CHAPTER TEN

Persistence or resistance?

10.1 Introduction

In this chapter I firstly briefly summarise the preceding nine chapters. In the light of the evidence presented in these chapters, I then conclude by re-examine the relative values of a 'political' or a 'cultural' approach to research amongst Aboriginal fringe dwellers, or whether this dichotomy is applicable to my findings.

10.2 Summary of chapters

In the first chapter, I discussed the anthropology of the Darwin area, a body of academic work which I argue still creates what Appadurai (1988:37) calls the 'spatially incarcerated native', restricted in what they 'know, feel, and believe' (p.37) by the mobile and all-seeing anthropologist who alone is not confined to the observed location. I argued that Aboriginal protest is often written out of the literature or is only mentioned for its functional role in Aboriginal ethnogenesis. I then located my thesis in the context of the parallel 'cultural' and 'political' approaches to ethnography, typified by Basil Sansom and Gillian Cowlishaw in their studies of Aboriginal societies in urban areas. I compared these approaches to the debates on the construction of Aboriginality through persistence or resistance, which in recent years has been blurred by the use of a 'politics of culture' by Aboriginal people and others to emphasise an essential Aboriginality that has survived invasion. After a discussion of 'intransitive', or everyday hidden informal resistance and 'transitive', or organised open formal resistance, I drew upon the literature of peasant studies, to suggest that the 'political' approach offers an understanding of the position of fringe camps in Darwin which cannot be gained through a bounded single-sited study.

I drew upon the literature of peasant studies to suggest that Aboriginal fringe campers in Darwin are more politically conscious than a bounded single-sited study might suggest.

In the second chapter I discussed definitions of homeless Aboriginal people and the relationship between signifier (the word), signified (the subject) and referent (the actual topic of reference). I have suggested that these contested definitions are themselves sites of struggle that reflect the place of fringe dwellers in Darwin. After describing the use of various categories in reports and elsewhere, I distinguished 'town camps' from the 'illegal' camps where I conducted my fieldwork. Finally, I explained my decision to follow Sansom (1980a) and Collmann (1988) in using the term 'fringe dweller' to describe my interlocutors, who are also 'homeless' people in Darwin, according to the criteria.

In Chapter Three, I discussed my role as an activist anthropologist. I included my entry into the field and the historical background of the Fish Camp site in my multi-sited study. My previous experience as an activist for the rights of Darwin fringe dwellers gives my research a diachronic depth not usually possible within the limitations of postgraduate fieldwork. Any remaining illusions of a neatly bounded field were ended by a complaint to the Anti-Discrimination Commission and the resultant media interest. In contrast to the public hostility towards fringe camp communities, which are harassed by Local and Territory Governments, I then gave the example of public sympathy for the Railway Dam town camp community, which had been 'legitimised' almost twenty years earlier.

In Chapter Four, I revisited Basil Sansom's definitive ethnography, *The camp at Wallaby Cross: Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin* (1980a), and his other texts. Drawing upon my past experience, I located 'Wallaby Cross' in the wider events before, during and after Sansom's fieldwork. My analysis suggested that in the 1970s the mob at 'Wallaby Cross' belonged to a tradition of fringe dweller resistance shared by the Burarra people of Fish Camp and Lee Point in the late 1990s to 2001. In my reinterpretation of

Sansom's texts in Chapter Four, I suggested that the texts cannot be separated, figuratively and literally, from the ongoing struggle for space by fringe dwellers in Darwin.

The Burarra people who predominate at Fish Camp and Lee Point have a long history of movement into Darwin from central Arnhem Land, where they were early participants in the homelands movement in the 1970s. As I related, there have been past and recent attempts by Burarra people to build links with the wider community. A section of this chapter describes life At Fish Camp between 1996 and 1998. I examined some of the Burarra people's attempts to engage with the invading society and suggested that resistance can be a form of engagement, or reaching across difference, in response to government or public hostility. As a substitute for the Yolngu ideal of 'two-ways, both-ways', which depends on a reciprocal relationship between invader and indigenous people not displayed by Darwin authorities, I developed what I believe is a more appropriate urban metaphor of merging traffic for the mostly unreciprocated attempts at articulation between fringe dwellers and the town.

In the next two chapters I placed fringe dwellers in the context of the debate between Basil Sansom and Peter Sutton. I included this discussion because the theories of both these anthropologists have been influential in the relationship between Darwin fringe dwellers and other Aboriginal groups, and the understanding of fringe dwellers by anthropologists. My examples of fringe dweller resistance to the state in 1996 to 2001 parallel the earlier and continuing struggle of the 'Wallaby Cross' people for their land at Knuckeys Lagoon. In reply to refutations by the media and Northern Territory politicians that all people in Darwin are treated equally, I argued that these assertions ignore the special circumstances of Aboriginal people and thus further disadvantage them, as my examples indicate.

In Chapter Seven, anthropological evidence that supports the 'traditional' Larrakia people with a 'neo-classical' interpretation of Aboriginal society is contrasted with descriptions of the 'fluidity' of the 'historical' fringe

dwellers. I suggested that this theoretical dichotomy has widened the growing gap between Aboriginal people who have moved onto Larrakia lands and previously shared the fringe camps with the traditional owners, and the Larrakia 'new tribe' who made a native title claim to Darwin during my fieldwork. On the ground, despite the notable exceptions I have given, the fringe dwellers now have limited contact with the mostly urban Larrakia people. My evidence further suggests that in the late 1990s, Aboriginal representative groups have failed to assist the fringe dwellers, who appear to have no recognised rights to support their wish to live as a community in the city of their choice.

The eighth chapter looked at more successful examples of 'merging', when fringe dwellers found allies amongst White and Black activists, alternative lifestylers and others in Darwin. I suggested that the possibilities for these relationships began in 1969 in Darwin, as young Australians and travellers, influenced by social changes taking place in North America, looked to 'new' models of social organisation. This was also the period when my involvement with Aboriginal fringe dwellers began. My examples suggested that while Aboriginal fringe dwellers claimed a uniquely Aboriginal connection to the land, they did not necessarily seek a closed domain. Instead, during my fieldwork there was a perceived commonality of purpose between Aboriginal fringe dwellers and activists in resistance to the NT Government and Darwin City Council. Finally, because music appeared to be central to shared understandings during my fieldwork, I discussed its role in the creation of spaces where 'merging' can occur.

In Chapter Nine, while recognising the centrality of alcohol in the fringe camps, I also examined its importance to the settler society in Darwin. I suggested that an analysis of the Beer Can Regatta provided insights into changes in the Darwin scene which help explain the creation, and continuation, of Aboriginal drinking camps. My analysis belongs to a 'political economy' approach advocated by Saggers and Gray (1998) which suggests that Aboriginal binge drinking is important to the Darwin economy. After describing elements of the 'grogging style' of fringe dwellers

today, I reviewed the ethnography of Aboriginal drinking. Based on my fieldwork and past experience, I attempted to account for the correlation between Aboriginal alcohol drinkers and a preparedness to actively resist Darwin authorities.

10.3 Persistence or resistance?

As Lattas (1993) stresses, there is not necessarily a dichotomy between Aboriginal cultural continuity, or persistence, and resistance. For example, Morris (1988, 1989) links Aboriginal resistance to the maintenance of a distinct domain. Clendinnen (1999:89-93) interprets Sansom's ethnography of cultural persistence, *The camp at Wallaby Cross*, as an example of Aboriginal resistance, while Trigger (1992:101) writes: 'Social life within the Aboriginal domain can be regarded as at least in part an arena of resistance to the colonial imperative of assimilating the colonised to the beliefs and practices of the colonising society'.

For Darwin fringe dwellers, cultural persistence is a form of resistance in an embattled arena which is expressed through connection to the land, religious practices, languages, songs and traditional social roles. Largely because of later contact times, the above behaviour enacted in an enclave of settled Australia is an everyday 'oppositional culture' which is not as reactive as the behaviour described by Cowlishaw (1988a) in rural towns of 'settled' Australia. However, the statement by Cowlishaw (1993:187-8) that 'cultural reproduction amongst Aborigines is *always* in a context of opposition' can be said to apply to the harassment I have described confronting 'illegal' fringe dwellers in Darwin.

My data suggests that everyday actions like sitting on the ground in groups, gathering 'bush tucker' or cooking on a fire are politicised by Aboriginal relocation onto contested land and the hostility of city authorities. Alternatively, the interest of other residents in the town draws attention to everyday practices which are seen as unusual in the city environment, like spearing fish or weaving a pandanus-leaf basket. Inviting the media or activists to urban ceremonies like the burning of Gojok's possessions at Lee

Point after his death (Plate 2) and the raising of an Aboriginal flag at Fish Camp (Plate 14) added a public and political dimension to these rituals. Other more private, and larger, cultural gatherings of fringe dwellers for mortuary ceremonies in Darwin (Plate 13; AAPA 1996; Day 1997a) do not usually make an explicit political statement. However, in my experience, non-Aboriginal people who are privileged to attend the combined rituals held in urban bush clearings or town camps to smoke and wash associates of the deceased are impressed with the strength and continuity of Aboriginal rituals in the face of public and government hostility to the Aboriginal presence.

When Sansom (1988a:152) criticises Rowley (1972a, 1972b, 1972c) and states that '[Aboriginal intransigence] is rooted not in rebellion but in the resilience of cultural practice', he suggests that the fringe dwellers maintain their domain on the outskirts of Darwin by conducting all their affairs in a uniquely, though changed, Aboriginal way. I have suggested that the cultural continuities which Sansom describes owe much to the cattle station backgrounds of most of his informants. I have also maintained that fringe dwellers order their society by selective Aboriginal customary ways, including traditional language, beliefs and social roles. Although I suggest that these practices are more influential in the camps where I conducted my fieldwork, these forms are not necessarily dichotomous to the 'fluidity' of Aboriginal social organisation which Sansom's processual analysis suggests is typical in northern Australia. For this reason, I have argued that Sutton's model of classic Aboriginal social structure has been disadvantageous to the fringe dwellers.

My analysis of Sansom's texts presents evidence that the people at 'Wallaby Cross' were more politically engaged than is apparent in his accounts. The open protests which I have described being made by people from 'Wallaby Cross', Fish Camp and Lee Point and other fringe dwellers indicate that these groups have a level of political awareness which satisfies Sansom's use of the term 'rebellion', cited in the previous paragraph.[1] My work also demonstrates that in particular circumstances, with outside assistance in

addition to the existing political awareness of fringe dwellers, everyday resistance can escalate into formal or active resistance, in the sense discussed by Berndt (1969:11):

> [P]ublic protest is one way through which much can be achieved - if negotiations break down, or overriding injustices are ignored or sidetracked by those who could do something about them. Public protest, in such circumstances, represents the only forum for the expression of free speech, for the presentation of a case.

My past activism suggests my choice for a thesis topic would present a difficulty in maintaining 'scientific disinterest'. With reference to Rose (1987), Scheper-Hughes (1991, 1995) and Bourgois (1995, 1996), I have argued that the position of the Lee Point and Fish Camp fringe dwellers in the 1990s and others in 2001, and my friendship with some of them over many years before my fieldwork, obliged me to become an active witness rather than a supposedly neutral observer. This role led to the involvement which I discussed in Chapters Three, Six and Seven, and my eventual arrest at Lee Point in May 1997.

Cowlishaw (1997b:101) argues that a technique of Australian anthropology (which this thesis attempts to avoid) has been to 'bracket off the domain of actual lived relations between white and black people'. Taking the 'political' view, Cowlishaw (1997b:111) states:

> At best the classical ethnographic accounts of specific Aboriginal societies were peripheral to the exercise of colonial power. At worst, they purveyed a traditionalism which could be seen as reinforcing primitivist evolutionary ideas while exploring the fascinating intricacies of certain aspects of Aboriginal social existence ... Only by turning our attention to the cultural borderlands of racial interaction can this failure be understood and overcome.[2]

In a seminal article from the 'cultural' side of the dichotomy, Langton (1981:20) criticises materialist analyses which 'can only explain the structural position of Aboriginal societies within the larger Australian sovereign state'. She (p.19) states: 'Culture is not a matter of this interface, of class relations or race relations'. Instead, she argues that urban Aboriginal 'society' and 'culture' (her quotes) must be seen as complete systems (p.19). I have given evidence of several fringe dweller groups' integrity as 'complete systems', while engaging in acts of 'merging' with an encompassing wider system. My analysis also suggests that any study proposing to represent the priorities of Aboriginal fringe dweller society is incomplete without an analysis of their political and structural position in relation to the wider society, and that the dichotomy suggested by Langton (1981) can therefore not be maintained.

In summary, fringe dwellers in Darwin do not appear to maintain the closed Aboriginal domain which Cowlishaw (1988a) and Sansom (1980a) describe respectively in Brindleton and Wallaby Cross. Darwin fringe dwellers are also more prepared to openly oppose policies which affect them than were the Aboriginal people at Brindleton who Cowlishaw says ordered their lives through an 'oppositional culture'. Traditional Aboriginal beliefs and social structures continue to order the lives of fringe dwellers in the camps where I conducted my research. That is, in my research suggests that the identifiable Aboriginal cultural continuities in the camps are not predominantly those described by Sansom (1980a).

My examples also suggest that resistance by the campers is expressed in more open, confident and engaged forms than the reactive everyday opposition which Cowlishaw describes amongst Aboriginal people in rural New South Wales.

In this thesis, I have asked: Do Darwin fringe dwellers order their lives in urban bushland camps through 'cultural continuities in a world of material change' (Sansom 1988b:159), or is it in opposition that the ongoing recreation of a distinct cultural heritage occurs (Cowlishaw 1988b:99; 1988a:243, 1993:188)? I have concluded that the most appropriate answer is, 'both and neither'. As they negotiate their lives in the City of Darwin, the campers blur

the dichotomy between cultural continuities and an oppositional culture, between a 'cultural' and a 'political' analysis, between transitive and intransitive resistance, between 'historical' and 'traditional' people and between 'fluid' and 'classic' Aboriginal social structure.

Basil Sansom's influential ethnography vividly described the lives of Aboriginal people living in poverty on the outskirts of Darwin in the 1970s. My fieldwork from 1996 to 2001 indicates that many Aboriginal people still live in small communities on sufferance on Crown land in Darwin where they are threatened with eviction as the city spreads.[3] As Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin, these small groups live within an enclave of 'settled' Australia, maintaining their 'illegal' camps as the successors of the camp at 'Wallaby Cross'.

Endnotes

[1] Sansom (1988a) was responding to Rowley's (1972a) reduction of Aboriginal people to 'class actors', whereby historical and economic factors are considered more important than cultural difference.

[2] See also Merlan (1998:4) and Cowlishaw (1999:4).

[3] In a section headed 'City and town dwellers', the final Woodward report states:

> 284. The necessity to set aside urban land for Aborigines will have two results. In the first place it will compel the specific inclusion of planning for Aborigines amongst other town planning requirements. Secondly, the bare Aboriginal lands will draw attention to housing needs whereas makeshift camps on Crown lands could be and have been, ignored.
>
> 285. I would hope that by 1976 there will be no Aboriginal groups in the Northern Territory, except those actually travelling, living on sufferance on Crown lands. By that time they should all be living on places they have chosen, where they have a recognised right to be, and plans should be well advanced for permanent camping facilities or community housing projects as required (Woodward 1974:52).