Fuel, Cars and the Geography of Petrol Sniffing

Maggie Brady

The petrol which kids and adults are sniffing, well it's really bad. It makes people listless, and will make you sick. It will burn you away, your lungs, liver, brains, heart, eyes. Tell them immediately to stop, you mothers, fathers and anyone else. The Police and the Council have said [this]. Your children, and your siblings, tell them off quick. They could increase in number, and their breathing could be impaired from sniffing. If they sniff all the time it will increase.

Petrol isn't milk, cool drink, or water, no—it belongs to motor vehicles. You aren't a car, no you're a person. Take it easy, drink water, cool drinks, milk.¹

Inhaling petrol fumes in order to achieve a euphoric mood is usually discussed as a form of social pathology—after all, it is a deviance made more illicit and peculiar because the substance (petrol) is not intended, or designed, to be a drug; its real purpose lies elsewhere. The intensification of the drug-using activity we have come to know as 'petrol sniffing' was intimately linked to the exponential rise in Aboriginal ownership of vehicles and the availability of petrol. Ironically though, it has been the fuel itself in a modified form that has, in the end, helped to curb the practice. This essay provides a brief ethnographic review of sniffing and the unanticipated consequences of automobility. Many of the ideas here draw on original anthropological fieldwork undertaken by the author in several parts of remote Australia.²

Most people are surprised to learn that the deliberate sniffing of petrol has been reported among Aboriginal Australians for more than 60 years. Two prominent Aboriginal men, the late Charles Perkins and Bob Randall, recalled that, as children in the 1940s, they had experimented with petrol sniffing at the institution known as The Bungalow in Alice Springs.³ Apart from this specific

1 Junga Yimi, Yuendumu, November 1982, translated from Warlpiri by Dr David Nash.

2 The author undertook fieldwork focused on petrol inhalation in Arnhem Land, NT (Numbulwar, Groote Eylandt, Ngukurr, Maningrida, Galiwin'ku), Western Australia (Warburton, Blackstone, Jamieson, Warakurna) and South Australia (Yalata, Oak Valley) between 1988 and 1990. She held a World Health Organisation travelling fellowship to Canada in 1990 that focused on sniffing prevalence and treatment. Since then the author has maintained an active research involvement in the issue.

3 Senate Select Committee on Volatile Solvent Fumes 1985, *Volatile substance abuse in Australia*, Official Hansard Report, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, p. 190.

report, a folklore of sniffing has become established, attributing its origins to imitative behaviour in which Aboriginal people were said to have copied the activities of American servicemen stationed on northern coasts during World War II. Verifying this rumour is difficult; there are no official reports of servicemen inhaling petrol fumes.⁴ Perhaps it is worth remembering that American servicemen were said to be responsible for the advent of glue sniffing in the United Kingdom as well.⁵

In Australia the first written documentation of the practice dates from 1950, when a report noted that Aboriginal people were sniffing petrol on the Cobourg Peninsula, a tract of tropical land north-east of Darwin. Historians know the peninsula because it was the site of two failed nineteenth-century British settlements, at Raffles Bay and Port Essington. The petrol being sniffed on this occasion was not sourced from cars—it came from a sawmill that had started operations in the 1920s and which employed Aboriginal men from the surrounding region. These men were accompanied by their wives and children. In 1950, a government patrol officer found that some of the ‘natives’ were ‘disposed to inhale the fumes’ of the petrol powering the mill, and he locked it up out of harm’s way.⁶ When these people returned to their communities—mostly dotted along the coastline to the east of the peninsula—those who had been experimenting with sniffing the fumes took with them the knowledge they had acquired. They had learned that petrol fumes could make you see and hear imaginary things—an experience not felt before. These returning workers inadvertently sparked the diffusion of a substance use that spread across Arnhem Land ‘like fire’ (as one local Aboriginal man put it), which was to cause angst, despair and death in the decades to come.⁷

Using petrol as a drug is not confined to Aboriginal people in Australia, but is part of a global landscape of drug use. It seems inevitably to be a *fringe* drug—a substance used by a subset of young people who are themselves a minority group within a society. Some are indigenous, and petrol sniffing is reported among aboriginal groups in Canada and the United States, and among Islanders and Maori in New Zealand. Other users are reported to come from poor or marginalised groups including Mexican-Americans, Brazilian street children, black South Africans and some Pacific Islanders. The use of volatile inhalants other than petrol is common in these populations as well.

4 Brady, M. 1992, *Heavy Metal: The social meaning of petrol sniffing in Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, p. 140.

5 O’Connor, D. J. 1986, *Glue Sniffing and Solvent Abuse*, Boys’ and Girls’ Welfare Society, Cheshire, UK, p. 17.

6 National Archives of Australia, CRS F315 11949/393 A111 CA 1078, Native Affairs Branch, National Archives of Australia, Canberra.

7 Brady, *Heavy Metal*, p. 142.

Geography

In Australia the knowledge of sniffing radiated out from several hubs in the north and centre of the country from the 1960s onwards, moving between communities linked by language and kinship, in concert with increased access to cash, the opening up of new roads and the growth in car ownership. Access to cash and vehicles led in turn to an increase in mobility and visitation between communities for schooling, church fellowship, sport and ceremonial activity. Demographers John Taylor and Martin Bell have identified what they term ‘circular mobility’: networks of movement between places that combine to form functional regions.⁸ There were five communities reporting sniffing in the 1960s, nine in the 1970s, 12 in the 1980s, and, once established in these locations, sniffing rarely left them. By the 1990s, sniffing had taken hold in parts of Arnhem Land and Central Australia, the Goldfields and old Central Reserves of Western Australia, and the far west coast and northern regions of South Australia. There were outbreaks on Queensland’s Cape York Peninsula and in outback New South Wales. In 2006 there were still 600 regular sniffers in desert regions of the Northern Territory, and in 2008–09 new or repeat outbreaks of sniffing were reported in other regions of the Territory, in the Kimberley, the far west of South Australia and in Queensland.⁹

Notably absent from this geography of sniffing were the old cattle station regions of the north, such as the Barkly Tableland, the Victoria River district and the Kimberley. Somehow, among Aboriginal groups living on or near the pastoral properties on which the older (and some of the younger) generation had mustered cattle, built fences and broken in wild horses, petrol sniffing was absent. Intimate involvement with the cattle industry in the recent past seemed to protect the young from the desire to take up sniffing. This was the case in the 1980s and is largely the case today in the first decade of the twenty-first century. These were locations where the Aboriginal cowboy ethic lived on and permeated the younger generation. A greater sense of independence, pride in work, a secure masculine identity and the chance to engage in alternative ways of taking risks—all of which are associated with involvement in the cattle industry—constitute the social underpinnings for the absence of sniffing in these regions. Aboriginal people were living on or near their own country and ranging into it as part of their mustering work or in the off-season when people were free to make visits. The populations here were smaller than in the welfare

8 Taylor, J. and Bell, M. 2004, ‘Continuity and change in Indigenous Australian population mobility’, in J. Taylor and M. Bell (eds), *Population Mobility and Indigenous Peoples in Australasia and North America*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 13–43.

9 Senate Community Affairs Committee Secretariat 2009, *Grasping the opportunity of Opal: assessing the impact of the Petrol Sniffing Strategy*, Senate Committee Report, Standing Committee on Community Affairs, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, pp. 8–9, <www.aph.gov.au/SENATE/COMMITTEE>

or mission settlements, and there was comparatively less official interference in people's day-to-day lives. Cattle station workers also absorbed whitefella notions of keeping youths under control; there seems to have been less 'cheek' and fewer examples of kids getting 'on top' of their parents in the ways complained of by Aboriginal families in the larger government settlements.¹⁰

During the 1970s and 1980s petrol was the drug of choice for children and teenagers (who were mostly but not exclusively boys), but by the 1990s, as the cohorts of surviving sniffers grew older, adults too were sniffing petrol.¹¹ In these decades, sniffing became something of a subculture, and young people in some regions created named gangs, differentiated from others by an adopted style of distinctive clothing and by the type of music played on their ghetto blasters: heavy metal. Kids learned about sniffing from one another, with older brothers inducting younger ones. New users learned the performative rituals of stealing petrol (cutting fuel lines if necessary) and how to personalise the empty beer or soft drink cans used for delivering the drug. Aluminium cans work well if shaped to fit around the nose and strung with wire around the neck (hands-free). Users also taught one another the technique of removing the top of a can by rubbing it on concrete, so that sniffers' haunts were littered with neatly sheared-off can tops.

Figure 1 Modified soft drink can found on Maningrida Oval, October 1986

Photo courtesy of Maggie Brady

¹⁰ Brady, *Heavy Metal*, pp. 183–90.

¹¹ Brady, M. and Torzillo, P. 1994, 'Petrol sniffing down the track', [Editorial], *Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 160 (21 February), p. 176.

In 1988 a young woman in east Arnhem Land told me her story:

My brothers and cousin-brothers were learning me to sniff...get the tin, scrape tin on cement to get the top off. They taught me. [I] started in 1983. It was killing my brain and the petrol bin go all over my body and I bin sick. After that I bin sniffing again and then I went to [nearby town] with boys and girls to steal car and drink beer. Went to steal truck, skid around. Got petrol from workshop, where cars staying, from old car. After that I was stealing too much, sniffing 24 hour [that is, day and night]...Not this time [that is, now] I bin Christian. I bin baptized and confirmed in river. I'm good life, getting strong and too much tucker. I bin forget about it, sniffing. (HD, aged twenty)¹²

Sniffers enhanced the experience of intoxication through shared, learned rituals: sitting with candles at night or watching scary videos. Each sniffer dared the others to confront ghosts or snakes and summon up 'the horrors'. The effects were frightening, thrilling and oppositional. Apparently oblivious to the risks of permanent damage to the brain and nervous system, a sniffer could not only engage in imaginary warfare and be liberated to explore unsupervised youthful sex, he could also provoke immediate responses from those around him: attention, fear, outrage, persuasion, coddling or rejection. 'We don't listen to anybody!' one young man boasted. One reformed sniffer told me: 'When I was sniff, and my parents told me not, [I said] "I got my own life. If I want to die, I die, you don't have to tell me what to do. I don't take notice from anyone!"'.¹³ A ubiquitous retort from sniffers was 'It's *my* body!'.

Many young sniffers exploited the loopholes that were becoming increasingly apparent in customary, highly permissive Aboriginal child-rearing practices. Adults told me they were often frightened of sniffers; they also attributed supernatural powers to them: sniffers were thought to be abnormally strong, they ran around fast, they could 'see' anything—monsters, devils—or see through people with their X-ray vision. Young men had tantrums and engaged in emotional blackmail, threatening elderly parents or grandparents with their continued use of petrol unless their demands were granted. Sniffing gave power to the otherwise powerless within the gerontocracy of Aboriginal society. But even the elders had trouble managing sniffing, and collective action in many communities was undermined by sniffers' families who defended their own against expressions of disapprobation coming from others. By the 1980s, community councils often consisted of men and women whose own sons or daughters were using petrol, making it doubly difficult for them to take decisive action. Some council members had even been sniffers themselves in preceding

¹² Brady, *Heavy Metal*, p. 86.

¹³ Brady, Fieldnotes, 1988.

years. This was a substance abuse not so easily explained by the usually deployed reasons such as poverty, dispossession or the lack of land rights; its prevalence included regions where Indigenous people controlled and owned their land and had never been removed from it.¹⁴

Some communities were paralysed by social disorder and disharmony, compounded in turn by the pain, sorrow and guilt associated with the sniffing behaviour of their young people. Governments washed their hands of the issue for decades, conveniently citing self-determination policies and expecting the communities concerned to manage it themselves. It was only the pressure arising from several prominent coronial inquiries into petrol-related deaths in Central Australia and dramatic front-page newspaper coverage¹⁵ that provoked more concerted policy responses in the twenty-first century, as well as finally attracting the attention of the petroleum producers.¹⁶

Aboriginal people (and government officers) had seemed initially bewildered and paralysed by the peculiar nature of the activity.¹⁷ The early responses to petrol sniffing emanated from concerned outsiders—teachers, welfare officers and police—and interventions included bush camps and outstations, temporary ‘exile’ and isolation, community service orders, and cattle and fencing activities. The YMCA ran recreation and after-school ‘prime crime time’ activities to offer alternatives to young people.¹⁸ There was a family counselling team in Central Australia with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members, and in Western Australia a working party of health educators was set up; both involved local community members. It was only in the 1980s that social projects and interventions initiated by Aboriginal community members began to flourish. Some communities tried public shaming and physical punishment; others organised separate out-camps for sniffers, supervised by caring Aboriginal couples. An outstation beyond Yuendumu, Mt Theo, became the most well known and successful of these strategies.¹⁹ Aboriginal art was also recruited in efforts to communicate messages about sniffing and there was a proliferation of

14 Brady, *Heavy Metal*, p. 192; Sutton, P. 2009, *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the end of the liberal consensus*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic.

15 For example, Toohey, P. 2001, ‘Plague on dark side of the Rock’, *The Weekend Australian*, 6–7 January, pp. 1–2.

16 d’Abbs, P. and Brady, M. 2004, ‘Other people, other drugs: the policy response to petrol sniffing among Indigenous Australians’, *Drug and Alcohol Review*, vol. 23, p. 255; d’Abbs, P., MacLean, S. and Brady, M. 2008, ‘From platitudes to policies: the evolving response to volatile substance misuse in Australia’, in D. Moore and P. Dietze (eds), *Drugs and Public Health. Australian perspectives on policy and practice*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, pp. 39–48.

17 Elsegood, P. 1978, Petrol sniffing: is it a problem?, Mimeo., Remote Area Team, Northern Territory Department of Community Welfare, Darwin.

18 Dalton-Morgan, D. 1978, ‘Petrol sniffing Papunya: a community solution’, *Australian Crime Prevention Quarterly Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 32–3.

19 d’Abbs, P. and MacLean, S. 2008, *Volatile substance misuse: a review of interventions*, National Drug Strategy Monograph No. 65, Department of Health and Ageing, Canberra; Stojanovski, A. 2010, *Dog Ear Café. How the Mt Theo program beat the curse of petrol sniffing*, Hybrid Publishers, Australia.

posters ('Sad boys are sniffing') and flip charts including the *Brain Story*.²⁰ Other preventive strategies included the production of music cassettes of Aboriginal bands featuring songs of sorrow and exhortation about sniffing—for example, the Wedgetail Eagle Band and Ilkari Maru, both from the Pitjantjatjara lands in South Australia:

Out in the cold night, our children wander around
 Why don't they understand, why don't they listen for a while?
 You throw your lives away
 With a petrol can today
 Please, please listen to what I say.²¹

Makes me feel like crying so many nights
 What can I do with this problem?
 So help me someone find a solution
 So many young ones are dying with a can
 Like the sun sinking behind the mountains.²²

In 2001, the Australian Children's Television Foundation and Palace Films released *Yolngu Boy*, a film with a message about three Yolngu teenagers and their passage from adolescence to adulthood; one is a petrol sniffer in real life as well as in the film. This young man and his film persona became fused in the minds of some young Aboriginal viewers, and although the film came with a teacher's guide to its study, its release might have been partly responsible for a short-term upsurge in sniffing in the actor's home community.²³ This outcome exemplifies the challenges and dangers attached to educational attempts at dealing with this drug use.

20 Petrol Link Up 1994, *The Brain Story*, Flip chart, Original paintings by Rachel Napaljarri Jurra and Naparrula Butler, Petrol Link Up Project, Northern Territory Health Services, Alice Springs, NT; Yapakurlangu yimi 2001, *Newsletter*, vol. 2, Mt Theo–Yuendumu Substance Misuse Aboriginal Corporation, NT, <www.yapa.tv>

21 Wedgetail Eagle Band 1988, *Wedgetail Eagle*, [Sound cassette], Petrol sniffing [song], Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, Imparja Records, Alice Springs, NT.

22 Ilkari Maru 1984, *Ilkari Maru*, [Sound cassette], Petrol sniffer [song], Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, Imparja Records, Alice Springs, NT.

23 Palace Films 2001, *Study Guide Yolngu Boy: Three lives, two laws, one country*, Australian Children's Television Foundation, Melbourne, <www.yolnguboy.com>; Toohey, P. 2001, 'A cult of immortality in the fumes', *The Weekend Australian*, 30 June – 1 July, pp. 1, 4.

Figure 2 Ernabella, South Australia in 1966, with its 44-gallon drums

Photo courtesy of Maggie Brady

Cars

Sniffing was unwittingly facilitated by the proliferation of privately owned vehicles and the increased availability of fuel in remote communities. In the 1950s and 1960s, most settlements had been without their own petrol pumps. In 1966, for example, the petrol supply at Ernabella in north-western South Australia consisted of just a couple of 44-gallon drums with hand pumps. In the years when private car ownership among Aboriginal people was uncommon and most vehicles were owned by whitefellas, sniffers sometimes cut fuel lines to obtain petrol²⁴—but later sniffers were stealing petrol from cars owned by Aboriginal drivers. In 1970 at Yirrkala in east Arnhem Land, four clans had bought their own vehicles to facilitate hunting, and mission vehicles were rented out occasionally. In the following decades, cash wages, sales of art and artefacts and better access to welfare and training allowances meant more disposable income. Motorcars (station wagons or saloons) were the number-

24 Eastwell, H. D. 1979, 'Petrol-inhalation in Aboriginal towns. Its remedy: the homelands movement', *Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 2 (8 September), pp. 221–4, at p. 221.

one item and they were cheaper to buy than four-wheel-drive diesel vehicles. By the mid-1980s at Maningrida, there were about 60 vehicles, one-third of which were privately owned by Aboriginal people. As the ultimate desired object, the '*mutika*' caused friction and humbugging.²⁵ In Central Australia in the 1980s, members of the Healthy Aboriginal Life Team (HALT), which ran a program to ameliorate petrol sniffing, were forced to clarify the fact that their program would *not* be providing communities or individuals with Toyotas, nor would the program disburse monies for their purchase. This was done to counter widespread expectations at the community level that a petrol-sniffing program usually came with a four-wheel-drive vehicle 'attached', ostensibly to take youths out bush but frequently purloined for extraneous and less altruistic uses. The approach of the HALT program was to focus on interpersonal work designed to reactivate kinship responsibilities between older and younger men, rather than relying on the more common 'diversionary' trips away.

Fuel

By the late 1970s petrol for sniffing was relatively easy to obtain. Every community had a rubbish tip and cars that were permanently abandoned or temporarily unattended awaiting repairs. In coastal communities, some people unthinkingly left jerry cans in their dinghies overnight. The advent of petrol pumps in communities meant that community councils were forced to take evasive action: some housed their pumps behind locked steel-mesh cages, while others built locked underground petrol tanks. Diesel vehicles were encouraged.

The petroleum industry has known for a long time that its product is toxic. Lead—a heavy metal—was added to petrol as an anti-knock agent from the 1920s until the 1980s, when it was phased out. In 1925, the high toxicity of lead caused a cluster of deaths among workers in the petroleum industry, and production was brought temporarily to a standstill. One of the world's leading neuro-toxicologists believes that had the toxicity of lead been better understood then, it would never have been added to petrol.²⁶ It is easy to forget that in the 1980s there were major environmental campaigns to remove lead from petrol in the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe, and that the petroleum companies and governments vigorously resisted change.²⁷

25 *Mutika* = motorcar. See Gerrard, G. 1989, 'Everyone will be jealous for that *mutika*', *Mankind*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 95–111.

26 Grandjean, P. 1983, 'Health significance of organolead compounds', in M. Rutter and R. Russell Jones (eds), *Lead Versus Health*, John Wiley & Sons, London.

27 Wilson, D. 1983, *The Lead Scandal. The fight to save children from damage by lead in petrol*, Heinemann Educational Books, London.

The early concerns about sniffing in Australia (as elsewhere) were focused on medical matters and on lead poisoning in particular. Sniffing leaded fuel could and did cause clinical lead encephalopathy (a degenerative disease of the brain) leading to death, as well as causing a host of serious neurological problems in long-term sniffers. Aboriginal deaths among new users began to increase in the 1980s. They died of acute causes such as car accidents or burns. There were also deaths among users who had been sniffers for 10 years or more. These chronic sniffers died of pneumonia, asphyxia or cardiac dysrhythmias. For example, 1984 was a bad year: 10 young Aboriginal men died; six died in 1986. Between 1981 and 1991, there were at least 63 Aboriginal deaths Australia-wide associated with sniffing, mostly clustered in desert regions; over a 22-year period (1981–2003), the recorded number of deaths was 109.²⁸ Hundreds more young people were hospitalised and many were permanently disabled in the years when petrol still contained its toxic loading of lead. Twenty-five patients were admitted to Perth hospitals with a diagnosis of intentional petrol sniffing between 1984 and 1991; five had acute intoxication from an isolated incident, the remaining 20 were chronic sniffers, 18 of whom were Aboriginal. These patients showed a high prevalence of seizures and an alarmingly high case-fatality ratio: 8 of 20 died. All had an altered mental state with drowsiness, delirium or stupor. They showed abnormal jerky movements and ataxia. The high blood-lead levels of these patients were associated with a poor prognosis, and attempts to reduce their lead load with chelating agents were disappointing. The neurologists treating these 17 males and three females observed that sniffing could cause sudden death or irreversible encephalopathy, and that even with treatment the prognosis was poor. The physicians called for better preventive strategies.²⁹

Unleaded fuel and the new range of cars that could run on it were slow to penetrate the remote regions of Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Despite its complement of toxic hydrocarbons such as benzene, toluene and xylene, unleaded fuel did eventually cut presentations to health clinics and the number of hospitalisations. The deaths of sniffers continued, however; many were from accidents, burns or suicide, or were the result of cumulative medical problems from long-term sniffing with leaded fuel.

Aboriginal mobility between communities had unintentionally assisted the diffusion, and the reappearance, of the practice of sniffing in different locations, but in the end it was grassroots contact with other communities that brought decisive change. In 1992, an Arnhem Land community discovered that avgas—aviation fuel—was not sniffable, and could be used safely in vehicles that ran on

28 Brady, *Heavy Metal*, pp. 55–7; Shaw, G., Biven, A., Gray, D., Mosey, A., Stearne, A. and Perry, J. 2004, *An Evaluation of the Comgas Scheme*, Department of Health and Ageing, Canberra, p. 49.

29 Goodheart, R. S. and Dunne, J. W. 1994, 'Petrol sniffer's encephalopathy. A study of 25 patients', *Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 160 (21 February), p. 180.

regular petrol. Council members from other communities made visits in order to learn more about this; they instituted the use of avgas themselves and word spread through the grassroots from the north to the centre and to Western Australia. More and more communities substituted avgas for 'red petrol', and avgas did make a difference, especially where communities consistently maintained it over time as a petrol substitute and where alternative sources of petrol were difficult to obtain. Avgas contained fewer hydrocarbons than petrol (these are what produce intoxication and cause damage to the central nervous system), and its use reduced easy accessibility to regular petrol. Elaborate attempts by sniffers to make avgas usable by various means were largely unsuccessful. The communities that used avgas in concert with efforts to provide employment and skills training had considerable success in putting an end to sniffing and, in communities where sniffing persisted, the practice became more episodic and dependent on irregular (and sometimes illegal) supplies of petrol. Avgas became 'Comgas' in 1998 when the Commonwealth Government agreed to subsidise its purchase by communities, as it was more expensive than unleaded petrol.³⁰ Evaluators of this scheme recommended its expansion as being worthwhile, while acknowledging that its impact, naturally enough, was variable between communities.

There was one problem with avgas as a substitute for petrol. It is a leaded fuel, and, with moves in 2004 to reduce its lead content, more aromatic hydrocarbons would be added, making it environmentally acceptable but potentially sniffable. Finally, the petroleum industry, which, like the alcohol industry, had long denied any responsibility for the unwanted uses of its product, began to be involved in a meaningful way. In the 1980s, the Australian Institute of Petroleum had attempted a well-meaning but ill-considered intervention involving the odorant ethyl mercaptan (in an attempt to render petrol foul-smelling and unsniffable), together with a poster campaign based on 'scare tactics'. Neither was successful. But in February 2005, after considerable research and development, BP Australia launched a new unleaded fuel called Opal, which has low levels of the aromatic hydrocarbons associated with the 'high' sought by petrol sniffers—only 5 per cent as opposed to standard unleaded petrol with 25 per cent aromatics. In short, BP produced a non-sniffable fuel. Unusually for a transnational oil company, BP has made Opal available to Shell, Mobil and Caltex distributors for the same price, and Canadian Aboriginal communities—where sniffing has also been widespread—are also interested in the 'no-sniff gas'.

30 Shaw et al., *An Evaluation of the Comgas Scheme*, p. 11.

Figure 3 Postcard promoting the use of Opal fuel, 2005

Image courtesy of The Greens

The Australian Government subsidy scheme that helped pay the costs of making Comgas available has been extended to Opal fuel, which would otherwise be prohibitively expensive. Because of the subsidy, the new fuel costs the same as standard petrol, and the overall costs of the subsidy itself greatly outweigh the estimated \$79 million costs of petrol sniffing through the burden of disease, the cost of rehabilitation, and the strain on the health and justice systems.³¹ As a result of vigorous lobbying by The Opal Alliance (a coalition of industry, Aboriginal women's and youth organisations), Opal has been progressively distributed to about 70 registered Aboriginal communities, where it has universal support.³² The rapid drop in the numbers of people sniffing following the installation of Opal has mobilised community members in those locations to confront the remaining sniffers, who were told they had to stop. Together with youth diversionary activities and the hard work of non-governmental organisations such as the Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service,³³ Opal fuel has brought about the first major cessation in sniffing across a wide area of the country in 60 years.

31 Opal Alliance, Media release, 8 March 2006, Alice Springs, NT.

32 Rossmanith, A. 2006, 'Petrol sniffing and alternative fuels', *Of Substance*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 8–11.

33 Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service 2007, *Youth Link-Up. A newsletter by CAYLUS: The Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service*, December, Alice Springs, NT, <www.tangentyere.org.au>

Fuel technology has—for the time being—given Aboriginal communities the chance to take stock. But although dozens of fuel outlets servicing the regions subject to the most intense concentrations of sniffing have substituted the new Opal fuel for old petrol, others on the fringes of these regions have not. Some petrol stations within striking distance of communities have been highly resistant to stocking it.³⁴ Premium petrol is still about and deaths associated with petrol sniffing continue to occur, as do the coronial inquests. Petrol sniffing is socially contagious. Frequent Indigenous journeys and circular mobility between communities and towns within and across regions present constant opportunities for the practice of petrol sniffing to be reignited.

34 Senate Community Affairs Committee Secretariat, *Grasping the opportunity of Opal*, pp. 52–3.