Chapter 3

The superintendent's window

In mid-July 2013 I receive a phone call from a friend at Yuendumu, a woman in her early fifties, seeking my financial assistance to purchase food. Such calls are not uncommon, but have become more frequent in recent years as cost of living pressures have intensified. My friend tells me she has been forced to move from her house and is now living in an old 'tin house' on the edge of town, with no power, no running water, no toilet or shower. She has to walk some 200 metres along the road to use the bathroom in an overcrowded house occupied by relatives. Staying with this woman are three grandchildren under the age of eight whom she currently cares for. It is mid-winter, temperatures these past days have been unseasonally cold for Central Australia and it is raining. The tin house leaks. Housing availability at this time is worse than ever as, finally, after years of conflict between the Yuendumu community and the federal government, traditional owners have signed a forty-year lease, triggering a release of funds that will enable thirty new houses to be built and a further sixty to be renovated. In order that this work commence people whose houses are listed for demolition or renovation have been instructed to move out and establish humpies for themselves for the duration.

* * *

If drought and conflict over access to water figured as crucial factors in Warlpiri being forced off their lands, the problem of water was not resolved with their relocation to settlements. Warlpiri would have marvelled at the technologies brought by Europeans to extract water from the ground; Larry Jungarrayi's drawing of the windmill and water tanks at Hooker Creek attests to this watchfulness (figure 1). Yet the

Figure 1:
Larry Jungarrayi: *The windmill and water tanks at Hooker Creek*, Hooker Creek 1953–4.
(Drawing #61, Meggitt Collection, AIATSIS.)

windmill's reliance on wind and batteries, both of which were often in short supply, meant the problem of water remained constant. In early February 1952 the situation was grim. A senior Gurinji man from Wave Hill arrived at Hooker Creek and presented himself to the superintendent as a rainmaker. He explained that he needed to stay in the area in order to make rain. The superintendent directed the man to return to Wave Hill as soon as possible.[1] In this place being newly carved out of the desert only one approach to the environment would find legitimacy.

Larry Jungarrayi made his drawing of the windmill and water tanks for Mervyn Meggitt less than a year after he and 130 of his countrymen were trucked into the new settlement. Twenty-five people had first been brought to Catfish ration depot in 1948. They were soon moved to the better-watered site at Hooker Creek. In return for rations these people were required to work, to help construct the settlement that the government decreed would be their new home. At the place of *Kiwinyi Jukurrpa*, Mosquito Dreaming, this meant gruelling physical work in a tough environment.

The settlement daily journal diligently kept by the superintendent provides glimpses of the challenging conditions under which people toiled — the climate was characterised by hot winds, lack of rain and extreme heat, followed by nerve-wracking periods of stillness which brought the settlement's windmill-powered water supply to a halt. Bitterly cold winds whipped through the settlement through the winter months. Flies and mosquitoes were often thick in the air. The ground to be cultivated was rock-hard. In October 1952, six months before the Meggitts arrived, Superintendent Petherick reported a 'sour and unwilling' attitude of Warlpiri residents in the seasonal build-up. Reluctantly he allowed a group of 'eleven boys and lubras' who had been working without break for more than twelve months to 'go on holiday'. Two months later, four more workers who had been labouring for more than two years were permitted to follow.[2]

Figure 2:
Larry Jungarrayi:
The malaka's house,
Hooker Creek 1953–4.
(Drawing #63, Meggitt
Collection, AIATSIS.)

In carving out of the arid northern Tanami Desert a new settlement that would meet the needs of hundreds of Aboriginal people a raft of urgent tasks required attention — constructing houses, shelters and stores; securing water supply; digging lavatories; clearing and maintaining an airstrip; establishing vegetable gardens; carting fire wood; planting trees; servicing vehicles and bores; cooking meals; tending the sick and injured; cutting posts and digging holes for fence posts; and mustering, branding, killing and butchering cattle. Hard labour lay at the heart of the new settlement regime with its two interrelated goals — to construct a viable place for Warlpiri to live and produce a newly disciplined and work-ready Warlpiri subject. Essential to this process were not only methods of work but elaborate reporting practices. The superintendent was required to report daily on all the work done, the movements of people, incidents of illness and injury, status of infrastructure and levels of supplies, and on any other issues of significance. These reports were read, summarised, commented upon and filed by patrol officers and bureaucrats in Alice Springs and Darwin. The twinned practices of labour and print-literate surveillance were lodged at the heart of the post-war governance of Aboriginal people.

Larry Jungarrayi's picture *The malaka's house* (figure 2) makes clear that Warlpiri were watching the evolution of this new regime with heightened attention. As Tess Napaljarri, the adopted daughter of Larry Jungarrayi's brother, observed astutely as she looked carefully at this picture, the window Larry Jungarrayi drew is not an empty window, but a window with light shining behind it — light that is perceptible to those outside the house, light

created by kerosene lamp, light that signals night-time activity. 'He used to see this window close up from where he was staying, or maybe walking around. Maybe every morning he walked past this house?', she speculates. The window separates the space and nightlife of the superintendent and those in his company from the lives of Warlpiri people. What to make of this curious new structure? Meggitt reports that Larry Jungarrayi was most taken by the fly screen that surrounded the verandah of the house, but the drawing also hones in on the grid-like structure of windows as well as the interior space beyond. What went on behind that well-lit window? Napaljarri implies that we should interpret this drawing as a marker of Larry Jungarrayi's curiosity with white man's ways. While government authorities went about implementing new forms of surveillance and accounting, Warlpiri people returned the gaze, watching the ways these new strangers did things, with intensity.

In *The right to look: A counterhistory of visuality*, Nicholas Mirzoeff shows distinctive visual regimes, or ways of seeing, to be integral to the precise ways in which forms of authority have historically been enabled and legitimised. 'Visuality', he writes, 'sought to present authority as self-evident', it 'supplemented the violence of authority and its separations, forming a complex that came to seem natural by virtue of its investment in "history"'. Mirzoeff stresses that visuality is not confined to processes of perception, but rather 'is formed by a set of relations combining information, imagination and insight into a rendition of physical and psychic space'.[3] In the governance of Central Australian Aboriginal people, the remote settlement was the ground where this constellation of practices came together.

In pursuing the story of how post-settlement life unfolded for the Warlpiri, Larry Jungarrayi's drawing of *The malaka's house* guides our enquiry. This drawing, I will suggest, comments on *the act of picturing itself* at a time when the very shape and parameters of the Warlpiri world were in turmoil. It bespeaks the quiet watchfulness of an acute observer; it invites meditation on the weight and scale of change that Warlpiri people were experiencing at multiple intersecting levels. Perhaps most surprisingly, given the weight of Warlpiri experience of the previous decades, this drawing withholds judgement on what these processes would amount to. Larry Jungarrayi's drawing, I will argue, is a potent enactment of what Mirzoeff terms 'the right to look', a way of seeing that stands outside of and refuses the categorising terms of the dominant visual regime, a way of seeing characterised by openness, a way of seeing that might give rise to a new attitude.[4]

Visuality, for Mirzoeff, is a *complex* of practices that involves classifying by naming, categorising and defining. A visual regime separates and segregates groups of people so classified to present them from cohering as political subjects, and it makes this separated classification seem right and hence aesthetic. Here Mirzoeff draws upon the work of Franz Fanon, who observed that this process generates an aesthetic of respect for the status quo, the aesthetics of the proper, of what is felt to be right and hence pleasing.[5] Mirzoeff highlights the intersection of modes of governance, forms of surveillance and the production of particular kinds of subjects. Such a conceptualisation is compelling for our enquiry as it allows for attention to be drawn to both governmental and Warlpiri regimes of visuality. It also provides a compelling prism through which to analyse the archive that details the practices by which the Warlpiri were made visible and governed in the mid-twentieth century. But a close reading of this material also reveals countless instances of bureaucratic failure and brings the stark certitude of 'regimes' into more murky and circumspect terrain.

Of humpies and houses — desert dwellings and the clash of ontologies

As the previous chapter made clear, many of the Warlpiri men and women transported to Hooker Creek would not have been strangers to European-style work regimes. Through the 1920s and 1930s growing numbers of Warlpiri were enlisted in stock work, domestic labour and mining. But the development of settlements involved productive work of a new kind: the construction of a new built environment, new structures that Warlpiri themselves would erect and occupy. In an earlier era the idea