN total revenue variable and the transformed operating surplus ratio are then tested to determine if there is a statistically significant value of Pearson's r . This is a one-tailed (or

unidirectional) test because the hypothesis seeks to determine if there is a positive relationship between councils' tendency to achieve operating surpluses and their respective total revenue size, or in other words if local government organisations are able to generate larger surpluses more often if their scale increases. The results of the Pearson's r statistical test are given in figures AB.31 and AB.32, which find there is not a significant relationship between the two variables, $r = 0.005$, $n = 121$, $p = 0.477$ (one-tailed) (see figure AB.31). The scatterplot diagram in figure AB.32 plots the distribution of correlations with both linear and quadratic regression fit lines, and reports the the r -squared statistic (or the coefficient of determination). R^2 linear = 0.000025, which indicates that 0.0025 per cent of the variability in the share of administrative expenditure of total operating expenditure is shared with the variability of LN population size. R^2 quadratic = 0.014 also indicates a negligible fit of the distribution to the (concave) quadratic fit line. Based on these inconclusive results, the research hypothesis is rejected.

Figure AB.31

		Correlations	
		LN_TotalRev	LN_Op_Surp_Ratio
LN_TotalRev	Pearson Correlation	1	.005
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.477
	N	121	121
LN_Op_Surp_Ratio	Pearson Correlation	.005	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.477	
	N	121	121

Figure AB.32



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