

Blurring the boundaries: Fish Camp gives a barbecue.

‘The white Aborigines of Darwin’

from “Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin: cultural persistence or a culture of resistance?” pages 65-71

In 1969 a new type of homelessness appeared on Lameroo Beach, at the base of jungle-clad cliffs fringing the Darwin inner city. While Aboriginal people in the north were still being indoctrinated by assimilationist policies, non-Aboriginal people from other parts of Australia and overseas began to experiment with alternative lifestyles that challenged the hegemony of the dominant White society in Darwin. The Darwin newspaper called these longhaired newcomers the ‘hippies’. They slept on Lameroo Beach, where the indigenous Larrakia people had camped before the coming of the colonisers.ⁱ Although the Larrakia people had been harassed from their camps at Lameroo by 1911 (Wells 1995a:21), in 1969 ‘the hippies’ began to resist attempts by the Darwin City Council and police to remove them from the beach.ⁱⁱ

The tropical north was the beginning and the end of the backpackers’ overland trail through Asia and a refuge from the southern winter for dissatisfied youth. In the streets of Darwin the travellers, who the media later called ‘Darwin’s white Aborigines’ (*Advertiser* September 17, 1981), contrasted with the Territory ‘redneck’ frontiersmen and women and the city’s neatly dressed bureaucrats. In a year of full employment, each weekday morning almost all of the Lameroo campers who reported to the crowded Commonwealth Employment Services (CES) office were assigned casual labour in the town. At night the Lameroo campers mingled with Aboriginal people from remote hinterland communities, to spend their pay in the sprawling beer gardens of Darwin hotels, where they danced to the music of local mixed-race rock and roll bands. It was in these bars with their Aboriginal patrons that I first heard of the surviving Larrakia elders in their fringe camp behind the drive-in cinema.ⁱⁱⁱ

Before its destruction by Cyclone Tracy in December 1974, the Star Cinema in Smith Street, Darwin, was popular with Aboriginal people. By 1969, mixed-race or ‘coloured’ patrons, as they were known, could sit on the canvas seats in the covered stalls or upstairs in the dress circle while ‘full bloods’ sat in the low-priced front rows close to the open-air screen, separated from the stalls by a flat concrete area where families could sit on blankets to watch the films. Little children scampered about as cowboys galloped over the dusty plains on the screen above them. The Star Cinema was a survivor of the stratified colonial Darwin lifestyle, while vast changes were taking place around the world. However,

change came to the Star in 1969, as 'the hippies' demanded the right to sit in the cheap front rows with the Aboriginal customers.^{iv}

In October the monsoon storms arrived and the Lameroo campers returned to the south or took a flight to Asia, leaving their litter along the beaches and rocky coves at the base of the cliffs. Like some others, I found a job in town and moved into rented accommodation. However, for six years, while there was a shortage of casual labour in the north, every dry season campers returned to Lameroo to defy the Darwin City Council warnings that a forty-dollar fine was the penalty for illegal camping and that the camps were a health risk.

A 1972 press report described the unsanitary tin humpies of Daly River Aborigines camped at Knuckeyes Lagoon, near the Berrimah crossroads on the highway leading out of town (*NT News* March 4). The Lameroo campers asked why the council was evicting the hippies while Aborigines lived in worse conditions in camps hidden in bush around the town. Sensing a double standard and defending their right to live on the beach, the hippies asked the council inspectors: 'They say the beach is dirty but what about the Aborigines at Berrimah? They live in worse circumstances than we do, and what conveniences have they got?' (*NT News* June 29, 1972).

A southern journalist described the 'liberated area' of Lameroo Beach, 'the only legal nudist beach in Australia ... population 700 heads and 200 yards from the main shopping centre' where '[t]enuous structures grip the trees and rocks, delicate fabrications of driftwood and plastic held together with good intentions' (Stocks 1973:6).^v The article, titled 'Adventures in paradise', inferred there were parallels between the lives of the hippies and the fringe dwellers with a photograph showing 'the white squatters at Lameroo' above a photograph of the Knuckeyes Lagoon self-made iron shacks captioned, 'black squatters at shanty town'. 'Only the heads and the blacks have that existential sense of place', enthused the report (Stocks 1973:6).

At a time when Aboriginal women in white-controlled areas had 'little hope of aspiring to anything more than the supposed egalitarianism of the nuclear family' (Hamilton 1975:178), the hippies and the homeless Aborigines demanded the right to live communally, outside the isolation of a suburban block and the economic system which is inferred by that lifestyle. Their 'alternative lifestyles' placed them in conflict with urban planners, as the hippies pointed out in their confrontation with authorities in 1975:

[T]he big trouble started when the Travelodge was finished. We became very much a thorn in the sides of the establishment. There was the nice, expensive Travelodge Hotel and here, only a few hundred yards away [on Lameroo Beach], was a bunch of people living in nothing, living with nature ... They can't tolerate people saying, 'I don't want to conform to the system'. This is a contradiction they can't handle (*NT News* July 30, 1975).

Alternative lifestylers in Darwin claimed: 'Aborigines especially like us because they feel we treat them like people' (*NT News* July 30, 1975). This mutual support had been demonstrated when a group from Lameroo joined Aboriginal protesters on National Aborigines Day 1972, in a march through the city streets (*NT News* July 15, 1972). In return, the Lameroo dwellers received support from the Larrakia people of the Darwin area. Visiting Lameroo Beach from the Aboriginal camp at Kulaluk behind the drive-in cinema at Nightcliff, Johnny Fejo for the Larrakia traditional owners confidently assured the hippies that the city council could not evict them because Lameroo belonged to the Larrakia tribe (*NT News* August 7, 1972). The campers were reported as responding: 'to us this land belongs to God, who is not a white man, but if we the present dwellers are to recognise proprietorship then it is the black people to whom we look'.

By the end of 1975 the demand for transient labour had abated in Darwin, the public conveniences at the top of the cliffs had been demolished and Lameroo Beach was deserted again. Cock (1979:244) claims that there would have been 'a national outcry' if the harassment of the Lameroo Beach hippies 'had been done to an Aboriginal tribal community'. He believes the hippies' lifestyle and values had more in common with the indigenous Australians than with the majority of Whites and their culture (p.244). Certainly, the NT Administration's opposition to the Lameroo campers contrasted with the apparent tolerance of unserviced Aboriginal fringe camps around Darwin.

Newton (1988:61) describes the 'naive and romantic' notions of 'tribal living' amongst alternative lifestylers at Nimbin, in New South Wales, seeking a sense of belonging, or *communitas*, outside their perception of the oppressive structure of the dominant society. According to Newton, alternative lifestylers have looked to non-industrial societies for new models of living. At Lameroo in 1969, the predecessors of Nimbin danced to the song 'Age of Aquarius', from the anti-establishment American 'tribal rock musical', *Hair*, as they improvised new rituals beside their campfires on the beach (Day 1994:1). However, the naive and romantic notions of Aboriginal culture described by Newton (1988) in southern communes were difficult to sustain in the north, where there was daily and unmediated

contact between races. A journalist wrote of my first encounters with Aboriginal people: '[H]e did not know that much about Aborigines when he first arrived. [He said,] "I was amazed when I found out they didn't speak English and that they had their own languages"' (*Sunday Territorian* October 7, 1984). In the north, my examples suggest that the finding of common ground by fringe dwellers and other groups in an oppositional culture ensures a respect for Aboriginal culture, rather than the appropriation of it.^{vi}

Although Newton (1988:58) argues that 'the countercultural movement' in Australia is 'strongly derivative of the movement overseas', my experience on Lameroo Beach suggests that from 1969 to 1975 the bush worker tradition described by Ward (1958) and Rowley (1972a:234) was a homegrown oppositional lifestyle as influential amongst the beach dwellers of Lameroo as the idealistic movements of the 1960s. That is, by their dress, binge drinking, values of mateship, suspicion of authority, insubordination and hatred of police, many of the young southerners were emulating the Australian traditions of their bush worker forebears that Ward (1958:84, 100, 127, 258) describes. Also, as Ward (p.76-7) notes, labour shortages enabled the bush workers to value an independent lifestyle, 'albeit, at what was, from a middle-class point of view, a relatively low level'. Since European settlement, liminal locations that were similar to the fringe camps and the Lameroo camp have been meeting spaces for Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal bush workers (see Cowlshaw 1988a:97). In my view, these traditions became integrated with the ideology of the North American hippies in Darwin in from 1969 to the mid-1970s.

During my fieldwork between 1996 and 2001, , references to Australian bush traditions were frequently used by activists who became involved with the struggle of fringe dwelling Aborigines. I will suggest that many of these activists were the present-day successors of the hippy movement of the 1960s. In 1996, an artist/protester sat a plaster, wire and fabric life-sized dummy on a bench in the Smith Street Mall. In the dummy's mouth was a cigarette and on its chest was printed: 'There was once a jolly swagman but he was arrested in Darwin for anti-social behaviour' (*NT News* May 18, 1996, p.3). In the mall in August 2001, a young traveller named Truce and his friends from their shared house laid a be hatted dummy of a swagman inside a swag between two printed signs which connected the 'long grassers' with 'Australian icons' and traditions of anti-authoritarianism. The idiosyncratic wording on the placards is reproduced below without changes or additions:

A Waltzy long-grass SONG

Once a jolly swaggies (original Australians)
camped by the foreshore (coast and beach)
under the shade of a coconut palm
and they sang and danced as they loved their cultural lifestyles
you'll come a waltzy Matilda with us!
Down came a Rich Yob (overseas businessman)
To develop all the foreshore dreamin
up jumped the politition (CLP Government)
and grabbed him with greed.
and they partied and committed genocide as
they shoved money into their Bank Accounts.
you'll NOT come a Waltzy Matilda with US!
down came a ranger mounted in a Council vehicle
up sprang the Coppers, one two, Fifty.
there will be no more here Corobborries
in this here tourist monopoly
you'll Not come a Waltzy Matilda at here
up jumped the swaggies and said "this
here Larakia Land, you'll Not move
us away so easily you see", and
the Larakia are still there as you
pass by the Darwin foreshores
you'll COME A WALTZY MATILDA WITH US!

The second sign stated in part:

Why is it a CRIME to be homeless in Darwin?
C.L.P. Laws attack AUSTRALIAN ICONS!
The Jolly Swagman goes to Jail: Anti-social Laws.
Darwin City Council steal our swags - HOMELESS [are]
CHARGE[D] \$50 to RETURN [the impounded swags]!

Similarly, Caroline, who defended Bob Bunduwabi before the Anti-Discrimination Commission in

1996, forwarded a message to me in October 2001:

... a part of cultural diversity [which] is continually recognized in the wrong way [is] of course the long-grassers. To think that this nation once wanted Waltzing Matilda as our/their anthem is amazing. In art and prose the life of the vagrant/itinerant has always been conveyed as *joie de vive* with Shakespeare, Banjo [Patterson], H Lawson and etc all have their seminal works steeped in the mystery of the streetsleeper/longgrasser.^{vii}

Darwin remains a popular location for activists and alternative lifestylers who live in shared and communal housing in the city and rural areas. These groups resist the policies of unrestrained economic development and opposition to Aboriginal claims propounded by the Northern Territory Government.^{viii} Homeless Aboriginal people have been particularly vilified, and have been left with few options but to resist state policies. Their resistance has brought the fringe dwellers into contact with a widening group of non-Aboriginal people in a process that continues today.

i **Endnotes:**

- Wells (1995a:21) states that the park in front of the new NT Parliament House, above Lameroo Beach, has been named 'Demeora Park' in recognition of the Larrakia name for the area.
- ii My connections with the Aboriginal fringe dwellers of Darwin began with friendships formed while camping in the open on Lameroo Beach from June to October in 1969. At that time, prior to Sansom's (1980a) groundbreaking ethnography on fringe dwellers in Darwin, most anthropologists had little interest in Aboriginal fringe dwellers (see Sansom 1982b:118).
- iii In 1973, Woodward (1973:26) was told that there were 'eighteen members of the [Larrakia tribe] now left'. He says that many more could trace maternal links. A 1973 Welfare Branch report, cited by Cooper (1985), claims that only seven Larrakia people of paternal descent survived.
- iv As a result, the cheap seats were discontinued, and all tickets in the stalls were the same price.
- v 'Heads' was a synonym for 'hippies', referring to their reputed liking of marihuana.
- vi The 'hippies' who lived at Lameroo Beach in 1969 had successors in the 1998 Jabiluka anti-uranium activists' protest camp, which supported the Aboriginal traditional owners.
- vii Email sent to Caroline Tapp, forwarded to Bill Day October 25, 2001. Re: The Diversity Conference November 2001: redefining the mainstream - Local Government, inclusive communities.
- viii These policies also place most anthropologists who represent Aboriginal people in the NT in an oppositional role (for example, see Trigger 1998b). However, Sansom told the 1998 Ethnographic Forum that he was about to leave for Darwin to represent the Northern Territory Government in the Kenbi land claim hearing.