ACADEMY OF
THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
IN AUSTRALIA

TRAPPED IN THE GAP

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR EMMA KOWAL

ACADEMY PAPER

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I

This lecture[i] coincides with the launch of my first book, *Trapped in the Gap: Doing Good in Indigenous Australia* [S]. Launching a book, especially a first one, is a time of reflection. In the lead up to today, I found my thoughts looping back to various points where the journey that ends tonight could be said to have begun. The more I thought about it, the various life arcs and policy arcs that produced, fueled, and at times confounded this journey proliferated and intersected in my mind like so many crazy rainbows. And while the book I have here is my pot of gold (only intellectually speaking, academic books don't make money), the Indigenous policy arcs of recent times are generating violent storms, especially in remote areas of WA and SA, with no rainbows in sight.[ii]

In this lecture I will trace the beginnings and possible endings of some of these personal and policy arcs. I will draw partly on some of my recent work on the 20th-century history of biological research in Indigenous communities. This work has me delving into the archives to understand the emergence of Indigenous studies in the 60s and its relationship to Indigenous policy. It has also provided another way to explain the anthropological observations I make in the book, so rather than just talk you through the main arguments of the book—I don't want to spoil the reading experience for you—I will share some of my recent thoughts.

One beginning to the arc that ends tonight was my personal political journey that began in medical school at Melbourne University in the early 1990s and ended in Darwin, 4,000 kilometres and a world away. I became interested in Aboriginal justice as a university student, angry that the high standard of living that most Australians enjoyed was built on the denial of Indigenous sovereignty and the continued suffering of an impoverished minority. The end of the Hawke-Keating era in 1996 saw Prime Minister Howard make deep funding cuts across the public sector, including Indigenous affairs, but this did not dampen the enthusiasm of many Australians for the Reconciliation Movement that Keating had started. At Melbourne University I helped to start an Indigenous solidarity group and arranged to do some of my medical training at Utopia, a remote community northeast of Alice Springs. When I finished my medical and arts degrees, at the age of 25, I bought my first car, an old Toyota 4-runner, and drove across the country to begin my internship at the Royal Darwin Hospital.

I arrived in Darwin between Christmas and New Year's Eve. Humidity was at its annual peak, and for three days I felt I was in a fog, unable to think of anything but the oppressive heat. I soon began work at the Royal Darwin Hospital where around 70 per cent of patients were Aboriginal. The air-conditioned hospital was too cold for them, and the concrete area outside the main doors buzzed with life, with young kids running around and family groups sitting and talking in various Aboriginal languages, eating chips from the cafe and passing around cigarettes, with tubes and bags of bodily fluids protruding from hospital gowns.

It seemed to me that more should be done to prevent the endless cycle of sick Indigenous people through the health system and back to the social conditions that had made them sick, and would do so again. It was not long before I became interested in the public health research institute next door, a place where dedicated non-indigenous researchers worked alongside Indigenous people to find better ways to prevent disease. I attended their weekly meetings and eagerly listened to tales of community health promotion projects where researchers supported local people to identify and address their own health priorities. Their presentations were littered with happy snaps of cultural

connection: Indigenous people cheerfully participating in research, kids playing up for the camera, island beaches, lily-strewn billabongs and damper roasting on the fire. In my personal journey of methodically applying myself to what I thought to be the most important cause in the most effective way, public health research seemed the next logical step.

Finally, it was *me* flying on a tiny plane to a remote community, shyly meeting the council chairman and thanking him for letting me visit, explaining our project to Aboriginal Health Workers with the aid of a brightly coloured flipchart, and tentatively trying out the Aboriginal language phrases I had learnt. After a few years of intermittent remote community work, combined with long stretches in front of a computer in town, translating the work into quantifiable outcomes and lists of remaining challenges, I felt a growing sense of unease. The rhetoric of the Institute promised that adopting the principles of self-determination and Indigenous control would lead to effective public health measures that would 'close the gap' in health outcomes. But in practice, all the measures to increase Indigenous control seemed to have the greatest effect on white researchers, making them wary of what they did and said. I realised that what I had 'learnt' in my time at the Institute was more about the moral politics of race and identity than improving Indigenous health.

I began to form an answer to that fundamental question I sometimes asked myself in times of frustration, a question that haunts many of the White anti-racists described in the book: [S] 'What the hell are we White people actually doing here?' As my research progressed, I began to express this differently: [S] 'What happens when a group of intelligent, well-meaning people, aware of the past and supported by the state, attempt to help Indigenous people without harming them?' *Trapped in the Gap* is an attempt at an answer.

While I won't spell out my answers in any detail here, suffice to say I found that the attempts of White anti-racists to help without harming were wracked with ambivalence.

Those who seek to close the gap experience two equal and opposing fears. First, they understand that improving Indigenous health requires systemic change, and they question their ability to overcome the institutional racism of post-settler society. While 'the gap' remains as an organic barometer of continued colonial oppression, they fear they are doing too little. At the same time, they fear they are doing too much. Encounters with radically different Indigenous ways of life leave White anti-racists concerned that their efforts to improve the health and social status of Indigenous people might be furthering Western norms at the cost of Indigenous difference. If the 'gap' is due to the ways of life essential to cultural survival, it follows that erasing the gap erases Indigenous culture. Despite the post-colonial mantra of community control, White anti-racists worry that their labours will be judged as indistinguishable from those of racist bureaucrats and missionaries of the past.

The book explains these fears as the product of a long-standing tension between equality and difference. For as long as white Australians have sought to intervene in Indigenous lives, some of those missionaries, anthropologists, professionals or bureaucrats have worried that the goal of improvement—whether it be civilization, salvation, citizenship, good health or education—runs counter to the goal of maintaining Indigenous difference. Each era of Indigenous policy attempts to manage the tensions between equality and difference in its own way, forming the interconnecting and conflicting policy arcs I will sketch out.

II

In what is known as the 'self-determination era', which began in the early 1970s and may or may not be currently ending, equality is understood as statistical equality [S]. We produce a myriad of statistics about those things we consider to constitute a good life, like good health, stable

employment, and one functional, clean house per nuclear family, and we strive to equalise the outcomes for non-Indigenous and Indigenous people, to make the lines on the graph converge.

The gap forms its own arc in my life, and in Indigenous policy. [S] As I wrote up the PhD that forms the empirical backbone of this book in 2006, the very first 'close the gap' campaign was launched by Cathy Freeman and Ian Thorpe for the international NGO Oxfam. The first time I saw the logo, it crystalised everything I had been writing about equality in the self-determination era. Since then, 'close the gap' has become the mantra of Indigenous policy across the nation and measurable indicators, sometimes even culturally based ones, have mushroomed and overflow from statistical collections, standing committee terms of reference, performance frameworks, and NGO report cards.

The beginning of the gap as a policy arc coincided with a new arc in my life [S]. I wrote my PhD frantically, with frequent interruptions and gaps, as I struggled to adjust to the competing demands of the academy and motherhood, demands I could never have met without the incredible support of my husband, Yin Paradies. I began to hone that cruel but absolutely necessary skill of pretending not to hear my child in order to finish writing my sentence.

And I commit the faux pas of bringing the private into a public lecture because so many early career researchers work under these emotional relations of production and it is, to put it mildly, a challenge. Nine years later, combining an academic career with motherhood is still highly demanding, but I get a flush of ironic joy—a version of what we call in Yiddish *naches*—when my girls now pretend not to hear *me* in order to finish reading and writing their own sentences. Back then, in the gaps between feeding and cooking and washing and not enough sleeping, I wrote about the politics of closing statistical gaps [S]. Here again is this characteristic image of statistical equality, in this case child mortality in the Northern Territory from the late 1960s when vital statistics were first collected until the turn of the century. After dramatic improvements into the early 1980s, the lines remain frustratingly parallel, decreasing at roughly the same rate. And as the gap remains the same, the proportional difference increases. By a quirk of simple arithmetic, if Indigenous and non-Indigenous rates improve by the same rate, the ratio of Indigenous to non-Indigenous is amplified. Unless Indigenous health can be improved faster than the health of the general population, efforts to close the gap will be fruitless.[iii]

[S] But the latest Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report, released last November, shows that the narrative arc of the gap may be coming to an end, or at least beginning to. After seven Productivity Commission reports on Indigenous disadvantage that are full of measuring gaps and assessing progress in shrinking them, this eighth report explicitly disavows the gap [S]. At the top of page 2 we are told: 'The key consideration was change over time in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians not the gap to non-Indigenous Australians. It is important to acknowledge improvements in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander Australians, even if improvements for non-Indigenous Australians mean that the gap has not narrowed.'[iv]
This is a startling shift. The very purpose of this report is to report against the COAG targets set in 2009, and each of the six targets aims to either halve or eliminate a *gap*. So how can they dispense with the concept? The report deals with this significant semantic problem by stating the improvements (or lack thereof) for Indigenous people for each target area (education, employment, income), and then stating the change over the same period for non-Indigenous Australians, but without directly comparing the two.[v]

I don't know if this approach will become the norm, or what Indigenous policy will look like without the gap. But I appreciate the ironic symmetry that as the culmination of my sustained critique of the gap is finally published, the gap itself may be in retreat.

The possible end of the gap as a policy tool and object of analysis pales into insignificance in a time where we are facing the end of some remote communities [S]. Remote Aboriginal Australia, at least in Western and South Australia, is facing an unprecedented crisis, which is saying a lot for a population that seems perpetually associated with crisis. This time, the very existence of communities is threatened as the federal government withdraws financial support for outstations, creating a funding chasm that the two state governments have decisively stepped away from.
The beginning of this ending can be dated to 2005, Howard, fresh from abolishing ATSIC, announced the first 'mutual obligation' policy. It concerned Mulan, a small community 300km south of Halls Creek, and west of the former mission community of Balgo. Mulan was established as part of the 'outstation movement', a hallmark of the self-determination era, in the late 1970s. The outstation movement provided government support to Aboriginal people to move away from the larger remote communities, former missions or government settlements, to establish small settlements on traditional country that in many cases had passed into Aboriginal ownership through land rights legislation or other means. Mulan is a typical story, formed by Walmajarri people moving west from Balgo mission to a pastoral station that had been transferred to the Aboriginal Land Trust in 1978.

As the site of Howard's first Shared Responsibility Agreement, Mulan was thrust into the national spotlight late in 2004. Under the agreement, residents would receive a petrol bowser in return for making sure children attended school regularly and washed their faces twice a day to reduce the high incidence of trachoma, an eye infection that causes blindness. At the time, commentators and scholars wondered if this was the beginning of the end of the self-determination era, with the then Indigenous Affairs Minister Amanda Vanstone coining the term 'cultural museums' to describe outstations and declaring that some would not be viable in the longer term.
The recent announcement that Premier Colin Barnett plans to withdraw funding to 150 outstations in Western Australia from July this year may close the policy arc begun in the early 1970s. Mulan, with a population of 114 at the 2006 census (and estimated by the community to be 140 in 2009), may be in danger of making the list of communities destined to have their water and power supply cut from 1 July. If it is, this would cement Mulan's historical significance as a site of fluctuating policy experimentation.

If the self-determination era is indeed completing its four-decade policy arc, what is replacing it? This question has been asked by many in recent years. A common answer draws on the current policy buzzwords, 'responsibility' and 'partnerships', influenced most of all by Noel Pearson. Others have warned that the policies of recent years are a 'return to assimilation' [S].[vi] I agree or disagree, depending on what you mean by assimilation. To most progressive, anti-racist Australians, assimilation means stealing so-called 'half-caste' children and placing them in often abusive institutions; breeding out the colour; the micro-management of every aspect of Aboriginal lives, and stolen wages; missions forbidding people to speak their own languages.

It is critical that these cruel and tragic features of 20th-century Australian history are remembered and their victims compensated. However, most historians agree they were not the core logic and practice of the assimilation era. Contrary to how it is often characterised, as it developed from the 1930s to the 1960s, assimilation was above all a progressive policy of inclusion.
So while the image of whitening across the generations is the most iconic one associated with the assimilation era, this somewhat less famous image may better represent assimilation [S]. It is the cover of a 1961 edition of a series of booklets published by the Department of Territories to support the 'civil' component of assimilation. The series aimed to convince non-Indigenous Australians to accept Aboriginal people as full citizens, and amounted to a sustained anti-racism campaign, I think one of Australia's first.

Reading this image for the meaning of assimilation, it is difficult to conclude that assimilation was primarily about making Indigenous people into white people. This model of an 'assimilated' Aboriginal man on the cover is an 'Aboriginal' mechanic, equal to but not the same as his white colleague. As explained by the Secretary of the Department of Territories in 1961, assimilated Aboriginal people should retain their culture except those aspects that interfered with their ability to work, such as 'a tendency to go walkabout' or 'extravagant sharing of possessions'.[vii]

The start of this policy arc could be identified in the Aboriginal activist movements of the 1930s that demanded citizenship and equality for Aboriginal people. It could be the 1944 book *Citizenship for Aborigines* where anthropologist AP Elkin set out a comprehensive program for assimilation and equal rights. While these are critical precedents, for practical policy beginnings we could look to the 1948 Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities that resolved to provide education to Aboriginal settlements in the Northern Territory (Macgregor: 74).

But for a systematic statement of assimilation policy and its implications we must move forward to the year this booklet was produced, 1961. At the Native Welfare Conference held on Australia Day that year, Paul Hasluck, Commonwealth Minister for Territories since 1951, successfully brokered an agreement with the states to comprehensively define assimilation and its policy implications for the first time [S]. Assimilation meant that: 'all aborigines and part-aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians'.

Now, there is plenty to critique in this definition, and in the years following official definitions shifted to value more the continuation of Indigenous customs and beliefs, before eventually being abandoned as a policy in the 1970s. But what I want to emphasise here are the [S] 'methods of advancing the policy' that formed the next part of the conference statement: 'Extension, where applicable, of government settlement work to encourage nomadic and semi-nomadic natives to adopt a more settled way of life and to make health services, better standards of housing and nutrition, schooling, vocational training and occupation available to them and their children, as a first stage towards their assimilation.'

Although some of these services had been provided through missions for decades, and Hasluck had increased funding for missions and government settlements through the 50s, here, for the first time, national and state governments were admitting their responsibility for providing services to all Aboriginal people with the aim of 'attaining the same manner of living as other Australians'. It is to this point in 1961 that the policy arc of the gap can most clearly be traced. This policy arc has continued through various buzzwords and catchphrases: Integration, Advancement, Closing the Gap, Shared Responsibility, the NT Intervention, Stronger Futures, Advancement (again), and now Empowered Communities. It is what I explore in the book as 'remedialism', the desire to achieve statistical equality for Indigenous Australians. This vision sees the Indigenous population climb the ladder of opportunity, accumulating social capital until they eventually become middle class. It is a policy arc that has steadily gained momentum and sophistication over the last 50 years, and is advocated by many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike.

While the self-determination era is usually depicted as the antithesis of assimilation, if we consider the long policy arc of remedialism, it is the continuities that come to the fore. The major legacies of the self-determination era (according to Tim Rowse), a) the statistical archive of Indigenous disadvantage and b) the thousands of incorporated Aboriginal organisations, have both aided efforts at equality—at closing gaps and climbing ladders—by providing methods to measure them and Aboriginal organisations to deliver government-funded gap-closing services. So, notwithstanding my earlier observation about the possible end of the 'gap', I don't see an end in

sight for this policy arc.

IV

A second, shorter policy arc overlays the longer arc of remedialism. This is the arc of difference that began in the early 1970s and may be in its final days. This arc is contained within the era that was heralded by Whitlam's pledge to 'restore to the Aboriginal people of Australia their lost power of self-determination' (Whitlam 1973: 12). My contention is that some aspects of the self-determination era served the policy arc of equality, like those I just mentioned, while other aspects served the conflicting policy arc of difference. The self-determination era encompassed two aspects that supported Indigenous difference to an unprecedented degree: land rights and the outstation movement. In combination, these policies supported the maintenance of priorities and modes of life radically different to those of the western mainstream. Particularly in the remote northern and central regions of the country, the 1970s saw a renaissance of subsistence activities and ceremonial life.

In this period, the policy arc of equality and the policy arc of difference overlapped, and were in tension. For while arguments have been made that outstation living may be the key to closing the gap, for example that outstation residents have better health, the bulk of evidence clearly contradicts this (an argument I have explored elsewhere). As Jon Altman, perhaps the most prominent outstation advocate, observed in the wake of the NT Intervention [S]:

The big picture… is that equality of socio-economic status will not occur if people continue to live on their land in remote Australia, if they retain distinct cultural practices and priorities and if they resist or do not desire to move up the settlement hierarchy to towns and cities. (Altman 2007)

The ambivalences and ambiguities I found among the White anti-racists described in this book can be explained by the collision of these two policy arcs. Supporting radical Indigenous difference on outstations while simultaneously trying to close the gaps of disadvantage brings the tension between difference and equality to breaking point.

But I have not answered the question I posed: what is replacing the self-determination era, and what does it mean for White anti-racists?

For the sake of argument, let us accept that the current moment is indeed the end of the policy arc that began in the early 70s and supported, or allowed, or maybe just flirted with, the perpetuation of non-western lifeworlds. The end of this relatively shorter policy arc of difference may relieve the tension of difference and equality. The goal of equality, unperturbed by radical difference, is imagined as a stepwise transition from unemployment to unskilled jobs to skilled jobs to home ownership, with some reaching the middle classes perhaps over two generations. If those different ways of life that stand in the way of a protestant work ethic—'a tendency to go walkabout' or 'extravagant sharing of possessions'—are lost on the way, then so be it. In my ongoing contact with people who work in Indigenous affairs, my sense is that this unadulterated remedialism, this quest for equality without ambivalence, is on the rise.

If this is the case, the question of whether this shift is a good thing or a bad thing is critical, but a much longer conversation than I can broach here. But I will end by troubling my own narrative of the end of the policy arc of difference by saying that even those who seem untroubled by difference may always be haunted by it. I illustrate this with an article in the latest issue of the *Monthly*, a publication aimed at a progressive, anti-racist audience and that more or less reflects their concerns. The article is about Aboriginal art, which is itself a component of the policy arc of difference, and which it is feared is in permanent economic decline as the so-called 'first-contact' artists who grew up beyond the reach of White people and institutions are almost all gone.

The article was about the late artist known as Sally Gabori, a Kaiadilt (Kayardild) woman from Mornington Island who became an international sensation after taking up painting in her early 80s until her death two months ago. A story is told about the National Gallery of Australia's second Indigenous Art Triennial in 2012 where Gabori's work was heavily represented. As another artist gave a talk, Gabori sat at the back of the crowd, close to some of her paintings. Then, without warning, she rose from her wheelchair and began to silently dance. Some in the crowd realised what was happening and turned to marvel and record the unscheduled performance. The article concludes, 'No one quite knew what they were witnessing but everyone, it seems, believed'. What did they believe in, those who watched Sally Gabori dance? And those of us who worry about radical difference and its possible end—what do we believe in? Do we believe that distinct ways of knowing and being must be preserved, whether in the name of human rights, indigenous cultural rights, restorative justice, national heritage or global diversity? Will we need the knowledge that propelled Sally Gabori out of her wheelchair to save our skins in this anthropogenic age of extinction?

Or do we believe that globalising change is inevitable, that Indigenous people should participate in it like the rest of us, and protecting them from the 'real' economy is counterproductive? Do we reject the dichotomy between development and cultural identity and have faith that Indigenous people will be, and already are, global citizens in their own distinct way?
[S] It may be frustrating for some that *Trapped in the Gap* does not tell people what to believe. Instead it provides a conceptual framework to map the fraught terrain of Indigenous affairs, inviting readers to trace their own arcs of understanding and belief.

As the arc of this lecture comes to a close I'd like to end by expressing my gratitude to Fethi, Lee and Brenda for recognising what I had done, and what I could do at Deakin. I'd like to thank all the mentors who have supported me in recent years, many of whom are acknowledged in the book, but especially John Cash, Bob Williamson, Warwick Anderson, Ghassan Hage, Monica Minnegal, Chris Healy, Deidre Coleman, and last but not at all least, Martha Macintyre, who supervised my Honours research 16 years ago and saw my potential as an academic years before I thought of becoming one, and who nominated me for the Paul Bourke award. And finally, I want to thank my family for all their support, love, and tolerance.

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[i] I would like to thank Professor Spearritt and the Academy for this award and I would like to dedicate the 2015 Paul Bourke lecture to my friend and fellow anthropologist, Emmaline Schooneveldt-Reid.

[ii] Except perhaps for those select Indigenous groups who can benefit from mining agreements without suffering excessive social costs.

[iii] For example, recent research showing Indigenous infant mortality rates had improved but at a lesser rate than non-Indigenous rates (although greater in absolute terms) (Freemantle et al 2006) was reported in the media as 'Aboriginal babies in appalling death rate' and 'Infant mortality gulf widens' (Banks 2006; Jenkins 2006).

[iv] http://www.pc.gov.au/research/recurring/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/key-indicators-2014/key-indicators-2014-overviewbooklet.pdf

[v] 'The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 20–24 year olds completing year 12 or equivalent or above increased from 45 per cent in 2008 to 59 per cent in 2012–13. For non-Indigenous Australians, the proportion remained between 86 and 88 per cent.'

[vi] From Neville, AO Australia's Coloured Minority. Sydney: Currawong Publication Co, 1947.

[vii] 1960 booklet—expansion of what Aboriginal heritage could remain in assimilated subject—everything except 'extravagant sharing of possessions' 'a tendency to go walkabout' 'primitive standards of hygiene' 'tribal obligations' (McGregor 96) 'not only for the aborigines themselves but as national heritage' (cited in McGregor 138).