

Tess Lea

“From Little Things, Big Things Grow”: The Unfurling of Wild Policy

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There are many forms of everyday violence that, to even be identifiable, have to be constituted as a particular kind of thing. For casual forms of street harassment (the eye-follow, the jostle, the unfunny catcall) to emerge as something recognizably prosecutable, for instance, rare conditions must coalesce. Minimally, (a) something definably illegal happens, which (b) is credibly witnessed and (c) of a certain large scale, that (d) institutional moves to take the ordinary into a prosecutable event are authorized – all presuming that (e) the maddening upheavals involved still seem warranted. By the time ordinary violence conforms to these (infinitely violating) conditions, the state apparatus that ordains ordinary violence in the first place has been conserved. Here, drawing on a form of posthumous ethnography – that is, concerning an event that most would consider done and dusted – the inverse correlation is explored: how big events can act like the sneaky, hard to pinpoint micro-tactics of everyday violence in sweeping non-eventful details-that-nevertheless-matter to one side.

Starting with the big event of the Australian government’s Northern Territory Emergency Response of 2007, ostensibly targeted at child sex abuse within Aboriginal communities, together with a few cousin events such as the largest Indigenous public housing and infrastructure program ever conducted in regional and remote Australia, and a related tsunami of early construction failure, I consider the old-new forms of decomposition for Indigenous tenants left in the washout that have no particular character at all. These lesser forms of debris are everywhere, turning up in administrative mazes and rationing systems, as intensified landlord powers and tenancy humiliations, or the loosening of nuts and bolts in the innards of cost-compromised infrastructure. Understanding the feral unfurlings of bureaucratic ganglia, of what I prefer to call “wild policy,” means confronting a surfeit of documents that are designed not to be read – that are replete with such arcane and mind-numbing sentences, such excessive minutiae, that they actively repel close attention. Recoiled, analysis goes somewhere else, to the scoop, the event, the sublime instance of corruption or system failure, when a project manager gets the sack and a construction company gets replaced. This in its own way is how the “red tape” of such inarguable political denouncement grows into a social policy thicket that resists easy containment or description.¹ Like water that leeches through structural cracks, such forces might lack the compulsory visibility and procedural legibility of an eventful wrongdoing, but are no less powerfully

disassembling for being less dramatic. Finally, the essay considers what is it about dull administrative details and everyday wear and tear that casts such a pall over analysis; a question which helps situate the importance of Elizabeth Povinelli's capture of what she calls "quasi-events" and "the conditions of the emergence and endurance of the otherwise"?²

Events

In Australia, images of ruined Indigenous housing³ frequently saturate the media, forming part of what one journalist involved calls "black war porn" reporting.⁴ Things came to a head in June 2007 when the Australian federal government, under then Prime Minister John Howard, used a report on the seemingly rampant child sexual abuse and "rivers of grog" flooding Aboriginal communities to unleash the Northern Territory Emergency Response – known more widely by its simpler shorthand, "the Intervention" (then as "Closing the Gap," or its latest revamp, "Stronger Futures").⁵ Processes of community consultation and Australia's Racial Discrimination Act were both suspended to enable extraordinary powers of land tenure resumption, the sequestering of welfare income, a vastly increased police presence, expanded powers of household entry without warrant to non-police bodies, the installation of government business managers in targeted communities, compulsory health screenings for children with a view to surfacing the hidden signs of sexual abuse, tight restrictions on the availability of alcohol and pornography for Indigenous adults (including limits on general internet access), compulsory school attendance, and, for a brief time, deployment of the national army to build or refurbish infrastructure on an emergency-driven in and out basis.

The Northern Territory of Australia was the site for intervention in part because this environmentally challenging region was among the last to be colonized and so retains the largest proportional body of Indigenous people per capita in Australia – but mostly because, under the Australian Constitution, the Northern Territory is not a state with its own powers of regulation, but a territory of the federal administration. It is thus not simply a postcolonial liberal settler state, but a frontier outpost, whose policy apparatus (including its self-government status) can be usurped at any time by the higher legal authority of the Canberra-based federal government. In other words, the Intervention enabled the federal government to put in place social experiments that it admitted contemplating for other Indigenous communities in regional and remote Australia, but which it could enforce in the

Northern Territory without constitutional encumbrance.

The Intervention came with money, more money than ever before for health clinics, police stations, schools, data management systems, and – my focus here – housing and infrastructure. The Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP) was funded as part of the Intervention's institution-spreading largesse.⁶ Houses were somehow intended as a precursor or foundation to the deliverance of liberalism's goods under market capitalism. With shelter and tighter tenancy responsibilities, Aboriginal householders would reconfigure their conditions of life and expectations, turning their newly secured bodies to the demands of school, work, and obedience to the law of the land.

The tight timeframe was complicated by multiple objectives. Among other things, SIHIP was meant to generate a minimum 20 percent Indigenous employment and certificated training out of its building works and allied services. SIHIP houses were also meant to comply with Australian building codes and best practice guidelines for Indigenous housing in the design, delivery, and implementation phases; have a minimum thirty year structural life span; and incorporate energy conservation measures. Attention to roads, sewerage, power, and water infrastructure was also promised, with the aim of ensuring that new, replaced, or refurbished houses do not suffer from inherited shortcomings in communal public utilities.

Fifteen months into SIHIP, the program was imploding from one cost blowout revelation after another, with claims of funds being siphoned into consultancy fees, of bloated bureaucrat fiefdoms, and confected pre-build construction figures. Journalists pounced on the stories, sensing the imminent death of an already vulnerable Northern Territory government.⁷ Even former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was concerned enough to send urgent messages from his European meeting with G8 leaders demanding that his federal minister in charge of the bulk of the funding for SIHIP, Jenny Macklin, urgently get the program under control.

National and domestic daily coverage, an explosion in blog and text messaging, a Wikipedia site and four hurried reviews, a political resignation, and multiple sackings followed.⁸ Behind closed doors, the über-bureaucrats charged with putting SIHIP back on its rails met with representatives from contracted construction agencies. Their take-home message: the unit price of each house must come down.⁹ What's more, the original SIHIP metrics ostensibly still applied: the same number of houses would be built to a newly

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restricted budget and in even less time.

Right down to the absence of the Aboriginal householders in whose names subtractive decisions were being made, the room full of weary project men was a congress taken to represent the full problem of Indigenous housing.

In order to comply with the new requirements, the refurbishment program cherry-picked the best houses to fix, leaving those with rotting wet areas aside, in order to stay with the metric (x number of houses in y time) within the capped price. With objections thus neutralized by the invitation to “put it on the table,” the discussion quickly turned to ways of building lower-cost houses at speed by lopping off such seemingly discretionary design features as louvered windows and sunhoods, internal flashings for waterproofing, or disabled access. In the flurry of designing and then undoing the designs for appropriate housing, it was the sound of a built house falling apart in the non-specifiable future that could not compete with the noise of a threatened-and-defensive government in the here and now.

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bear witness to the shrouded interconnections held in remote community and government offices that created countless failed houses, or what I have elsewhere called “non-houses.”¹¹ There were houses built that had to be bulldozed; slabs of concrete poured where no house could be built; footings that twisted so badly they could bear no weight; and building materials that ended up as cereal for termites.¹² Large sums of money were squandered; in August 2009, a federal government report found AUD \$45 million had been spent by SIHIP without a single house having been completed. Earth Connect Alliance, the building group entrusted with Groote Eylandt’s building program, had to be sacked after massive cost overruns and shoddy workmanship.¹³ Incompetent bad apples were trounced; and it took much effort for the program to return to business as usual.

From Table to Paddock

Let’s admit that these are the kinds of events which satisfy the analytic desire to expose the kinds of compromised actions that lead to compromised human services. I have written about SIHIP in this way too: the program’s public scandals are irresistible.¹⁴ But stopping here would simply affirm the faux-realism of instrumentalist policy critique and its cauterizing steps. The scale of SIHIP was unprecedented – the largest Indigenous public housing and infrastructure program ever conducted in Australia – and its history is already being written as one of unintended consequences of what were the mostly welcome material benefits of the Intervention.¹⁵

Trouble is, event teleology posing as ethnographic exposé simply joins the massed forensics of imminent project failure and correctives that also accumulated around SIHIP as it unfolded. The effectiveness or otherwise of the “Northern Territory Emergency Response” and its sequels is highly contested by anthropologists and others.

Such assessments of the Intervention’s effects are evaluative framings, proposing the continual possibility of review as a technique of self-correction.¹⁶ The soothing notion of review also makes the collateral damage of interventions, or what is otherwise termed “the unintended consequences of policy,” the stuff of investigation: how to get less of the unintended so outcomes align more with the intended. The idea of intentions gone awry pretends there was no foundational opacity within original policy forecasts, no refusal to calculate the cost of optimistic project loadings, in turn allowing wild policy to unfurl as if by surprise. This is the perfection of the phrase “unintended consequences”: as a catch-all euphemism it



Figure 1: “All options are on the table,” federal bureaucrats told sleep-deprived SIHIP contractors, given twenty-four hours to come up with the magic configuration:

Contractors: What about the requirement for 20 percent aboriginal employment on projects?
Government: It’s on the table.
Contractors: Do we have to comply with the Indigenous housing guidelines?
Government: We should meet the key elements, not the “nice to haves.” We need to reduce the footprint of the house. Do toilets need to be separated from bathrooms? Are verandas really needed? A seven star energy rating? It all needs to go on the table.
Contractors: What about a roof? Is a house with a roof in or out?¹⁰

It would be easy to dwell here, in the doomed alchemy of turning a fantastical metric into a house suitable for Indigenous tenants, to

refuses the more specific namings that were always possible yet somehow never feasible.¹⁷ In effect, both the original housing metrics invented for SIHIP and the hasty mutations in the politicized public outrage that followed were estimated through a double-blind calculus, a true scientific objectivity. Not only were previous housing and infrastructure data locked in untraceable archives, the costs for fixing old and building new SIHIP houses were also estimated in a dim abstract, on paper, databases, and whiteboards, with no sampling of any actual house as a statistical verity or reality check. “Unintended” they say, so enabling (wild) policy to attain the semblance of coherence as Indigenous targets are reaffirmed as the unruly ones.

Such productive recuperations are a reminder that liberal policy is an organic – or as I prefer, a *wild* – force, a biota which thrives on the heralding of cataclysms and thus the cumulative need for policy beneficence. Importantly, as Povinelli’s works insists, beyond the publicity of the big announcement or the sublime scandal, and the recovery of these events through sanitizing performances of media scrutiny and prescriptive defense and rapid image reformulation, more endemic forms of everyday corrosion stop-start away. The flow of money to save children from being (purportedly) assaulted by their own kin, and the specter of wasted money and sacrificed project managers, were mesmerizing events indeed. But beyond the dazzling chain of actions and reactions, new obstacles and thickened intrusions of the kind that clot Aboriginal life-worlds grew apace, from new tenancy regulations to misaligned house footings.

Corrosions and the Non-Event

To find the slow corrosion, one need only turn to duller scenes, such as the order and disorder of irretrievable archives or to SIHIP’s back rooms, a fluorescent-lighting world of software prosthetics, incommensurable databases, Gantt charts, and urgent, time-consuming tasks represented in backlogged emails, paper stacks, and beeping mobiles.

SIHIP came with many non- or barely publicized stings in the tail, obscured in the bureaucratic back rooms. Take how, to receive any housing and infrastructure funding in the first place, Aboriginal land title holders had to relinquish their tenure over community lands, under threat of compulsory acquisition. Tangentyere Town Camps, an Aboriginal housing organization based in Alice Springs, for example, protested the convergence of necessary public housing and infrastructure upgrades with extinguishment of their title in a failed federal

court challenge. Under considerable duress, they signed a forty-year lease deal. As reported in the *National Indigenous Times*, Tangentyere’s lawyers, Gilbert & Tobin, critiqued the Commonwealth’s heavy-handed methods of securing an agreement: “The housing associations have agreed to enter into the sub leases for the simple reason that you have threatened them with compulsory acquisition if they do not,” the Gilbert & Tobin lawyers wrote.¹⁸ In its reassembly of legislated powers over Indigenous lands, the Australian government had also extended its existing federal right to issue mining licenses and leases to third parties over to local state and territory ministerial discretion. And they warned householders that they would face new tenancy and asset management regimes when the keys were handed over – which is where our story about the corrosive non-events behind more scandalous and contested spectacles properly begins.

Little things pile up,” Povinelli says, describing how hope and despair “are conjured through the endurance of the exhaustion of numerous small quasi-events,” the quadrillion little things that are hard to put a finger on, literally or metaphorically.¹⁹ She writes, “It is hard to pull a thisness out of the ongoing flow of the everyday because so much decomposition happens below the threshold of awareness and theorization,” and I think too of audit entropy and the thickness of unnamable obstacles that bureaucratic and NGO helpers wanting to do anything different also encounter.²⁰ As Australian anthropologist Patrick Sullivan notes, Aboriginal life is “almost entirely supported by grant and welfare regimes, and therefore by public sector administration and by Aboriginal community sector service delivery.”²¹

Povinelli’s concern is with both a sapping of will and the resilience of spirit for individual subjects living within what she calls “zones of abandonment,” asking her fellow philosophers, what is the bodily cost of being the otherwise, of enduring under Late Liberalism, of representing the different ways of being in the world that the disenchanting intellectual so craves? My own concern has been to confront the productivity of infinite bureaucratic regress, to see liberal settler institutions as organisms seeking their own reproduction using circular remedies dressed as humanitarian responsibilities.²² The hydra-headed administrative formations surrounding reform, depleting community-focused organizational energies and entangling clients alike, remain just as under-theorized for being nothing much in themselves.²³ Behind the publicized event(s) are multiple forms of administrative violence and ineptitude, petty corruption and graft, squatting alongside more

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ubiquitous quasi-events²⁴ – stalled payments, forms that are impossible to fill in, nonsensical databases, computers that don't quite work, freighted goods that arrive damaged or with missing parts – which lie behind the non-attendance of material problems in the Indigenous domain.

Such arrested moments and infrastructural stutters more properly explain the relentless breakdowns in function and sensibility of just about everything needed for Indigenous people to be what governments repeatedly demand they be (educated, employed, housed, tax-paying, self-disciplining). The moral torpor of words like “low SES” in evaluation reports and strategy documents helps recuperate the images of depravity, ill-health, and social suffering that originally energized the Intervention back into remedial targeting and its drone activities, subsuming anew the gritty textures of everyday-life difficulties into an actuarial aesthetic that soothes as it smoothes away any sense of policy shrapnel still being at large.

A final example can be drawn not from the realm of (admissible public) debacles – houses not being built, skyrocketing costs, dodgy project managers – but from the dull worlds of documents, software, and regulatory lines athwart regulatory lines.

Let's take the mainstreaming of Indigenous public housing – another promise of the Intervention writ large. This was meant to deracinate tenancy management, bringing the benefits of mainstreaming to previously discriminated-against Indigenous tenants. SIHIP constructions were added to existing public housing stock, leaving Territory Housing (the Northern Territory government department with landlord responsibilities) with housing of varying quality to manage and lease. Territory Housing accordingly developed graded tenancy arrangements to cover the differences between so-called improvised dwellings, legacy dwellings, and remote public housing.²⁵ Under the Residential Tenancies Act (RTA), residents of improvised dwellings should not pay rent, while residents of legacy dwellings are obliged to. However, the government does not define these charges as rental payments, but as “maintenance levies,” which means the protections that come with the onuses of the RTA also do not apply. So when a man tried to recover the money he had been charged for the many weeks he'd spent living in a makeshift tent, waiting for SIHIP to refurbish his legacy dwelling into the higher-rent-attracting category of remote public housing, Territory Housing refused any refund, “arguing the tenant's payments were a Housing Maintenance levy charge and as such should have been paid.”²⁶ As it turned out,

Territory Housing was holding close to AUD \$1.4 million in such untraced rental payments, gleaned from the poorest of Australia's poor.

Using the administrative windfall of Intervention monies, all details of remote housing tenants were shifted onto a centralized IT database called the Tenancy Management System (TMS), ostensibly to reconcile the poll taxes (service fees or maintenance levies) being paid by individuals with the type of housing they were living in, so that the alleged fair rent would be paid. Yet despite the synoptic vision:

Territory Housing cannot easily provide rental statements for residents who are not on TMS. It also has difficulties identifying whether people are paying rent when they should not or, conversely, whether people are not paying rent when they should. FaHCSIA and Territory Housing have limited visibility of the true extent of overcrowding (both on an individual house and community-wide basis) and an incomplete picture of all housing stock and tenants.²⁷

And while deductions for cruddy legacy buildings are meant to be capped to avoid overpayments, the database does not reconcile the number of people residing in a legacy house with what is being charged. It relies on the leaseholder to have read the tenancy agreement in the first place – in all its eye-glazing, unfriendly documentary hulk – to know that they are to keep the authority up-to-date on things like when visitors cease to be visitors and have become residents, which in turn relies on householders being trustful that having too many people in the house will not invoke other (very familiar) interventions – like an eviction. The elusive promise of reimbursability presumes knowledge too that one has been ripped off, of how the theft occurred, and confidence that the processes for recuperating the stolen money are worth the long and frustrating while, and not triggers for new traps. This is to leave aside the armory of techniques needed for battling through the multiple sentry points choking individual quests via a confusion of fine-print requirements and misdirects, defeat being the inadmissible purpose of these ubiquitous non-processes – a bit like the scaling up from street harassment to prosecution case file, one might say.

Non-Narratability

SIHIP is no longer a program. Enacted through multiple inquiries and public hearings, the mediatized event of SIHIP has sequenced the idea of project closure, complete with timed and costed boundary markers in the form of audits and acquittals. In its wake, the limitless movement of what the anthropologist of debt and anarchy David Graeber has called “bureaucratic violence,” trying to define the

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wounds of infinite paperwork and procedures with no straightforward endpoint, just maddening rounds of being told you've waited in the incorrect line with a mistakenly filled or the wrong bit of paper.²⁸

In his brief account of trying to get power of attorney over his mother's finances after she suffered a stroke, Graeber describes what colloquially people would call a runaround, a kerfuffle, a bitch of a time: synonyms for administrative delay and vapid interactions at counters and on phones, with piped advertorials and muzak as deaf witnesses to the tedious inconvenience. Only Graeber was not describing the kind of trifling hurdles that anyone confronting the prospect of supplications mediated by paperwork and official authorizations must endure. He was trying to explore the institutionalized, class-differentiated interpellations that makes supplicants "stupid" as they empathize with the procedural interaction, trying to get their part right, and in so doing, authorizing the institutional violence they are at once prey and party to; how "powers that be" are able to remain oblivious to how their bureaucracies are precisely organized so that its actors can never do their purported jobs. Graeber is never speaking to someone with the power to bend rules or do something about the cascade of technical absurdities. A complaint will transform into a pointless persecution of some junior functionary; pointless really. Then, just as he tries to explain why ethnographers barely deal with such non-eventful dynamics, the essay dwindles, lost in a formless critique of Weber and Foucault and a rant against anthropological conservatism.

This fading away of powerful explanation is not a problem for Graeber alone. Even before the compassion fatigue from overabundant broadcasts of global tragedies, the immensity and unwritability of lives lived beyond the parentheses of enclosed events, of lives wearied by their denied sustenance, of the damages done by happenings with no mark in time but warping the potentials of lived time for all that, has daunted artists and analysts, from Kafka to David Foster Wallace. Wallace's last work before he hanged himself, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel*, was set in an Internal Revenue Service office in Peoria, Illinois, where, the book's cover blurb tells us, low-ranking fiscal bureaucrats are immersed in such tedious routines that they receive boredom-survival training. But there is something profound being transacted in this least romantic, uneventful settings, here in the middling bulk of the liberal market economy. "Consider ... the advantages of the dull, the arcane, the mind-numbingly complex," Wallace

writes. "The IRS was one of the very first government agencies to learn that ... abstruse dullness is actually a much more effective shield than is secrecy."²⁹

In a different way, this is Povinelli's concern too, when she is describing the resilience of her families in northern Australia, the cleverness of people finding their own means of "making the world work" amid the slow violations and disjunctions in space and time which characterize the contemporary condition of Aboriginal life-worlds. Without romanticizing, she describes how the inventiveness of "making do," the strength of escaping daily crud with jokes, care, adjustment, and drink, disappears within discursive forces that can only recognize Indigenous people in binary terms: as a threatened-species-status people with eroding traditions (the genealogical subject of anthropological pursuit), and/or as those who must be shaped into full market economy participants (the autological future-perfect subject of policy imaginaries). Events are framed and recorded through these signature codes too, making "the harms done within these brackets narratively disappear."³⁰

Policy ethnography conducted as an event history – or as policy biography – enacts its own disappearances, reintroducing coherence and intentionality where inchoate rationalities and deformations in practice are the logical outgrowths. The shoddy workmanship that public housing tenants know to expect becomes, on the few occasions it is exposed, something exceptional, something that can be traced to aberrant moments, to hasty briefings or a faulty reporting structure, becoming in turn a pedagogical event, staked out in inquiries that draw out culprits and lessons.

I want to suggest that Graeber's faltering indicates another representational difficulty. By the time ethnographic intervention is made into the barely narratable, with words summoned to capture the absurd, the tedious, and the arbitrary, a new problem arises. There is a challenge to naming these ubiquitous practices as, yes, pervasive – but not as therefore experienced in common. Everywhereness is not an everyness. Small non-events have cumulative consequences that are differently and differentially experienced depending on who, what, and where. An irritating inconvenience for me is not a denial of a vital service or funding line or a threat to my parenting capacities, what with my overeducated literacy, bureaucratic savvy, access to logistical equipment, influential networks, and fortnightly pay check. My mounting irritation does not transmute into a pathological and materially punishing portrait of me as a service-resistant,

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noncompliant, or intervention-warranting citizen. The ability to persevere, to minimize and to evade impedimenta, is differentially scaffolded, for individuals and their interfacing organizational clusters alike.

This then is another ground for the non-narratability of Povinelli's quasi-events. The ordinary rigmarole of administrative is immediately familiar. It is every fight with a telecom service anyone has ever had; the prolonged madness of transferring a car registration across state boundaries; the infuriating one-step-forward, one-step-back delays in getting an overseas visa application cleared on time. The ordinary is something everyone recognizes as stuff that happens to them too. Only the ordinary is not a stable zone in fixed space-time that everyone is participating in as equals. There is no "an" or "the" prefacing a singular shared ordinary. Falling-down systems are neither decomposing nor encountered identically. Erosion attacks weaker, cheaper structures, with erosion's ramifications operating at and amplifying along differential scales and time dimensions. These may be shaped by the rapid exigencies of shifting policy personnel at the most abstract level, and by very particular, bitsy, analytically elusive, local experiences – a tradesman who does not show up; a structural corner that has been cut; an appointment that can't be met; a relative that drinks the rent money – that shift in meaning and noteworthiness depending on their (socially orchestrated) legibility.

Tracing (dys)function – how it occurs, and to whom, what, and how it is ascribed – might yield fleeting glimpses of the stealthy means by which systems of slow death occur under liberal beneficence, yet such hard-to-ameliorate, enclosure-refusing life routes also resist neat homilies. This too is a condition of their non-narratability: the requirement to abandon a text without satisfactory end, for morally affirming conclusion is also a misleading tact.

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I would like to thank Dr Morgan Richards of The Design Embassy for her intellectual generosity in conceptualising and designing the intervention infographic.

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1
The attacks on red tape with every announcement of savings cuts lets us imagine it is these mindless processes that will be dismantled, as if doing less with less is not already here, creating the thicket, as the logical result of cuts and rationings that pretended they were not attacks on frontline services. On red tape as cultural phenomena, see Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2012); and Matthew S. Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2012).

2
Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Routes/Worlds," *e-flux journal* 27 (Sept. 2011) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/routesworlds/>

3
I borrow the term "ruined" public housing from Catherine Fennell, "The Museum of Resilience: Raising a Sympathetic Public in Postwelfare Chicago," *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 27, no. 4 (2012): 641–666.

4
Bob Gosford, "A yarn with Michael Coggan, journalist," *Crikey*, Nov. 28, 2010 <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/northern/2010/11/28/a-yarn-with-michael-coggan-journalist/>

5
The report by the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, titled *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: "Little Children are Sacred,"* can be found at http://www.inquiriesaact.gov.au/pdf/bipacsa_final_report.pdf. For critical analysis of the Intervention, see *Coercive Reconciliation: Normalise, Stabilise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, eds. Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson (Melbourne: Arena Publications, 2007).

6
Millions of dollars were assigned to create 750 new houses, 2500 refurbishments, and 230 "demolish and replace" homes in some seventy-three Aboriginal communities within four years of the program's commencement.

7
See Nigel Adlam, "Path of Least Resistance for Angry Anderson," *Northern Territory News*, Aug. 1, 2009.

8
See, for example, Natasha Robinson, "Failure of indigenous housing policy in the Northern Territory," *The Australian*, Aug. 15, 2009 <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/investigations/refugees-in-their-own-land/story-fn6tcs23-1225761764965>; and Victoria Laurie, "Home Improvement: Indigenous

Housing," *The Monthly* 68 (June 2011) <https://www.themonthly.com.au/victoria-laurie-indigenous-housing-home-improvement-victoria-laurie-3362>

9
From here on, the most expensive house in the most isolated and climactically extreme conditions could cost no more than AUD \$450,000, inclusive of indirect, freight, and labor costs, while refurbishments could not exceed AUD \$100,000.

10
Witnessed by the author. Ethnographic fieldwork on SIHIP and other social policy fields took place in 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012 as part of my Australian Research Council QEII Fellowship (DP1094139) pursuit of the question, "Can there be good policy in regional and remote Australia?" My time with SIHIP bureaucrats in government back rooms was limited to this brief period when the program was in crisis mode, before the federal minister Jenny Macklin made it clear that ethnographic documentation was not desired and my research permission was refused. (For more on the "event," see <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-08-19/macklin-blamed-for-indigenous-housing-wrangle/1396706>; also Murray McLaughlin, "Indigenous Housing Boss Removed," transcript, *The 7:30 Report*, Aug. 18, 2009, Australian Broadcasting Corporation <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-08-18/indigenous-housing-boss-removed/2675114>.) I later traced SIHIP's ramifications in Groote Eylandt, including the attempt by the Anindilyakwa Land Council to establish its own civil and civic engineering works company so that future projects could be managed in situ.

11
Tess Lea and Paul Pholeros, "This is not a pipe: the treacheries of Indigenous housing," *Public Culture* vol. 22, no. 1 (2010): 187–209.

12
Tess Lea, "What's Water Got to Do with It? Indigenous Public Housing and Australian Settler Colonial Relations," in "Other People's Country: Law, Water, Entitlement," special issue, *Settler Colonial Studies* (forthcoming).

13
For discussion of Groote Eylandt and the sacking of Earth Connect, see Tess Lea, "Ecologies of Development on Groote Eylandt," *Australian Humanities Review* 53 (Nov. 2012) <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-November-2012/lea.html>

14
See Tess Lea, "When Looking for Anarchy, Look to the State:

Fantasies of Regulation in Forcing Disorder within the Australian Indigenous Estate," *Critique of Anthropology* vol. 32, no. 2 (2012): 109–124.

15
See, for example, the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, *Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP) – Review of Program Performance*, Aug. 28, 2009 http://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/sihip_review.pdf; Australian Government Auditor-General for the Northern Territory, *Strategic Indigenous Housing And Infrastructure Programme Report To The Legislative Assembly*, June 2010 <http://www.nt.gov.au/ago/reports/2010%20June.docx>; Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, *Strategic Indigenous Housing Infrastructure Program (SIHIP): Post Review Assessment (PRA)*, March 10, 2010 http://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/sihip_pra_report.pdf

16
Anthropologist Jon Altman valiantly attempted to place an iodine trace on the plethora of evaluations that surrounded the Intervention to determine when its work could be considered “done.” Failing to find the terminus, he instead turned attention to the exercise of trying to define “what is, or was, the Intervention?” This definitional quest likewise disintegrated. See Jon Altman and Susie Russell, “Too Much ‘Dreaming’: Evaluations of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Intervention 2007–2012,” *Evidence Base* 3 (2012): 1–24.

17
For instance, housing intervention and cost information from previous regional and remote construction programs was either deemed commercial-in-confidence by the private companies, or archived in Canberra by the aptly named storage specialists Iron Mountain and were not available for SIHIP project reference without both Freedom of Information probes and prior knowledge of exactly where the files were dispersed and how they were catalogued, down to level of barcodes.

18
See Chris Graham, “Macklin’s town camp takeover derailed by Tangentyere letter,” *National Indigenous Times*, July 31 2009.

19
Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late*

Liberalism, (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2011), 183.

20
The expressionless exhaustion of Indigenous householders besieged by the shape-shifts of wild policy was and is mirrored within social service and community organizations, with their partially privatized responsibilities for recuperating money for their care work. The performance of accountability over a plethora of specific-purpose short term grants demands canny skills in brokerage and translation, as the local compromises required to get anything implemented are re-imagined to match the fragmented and abstracted contract and reporting requirements of different parts of different funding bodies. See discussion on the arts of policy brokerage by David Mosse, “Is Good Policy Unimplementable? Reflections on the Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice,” *Development and Change* vol. 35, no. 4 (2004): 639–671.

21
Patrick Sullivan, “Bureaucratic Process as Morris Dance: An Ethnographic Approach to the Culture of Bureaucracy in Australian Aboriginal Affairs Administration,” *Critical Perspectives on International Business* vol. 4, no. 2/3 (2008): 127–141; 128.

22
See Tess Lea, *Bureaucrats and Bleeding Hearts: Indigenous Health in Northern Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008).

23
But see David Graeber, “Dead Zones of the Imagination: On Violence, Bureaucracy and Interpretive Labour,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* vol. 2, no. 2 (2012): 102–128.

24
See Elizabeth A. Povinelli, “The Child in the Broom Closet: States of Killing and Letting Die,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* vol. 107, no. 3 (2008): 509–530.

25
Improvised dwellings are defined as a structure used as a place of residence that does not meet the building requirements to be considered a permanent dwelling, including caravans, tin sheds without internal walls, humpies, and dongas. See Nadia Rosenman and Alex Clunies-Ross, “The New Tenancy Framework for Remote Aboriginal Communities in the Northern Territory,” *Indigenous Law Bulletin* vol. 7, no. 24 (2011): 11–16. See also Alison Larkins, *Remote Housing Reforms in the Northern Territory*, report by the acting Commonwealth Ombudsman, June 2012 http://www.ombudsman.gov.au/files/remote_housing_reforms_in_the_nt_report.pdf

26

Cited in Rosenman and Clunies-Ross, “The New Tenancy Framework.” 13.

27
Larkins, *Remote Housing Reforms in the Northern Territory*.

28
Graeber, “Dead Zones of the Imagination,” 121.

29
David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011).

30
Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 73.

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e-flux journal #58 — october 2014 Tess Lea
“From Little Things, Big Things Grow”: The Unfurling of Wild Policy