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Mysterious Motions: A Genealogy of 'Orbiting' in Australian Indigenous Affairs

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There are several signs that we are between distinct periods in federal policy in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. Following its emergence in 2015, the first and second Turnbull administrations demonstrated an acute case of policy *aporia*, lacking direction or vision in relation to Indigenous policy. Faced with the Uluru Statement from the Heart in May 2017—the outcome of deliberations by over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives from across Australia—the Turnbull Government rejected its modest plans as 'too ambitious'.[1] This included the proposal for an elected 'First Nations Voice' that would act as an advisory body with far less institutional power than its predecessors, such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) abolished by the Howard Government in April 2004. Since the Uluru Statement, the various federal policy processes built around a proposed referendum on the constitutional recognition of Indigenous peoples have come to a grinding halt. The 'Recognise' advocacy body established to foster public support for such a referendum was quietly folded after receiving $25 million in federal funding over

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1   McKenna, *Moment of Truth*; Calla Wahlquist, 'Turnbull's Uluru Statement Rejection Is "Mean-Spirited Bastardry" – Legal Expert', *The Guardian*, 26 October 2017, www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/oct/26/turnbulls-uluru-statement-rejection-mean-spirited-bastardry-legal-expert.

four years.[2] Subsequently, in 2018, the Turnbull Government announced a 'refresh' of the Closing the Gap strategy, which sought to improve the lives of Indigenous peoples by focusing upon quantifiable quality of life measures such as life expectancy and school completions. This was the first indication of a potential move away from a policy approach that has enjoyed bipartisan favour since its initiation in 2008.

Another sign of a possible epochal shift is the recent downturn in the political fortunes of individuals I have described elsewhere as 'executive advocates'.[3] These are people who, subsequent to the dissolution of ATSIC, sought to 'navigate the space between the settler state and specific Indigenous communities and regions' by acting as de facto representatives in federal and state politics. As policy consultants, media personalities and business executives, these individuals have endeavoured to 'make Indigeneity and Indigenous peoples legible' to government while themselves remaining separate from government institutions, 'discursively fluid, and sometimes conceptually contrary'. This 'advocate' finds its archetype in the lawyer and policy consultant Noel Pearson. Subsequent to his rise to national prominence during the tense negotiations over native title legislation in the early 1990s, Pearson became a major voice in policy debates during the early 2000s on the basis of his bold assertions about Indigenous peoples' 'right to take responsibility' for their socio-economic situation.[4] Funding and widespread political favour followed in the next decade, to the point that it was quite reasonable to state, in 2011, that he was 'undoubtedly the most influential person in Indigenous policy making in Australia today'.[5] However, like other advocates who rose to prominence during the same period (e.g. Warren Mundine, Marcia Langton and Bess Price), Pearson has recently been sidelined from the federal and state policy circles that once supported him. This culminated in Pearson's (2017) public declaration that he had been cruelly 'betrayed' by the conservative politicians with whom he had been previously been allied.[6]

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2   Latimore, 'Jumping the Gate'.
3   Neale, *Wild Articulations*.
4   See Pearson, *Up from the Mission*.
5   Altman, 'Noel Pearson's Policies'.
6   Pearson, 'Betrayal'.

This is not to suggest, in any way, that Pearson and other similar executive advocates will not find equal political favour again. Rather, as part of broader consideration of shifts in Australian Indigenous policy,[7] this seems an apt time to reconsider the cultural and political influence of executive advocates, such as Pearson, who became nationally prominent over the past two decades.[8] In this chapter, I would like to contribute to such a review by giving a brief genealogy of Pearson's concept of 'orbiting', revisiting its practical instantiations, discursive framing in news media, international parallels and academic reception. As I explain, Pearson's proposal that remote-living Indigenous peoples should 'orbit' in and out of their remote communities presents many conceptual issues, and there is little empirical evidence to suggest Indigenous peoples have followed his advice. What is important to understand, I argue, is how the celebration of the 'orbiting' idea in news media and policymaking has helped sediment certain precepts or assumptions into Australian political discourse about Indigenous peoples, their communities and their futures.

What is Pearsonian Orbiting?

As anthropologist Paul Burke states, Pearson's idea of orbiting 'could be minimally defined as an alternative to irreversible migration to urban centres':

> [It] encourages Aboriginal people in remote settlements to take up distant educational and employment opportunities, but with the expectation of return to the home settlements for culturally significant events.[9]

In other words, the capacities of remote Indigenous communities are best grown by encouraging individuals with significant future earning potential to leave them because, avowedly, they may then return at some point. While, as Burke notes, 'the concept has never been fully developed in easily accessible documentation', it is nonetheless worth surveying the thin explanations of this influential concept. An early version appears in a speech Pearson delivered in 2000, later published in his collective writings, in which he posed his problem as 'the social and economic incorporation'

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7   For example, Altman, 'In the Name of the Market?'; Maddison, Clark and de Costa, *The Limits;*
Strakosch, *Neoliberal Indigenous Policy.*

8   See also Klein, 'The Curious Case'; Watt, 'Debating Decentralisation'.

9   Burke, 'Indigenous Diaspora'.

of 'the most marginalised underclass in Australian society'.[10] The answer, Pearson stated, was that 'we have to get educated', which would occur by sending Aboriginal children in remote regions 'into orbits into the wider world' and their mainstream educational institutions. These children would become 'completely bicultural' and periodically 'come back to their home base' in remote communities, enriching those communities with the skills, resources and financial capital acquired elsewhere. It was entirely possible, Pearson insisted, for Aboriginal people to maintain 'our culture' and connection to 'home' after being embedded in and enculturated by the (white) sites of late capitalism. Thinking in opposition, Pearson was arguing against the possibility that the integration of Aboriginal people raised in Aboriginal-majority communities into the lifestyles and practices of cities—'Perth or New York or Singapore'—would negatively affect them in any way or make them reluctant to return to their places of birth. It would be transformative, but only in benevolent ways that did not taint the individual's 'cultural' core.

As I have discussed elsewhere, the first decade of the new millennia was a period in which Pearson built a political and organisational empire in Australia.[11] He established Cape York Partnerships (CYP) in 2000, which then became the coordinating agency for a range of other companies delivering a spectrum of social services independently and in collaboration with government departments. In the following years, these networks implemented disciplinary measures such as alcohol restrictions and welfare quarantining in a range of Cape York communities, all couched in the language of 'grassroots change', alongside capacity-building programs in bicultural schooling, parenting skills, financial management, home improvement and much more. Recalling this period, Pearson later remembered how he had been guided by the contention that 'under no scenario were any of these communities viable without a significant proportion hitting the road in search of jobs'.[12] By the close of 2011, $100 million in state and federal government funds had been spent on four communities targeted by most of these programs—Hopevale, Aurukun, Mossman Gorge and Coen—amounting to over $36,000 per Indigenous resident. In 2010, one of the Pearson-led companies began administering schools in three of these communities before, in 2012, taking over the management of a secondary school named Djarragun College near

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10   See Pearson, *Up from the Mission.*
11   Neale, 'Staircases, Pyramids'; Neale, *Wild Articulations.*
12   Pearson, 'Remote Control'.

the city of Cairns. These attempts at educational administration received significant criticism in the years that followed due to their use of an expensive United States literacy program, highly publicised outbreaks of violence and the 'inconclusive' results of government audits.[13] In November 2016, after complaints by community members and threats by state government overseers to void these administration contracts, Pearson's company forfeited the management of the Aurukun school.

Through this period, Pearson and his allies continued to propagate the 'orbiting' concept without clarifying it.[14] Pearson frequently appeared in the nation's newspapers insisting that remote Indigenous communities 'cannot be parochial', lambasting politicians who doubted his vision and proclaiming his belief 'in the need for mobility for Cape York Peninsula youngsters'.[15] Young people must 'have the confidence and capacity to orbit between two worlds and enjoy the best of both'.[16] Yet, what of the practical measures? One early CYP trial program, documented in a series of unpublished papers, involved temporarily placing an unknown number of Indigenous youth offenders with Indigenous families in distant towns and cities. These 'young people who need to be removed from their environment' were avowedly an instance of 'orbiting',[17] as was the group of 16–25 year olds that CYP transported over 3,000 kilometres to south-eastern Australia to pick fruit for three months, 'well away from distractions and interference of families'.[18] The latter received significant media attention, with journalists eager to celebrate how seasonal labour 'offers [these young men] the chance to build a life' and 'an introduction (in some cases a rude one) to the individualism and competition that underpin the prosperity of mainstream Australia';[19] they were 'valuing money because they had earned it, and not had it handed to them'.[20]

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13   Joshua Robertson, 'Noel Pearson Under Fire from All Sides over Aurukun School Experiment', *The Guardian,* 7 July 2016, www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/jul/07/noel-pearson-under-fire-from-all-sides-over-aurukun-school-experiment; Leisa Scott, 'What's Being Done to Save Cape York's Troubled Communities?', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane)*,* 20 July 2016; Jamie Walker, 'Noel Pearson Teaching Model to Get $22m', *The Australian,* 1 July 2014.
14   For example, Ah Mat, 'The Moral Case'; Pearson, 'Man Cannot Live'.
15   Noel Pearson, 'Labor's Ideas Mature', *The Australian,* 9 December 2006, www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/noel-pearson-labors-ideas-mature/news-story/b39be24b54b5bf90f4e1cbbe391b0cd1.
16   Tony Koch, 'Out on a Limb', *The Weekend Australian,* 20 November 2004, magazine section, 23.
17   James, 'Petrol Sniffing'.
18   James, 'A Report on the Trial'.
19   Michael Duffy, 'The Welfare Trap That Denies the Right to Self-Improvement', *The Sydney Morning Herald,* 23 December 2006, www.smh.com.au/national/the-welfare-trap-20061223-gdp42u.html.
20   Tony Koch, 'Indigenous Pickers Grab Job Chance', *The Australian,* 23 March 2005, 1.

In internal reports too, these programs approached orbiting as a remedial or preventative disciplinary technique applied to young people with emerging drug and alcohol issues. During this period, Pearson also appeared in the national news publicising a five-year 'orbiting' program funded by Macquarie Bank, called 'Higher Expectations', through which 'the top' Cape York high school students were given scholarships to attend prestigious boarding schools in metropolitan centres.[21] Such projects excelled in attracting publicity but were subject to little scrutiny or assessment. The first comprehensive federal government review of Pearson's social welfare program noted in 2013 that, while having 'people increasingly "orbit" from [their home community] for work' was a key aim, 'there is no evidence to indicate that more residents are taking up the opportunity to leave or "orbit"' either organically or through the program's inducements.[22]

Surveying its various articulations, there seem to be five key precepts to Pearsonian orbiting, all of which are clearly contestable. First, *the capital deficit precept* asserts that remote-living Aboriginal people need to acquire labour skills and financial and cultural capital that they currently do not have to thrive both individually and collectively. Second, *the capital supply precept* claims that these labour skills and financial and cultural capital are solely available in urban and regional centres and, ideally, from certain mainstream educational institutions. Third, *the return precept* assures doubters that Aboriginal people who venture to urban and regional centres will go back to their home communities at some undefined point, whether permanently or periodically, necessarily enriching those communities. They will do this, Pearson has argued, because of their 'strong and continuing cultural connection to ancestral lands'.[23] Fourth, *the cultural stability precept* insists that these 'orbiters' will remain culturally Aboriginal regardless of how prolonged or in-depth their engagement with the dominantly non-indigenous institutions, cultural norms and social networks of urban or regional life. Fifth, *the beneficence precept*, which I infer from the breeziness with which Pearson describes orbiting practices, implies that the different stages of adaptation and adjustment encountered by these individuals will be relatively easy. As I discuss in the following section, all five of these precepts have been contested by

21   Smith, 'Cape York Student'.
22   FaHCSIA, *Cape York Welfare*.
23   Noel Pearson, 'In Search of a Sustainable Future', *The Australian Financial Review,* 15 November 2005, 23.

activists and scholars in Australia. They are also entirely contrary to what we know of other peoples' parallel journeys in other countries, travelling routes often described as 'circular migration'.

Circulating Orbits

Discourses, policies and studies of circular migration have led curious parallel lives in international diplomacy and Australian policymaking. Without attempting to give an exhaustive account, it is worth taking a brief look at these different contexts and tracing some of their political and conceptual interrelations. While clearly linked to earlier forms of journeying and migration, the phrase 'circular migration' became prominent among migration researchers and diplomats in the late 1960s and 1970s as a way of describing repeated seasonal or life cycle migrations. Early studies were interested in measuring the phenomenon of 'short-term, repetitive or cyclical' movements of people within nations, seeking to track, rather than necessarily explain, how people moved between different sites of residence.[24] Arguments about the forces propelling these individuals were, and typically remain, derived from the five approaches that have shaped studies of labour migration more generally since the late nineteenth century, synthesised by Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan as two approaches: 'dual economy' understandings that focus on individual rational actors, variously taking advantage of wage or cost of living differences in different sites; and Marxian understandings that privilege the pressures of uneven development, mapping migration onto the differences between processes of modernisation and capitalist production in different sites.[25] As Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan suggest, the 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a significant push in international scholarship to respect both migrants' agency and the impersonal structures shaping their lives, attending to the personal advantages of migration, the harmful social implications for families and communities, the occasions of extreme exploitation and the 'modest origins of counterhegemony' in their movement between social worlds.

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24   Hugo, 'Circular Migration'.
25   Shrestha, 'A Structural Perspective'; Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 'Circular Migration'. See also Jokisch, 'Migration and Agricultural Change'.

In the past two decades, talk of circular migration has become 'the rage in international policy circles' due to its ostensible 'win-win-win' labour outcomes.[26] Avowedly, 'receiving' countries gain comparatively cheap labourers with limited political rights, 'sending' countries receive remittances from that labour, and migrants and their families receive comparatively higher wages. Much ink has been spilled by institutions such as the World Bank and European Commission on the appropriate management of these flows—particularly between Eastern and Western Europe—one outcome of which has been robust data suggesting that the individuals involved are neither truly returning or temporary migrants, but rather engaged in 'a continuing, long-term and fluid movement'.[27] Circulation between economies leads to a life of interminable parallel circulations. Does this international literature therefore conform with Pearson's vision? Not quite, as many of the factors that keep migrant labourers circulating across national borders do not apply to Indigenous peoples living in remote Australia. To simplify: Indigenous peoples' legal rights to reside and work do not differ between urban and remote contexts, and their origin in a relatively affluent 'receiving' nation is a barrier to their being attractive to other 'receiving' nations. In short, the spatialised disparities between rights and economies that are central to circular migration internationally do not hold. As Basok has shown, migrants 'orbit' between their 'sending' and 'receiving' contexts because they cannot remain permanently in the latter, perpetually circulating in part to maintain their relative affluence in their 'home' context; this ensures that they remain highly vulnerable to abusive employment.[28]

If there is something to draw from this literature, it is arguably that the third and fourth precepts of Pearsonian orbiting are unsound. While part of what has been celebrated about circular migration has been its role in the growth of official and unofficial remittances back to comparatively less affluent 'sending' regions, far exceeding levels of international aid, the return of financial capital is not necessarily correlated to the return of human capital.[29] When migrants have the ability to remain (legally or illegally) in contexts where they have greater earning potential, but limited social networks, they often do so. Pearson has suggested that Aboriginal peoples will necessarily return 'home' because of their cultural ties that,

26 Vertovec, 'Circular Migration'.
27 Agunias and Newland, *Circular Migration and Development*.
28 Basok, 'He Came, He Saw'; Basok, 'Post-National Citizenship'.
29 Vertovec, 'Circular Migration'.

according to the fourth precept, will not be transformed by their travels. It takes little effort to see this is a ridiculous assertion, not only because people have historically sought travel precisely because of its transformative effects, but also because it contradicts Pearson's own narrative.[30] Orbiting is imagined to initiate a singular revolution in an individual's skills, norms and values, but without affecting their 'culture'. This paradox parallels another in Pearson's schema, which is that he imagines young Aboriginal people to be sufficiently rationalist self-serving actors that they pursue individual gains, leaving their families and social worlds, while remaining sufficiently communally minded as to be willing to forfeit or redistribute those gains at a certain point.[31] Such contradictions are arguably a feature of, rather than a glitch in, his arguments.[32] Insisting on both incorporation into mainstream education and employment institutions and the value of cultural continuity provides considerable rhetorical space in which to manoeuvre as required.

Possibly due to its vagueness, academic assessments of Pearson's orbiting proposal have been relatively slow to develop in Australia. In the wideranging *Black Politics*, political scientist Sarah Maddison critiqued Pearson's account as founded in a false idea of Aboriginal people as 'atomized individuals' rather than embedded members of dense social networks.[33] This discursive move, Maddison suggests, is linked to other attempts to re-imagine and re-territorialise communally held Aboriginal lands as individual private property. Meanwhile, seasoned anthropologists pointed out that neither the theory or practice of orbiting was wholly novel. As Peter Sutton noted, during the 1960s, missions in South Australia and the Northern Territory had sent, or encouraged, their Aboriginal residents to travel hundreds of kilometres to acquire skills and market capital by becoming seasonal fruit pickers in the continent's south-east.[34] Merlan has similarly stated that Katherine-area Aboriginal people were orbiting during the 1960s, 'long before' Pearson coined the term, when 'a quite active system of managed, and often mobile, labour policy' allowed, and sometimes forced, them to work far from home for varying periods of

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30   Clifford, *Routes*.
31   Demographic evidence suggests that employment prospects may actually decline for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with migration. See Biddle, 'Indigenous Migration and the Labour Market'.
32   Neale, 'Staircases, Pyramids'.
33   Maddison, *Black Politics*.
34   Sutton, *The Politics of Suffering*. See also Sharp and Tatz, *Aborigines in the Economy*; Prout Quicke and Haslam McKenzie, this volume.

time.[35] Crucially, these people could legally (and illegally) be forced to both leave their home communities and to also return.[36] Surveying the myriad subsequent policy interventions that have shaped the lives of remote-living Aboriginal peoples, Morphy has suggested that the 'anchored kin-based network has proved to be extremely resilient, adaptive and persistent' in forestalling migration out of the places in which they were raised.[37] When people do migrate from remote communities, Coulehan and Gaykamaŋu write, 'the movement … to the city is more complex, contentious and open-ended than Pearson's vision'.[38]

Reproof to Pearson's beneficence precept, among others, can also be found in Paul Burke's attempts to study the 'diaspora' of Walpiri peoples between 2009 and 2012. During this time, as Burke explains, many factors pressured Walpiri peoples living in central Australian remote communities to migrate out, including not only the restrictive social policies of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (the 'Intervention') beginning in 2007, but also longer-term histories of social tensions and violence within their immediate environs.[39] Among the diaspora, Burke found that only 'a tiny minority' resembled the Pearsonian ideal of socially and spatially mobile persons with full-time employment, and that, in fact, for the overwhelming majority, the basis of economic life remained the same outside remote communities as it was inside them; namely, government welfare payments and public housing.[40]

Burke is nonetheless careful to note that social and cultural transformations are occurring. While they do not conform to the 'orbiting' ideals found in policy advocacy, a subsection of middle-aged Walpiri women have established new lives and social networks outside central Australia, many entering into long-term relationships non-Walpiri men. In their movements, these women are not motivated by aspirations of careerism or communal development, but by a shared critique of the gender relations and social conditions of their home communities. Discussing this same context, notably through the experiences of one particular Walpiri woman, Melinda Hinkson has recently described such trajectories in

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35   Merlan, 'Anthropology and Policy-Preparedness'.
36   See also Beckett, 'From Island to Mainland'; Collmann, *Fringe Dwellers and Welfare*.
37   Morphy, '(Im)Mobility: Regional Population'.
38   Coulehan and Gaykamaŋu, 'Family Matters'.
39   Burke, 'Indigenous Diaspora'.
40   Burke, 'Indigenous Diaspora'.

terms of *eviction* and *exile* rather than diaspora or orbiting.[41] In using this language, Hinkson draws attention to the ways in which 'leaving' irrevocably transforms interpersonal relationships, the factors (some potentially lethal) that keep people from returning 'home' and the personal placemaking that necessarily occurs away from 'home'. One could well argue, based on the diverse literatures surveyed in this section, that the lives of actual 'orbiting' Aboriginal peoples likely neither remain stable nor change in the ways Pearson has proposed.

A Looping Discourse

There appears to be little evidence in Cape York Peninsula or elsewhere to indicate that Pearson's idea of 'orbiting' has been taken up by Indigenous peoples living in remote or rural areas. Census data suggest that in the Cape York Peninsula communities targeted by Pearson's social reform agenda, populations have neither shrunk nor grown dramatically between 2006 and 2016, whereas unemployment rates have ballooned.[42] This is not to suggest, though, that 'orbiting' has not been influential. Rather, as I will argue in this closing section, Pearson's descriptions of 'orbiting' and its celebration by journalists, politicians and others have played an important role in shaping Indigenous policy debates. 'Orbiting' is fundamentally focused on those Indigenous peoples born in remote and regional communities and their future prospects. For many decades, the viability of life in exactly these communities has been a focus of Indigenous policy in Australia. During the so-called 'self-determination' era (c. 1972–98), federal agencies, in particular, sought to fund multiple programs that would enable the continuation of Indigenous life and cultural practices in these places.[43] Such initiatives were later criticised for 'failing' to create long-term economic support for these communities, though this was not their objective, and taken as examples of unsustainable policy. Thus, in the 1990s, conservative political voices began to speak of the 'failure' of self-determination policy, variously framing the living conditions and economic disadvantage of remote and regional communities as a result of inappropriate social policy rather than settler colonial dispossession,

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41   Hinkson, 'At the Edges'; Hinkson, 'Precarious Placemaking'.
42   For example, unemployment in Coen (3.5 per cent in 2006 and 31.5 per cent in 2016), Aurukun (9.5 per cent in 2006 and 48.8 per cent in 2016) and Hopevale (5 per cent in 2006 and 41.8 per cent in 2016) increased through this decade. See also Altman, 'Searching for the "Real"'.
43   Myers and Peterson, 'The Origins and History'.

exploitative resource extraction, insubstantial land rights, institutional racism, predatory business practices or the many other causes one might reasonably identify.[44] The problem, they argued, was too much 'culture' and not enough economy. In the early 2000s, Pearson stepped into these debates by first proclaiming Indigenous peoples' 'right to take responsibility' for their socio-economic positions and futures, and then insisting they 'orbit' into capitalist geographies.

In doing so, Pearson has helped sediment several 'orbiting' precepts within Australian policy. Pearson was not the originator of these ideas, of course, as there is a long history of bureaucrats and others making similar discursive divisions. For example, understandings of remote and regional Indigenous communities as sites of endemic capital deficit, and urban centres as singular sites of capital supply, were foundational to the era of assimilation policy (c. 1951–72) and its strategies of removing Indigenous peoples—particularly children—from their remote and regional homes. Thus, when journalists, policy advocates and politicians began to use this pattern of reasoning again in the early 2000s, they were criticised as endorsing a 'new' assimilationism. In this new iteration, Indigenous communities were frequently described as 'cultural museums' or 'lands of shame' in which there was little to no formal employment.[45] Rather than having 'real jobs' in the 'real economy' of market employment, the residents of these communities were depicted as avowedly engaged in 'pretend jobs' in the 'gammon economy' of government welfare.[46] Journalists could be found regularly describing remote Indigenous communities as 'abject failures', with incredibly high rates of unemployment and living conditions 'worse than those in Rwanda and South Africa'.[47] Such accounts reached fever pitch around the time of the 2007 Intervention and have continued through the subsequent years. For example, in 2014, the Western Australian premier described remote communities as 'not viable' and 'not sustainable'.[48] The following year, the prime minister, Tony Abbott, drew both criticism and support after he claimed that Indigenous peoples in remote communities were making

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44 See Austin-Broos, *A Different Inequality.* For example, Sutton, 'The Politics of Suffering'.
45 For example Hughes, *Lands of Shame.*
46 See Jordan, *Better than Welfare?*; Kowal, 'Responsibility, Noel Pearson'.
47 Neale, *Wild Articulations.*
48 Dan Harrison, 'Remote Indigenous Communities Under Threat', *The Sydney Morning Herald,* 14 November 2014, www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/remote-indigenous-communities-under-threat-20141114-11myb9.html.

a 'lifestyle choice' that could not be supported indefinitely by taxpayers.[49] More recently, in 2018, commentators on national television called for 'another stolen generation' to remove Indigenous children from remote communities.[50] While Pearson has criticised the language used in many of these comments, his work has nonetheless been important in supporting the spatial and discursive divisions that underpin them.

Figure 11.1: Noel Pearson with Australian prime minister Tony Abbott in the Northern Territory, September 2014.

Source: Tracey Nearmy, AAP Image.

Perhaps the most important, though less obvious, effect of Pearson's work has been its mobilisation of the language of 'choice' in relation to remote and regional Indigenous communities. Precept four of 'orbiting', as I outlined earlier, involves the contention that Indigenous peoples can exit their home communities without changing their 'cultural' identity. They remain culturally whole even as, following Pearson, they become 'completely bicultural'. From this (contradictory) point of view, Indigenous peoples who are born remote from the 'opportunities' of urban education and employment appear to be faced with a kind of choice in

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49 Shalailah Medhora, 'Remote Communities are "Lifestyle Choices", says Tony Abbott', *The Guardian,* 10 March 2015, www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/mar/10/remote-communities-are-lifestyle-choices-says-tony-abbott.

50 Josh Dye, 'Sunrise Investigated over "Racist" Aboriginal Segment', *The Sydney Morning Herald,* 30 March 2018, www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/sunrise-investigated-over-racist-aboriginal-segment-20180330-p4z71s.html.

which their Aboriginality, connection to kin or cultural identity is not at stake. Remote-living Indigenous peoples, Pearson has written, need to acquire 'the capabilities to choose a life that they have reason to value', namely a life of wage labour and wealth accumulation.[51] Indigenous peoples' 'traditional cultural forms', as Pearson has said, appear to be 'a choice rather than a necessity' in capitalist modernity.[52] It is not a coincidence that, in the years after Pearson first used such language, conservative politicians have spoken of Indigenous peoples needing to be given 'a genuine choice' about where they live,[53] framing life in remote community as a 'lifestyle choice', and conservative policy advocates, such as the mining magnate Andrew Forrest, have represented their programs to encourage Indigenous employment in mainstream economies in terms of creating 'healthy lifestyle choices'.[54] Using 'orbiting' reasoning, a chorus of politically conservative voices have repeatedly and successfully lobbied for the end of various remote services, including the Community Development Employment Projects scheme, criticising anything that does not directly or indirectly coerce people from their remote and regional homes.[55] For such commentaries, the 'orbiting' concept is a crucial discursive foundation. Using it, residents committed to living in remote Indigenous communities are able to be re-positioned as errant subjects, making an 'unhealthy' choice to delay their inevitable exit.

As I wrote at the beginning of this chapter, it is premature for any retrospective summary of Pearson's influence on Indigenous politics and policy in Australia.[56] However, there are clear and present signs of a transition in the language and paradigms underpinning federal and state policy, moving from a post-ATSIC moment in which Pearson and other 'executive advocates' held significant sway over the terms of debate. This provides an important opportunity to reconsider these terms and their practical effects. Existing research by myself and others' suggests that the practical effects of 'orbiting' initiatives have been marginal, contrary or virtually impossible to detect, and that their underlying precepts do not align with research in Australia or internationally. What is also apparent, I have argued, is that the 'orbiting' idea has helped sediment

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51   CYI, *From Hand Out to Hand Up*.
52   Pearson, 'Pathways to Prosperity'.
53   Eastley, 'Vanstone Says'.
54   Andrew Forrest, 'We Have a Mutual Obligation to End the Welfare Trap', *The Australian,* 2 August 2014, 4.
55   See Altman and Klein, 'Lessons from a Basic'.
56   However, also see Watt, 'Pearson's Mission'.

certain discursive constructions of Indigenous lives in remote and regional Australia within political and policy contexts. In short, 'orbiting' has helped many to (re)imagine these lives outside local context and communal relations, staging them as individualised actors who should choose the only sound 'lifestyle choice' in capitalist modernity: the life of a migrant labourer.

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