

!!Pre-publication version!!

To appear as:

Ponsonnet, Maïa. To appear. Colonisation as presence and absence, in Mellick Ross ed., *Presence in the contemporary world*. Berlin: Springer.

Maïa Ponsonnet

The University of Sydney

Centre for the Dynamics of Language, The Australian National University

Colonization as presence and absence

What the world is like, the way it is populated, the way it looks – in other words, what *is there* in the world – has evolved most dramatically in recent centuries with colonization and the spread of industrialization. In many parts of the world, people’s lives are very different from what they were just a few decades ago: entire continents have been colonized, and then ‘globalized’, so that the world people live in has undergone striking transformations. In some places, colonization is so recent that the most drastic changes occurred in living memory. Individuals who have faced the loss of their own world and values are still here to tell us about what *their* world was like. In many cases, these are stories of regret and grief. This is the case, for instance, in Northern Australia. Some parts of the ‘Top End’ of Australia were only invaded in the 1920s, and ‘settled’ even later. In the vast region called Arnhem Land, which is now Indigenous property, old people remember vividly what things were like ‘before the white men came’. The overwhelming presence of the invader, and the resulting absence of those they killed and of the lifestyles and values they destroyed, are acutely perceived by some.

The following pages tell the story of an Australian Aboriginal man who spoke to me about how he lived through this transition, and could never accept the world to which he was present – as opposed to the world as it *should* have been. His own world – the real one, the one that made sense – was inexplicably absent. His people, his friends, were absent because they had died too early, decimated by alcohol and diseases brought by white people. His values and beliefs were absent because they were no longer embraced by the surviving population, and no longer embodied in cultural representations – songs, dances, paintings, ceremonies. To this man, these absences were felt as unsurmountable loss, and the presence of the world as it actually stands,

with its nonsensical values and principles, was a source of incommensurable despair. In this short text, I attempt to convey and explain a small part of my friend's ocean of sadness.

Losing friends

When I first met Rob, he was already alone. Although not even sixty-five, he was in a sense a survivor. Had I come a couple of years earlier, I might have met a handful of cheerful, long-time mates of his: half a dozen men and women of very traditional Aboriginal backgrounds, who had lived happily together in this very small, very remote community.

The community was just a small village, a dozen houses, a small hundred inhabitants, in what many might see as the middle of nowhere in Arnhem Land, a vast region legally owned by Aboriginal groups in the north of Australia. A few kilometres away another community featured a shop selling basic supplies, a school, a clinic, and the office of a local council. Scattered around at some distance from the villages were smaller hamlets or 'outstations', the semi-permanent homes of just a family or two. The closest town was located 320 kilometres away via a dirt road flooded during the wet season. All around was the bush, the land belonging to the local clans.

Rob and his family had moved to this location in the early 1980s, after living in a larger community closer to town for a few decades. They had not moved there alone. A number of families, who belonged to the same language group and were all relatives according to classificatory kinship, had moved together, forming a new village. Rob and his mates used to go fishing and hunting together, to spend time at the outstations, on the land of their fathers and grandfathers, where each feature of the landscape, each billabong or hill, was evidence of an ancestral past that had created the world as it stood today. They used to walk everywhere so that every inch of this immense territory was as familiar to them as one's own bedroom. The ancestral territory was saturated with recent memories, with beauty, smells and promises of juicy bees or fat game; as well as with ancestral meanings, and sometimes sacred energy. Rob and his friends would tell stories around the fire in the evenings, conversing in their traditional language. While Rob recounted these shared activities with great pleasure, even more crucial to his eyes, perhaps, were the shared beliefs, values and 'laws' – a set of stories, rules and principles that Rob had learnt from his fathers and uncles, who had learnt them from his

grandfathers, who had learnt them from his great-grandfathers, and so on, following all his ancestors before them.

When I arrived to work in Rob's community in June 1998, he was probably the only one willing to hold on unconditionally – and desperately – to these beliefs and to the associated worldview. His relatives in his generations – his friends – had passed away, one by one, over the previous two or three years. Quite suddenly, he felt, they had all collapsed, wiped out by strange, evil diseases that he had never seen before. Doctors had mentioned liver and other kinds of cancers, diabetes and heart conditions. Rob knew little about these obscure labels. But for years he had encouraged his friends to stop drinking rum and beer in such devastating amounts; to give up on Log Cabin, the thick and extra-strong tobacco that was really like poison packed in small flashy orange metal tins; to eat something else than the deliciously thick but less than nutritious soda bread called 'damper'; to put less sugar and more milk in the buckets of tea they would sip all day.

They should have fed on wild kangaroo meat, on barramundi fish, crocodile and goanna, on yams, juicy bush potatoes and other healthy vegetable. But for men and women brought up as hunters-gathers in a relatively arid environment, high-calorie intake was and remained a survival imperative. In traditional life, the only source of sugar was the incredibly tasty wild honey, precious but hard to find. This treat and its energy benefits were highly sought, but by nature not often granted. Processed white sugar provided a readily available (if less tasty) substitute – with disastrous consequences on health. White flour equally offered a quick and convenient fix to the belly' hungry calls, warranting permanent repletion at low cost and effort – with no less disastrous effects, aggravated by recently adopted sedentarism. Rob had tried to warn his friends – to no avail. They were all under 60 year old when they'd become sick, consumed away by these easy, pretty, sweet, pernicious white man's treats. Softly killed by the most imperious and pervasive of all white powers.

When I met Rob, his last, and probably dearest friend, his father-in-law and traditional instructor, was dying in hospital. Rob's father-in-law was buried with the greatest of ceremonial honours a few weeks later, leaving Rob in despair, with no one to go hunting and fishing with, no singer to play the didgeridoo for, no didgeridoo player to accompany his own singing, no dancers to enact the ancestral stories.

Losing languages

Rob was a tall, strongly built, very dark-skinned Aboriginal man with intensely black eyes. I spent hours and hours listening intently to his deep compelling voice telling stories, and watching his arms and hands dancing his words in ample and noble movements. Rob knew what he said, said what he knew, and at all times he was very affirmative. He spoke to me in his own personal language, not his traditional tongue but the language he used to address his family, once his traditional languages had been abandoned by younger generations.

This language that he used in his everyday life resembled Kriol, the creole language spoken in many remote Aboriginal communities in the Top End of Australia. Kriol is a new language that emerged early in the 20th century and by the 1960s it had been adopted as a native tongue by thousands of Indigenous Australians in this part of the continent. Kriol speakers probably number twenty to thirty thousand today, making it by far the most widely spoken Australian Aboriginal language. Most Kriol words are originally inspired by English words in their form, but the language uses very different sounds, so that ultimately speakers of English can't understand it. For instance *awuj* means *house*, and if you pronounce it aloud you may hear the resemblance between the two words. However, when Kriol speakers talk fast, the resemblance with English it is hard to catch. The sense of Kriol words often originates in Aboriginal languages, even though the forms come from English. The verb *kilim*, for example, comes from 'kill him', and it sometimes means 'kill'. Yet, it also often means 'hit', reflecting the fact that in many Aboriginal languages, a single verb refers to these two actions, 'hit' and 'kill'.

Rob lived in a community where everyone spoke Kriol and where many, across generations, had endorsed this language as their own. Most Kriol speakers in these communities acknowledge its Aboriginal influence and identity. Yet, for some elders who, like Rob, had witnessed colonization and its violence first hand, Kriol remained the language of the invaders. Rob was inclined to call it *Ingljij* ('English') or *munanga langgij*, 'the white man's language'. Besides, he did not speak it well. Although Kriol – or an approximation of Kriol – was the language he used the most on a daily basis, he had learnt it at a later age. It was really only his fourth or fifth language. Like most Aboriginal people in his generation, Rob had learnt his mother's language first, then his father's language, and, later, a couple of neighboring Aboriginal languages. He was no

doubt a quite gifted language learner, but his Kriol speech had many idiosyncrasies that I have never heard in anyone else's Kriol since, and his 'Aboriginal' accent was very thick – that is, he pronounced words in a way that recalled traditional Australian languages.

After several years, I could understand him without the hint of an effort, but I had the impression that many of his grandchildren, who spoke standard Kriol, often missed what he was trying to say. Rob repeatedly commented that they didn't listen – and *lisiin* 'listen' in Kriol also means 'understand': indeed, Rob was not understood, and neither was he listened to as much as he would have wanted. Now that most of his own generation was gone, Rob's ancestral languages were also dying, only known by a few older or middle-aged people rather than youngsters, let alone children. They were seldom used by anyone, so that Rob was left with a language that he was the only one to speak, a code that was really just his own, so to say. It was somewhat ironic that in the precolonial world, Rob had been able to understand and to be understood by a large proportion of the population of Arnhem Land, thanks to the many languages he mastered. But in this strange new world, nearing the end of his life, none of these languages were useful to communicate with the people he lived with, his children and grandchildren. And this presumably did not help his feeling of loneliness and helplessness.

Stories and history

Rob was born well before the Second World War, in another part of Arnhem Land, closer to the coast of the Arafura Sea. Rob had to leave this region when he was very young – as a teenager perhaps. He walked over hundreds of kilometres inland, with two of his uncles and his younger brother – a child at the time –, to join a cattle station on the border of Arnhem Land, and work there as a stockman. When questioned about the reasons why they left their country, Rob always put on a dark face and dropped obscure but dreadful answers: *ol binij deya; main dedi, main enkul, ol binish* – 'They all died there, my fathers, my uncles, they were all dead'. I never understood what exact scenario had brought Rob to the region where he lived the rest of his life, but it was not a happy one. White people had had contacts with coastal populations for decades, but it seems that Rob experienced quite violent first actual contacts as a child. Rob reported that his family had initially thought the visitors were ghosts, because the skin of dead human bodies turns white after a while. He alluded to feuds and killings due to the presence of

the new comers. According to him, his original clan, the family circle of his childhood, had been so badly disrupted that he had to run away, to start a new life in a country that was not his own.

Rob settled inland, working on a cattle station with extended family. Later, he moved to government-managed settlements closer to the town of Katherine, another 300 kilometres to the south-west. That was hundreds and hundreds of kilometres from his homelands, which he rarely visited. This would have been in the 1950s or early 1960s, when the Australian government maintained a fairly controlling regime in administered Aboriginal settlements. Rob became employed as a carpenter, helping build houses for an increasing number of new families arriving at the settlement. He got married, had six daughters, lost his first wife, got remarried. He learnt several of the local languages, and grew to become a knowledgeable man. He had troubled years, as a very young man, when he used to smoke and drink heavily. He was lost, as he himself put it, perhaps trying to come to terms with the loss of his close family and traditional land – and with the disruption of his entire world.

In Rob's own words, what put an end to his erring was *sidisenjip*, 'Citizenship'. In 1967, a referendum changed the legal status of Aboriginal populations, and although it did not, technically, grant Aboriginal people with Citizenship, a lot of Australians think that it did. Rob mostly associated *sidisenjip* with the end of alcohol restrictions for Aboriginal populations, which in fact took place prior to the referendum. Rob did not follow such things closely: *munanga bisnis*, 'white men's business', as he said. Overall, in his mind, *sidisenjip* was certainly not a good thing – quite the opposite. He very explicitly referred to *sidisenjip* as the beginning of the end of his people and of his world, when everyone started to drink and the traditional law started to disintegrate. Prior to this, life at the settlement had been quite structured: a lot of people were employed by the settlement itself, that is, by the Australian government. Everyone was fed with daily rations, children were sent to school every day of the week. Later in his life, Rob seemed to think that earlier new order, although imposed by the invaders, was preferable to the chaos that followed – initiated, in his view, by *sidisenjip*.

Rob had been a drinker for a while, as were many Aboriginal people who could get alcohol from shady sources. From his personal point of view, looking back, *sidisenjip* also represented a life-saving revelation: the sight of others drinking to excess in public,

and the destruction this brought, helped him realize that he had been going too far and that he needed to adopt new principles for his own life. He consequently stopped drinking and smoking, and in his own opinion, this saved him. Looking around him towards the end of his relatively long life, thinking about the missing friends who had left prematurely, he concluded that he should have been dead himself for a long time. The reason why he was alive, he thought, was that he did not drink, he did not smoke, he did not put half a pound of sugar in his tea. For most of his life, he kept away from, and even fought, these avatars of the white man's evil. And that saved him, he said – that is, he lived on for a number of extra, rather lonely years.

From the mid-1960s – he would have been 30 year old by then –, Rob led a physically healthy and intellectually rich life. He spent time with the elders in his adopted community and learnt the 'traditional laws': traditional stories about the creation of the world (sometimes referred to as 'Dreamtime stories'), the finest complexities of the kinship systems, scripts and performances of ceremonies. Rob became an accomplished painter, singer and didgeridoo player. As part of a traditional band, he was taken to several Australian cities and foreign countries by a white impresario, to perform for large audiences in prestigious venues.

In the 1970s, the left-wing Whitlam federal government created opportunities for Australian Aboriginal people. Among these opportunities, the Land Rights movement resulted in the adoption of legislation that acknowledged land ownership of some land for some Aboriginal groups. Based on this Act, Rob's wife was handed back some of her land, in the bush, far from the town of Katherine and surrounding settlements. Rob moved back with her to a new remote community – where I later met him. From there, they had access to her own ancestral land, where an outstation was built for them to reside during the dry season. This featured a beautiful billabong with rich supplies of fish and turtles, wild honey, seasonal fruit and roots harvests, to all sorts of smaller and bigger game, and the beauty of a homely, peaceful country. On the other hand, moving to this remote location also meant less access to health services for instance, and to schools, which his children and grandchildren only attended intermittently from then on.

Rob continued to learn about his laws and traditions – for Aboriginal men, it is only in later adulthood that full access to knowledge is achieved. Much of the traditional

knowledge is secret and sacred, restricted to initiated men. Such knowledge was gradually acquired year after year, as men slowly climbed the knowledge ladder. Rob's father-in-law, who was also his traditional master and teacher, occupied the very top of this ladder. Just a few days before his death, he made Rob come to him for a special conversation when he passed on the very last pieces of knowledge, the only ones Rob was missing. After this, Rob knew *everything*. But by that time, most of those to whom this knowledge was truly relevant were already gone.

Absence

I always had a strong sense that Rob felt that he lived in the wrong world – and feeling like this is probably the cause of the deepest and most irremediable despair one can experience. The right world – his world, the true and meaningful world – he felt had been stolen from him forever by white colonizers when they invaded his country and disrupted his way of life. The replacement world that was imposed on him, the colonial set up he had to cope with every day was, to him, no more than a farce. A pale, illusory reality, while the proper world was elsewhere, presumably continuing along in a parallel line of truer history.

In Rob's world, he was someone important. As a matter of fact, Rob was somewhat influential, a prominent elder in his community. He was also carefully listened to by white people such as administration officers in charge of orchestrating the life of the community, as well as by anthropologists and other researchers. Unfortunately, being prominent in this 'farce' was not enough for Rob, because in his own, true world, this prominence would have had much more significant consequences. Recognition would have been more than lip service. People would have actually listened to him, people would have *believed* him. Younger people, older people, white people and black people. After all, he knew everything. He was the custodian of a partly secret multi-centenary ancestral knowledge, a universe of stories, songs and ritual practices that explained everything in the world – that is, in the real world. It was only an unfortunate and mistaken accident of history that his knowledge had recently been devalued by the power of white people's technology. Rob never lost faith in his beliefs: *langos mi ai no, mi ai bilib mai ron*, 'because I know, I believe my own [truth]', he repeated, softly touching the dirt between his feet with his long fingers, *im berid iya*, 'it's buried here', onto the land that bore the marks of ancestral beings travelling through the country. *Dadsdewei ai tokin mi bat nobodi endesten* 'this is the way I talk, myself, but no one

understands'. Rocks, billabongs, trees and other landmarks were evidence of long past events involving ancestral animal beings who begot nowadays clans – how could others not see this? *Jambala nomo bilib langa mi* 'some people don't believe me', he often lamented – *wal dei gin gu* 'well they can leave'.

White people should have believed him and did not. Children should have believed him and did not. They had grown up in the colonized world and received bits of Western education, at school and in church. By and large, the traditional education they should naturally have been exposed to – ceremonies, songs and the stories they told, the history of creation – had not taken place, disrupted by successive relocations, an entirely different lifestyle, modified moral values and schooling. Instead, white people and younger black people alike believed in God and all sorts of stories about human beings evolving from very small marine animals – *ol bulshit*, Rob concluded. He knew the truth, his own story, about the ancestral beings who had given birth to his people and their country. In Rob's world, he would have been able to present further evidence for his knowledge. Unlike the white people's stories, Rob's account of creation was unique and could have been demonstrated, if only he still had a troupe of dancers to enact his stories. The innumerable songs he knew, as a singer, all in cryptic spirits' language, were both knowledge and evidence, and their enactment into dance was the ultimate proof. In Rob's world, daily informal dances and sacred ceremonies would have proven him right, and made him important and influential. Instead of this, the elders were all gone, and he was now the only singer left, the only didgeridoo player left, and without a single dancer. How could he teach anything to his own grandchildren?

In Rob's world, the years would have been paced by ritual agendas. Ceremonies would have been conducted under his lead as a master singer, and according to his ancestral law. They would have served to instruct young men and convince them of the relevance of his knowledge system. They would have kept the land in good spiritual order, thus preventing potential terrible disasters brought about by supernatural forces. Rob's true world was one where traditional law was known by all, valued and obeyed, as his ancestors had done for so long that it defied human understanding – always in the same, immutable way, following the cycles of generations. *Ai jinking fo wei bek biyaind*, 'I'm thinking about way back behind', he repeated, tirelessly.

In Rob's world, his lifestyle would have agreed with his status. In the true, precolonial world, this would have translated as having many wives. In the current, fake world, this should have translated as having more money. If Rob's status had been adequately acknowledged, he should, in his view, have had enough money to never worry about anything. Like many men and women of his generation and background, Rob held that all white people enjoyed high income provided by the government, somewhat independently of employment and actual work. This seemed logical given the experience of work and remuneration in this generation. Rob had worked as a stockman on a cattle station for several years for virtually no pay. Later he had worked as a carpenter at the government-managed settlement, and received some money along with food rations. He then retired and continued to receive money in the form of a pension. In recent decades – after the laws differentiating white and Aboriginal Australians were repealed –, all his younger family members, and basically everyone in his community, received fortnightly sums while being unemployed. The fact that these were actually welfare payments – as opposed to wages or pensions – did not alter Rob's frame of understanding. Given that he had worked for no money and that many people received money while not working, the conventional correlation between work and money was hard to establish. Instead, like many members of his community in his generation at least, Rob held that the government provided more or less money to one or the other, on a somewhat arbitrary basis. Thus, Rob seemed to consider that money reflected status, and overall mirrored a racial hierarchy: white people always seemed to be better off. 'Why can't I make million dollars?', he sometimes asked rhetorically, in a provocative tone.

Rob actually owned a large tract of land – or rather, his wife's clan did. As a white community employee once pointed out to me, Rob had two houses – one in the community and one in his outstation, on his wife's land. The outstation in fact had several buildings, a generator, a cold room; Rob owned a car, as well as a tractor supplied and maintained by the outstation fund. But Rob's feeling of deprivation originated elsewhere, in his sense of an irreparable and fundamentally unfair disempowerment. What right had white people to come and settle his land for a start? What right had they to decide whether they should live in this or that settlement or community? How did his own people suddenly become so disempowered and unable to define their own destiny? How did they lose their values and beliefs and to those of

another, stronger group, simply because the new comers had some mysterious wealth and access to surpluses of flour, sugar and tobacco? Where was this real world gone, where he would have been *someone*? Why couldn't he live in a pretty house, drive a flashy car, like these white people working in his community, supposedly *for* his community? Why did all the white people around him always seemed to have more than he did, when they lived on *his* land – a land they knew nothing about and had no ancestral connections with?

But no. No status, no wives, no money, no flashy four-wheel-drive or pretty houses. Rob had all the knowledge but he would never get the recognition and the attention it deserved. And yet, he never lost his faith in his own world, in his values: *ai no bos, ai no maisef* 'I'm not an important man; as for myself, I know'. In a strange way, it seemed that he had some secret and subconscious, but indefectible faith that some day, things would return to normal. The course of history would slip back to its original trend and the world would magically return to its natural, precolonial state. It would have felt like waking up from a bad dream, waking up to the only true, real world.

Presence

Contrary to his own, the world where Rob was forced to live underwent incessant, absurd changes. What kind of a law is a law that changes all the time, upon men's decision, Rob used to ask with bitter irony. *Tu meni rule*, 'too many rules', he whispered in disbelief. In this strange world, policemen had come from nowhere to take his own daughter away. Government policy had allowed the removal of many Aboriginal children from their family to put them in the hands of official 'welfare', creating what is known as a 'Stolen Generation'. Rob had fought and kept his daughter with him, but he had seen many children disappear from his community, incomprehensibly taken away by the police force. At other times, young anthropologists, freshly graduated from university, insisted on explaining to him which clan owned which part of his land. As if he had not been the one to tell them, as if he was a kind of outlaw. At other times again, white employees of the local shop or council, who had been friendly and kind to everyone for years, left at no notice, stealing dozens of thousands dollars from the community account.

Instead of an expensive four-wheel-drive and a shiny house, Rob lived in a shabby government-built stone house, sharing two rooms with his wife, his wife's son and

daughter in law, and their four children. In the main room, a noisy television was on a good part of the day. In the evenings, young people listened to music – ‘modern’ music. Men sometimes drank during the night and became noisy, occasionally violent and actually dangerous. Rob got hit once as he was trying to protect his daughter in law from her own husband. But Rob seemed relatively insensitive to physical threat. What truly irritated him, what undermined his mood and his life energy, was to watch his people go astray. To see them forget their beliefs, the ancestral law and its principles. As a result they also forgot to care for others – for their spouses, their children, their parents and other relatives. The values in Rob’s world imposed to care and share for family members – that is, for everyone. Food and other goods were to be shared based on some structured principles. Weaker or older people were to be looked after. In the colonial world, people were encouraged to become more and more protective of their own belongings, preoccupied with their own lives, and to forget about others.

Tumatj bidio, tumatj rokenrol, ‘too much video, too much rock and roll’, Rob used to complain, perplexed by the appalling shift in interests and values of his descendants. *Dei nomo luk bek*, ‘they don’t look back’ – to the olden days, to their ancestors, to this other, and according to Rob much better lifestyle that most in the youngest generations had in fact never been exposed to. Rob could hardly see any value in modern forms of creativity, would it be pop music, virtuoso rap dancing, movies however good they were. He saw this all, most of the time, as evil paths to his people’s loss. *Dei nomo sabi wai dei bin iya en wai dei bin bon*, ‘they don’t know why they are here and why they were born’, he lamented for these empty souls – also feeling sorry about himself, a lonely lucid mind in a world of fools.

Rob’s world was constantly undermined by unmanageable technologies. There was always something that did not work. Everyday things that seem simple become burdens when you live in a world for which you haven’t been prepared. If you have been raised as a semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer, you will have internalized principles such as: never keeping more than you need because carrying it might kill you; eat as much as you can when there is food because you don’t know what you’ll find tomorrow; never keep food for the next day because it might go off or be eaten by other animals during the night; etc. These crucial survival rules in the precolonial world had become ineffective and even damaging under the white man’s regime. In spite of their apparent simplicity, such behavioural patterns are deeply entrenched and difficult to abandon. Especially if you

already live through constant cognitive and emotional challenge in a new and very strange world, where every single device – car, telephone, television... – is a blatant mystery. Adaptation takes energy, and time – literally generations.

Rob and his families, like others at the time in the community, were constantly struggling to make their daily lives practically workable in a world that they strived to understand. For instance, electricity was conditioned by power cards that had to be purchased from the local shop, a couple of kilometres away. The cards invariably ran out around midday on Saturdays, when the shop closed down for the rest of the weekend – but of course, Rob and his family were oblivious of clock time and calendar days. When electricity was under control, the car might be broken down. Rob would open the bonnet to stare at the mechanisms for a while. But money was usually needed to pay a mechanic – usually more than Rob ever had at any given point in time. While the car remained broken down, fishing and hunting options were cancelled. The immediate surroundings of the village were bare of game, due to demographic concentration. In the absence of a running car, every trip to the shop was an adventurous expedition. One had to find a lift on the way in, another one of the way back. Entire weeks passed when the whole family was focused on – and worried about – getting bread for the next day. No time or energy was left to tell and listen to stories, sing songs, share knowledge, and other important matters. Life seemed to be about managing to get fed – and not even well fed.

In this new postcolonial world, people kept dying. Apart from health damages inherent to the colonial lifestyle, alcohol caused numerous accidents – car accidents of course, but also less expected hazards such as getting drowned in eighty centimetres of water, and the like. Not to mention violence and direct murders. Added to these were devastating suicides and other traumatic losses. Rob's life was a succession of mourning efforts. But even funerals were not carried out in the way he would have liked. As years passed, there were no good dancers left in the village to perform the adequate mortuary dances. Instead, a handful of young women all impeccably dressed in black and white dresses and shirts would sing Christian songs, accompanied by an electronic organ. Most of the time, there was even a priest. Rob could hardly bear his speech and kept grumbling impatiently – *ol bulshit*.

At least in the last decades of his life, there was probably not a single day when Rob did not experience intense indignation about the world he was being asked to embrace. It was a ridiculous world with shifting principles, where people could not possibly live well, and often decided not to live at all; but could not die with dignity either. Rob never ceased to voice his anger, standing in powerless but constant opposition with what he could see around him, and bitterly grieving the tragic absence of what was not there, that should have been.

Leaving

Rob's subconscious faith in a sudden and radical change that would have put history back on track was sometimes affirmed in his daily life. Now and again, an organization introduced a new policy for his community, organized a series of meetings explaining how great things would be when, say, the village would have its own town council and office. Led by his deeply entrenched combativeness and optimism, Rob invariably embraced these projects. For a few months, he would live in hope and only talk about how different things would be when the new scheme would be in place. Invariably, the project would fail to make a noticeable difference. Rob returned to his despair for a while, until a new project came, again, to feed his indestructible hope.

Rob's intellectual passions, his hope and pugnacity were possibly what kept him alive for so long, in these strange and lonely surroundings. Sadly, Rob died far from his truth and values: in an aged care home in town. He had become too weak and sick to live without professional care. His mind was tired but still lucid. He knew where he was and knew that it was not where he wanted to be, far away from his land and from his family. Although he had some relatives in town and received regular visits, his memory refused to keep track of these encounters, so that he constantly complained about being alone and abandoned. Perhaps the number of visits could never make any serious difference. He knew he would see nothing other than the four walls of this lonely room, far from his land and the whisper of the wind in the melaleuca eucalyptus near the billabong, far from his birth place, far from his clan and the music of his own languages, far from anyone who could share his beliefs. After living in the wrong world, he was about to die in the wrong place. As a spirit, perhaps, he would return to the real world, and pay occasional visits to his beloved ones lost on the wrong side of the colonial frontier.

Further readings

- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. 1997. *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. Sydney: HREOC.
- Cowlshaw, Gillian. 1999. *Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas: A Study of Racial Power and Intimacy in Australia*. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin.
- Cummings, Barbara. 1990. *Take This Child: From Kahlin Compound to the Retta Dixon Children's Home*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Evans, Nicholas. 2010. *Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us*. Chichester, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Meakins, Felicity. 2014. 'Language Contact Varieties.' In *The Languages and Linguistics of Australia: A Comprehensive Guide*, edited by Harold Koch and Rachel Nordlinger, 361–411. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Ponsonnet, Maïa. 2011. "Brainwash from English"? Barunga Kriol Speakers' Views on Their Own Language.' *Anthropological Linguistics* 52 (2): 24.
- Rowse, Tim. 1998. 'White Flour, White Power. From Rations to Citizenship in Central Australia.' In . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sandefur, John R. 1986. *Kriol of North Australia: A Language Coming of Age*. Summer Institute of Linguistics, Australian Aborigines Branch. Darwin: SIL-AAB.