

# Raphael Lemkin in Remote Australia: The Logic of Cultural Genocide and Homelands

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## ABSTRACT

*In the 1970s, Aboriginal people in remote Australia took decisive steps to decentralize from government settlements and missions to live and make a living on their ancestral lands at places that have become known as homelands. Over time, this migration garnered some state support and saw the emergence of new facilitating institutions. But in the last decade homeland living has been discursively demeaned by politicians, and policies have been put in place to undermine the possibility of residing and making a livelihood in these smallest, most remote places mainly located on Indigenous-titled lands. As Indigenous territorial rights expand, the state looks to extinguish possibilities for current and future generations to utilize the land and its resources for livelihood. In this article, I draw on evidence from political discourse, policy documents and programme design and implementation to outline this state project to eliminate a contemporary lifeway. I provide ethnographic evidence from work with Kuninjku people in Arnhem Land that documents this destruction. I engage with the work of Raphael Lemkin to document and theorize the techniques being deployed in terms of the logic of cultural genocide. I end by asking what homelands people might do to push back and what role anthropologists might play in such a process.*

Keywords: Indigenous Australia, homelands, cultural genocide, Raphael Lemkin, hunter-gatherer lifeways.

In the situation as it exists at present there is no means of providing for alleviation of the treatment of populations under occupation until the actual moment of liberation. It is then too late for remedies for after liberation they can at best obtain only reparation of damages but never restoration of those values which have been destroyed and which cannot be restored. (Lemkin 2008:94–5)

## INTRODUCTION

Homelands, outstations, or decentralized communities consist of small and remote Indigenous residential formations (Myers and Peterson 2016:1). They have been defined officially by government as ‘small decentralised communities of close kin established by *the movement* of Aboriginal people to land of social, cultural, and economic significance to them’ (Commonwealth of Australia 1987:xiii, my emphasis). The inclusion of movement in this definition indicates that people move to homelands from somewhere else, usually larger government settlements and missions, although in some unusual situations that were historically beyond the colonial frontier, groups may have never moved far from their traditional lands. Officially, there is also reference to these small communities, probably the smallest in the Australian settlement hierarchy, as being ‘relatively permanent’ (*ibid.*:7). I refer to these

communities here as homelands in part to connote that they are usually located on Indigenous-titled lands. These lands are mainly located in those sparsely populated parts of the continent that are referred to in policy and public discourse as 'remote' Australia, bearing in mind the obvious point that what might be 'remote' from the perspective of the settler society is the centre for Indigenous people who have occupied these regions for millennia.

As I will show later through spatial picturing it is estimated that there are about 1,000 homelands distributed across nearly 50% of Australia. They are populated by maybe 20,000 people, or 5% of the estimated current Indigenous population. Indigenous people often identify themselves as a resident of a named homeland. But there is no Australian English term that I am aware of that refers to the people that reside at homelands on a permanent, seasonal, temporary, or occasional basis. In this article, I will use the term 'homelands people'. I use this term for descriptive purposes only, fully cognizant that there are complexities and contestations in defining not just who has ownership and residence rights to homelands and the lands on which they are situated, but also the challenges of operationalizing these rights. In the past, I have referred to homelands as communities, or infrastructural nodes, on Indigenous-titled land inhabited by a usually related, and always highly mobile, Aboriginal population (Altman 2006:1). I have noted that there is lack of precision in policy and public discourse between homelands as a place (residential area) and the people who own, or inhabit, that place (the homeland community). There is also a tendency in popular discourse to either create a false dichotomy in settlement hierarchies between larger discrete Indigenous townships and smaller homelands, or else to conflate the two without recognizing that regular movement between townships and homelands is a culturally distinctive feature of the way Aboriginal people live today (*ibid.*:1). I describe 'homelands people' as a social group that share aspirations to live at homelands and to make a life at these places, even if they are not always resident there.

I have had an abiding interest in homelands living and policy that began when I was a doctoral student and resided at a homeland called Mumeka in western Arnhem Land in 1979 and 1980 (Altman 1987). As an apprentice economic anthropologist, I was keen to understand how people made their living when residing at homelands, how they survived in places that are as geographically remote from market capitalism as was possible in Australia then (and today). At Mumeka I lived with a group of related people who are members of a larger interconnected and intermarrying community whose members all speak the Kuninjku dialect (and even 'clan-lects') of a regional pan-dialectical language Bininj Kunwok (Garde 2013).

Over the past 40 years, I have maintained regular contact with this community, while also developing a broader research interest in homelands policy (Altman 2006) and the resource agencies that are invariably required to assist them with municipal and other services (Altman et al. 1999). In December 2013, I was one of the 'older generation of anthropologists' who participated in the conference 'Experiments in Self-Determination: Histories of the Outstation Movement in Australia' (Peterson and Myers 2016). It was striking both in conference presentations as well as in subsequent book chapters that the optimism of such 'experiments' has given way to deep despondency. Not only was homelands living being interpreted by many as a failed experiment, but it was also unclear from scholars with long-standing associations with homelands people how the current policy approach might be understood and why and how the dramatic changes in mood, policy, and otherwise, had come about?

I share that despondency, as demonstrated in my own conference presentation that traced the fluctuating fortunes of Mumeka residents, largely interpreted through the prism of continual changes in state policies (Altman 2016). In fieldwork before and after the conference at the regional township of Maningrida and homelands, both my observations and the

views of my Kuninjku interlocutors make it abundantly clear that they are struggling, both to remain at, or retain contact with, their homeland communities; and to enjoy a modicum of a decent livelihood. On recent visits, I have been struck that Kuninjku people living in the township of Maningrida regularly tell me that they are hungry. When these same people are residing at homelands, on their ancestral lands, and are hungry they can do something about it – they can go out to hunt, fish or gather bush foods. It is saddening and shocking when people who are proud and successful hunters in the bush tell me that they are hungry, but it is not surprising: logic indicates that if people are looking to live on welfare in a township, even if supplemented with arts income, and buying food from community stores where prices for basics are high, they will struggle. And if people lose some of their welfare income for missing compulsory work-for-the-dole activities they will financially struggle even further (Altman 2018).

I have sought to explain the growing impoverishment of the Kuninjku community as the careless administration of a state project of improvement that is looking to recentralise people in a larger urban setting. However, Maningrida itself only has a small population of about 3,000, poor infrastructure and few jobs – according to the latest 2016 Census only 15% of adults are in paid employment which means 85% are welfare dependent. Using an anthropology of development framework (Ferguson 1994; Li 2007) to analyse the nature of the governmentality at work that is resulting in deepening poverty and anomie (Altman 2018) seems inadequate for explaining the monumental shifts in lifeways and wellbeing that I was observing.

Quite coincidentally, early in 2017 I read Philippe Sands' (2016) book on the origins of genocide. This in turn led me directly to *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* by Raphael Lemkin that was originally published in 1944 (2008). Lemkin is the legal scholar who coined the term genocide and like many social scientists I associated this term with the physical elimination of people and with mainly historical debates in Australia over whether colonial frontier violence and child removal constituted genocide. But in reading Lemkin I was particularly struck by a short section of his book (Lemkin 2008:82–90) that outlines techniques of genocide in various fields. These techniques for the 'destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group' (Lemkin 2008:79) seemed to bear some striking resemblance to the programmes that were being administered by the Australian state in remote Arnhem Land.

People living at homelands are human 'groups' and the institutions that had developed during the self-determination era to allow them to live on their homelands are being dismantled. Could what Lemkin referred to as 'cultural genocide' (Docker 2008:82) be occurring in Australia today? Might the contemporary culturally destructive approach that I was observing in Arnhem Land be explained using an analytical framework based on a logic of cultural genocide? Is there a possibility to marry long-term ethnographic work and the lived experience of people whose living conditions are in absolute decline to highlight that basic human rights (as outlined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) are being violated? I wondered why Australian anthropology has largely eschewed the notion of cultural genocide from its analytical armoury while sociologists (like Short (2010, 2016) and Van Krieken (2002)), political scientists (like Tatz (2001, 2017)), numerous historians (in edited volumes by Moses (2004, 2008)), settler colonial theorists (Wolfe (2006, 2016) and Veracini (2010)), criminologists (Balint (2014)), Indigenous legal scholars (Behrendt (2001)) and Indigenous activists (like Michael Anderson quoted in Short (2010:61–2) and those reported in Balint (2014)) have all deployed elements of the genocide framework. This article sets out to address some of these questions in an exploratory, somewhat tentative, way.

My focus is very much on the present and I look to explore whether cultural genocide is currently occurring in contemporary remote Australia. My contestation is that the *logic* of

cultural genocide like Wolfe's (2006) logic of elimination is extant, even if Indigenous push back and struggle for cultural survival ensures that it is by no means everywhere or always successful. I deploy cultural genocide as a heuristic to demonstrate, to paraphrase Lemkin, the intentional and coordinated state project to eliminate the essential foundations of life for homelands people. I begin with a brief context of the homelands social movement through three policy periods that I term colonial, post-colonial and re-colonial. From the early 1970s, the project to re-occupy country by re-establishing homelands was tolerated, even encouraged, by the state apparatus, following the acknowledged failure of the previous colonial assimilation project. On the only occasion when the homelands movement has been comprehensively examined by a parliamentary committee (Commonwealth of Australia 1987) it was given official endorsement and some financial and administrative support.

I then look to document what has happened since 2005, carefully tracing the links between political discourse and policy documents that provide the framework for a coordinated set of programmes that seek to recentralise Aboriginal people from homelands to townships away from their ancestral lands, to alter their norms and values, and to extinguish a form of living as mobile hunter-gatherers that remains essential for homelands living. I outline some of the impacts of these programmes, focusing ethnographically on the Kuninjku community. I provide a brief glimpse into the views of the subjects of these programmes, how they experience the latest project of improvement. I end by asking what avenues might be available to politically disempowered and economically marginalized homelands people looking to push back against the numerous effects of cultural genocide, and to exercise a right to live on, and to make a livelihood off, their ancestral country? What might be required to imagine, foster, and sustain spaces of hope (Harvey 2000) for homelands people?

## CULTURAL GENOCIDE

Let me briefly outline Lemkin's framework. I want to highlight three things that have all had some coverage in the literature especially in monographs by Dirk Moses (2004, 2008) who is credited by sociologist Damien Short (2016:3–4) for developing what is now regarded as the 'colonial/cultural turn' in genocide studies. First, Lemkin emphasized that while genocide might be defined in terms of mass killings, it can also occur through 'the destruction of the cultural patterns of a group' including its traditions (Docker 2008; Short 2016): 'A group does not need to be physically exterminated to suffer genocide' (Lemkin 2008:xxi). This broader 'cultural' notion of genocide is often overlooked because it was excluded from the UN Convention on Genocide in 1948 – powerful states opposed possible scrutiny of their coordinated plans against domestic groups being subject to international human rights scrutiny. Therefore, all too often the genocide analytic is limited to direct physical killing and is conflated with the Holocaust. Lawson (2014:15–7) notes that rejection of the term genocide reflects an almost instinctive reaction in Australian politics and history.

Second, Lemkin (2008:xxi) wrote of genocide as having two phases, 'the destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group', and 'the imposition of the national patterns of the oppressor'. In this article, an attempt will be made to carefully track political discourse, policy scripts and programme prescriptions to examine if there is a logic of cultural genocide at work that is looking to destroy the cultural pattern of a group and replace it with another to some premeditated and coordinated plan.

Third, Lemkin (2008:93) noted that 'We should not overlook that genocide is not only of war but also of peace'. As violently colonized peoples, Indigenous people associated with

homelands might question whether there has ever been peace since colonization. Maybe for a time at least for homelands people during the days of so-called self-determination? Damien Short (2016) suggests (invoking Patrick Wolfe) that genocide, like invasion, is an ongoing process in an Australia that has failed to decolonise.

Anna Haebich (2004:265–89) is the only academic I am aware of who has sought to systematically apply Lemkin's framework and techniques of genocide to an Indigenous Australian context: the Southwest of Western Australia during the historical period 1900 to 1940. She notes how 'in their efforts to deal with Aboriginal people trapped in their midst, the state and settlers resorted over time to strategies that mirrored the 'techniques of genocide' in the various fields listed by Lemkin: economic, political, social, cultural, biological, physical, religious, and moral' (Haebich 2004:266). While Haebich refers, following Tony Barta, to the intent of elimination by 'a genocidal society' she stops short of adopting the term a 'coordinated plan' of genocide. Like Barta (1987) in his earlier writings, she sees disastrous outcomes as 'inevitable' rather than 'intended'.

In much debate about genocide the issue of settler state intentionality looms large. The issue of intentionality arose in 1998 in a case heard in the Australian Capital Territory Supreme Court that has had little coverage in the literature. Genocidal charges were brought by four Aboriginal activists on behalf of the Gungalidda, the Wiradjuri, the Kamiloroi, and the Boorun who were later joined by other Aboriginal intervenors from around Australia. As Jennifer Balint (2014) recounts the case argued before Justice Crispin was that proposed amendments to the Native Title Act that provided for 'bucket-loads of extinguishment' were an act of genocide and a continuation of genocide perpetrated since colonization. Genocide prosecutions were brought against then Prime Minister John Howard and parliamentarians Tim Fischer, Brian Harradine, and Pauline Hanson. Crispin refuted the claim that the amendments were an act of genocide as they lacked the requisite 'intent to destroy' required by the Genocide Convention; he also argued that members of parliament could not be liable for criminal prosecution in carrying out their duties. But Balint argues that the judge did not properly acknowledge the connection between current acts of dispossession and the intention to destroy a group 'in whole or in part' as per article 2 of the Genocide Convention. Importantly though Crispin placed on the judicial record that genocide had occurred in Australia. On appeal in the Federal Court, Justice Merkel found that genocide could be understood as a crime under Australian law, while Justices Wilcox and Whitlam found that the common law of Australia did not recognize genocide. The case went to the High Court a year later and was dismissed.

Sociologist Damien Short (2016) in his recent wide-ranging book looks at the role played by settler colonialism, capitalism, finite resources, and ecological crisis in driving genocidal social death on a global scale. His chapter on Australia builds on Wolfe's (2006:388) earlier work on territoriality – the control of the land and resources – as settler colonialism's irreducible element. Within his case study he briefly examines homelands using secondary sources rather than ethnography and refers to cultural genocide through urbanization (dispersal from homelands to larger communities). He notes that the personal and group identity of homelands people is intertwined with the landscape. I would add interwoven with physical and spiritual landscapes, ceremonial obligations to designated places on that land, obligations to ancestors and ancestral beings, and use of the land and its resources as a source of partial but symbolically important subsistence: for people who live at homelands, 'land is life' (Wolfe 2006:387). Short argues, and I concur, that colonial state policy is preventing homelands people from maintaining a particular way of life that is linked to the land, instead imposing a cultural assimilation policy framework. Short (2016:14) also raises the notion that groups might be defined by 'perpetrator selection',

certain groups might be selected for destruction when prior to this act of selection no such group existed, an interesting observation in relation to ‘homelands people’ and the definitional issues with which I began.

### SMALL DOTS IN A VAST LANDSCAPE

Today it is estimated that as much as 46% of the Australian continent is under some form of Indigenous title, including non-exclusive native title possession where land is shared with others but limited native title rights and interests are maintained.<sup>1</sup> As a general rule the processes for gaining *de jure* rights to land require an institutional codification of traditions and customs for making claims to land that remains unalienated or alienated for specific purposes only like cattle raising. The first substantial land rights law, in the Northern Territory (NT) passed in 1976 by the Commonwealth, requires claimants to demonstrate that they are a local descent group with primary spiritual responsibility for land and sacred sites and are entitled as a right to forage over the land claimed. Native title law passed in 1993 requires claimants to demonstrate continuity of rights and interests under traditional laws acknowledged and traditional customs observed and to demonstrate connection with lands and waters since colonization.

As more land comes under some form of Indigenous title, it seems logical that more land owners will want to live on or enjoy access to their ancestral lands – arguably going back to country to live at homelands is a logical extension of successful land claim. This is particularly likely as land rights and native title laws allow title holders unrestricted access to natural resources for domestic subsistence use. Conversely, title holders have no property rights in sub-surface minerals. Under NT land rights law, traditional owners have a right to veto exploration, a form of free prior and informed consent right; under native title law, title holders (and claimants) only have procedural rights to negotiate. It is rarely acknowledged, but there are also provisions in native title law for successful determination to be revoked if connection to land (occupation) is lost.

In Fig. 1, what the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007) refers to as discrete Indigenous communities are spatially represented by dots, places mainly located on the Indigenous land-titled landscape; and in Table 1 these dots are statistically tabulated. The smallest dots, with a population of less than 200 people each, are homelands or outstations. We have very limited recent information about these places, as in 2006 the Australian government stopped funding the collecting of information on such communities in the Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey. At that time there were 988 homelands: 560 in the NT, with an estimated population of about 10,000 and an average of 18 per small dot; and 230 in Western Australia (WA), with an estimated population of 5,000, an average of 23 per dot.

More recent data, from a Centre for Appropriate Technology (2016) survey, documented 630 homelands across the NT with an estimated population of between 4,532 and 11,174. The wide range in this estimate reflects considerable population movement which has always been associated with homelands; and a likely decline in numbers in recent years as the genocidal governmental framework described here has effects. It is reported that 70% of these homelands are occupied 70% of the time. In WA, recent estimates indicate that there are 239 homelands, 19 with a population of 50–99, 91 with 10–49, 60 with less than 10 and 69 only occupied seasonally (Western Australian Government 2016:7). In 2006, the NT and WA accounted for 80% of homelands and 80% of homelands people. As such, almost all homelands policy focus has been on these two jurisdictions, although there are clearly significant numbers of homelands also in remote northern parts of South Australia and Queensland as shown in Table 1.

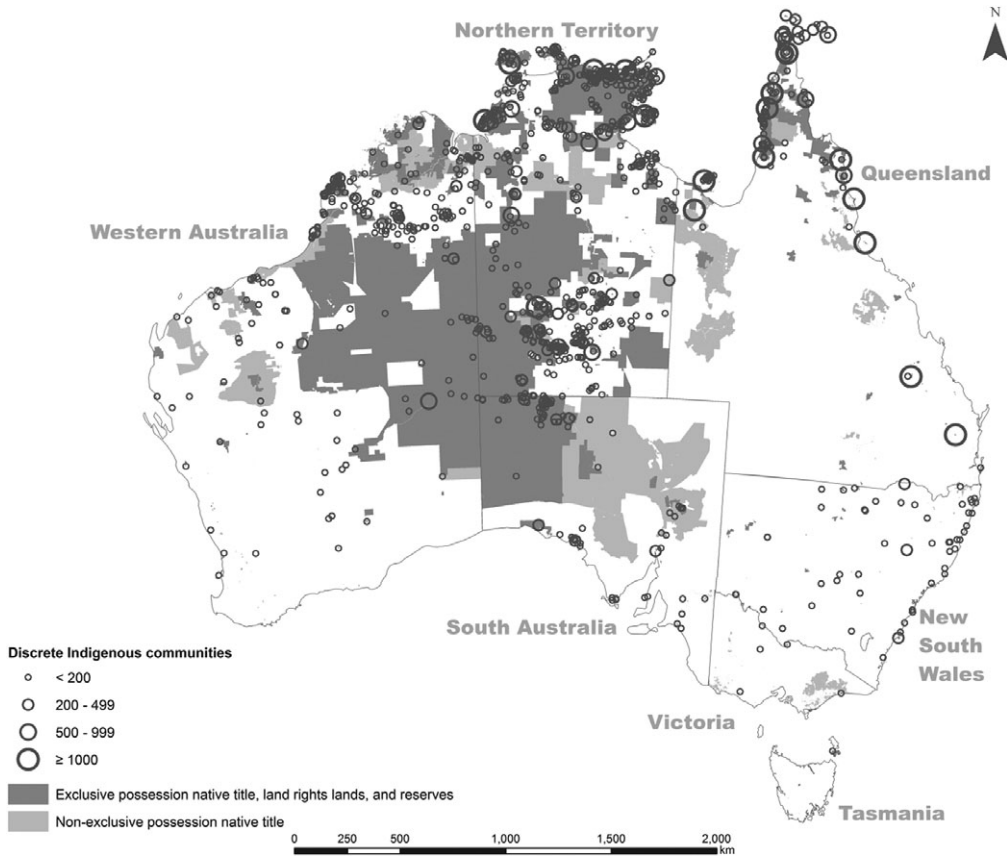


Figure 1: Homelands on Indigenous-titled lands (Jon Altman and Francis Markham, work-in-progress).

**Table 1** Location and number of discrete communities with a reported usual population of less than 100, 2006

State/Territory	Communities < 100	Total population <sup>1</sup>	Average size
NT	560	9,951	18
WA	230	5,182	23
Qld	88	772	9
SA	75	1,296	17
NSW	34	1,545	45
Vic/Tas	1	76	76
Total & average	988	18,822	19

Source: ABS (2007)

### THE HOMELANDS MOVEMENT

There has only been one comprehensive attempt by the Australian government to look at homelands, in a landmark parliamentary inquiry *Return to Country: The Aboriginal Homelands Movement in Australia* (Commonwealth of Australia 1987). That inquiry was completed 15 years after the modern homelands movement started in earnest in the early 1970s. Conducted over a two-year period, it was thorough and bipartisan, in a manner that is

unimaginable today (Altman 2006; Myers and Peterson 2016).<sup>2</sup> *Return to Country* was progressive and constructive, establishing elements of a policy architecture for governments to assist homelands living.

To summarize the Inquiry's findings, briefly and using the language of the time, the homelands movement was regarded as one of the most significant developments in Aboriginal affairs. It was an Aboriginal-initiated movement clearly demonstrating the desire of Aboriginal people to assert control over their lives by establishing communities that are better attuned to their needs. It represented a concerted effort by Aboriginal people to leave larger places and re-occupy their traditional lands. The movement was interpreted as reactivating relationships to land that had been disrupted by colonial processes. At that time, it was estimated that there were 588 homeland communities with a total population of 9,500. The Committee believed numbers of homeland places and people would grow and history now shows it was correct.

The multi-party Committee made 58 recommendations with no dissenting views. I highlight just a few that are pertinent to what will unfold later in this article, bearing in mind the Committee's overarching assessment about 'the positive nature of the movement'. An important recommendation was that representative outstation resource organizations be funded to support and coordinate service delivery to homelands. Access to social security entitlements would be improved, and a flexible income support and employment creation programme called the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme should be extended to all who wished to participate. There were recommendations for the provision of housing, infrastructure, and transport because homelands people maintained connections to kin in other places.

The two most significant blocks of recommendations related to funding and education. The first recommended that all levels of government equitably support homelands. The second recommended that there be a high degree of consultation with people at homelands about the nature of educational delivery and curriculum materials, training for local teachers, visitation by professionals, proper resourcing, use of new and alternative technologies, vocational training, and adult education.

Homelands were never resourced as recommended: even today one can see the very rudimentary level of physical infrastructure at these places (Centre for Appropriate Technology 2016); and the Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey (ABS 2007) documented the paucity of educational and other services available to homelands. Nonetheless, people persisted in living at these remote places under a protective, but limited, funding umbrella provided by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) – a national Indigenous representative and funding agency established in 1990 – under its National Homelands Policy.

In 1998, I participated in a review of outstation resource agencies commissioned by ATSIC that found about 100 of these Australia-wide servicing about 1,000 homelands (Altman et al. 1999; Palmer 2016). A surprising finding was that the main source of funding for these organizations came from the CDEP scheme. Outstation resource organizations were also of fundamental importance for providing rudimentary local government services to homelands, even as there was ongoing political disputation between Commonwealth, State/Territory, and local governments about funding and services responsibilities and resulting generalized neglect. Part of this was due to a Memorandum of Understanding between the Commonwealth and the NT in 1979, just after self-government was granted, that retained homelands support as a Commonwealth responsibility in part because almost all were on Aboriginal land already granted under Commonwealth land rights law. The underfunding of homelands was exacerbated by enduring official cynicism about the commitment of homelands people to on-country living. Even at the most dynamic stage of the



movement, in the early 1970s, there were paternalistic requirements for Aboriginal people to demonstrate a 'six month commitment' to homelands to garner the most basic support (Altman 2016; Myers and Peterson 2016).

Following the *Return to Country* inquiry, there has never been any comprehensive support provided to these remote places, in part because governmental machinery is attuned to thinking about stable places and populations, not tiny places with hyper mobile populations. In some ways, homelands are extra-governmental spaces. This suited many people living at homelands, who wished to avoid the colonial state surveillance they experienced in the past, deploying what James Scott (2009) has termed the 'art of not being governed' by living in places that were extremely remote and at times seasonally inaccessible.

### HOMELANDS AS 'CULTURAL MUSEUMS'

ATSIC was abolished in 2005, a process overseen by then-Minister Amanda Vanstone. Consequently, homelands became vulnerable to a new approach in Indigenous affairs at both national and sub-national levels. This approach is variably referred to as the 'new mainstreaming', normalization, or even 'neo-assimilation', in part because Indigenous-specific programmes have been relocated to mainstream government departments in Canberra. Homelands became caught up, almost emblematically, in these major policy shifts fuelled by culture wars and history wars at a time when the tolerance of liberalism to multiculturalism and Indigenous difference was in decline (see Macdonald 2008; Povinelli 2002).

Vanstone delivered a significant speech in December 2005, 'Beyond Conspicuous Compassion: Indigenous Australians deserve more than good intentions'. It was subsequently published (Vanstone 2007) and got much attention on national radio and in the print media. The speech illustrates how far thinking about homelands had changed in the 20 years since *Return to Country*. Vanstone decried the parlous situation of Indigenous Australians in remote Australia in general, but it was her use of the term 'cultural museum' in referring to homelands people that captivated the media and angered Aboriginal people. This term suggests that people at homelands are fixed in time and space in static cultural state museums. Yet they are also too mobile but in all the wrong ways, refusing to live in standard dwellings (often unavailable or undesired) and eschewing the trappings of 'civilization', and simultaneously too tied to place and refusing to migrate to larger places for educational and employment opportunities. The combination of Indigenous mobility (as cultural and economic practice) and fixity (ineradicable connection to country) is deeply troubling for the settler state. One is reminded here of James Scott's (1998:1) observation about nomadic hunter-gatherers ... 'Efforts to permanently settle these mobile peoples (sedentarization) seems to be a perennial state project – perennial in part because it so seldom succeeds'.

At the heart of Vanstone's discursive critique of homelands was her sudden concern about living conditions at the 1,000 remote communities with less than 100 people each in remote Australia, some of which she had visited in the north of South Australia and no doubt found confronting. She also expressed concern that homelands might be risky environments particularly for women and children (Vanstone 2007). Signalling the early days of the emerging discursive trope concerned with the safety and wellbeing of the child, reminiscent of the Stolen Generations and streamlined into a political art form during the NT intervention 18 months later, Vanstone articulated an anxiety that kids needed a decent education and should make that choice for themselves:

And if they want to live in a traditional lifestyle in a remote area: good luck go to them. ... But they should have the choice to say: 'No I want to go on and be a doctor or a lawyer'. You know, Aboriginal kids are not dumb, they are as smart as anyone else, and we should have deliver education standards the same, and we should expect the same back [*sic*]. Our job is to make sure that when the kid's 20 he really does have a genuine choice about whether he wants to go to the city and be a doctor, or a lawyer or a plumber; or whether he wants to stay in his homelands. And not giving him that choice, not having educational standards at that level is consigning that kid to a cultural museum for the benefit of, you know, the chardonnay drinking commentators.<sup>3</sup>

This was a precursor of an emerging trope in what has become the 'Aboriginal culture as a negative barrier' discourse – one of four political and parliamentary discourses that culminates in a particular 'Regime of Truth' about Aboriginality (Checketts 2016).

In this discourse, homelands are represented as remote, unpoliced places where traditional culture is strong, and women and children are unsafe, education is poor, and opportunity limited. Services are difficult and expensive to deliver, and people are hyper mobile, yet they also require mobility to get away from homelands for education and employment. Several recent studies have undertaken textual analyses that highlight the need, expressed in political discourse, to save the vulnerable child from the 'primitive savage men' lurking in these remotest places (Checketts 2016; Hinkson 2010; Lea 2012; Macoun 2011; Stringer 2007).

In making these comments, Vanstone represented herself as the champion of saying what needs to be said, unhampered by 'political correctness'. But interestingly, Vanstone made this significant discursive interjection after ATSIC – that provided a degree of political representation to homelands people – had been abolished, not before. Also, she made no concession to the successful aspects of homeland life, even though she had been briefed with evidence of the vibrant livelihoods extracted from even the most difficult of places.<sup>4</sup> However, she was not interested in being influenced by such reports. Realistically, one cannot survive at a homeland without working hard in self-provisioning, irrespective of where the cash comes from, be it through welfare or art sales. One might have thought that the challenge to work hard to make the homelands successful would be a trope endorsed by government.

But Vanstone was intent on endorsing another powerful ideological trope, 'the trouble with culture', one also deployed by Noel Pearson (2000, 2009) in promoting his reform agenda on Cape York, that re-emerged on the eve of the NT Intervention, in June 2007, in the evocative image of the cowering child hiding from abusive drunken parents. This trope was also picked up and deployed by the national broadcaster's *Lateline* (and subsequently in other media), in concocted stories about paedophile rings that were reiterated by then-Prime Minister Howard and Minister Brough to justify the Intervention. Again, in 2014, this trope emerged after a 12-year-old Aboriginal boy committed suicide in the town of Geraldton which is not a homeland. WA Premier Colin Barnett subsequently claimed that the closure of 150 small communities would help reduce the devastating suicide crisis afflicting Aboriginal communities (New Matilda 2015).<sup>5</sup>

This trope was also articulated by public intellectuals as diverse as anthropologist Peter Sutton and economist Helen Hughes. When promoting his book *The Politics of Suffering* on national television and radio, Sutton (2009) highlighted 'Outback Ghettos' (remote townships) where people were 'trapped'. If maladapted 'traditional culture' is perceived and presented as one problem limiting people's progress to modernisation and development, as Sutton put it (Colvin 2009), then intervention for cultural change is urgently needed.

Similarly, Hughes (2007) in *Lands of Shame* conflates homelands with larger townships to argue directly to the Australian government for the closure of homelands. It follows that if particular forms of culture and tradition are perceived to be strongest among homelands people, then something had to be done about this situation.

There is much in this debate about liberalism, multiculturalism and the state that could be examined in more detail, but this would divert me from the analytic arc I am pursuing here. Certainly, the debate resonates with Povinelli's (2002) notion of the 'cunning of recognition' whereby the liberal state tolerates forms of cultural difference that are not repugnant. Indigeneity needs to be performed in ways acceptable to the state. And so, Amanda Vanstone can demean homelands living while simultaneously declaring Aboriginal art as 'Australia's greatest cultural gift to the world' (Price 2005) thus failing to recognize that a high proportion of the art is sourced from homelands. Macdonald (2008) presciently argues that an ontological tension between liberal and Aboriginal world views is likely to see a neoliberal (and colonial) state more conspicuously use its power to contain ethnic difference (also see Strakosch 2015).

### POLICY AND PROGRAMME PRESCRIPTIONS FOR CULTURAL REFORM

Two decades after the celebration of homelands in *Return to Country*, the changed political mood reflected in Vanstone's intervention saw government attitudes to homelands policy shift dramatically to hostility and outright threats of heightened neglect. This matched, in part, changes in the overarching policy framework away from state-sanctioned forms of self-determination and self-management at homelands (Myers and Peterson 2016) to a form of governmentality that Strakosch (2015) has termed 'neoliberal Indigenous policy' (also see Macdonald 2008).

The Northern Territory National Emergency Intervention, launched in June 2007 in response to the *Little Children Are Sacred* Report (Wild and Anderson 2007) targeting 73 prescribed communities, originally overlooked the 560 homelands in the hinterland.<sup>6</sup> But the Intervention marked the beginning of an ongoing phase of policy that is directly and indirectly drastically reducing prospects for homelands living. Despite proposals to abolish the CDEP scheme – essential for income support and for the maintenance of the financial viability of resource agencies – and the introduction of income management techniques which tie people to stores in townships as well as the increased pressure to send children to schools often institutionally absent at homelands (Hinkson 2007), life at homelands continued – for a while. But policy intent was clearly demonstrated in a new 'Memorandum of Understanding' (that superseded the earlier one made in 1979) between the Commonwealth and NT Governments which stipulated that no new housing was to be provided at homelands irrespective of need. The infiltration and takeover of 'prescribed communities' by the Commonwealth and its agents, especially government business managers, effectively disempowered and depoliticised community-based organizations which were charged with representing the homelands constituency.

Following the change of Federal government in November 2007, the Intervention laws, passed to continue to 2012, were maintained. In early 2008, as a central element of the National Apology, the Rudd Government established the Closing the Gap policy framework under the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) umbrella (COAG 2008). This new approach bore similarities to John Howard's earlier focus on practical reconciliation and looked to close statistical gaps between Indigenous and other Australians. With policy framed in a way that emphasized statistical equality, the differences at homelands were always going to be deeply problematic: how could the 'gaps' marked by disparities in

health, education, and employment outcomes, as measured by standard social indicators, ever be closed at homelands, the smallest, remotest, and least-served places?

Embedded in the National Indigenous Reform Agreement was a set of ‘National Investment Principles in Remote Locations’ (COAG 2008:E70). While not explicit about homelands, the focus on remote locations clearly had implications for homelands. It stated that so-called ‘Investment decisions’ should aim to: (1) improve participation in education/training and the market economy on a sustainable basis; (2) reduce dependence on welfare wherever possible; (3) promote personal responsibility; and (4) promote engagement and behaviours consistent with positive social norms (COAG 2008:E70; Sullivan 2011:109–10).

While Aboriginal peoples’ cultural connections to homelands (whether on a visiting or permanent basis) are paid lip service in the reform agreement, policy dictates that government expenditure in service provision should be avoided in places where there are few economic or educational opportunities. What should be facilitated instead is ‘voluntary’ mobility by individuals and families to areas where better education and job opportunities exist, along with higher standards of services. (COAG 2008; Sullivan 2011:101–10). The connection here with Vanstone’s earlier observations are clear.

The voluntary ‘facilitation’ became blatantly coercive from 2013 when the new Abbott conservative government introduced its Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) suggestive of ‘advancement to integration’. The IAS has the stated objectives to achieve ‘real’ results in the key priority areas of getting kids to school, adults into work, and building safer communities. This was the oft-repeated motto of Tony Abbott, the then powerful self-ordained Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs.

This approach was highly disconnected from reality on the ground in remote Australia and augurs negatively for those homelands where there are no schools, and no jobs, and where community safety is not any more of an issue than anywhere else – although if homelands are represented as risky environments, then heightened police scrutiny is justified. There is little room in this policy framework for highly mobile and highly flexible hunter-gatherer ways of living on the land and use of its resources that is underwritten by a combination of state income support, a few available jobs, and a tenuous engagement with market capitalism mainly *via* cultural industries and natural resource management.

Effective implementation of the broad policy objectives in ‘Closing the Gap’ will inevitably require the elimination of those smallest dots on the landscape. A core element of approach is a re-energized state project to recentralise homelands people as occurred during the transformation at the frontier to colonial assimilation. Simultaneously there is a parallel focus to revisit the recurring project to ‘Develop the North’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2015) that has been articulated since 1909 when the transfer of the NT to the Commonwealth was first proposed. The Commonwealth approach looks to force the movement of homelands people up the settlement hierarchy into larger places, modifying their norms and values to match those of mainstream Australians. It is replicated and in lock-step with the approaches of the NT and WA governments (at least until 2017) – a rare example of a coordinated intergovernmental plan of action on Indigenous matters.

In the NT, under a parallel conservative administration, there were policy proposals, including one called ‘Homelands Extra’ in 2013, that purported to fulfil the needs of homelands people but instead focused administrative attention and financial support on larger residential centres that were for a short time called ‘Territory Growth Towns’. While this policy language has been reframed as the larger towns have not grown but have economically stagnated or declined, the effect has been to further marginalize those living at homelands (Markham and Doran 2015).

In WA, a conservative government released a ‘road map’ for regional and remote Aboriginal communities called *Resilient Families Strong Communities* (Western Australian

Government 2016). This plan is a pastiche of policies borrowed from the Commonwealth, NT, and Queensland. It proposed defunding 150 small communities, often deploying the term ‘closure’. This has seen the physical removal of basic infrastructure from some homelands. In 2015, Tony Abbott controversially referred to residence at remote places as a ‘lifestyle choice’ that should not necessarily be supported by the WA and Australian governments (Mehdora 2015).

Homelands people currently confront a double jeopardy. On one hand, governments are looking to unilaterally break the late 20th century social compact to assist them, looking to redefine homelands as private places. On the other hand, there are emerging legal and administrative compulsions to centralize, even though such migration might dramatically reduce life chances and eliminate distinct ways of life inter-generationally.

The current overarching Commonwealth policy framework has five elements: *Jobs, land and economy* – getting adults into work; *Children and schooling* – improving school attendance; *Safety and wellbeing* – ensuring that Indigenous people are healthy and enjoy the emotional and social wellbeing experienced by other Australians; *Culture and capability* – supporting Indigenous Australians to maintain their culture; *Remote Australia strategies* – addressing the social and economic disadvantage in remote Australia and supporting solutions based on community and government priorities (Commonwealth of Australia 2018b).

From the perspective of homelands people each of these elements that have seductive improvement goals could jeopardize aspects of their preferred lifeways, ready-made Closing the Gap ‘solutions’ for people who live most remotely, flexibly, and differently. While it is not easy to gain access to the programme logic models for these elements, they do exist and inform bureaucratic approaches even as they are kept from public view. An important illustrative example of the programme logic for the Community Development Programme (CDP) prepared by the Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet was

**Table 2** IAS elements, programmes, intended outcomes

IAS element	Actual programme/approach	Intended outcome
Jobs, land and economy	Community Development Programme (compulsory work-for-the-dole); land reform	Compulsory make work for the jobless; training for jobs; and individualisation in business, employment and land tenure
Children and schooling	Remote School Attendance Strategy/School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (abolished December 2017)	Participating in standard English-only schooling with financial penalties for non-attendance
Safety and wellbeing	Increased policing; income management <i>via</i> BasicsCard for ‘food security’; greater external surveillance of stores	Modification and normalization of expenditure of welfare; heightened policing to ensure greater compliance with western law
Culture and capability	Support for acceptable cultural and western governance competencies; arts programmes	Participation in ceremonial activity curtailed, sidelining of customary law; commercialisation of culture
Remote Australia strategies	Closing the Gap statistical targets; enhanced marketisation of service delivery; special measures	The disempowerment of community-controlled organizations; expectation that mainstream norms adopted

accessed after a Freedom of Information application; it is reproduced in Fowkes (2018:145). The logic in the complex model is presented as an intricate matrix that is instructive of the programme's goal to behaviourally and attitudinally transform Indigenous people into mainstream citizens. The intensive forms of daily electronic surveillance of the jobless to ensure compliance with imposed work obligations have significant livelihood implications for homelands people.

In Table 2 above, I summarize the coordinated elements of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, the actual programme/approach deployed, and my interpretation of their intended outcome.

This imposed suite of programmes aims to recentralise homelands people for close surveillance of their work, education, and expenditure patterns with the explicit goal of altering their norms and values to better align with those of mainstream citizens. This is a 21st century version of what Wolfe has referred to as the logic of elimination (Wolfe 2016). Yet Wolfe (2008:102) also contended that settler colonialism had a generative dimension, the biocultural assimilation of indigenous peoples. Even if this is the case, a problem in remote Australia is that there is growing evidence that such assimilationist (Closing the Gap) goals are failing even on the state's own statistical terms (see Commonwealth of Australia 2018a). Markham and Biddle (2018) document the deepening poverty in very remote Australia. And yet the state persists, because not to persist is to tolerate the refiguring by homelands people of the state and capitalism to their own different ends. Simultaneously, the presence of homelands people on country challenges the asserted state (Crown) right to unrestricted access to mineral resources on Indigenous lands. And not to persist also highlights the continuing failure of the expensive decade-old project of Closing the Gap. This forced recentralisation that is increasingly required to qualify for government assistance produces a form of ghettoization (see also Grieves 2017).

### BEING KUNINJKU

I now move to describe how the suite of programmes constitutes 'techniques' to extinguish the hunter-gatherer subjectivity of homelands people and so eliminate them as a social group. I do so from my fieldwork observations and discussions in recent years with Kuninjku-speaking people and so provide ethnographic evidence to illustrate my argument that a logic of cultural genocide is intentionally embedded in these programmes. I use this group as an exemplar of the experience of many homelands people, acutely aware of regional variations, for several reasons: I am very familiar with their changing circumstances and I have recently had the opportunity to engage with several long-standing friends in collaboration with a skilled linguist and interpreter Murray Garde, especially on questions about their aspirations.<sup>7</sup>

By way of brief background (for more detail see Altman (2016, 2018)), in the 1960s Kuninjku-speaking people resisted and then rejected incorporation into a distorted form of state capitalism in the artificial township of Maningrida – established as a government settlement in 1957 with the clear intent to alter their nomadic way of life for eventual assimilation. Instead, after a decade or so of residence in Maningrida, they made the conscious choice to go back to their homelands and entered an informal social compact with a then more progressive state from the early 1970s. Under the policy of self-determination that was responsive to Aboriginal aspirations to decentralize (Myers and Peterson 2016), homelands living was initially tolerated, and then encouraged in Arnhem Land, but it was only minimally resourced. Kuninjku as a community, living primarily at homelands, ultimately accepted a form of second-class citizenry in exchange for relative autonomy. For many

reasons, including relative economic success, this preference abated in the late 20th century, and increasingly Kuninjku lived between Maningrida and their homelands, more recently mainly in the township of Maningrida. Kuninjku people today see this shift in residency as due to changes in government policy, but my interlocutors are also acutely aware of the lure of Maningrida for younger generations, in part because of the absence at homelands of now 'essential' services like mobile phones and Internet access.

Let me now summarize a few observations from their perspective, weaving the statements of several interlocutors into one narrative without being overly reductionist. Kuninjku people are deeply concerned that the government keeps changing 'rules'. They are also aware that their representative and service delivery organization seems to have changed, doing what the government wants (as an employment and training provider). Why, people ask, did the government rules change, and why did they make Bawinanga, their organization, do what the government wants rather than work for Kuninjku? People understand the government wants them to stay in the township; they highlight that they have built new houses in the township to attract people in (even though extreme overcrowding is ubiquitous), while failing to build any houses at homelands. People are worried about the constant pressure for the new generation, the young, to move to Maningrida, to adopt Balanda (European) ways and to forego Kuninjku ways. They are deeply concerned about the new generation stuck in Maningrida developing a taste for western foods from the store: 'We are the last generation to eat bush tucker but the children today they are not used to eating bush food'; 'If you stay here in Maningrida, you do not learn anything about your country and how to gather food from it'; 'You only think about chicken and Balanda [white people's] food'. When people come to Maningrida they become like Balandas: 'Today people of this generation are not really standing properly on the ground [their ancestral land]; they do not tread upon the ground with the same confidence'. There is concern that people are losing intimate knowledge about places and species and are not maintaining responsibility for sacred sites and the graves of the deceased at homelands.

Kuninjku understand that a new work-for-the-dole scheme introduced in 2015 has replaced the modicum of income security provided to them by the CDEP scheme in the past. The newly named CDP (that sounds just like the popular CDEP and whose programme logic is referred to above) means less income and greater risk of being financially penalized for not turning up to work every day. They understand that their outstation resource agency the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, what we might call a political and economic institution that has been of fundamental importance to the operation of their mode of livelihood (that I term 'hybrid' – a historically successful mix of transfer payments, arts income, and returns from hunting) has been drastically weakened. It gets less funding from government, but also went into special administration for two years owing to financial mismanagement and is now burdened with debt. Most Kuninjku do not want mainstream forms of full-time employment, although some, working as rangers or in the arts, do. They are aware of emerging inequalities, how some young people get jobs as rangers, with access to vehicles and guns and game, but such emerging inequalities are resisted through maintenance of principles and practices of sharing, people articulate normative rules based on kinship and reciprocity: 'We must never refuse any request from family; we must give to them every time'. People speak their own language, and they are reluctant to send their children to school in Maningrida where all teaching is in English. They are subject to a compulsory income management scheme if on welfare, but this does not worry them unduly. They share food, and they share tobacco, a substance whose purchase with welfare is intentionally restricted by the electronic BasicsCard.

People are angry that when they live in Maningrida they live in crowded and unsanitary conditions. And they are angry about their relations with the police that are becoming

increasingly acrimonious as Kuninjku are apprehended for driving unregistered vehicles, or without current driving licences, or having guns impounded because the user does not have a licence or a gun safe. They are acutely aware of the greatly increased criminalisation of the younger generation, many who have no income and sit outside the welfare safety net because they will not comply with onerous work-for-the-dole requirements, of needing to pay fines to keep their offspring out of gaol, seeing family members imprisoned for fine default and for dealing in marijuana. People are devastated by the high rate of early death for Kuninjku, people dying in the 40s and 50s, the growing financial burden of mounting proper funerals for close kin, and the associated burden of deep grief. They worry about intergenerational loss of knowledge and skills transfer. At the other end of the demographic spectrum, they are deeply worried that for the first time in living memory Kuninjku children assessed as ‘failing to thrive’ have been taken from their parents and fostered in Darwin. Such action suggests that their commentary on hunger, which I mentioned earlier, is for them a lived reality. As reported elsewhere (Altman 2018), my interlocutors invariably see ‘the good life’ in the past tense.

I could say much more,<sup>8</sup> but my aim here is primarily to juxtapose the abstract perspectives evident in policy statements and programme logics, imagining incorporation into a mainstream that is non-existent in this region, with the lived reality and views of people who are the subjects of this policy. They are being corralled into town for transformation as in the colonial past, for norms and values modification using a western logic of behavioural economics. But they are resisting. Some manage to live at homelands still, others move between the homelands and Maningrida or even into town camps in Darwin. Even as the state is looking to eliminate a form of transformed postcolonial hunter-gatherer lifeway that was relatively successful, Kuninjku people can see the intentionality in what is being proposed. They can see that to lose contact with their land and sacred places and ceremonial life on their country, their hunting traditions and their ethics of familial sharing will undermine what is critical to their sense of who they are, what it means to be Kuninjku.

#### RAPHAEL LEMKIN IN THE OUTBACK

For some years now, I have found Patrick Wolfe’s (2006, 2016) theorisation that the logic of elimination is an organizing structural principle of settler colonial society in Australia broadly compelling. And yet in the past I have also seen this process of elimination challenged. There was a glimmer of hope in the partial recognition of land rights. Then the homelands movement was assisted by now defunct policies of self-determination and self-management. This movement allowed for the active agency of Aboriginal groups to diversely refigure their economic and political relations with the state, and with market capitalism, to ensure the continuation of a distinct lifeway.

All this has changed. As outlined in my introduction, I no longer find my previous analytical framework based on a critical ‘anthropology of development’ approach convincing (see *e.g.* Altman 2016). This earlier work was based on an interpretation that the destruction wrought on homelands people was an unintended consequence of a failed project of improvement (Li 2007), as political and bureaucratic classes looked to render deeply historical and structural development challenges ‘technical’ to borrow James Ferguson’s (1994) much-used terminology.

And so I turn to analyse how the logic of cultural genocide is applied to homelands living. In Table 3, I summarize Lemkin’s general theory of genocide and apply it to a categorical context, homelands people. I do so for the present, that I interpret as the apex, to date, of a coordinated plan of cultural elimination that has evolved over the previous decade. This



**Table 3** Lemkin's techniques of genocide in various fields applied to homelands people

Field	Techniques from <i>Axis Rules in Occupied Europe</i> (published 1944)	Australian government techniques for homelands people today
Economic	The destruction of the foundations of economic existence crippling development	Destruction of the foundations of the homelands economy cripples development
Political	Local institutions of self-government destroyed	Local institutions of self-government destroyed and depoliticised
Social	Abolition of local law and local courts	Abolition of customary law in sentencing and local courts; enhanced criminalisation
Cultural	Local population forbidden to use its own language in schools	Monolingual English-only schooling and punishment for non-attendance
Biological	Depopulation policies pursued; under-nourishment of parents	Removal of children assessed as 'failing to thrive'; poverty linked hunger; low adult life expectancy
Physical	Racial discrimination in feeding; endangering of health; mass killings	Racial discrimination in controlling expenditure of welfare and forced labour; overcrowded housing; people deprived of traditional foods
Religious	Disruption of religious influences especially in the field of education	Discouragement of traditional ceremonial life and controls on requisite mobility
Moral	Creation of an atmosphere of moral debasement to weaken the spirit of the national group	Demeaning of norms, values and customary practices especially of sharing with kin and ceremonial life; national humiliation in media coverage focused on untrustworthy Indigenous men

systematic comparison indicates an extraordinary similarity, bearing in mind that Lemkin's theorisation was informed both by his careful legal analysis of administrative practices in Occupied Europe, but also by his largely unpublished lifelong historical research on genocide (Docker 2008; Frieze 2013; Short 2016).

Let me now link these general correlations to the particularities of the Kuninjku ethnographic material. In the *economic* field, the centralisation of Kuninjku has seen them deprived of their means of existence, while their well-documented reduction in standard of living and access to cash has undermined their connection to country and ceremony, what Lemkin terms cultural-spiritual requirements. In the *political* field, local institutions of self-government have either been destroyed or depoliticised, with different patterns of imposed administration, many more police and a Canberra-appointed community overseer with powers to report back to Canberra. While I am not a criminologist I am acutely aware that Kuninjku criminalisation and imprisonment are escalating. In the *social* field, the legislated requirement to ignore customary laws and the enhanced imposition of Australian laws are further impoverishing already poor people with fines or imprisonment for fine defaulting; and depriving them of their contemporary means of production – trucks and guns. In the *cultural* field, artistic media is promoted for sale and export and is celebrated by metropolitan elites, an arena of continuing success. But the means to sustain the land-based cultural knowledge underpinning these marketable productions are curtailed. This includes the fact that teaching at the local school is in English, not Kuninjku, and the curriculum is

mainstream Australian. In the *biological* field, children who are assessed as ‘failing to thrive’ are removed to Darwin, fostered with non-Indigenous families and experiencing language and cultural loss. The struggle for livelihood is seeing a lowering of survival capacity, increased mortality rates and likely future morbidity risk for the young. This is partly because in the *physical* field there is an endangering of health with low-quality overcrowded housing, a lack of access to hunted game replaced in the name of ‘food security’ by unhealthy fast foods in local shops. In the *religious* field, there is active discouragement of traditional ceremonial life with those on welfare facing administrative hurdles to participate in mortuary ceremonies that are increasing in frequency. And in the *moral* field, there is an ongoing discursive assault that treats Kuninjku while formally Australian citizens as deviant and deficient, as denizens in need of imposed measures like income management and compulsory work-for-the-dole to regulate their behaviours. The burdensome administrative hurdles put in place to allow qualification for welfare benefits both demean Kuninjku and divert them from more productive activity on country; talented hunters are required to undertake menial municipal work.

I make three observations to summarize the compelling applicability of Lemkin’s general theoretical framing to life in Arnhem Land today. First, there is clearly a coordinated plan to strike at the very foundations of life at homelands. This does not mean that there are no vestigial programmes, most notably in the arts and in environmental management, that support connection to homelands, but these are swamped by the implementation of an overarching programme matrix for cultural extinguishment. Second, it is difficult to believe that this coordinated plan is not intentional given the electronic and statistical technologies of surveillance and monitoring and the human overseers that have been imposed on remote-living Aboriginal people. There is a growing body of academic research, some reported in the mainstream corporate media, that shows that living conditions for homelands people are in absolute decline. Finally, is this project based on a logic of cultural genocide universally successful? Of course not: there are groups that are managing to maintain a tenuous hold on homelands living. Much depends on the level of financial dependence on the state. Some groups have been able to dilute state affects by developing supportive and instrumental relationships with the corporate sector; or with independent non-profit organisations and philanthropy. But such counter-examples, often based on productive partnerships with non-Indigenous actors, do not negate state intentionality and the *logic* of cultural genocide.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have set out to explore the effects of the ongoing and long-standing settler colonial project of Indigenous character reformation with a focus on those trying to live at homeland communities. I am suggesting that a powerful ideology of ‘development and progress’ for remote Indigenous Australia is seeing a policy framework and set of programmes put in place by governments to eliminate the lifeways of homelands people. I have set out to systematically demonstrate that the technical processes for doing so are coordinated and structurally intentional. Historically, Indigenous people in remote Australia were centralized and subjected to a colonial regime whose governmentality was violent and destructive. Then, for a time from the early 1970s, a more tolerant policy shift to state-sanctioned self-determination and land rights saw many Aboriginal people choose to move back to their ancestral lands and create new postcolonial possibilities. An element of this decolonising transformation was an informal social compact with the state that saw people at homelands receive minimal support while living in largely ungoverned spaces that allowed them a degree of autonomy to maintain modern, highly mobile, forms of hunter-gatherer living,

even as they engaged increasingly in hybrid forms of livelihood that included engagements with market capitalism. By the time I lived at Mumeka with Kuninjku people in 1979, their lifeways had already fundamentally transformed, cultural change over which they had some control was under way. As I show with reference to the *Return to Country Inquiry* (Commonwealth of Australia 1987) homelands living was judged by those in power as positive and a relative success.

For many reasons the policy perspective tolerant of homelands living began to dissipate a decade later, culminating in what I see as a pivotal political moment when Amanda Vanstone (2007) made her influential ‘Cultural museums’ speech in late 2005. The ostensible reason for this radical shift was that the conduct of homelands people was deemed to be unruly and in need of closer scrutiny and paternalistic governance for reformation. A key component of that unruly conduct was hyper-mobility that can be explained in part by cultural continuities, in part by the need for regular movement to access basic services unavailable at homelands owing to state neglect. The proposed solution was to deploy a set of blunt instruments to recentralize homeland people to larger places depicted as more conducive to development where basic services could be delivered more cheaply to more stable populations whose conduct could be monitored and modified. Programme logic that has been made visible, such as for the Community Development Programme, shows a clear governmental intent to attitudinally transform Indigenous people who are jobless and welfare dependent into job-ready workers, on standby to participate in the grand national project to ‘Develop the North’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2015). A key element in this transformation is a quest to individualize Indigenous norms and values that currently prioritize kinship and reciprocity.

While unravelling the convoluted motivations of key state and corporate actors is not central to my argument here, in my view access to a massive estate of ‘reserved’ land is far more important than access to a reserve army of labour. This mirrors Wolfe’s (2006) argument that territoriality is settler colonialism’s irreducible and enduring element. For as Fig. 1 shows, much of the north is under Indigenous title and is likely prospective for mineral extraction and capitalist accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2010:244). In remote Australia the current dominant policy paradigm to ‘close the gaps’ might just be a ruse to empty the vast landscape of homelands to facilitate its future capitalist development. This hegemonic project is proceeding largely unimpeded for two main reasons. First, homelands living has always been predicated on a degree of state sanction and financial support. This dependence renders homelands people vulnerable to state affects and unilateral policy shifts. Second, the representative organizations of homelands people from the national ATSIC to the regional resource agencies have been eliminated, co-opted or significantly defunded – political representation has been greatly weakened.

My key proposition is that the settler state project to effectively delink Indigenous people from homelands, connection to country and associated hybrid modes of mobile living that are inclusive of hunting and gathering can be understood in the terms of cultural genocide. Highlighting the situation at homelands is not to exclude Indigenous people in other places subject to similar genocidal processes; nor am I suggesting that that there is no push-back from homelands people to this project. Indeed, some anthropologists might take issue with my analysis on three grounds: that intentionality and coordination is not properly established or even possible; that cultural change cannot be clearly differentiated from cultural genocide; and that I underestimate the strength of agency and resistance.

In my view, intentionality is established by tracking the arc over the last decade from political discourse to programme implementation, bearing in mind Short’s (2016:14) call to also consider ‘perpetrator selection’: homelands people may have been targeted for special interventionist ‘solutions’ to what is viewed as a particular Indigenous ‘problem’. The

commitment to coordination while never implemented perfectly (Lea 2012) is nevertheless evident in the Closing the Gap approach of Australian governments from 2008, but more particularly in the relocation of most Commonwealth programmes listed in Table 2 to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet from 2013. The methods and techniques of cultural genocide as outlined in Table 3 mirror this coordinated plan of different actions that aim to destroy the essential foundations of homelands living. Whatever the underlying motives for effective dispossession, I concur with Short's (2016:157) observation that the exertion of forcible control over people's lives and the moves to forcibly coerce people off their homelands is intentional.<sup>9</sup>

The distinction between cultural change and cultural genocide is open to debate especially as from an anthropological perspective 'culture' is never eliminated. Indeed, there are even hints in policy that it is only the unacceptable elements of culture, like hypermobility and kin-based sharing, that need to be surgically removed, while positive aspects of culture like art and environmental knowledge are retained – as if the 'high' culture can be neatly dissected from the everyday culture. The key issue here is who is driving the change; and at what pace. If cultural change is driven by Indigenous people themselves who are granted a degree of political autonomy, as occurred with the historical establishment of the homelands movement, this is not genocidal. But in so far as being a homelands person is synonymous with attachment to, access to, and use of the land, then the forcible aim to destroy the cultural pattern of a group and replace it with the national pattern of the oppressor (Lemkin 2008:xxi) is genocidal. If the relationship with the land of homelands people is forcibly broken down or intentionally hampered by settler state political ideology implemented in policy and programmes, then a genocidal logic is at work.

All of this is not to deny that there will be a diversity in implementation, especially at the local and regional level, across much of the continent; and a diversity of response by homelands people – their agency and resistance may or may not prove to be effective. I want to end with some vexing questions around two issues: First, what is at stake in this destruction? And second, how might these destructive policies be challenged, is there a decolonising pathway out of the currently genocidal relationship between the state and homelands people, or is this relationship structural and ongoing?

Lemkin notes (Lemkin 2008:xxi), 'It takes centuries and sometimes thousands of years to create a natural culture ... but Genocide can destroy a culture instantly, like fire can destroy a building in an hour'. Maybe 'instantly' in deep historical terms, but for three decades homelands people did resist and reverse a project of colonial elimination through what proved to be unsuccessful assimilation. An economic and social formation emerged based on highly flexible modes of living. On country living saw the maintenance of Indigenous cultural and ecological practices at homelands that are grudgingly valued even as they are threatened. There is even a view that such practices can be maintained on an expeditionary basis from residence at larger places as if peopling the landscape is inconsequential. The value of such practices might not be readily quantifiable, but they are irreplaceable. The recolonizing project is denying homelands people the social justice right to live on land that they have reclaimed under Australian law. What might be the cost of this, not just to homelands people but to the social fabric of a settler state formation already struggling for legitimacy? And for humanity in the current moment of global uncertainty?

Sociologist Damien Short (2016:37) calls for academics to look at the contexts and ways indigenous cultures are changing in the face of settler colonialist expansionist governance. Historian Tony Barta (2015) suggests that it might be productive to liberate genocide as a contemporary activist concept. It strikes me that anthropologists with their grounded ethnographic methods and long associations with particular people and places might be well positioned to make important contributions to such debates at a time when there is urgent

need to spark wider struggles for economic and social justice to counter what is effectively a project to eliminate different ways of living that do not conform with the requirements of late capitalism. Hopefully, avenues will emerge for currently politically disempowered and economically marginalized homelands people to re-establish their right to live on their ancestral country. Homelands people already deploy any available means to challenge the most recent manifestation of the state project of elimination (Wolfe 2016), living precariously at homelands despite neglect, mobilizing to counter imposed programmes like monolingual education and compulsory work-for-the-dole with heightened engagements in local projects of cultural reproduction through the arts and environmental management. I opened with a quote from Lemkin warning that what is lost might be financially compensable but never retrievable; by deploying his framework it might be possible to challenge the contemporary state-driven project of cultural genocide before too much is lost forever.

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### NOTES

1. Based on ongoing quantification and mapping work I am currently undertaking with Francis Markham at ANU. At 31 December 2016 we estimated land rights or lands reserved at 11.7% of the continent, native title exclusive possession at 11.3% and native title non-exclusive possession at 19.8%, although there may be some marginal overlaps. The total area is nearly 3.3 million sq kms. By 30 June 2018, the latter two categories had expanded to 12.1% and 22%, respectively. See <http://www.nntt.gov.au/assistance/Geospatial/Pages/Maps.aspx> (accessed 3 October 2018).
2. I provided two submissions and expert evidence to the Inquiry in 1985 and 1987 that were used extensively, especially in Chapter 8 ‘The Economies of Homeland Centres’.
3. Indigenous Affairs Minister Amanda Vanstone speaking with Alexandra Kirk on Radio National AM, on 9 December 2005 (Eastley 2005).
4. I was afforded opportunity to provide such a briefing in late 2003 at a meeting of the Ministerial Council of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (Altman 2004).
5. Blaming homelands people and seeking the closure of their communities seems to be an ongoing default position among some powerful Australians with easy access to the media. A recent shocking incident in the town of Tennant Creek elicited such a call from ex-Indigenous Affairs minister Malcolm Brough (McKenna 2018).
6. In the early days of the Intervention some people fled to homelands to escape the possibility that their children might be taken, especially in the context of threatened mandatory health checks that did not eventuate.
7. Since early 2015 three of our interlocutors have sadly died. I will not go into detail here about the interviews we conducted between 2015 and 2017, some have been reported elsewhere (Altman 2018).
8. As I finalize this article, John Mawurndjul an internationally acclaimed Kuninjku artist with whom I have collaborated since 1979 is having a major retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney titled ‘John Mawurndjul: I am the Old and the New’. The exhibition covering 40 years of his arts practice is politically charged. At Mawurndjul’s insistence it is entirely bilingual and pointedly illustrates through visual art the deep

knowledge of sacred place and associated mythology, the ecological knowledge of country and species and of painting materials that can only be acquired by living and working on country (see Bulloch 2018).

9. From historical and anthropological perspectives McGregor (2004) and Lea (2012) provide a different perspective of governmentality, focusing on *ad hoc* policy making and inept implementation in the latter case by a state that operates anarchically. I am sympathetic to their views but emphasize that what I see on the ground in relation to homelands is well coordinated and highly destructive. Some punitive measures like the levying of financial penalties for work-for-the dole non-attendance under the Community Development Programme is demonstrably highly effective and impoverishing (see Fowkes 2018; Markham and Biddle 2018).

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