



CHAPTER 1

Everyday life in a remote Aboriginal settlement

The starry night sky above us, we had arranged piles of blankets and pillows so that we could lounge comfortably on top of our mattresses, a fire crackling cheerfully on the side, and a television set on a long extension cord in front of us. We were watching *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*, a game show popular in Yuendumu. Tamsin, a seventeen-year-old Warlpiri girl, came to join our row of bedding, nestling down between her mother Celeste and myself. ‘Who wants to be a millionaire?’ the game master asked on the television. ‘Me’, ‘me’, ‘me’, the residents of the *camp* shouted in reply, Tamsin loudest of them all. ‘What would you do with a million dollars?’ I asked her.

Tamsin: I would build a house.

Yasmine: Where?

Tamsin: In Yuendumu.

Yasmine: And what will it look like?

Tamsin: It’s really, really big, with lots of rooms, and every room has furniture in it. Sofas, and beds, new blankets, and tables and chairs. And every room has a stereo in it, and a television, and a video player and a playstation.

Yasmine: And who will live in that house?

Tamsin: Me.

Yasmine: And who else?

Tamsin: Nobody else. Just me!

Yasmine: Won’t you be lonely?

Tamsin: No, I’ll have peace and quiet. And I’ll keep the door locked. I won’t let anybody in.

The fantasy of winning a million dollars provides a license to dream about what one desires most. Since ever having access to so much money is utterly unrealistic for most Warlpiri people, the dream might as well be about something one will never get, acquire or achieve. In Tamsin's case this was her own new house filled with large numbers of desirable items such as new blankets, video recorders and playstations. This is understandable enough, given the impoverished material circumstances in which people at Yuendumu live and the long waiting lists for council-provided housing. Her desire for material goods is identical to that of many other Warlpiri people.

But there was more to the fantasy. As I lay on those swags, cosy not only because of the warmth of the fire, the blankets and pillows, but also in the presence of the people around me, my body comfortably snuggled close to those of my friends, curled around Tamsin on one side and with Greta behind me, her arm slung over my waist, Tamsin's desire to be alone in that dream house struck me as extraordinary. Living in the *camps* of Yuendumu, I had taken quite some time to get used to being constantly surrounded by and involved with other people all day and every day. Whenever I sat down with a book in the shade of a tree, people immediately joined me and started conversations, assuming I was sad or lonely. Once I went to get firewood on my own, only to get into trouble afterwards. I could have been bitten by a snake! Gotten lost! Been assaulted by strangers or spooky beings! And had I forgotten the people who were *looking after* me, those who were responsible for me? Imagine the trouble they would get into if something happened to me!

No, being alone was never an option in Yuendumu. And after a while I came to appreciate the constant company, and even to depend on it. Once I stayed in a friend's guestroom in Alice Springs, and woke up panic-stricken in the middle of the night, because I couldn't hear anybody else breathing!

Of course, relations weren't always as smooth as they were on that evening we were watching *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*. Fights broke out frequently and then people left the company of those they were fighting with, but only to join others, never to be alone.

Yet here was Tamsin yearning for a space that was hers and hers alone. While her desire for material goods can be understood literally, the space inside the house requires, I believe, more interpretive work, and can be better 'read' in ways suggested by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. His *The Poetics of Space* (1994, first published in 1958) is

a psycho-philosophical treatise on the house as a primary metaphor in thoughts, memories, and dreams. He describes how it is 'reasonable to say we "read a house," or "read a room," since both room and house are psychological diagrams that guide writers and poets in their analysis of intimacy' (1994: 38). This is not only true of poets and writers. Tamsin's fantasy house strikes me as an excellent if puzzling 'diagram of her analysis of intimacy'. The house in her fantasy is a space she can only dream about. It is a space where she is independent: the house contains quantities of everything she needs. It is a space filled with peace and quiet, where she is happy. It is a space where she is in control; she holds the keys to the doors.

Why would a seventeen-year-old Warlpiri girl living in Yuendumu formulate such a curious desire? The answer lies, I believe, in considering more deeply the issue of intimacy. What does Bachelard mean by 'intimacy' when he calls the house a diagram of an analysis of intimacy? As I understand him, he conceptualises intimacy as a kind of innermost protected idea of selfhood, a way of being and seeing oneself. If we are to truly understand what Tamsin expresses in her fantasy, we need to understand not only the wished-for intimacy, but how and why this differs from more common Warlpiri forms of intimacy. These find expression in the ways in which Warlpiri people define their personhood in everyday social practice by relating to each other. Exploration of such Warlpiri expressions of intimacy opens paths towards understanding the contradiction inherent in Tamsin's wish for a house of her own, with keys to lock the doors so she can exclude others, while at the same time defining herself through relating to others. This contradiction arises, I contend, out of the dynamics between the social practices of contemporary everyday life in a remote Aboriginal settlement and the realities of living in a First World nation state.¹ Exploring these dynamics and the meanings encapsulated within them is the central aim of this book.

My way of approaching this aim is to further problematise, question, and unpack the metaphor which encapsulates the space of intimacy of Tamsin's fantasy: the notion of the house. Bachelard (1994: 6) aims to 'show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind'. I do not wish to diminish what he says about the house; in fact, I believe its metaphoric potency cannot be emphasised strongly enough. However, I take issue with extending this metaphoric potency to all of 'mankind' in a unified way.

While Bachelard shows *how* the house has great metaphoric potency, I find that the essay ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ (1993, first published in 1951) by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger best explains *why* this should be so. He identifies the ways these three practices are related to each other. In order to dwell, one has to build; and the way one builds mirrors the way one thinks: which in turn is inspired by the way one dwells, creating a processual cycle. This goes beyond Bachelard, who asks: ‘if the house is the first universe for its young children, the first cosmos, how does its space shape all subsequent knowledge of other space, of any larger cosmos?’ (Bachelard 1994: viii).² In Heidegger’s idea there is no unidirectionality; instead he demonstrates how the three practices are interdependent and how, as a series, they encapsulate ideology; and by that I mean nothing more or less than a socio-culturally specific way of looking at the world and being in the world. The ideology, or the multidirectional connectivity between the physical structures in which people live (building), their social practices (exemplified through their practices of dwelling) and their world views (thinking), can be expressed – and here Bachelard again is useful – in metaphors of great potency. In the Western context, this ideology can be symbolised by a stereotypical house:



In his essay, Heidegger commences his theory on building–dwelling–thinking with the assertion that the verbs ‘to build’, ‘to dwell’ and ‘to think’ stem from the same etymological root in Germanic languages. From this alone we can infer that Heidegger is concerned with a socio-culturally and historically particular series of building–dwelling–thinking, valid in Germanic or, more contemporarily, Western contexts. The etymological link in his particular example is interesting but dispensable; significant are the meanings he attaches to the series, meanings which substantially transcend the linguistic level. My point (not necessarily Heidegger’s) is that it is more than likely that the same series may exist with different implications but equal potency in other (non-Western) contexts, independent of the presence or absence of etymological links. If this is true, then such ideologies, or the interconnectivity between the physical structures in which people dwell, their social practices and their world views, can be metaphorically encapsulated in symbols for different physical structures of domestic space. Such symbols representing the

physical structures express the ‘integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams’ of the people who live in them. In short, each such symbol can be taken as a metaphor embodying the socio-cultural series of building–dwelling–thinking and encapsulating a particular way of looking at and being in the world.

I propose that in the Warlpiri context the term that encapsulates the parallel metaphoric load to the house in the Western context is *ngurra* — a conceptual term of profound depth, encompassing multiple levels of meaning ranging from the mundane to the ontological. Most immediately, *ngurra* can be translated as camp, burrow, or nest; but this meaning of ‘shelter’ expands to include place, land, country, and fatherland. On an emotional plane *ngurra* means home, as well as the place with which a person is associated by conception, birth, ancestry, or ritual obligation. Socially its meanings encompass the people living in one *camp*, being one family, being from the same place. Temporally, *ngurra* is a label for the period of twenty-four hours, and is used to designate numbers of days or nights. Lastly, it is used for socio-spatial designations during ritual. Warlpiri people have two iconographic representations for *ngurra*:



concentric circles which may serve to represent the entire range of meanings listed above, or any context-specific ones; and



a combination of one horizontal and a number of vertical lines.

The latter iconographic design always denotes a specific *camp* in which particular people have slept, with the horizontal line depicting the windbreak and each vertical line standing for a person.

Following the Warlpiri iconography, throughout this book I use the first design of concentric circles and the Warlpiri term *ngurra* when I refer to the entire range of meanings, and the Aboriginal English term *camp* and the iconographic depiction using lines when referring to a particular *camp* or when reproducing maps of particular sleeping arrangements. In short, a *camp* is one of many possible manifestations,

and represents only one of a number of levels of signification contained within the term *ngurra*. Or, put differently, a *camp* in this regard is the equivalent of an actual house (rather than the house as symbol). In terms of the series of building–dwelling–thinking, a *camp* and an actual house are both manifestations of two aspects, building (the material structure) and dwelling (social practices of relating to domestic space). *Ngurra*, on the other hand, encapsulates the entire Warlpiri series of building–dwelling–thinking; as a term, concept and metaphor it contains Warlpiri ideology in exactly the same way as the metaphor of the house does in the West. From this it follows that we can say that



represents building–dwelling–thinking in the West, and



represents building–dwelling–thinking Warlpiri way.

Since the creation of the settlement of Yuendumu, sedentisation and the advent of Western-style housing as entailed in the processes of colonialism and post-colonialism, Warlpiri people have been experiencing an intersecting of these two series of building–dwelling–thinking. This intersection shapes the contemporary settlement everyday, those things that people consider normal, routine and mundane; it shapes contemporary Warlpiri ways of being in the world. It also shapes Tamsin's fantasy. Here she is, wishing for a house, her own, just for herself, and smack-bang in the middle of Yuendumu, no less, while cosily snuggled up to her mothers in a *camp*. Taking into account her way of being in the world, her experiences of settlement life, her life history, we must ask ourselves whether she wishes for a house and only a house, or whether the imagery of the house in her fantasy also stands for something else.

Like those pictures used in psychological testing, in which, depending on how one looks at them, one sees either an old woman or a young one but never both, houses at Yuendumu, I contend, also have at least two mutually exclusive meanings. The house, which at Yuendumu materially embodies the intersection of the two series of building–dwelling–thinking, in Tamsin's fantasy is a vehicle for expressing a particular

desire; but it can also stand for the expectations which the Australian state has of Warlpiri people.

The framework of the book

If we credit the house with the metaphoric potential which Bachelard ascribed to it, state-provided housing can be viewed as carrying a specific agenda: the imposition of a particular way of ‘thinking’.³ This goes some way to explain why housing, from the onset of the Australian state’s engagement with Aboriginal people, has been and continues to be among the biggest items in Australia’s annual Aboriginal Affairs portfolio budgets, consistently accounting for between 25 and 35 per cent of the total (Sanders 1990: 41).⁴ Viewed from the perspective of the Western series of building–dwelling–thinking, Yuendumu houses stand for the expectations the state has of Indigenous people — that they become like ‘us’. The always ‘over-crowded’, often dysfunctional and partly derelict houses at Yuendumu become an expression of the Warlpiri ‘failure’ to comply, a failure to be in the world in ‘acceptable’ ways. Yet Warlpiri people want Western-style houses: council discussions of housing allocation are by far the most heated as well as the best attended meetings; and Tamsin, asked what she would do with a million dollars, answers that she wants a house.

Why do Warlpiri people want those suburban houses so badly, seeing that their practices of dwelling and their ways of thinking about and being in the world conflict so starkly with the values that houses are imbued with in the mainstream? In order to understand more fully the nature of the contradictions between the state’s expectations and Warlpiri people’s desires, I employ the lens of the intersecting series of building–dwelling–thinking to the ethnographic data presented throughout this book.

The ethnography of this book is based on the dramas of everyday life as they unfolded in the *camps* of Yuendumu during my fieldwork, and particularly revolves around the three values that seemed to shape the everyday as I experienced it: mobility, intimacy and immediacy. I suggest that these values (mobility, immediacy and intimacy) are constitutive of the contemporary settlement everyday because they are manifestations of the Warlpiri series of building–dwelling–thinking. In order to make this case, to convey a sense of the ‘feel’ of Yuendumu everyday life, to illustrate the interconnectedness between intimacy, immediacy and