The story I am about to tell takes place in a small town in a remote part of Australia known as Arnhem Land, in the NE of the Northern Territory, home of the Indigenous Yolŋu people. Each of these towns is more commonly referred to as an 'Indigenous Community', a term which tends to overlook their diverse constitution of Yolŋu peoples brought together by the outworking of many, often external agencies. They are also the home of numerous balanda, the non-Indigenous people who work here as teachers, nurses, tradespeople, bookkeepers and managers of the various Western institutions which are integral players in these towns: the town council, the school, the clinic, the store. In this story I am at the Women's Centre, where local women are employed by the council to work with and support other women in the town. I used to be a teacher in the school, but at this time I am a researcher, an ethnographer with a particular interest in how computers are getting on in this town, as some of its newest and most surprising residents.

It's 10.00 am and I'm sitting at a desk in a small besser brick building equipped with several of these desks, some air cons, a scattering of children's toys, several unused sewing machines and here on the desk, a computer. There is a lull in the usual morning frenzy of requests for help with transferring money between bank accounts and as I push back my chair I see several pieces of blank A4 paper on the floor. Blank paper can be rare here so I reach to pick it up, but as I go to discard the one on top with a foot print, I see it isn't blank paper; on the other side there is the imprint of a brief form: a place to write one's name, bank account number and address and another place for two signatures. They are blank forms but one signature is already in place, with the tell-tale suggestion of photocopied biro.

I sort of smile inside as I tear the papers up and put them in the bin. I know the signature. I know why it's there, even though in the past I have torn up these sheets in front of people, saying, 'This is illegal. We can't do this. This person is signing to say, that they know this (other) person. They are who they say they are.' ('I am an approved elder of this community. You have my name on a list and here is my signature!') But still I find these photocopied forms on the floor and in the desk drawer.

I have been here on other days when these pre-signed forms haven't appeared, when people have gone off on long trips on foot across a hot dusty town in 90% humidity to get that legal signature. I've done a fair bit of that trudging myself, and seen something of what people are doing when they aren't making their way around our hot town. Yes, there's a great deal of resting to be done in these conditions, but there are also kids to feed, shopping and washing, vehicles to repair, the current funeral to attend (every evening for a week). And I've been here long enough to realise that this...
is only the visible tip of the huge busy-ness of living as part of a town where everyone is related to everyone else, where obligations, ceremonial and mundane, are real and must be worked. So when I’ve seen the photocopied forms I’ve felt sympathetic. And yet still justified. After all, we (us people, the forms, the signatures, the fax machines and the people at the bank who will receive the signatures) are all behaving legally.

As I turn away from the bin where the shredded forms are settling in with other papers clearly displaying people’s names, their bank account numbers and signatures—discarded once the transaction is over and the importance of the paper has been replaced by the prospect of the money waiting at the store—I glance at some papers on the other desk. They are time sheets, for this week. The one on top has already been filled out and it says that this person (whom I haven’t seen today) has been here from 8.30 to 12.30. It has been signed and now the form is awaiting another signature, that of the workplace supervisor, the worker’s older sister.

I know these sisters. I have known them for years. I’ve sung Christmas carols in Yolŋu Matha from old missionary hymnals on a rug outside their house on Christmas Eve. I’ve been to heartbreaking funerals where the older sister is a lay preacher and her gentle Christian sermons at the graveside have somehow integrated themselves into the week’s grieving through traditional dance, song, clapstick and didgeridoo and the ancient ritual of throwing oneself on the ground, beating oneself with rocks.

I’ve spent hours with these sisters, too, pouring over computer screens, trying to solve the problems of old computers mixed with our inadequate computer skills. We are really fond of each other and call each other ŋama and waku. I’m a mum to them. They are my ‘daughters’. Now the smile inside me turns to a sort of ache. I really feel like a parent now.

The feeling is like a stop. It elicits a memory of something I read in a journal of the Danish Philosopher, Kierkegaard. He wrote that he knew what it felt like to be a chess piece when someone says, ‘This piece cannot be moved.’ I even notice that I can picture the place on the page where it says this in my copy of the book.

It intrigues and comforts me. But why should I need comforting?

I have just the language for describing this moment. It is the language of a world where humans are paramount in all things: their needs, their explanations and their virtues. But curiously, while humans are paramount and distinct from things, they need things to maintain this distinction; specifically things called numbers and written words. And paper is very useful for keeping these in place, especially certain types of names, called signatures, and special kinds of numbers called time and money, and special kinds of paper, called books; places from which the words of a philosopher, a wise person, can be revived and performed. (I’m turning to the paperwork inside me to find a response to the paperwork on the floor.) I’ve done my homework; I know that something as fragile as paper can only hold the world in place because of another sort of work which has been done, translating that world into a sort of office (Latour called it a laboratory) where words and
numbers, diagrams and tables can represent us all: people and land masses, creatures and feelings, relationships and acts. It’s the recognisable work of scientists and bureaucrats and the kind of world that certain kinds of moralists love. In it there are recognisable ‘marks’, completely mobile and translatable, by which we can judge the ethics of others. Standing by my waku’s desk in her workplace I understand these moves. But I know I am in trouble. Like the chess piece I feel I can’t make any of my normal moves.

I do have, however, another resource, another familiar set of vocabulary to help me. It’s the language of relativity, of Olivier de Sardan’s ‘social logic’... of ‘walking a mile in their shoes’. I know I haven’t moved from my humanist, protagonist, stand point, and I have an uneasy feeling I should have, but by now I am enchanted by my understanding. Aren’t my sisters acting in good faith, keeping the community running, keeping the money flowing, keeping the signatures coming? It’s a different approach to doing the world but this is a very different place. Surely this way of thinking should mitigate my disconcertment.

But it doesn’t. Instead I find myself caught in a powerful dualism. It’s an either/or description of the situation in which I am left having to choose, having to flip-flop between worlds. Or rather, the signatures have made me a split personality: both ŋama and mother.

The effort tires me so I sit down in the empty room, trying to access more familiar paperwork. If I recognise this stop for what it is, or rather, for what it can be, I see it as the apporia, Appelbaum’s ‘moment of poise’, which he says, offers a choice (Applebaum 1995, p. xi). But it is choice which flaws me, which produces this enervation. It seems to be a choice between parent or ŋama; the parent who knows what’s right in the balanda world, because it enables banks to do what they do well, which Yolŋu want them to do, or the ŋama who is starting to belong because she has been taken by the hand into a world of new relationships, understandings, obligations and challenges, including the challenge which is experienced by each Yolŋu, of living as a member of a large family, in houses designed for a few people, in conditions of extreme heat and humidity.

But if I take up Appelbaum’s challenge (albeit sheltering in air conditioning) I have to accept that choice is inevitable, and that maybe the choice is between dualism and something else. In particular, I need a way that might take us all forward, and not just me. I am aware of another way of thinking which I can also access through my internal paperwork. It’s couched in the language of the Actor Network Theory (ANT) writers. It is particularly relevant at this moment in my disconcertment because these writers have made it very explicit, that their first movement (in being true to ANT) is to reject dualisms. They reject them as something given, as places to start out from. Their second move is, as they put it, to follow actors: all the characters in the drama of the worlds we inhabit and seek to understand, and to watch what they are up to. Their third move is to describe what is happening in terms of these actions, which the ANT writers call ‘translations’. They are teaching us to use a language free of its former associations, its imbedded dualisms: not active humans and passive things, moral balanda and struggling Yolŋu, just actors, involved in transitions. I’ve been following these particular actors (the ANT writers) for some time and so I am familiar with something they have noticed in their own long histories of following all sorts of actors, in both the
developed and developing worlds. Latour said it this way, making up a word to help us understand his point. He says, that if we look this way, none of the actors in a particular network of connected translations,

... ever think either illogically or logically, [morally or immorally] but always sociologically; that is they go straight from elements to elements until a controversy starts. When this happens they look for stronger and more resistant allies, and in order to do so, they may end up mobilizing the most heterogeneous and distant elements, thus mapping for themselves, for their opponents, and for the observers, what they value most, what they are most dearly attached to (Latour 1987, p.205, interpolation and emphasis mine).

I watch myself this way, sitting by my waku’s desk. I am attached to the network of innumerable translations that have made me who I am. I am imbedded in a world which translates itself into numbers and signatures at the hint of a controversy (numbers and signatures mobilizing heterogeneous and distant elements). But I sense my waku and I know she is doing exactly the same thing, and in the process mapping for herself, for her opponents, and for her observers, what she values most, what she is most dearly attached to.

This feels like the same thought I had several minutes ago, but in this moment of tension, something breaks. This is not (or doesn't have to be) a reversion to the choice which has just been paralysing me, because the dualism has gone. My waku and I are doing the same thing. By mapping for ourselves what we value most, what we are most dearly attached to, we find ourselves in different worlds, overlapping and contradictory, but we perform these worlds in exactly the same manner. We always had the opportunity for understanding, and for dialogue based on understanding, but there is something new here. Where we tried to understand each other’s worlds from two different stand points, where morality (based on the testimony of marks on paper) is the domain of one and the powerful agency of kinship the domain of the other, with huge either/or choices to be made, we now have the chance to talk about morality and ethics together and the networks which perform them and the translations we need to perform together to engage in certain networks. It is a potential path forward.

I don’t think it will be easy for either of us, but it is a reason for hope; it is how good faith works. As I shut the door on the cool air in the Women’s Centre and head off into the heat of the town, I feel I can breathe a little easier.

References

