FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES
Finding space for Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin

William Day

In May 1997 I was arrested in a dawn raid and charged under the Northern Territory Trespass Act for refusing to leave vacant Crown land near Lee Point, a scenic recreation spot on the northern outskirts of Darwin. I had been living under tarpaulins and cooking on an open fire in the bush with an Aboriginal group, known locally as 'itinerants' or 'long grass people'. The Aboriginal campers were targeted by a harassment campaign to drive homeless people out of the city (see Ween 1997; Day 1998). On two earlier occasions they had been forcibly evicted from the secluded campsite which is near the sea with access to public amenities and bush foods. I had been working with them for nine months when the arrest occurred. At a later court appearance I explained to a sympathetic magistrate the requirements of participant observation and was placed on an eighteen months good behaviour bond without a conviction being recorded. For the remainder of my fourteen months postgraduate fieldwork I lived with the Aboriginal group in a field bounded by the state.

In this paper I follow two complaints made by members of the Lee Point group to the Northern Territory (NT) Anti-Discrimination Commission to illustrate that the camp's claim upon physical space in a commodified landscape contested popular, legal and anthropological representations which typically dispossess Aboriginal people from symbolic space (see Langton 1993). For the people living in these camps, all vacant land is Aboriginal land until the fences, signs or eviction notices state otherwise.[1] The challenge to traditional ethnographic writing, and to the role of the anthropologist, by the fringe dwellers' attempts to cross boundaries in a process I call 'merging', is resolved by a morally-grounded multi-sited study.

THE ROLE OF THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

My central question in the field was whether Aborigines living in the illegal camps ordered their lives through cultural continuities (Sansom 1980, 1982, 1988a, 1988b, 1995), or by an oppositional culture (Cowlishaw 1988, 1993, 1994). Marcus (1986:178) has typified the first approach as 'staging culture as an integral spatio-temporal isolate' (see White and Bain 1981; Cowlishaw

Canberra Anthropology 22(2) 1999:62-69

1990; Merlan 1995) and the second as viewing 'culture as a product of struggle' (see Rowse 1990; Trigger 1990). Marcus attempts to synthesise these two textual representations of culture by developing models of 'multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Marcus 1995) which are useful and applicable to the 'dynamics of encapsulation' (Marcus 1995:96) experienced by the Aboriginal fringe dwellers of Darwin. Furthermore, a multi-sited analysis which 'follows the conflict', as Marcus (1995:105) suggests, opens political and ethical issues which the neutral observer in the 'segregated field' of Sansom's ethnography renders invisible.

As Weiner (1997:87) notes, 'there are no such things as innocent social relations' when immersed in a complexity of domains (see also Marcus 1995:101). I maintain that a multi-sited study should begin with the role of the anthropologist, who is now 'less confident about delineating where different worlds begin and end' (Weiner 1997:85). In this shared world where power is blatantly displayed on the Darwin fringe, the answer to the critique of anthropology is 'an ethnography that is personally engaged and politically committed' (Scheper-Hughes 1995:419). Therefore the primary issue in the encounter between anthropologists and unhoused Aborigines in Darwin is not the 'ownership' of their claims in the contest with legal systems (Sansom 1985), but whether the fieldwork experience and beyond can make a difference in their lives. Regretfully, my commitment is cursory in comparison to my primary interlocutor, an elderly Aboriginal man severely disabled by leprosy, who returned to Lee Point and refused to move from his inadequate shelter despite cyclonic conditions and oppressive government actions to have him evicted (see Day 1997, 1998). He died a martyr, as he vowed on television news he would, while I was in Perth taking a Christmas break from fieldwork.

The living conditions in the illegal camps, from 1996 to the present, demand the active voice of a witness, not that of the passive neutral observer hiding behind scientific objectivism.[2] I write as a witness, 'accountable for how we have used and how we have failed to use anthropology as a critical tool at crucial historical moments' (Scheper-Hughes 1995:419).

DEFINING THE FRINGE

Knuckeys Lagoon and three other established Darwin special purpose leases with rudimentary shelters and services are generally referred to as 'town camps'.[3] The parliamentary committee formed to investigate the needs of fringe dwelling Aborigines makes a broad definition of 'town campers' as

'any group of Aboriginals living at identified camp sites near or within towns or cities which form part of the socio-cultural structure of the towns and cities but which have a lifestyle which does not conform to the majority of non-Aboriginal residents' (HRSCAA 1982:6). The committee was responding to anthropological recommendations that 'fringe dweller' had connotations of 'semi-permanency and marginality'. However, an alternative definition mentioned by the committee describing fringe dwelling communities as 'living under sub-standard conditions on the outskirts of cities or towns including homeless and transient Aboriginal people' remains useful to distinguish the unserviced 'illegal' camps from the established town camp leases, except that fringe camps are not always 'on the outskirts' of town. Also, to describe the Lee Point people and others like them as being 'part of the socio-cultural structure' of the town is premature. Fringe camps resist the incorporation into state structures which is an unintended but observable consequence of becoming an official town camp (see Rowse 1988).

ENTRY INTO THE FIELD

When I entered the field in 1996 my intention was to find a manageable field site amongst Aborigines who had migrated to Darwin and established hidden bush camps on vacant Crown land. This would be difficult because a petition signed by over 4000 Darwin residents had prompted the mayor to vow to 'harass, harass, harass ... keep them moving so they won't settle'. Council inspectors issued fifty dollar on-the-spot fines for sleeping in a public place and regular police patrols moved people from parks and foreshores (Schulz 1996).

While reading the debates in the media, I noted an article describing the closure of a camp at Lee Point where people from Central Arnhem Land had lived for at least four years (*NT News*, 8 July 1996). The group had been evicted by the NT Department of Lands, Planning and Environment under the Trespass Act. A photograph showed a disabled 65 year old Aboriginal man being carried from the land by one of his family. I had known this man, who I shall call Gojok, when he was living under a shelter of plastic sheets and cardboard on a narrow beach beside a sewerage pump house where he had set up camp after the Darwin East Arm Leprosarium closed in 1982. I was surprised that he had survived fourteen years in those conditions. Drysdale described meeting him in Arnhem Land in 1958:

> One day I was stopped ... by a young man who had been hiding behind a clump of pandanus palms. I noticed that he had just enough flesh below one ankle to hold a bandage where one foot had been, and enough on the other to maintain his balance on the blood-covered stumps. Only part of his hands remained, with one or two little inch-long claws in place of the fingers he had lost.
>
> 'Sorry, Missus', he said in apology for having startled me. 'I wanna medicine' (1974:120).

Following a lead provided by the newspaper article, I found Gojok with a small group of relatives from the Blyth River region of Arnhem Land living at a location called Fish Camp under the Darwin international airport flightpath.[4]

The cluster of shades in a cleared patch appeared to be a manageable fieldwork site where I could form a relationship with the people through my renewed friendship with Gojok. Despite the jets screaming intermittently overhead there was a sense of entering a communal Aboriginal domain which had retained a sort of autonomy. There was a sense of being a 'time traveller', if not into a precontact world then into a frontier society unlike the modern Darwin of high rise apartments and shopping malls. The only water in the camp was carried through the mangroves in containers and the soil around the tarpaulins was a fine red dust which clung to everything. However, the borders around this field were shaped by a system of dispossession expressed in the mayor's harassment campaign, not by a hunter-gatherer past.

THE UNBOUNDED FIELD

When the television cameras arrived at Fish Camp, I sensed the rupturing of the borders which I had mentally created to fit the 'isolated and self-contained laboratory' of the Malinowskian tradition that I had internalised. After the publicity, the camp became a symbol of the plight of other unhoused Aborigines in Darwin. A complaint to the NT Anti-Discrimination Commission, which I helped prepare, took that representation into the legal arena, further complicated when Gojok and a few of his followers returned to Lee Point and defied the authorities to evict them. Later, over fifty 'long grass' Aborigines and a group from Knuckeys Lagoon town camp marched on Parliament House to deliver a petition (*NT News*, 18 March 1997).

When I returned to Perth for Christmas, faxes and telephone calls to and from supporters in Darwin kept me well informed enough to give interviews by telephone to the inquiring media and to continue as Gojok's broker with the Anti-Discrimination Commission. He had been given an eviction notice

shortly before Christmas but his complaint allowed for an injunction followed by an extension until a finding could be made within a month. Before a decision could be made on his complaint, Gojok died and the complaint lapsed.

After subsequent protests from Gojok's extended family the NT Minister for Lands, Planning and Environment stated on television:

> I mean, these people have their own homelands. We've heard so much over the last two decades that if people are given their land back and they've got full control over their land then they will have self esteem and be able to accept on behalf of themselves their responsibility. These people have their homelands. They have never been taken from them in fact, being Arnhem Landers, yet we still have this circumstance where the taxpayer is expected to run after people the moment that they have some demand on the community (*Stateline*, ABC TV, 23 May 1997).

On the basis of this statement Gojok's niece lodged another complaint to the Anti-Discrimination Commission which was accepted. She has lived in Darwin since she was seventeen and her four children were born there. The minister attempted to locate her and her people within an anthropologically-defined bounded field, and in return she asked, 'Why doesn't he go back to where he came from?' By September the complaint had proceeded to a settlement conference convened by the minister with the aim of satisfying the need for another town camp for the Fish Camp people. After two years the government and the group were communicating.

During these years a number of young Balanda (white) activists became closely involved with the Fish Camp people. Their regular visits to the camp, where I was now living, left the field further open to interpretation and confused the dichotomy of self and other. The young activists participated more freely in the life of the camp than I did. Like myself they were accepted into the skin system and given kinship names. Although they were my friends, their anti-establishment distrust of anthropology often left me feeling on the outer as 'other'. Some had video cameras and made hours of tapes, even winning first prize in the local annual Human Rights Exhibition awards for a video on Fish Camp. Later they established a Fish Camp home page on the Internet.[5] Other supporters were members of the Greens. In the 1997 Northern Territory elections Senator Bob Brown launched the Greens campaign in the dust of a waterless but colourfully flag-bedecked Fish Camp.

CONCLUSION

Arnhem Land Aborigines accustomed to centuries of trade with northern seafarers, describe the meeting of cultures as *ganma,* the turbulence and foam where the fresh water meets the salt in a tidal river (McConvell 1991:17). Like the sea and the river, the two cultures remain distinct. *Ganma* is an appropriate metaphor for the 'two ways' concept in Arnhem Land but it does not hold for an asymmetric relationship in the towns.

The location of the camps, in the present political environment, is an indication of the status of the land as indeterminately owned. Thus, the camps are site of struggle for Aboriginal people. Although their movement into settled areas makes oppositional values an issue, the Fish Camp residents are too confident in their multilingual and kinship-grounded identity to define themselves only in opposition. Rather than centring on a single site, following paths of connection will better explain the position of the campers.

NOTES

[1] Recently the Darwin fringe dwellers have been thwarted by anthropologically-defined Native Title claims over all vacant city spaces (see Carey and Collinge 1997:22-3; Sutton 1998:103-11).

[2] In December 1997 The Northern Territory News reported that several cases of tuberculosis had been detected in the camps. Three of these cases were occasional members of my host community.

[3] There are fourteen town camp leases in Alice Springs (HRSCAA 1982:16).

[4] Most of my interlocutors belong to clans described by Hiatt (1965).

[5] www.geocities.com/rainforest/canopy/6905.

REFERENCES

Carey, Cathy and Amanda Collinge
1997 Larrakia native title: the long march. *Indigenous Law Bulletin* 4(2):22-3.

Cowlishaw, Gillian
1988 *Black, white or brindle: race in rural Australia.* Sydney: Cambridge University Press.
1990 Review of *Being black: Aboriginal cultures in 'settled' Australia* by Ian Keen (ed.). *American Anthropologist* 92:246.
1993 Introduction: representing racial issues. *Oceania* 63(3):183-94.
1994 Policing the races. *Social Analysis* 36:71-91.

Day, Bill
1997 The homeless in the Territory. *Australasian*, August.

Day, Bill
1998 Gojok's dream of home. *Parity* 11(4):22-3.

Drysdale, Ingrid
1974 *The end of the Dreaming*. Sydney: Rigby.

Langton, Marcia
1993 Rum, seduction and death: Aboriginality and alcohol. *Oceania* 63(3):195-206.

Hiatt, L.R.
1965 *Kinship and conflict: a study of an Aboriginal community in Northern Arnhem Land*. Canberra: Australian National University Press.

HRSCAA [House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs]
1982 *Strategies to help overcome the problems of Aboriginal town camps*. Canberra: Australian Pubishing Service.

McConvell, Patrick
1991 Cultural domain separation: two-way street or blind alley? Stephen Harris and the neo-Whorfians on Aboriginal education. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1:13-24.

Marcus, George E.
1986 Contemporary problems of ethnography in the modern world system. In James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds) *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*, pp.165-93. Berkeley: University of California Press.
1995 Ethnography in/of the world system: the emergence of a multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24:95-117.

Marcus, George E. and Michael M.J. Fischer
1986 *Anthropology as cultural critique: an experimental moment in the human sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Merlan, Francesca
1995 Vectoring anthropology: a critical appreciation of Basil Sansom's work. *Anthropological Forum* 7(2):161-78.

Rowse, Tim
1988 From houses to households? The Aboriginal Development Commission and economic adaptation by Alice Springs town campers. *Social Analysis* 24:50-65.
1990 Are we all blow-ins? *Oceania* 61(2):185-91.

Sansom, Basil
1980 *The camp at Wallaby Cross: Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
1982 The Aboriginal commonality. In Ronald M. Berndt (ed.) *Aboriginal sites, rights and resource development*, pp.117-38. Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press.

Sansom, Basil
1985 Aborigines, anthropologists and Leviathan. In Noel Dyck (ed.) *Indigenous people and the nation-state: fourth world politics in Canada, Australia and Norway*, pp. 67-94. Newfoundland: Institute of Social and Economic Research.
1988a The past is a doctrine of person. In Jeremy R. Beckett (ed.) *Past and present: the construction of Aboriginality*, pp.147-60. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
1988b A grammar of exchange. In Ian Keen (ed.) *Being black: Aboriginal cultures in 'settled' Australia*, pp. 159-78. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
1995 The wrong, the rough and the fancy: about immortality and an Aboriginal aesthetic of the singular. *Anthropological Forum* 7(2):259-314.

Schulz, Dennis
1996 Down and out in Darwin. *The Bulletin*, February 27:28-9.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy
1995 The primacy of the ethical: propositions for a militant anthropology. *Current Anthropology* 36(3):409-420.

Sutton, Peter
1998 *Native title and the descent of rights*. Perth: Native Title Tribunal.

Trigger, David
1990 Review of *Black, white or brindle: race in rural Australia* by Gillian Cowlishaw. *The Australian Journal of Sociology* 26(2):235-37.

Ween, Gro
1997 Perceptions of Aboriginality within contested spaces: a Darwin case study. Thesis in partial fulfilment of Master of Philosophy, Oxford University.

Weiner, James F.
1997 Must our informants mean what they say? *Canberra Anthropology* 20(1 and 2):82-95.

White, Isobel and Margaret Bain
1981 Review of *The camp at Wallaby Cross: Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin* by Basil Sansom. *Mankind* 13(2):187-8.