An ‘unremarkable’ place: Contesting value and constructing place in the James Price Point no-gas campaign

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Abstract

This paper uses the controversy over the proposed construction of a gas plant at James Price Point in Australia’s remote north-west Kimberley region as a case study to explore questions about how distant audiences are engaged in debates about the future of far-away places. When Western Australian Premier Colin Barnett declared in 2009 that James Price Point was an ‘unremarkable beach’, he provoked the ire of many Broome locals, Aboriginal traditional owners and environmentalists who did not want to see a gas plant at the site. This paper situates Barnett’s comments—and the no-gas movement’s response—in relation to the reification of ‘pristine’ landscapes in conservation and tourism discourse; a practice that has been integral to winning mainstream support for environmental conservation efforts around the world, but also criticized for romanticizing unpeopled, ‘pristine’ landscapes and sidelining the rights and interests of indigenous peoples. Understanding the news media to play an important role in mediating environmental conflict for distant audiences, this paper offers a critical discourse analysis of coverage of the James Price Point campaign in selected feature articles and editorials in three major Australian newspapers. The analysis finds that while the three newspapers are alike in their framing of the gas plant controversy as a ‘battle’ playing out in a frontier ‘wilderness’, they differ in their representation of the contestants in that battle—with corresponding implications for how the distant reader is engaged in emotional debates about the future of James Price Point and the Kimberley. In the context of increasingly urgent disputes over climate change and the expansion of coal and gas leases in Australia, this paper makes a timely contribution to the discussion about future mining and industrialization in so-called ‘wilderness’ areas.
Introduction

James Price Point—Price’s Point or Walmadan to the locals—is a coastal area some sixty kilometres north of the town of Broome in Australia’s remote north-west Kimberley region. From late 2008 to early 2013 it was the subject of heated controversy as the proposed site for a major Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) plant, which was to process gas from the Browse Basin some 450 kilometres offshore. When Western Australian Premier Colin Barnett declared in 2009 that James Price Point was an ‘unremarkable beach’, he provoked the ire of many Broome locals, Aboriginal traditional owners and environmentalists who did not want to see a gas plant developed at the site. They would spend the next five years attempting to convince distance audiences in the nation’s capital cities that James Price Point was, in fact, remarkable—culturally, historically, environmentally and aesthetically. Countering the premier’s claim that James Price Point was ‘flat as a table’ and ‘not the Kimberley that Qantas uses for its ads’ (Manning, 2009b, p. 2) with stunning photographs of the area’s towering red pindan cliffs, the no-gas movement built considerable national support for its campaign. A sophisticated news media operation was combined with effective use of social media, and in the later years of the controversy thousands of people turned up to show their support at free concerts in Sydney, Melbourne and Fremantle. This was in, in fact, how I first heard about the campaign, from a Facebook invitation to ‘Save the Kimberley’ by attending a free rock concert at Federation Square in Melbourne—and it was this straightforward injunction to enter into the politics of a far-distant place that initially sparked my interest.

This paper situates Barnett’s ‘unremarkable’ commentary—and the no-gas movement’s response—in relation to the reification of ‘pristine’ landscapes in conservation and tourism discourse; a practice that has been integral to winning mainstream support for environmental conservation efforts around the world, but also criticized for romanticizing unpeopled, ‘pristine’ landscapes and sidelining the rights of indigenous peoples. It understands news media and journalism to occupy an important and powerful place in environmental conflicts, not only due to the well-recognised capacity of news media to favour and grant legitimacy to some positions and voices and not others (Cox, 2013; Hansen, 2010; Lester, 2010), but also for the way these practices serve to produce what Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) calls the media’s ‘own ethical norms and standards for public conduct’ (p. 19). Following Tomlinson’s (1999) two-pronged definition of mediation as being about both overcoming moral and geographical distance in communication, and about acknowledging the intervention of technology in everything we watch and read (p. 154), like Chouliaraki, I approach
mediation as a process that actively enacts certain ethical values which are embedded in media narratives (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 11, 19). Accordingly, the paper focuses on how the place of James Price Point is mediated for distant audiences in feature articles and editorials in three Australian newspapers. It questions the modes of possible engagement and norms of public conduct that are available to readers in these articles. I suggest that while the newspapers are alike in their framing of the gas plant controversy as a ‘battle’ playing out in a frontier ‘wilderness’, they differ in their representation of the contestants in that battle—with corresponding implications for how the reader is engaged in debates about the future of James Price Point and the Kimberley.

**Theoretical Framework**

The reification and conservation of distant places by predominantly white, western environmentalists has been the subject of considerable criticism from indigenous and postcolonial scholars and activists (Bayet, 1994; Cronon, 1996; Dove et al., 2011; Guha, 1989; Langton, 2012; Plumwood, 1998). Dan Brockington brings some of these tensions to the fore in his article, ‘Powerful environmentalisms: conservation, celebrity and capitalism’ (2008). Brockington takes aim at previous studies by Burgess, Harrison and Maiteny (1991) and especially, Hutchins and Lester (2006) for focusing on campaigns committed to protecting ‘the special places from which people derive meaning, pleasure and identity’, and (in his view) for failing to acknowledge the level of conflict that exists between different environmentalisms, especially ‘between its weak and powerful variants’ (2008, pp. 552, 553). He touches on a key critique directed against international conservation organisations by many postcolonial and indigenous scholars: that attempts to protect ‘pristine’ or ‘wilderness’ areas in remote and distant places ‘can be alien to the lived experience and identity of the people living in the places designated for conservation’ (Brockington, 2008, p. 553; see also Guha, 1989; Dove et al., 2011). Brockington continues to chide Hutchins and Lester for categorising environmentalists broadly as ‘those people and organizations with their feet, hands, minds and hearts firmly in and on the ground’ (2006, pp. 436-437), when in fact, he contends, ‘many people’s lives and encounters with environmental causes tend to be characterized by a lack of contact and interaction with the environments they value, or else they are characterized by infrequent, highly staged and carefully framed encounters provided by wildlife safaris or ecotourism trips’ (2008, p. 553). He argues instead that, ‘To understand the popularity and power of ungrounded environmentalisms we have to understand how people come to love particular representations of nature’ (2008, p. 553; italics in original). On the one hand, Hutchins and Lester’s
article in fact seems acutely aware of the difference between loving nature and loving particular representations of nature—the article addresses the struggle between journalists and activists for definitional control of how the Franklin River blockade of 1982-83 was framed in media reports (Hutchins and Lester, 2006, pp. 442, 445; see also Lester, 2007). On the other hand, it is fair to say that Lester’s wider work on the Franklin River campaign does not closely engage with the amount of disagreement within the Tasmanian community over the proposal to dam the river—while it is important to note that this is not Lester’s focus (she is interested chiefly in the relationship between the activists and the media), nonetheless, there are local/national tensions that are alluded to but largely unaddressed.

The Franklin River blockade was a classic place-based campaign: its success hinged on convincing people (and governments) around Australia and overseas that the Franklin was a ‘special place’ which should not be destroyed. Yet, to whom this special place belonged, and who had a right to speak on its behalf, was a topic of great debate. Lester’s analysis found that while hard news stories about the dam proposal in both Victoria’s The Age newspaper and Tasmania’s The Mercury were relatively neutral (with the exception of the selective use of the term ‘wilderness’), in editorials and opinion pieces the two newspapers maintained ‘consistent, concise and abundantly clear’ positions: The Age fiercely opposed the dam, while The Mercury strongly supported it (2005, p. 127). Significantly, Lester found that it was coverage of the blockade in The Age (and to a lesser extent, The Australian), that attracted national attention to the issue and was instrumental in building support from the mainland.

The local/national tension is often overlooked in commemorations of the Franklin blockade as the birthplace of the modern environmental movement in Australia. Yet the struggle over the right to lay claim to a place; over who has the right to speak for place; is a crucial question. For journalists and media, it raises a number of ethical issues. Brockington (2008) has highlighted how constructions of distant places in national and international media can become a problem when they prompt the reader to take up a moral and political position that—deliberately or otherwise—impedes the capacity of local populations to make decisions about the places in which they live. Does this make the construction of place for a national or international audience any less valid though? Should journalists seek to avoid representation of place put forth by any other than local inhabitants? Chouliaraki (2006), Luc Boltanski (1999) and others (Peters, 2001; Silverstone, 2003) have asked similar questions of the humanitarian context, where the seeming moral good of media...
representations that carry an injunction to alleviate the suffering of distant others can go awry in all sorts of ways, from ‘emotional porn’ (Tester, 2001) that objectifies the sufferers to human interest stories that fail to address the socio-political causes of suffering. Yet, this does not negate the desirability of stories that in some way facilitate a more ethical engagement with the other. Hence, Chouliaraki asks, ‘Under what conditions is it at all possible for the media to induce displays of global care for people we know nothing about and will never meet?’ (2006, p. 2). I extend this question to the environmental context: What responsibility do distant audiences have to engage in emotional debates about the future of places far away from them, and which they may never visit? Can such engagements take an ethical form? What role can mainstream media play in facilitating that engagement? In the remainder of this paper, I will examine these questions in relation to the James Price Point controversy. First, however, a brief note on methodology is required.

**Analytical Framework**

**Method**

The methodology used for this study is adapted from Anabela Carvalho’s article, ‘Media(ted) Discourse and Society: Rethinking the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis’ (2008). Critical Discourse Analysis provides the analytical tools to explore how relations of power between a range of state and non-state actors may be discursively constructed and enforced—or alternatively, how they may be challenged—in contemporary media texts (van Dijk, 2001, p. 353). Following Carvalho, this study incorporates both longitudinal, quantitative analysis and latitudinal, qualitative analysis. The analysis is therefore able to provide a wide-ranging picture of how the James Price Point story developed in newspapers over time, as well as being able to drill down and offer more detailed qualitative analysis of moments when key social or political developments occurred to push the issue into new phases of cultural understanding—what Carvalho calls ‘critical discourse moments’ (2008, p. 166; see also Carvalho and Burgess, 2005, pp. 1461-1462).

The longitudinal, quantitative analysis looks beyond individual texts in order to capture a sense of different representations of a single issue both over time (historical-diachronic analysis) and at a single time across different news outlets or articles (comparative-synchronic analysis) (Carvalho, 2008, pp. 171-172). I address this aspect of the analysis by studying texts across three different news outlets from July 2008 (when James Price Point was first named as a possible location for the gas hub) to April 2013 (when Woodside, the chief financial proponent, announced it would not be
proceeding with the onshore hub). Of course, as Carvalho observes, to conduct a thorough discourse analysis of all the articles that occurred over this period would be a vast undertaking, so I have adopted to focus on longer feature articles and editorials. These can provide clear insight into a newspaper’s stance on a particular issue; tend to contain more complex rhetorical strategies to engage readers than general news stories; and are usually published during times of high media interest, thereby offering a snapshot of crucial moments in the campaign. The longitudinal analysis is also informed by a content analysis conducted as part of a larger study that identifies troughs and peaks in coverage and key frames adopted in headlines and lead paragraphs.

The latitudinal, qualitative analysis is then applied to key feature articles and editorials, paying close attention to the layout and structural organisation of the article (including any photographs or visual accompaniments; the sources or social ‘actors’ who are quoted or referred to; the style of language, grammar and rhetoric that is employed; other discursive strategies that are used including framing and positioning; and ideological standpoints or assumptions that underpin the article (Carvalho, 2008, pp. 167-169). My particular aim in conducting the Critical Discourse Analysis is to explore how the reader is positioned to respond and engage with the James Price Point issue. I follow Chouliaraki (2006) in treating each article as ‘a discursive event “reporting the news” and a practical logic that reflects a specific ethical value about how important this particular sufferer [for my purposes, place] is’ (p. 6). This involves asking questions about the discursive and rhetorical strategies that are employed to establish a connection between the reader and James Price Point, and what, if any, ethical demands are placed upon the reader as a result.

**Materials**

I analyse how the ‘place’ of James Price Point is constructed in a core body of mainstream print news publications—The Age, The Australian and The West Australian. The decision to focus on these three mastheads was made for reasons of quantity and quality. With the exception of Australian Financial Review (which I excluded because it serves a specialised, niche audience), these publications provided the most extensive newspaper coverage of the Browse LNG proposal across the survey period.\(^1\) Circulation figures for the three newspapers are comparable: in 2009 (at the

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\(^1\) Results of a content analysis on total mentions of James Price Point proposal in Australian news sources, 1 July 2008 – 30 April 2013, using the Factiva database. Conducted 17 December 2014. Search terms: ‘(browse and gas and kimberley) or james price point or walmadan$1’.

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beginning of the no-gas campaign) *The West Australian* had a weekday circulation of approximately 195,000 (increasing to 330,000 on Saturdays), *The Age* of 201,000 (284,000 on Saturdays) and *The Australian* of 134,000 (302,000 on weekends) (The Newspaper Works, 2010). Most importantly for the purpose of my research questions, these newspapers allow me to examine how the James Price Point issue was framed for a set of three distinct, distant audiences.

As the major daily broadsheet newspaper serving Melbourne and regional Victoria, *The Age*, owned by Fairfax Media, provides a good example of how the James Price Point issue was reported for an educated, east coast, broadly left-leaning audience. Additionally, the newspaper’s historical investment in the Franklin River campaign (which it commemorated in a series of articles marking the thirtieth anniversary of the blockade in 2013) makes for an interesting comparison with its stance on the James Price Point campaign.

Though ostensibly serving a nationwide audience, the majority of *The Australian*’s audience is located on the populous east coast, where it is influential among business and political elites and editorially favours neoliberal economic policy. Although it has a lower circulation than many of its competitors, *The Australian*, owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp, has a reputation of influence overreaching readership and continues to wield considerable power on the political stage (Manne, 2011; McKnight, 2012). It has also maintained a long campaign against what it calls the ‘orthodoxy’ of climate change consensus and other environmental problems (McKnight, 2012; Myers, 2013), and has been both applauded for its in-depth coverage of Indigenous issues and criticised for its strong ideological stance on matters of federal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy (Manne, 2011).

*The West Australian* is the only daily newspaper published in Western Australia. It also has the distinction of being the only major metropolitan daily print newspaper in Australia not owned by News Corp or Fairfax. *The West Australian* is included to compare how the issue was covered in its home state of Western Australia, and to consider the question of proximity and distance from a different angle—for while the two may still be in the same state, James Price Point is still some two thousand kilometres away from Perth, where *The West Australian* is published.
Analysis and Discussion

Background and context

The proposal to build a gas plant at James Price Point was controversial for a number of reasons. Located on the environmentally-sensitive Kimberley coastline, opponents claimed that the plant and its associated infrastructure and construction works (including seabed dredging, an eight-kilometre sea wall and a 400 kilometre pipeline to bring the gas from the Browse Basin) would destroy the habitats of endangered sea turtles and bilbies and disturb a major humpback whale calving ground. They also argued the plant would cut through a globally-significant track site of fossilised dinosaur footprints (the only known site of its kind in Western Australia), and disturb numerous Aboriginal sacred sites in the area including a significant and well-documented songline. Finally, and perhaps most problematically for journalists and commentators seeking to impose a clear-cut division between the pro- and anti-gas camps, the views of traditional owners themselves were divided. The local Aboriginal land council (Kimberley Land Council or KLC) had negotiated a $1.5 billion benefits package with Woodside and the state government on behalf of the Goolarabooloo-Jabirr Jabirr joint native title claim group. Although the size of the benefits package was unprecedented and hailed by supporters as a much-needed economic boost for the region’s Indigenous community, there was far from unanimous support for the deal. One concern shared by traditional owners both supportive and critical of the agreement was that it had been reached under the threat of compulsory acquisition by the state government, an arrangement that one Indigenous leader compared to ‘negotiating with a gun to your head’ (quoted in Hawley, 2009, p. 22). The diversity of views within Aboriginal society in Broome and the Kimberley tested generic media narratives that have tended to portray Indigenous Australians as a homogenous group (Mortimer, 2010). It also brings to the fore pressing questions about the relationship between national environmental organisations and local populations, including traditional owners.

Songlines, song cycles or dreaming tracks are an important part of Aboriginal law and culture. According to the Goolarabooloo (custodians of the song cycle that goes through James Price Point), the song cycle ‘recounts the creative journey of the ancestral beings who made the land and its people’ and encodes the patterns of behavior (law) set by the ancestors (Goolarabooloo, 2011). The song cycle can also serve as a map of the land, marking sites such as fresh water sources, seasonal food places, ceremonial grounds, and different species of plants (Goolarabooloo, 2011).
Media reporting of the James Price Point controversy

Throughout the campaign, but particularly in its early years, the three newspapers were united in setting the James Price Point issue up as a ‘battle’ in a wider frontier war over future mining and industrial development in Australia’s ‘last great wilderness’, the Kimberley. We see evidence of this in headlines such as ‘Race to study untouched Kimberley’ (Laurie, 2009, p. 37), ‘Battle looms over Kimberley development’ (Manning, 2009a, p. 2), ‘Battle for the last great wilderness’ (Harvey, 2011, p. 21) and ‘Battle to keep Kimberley wild, remote’ (Lloyd, 2012b, p. 1). Beyond this, however, the newspapers differed in their representation of who the key opponents were in this battle, and whether James Price Point should properly be considered part of the ‘spectacular’ Kimberley as no-gas campaigners advocated, or an ‘unremarkable’ spot on the vast Kimberley coastline. To demonstrate these differences, I will compare three early feature articles published in The Age, The Australian and The West Australian respectively, as these serve as examples of how the newspapers initially framed the issue for their readers and set the tone for subsequent coverage. I will follow the analysis of each article with a brief summary of key trends in each newspaper’s coverage of the whole campaign.

Janet Hawley, ‘Pipe Dream’, The Age – Good Weekend, 7 March 2009

Janet Hawley’s article ‘Pipe Dream’, appearing as the cover story in The Age’s Saturday features magazine Good Weekend in March 2009, was a significant coup for the no-gas movement. As the magazine is also distributed with The Age’s sister newspaper Sydney Morning Herald, it has a circulation of more than double the weekday average for the newspaper (The Newspaper Works, 2010). Despite the fairly innocuous title, ‘Pipe Dream’ is very sympathetic to the views of no-gas campaigners and highly critical of the state government. This position is signalled bluntly on the front cover of the magazine, which features a photograph of a dramatic, rocky seascape with the words ‘FOR SALE’ stamped in bold white letters over the image. Inside, a string of clichés reinforce the popular cultural framing of the Kimberley as a pristine wilderness, describing the region as ‘an iconic wilderness that must be protected’ and a ‘vibrant haven … where endless white sandy beaches meet red pindan cliffs’ and ‘coral-fringed’ islands ‘bead far north in a cerulean sea’ (p. 20). Casting the current battle in a long history of environmental struggle in Australia, Hawley writes that it ‘looks like becoming the country’s biggest environmental battleground since the Franklin River’ (pp. 20-21). James Price Point, meanwhile, is described as ‘beloved by generations of locals as an idyllic picnic, camping, fishing, and bird- and whale-watching spot, shared by everyone,
indigenous and white’ (p. 21). In this way, the reader is invited to engage with the threat posed to
the wider Kimberley region as a place of national significance, while being reassured of local
support for the campaign through the construction of James Price Point as a beloved place.

The article also stages the conflict as a familiar story of big business and a greedy government
clashing with environmental and Aboriginal interests. Quoted sources are cast in the roles of villains
and heroes: Barnett is described as a ‘ paternalistic, pro-development’ premier who is ‘hell-bent on
creating his big industrial dream’ (p. 21), while young Indigenous leader Albert Wigan is a
‘thoughtful, charismatic man’ who speaks passionately about the need to protect his land—even
speaking out against some of his elders who support the plant (p. 24). Furthermore, although the
article observes that Wigan ‘has felt the full wrath of the elders for openly criticising them’ (p. 24),
the thorny issue of divided views among traditional owners is sidestepped by the near-unanimous
criticism of Barnett’s threats to compulsorily acquire James Price Point, which have ‘caused huge
disquiet, stress and argument among indigenous people’ (p. 24). By positioning Barnett as the
villain, traditional owners on both sides are once more cast as allies. It is Wigan who gets the final
word, as he tells his children, and by extension, his readers in Melbourne and Sydney:

“Our responsibility is to look after the land, not sell it or surrender it to be buried under a gas
precinct. It’s our chance to set an example to the rest of the world, to inspire people by how well we
care for country. If we lose what we have, we’ll never get it back.

“Gas companies will come and go, but the Kimberley is forever.” (Quoted in Hawley, 2009, p. 24)

The concluding quote acts as a call-to-action to distant audiences, presenting intervention as
relatively unproblematic: a pristine part of Australia is at risk of industrialisation, and Aboriginal
owners, together with Broome community members and environmentalists, are asking for your help
to save it—and it worked. Of the nine letters-to-the-editor published in response to that weekend’s
edition of *Good Weekend*, seven of them were about the Janet Hawley article, and all of them were
opposed to the gas plant. Contributors included the singer-songwriter Missy Higgins, who was
already involved in the Save the Kimberley campaign; the Australian author Di Morrissey, who had
published three novels set in the Kimberley; and Martin Pritchard, the director of Environs
Kimberley (although his title is not included in the letter itself). The other letters came from readers
in Victoria and New South Wales and responded passionately to the national call to protect
Australia’s ‘glorious ancient crown’ (Hawley, 2009, p. 20).
The Age’s coverage across the campaign

Despite its early impassioned intervention in ‘Pipe Dream’, The Age’s coverage of the gas plant proposal was mainly limited to the business pages, and mostly to short news stories providing updates from an industry perspective. No editorials and only two opinion pieces on the topic were published (one for the proposal, one against). It was clearly not an issue that The Age felt warranted regular attention; perhaps editors felt it was too distant. However, the frontier/wilderness framing established in Hawley’s article was carried through, albeit in more muted tones, in the columns of energy reporter Paddy Manning. Manning (who would later lose his job for expressing concern about ‘creeping advertorial’ on the business pages of Fairfax newspapers in an article for a rival publication) devoted six of his ‘G-BIZ’ (Green Business) columns to the controversy. As some of the headlines indicate, these articles explored social and environmental impacts of the proposal as well as financial ones: ‘Pressure building on Kimberley coast’ (2010, p. 2), ‘Kimberley coast shapes up as crucial battleground’ (2011, p. 12) and ‘WA to change the face of the Kimberley forever’ (Manning, 2009b, p. 2). The framing of the Kimberley as a last hold-out against industrialisation persists here, as does the representation of the ‘pro-development’ state government as a villain, inviting the reader to engage with the controversy as an issue of national environmental significance.


In contrast to ‘Pipe Dream’, ‘Kimberley braces for call of progress’, by Victoria Laurie, paints a much less romantic and more dispassionate picture of James Price Point. The area is described simply as a ‘flat, scrubby coastal strip 60km north of the tourist town of Broome’ (2008, p. 13). Like Hawley’s article, the stand-first frames the conflict as an ‘old story: balancing the needs of the economy with environmental and indigenous objections’ (p. 13), but absent are the adjective-laden descriptions of the Kimberley’s pristine beauty. The article instead sketches the range of social actors involved in the controversy on both sides and highlights the breadth of the no-gas movement’s activities, from film star Jack Thompson appearing in a big-budget Wilderness Society cinema advertisement, to the anonymous ‘Hands Off Country’ YouTube site featuring low-budget hand-held videos.

Significantly, Laurie draws a connection not with the Franklin River, but with the Noonkanbah Station protest, a famous blockade staged by Yungngora traditional owners on their land in the Kimberley region in 1980 (Ritter, 2002). The state government eventually sided with the mining company and sent a convoy of trucks from Perth to break the blockade. The current conflict is
thereby situated in the history of Aboriginal land rights rather than environmental struggle—a framing that is carried through in the breadth of Aboriginal voices that are quoted in the article, from both sides of the debate.

Like Hawley’s article, Indigenous people from both sides are positioned as allies against the common enemy of Barnett and his single-minded determination to build the plant at James Price Point, with or without the support of traditional owners. Yet unlike Hawley’s article, where the final word was given to a young Aboriginal man who is committed to the passionate defence of the land against all else (thereby aligning with environmental interests), in Laurie’s article the emphasis is on the right of Aboriginal people to decide on the future of their land. Accordingly, the article concludes with a quote from Kimberley Land Council member and Jarlmadangah elder John Watson, who was involved in the Noonkanbah Station blockade as a young man: “Everybody was very strong at that time,” recalls Watson, “and people came from outside the Kimberley to help us, white people, union people.” He adds: “It could happen again with the gas hub” (p. 13). Like ‘Pipe Dream’, the article ends with an implicit call-to-action, but here it is lodged squarely on the shoulders of Aboriginal land rights rather than overreaching environmental concerns that may or may not align with Aboriginal interests. As I shall show in the next section, it was a framing that would be carried throughout The Australian’s coverage of the gas plant proposal.

The Australian’s coverage across the campaign

The Australian has seldom been reticent in taking an opinionated stance on Indigenous issues, and its editorial response to the James Price Point proposal was no exception. Between April 2009 (when the KLC signed the initial Heads of Agreement with Woodside and the state government) to September 2011, the newspaper published eight editorials on the plant, all of them strongly in favour of the plant being built. Its reasons for this support were uniform: in line with the paper’s ideological commitment to neoliberal economic policy, The Australian is a strong supporter of addressing Aboriginal disadvantage through economic development and private sector investment in native title areas. Additionally, the proposal allowed the paper another opportunity to continue its long-running attack on environmentalists and the Greens party. In one characteristic editorial entitled ‘Bogus greens should back off’, The Australian paternalistically praises the ‘wise’ actions of traditional owners who backed the development at James Price Point while attacking opposition from ‘affluent celebrities such as Midnight Oil drummer Rob Hirst, singers Missy Higgins and John Butler and retired judge Murray Wilcox’ (2010, p. 15). The newspaper justifies its support in terms
of Aboriginal self-determination and letting traditional owners decide for themselves, a position which crafts standing back and maintaining distance as the ethical norm of public conduct for the reader. Yet this justification itself relies on a failure to acknowledge the level of disagreement within the Broome Aboriginal community; inaction, after all, is rarely a neutral act.

From September 2011 however, a surprising shift in *The Australian*'s coverage of the proposal took place. There were no more editorials, and just one more opinion article that supported the plant compared to two opposed (up to September 2011, the paper had published four opinion articles in favour of the plant and just one against it). While *The Australian* continued to air anti-green sentiment in its hard news stories, these were matched, and in many cases overshadowed, by the articles of environment editor Graham Lloyd. Lloyd is an enigmatic figure: widely reviled by many as a climate change sceptic who has devoted significant column space to wind turbine sickness, he is also an ardent conservationist who, together with his partner (and *Australian* photographer Vanessa Hunter), started a conservation reserve in the Peruvian Amazon to prevent deforestation (http://www.lupuna.org/). His articles were more sympathetic to the no-gas campaign and gave liberal expression to the views of traditional owners who opposed the plant, particularly in an article provocatively headlined ‘Kimberley heritage sold out by “conspiracy of deceit”’ (Lloyd, 2012a, p. 19). While the reasons for this apparent shift in *The Australian*'s coverage of the gas plant proposal are unclear, I believe it is connected to the fact that by late 2011, it was looking increasingly likely that the gas plant would not go ahead. For the purpose of my analysis, it is important to note that *The Australian*'s shift was accompanied by a shift in its allegiance to Aboriginal voices in the campaign: as articles became more cautiously opposed to the gas plant, opposing voices were quoted more regularly while supportive ones were marginalised.

*Ben Spencer, ‘Gloves off in Broome as gas hub polarises town’, The West Australian, 3 January 2009*

*The West Australian* resisted the wilderness framing from the start. Its first feature article on the topic was headlined ‘Gloves off in Broome as gas hub polarises town’ (Spencer, 2009, p. 12), and as the title suggests, it focuses on the tensions that were already emerging, even at this early stage, between people in the town. The issue is framed for Perth readers neither in relation to the Franklin River nor Noonkanbah Station, but to recent environmental struggles to preserve old-growth forests in the state’s south-west, just a few hours’ drive from Perth. Unlike the glowing descriptions
of the Kimberley in Hawley’s article and the deferral of aesthetic judgement in Laurie’s, Spencer sets James Price Point up as a place of perplexing contrasts:

At first glance, James Price Point is a remote place … The jagged, red-earth cliffs unique to the Kimberley glow like fire at sunset and are often pounded by massive waves during the cyclone season … But while Aboriginal groups and environmentalists trumpet a supposedly pristine environment, there are obvious signs not all feel the need to look after it. (Spencer, 2009, p. 12)

The article resists the generic wilderness framing advocated by sections of the no-gas movement, while also not fully endorsing Barnett’s ‘unremarkable’ claim. It seems determined to strip the romantic veil that often clouds accounts of environmental struggles in ‘pristine’ environments, but in doing so, the gas plant issue is presented as a toxic conflict fought between irrevocably opposed groups. Like the articles by Hawley and Laurie, Spencer gives the final word to a traditional owner, Save the Kimberley member Neil McKenzie: ‘My hair stands up on the back of my neck … I am really scared, just sick in the stomach at the thought’ (p. 12). Yet the statement does not issue the same call-to-action that it did in the Hawley and Laurie articles; instead it conveys a sense of despondency and inevitability that was absent in the determination to ‘stand up and fight’ expressed in different ways by Albert Wigan and John Watson. This is reinforced by the emphasis on the in-fighting and divisions throughout the article and it is a framing that is carried throughout The West Australian’s coverage.

The West Australian’s coverage across the campaign

The West Australian published thirteen editorials on the proposal between July 2010 and April 2013. All were underwritten by intimation that the gas plant would be good for the state and Aboriginal people in the Kimberley, though only seven made this support explicit. Those editorials that were more neutral in tone expressed concern at the broader process surrounding the gas plant proposal, such as conflicts of interest in the Environmental Protection Authority’s assessment report, Barnett’s dogged determination to proceed with compulsory acquisition, and the excessive police force (of more than 100 riot police) deployed from Perth to break the peaceful blockade in 2011. The West Australian seemed to see its role as peacekeeper, a paternal figure that acknowledged the right of the no-gas movement to protest but maintained the gas hub should go ahead in the best interests of the state and Aboriginal communities. The paper did, however, reserve a lashing of thinly-veiled anger for ‘outsiders’ such as environmentalist and former leader of the Australian Greens, Bob
Brown, who it accused of meddling in the affairs of Aboriginal communities and riding roughshod over their right to make their own decisions about the land (The West Australian, 2012, p. 18).

By 2012, the editorials also took on a tone of bitter regret as the project became increasingly unlikely and all that was left was a divided town, as reflected in the tone of its last editorial on the controversy: ‘Now the gas hub is gone, let us heal wounds’ (2013, p. 20). In this way, the paper claimed affinity with the project as something that affected all Western Australia, while acknowledging the significant emotional toll in Broome itself. A long feature article published in April 2013, shortly after Woodside announced it was abandoning the onshore hub, captured the essence of this pain. Headlined ‘Broome’s innocence lost’ (Pennels, 2013, p. 89), it details the extent of rifts caused by the plant. In other words, the human toll was at the forefront in The West Australian's coverage, with environmental impacts presented as valid concerns but not deserving of taking priority over the social and economic benefits of the plant. Environmentalist opposition to the plant was marginalised and with it, a space for audiences in Perth to feel like they could productively engage with the issue. Like in The Australian, the only option, it seemed, was standing back.

**Conclusion**

To return, then, to the questions with which I began this paper: How are distant audiences engaged in debates over places that are distant to them? What role does news media play in facilitating that engagement? Can such engagement take an ethical form? The preceding analysis has served to highlight the difficulties news organisations face in negotiating competing views and values of place, especially involving Indigenous communities. I want to suggest that at various times both The Age and The Australian omitted opposing Indigenous voices, and that this was because the alternative—presenting Aboriginal voices in conflict with each other—was too difficult. The framing of the Kimberley as a ‘pristine wilderness’, which was presented in The Age, offers readers an unproblematic call-to-arms based on ideas of defending national heritage and sacred Aboriginal land—but it fails to acknowledge the depth of disagreement with the Aboriginal community.

Similarly, The Australian's seemingly balanced appeal to readers—do nothing and let traditional owners decide for themselves—is problematic because it nonetheless relies on marginalising the voices of those with whom it disagrees. In both cases, the landscape is depoliticised by attempting to impose a false homogeneity on Aboriginal voices. I am inclined to agree with Stephen Muecke when he writes, ‘The more one seeks to iron out contradictions, the more one takes a smooth and
serene critical distance, and there is a problem with that’ (2011, p. 6). Yet the alternative, a highly-politicised landscape—such as in the depressing portraits of a town rent by anger and disagreement in *The West Australian*—is equally problematic. Painting the decision as one that is solely up to locals to decide is one that precludes any opportunity for the distant reader to feel that they have a right or a responsibility to lend their voice, in support or opposition. While this might seem like the ‘proper distance’ (Silverstone, 2003) for readers in Sydney, Melbourne, or even Perth to maintain, articles that paint the issue as one of solely local politics fail to acknowledge the unequal playing field of those involved (with multibillion dollar companies ranged against small land councils that are entirely dependent on government funding), and the radically non-local (and indeed, non-human) interests that are at stake—from the state and federal royalties that are to be spread across Australia, to the gas that is to be exported to Asia, to humpback whales that migrate past James Price Point on their way to Antarctica. It is only in the articulation of James Price Point as a place of multifaceted, competing value and of human and non-human interests—what Bruno Latour (2004) might call a *cosmopolitics*—that a space opens which both respects the rights of the ‘local’ while revealing the ways in which the non-local is present.

What remains unaddressed in this study then, and what future research will explore, is how to place this highly-localised campaign back into a global narrative of climate change and ecological risk. After all, although Woodside will not be building the onshore plant at James Price Point, the future of the site, and the wider Kimberley region, is far from settled. In September 2013 Woodside announced that it would push ahead with offshore development of the Browse Basin gas using floating LNG (FLNG) technology3 developed by its joint venture partner, Shell. And in November 2013, 3400 hectares of land at James Price Point was compulsorily acquired by the Western Australian government, which still hopes to develop an industrial precinct of some sort at the site. Future research therefore calls for a rearticulation of the global as it is expressed in highly-localised settings—for example, by exploring the global impacts of Browse Basin gas, or the ‘shadow places’ (Plumwood, 2008) that remain largely unexamined—like that giant ship that is to float unseen atop a coral reef hundreds of kilometres offshore, sucking up gas from the sea floor.

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3 Floating LNG enables gas from remote offshore fields to be converted into a liquid at sea via a processing facility that literally ‘floats’ on top of the gas field—in the form of massive a ship that is moored permanently to the seabed with huge chains.

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Now the gas hub is gone, let us heal wounds. (2013, 22 April). The West Australian, p. 20.


