CHAPTER NINE

Alcohol, resistance and race in Darwin: fringe dwellers and the Beer Can Regatta.

9.1 Introduction

In this chapter I suggest that alcohol becomes a marker of racial difference in the annual Darwin Beer Can Regatta which, at the time of its beginning, signified changes occurring in Darwin as a frontier society became an enclave of settled Australia in the remote north. In the 1990s, my analysis suggests that the festival remains a marker of attitudes to alcohol in the north as members of the settler society in Darwin demonstrate and confirm their ingenuity and their ability to drink in a socially constructive manner by constructing boats from beer cans and having fun racing them while raising money for charity. In contrast, Aboriginal drinking is commonly viewed as uncontrolled, purposeless and associated with antisocial behaviour, untidiness and litter.

I argue that in the Beer Can Regatta the Darwin non-Aboriginal settler society conceals its cultural dislocation and dispossession of Aboriginal people, while constructing settler myths on the urban landscape. In my analysis, I suggest that the festival mediates the disjunction between culture and place typical of immigrant people.[1] In contrast, I suggest that Darwin fringe dwellers believe that they are at home on their own land, while their drinking is associated with Aboriginal resistance to dispossession. I argue that Aborigines in the heavy-drinking fringe camps of Darwin order their lives in traditional ways rather than through a 'culture of opposition' but are

more inclined to actively protest than are non-drinking or housed Aboriginal groups in towns.

I firstly give an account of changes in drinking behaviour of Aboriginal people in Darwin and the previously undisciplined drinking style of White frontier males, leading up to the first Beer Can Regatta. I relate these changes to the present conflict between Aboriginal drinking in public places and the Darwin settler society and suggest the regatta assists to resolve the conflict between condemnation of Aboriginal drinking and the image of the beer-loving Territorian.

In my analysis I dispute Mewett's (1988) insightful interpretation that the regatta signifies class divisions, and suggest the regatta has a racial metamessage. I then give an account of the recent regattas, before discussing moves to regulate Aboriginal drinking in public places. After a brief description of fringe dweller drinking in the 1990s, a summary of the explanations for Aboriginal drinking is followed by evidence suggesting that there is a relationship between alcohol and fringe dweller resistance.

Sargent (1984:186) asks: 'Who benefits from the problem and certain ways of defining it?' Sargent (1994:212) claims: 'In Australia, where problems with alcohol are prevalent in *all* parts of society, for whites to label blacks as alcoholics is an obvious projection of blame by the powerful on the powerless'.[2] With these questions in mind, I have avoided taking advantage of the open lifestyle and hospitality of the fringe dwellers to create an intrusive ethnography of Aboriginal drinking. As I have argued in my critique of Sansom's texts, such descriptions can be offensive and harmful to fringe dwellers in Darwin.

My analysis of asymmetric power relations is similar to that of Saggers and Gray (1997:221), who advocate a 'political economy approach' that 'directs

attention away from Aboriginal people to the wider network of relationships in which their lives are lived'.[3] Arguing against particularistic studies that focus on demand rather than supply of alcohol, Saggers and Gray (1998:85-6) point out that Aboriginal groups 'do not exist in a vacuum'. Similarly, Wright (1996:4), in his study of Aborigines using emergency services in a major city hospital, believes that to focus on alcohol is 'oversimplifying in the face of complexity'.

Sansom's (1980a:44) observation that grog 'deserves prime emphasis because it gives the fringe camp its character and *raison d'etre*' is a view not accepted by this study. Certainly, regular and excessive drinking is the norm in most fringe camps (see O'Connor 1984:181). However, Eggleston (1974:60) suggests that the 'pathology of the white community which rejects Aborigines' is a more pertinent topic of study. Alternatively, the comment by Sansom (1980a:44) that 'the meaning of grog and grogging is rooted in history' suggests a line of research to explain the different drinking styles of the powerful and the powerless in Darwin.

9.2 Alcohol and citizenship

Most Northern Territory Aborigines had been prohibited from consuming alcohol until 'part Aborigines' had been given full rights in the Welfare Ordinance 1953. Under the new legislation, 'full blood' Aborigines became 'wards' of the Director of Welfare (see Chesterman and Galligan 1997:174). Wards were those who:

> had been declared by the Administrator to need assistance, by reason of their manner of living, or their inability, without assistance, to adequately manage their own affairs, or whose social habits and behaviour was undesirable, or who associated with undesirables.[4]

After many of the NT public objected that the Ordinance would give the Administrator too much power, regulations stated that no one could be declared a ward if they had a certificate of exemption or already had the right to vote (Franklin 1976:143). According to Franklin (p.143), 'this additional criteria made it certain that the only people who could be declared wards were full blood Aborigines'. In 1961, out of a population of 17,000 'full blood' Aboriginal people, only 89 had drinking rights (Chesterman and Galligan 1997:175). After a long campaign in Darwin for Aboriginal equal rights, the passing of the Social Welfare Ordinance in 1964 abolished the wardship system and thus removed restrictions on consuming alcohol (see Franklin 1976:152; Wright 1985:16; Wells 1995b). Bans remained for Aboriginal residents on reserves and cattle stations (Rowley 1972a:406). Remembering the era of prohibition and the campaigns for change, Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory and elsewhere equate achieving the right to drink with 'citizenship rights' (Albrecht 1974:5; Bain 1974:43; Sansom 1977:59, 1980a:49; Saggers and Gray 1998:50; Cowlishaw 1999:22).[5] With Aboriginal citizenship, non-Aboriginal Northern Territory drinkers were faced with the contradiction of deploring uncontrolled Aboriginal drinking while praising the frontier tradition of drinking to excess.

In the 1970s Aboriginal fringe dwellers in towns viewed themselves as 'the true inheritors of the new era' (Sansom 1980a:50). When I first arrived in Darwin in 1969, the town still had the atmosphere of a frontier city. Hotels catered for the Aboriginal patrons of spacious bars and beer gardens like the barn-like Bamboo Lounge of the Don Hotel or under the stars at the suburban Seabreeze Hotel. Single men bought drinks for Aboriginal women and fights were a regular event amongst the heavy-drinking crowds. At the courthouse each week, barefooted Aboriginal men and women were called forward to receive nominal fines for public drunkenness (see *Bunji* November 1972; Sansom 1980a:46; Day 1994:22). Down 'the track', the Stuart Highway was lined with beer cans that glinted in the headlights. To the east,

on the edge of the dry Arnhem Land Reserve, the notorious 'beer can mountain' continued to rise beside the thirsty Aboriginal customers of the licensed Border Store.

The Australian bush worker and Aborigines have long had a symbiotic and at times exploitative relationship at outback drinking locales where 'work and bust' was the rule (see Sansom 1980a:180). While the frontier population was predominantly European and Asian single men and the racially-mixed populace who called the Territory home, the Ted Egan song praising the 'bloody good drinkers in the Northern Territory, from Darwin down to Alice Springs they're always on a spree' remained popular. During the rebuilding of the cyclone-ravaged city in 1975, the casual 'thongs bars' frequented by single White men and Aboriginal drinkers experienced a revival (Sansom 1980a:179). However, as Darwin became more settled, the informal bars were gradually converted to a more stylish air-conditioned and controlled environment with strict dress codes.

As dress regulations, rising prices and a shift from frontier drinking in Darwin bars increasingly made Aboriginal men and women feel unwelcome in hotels, they moved out into the parks and found drinking partners amongst visiting kin. In addition, 'many indigenous Australians prefer open, public drinking environments' (Saggers and Gray 1998:63). Drinking styles became increasingly different and drinkers became increasingly segregated because the more racially exclusive gatherings are less secure than supervised bars for Whites.[6] Wild frontier drinking was also increasingly seen in settled Darwin as 'antisocial'; however, drinking beer remains an integral part of the image of a particularly north Australian way of life, as I suggest in the following case study of the Beer Can Regatta festival.

9.3 The decriminalisation of drunkenness

In 1974, the year of the first Darwin Beer Can Regatta, drunkenness was decriminalised in the NT, shortening the weekly parade of Aborigines before the courts. The repeal of Section 56 of the *Police and Police Offences Ordinance 1923* and the subsequent amendment allowed NT police to take drunks into custody for up to six hours without laying charges. However, the removal of drunken or homeless Aborigines from parks and contested spaces around Darwin continued apace. The 106 per cent increase in persons taken into custody for being drunk between 1974 and 1982 suggest the changes were 'decriminalisation in name only' (Donald 1984:25).

According to Warren Donald (1984:24): 'The increase [in numbers of those taken into custody for drunkenness] immediately after decriminalisation [from 8606 in 1974, to 17,766 in 1979] could be explained by the peculiar social conditions present in the Northern Territory in the reconstruction period following cyclone "Tracy"'. However, Donald gives no figures for 1975-7, the years of Sansom's fieldwork. Figures dropped and then rose in later years from 12,736 in 1980, 13,969 in 1981 to 16,217 in 1982 (Donald 1984:23).

Although they were not charged, the numbers of intoxicated Aboriginal people who were taken into custody under the amended ordinance by police in the years following decriminalisation suggest a much higher level of state intervention into fringe camp drinking than is indicated in the table reproduced by Sansom (1980a:47), showing that 179 Aborigines were charged in the Darwin magistrate's court in 1976, with 79.4 per cent of the charges alcohol-related.[7] Sansom has cited only the more serious offences, while the figures given by Donald reflect a greater police surveillance of Aboriginal lives. Donald's statistics raise doubts about the reality of a 'free grogging community' on the Darwin fringe described by Sansom (1977:60, 1980a:51) which 'established an independence from direct white

interventions' (Sansom 1980a:51) and an 'absence of alien and externally imposed ideologies and instruments of social control' (Sansom 1977:59).

The police discretionary powers to take drunks into custody could easily be misused without the protection against wrongful arrest that the courts offered to Aborigines and others (Donald 1984:25). Donald (p.40) believes the NT increase was a result of the failure to allocate specific resources until 1983 and the allocation of an unrewarded and unpleasant duty to police officers.[8] In contrast, in the USA decriminalisation produces a decline in drunks processed by the law (p.37). Although Donald (p.50) argues against accusations that a racial bias accounts for Aboriginal people comprising over sixty per cent of those taken into custody in Darwin in 1982, it is possible that the police reflect the desire in 'settled' Australia to 'clean up' the city by removing Aboriginal drinkers from public places.

By 1974, in Alice Springs public drunkenness was seen as 'uncontained and dangerous' in contrast to the 'contained' private drinking of most Whites (Collmann 1988:47). To avoid reports of racial tensions, the problem was expressed as a parochial concern over maintenance of social order and not as strife between Aborigines and other town residents (p.47). Reports of racial disputes aroused the national media and threatened federal intervention into Territory affairs at a time when aspirations for self-government were growing (Collmann 1988:51).[9]

At the same time, the Territory sought a new image by removing the kilometres and mountains of cans and labelling the excluded Aboriginal drinkers as 'transients'. Marcia Langton (1993a:197) writes of the colonial necessity of transforming the dangerous native into the 'pathetic mendicant "Abo"'. In addition, Langton (1993a:205) believes anthropological notions of social pathology and cultural degeneration amongst Aborigines in towns have supported White society's view of the Aboriginal drinker 'living a

fantasy of wanting to become like a white man, but unable to do so' (see also Langton 1981:18; Cowlishaw 1988a:103). For non-Aboriginal drinkers in settled Darwin, acceptance of these concepts avoids an analysis of the process of dispossession taking place in the north, in a pattern resembling that that occurred earlier in the southern cities of settled Australia.

In Darwin, it would seem that homeless Aboriginal people become less threatening as 'transients' or 'itinerants'. These categories are often used as the equivalent the iconic 'drunken "Abo"', as described by Langton (1993a). However, as Cowlishaw (1994:80) claims, the refusal of Aborigines in towns to be passive and silent 'stimulates the fears and feeds the paranoia' which many town residents feel towards the significant minority. The behaviour of public drinkers warrants increased local surveillance and intervention, without threatening the economy built around the sale of alcohol (see Drakakis-Smith 1981:41) or asking the question posed by Langton (1993a:199): 'Who benefits from the sale of alcohol?'[10]

Aboriginal people who did not conform to the lifestyle of the majority in Darwin were increasingly excluded in the 1970s as the city became an enclave of settled Australia in the remote north. Families began to 'put down their roots' and plan for a future in Darwin as the Territory population stabilised and the distant federal administration was being replaced by a settler-dominated legislature in preparation for self-government in 1978. Beyond the larger towns, the Territory remained typical of 'remote Australia' as described by Rowley (1972b:13), where Aboriginal people are a predominant percentage of the population. It was in these years of transition, in the early to mid-1970s, that the Beer Can Regatta began as a unique Darwin event that I interpret as a marker of the changing attitudes towards Aborigines and alcohol in the NT.

9.4 The Beer Can Regatta

The Beer Can Regatta was an instant success, gaining publicity for Darwin around the world and attracting large crowds. Team or individual entrants were required to construct various categories of vessels with used beer cans that were in abundance. In a good-natured spectacle, the finished boats and rafts competed in various classes and sizes on the calm dry-season waters of a popular Darwin ocean beach.

According to Mewett (1988:11), beer cans removed from their usual setting as alcohol containers become symbols. He suggests that: 'The beercan as the dominant symbol of the Beercan Regatta does not imply that the Regatta is about beer or drinking. Rather the beercan is symbolic of certain axioms about the social order' (p.11). A festival's 'metamessage' is about affirmation of social values and social control (p.6). In Mewett's insightful analysis, the values are those of the working man's frontier masculinity. These values are supported by the Darwin elites because the frontier is the image that draws high rates of federal funding (p.3). However, perhaps because he did not do extended ethnographic fieldwork and lacked local knowledge, the conclusions drawn by Mewett overlook the racial divide that I suggest is symbolised by the beer can boats.

Mewett misses the significance of the regatta's origins in the Keep Australia Beautiful campaign to clear the NT landscape of beer cans. The construction of beer can vessels publicised the need to collect used cans, which in remote Australia were otherwise left to be hidden by the long grass or be swept away in monsoonal floods. As the 1996 program for the festival stated: 'In 1973 [a Darwin business man] came up with the ideal solution for the Keep Australia Beautiful Council who were looking for ways to dispose of the drink cans that littered the city'.[11]

Comments which I will cite by entrants, suggest that instead of producing litter to disfigure an increasingly settled environment, emptying the cans becomes a useful occupation when the empty cans are subsequently bound together as boats for competition in the regatta. Similarly, I suggest that drinking becomes purposeful, constructive and family-orientated rather than an antisocial activity of the single frontier male who was often in the company of Aborigines, more particularly Aboriginal women (see Cowlishaw 1988a:95; Rose 1991:179-188)

The cans are glued, bound and contained into imaginative and colourful floating shapes. The vessels made from cans compete in organised races around a set course and at set times, guided and propelled by crew. In the speedboat section the aqua-dynamic craft use outboard motors to skim around the course at high speeds (Illustration 4). In my view, the symbolism is predominantly one of the controlled uses of beer cans, in contrast to discarded cans that are evidence of uncontrolled frontier drinking.

The association between clearing litter and controlling Aboriginal drinkers is still made in Darwin. In 1996, under a heading, 'The dirty drunks of Darwin', the founder of Clean up Australia Day, Ian Kiernan, was reported as saying that drunks are often to blame for litter in Darwin (*NT News* February 9, 1996).[12] The launch of the clean up also signalled the beginning of a campaign against 'itinerants' by the mayor who said: 'I'm saying that there is a problem, we have to admit there is a problem, and if that makes me a racist or a red-necked bigot, that's exactly what I am' (*NT News* February 10, 1996; see Illustration 2..1).

In his class analysis, Mewett (1988:4) describes the demography of Darwin in the 1980s, where public servants accounted for 46 per cent of all employed people. Mewett claims that the regatta is a 'festival of the working man' and that many of the middle-class shun the vulgarity of the events (p.5).

However, 'elaboration of the ideology of frontier' in the festival is supported by Darwin elites because it presents the Territory as unique within Australia, which helps attract the federal grants on which the Territory depends. Mewett adds: 'For the boom to continue and for all that this means for the ruling party and the Territory elites, the subsidies must keep rolling in' (p.4). Mewett (p.18) notes that 'Territorians, with the highest average incomes in Australia, are better off as ordinary people than those in any other part of the nation'. He concludes that 'the Beer Can Regatta facilitates the ready cooperation between working people and the Darwin elite' (p.4). At the regatta the two classes 'focus their consciousness together ... to generate a commonality of understanding' (p.12).

I suggest that, rather than signifying the class conflict that Mewett suggests, the regatta has a racial metamessage. Class differences are less significant in the Northern Territory, where the Chief Minister said, 'you could really be anything you wanted to be' (*Suburban* May 29, 1997). In this environment, racial divisions tend to replace class divisions. In the NT, the conservatives have held political power since the granting of self-government in 1978, largely by playing on racial issues that appear to draw many voters to their policies. Labor candidates are elected only in predominantly Aboriginal electorates while many Whites who settle in Darwin find a commonality in their opposition to Aboriginal claims to prior ownership of the land. According to Cowlishaw (1988a:6), 'Racist beliefs become culturally sanctioned responses that, perhaps unintentionally, defend the advantages that whites enjoy'.

Mewett (1988:14) noted that the festival had little ethnic participation:

> A final comment about the audience is that it was overwhelmingly composed of people who appeared to be of Anglo-Celtic origins (or at

> least of Western and Northern European extraction). Non-whites, both Aboriginal and migrant 'ethnic minorities' were noticeably absent...

For Mewett (1988:15), the racial composition of the crowd is significant only because it emphasises the common cultural understandings that are symbolically endorsed by the festival. Judging by my own observations during attendance at the regatta many times since its inception, and during my fieldwork, the absence of Aboriginal participation is a striking feature of the regatta, in comparison to other events that are supported by Aboriginal people.[13] In overlooking the significance of Aboriginal non-participation, Mewett has missed the racial metamessage of the Darwin Beer Can Regatta.

By failing to mention the significance to Aboriginal people of Mindil Beach (see Map 2), where the events are held, Mewett also reinforces the dispossession of Aboriginal people by viewing the landscape as an empty canvas on which meanings are inscribed by the settler society.[14] This is a role of the regatta which was implied by the *NT News* (June 15, 1974) when it reported that: 'Darwin has, of course, been on the map since the late 1800s when white men first settled here ... but it should be in little danger of slipping off the map after tomorrow's beer can regatta'.

Mindil Beach was a fringe camp at the turn of the century when Aboriginal people lived on the seafront in humpies very similar to the shelters in many fringe camps today (see *Bunji* May 1981).[15] In a belated recognition of prior use, a memorial was erected at the northern end of the beach in 1992. A plaque states:

> The memorial acknowledges that the Larrakia and in more recent times other Aboriginal people living in Darwin, have traditionally used the area for the burial of their ancestors.

> Designed by Koolpinya (Richard Barnes) one of the Larrakia custodians for the area, the memorial was completed in November 1992 with a traditional mourning ceremony putting to rest a skull returned from Edinburgh by an Aboriginal delegation in 1991...
>
> Darwin City Council funded the memorial to mark the site for Larrakia and other Aboriginal people to ensure that people are respectful and remain aware of the history and sacredness of the area.

For Mewett (1988:19) the association of dangerous sea and racing craft represents the conquering of the unknown frontier by 'real men' while the spectators in the safety of the dry beach are representative of effete men and females of settled and civilised Australia. However, in the dry season in Darwin the sea is calm and inviting. It is unlikely that spectators considered the ocean dangerous at the time of the regatta, as Mewett (1988:17) insists. Despite this criticism, I agree that the building of racing craft out of empty beer cans is a symbol of the ability of real men to 'overcome adversity' (p.17). However, I believe 'real *white* men' is the dominant signifier rather than 'real *working class* men' (as Mewett suggests).

Mewett stresses the gender message of the festival where 'boats were crewed almost exclusively by men' (p.12). Mewett (p.22) claims that the ironman event, where contestants drink beer between amusing tasks, is a demonstration of the competitors' mastery of beer:

> Men who are unable to 'handle' their beer in this way are distinguished and separated from real men and marked as part of that mass of effete men, barely different from women and children (p.23).

Rather than a marker of gender, my observations suggest that the ability to drink is seen as a marker of the racial superiority displayed at the Beer Can

Regatta. It is not women and men who are contrasted by the predominantly White spectators but Whites and Aborigines. The display of purposeful, enjoyable and controlled drinking by the participants in the races can be interpreted as a demonstration of the successful assimilation of alcohol into the culture of settled Australia, in contrast to Aboriginal drinking, which is viewed by many as childlike and without culture.

The displays of masculinity observed by Mewett (1988), appear to typify the role of men on the frontier as protectors of white women. However, in settled Darwin, functional and controlled white drinking is shared by white women and displaces the secret liaisons between frontier white men and Aboriginal women that were an integral part of riotous drinking in remote Australia. By 1997, the Beer Can Regatta ironman had become the 'ironperson', 'Mr and Mrs Beer Can Regatta' replaced Miss Mindil Beach and many women competed in the races. One Defence Force crew titled their entry, 'The vicious bitches' (*NT News* August 11, 1997).

Mewett (1988:18) believes the 'real [working] men' who have tamed the frontier mock the yachting regattas of the effete and wealthy in the south. I suggest that the regatta can be seen as a wet imitation of the 'Henley on Todd' races in Alice Springs where contestants run inside boat-shaped constructions in the dry riverbed. The connection became explicit when the Beer Can Regatta began including 'Henley on Mindil' races for crews carrying yacht-shaped structures in a dash along the dry beach. The borrowing of names can be read as ironic comments on the cultural displacement of the transient non-Aboriginal population, while inscribing a mythology onto an empty landscape. In addition, the signifiers of regatta and Henley-on-Thames suggest the British origins of 'civilised' society that distinguishes white drinking behaviour from the uncontrolled and purposeless drinking of Aborigines.

9.5 The Beer Can Regatta in 1996 and 1997

In 1997 the Living With Alcohol Program proposal to have breath-testing equipment at the festival caused a controversy (*NT News* August 9, 1997). According to the newspaper report, organisers believed people would be intimidated by breath-testing. They added that 'the "boozy" image of the regatta had been dispelled years ago'. After moves to change the name of the regatta to something less associated with beer drinking, the festival publicity chairman reflected the concern of an *NT News* (August 10, 1996) editorial that Darwin was losing 'its last frontier-type of image' (*Suburban* August 7, 1996). He accepted that responsible drinking must be promoted but also believed Darwin's beer drinking image should stay intact. The chairman said: 'Once they try and convert [Darwin] to a churchy, teetotalling sort of an area I think the image of Darwin will go down'. However, despite concern in 1996 that entries were well below the sixty the Lions Club event attracted in the peak years of the festival (*NT News* August 12, 1996), over 8,000 people, still predominantly Anglo-Celtic Australian, enjoyed the family events on the beach.

During my 1996 fieldwork at the regatta, a Christian group shouted testimonies from a distance, in opposition to the regatta's celebration of alcohol. In response, the crowd on the beach interrupted the Christians' singing of 'Amazing Grace' by throwing missiles at them. Smoke drifted from a campfire of four seemingly disinterested Aboriginal campers sitting under the grove of casuarina pines which fringe the northern end of the beach. The only other Aborigines from remote Australia apparent at the festival were small groups of high school boarders whose neat weekend wear contrasted with the half naked white skin around them. As the *NT News* (August 11, 1997) stated the next year: 'An hour after the event began Mindil Beach had transformed into a carpet of Eskies, resting red bodies and frolicking families'.

Heavy drinking was excused as preparation for the beer can races. One team said they had drunk 3,000 cans of beer in a week. 'If we win we'll get rid of a few more cans of beer - to use in next year's race, of course' (*NT News* August 6, 1997). Illustrating that beer drinking for the festival was a constructive 'occupation', distinguished from wasteful drunkenness, the *NT News* (August 11, 1997) noted: 'After months of arduous work (a moderate boat takes about 6,000 beer cans), eleven feats of engineering brilliance finally made it into the water for the Battle of Mindil'. The *NT News* (August 1999) reported that drinkers at the Berrimah Hotel had 'worked hard lifting 375ml weights' (beer cans) to build their entry: 'In fact they drank so hard they have built two boats for the regatta this year'. The burly crew were pictured consuming cans for their craft.

The declining interest in the Beer Can Regatta follows the successful transformation from wild frontier drinking in Darwin to a pattern more typical of settled Australia.[16] In the new environment, 'itinerants' do not belong or contribute to (civilised) society. I suggest the display of purposeful drinking, confirmed year by year at the festival, overcomes the contradiction of Whites enjoying their drinking while criticising Aborigines for their excesses. Cowlishaw (1994:80) observed in a similar situation 'a pervasive hypocrisy' associated with White morality which reserves 'disapproval and contempt' for Aboriginal drunkenness while being 'secretive and ashamed' of their own drinking to excess.

In postcolonial Darwin where public expressions of racial superiority are illegal, the festival makes a powerful unspoken statement authorising task-directed white drinking in public places. Aborigines, who are noticeably absent from the Mindil Beach festival, are further displaced by the appropriation of the supposedly empty landscape for the predominantly White festival. Finally, the festival is a measure of social change in settled Darwin where Aboriginal drinking as a remnant of remote Australian

lifestyle is disowned by the settler-residents of Darwin and banished to city parks and vacant land. In these 'public' spaces the newly won citizenship of the Aboriginal drinkers, who are now objectified as 'itinerants', is nullified.

9.6 The 2-kilometre law

Attempts to move Aboriginal drinkers from public space by amending the NT *Summary Offences Act* in 1983, making it an offence to consume alcohol in a public place within two kilometres of a licensed outlet, were viewed by many Aborigines as discriminatory (Brady 1998:117). Saggers and Gray (1998:100) claim 'most commentators see the 'Two Kilometre Law' as a transparent attempt to clear the streets of indigenous drinkers while doing nothing to address the underlying problems' (see also Brady 1988:59). The restrictions continue to entangle Aborigines in the criminal justice net, as has occurred since of the decriminalisation of drunkenness in 1974. Local Government by-laws have also had this effect (James 1993:13; *Australian* April 29, 1999). I reported in *Bunji* (March 1982):

> The men from east Arnhem Land said: 'This new law tries to make us hide in the bush and drink like fifteen years ago. We don't want this. We don't want your new law and if you gave us a place you would not need this new law' (see also 'Aborigines petition council for camps', *NT News* December 12, 1982).

The men liken the two-kilometre law to a loss of citizenship. They refer to the pre-1964 situation when concealed drinking was a tactic of resistance against discriminatory laws. Like many affected by the restrictions on public drinking, the Yolngu men complain they have nowhere else to go and demand provision for Aboriginal-controlled open-air spaces in Darwin. D'Abbs (cited in Saggers and Gray 1998:101) agrees that restrictions on alcohol consumption do not work unless they assist Aborigines themselves to control the use of alcohol.

The two-kilometre law also caused conflict amongst the non-Aboriginal people of Darwin who feared their rights were being restricted. While giving the police authority to remove alcohol from Aborigines drinking in public places the law also theoretically threatened the Darwin custom of serving alcohol at most outdoors occasions. For this reason, many areas and events like the Casuarina coastal reserve, the Mindil Markets and the Beer Can Regatta, popular with non-Aboriginal settlers and tourists, are exempt from the liquor restrictions. The Liquor Commission can also grant exemptions for social functions or family barbecues.

During my time in the field, the Chief Minister called for the two-kilometre law to be enforced 'vigorously, rigorously and without compromise' (*NT News* 15 April, 1997).[17] Two regular residents of Fish Camp were pictured in the *NT News* (April 18, 1997) being escorted into the police van in a blitz on Aboriginal drinking in the city parks that directed 393 drunks to the sobering-up centre in five days. However, senior police believed it was a 'short-term strategy that would not fix the problem'. The Deputy Commissioner said: 'We have to get together and provide long-term solutions, and Aboriginal people are the most important factor in that equation' (*NT News* April 23, 1997).

The police action and the language of the Chief Minister confused non-Aboriginal drinkers who were unsure which areas were exempt. One said: 'The 2km law is a joke because no one has any idea where or when you can drink around the place. Innocent people are going to be caught out' (*Sunday Territorian* April 20, 1997). Another white drinker claimed the Chief Minister's directive was 'an election ploy': 'It's aimed at a minority group and the rest of us have to suffer' (*Sunday Territorian* April 20, 1997).

9.7 An Aboriginal Club

James (1993:13) notes the need for legitimatised public space for Aboriginal drinkers:

> If one accepts that the lack of other available space is a primary explanation for the congregation of groups on the street and in shopping centres, then strategies geared toward the providing of alternative public space are essential.

An Aboriginal social club in Darwin is an alternative space often proposed (see *Bunji* February 1980). The concept of an Aboriginal social club 'combined with the responsible serving of alcohol and transport for anyone who needs it' was also proposed by the NT Police (*NT News* February 22, 1996). Although the Tyeweretye Club has fulfilled this role in Alice Springs since 1993, with mixed success, there is no Aboriginal club in Darwin. Brady (1998:100) quotes from the Tyeweretye Club rules:

> Tyeweretye Club is a place for Aboriginal people. Especially town camp people. It is also for people from bush when they are in town. The club aims to provide services that meet the social and other needs of Aboriginal people. The Executives of the club are Aboriginal people. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are equally welcome as members of the club.

Opposition to an Aboriginal-controlled liquor outlet is likely to come from the take-away market of licensed stores that cater for Aborigines by selling packaged alcohol with a minimum of service. Suggesting that opposition to their application for a take-away liquor licence might come from competing liquor outlets, the Tyeweretye Club commented:

> Aboriginal people like other members of the community have finite funds. There is only so much money they can spend on alcohol out of these finite funds. So the impact of the Tyeweretye Club getting a takeaway liquor licence is highly likely to divert money from other takeaway outlets rather than increase the consumption of alcohol (*Koori Mail* March 10, 1999).

In her study of drinking in the Northern Territory town of Tennant Creek, Brady (1988:22) notes the 'double standard' towards Aboriginal alcohol consumption by White residents who maintain a 'high tolerance for heavy drinking'. Attempts by a Tennant Creek Aboriginal organisation to have the sale of alcohol restricted were strongly opposed by licensees and others who claimed their rights were being infringed and their livelihoods threatened (see Roche 1995; Wright 1997; Saggers and Gray 1998a:330; Clausen 1999). Similarly, Aboriginal communities that enforce alcohol bans, or are completely alcohol-free 'dry areas', have experienced opposition from White residents, including police, who demand the right to consume alcohol (*Bunji* January 1982). Reggie Wuridjal, a traditional owner of the Maningrida area wrote in part:

> We will never agree to different liquor permit rules for white or black in Maningrida.
>
> If some white people want to drink as much as they want, when they want - they had better move somewhere else where they can do that.
>
> If there is to be any ban on grog permits in Maningrida then bans must apply equally to white and black (*NT News* December 25, 2000)..

A report by the NT Liquor Commission (1982:2935) suggests that the majority of Aboriginal drinkers in the north are 'opportunity drinkers' who

drink liquor if it is readily accessible 'but will not worry too much if it is not available...' The report adds that these drinkers 'are often prepared to live quite happily in dry areas, where non-Aboriginals would not' (p.2935). A correspondent to the *NT News* (March 7, 1996) wrote:

> Darwin has a lot of problems to solve in relation to drinking. The Living with Alcohol program in Tennant Creek may be a good starting point. But somehow I can't see the people of Darwin going without the ability to buy grog for one day a week.[18]

9.8 Profiting from Aboriginal drinking

After trial 'grog free days' and restrictions on the sale of wine casks, permanent restrictions were enforced in Tennant Creek by a decision of the NT Liquor Commission *(NT News* April 9, 1996; Wright 1997:250; Brady 1998:160; Saggers and Gray 1998a:330, 1998b:165). Commenting on the opposition from liquor traders to the Julalikari Council initiative for shorter hours, the Commissioner said: 'You can't separate yourself from the community for several hours a day while your bank balance swells. And go to church on Sunday morning and say I am part of this community: it is just too bad about the drinking problem' (cited in Wright 1997:257).

In a comprehensive summary of the literature on Aborigines and alcohol, Hunter (1993:100) uses an 'intercultural approach' to stress the importance of alcohol to the non-Aboriginal economy. Langton et al (1991:319) also found Aboriginal people believed that the Liquor Commission is 'acting on behalf of businessmen selling grog, and to be deliberately extending the availability of alcohol'. One submission to the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody (Langton et al 1991:319) stated: 'everyone is just trying to make more and more money from these outlets, and take money from the people'. For some Aboriginal people 'alcohol is seen as a deliberate component of the invasion

of traditional lands and the destruction of traditional culture and law' (p.308).

I agree with Hunter (1993:100), that sales of alcohol become the most direct route for federal money to Aborigines returning to the non-Aboriginal economy. Hunter (p.100) adds that the government is a beneficiary of Aboriginal spending on alcohol. The rapid spending of federal pensions and allowances boosts the general Territory economy with a regular, predictable injection of cash from Aboriginal drinkers who are condemned for their drinking while licensed suburban supermarkets stock their shelves with piles of cask wines popular amongst Aboriginal drinkers.

In a letter to the editor, a respected researcher, Peter d'Abbs criticises appeals from the Darwin Regional Tourism Association to 'banish' Aboriginal drinkers from public areas (*NT News* March 7, 1998). The plan is echoed in the editorial, 'Get rid of city drunks' (*NT News* March 9, 1998). D'Abbs wrote:

> I am sure that this is a genuine problem, though whether it has as significant an impact on the industry as you suggest is questionable.
> For if you are serious about the health of the tourist industry in the NT, I suggest that we have a rather more intractable problem on our hands.
>
> This is the way in which the tourist industry exploits indigenous culture for every cent that can be milked from it, while members of the society of which that industry is an important part continually display anger and contempt towards the carriers of that culture.
>
> Tourists are not blind; many of them, I suggest, recognise that this is a symptom of a somewhat sick society, and say so to their friends back home. Petulant racist outbursts by senior politicians, for example, help

> to maintain the NT's reputation as a land of rednecks, and probably do more to lessen our attractiveness in the eyes of other Australians than the irritation of being badgered for a dollar by a drunk on the Esplanade.

9.9 Drinking on the fringe in the 1990s

Like 'Wallaby Cross', Fish Camp and Lee Point are 'free grogging' communities that contrast with the restricted drinking in other Aboriginal communities. A large proportion of income is spent on alcohol, with surprisingly few incidents that require outside intervention. Police or ambulance were rarely called during my fieldwork. At most times the drinking in the camps is celebratory and accompanied by singing or dancing. Although Bolger (1991:46) and Burbank (1994:61) note that Aboriginal women associate alcohol with anger and aggression, and are the chief opponents of drinking, Bolger (1991:33) also notes that the proportion of women who drink in town camps is greater than in other Aboriginal groups. In addition, it appears that the women in the fringe camps enjoy drinking and on most occasions drink as equals and in safety with the men.[19] Protection comes from the openness of the fringe camp (see Burbank 1994:156) amongst familiar kin. The security is often compared to the danger of sorcery alleged to exist at Maningrida and the problems of drinking amongst rival groups in centralised Aboriginal townships.

At Fish Camp, there was no obvious attempt to attract the pension dollar, which Sansom maintains motivated Wallaby Cross leaders who worked 'to gain cash from fellow countrymen' (Sansom 1980a:7). In contradiction to Sansom's (p. 230) assertion that 'a mob member is not a free economic man', pensioners at Fish Camp and Lee Point appeared to be free to spend their money wherever they wished. Although they usually chose to be with kin, even pensioners sometimes spent days or weeks away at other camps. However, it appeared that 'performative kinship', on which Sansom

(1988b:170) bases his argument for 'structural indeterminacy ... in the Australian north', is less important in the Burarra drinking camps than obligations to kin determined by a 'classical' system applying to the homelands.[20]

I did not detect a 'service economy' amongst the fringe dwellers as noted by Sansom (1982b:129, 1988b) at 'Wallaby Cross'. Many kin of the campers are aware of the day and institution of payment and wait around banks and post offices on 'pay days', hoping to get a share of the cash. To avoid being ambushed, the payee uses back entrances or other subterfuges. One man who was unable to refuse his family waiting each fortnight outside his bank asked me to escort him out of the bank to a waiting car. The next hazard he faced was at the supermarket where others waited for their cut, or I was sometimes asked to drive to more distant liquor outlets. Another man carefully avoided his sister who regularly waited outside the post office on his payday to receive some assistance for her rent. In one case known to me, a man assumed a kinsman's identity to collect a cheque from the post office and cash it at a store.

Aboriginal kin who lived on the streets were usually welcome at the camp for the day, for respite or to stay for longer periods. They would leave early every morning for the banks, hoping to join a drinking party around someone with funds. They were under no obligation to perform duties in the camp, but if they regularly returned drunk and hungry they were eventually driven out by the tongue-lashing of the camp boss. Neither was I permitted to give them refuge in my side of the camping ground. Many who lived at the camp also spent time at other camps, in particular in various shifting locations around the huge northern suburbs shopping centre. These were also Burarra-speaking people who included Fish Camp on their urban beat of places to stay.

The large air-conditioned shopping mall at Casuarina, in the northern suburbs, acted like a stock exchange as Aboriginal campers moved through the arcades in the morning checking on the activity inside and at the various entrances. While those in the camps waited for visitors, the people around the shops actively sought the company of those who had received their payments. To the east of the shopping centre is a long taxi rank, ATM machines and a liquor outlet. To the west were banks, the post office mail-collection counter and post boxes. Spotters moved back and forth picking up word of who and what was making a move that day. Many were familiar with the particular days relatives and others received their unemployment benefit (pensions came on a regular day once a fortnight). There was competition to join a select group around someone who was collecting money that morning. Later, up to 13 people could share a minibus to an agreed location to spend the rest of the morning drinking and eating. Money changed hands around the outlets as loans were repaid or kinship obligations met.

Since the 1980s the preferred wine in the fringe camps has changed from port in glass flagons to moselle in four-litre casks. The most popular brand, which is also very economically priced, is the ubiquitous Buronga Ridge moselle, packaged in yellow cardboard containers commonly called ‘suitcases’ or ‘yellow boxes’. The bladder of wine, with its press-down plastic tap, is ripped from the cardboard wine casks when the drinking is about to begin, but is not passed around a drinking circle, as was done with the glass flagons of the 1970s. In Darwin fringe camps, drinkers no longer use a wine filled mug as a ‘communal chalice’, as described by Sansom (1980a:61). Clear empty plastic soft drink bottles of all shapes and sizes are now used to share out wine. The ‘plastic’ was usually cast aside without the top after the drinking session. Once their ‘plastic’ is filled with an agreed fair share, drinkers appear to be free to sit where they will and drink as they wish.

9.10 The 'spin dry'

Several of the men and some of the women who were my interlocutors were regulars at the sobering up centre in Coconut Grove, where police took drunks they found on the streets. After showering and changing into clean pyjamas, the intoxicated person sleeps on a clean bed to 'dry out'. During their stay, their street clothes are washed and dried by duty staff. Before leaving they are given a light breakfast. Appropriately, the regulars know the facility as the 'spin dry'.

After leaving the 'spin dry' early in the morning, some walk down the track to Fish Camp that is less than a kilometre away, in the bush behind the centre. At other times, men escaped from the 'spin dry' in their pyjamas and changed into spare clothing at the camp. More usually, my interlocutors appreciated a night in a bed. One group of Burarra men occasionally telephoned the police to make a complaint about 'Aborigines making trouble' outside a particular suburban shop. After telephoning the police, they would lie down and wait to be taken to the 'spin dry' for the night. The owner of the same shop knew this group well and encouraged them to use his liquor licence by opening the public toilets behind the shop if it was raining at night. This public drinking including opportunistic theft and the resultant frequent contacts with the police, city council inspectors and sobering up centre, is uncharacteristic of those who prefer the relative privacy provided by the hidden bushland camps.

9.11 The ethnography of Aboriginal drinking

One interpretation of Aboriginal drinking, and the popular view, is that of 'a traumatised people caught in a poverty cycle' (HRSCATSIA 1992:156) or of a dispossessed people affected by a loss of self-esteem (Lippmann 1973:145; Albrecht 1974:39; Kamien 1978:44; Sargent 1994:213; Hazelhurst 1994:5; Hale 1996:15). Similarly, Dagmar (1975, 1978:144) uses the 'culture of poverty' thesis outlined by Lewis (1966) to explain why Aborigines in Carnarvon did

not participate in the political system. Alternatively, Tomlinson (1974) found that empowerment of Aboriginal drinkers, on their own terms, motivated community action in Brisbane.

Sackett (1988:67) believes that the 'well meant sentiments' of the symptomatic approach overlook more functional explanations of alcohol use. Collmann (1979b:208) and Sansom (1982b:119) are others who criticise 'social problems', or 'cultural disintegration' analyses of Aboriginal drinking. They argue that Aboriginal drinking is rule-governed and assimilated into Aboriginal society. Brady and Palmer (1984:14) argue that 'patterns of drinking, far from being imitative, are aggressively Aboriginal in form'. Mandelbaum (1965) and Heath (1987) also defend cultural interpretations of alcohol and stress that meanings of alcohol consumption are culturally defined.

Heath (1987:109) notes case studies that indicate that drinking can be a defiant gesture by indigenous people rather than a retreat. Others claim that viewing drinking as deviant or as a sickness needing punishment or rehabilitation depoliticises the actions of drinkers (Tomlinson 1974:144. See also Edmunds 1994:100). Cowlishaw (1988a:236) claims that the 'social pathology' view is a misinterpretation that seeks 'cures' rather than recognising an oppositional culture amongst Aboriginal drinkers.

Like Cowlishaw (1988a, 1988b 1993, 1994), many researchers interpret Aboriginal drinking as a form of everyday resistance (see Reay 1945; Fink 1957:108; Beckett 1964:46; Eggleston 1974:55; Kamien 1978:151; Morris 1988:52, 1989; Sackett 1988:76), or as giving a sense of power or equality (Bain 1974:43; Sansom 1977:60, 1980a:49; Collmann 1979b:217; Brady and Palmer 1984:71; Brady 1991:180; Brady 1992b:702; Edmunds 1994:33).[21] Toussaint (1987, 1992) describes Aboriginal people in Perth maintaining a separate identity through sharing, which could include communal drinking, as

resistance against the coercive demands of the state. Tomlinson (1974) observes that hotels in Brisbane were centres of Aboriginal solidarity in the absence of other meeting places.

Collmann (1979b:209) states: 'The understanding of drinking among contemporary Aborigines will not advance until moral judgments about its effects on traditional society and about the irresponsibility of people who drink are suspended'. However, socio-cultural explanations of Aboriginal drinking are criticised by others, like Room (1984), who accuse anthropologists of the 'wet generation', for whom drinking is normative, of 'problem deflation' (see Saggers and Gray 1998:65). For example, ethnography concentrates on the public, collective behaviour of men rather than the 'private agonies' of women and children (Room 1984:172). Room (1984:171) states: 'In my view, the de-emphasis of the problematic side of drinking is not a matter of oversight, but rather tends to be inherent in a functionalist perspective'. Room adds that problems are then attributed to outside causes (p.171). In response, Beckett (1984:179) admits he took no account of the long-term physical consequences of heavy drinking he has since witnessed amongst the people he described in 1964.

Many commentators do emphasise the destructive effects of excessive drinking on Aboriginal society (Gilbert 1974:156; Weller 1981; Pettman 1991:191; Hollinsworth 1992:148; Rowse 1990:187; Gibson 1991; Brady and Palmer 1984:71; Morton 1996:7; Hazlehurst 1994), or question the effectiveness of alcohol as resistance by doubting the possibility of lasting transformations of Aboriginal society solely through 'inversions of bourgeois values' (Morris 1988:53; see also Fink 1957:104). While agreeing that alcohol heightens the sense of opposition amongst Aboriginal drinkers, Merlan (1998:207) claims characterisations of alcohol abuse as 'manifestations of resistance' are 'incomplete and simplistic'.

Economic or social change is often seen as a necessary precursor for reducing alcohol abuse (see Lickis 1974:32; Kamien 1978:159; HRSCATSIA 1992; Sargent 1994:209; Hale 1996:16). However, three writers, including two Aboriginal leaders, are particularly critical of anthropological explanations for Aboriginal drinking. Gibson (1991:187) emphasises that the alcoholic 'has actively created his own problems'. Hazelhurst (1994:9) is also a strong critic of 'the culture of opposition' that, in its worst manifestation 'takes shape in wanton irresponsibility, excessive use of alcohol, and other forms of belligerent self-destructiveness [which] hurts Aboriginal people more than the systems they are trying to punish'.

More recently, the Queensland Aboriginal leader, Noel Pearson (2000a), has stated: 'The symptomatic theory of substance abuse is wrong'. He adds that 'Our outrageous social problems and our current widespread unemployability followed passive welfare'. Placing the emphasis on 'reciprocity and responsibility' (Pearson 2000b:153), he claims that a first step is to 'ensure that the government stops interacting directly with individuals in our society by sending cheques in the mail' (Pearson 2000b:153). Pearson believes that 'passive welfare' leads to the 'direct corruption of individuals' (see also Pearson 2000c:22).

Whereas Cowlishaw and others suggest alcohol consumption is an aggressive assertion of identity in the face of White interventions, Pearson (2000c:19) argues that 'rather than drinking being a true expression of Aboriginal social and cultural values and relationships, it is a blatant corruption of them'. Hazlehurst (1994:148) believes: 'Denial that certain problems exist has allowed outside authorities and others to intervene and impose solutions'. Sackett (1988:76) notes that Whites are more likely to view Aboriginal drinking as mindless rather than as resistance, which therefore justifies more legal and social intervention into Aboriginal lives. Hazlehurst (1994:11) adds: 'In a large number of areas, Aboriginal councils are

responsible for, and derive considerable profit from, the import and sale of liquor to their own people'

Resistance always has its costs, often the loss of human life, to produce outcomes. Cowlishaw (1993:187) suggests, for example, the tragic suicides of Aboriginal prisoners is a form of protest that produced the Royal Commission Into Deaths In Custody. However, in a review of Cowlishaw's book, Rowse (1990:190) questions the viability of an Aboriginal oppositional culture:

> But to be a pitied and despised public embarrassment because one violates value consensus is only in a very weak sense to be a threat. One could argue to the contrary, that such 'opposition' maintains a cultural separateness which arises from and reinforces one's powerlessness ... perhaps the oppositional culture of Brindleton is a culture without interests, eschewing the political process to celebrate an Otherness without future, sustained economically by welfare cheques without end.

Lattas (1993) claims Rowse (1990) has devalued the challenge to White hegemony made by everyday Aboriginal resistance by emphasising political and economic forms of opposition.[22] Lattas (1993:242) writes, 'the rendering of Aboriginal defiance and disorder as the non-political moral crimes of individuals, is itself a political act carried out by state agencies'. He adds that the high arrest rates of Aborigines for petty crimes 'points not to a weak threat but to a sense of moral panic in the white community' (p.243). Sackett (1988:76) notes: 'Through drink Aborigines express their antipathy to the idea and practice of others administering their lives'.

Drinkers in the fringe camps notably resist assimilation through the communal nature of their lives as described by Gare (1961), Sansom (1980a),

Collmann (1988), Bropho (1980), Merlan (1998) and others. For example, the open-air living arrangements and the sharing at Fish Camp appear to be more compatible with the hunter-gatherer lives in Arnhem Land described by Hiatt (1965, 1982) and others than the rows of government-designed houses at Maningrida satirised by Hamilton (1975). Although the drinkers in the fringe camps are often stigmatised as 'antisocial' for their 'failure' to assimilate with urban life, attempts to regulate Aboriginal lives further marks Aboriginal customary ways as distinct and oppositional (see Cowlishaw 1993:188).

Hunter (1993:95) describes the pleasure from alcohol consumption as a factor that must be recognised. Other commentators note that social drinking of alcohol is an activity with real social value for Aboriginal people (Bain 1974; Eggleston 1974:59; Tomlinson 1974:172; Kamien 1978:160; O'Connor 1984:179; Collmann 1979b:208, 1988:151; Sansom 1977:61, 1980a:53; Brady 1991:206; Brady and Palmer 1994:11; Merlan 1998:183). O'Connor (1984) claims that this group activity is 'contingent drinking':

> [A]lthough a high degree of drink-centredness exists, its locus is in the fringe camp drinking group and not in the individual. Away from this group the individual typically does not display such alcohol-orientation' (O'Connor 1984:179).

Contingent drinking occurs in particular social and physical environments (O'Connor 1984:182), so a community solution is needed for Aboriginal alcohol problems, rather than concentrating on the individual (O'Connor 1984:182). Saggers and Gray (1998a:323) suggest one reason why action is slow to be taken at the level of community:

> Liberal ideology attributes the misuse of alcohol and other drugs to the weakness or susceptibility of individuals - whether biological,

psychological or moral - and denies the role of political and economic factors in misuse.

9.12 Alcohol and resistance: another view

In the first chapter of this thesis, I asked, 'What makes some groups more ready to resist than others?' In other chapters, I refer to examples of the preparedness to defy government authority by residents of more than six heavy-drinking Aboriginal camps in Darwin from 1971 to 1998. They are: Kulaluk, Railway Dam, Knuckeys Lagoon, 'Low Down', Lee Point and Fish Camp - with Palmerston and other camps also involved. This preparedness goes far beyond the hidden, informal or everyday resistance of 'an oppositional culture'. By way of contrast, with notable exceptions there was minimal involvement, and sometimes-hostile opposition, from urban-dwelling Aborigines living outside the fringe camps. To explain this notable feature of the Darwin drinking camps, in this section I discuss the relationship between alcohol and resistance, and alcohol and 'merging', or 'reaching across distance', in the fringe camps.

In 'settled' Australia, where Aborigines are a discriminated against minority, the solidarity derived by Aboriginal people drinking together described by Reay (1945), Fink (1957), Beckett (1964, 1965) and Cowlishaw (1988a). Sansom (1977, 1980a) has ably demonstrated that the social function of drinking is no less significant in the Darwin fringe camps where indigenous language, kinship systems and ceremonial life are regularly in use. However, because Darwin fringe dwellers in the more traditional camps are confident in their own culture, social structure and language, I argue that the oppositional role of alcohol stressed by the above authors is different in Darwin.

Earlier chapters describe how the hidden grog camps usually provide a site for freedom of association between Aboriginal drinkers and friends of their choosing, despite harassment from authorities. Despite the harassment

campaign by town authorities, one incidental result of the lack of tenure over land where fringe dwellers camp is a greater autonomy for residents than exists on some leases and at Bagot Community in Darwin. In my visits to Aboriginal town camps, Bagot Community, hostels and homes in Darwin during my fieldwork, I found the fringe camps to be the most welcoming, without any overarching authority or 'gatekeeper' deterring or screening my visit as anthropologist, activist or friend. The freedom of association in the camps appears to have a direct correlation with the freedom to consume alcohol. That is, people who wish to drink without interference also wish to be free to choose their associates. As I noted earlier (Day 1975:1), and confirmed during my fieldwork, alcohol also insulates the drinkers from the possibilities of infiltration by the state, its agencies or Aboriginal representative groups. The heavy drinking and associated 'antisocial' behaviour, dress style and financial priorities 'outlaws' the fringe camp community from any attempt to incorporate them by any means other than on their own terms.

Most of the fringe camp residents have moved from regulated Aboriginal communities. Others have been evicted from rent-paying houses in Darwin because of their preference to drink freely with associates of their choice. Their drinking and behaviour that prevents their assimilation also isolates them from organisations and councils established by the state to incorporate Aboriginal resistance. As I have described, this has also disadvantages the fringe dwellers in their attempts to find space in Darwin. On the margins, as I have described in Chapters Six and Eight, the fringe dwellers find their allies amongst alternative groups who also feel marginalised.

In the 1970s, 1980s and again in 1997 and 2001, it was the drinkers in the camps who were prepared to take direct action against government neglect. In all cases the actions were highly confrontational with the possibility of arrest. In my experience, the preparedness to risk conflict with authorities,

with maximum publicity, was almost unique to fringe camp residents. Unlike the residents in other Aboriginal accommodation, the fringe campers protested enthusiastically, not once but on many occasions in the 1970s, 1980s and again in 1996, 1997 and 2001 (see Day 1994; 1998), much to the surprise of the Darwin populace and activists who told me they had viewed the drinkers as stereotypically 'drunken and demoralised' Aboriginal fringe dwellers.

Some of the political activism of the drinkers has been described throughout this thesis. In each case the drinkers welcomed a chance to articulate their grievances. The resistance by the fringe dwellers in the 1970s lasted over three years, with another five years until their leases were granted. The Yolngu group at the 'Low Down' camp were active from 1978 to 1982. Few of these people survived in the late 1990s when the Burarra people similarly openly protested, and remained steadfast in their aims to the time of writing. These examples are undoubtedly in addition to earlier unrecognised Aboriginal activism that may have occurred in Darwin, and belongs to a pattern of resistance that has been recorded since initial invasion.

Many other cases could be given which would demonstrate an unusual lack of the internalised 'shame', which is a means of social control in traditional Aboriginal culture (see Tonkinson 1991:150). I do not believe the absence of shame can be attributed to alcohol. Instead, being noticeably under the influence of alcohol during the public protests is a cause of shame amongst the fringe dwellers of my study. In 1997, people from Fish Camp expressed shame at the crude language of some protesters who had been drinking before the March 1997 protest outside Parliament House. Otherwise there was no expression of embarrassment in participating in the very public actions. The participants planned their actions in the weeks beforehand and viewed themselves on television and in video replays. They loudly contrast their militancy with the hesitancy of other Aboriginal people and continue to

show pride in their actions, despite condemnation and ridicule from some Aboriginal kin and associates.

For a people continually harassed by police, the unusual lack of deference and fearfulness of the possible reaction by authorities is exceptional. Their protests do not appear to be actions of a demoralised people. Drinkers show a sustained willingness to place themselves in 'the firing lines' of the Aboriginal struggle for recognition of prior land ownership. I use the military analogy deliberately, because the price the drinkers pay is often their own lives, either through the effects of alcohol, the lack of services, or through other problems associated with their living conditions, as I have illustrated in Gojok's story (see also Bropho 1980:2; Day 1994:82). As in war, it is often others who are the beneficiaries of the conflict, evidenced by the family groups living in the relatively secure town camps of Darwin today.

In a study of an Aboriginal community, Brady and Palmer (1984:2) believe that Aborigines at the 'Diamond Well' camp, by drinking alcohol, 'seek to redress their powerlessness and subordinate status in a world dominated by European Australians'. Although this empowerment is real for those who consume alcohol, it is 'a contrived independence' (Brady and Palmer 1984:71). As I have illustrated, the Burarra campers often deal with European Australians in Darwin. During my fieldwork, they asserted themselves in many ways other than drinking. Drinking was something that was predominantly done amongst kin, and it was recognised that people should appear sober on public occasions. As my thesis suggests, they sought to redress their powerlessness in more direct ways than by drinking alcohol.

Brady and Palmer (1984:72) claim that Christianity offers alternative feelings of empowerment, so that the Aboriginal Christians do not need to drink at Diamond Well. In contrast to Diamond Well, most of the drinkers in the Darwin camps profess to be Christians but continue to consume alcohol.

Unlike the Christians at Diamond Well, they remain aware of their marginalisation and are prepared to redress it through active opposition.[23] The difference may be because Burarra Christians mostly belong to the Uniting Church that preaches an Aboriginal theology that swept through Arnhem Land in a series of revivals from the 1970s (see Blackett 1997; Gondara 1988; Magowan 1999; Bos 1985; Thompson 1982).[24] Unlike the Doomadgee Mission, where drunkenness posed an inevitable fall from Christianity (Trigger 1988a:224) and Christians were expected to reject 'Blackfella law' (Trigger 1992:196), the Arnhem Land revival movement preaches the 'blessings and insight offered through Aboriginal culture and spirituality' (Gondara 1988:6). My point is, the acceptance of Christianity amongst the fringe dwellers from Arnhem Land does not appear to result in the political accommodation noted amongst Doomadgee Christians (see Trigger 1988a:234, 1990:236, 1992:224).

In this chapter, in keeping with my multi-sited and political approach, I have largely avoided the ethnographic approach to an analysis of Aboriginal drinking, which Sansom (1980a, 1977) has used so graphically. I have chosen an alternative approach, partly because concerns about Aboriginal drinking in Darwin have often distracted attention from the wider context in which the drinking occurs. I have also attempted to respect the privacy of my hosts. Instead, I have used the Beer Can Regatta as a means to interpret differing attitudes to alcohol in Darwin. I have also given historical explanations for Aboriginal drinking as a focus of tension between White and Black society in Darwin. I have suggested that behind this tension, and the many expressions of it, lies the dispossession of Aboriginal people from their land in the city, their unfulfilled expectations of citizenship, the unresolved problem of Aboriginal homelessness and financial profiteering from Aboriginal drinking. In this racial, economic and political context, it is perhaps not surprising that there appears to be a correlation between the drinking camps and Aboriginal resistance.

Endnotes:

[1] For further discussion of cultural dislocation, see Gupta and Ferguson 1992:7; Hodge and Mishra 1990; Lattas 1991 and Morton 1996.

[2] As Heath (1984:181) notes, few anthropologists use the term 'alcoholism'. O'Connor (1984) argues that Aborigines in the fringe camps are 'contingent drinkers' and not alcoholics under WHO definitions (see also Merlan 1998:200). Similarly, Larsen (1979:147) found Aborigines in Perth are 'environmental drinkers' which he distinguishes from 'chronic drinkers', or alcoholics. However, regardless of these studies, Hunter (1993:127) states that the majority of Aboriginal drinkers in the Kimberleys consume amounts of alcohol at levels harmful to health (see also Saggers and Gray 1997:218; Saggers and Gray 1998:56).

[3] See also Brady 2001. It is insightful to follow the development of a political analysis of the problems in Wiluna in articles by Sackett (1977, 1978, 1988, 1990)

[4] NT Welfare Ordinance, 1953, cited in Franklin (1976:142).

[5] Rowley (1972b:263) comments that in the early sixties more attention had been paid to the right to drink than to the right to an equal wage. Voting rights were granted in 1962 (see Wright 1985:16; Chesterman and Galligan 1997:162). The 1967 referendum removed special provisions from the Australian Constitution that excluded Aboriginal people from the census and prohibited the Commonwealth Government from making laws for Aboriginal people. However, the vote was more generally seen as being for full citizenship rights for Australian Aborigines (see Bandler 1989; Attwood and Markus 1998).

[6] Sansom (1980a:58) claims outside drinking is more dangerous for fringe dwellers. However, Saggers and Gray (1998:62) maintain that research shows licensed premises to be the most 'risky' in terms of alcohol-related harm. Mandelbaum (1965:284), comments that in complex societies taverns perform the role of kinship networks, although, as places where anonymous people gather, they can be dangerous.

[7] Statistics submitted by Australian Legal Aid Services to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs (see NT Hansard, 3 July 1976, pp. 871-2).

[8] Donald (1984) notes that in 1983 a sobering-up centre opened in Darwin to complement an amendment passed that year making intoxication sufficient reason to be taken into custody. However, police retained the duty of picking up and transporting drunks in Darwin.

[9] As I have illustrated, racial outbursts by public figures in the 1990s sometimes projected the issue of Aboriginal drinking in towns into the national media.

[10] During my fieldwork the police began charging liquor outlets that served alcohol to drunks (*NT News* June 13, 1997). A drive-in bottle shop raised the price of casks and explained the increase to me as 'High profit for high risk' (see letters page, *NT News* September 19, 1997; Brady 1998:103, citing *NT News* June 13, 1996).

[11] Aluminium cans became a greater litter problem because they do not corrode as quickly as steel cans. However, it was more practicable to recycle aluminium cans in the north.

[12] Under a heading: 'Darwin's dirty problem baffles chiefs', the *Darwin Star* (July 25, 1981, reproduced in Tomlinson 1982:102) reported that: 'Litter is choking Darwin's beaches and

parks - but it appears nothing can be done. The problem is worst around the city's illegal campsites where there are no bins and little motivation to dispose of rubbish'.

[13] I instigated an Aboriginal entry in the first Beer Can Regatta ('Beer can boomer', *NT News* May 24, 1974, p.1). The 'boat' was actually a stack of 2000 beer cans wired together into layers for an experimental building materials project supported by a local architect and the Railway Dam Aboriginal community. The federally funded experimental building, using empty beer cans inside concrete slabs, coincided with the move to clean up Darwin and had the support of the fringe dwellers. The beer can boat did not make it to the starting line.

[14] In her interpretation of the Mindil Beach Sunset Markets, Helms (1998) also fails to consider Aboriginal readings of the landscape.

[15] *Bunji* shows a photograph of 'Woolna camp at Mindil Beach about 1904' from the Gillstrom Collection, National Library of Australia.

[16] A National Drug and Alcohol Research Institute report claims that alcohol consumption among non-Aboriginal people in the NT remains 43 per cent higher than amongst other Australians (*NT News* February 2, 2000). The report found there was significantly higher alcohol consumption in the Katherine and Alice Springs areas. Alcohol consumption in the Katherine region 1993-1997 was earlier reported as 18.7 per cent higher than the NT rate (Clausen 1999:36).

[17] The Chief Minister's comments that Aboriginal drunks deserved to be 'monstered and stomped on by the community' (*Sunday Territorian* April 13, 1997) were described as 'perhaps the most venomous public attack on Aborigines by a Territory politician' (*NT News* April 15, 1997). The editorial continued: 'Such comments will do nothing to improve the worsening problem of drunken itinerants'.

[18] For reports on alcohol restrictions in northern towns, see d'Abbs et al 1996, 1997.

[19] Outside the relative safety of the fringe camps, in isolated drinking locations around Darwin, several Aboriginal women were murdered during my fieldwork.

[20] Merlan (1991:262) notes that by 1988, Sansom had 'developed' his model of a unique Aboriginal economy (see Sansom 1980a:232) into that of 'service exchange' (see Sansom 1988b). She comments: 'This concept is one which I find more useful than the opposition of symbolic and material "economies" in his earlier work'.

[21] See also Brady (1992:192) and Folds (1987:85) on petrol sniffing as resistance in Aboriginal communities.

[22] Lattas (1993:242) refers to Langton's (1988) analysis of Aboriginal 'antisocial' behaviour in a metropolitan park as an example of how Aborigines 'defiantly map out the lack of total European control over Aboriginal existence'. However, Cowlishaw (1990:246) has accused Langton of 'anthropologising', or 'essentialising' Aboriginal behaviour, in contrast to Cowlishaw's (1994:81) politically engaged view of Aboriginal swearing and defiance in the face of attempts at suppression by authorities.

[23] Although some of the Burarra fringe dwellers have been baptised by Mormon missionaries, they continue to drink and rarely attend services of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

[24] The Arnhem Land Christian revivals since 1979 have resulted in temporary decreases in drinking, card playing and drug taking (see Brady 1989:62, 1992:116). Bos (1988:432) claims the revival was partly a response to increased alcohol abuse in Arnhem Land.