

CHAPTER ONE

Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin: cultural persistence or culture of resistance?

1.1 Introduction

In 1971 I was introduced to a few Larrakia people who claimed to be the traditional Aboriginal owners of the area where Darwin, the capital of the Northern Territory of Australia, now stands. When I first met them, the Larrakia group were living as fringe dwellers under sheets of corrugated iron in unserviced camps on vacant land in the Darwin suburbs. In that year, together with other Aboriginal groups who lived in similar camps around the city, the Larrakia fringe dwellers began an eight-year campaign for land and serviced housing in the city. For thirteen years, until I left Darwin in 1985, I documented the fringe dwellers' struggle in a newsletter of Aboriginal issues called *Bunji*.¹ I have drawn upon this experience to give diachronic depth to this thesis.

Between 1996 and 2001, as this thesis describes, the presence of unserviced camps of homeless Aboriginal people in urban bushland sites around Darwin remained a contentious issue. The preparedness of unhoused fringe dwellers to protest against their marginalisation in the city was again expressed during my fieldwork in the camps from 1996-8. In seeking an explanation for the continuing militancy of Darwin fringe dwellers over a period of thirty years, my thesis asks: Do Darwin fringe dwellers order their lives in the 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 (Cowlshaw 1988b:99; 1988a:243, 1993:188)? In brief, do Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin order their lives through cultural persistence or a culture of resistance? Equally as briefly, I suggest that the short

answer to my thesis question is 'both and neither', as I will explain in the following chapters.

I returned to Darwin in 1996 hoping to test whether the oppositional stance of past decades remained a feature of Aboriginal fringe camps in the contested sites around Darwin. As Glendinnen (1999:333) has said of the 'Wallaby Cross' fringe camp, they were 'a group of Aboriginal mavericks, conscientious objectors to the claims of white authority, who lived, at least for a time, a resolutely independent life on the edge of a potentially hostile white community'. From 1971 I knew the 'Wallaby Cross' people well, before and after Basil Sansom's acclaimed ethnography *The camp at Wallaby Cross: Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin* (Sansom 1980a). An intention of my study was to re-examine Sansom's vividly evocative descriptions of life in the camps, in the context of the political activism of the 'Wallaby Cross' people as I experienced it in the 1970s and 1980s.

Apart from ethnographies of Aboriginal fringe camps, theoretical approaches for a thesis representing the lives of Aboriginal people living on contested land in an Australian city are suggested by the literature on diaspora, rural immigration to towns, squatter settlements, articulation of modes of production, homelessness, urban nomads or indigenous identity in a changing world. Also the literature on 'Aboriginality' might contribute towards understanding Australian indigenous people who challenge boundaries. However, indigenous people deny that they are immigrants, squatters, nomads, or even homeless (see Dyck 1985:13). The unique Aboriginal connection to land can also be overlooked by the broader categories mentioned above.

The social and economic interconnections between fringe dwellers and the town suggest that a study confined to an analysis of a separate Aboriginal identity would not be adequate. A critique of 'the anthropological construction of natives' by Appadurai (1988:36-40) advocates the 'polythetic' approach used in much of the literature mentioned above, because study of 'family resemblances' resists the confinement of 'the native' (Appadurai 1988:46). Appadurai (1988:36)

decries ‘the anthropological construction of natives’ by the ‘boundedness of cultural units and the confinement of the varieties of human consciousness within these boundaries’. In the case of Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin, their move from their homelands into the city, where authorities harass them, suggests that a holistic and bounded cultural study would not represent the realities facing Aboriginal fringe dwellers in the city. Instead, what Marcus (1995) calls ‘a multi-sited’ study offers a means of incorporating the wider issues which impact upon fringe dwellers’ lives in Darwin.

In Chapter Four, my extensive critique of *The Camp at Wallaby Cross* and Sansom’s other texts, and my fieldwork experience, suggest that a more ‘political’ approach better represents the realities of fringe dwellers’ lives. Rather than concentrating on a specific site, a multi-sited study is able to examine the discourses with which fringe dwellers are engaged in a complex, interconnected environment.² By ‘following the conflict’, as suggested by Marcus (1995:110), a multi-sited study can trace the intersecting interests revealed by the resistance of the fringe dwellers and the opposition of the townspeople. As Ortner (1995:175) notes, resistance can be a useful category of study ‘because it highlights the presence and play of power in most forms of relationship and activity’.

Before examining these issues in more detail, in the next section I place my thesis in a theoretical, geographical, and historical context. I examine theories from Aboriginal studies that are relevant to my thesis, including the polarised ‘political’ and ‘cultural’ approaches, which are also reflected in arguments for the construction of Aboriginality-as-resistance or Aboriginality-as-persistence. Filling a perceived shortcoming in the Aboriginal studies literature, I then apply theories of peasant resistance to an analysis of fringe dwellers’ open and everyday opposition, observed before and during my fieldwork.

1.2 The influence of the Darwin region on anthropological theory

Aboriginal resistance has been ongoing since Darwin was surveyed in 1869 by armed men led by G W Goyder, the Protector of Aborigines and Surveyor General of South Australia, to satisfy speculators who had paid for unseen estates, and were growing impatient for results (James 1979; Wells 1995a:9). Goyder and his men completed the survey in record time, despite violent opposition from the local Larrakia people (Kerr 1971:146). Although few of the surveyed properties had been occupied by 1882, a recent native title judgment (see Devereux 1998; Strelein 1999) found that the land sales effectively dispossessed the Aboriginal landowners. With the establishment of a townsite, Aborigines were confined in their movements, their sacred sites were renamed and their land had become a commodity.

The slowness to settle northern Australia and the unsuitability of the land for agriculture offered some protection for Aboriginal people in the north. C D Rowley (1972b:x, 1972c:xiv) termed this vast sparsely populated area 'colonial Australia', or 'remote' Australia as it is more usually referred to today (see Map 4).³ Marcia Langton (1993b:12) notes, 'remote' Australia [is] where most of the tradition-oriented Aboriginal cultures are located'.⁴ In the 'settled' southern and eastern region of Rowley's continental divisions, the temperate climate and good soils where technologies of European agriculture could be applied, resulted in a more extensive dispossession of Aboriginal people (Rowley 1972b:4). In contrast, few Whites came to settle in remote or 'colonial' Australia (Rowley 1972b:14). While the boundary dividing the regions is 'an intellectual tool' (Rowley 1972b:20), I maintain that it remains useful in understanding the relationship between Aboriginal fringe dwellers and the non-Aboriginal settler population of Darwin.

In Chapter Nine I argue that as Darwin prospered prior to Northern Territory self-government in 1978, a more stable predominantly White population transformed the city into an embattled enclave of 'settled' Australia in the remote north. Contesting the status of Darwin as a securely settled region of Australia, as Rowley (1972b:16) predicted, Aboriginal people continued to move into northern towns and establish fringe camps on vacant land, 'mak[ing] more

obvious in towns the fact of a plural society'. I add that the opposition from within the towns that the campers attract suggests that the social plurality described by Rowley is unwelcome in Darwin, as an enclave of 'settled Australia'.

After Baldwin Spencer (1914:152) observed that the Larrakia tribe in Darwin had become 'too decadent to retain anything but vestiges of its old customs', the Darwin area had largely been ignored as a site for anthropological research. By 1970, forgotten by anthropologists and unrecognised by most of the general community, the Larrakia members of the local *danggalaba*, or crocodile, clan were living with people from allied language groups at an 'illegal' camp they call Kulaluk, behind the drive-in cinema in the northern suburbs (Map 3). Scattered around the town were unserviced camps of other language groups living in self-built shelters who recognised the Larrakia people as the local landowners.

The rapid spread of the Darwin suburbs in the boom years of the 1970s (ABS 1974:70) coincided with the increasing assertiveness of Darwin fringe dwellers, encouraged by the national movement for land rights which emanated from strikes and walk-offs by NT Aboriginal pastoral workers in the late 1960s (see Buchanan 1974; Duncan 1975). In 1971 the Darwin fringe campers formed a coalition, which they called 'Gwalwa Daraniki', or 'our land', and demanded ownership of their scattered urban bushland campsites.⁵ Their protests and occupation of the land continued until special purpose leases were granted in 1979 at Kulaluk (301.69 hectares), Railway Dam in the inner city (3.12 hectares) and Knuckeyes Lagoon at Berrimah (20.56 hectares). Despite government promises of more leases for Aboriginal town camps in Darwin, only one other lease has since been granted, twenty-four kilometres from the city centre.

In June 1972 the Federal Government in response to Aboriginal demands established the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission. The Commissioner heard submissions from the small number of Larrakia people at Kulaluk and their Darwin fringe dweller allies from other camps.⁶ In his findings, the

Commissioner, Mr Justice Woodward, at first used a narrow definition of Aboriginal claimants:

I was told that there are some 18 members of the [Larrakia] tribe now left. Later information suggests that fewer than this number can trace paternal descent from the Larrakia, but there are more who identify themselves as Larrakia because of maternal links (Woodward 1973:26).

However, Woodward (p.26) left his findings open by welcoming further submissions on 'the question of principles involved'.

Following the release of the Woodward's first report, a violent Aboriginal protest erupted at Kulaluk.⁷ Arguing for a politically involved approach, I editorialised in the Aboriginal newsletter *Bunji* (January 1978): 'It is not justice to almost wipe out a tribe and then judge them by anthropology books - books that tell only a small part of Aboriginal history' (reprinted in Day 1978:3). Subsequently, the struggle of the Larrakia and other Darwin fringe dwellers, including my role as secretary and White broker, was incorporated into Woodward's final report. The Commissioner wrote:

I have no doubt that the Larrakia people were the traditional owners of what is now the whole Darwin area. Some of the survivors, together with a few other Aborigines have formed an organization calling itself Gwalwa Daraniki. The secretary of this organization, a white man, has achieved remarkable results in obtaining press coverage and other forms of publicity for the claims of this group. In the result, Kulaluk has become something of a symbol of the stand which Aborigines, with help and guidance from many sources, are now making against the past tendency to put their interests last in any consideration of land usage (Woodward 1974:53).⁸

Since the success of the Kulaluk claim and the passing of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act, 1976* and the *Native Title Act, 1993*, there has been a remarkable

revitalisation of the Larrakia people into a language group, or 'nation' as they call themselves, which was said to have over 700 members, mostly living in the urban community (Walsh 1996:101; see also Wei 1990; Sutton 1998). Their numbers had grown to over 1500 members by 1999 (Risk 1999:1). Both Walsh (1996) and Povinelli (1993a:55-57) discuss the relationship between the Larrakia revival and extensive anthropological research that has facilitated the claims of the Larrakia and other Aboriginal people in the region. Undoubtedly, the well-publicised activism of a small group of Larrakia fringe dwellers and their allies in the 1970s also had some influence on the growing assertion of Larrakia identity.⁹

Researchers in Darwin argue for the acceptance of process and change in Aboriginal societies of the Darwin area (Sansom 1980a, 1981a, 1988a, 1988b, 1999; Brandl 1983; Brandl and Walsh 1985; Layton 1986; Povinelli 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1995a), while also proposing appropriate definitions of Aboriginal social structure and connection to the land which can be recognised by Australian legal systems (see Brandl et al 1979; Sansom 1980b, 1980c, 1982b, 1985; Walsh 1989a, 1989b; Povinelli 1995b; Rose 1995; Sutton 1995a, 1995b, 1998, 1999b). As Merlan (1997:5) points out, the Larrakia Kenbi claim is amongst those Aboriginal land claims which suggest: 'broad socio-territorial identities [have] involved people whose concepts of attachment to country [is] at less socially inclusive levels and finer geographic scale [as a result of] historical contingency and change'. From another approach, Kerin Coulehan (1995a) documents Aboriginal systems of governance that extend to Yolngu women and children who live in Darwin.

In 1978 the NT Government increased the size of the Darwin urban area to about three times the size of Greater London (Parsons 1998:15). All the Aboriginal claim to vacant Crown land on the Cox Peninsula, across the harbour from the city, was included within the new boundaries and therefore could not be claimed under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act, 1976*, which excludes claims to land in towns (see Olney 1991:12; Blowes 1992). Subsequently, the Larrakia people won a High Court appeal against the government action.

During my fieldwork, as I will later describe, the Larrakia people also registered a native title claim over the city (see Carey and Collinge 1997). However, the tribe had received no more than token recognition as traditional owners of the Darwin area prior to the December 2000 findings by the Aboriginal Land Commissioner on the Kenbi Land Claim to the Cox Peninsula and nearby islands.

Although most of the above studies incorporate into Aboriginal social systems some of the vast changes that have occurred in the Darwin region, I suggest that the writers continue to construct what Appadurai (1988:40) terms 'metonymic prisons for particular places (such that the natives of that place are inextricably confined by them)'. The construction of 'the survivor native' is understandable, in response to land rights legislation and past stereotypes of urban Aboriginal people; however, I suggest that the above brief 'genealogy' of descriptions of Aboriginal cultural continuity, or persistence, in the Darwin region reveals the exclusion, or marginalisation, of the prolonged resistance made by many Aboriginal occupants of the region.

A rare, though stifled, voice of opposition appears in a brief excerpt from the transcripts of the Kenbi land claim hearing that is cited by Povinelli (1993a:247):

June Mills: ...the majority of people here would know that we are Larrakia. The only ones that would not know would be the white people, and actually it is quite offensive that us black Larrakia people who have lived in - in the Darwin area, I find it - I find it extremely offensive - that we have to get up here now, in front of all you people, and to try to justify who we are and how we got to be here and do we know this and do we know that...

His Honour: Mr Parsons, I think the - if you could pursue - the witness has made a point and it is not going to be a political meeting, and there is no...

June Mills: No, but I want this down as evidence, because this is why I...

His Honour: Well, just - just - just take it easy. You have made your point, and we better get on to something relevant.

Compounding the silencing of Aboriginal oppositional voices, fringe dwellers have been excluded from the land claim process. As I discuss in Chapter Seven, the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act, 1976* excludes claims based on needs and the *Native Title Act, 1993* does not appear to support the claims of fringe dwellers in Darwin. In spite of their omission from these laws, in my experience most fringe dwellers resist containment and claim that they assert Aboriginal rights in their 'illegal' camps on vacant Darwin bushland.

Edmunds (1995:9) views town camps as 'the fundamental point of Aboriginal resistance to European-Australian dominance'. As sites of 'action and change', the camps stand for the recognition of '[Aboriginal] needs, their definitions of community and of the ways in which these definitions are derived from their particular relationship to country' (Edmunds 1995:9). These are issues I examine in this thesis. More usually, the seemingly displaced location of the camps, their reputation as a 'war zone' (see Merlan 1995:165; Glendinnen 1999:92) and the apparent acculturation of the residents has deterred anthropological fieldworkers. Where fringe camps have been the subjects of ethnographies (Sansom 1980a; Collmann 1988), their political context has been seen as secondary to a holistic study.

1.3 A multi-sited study

Bolton (2000:2) defines a single-sited study as 'concentrated participatory research among a defined group of people who are co-residents'. According to Bolton (2000:2), a multi-sited study requires a 'methodological shift ... dependent on ... the identification of a field of sociality as a subject, rather than the place where those relationships are worked out'. In my assessment, a multi-

sited study as proposed by Marcus (1995:110) tends to include the campers in town *space*, rather than being complicit in the confinement of fringe dwellers to a bounded *place*, which Appadurai (1988) suggests may occur figuratively and literally in a single-sited study. Although Sansom's analysis is an example of a potentially multi-sited study of people who are 'no longer exclusively located' (Sansom 1980a:5), in his ethnography the fringe dwellers are selectively bounded within a 'segregated social field' (Sansom 1981a:275) and a region (Sansom 1980a:iii) from which 'countrymen' are recruited into a 'hinterland Aboriginal community' (see Sansom 1985:84-87).

I claim that in the 1990s the Darwin fringe dwellers struggle for *space* where they can live, knowing that their location in a specific *place* is usually decided by city power structures that are inaccessible to the campers. However, the physical space contested by fringe dwellers differs from the type of Aboriginal domain that Trigger (1986:114) argues can 'never be permanently fixed by the location itself'. In Darwin, a shifting spatial domain is created by Aboriginal card players or drinkers in a public park. In contrast, the fringe dwellers I describe struggle for space with security of tenure. Rather than the passive resistance expressed within an Aboriginal domain, as described by Trigger (1992), the fringe dwellers openly challenge Darwin authorities, as my fieldwork illustrates.

Marcus (1995:100) points out that fieldwork, which is always potentially multi-sited, bounds the object of study to a single site by the selection of what to include. Even in a multi-sited study, through 'constructivism' (see Marcus 1995:105), it is the ethnographer 'who provides the only site of wholeness and continuity in the face of a fragmented, disjointed array of sites of incommensurable scales' (Weiner 2000:77). As the field widens, it tests the limits of ethnography and produces the 'anxiety' of losing the perspective of the subaltern (Marcus 1995:95). In addition, 'something of the mystique and reality of conventional fieldwork is lost' (Marcus 1995:100), including claims of being a holistic representation (see Marcus 1995:99). However, the evidence I present suggests that a multi-sited study better represents the priorities of the Darwin fringe dwellers.

According to my thesis, a failure to engage with the nature of power relations between fringe dwellers, the practice of anthropology, the public, other Aboriginal groups, legal institutions, the media and Local and Territory Government would be a failure to represent the 'perspective of the subaltern'. Marcus (1995:100) notes: 'what is not lost but remains essential to multi-sited research is the function of translation from one cultural idiom or language to another'. If the conflict in this case is a result of the intersection of powerful discourses with the aspirations of the fringe dwellers, the value of multi-sited research remains in the anthropologist's role of translation across cultures. This is made more complex in a multi-sited study because 'innocent "identity" politics' is less likely to be convincing (Marcus 1995:101) as the connections between sites are revealed. In the world of today, 'the very status of "cultural difference" as anthropological subject matter is rendered problematic' (Weiner 1997:87).

1.4 Cultural continuities or a culture of opposition?

In this section, I examine the literature that pertains to the dichotomies implied by my thesis question. The debates which I cite reveal the weaknesses and strengths of two differing approaches to ethnography which Marcus (1986:178) describes as, 'staging culture as an integral spatio-temporal isolate' and viewing 'culture as a product of struggle'. For example, in defending his descriptions of uniquely Aboriginal cultural continuities, Sansom (1984a:40) asks if apparent cultural accommodation, or 'adaptations', in Australia's indigenous minority must always be viewed as reactive? His view contrasts with the emphatic claim by Cowlshaw (1993:187-188): 'Cultural reproduction amongst Aborigines in Australia today *always* occurs in a context of opposition, official and unofficial, in Arnhem Land as well as Bourke'.

Although these two ethnographers foreground cultural forms in an Aboriginal domain, Cowlshaw (1986:10) includes within contemporary Aboriginal culture all Aboriginal resistance, 'as creative response to the conditions of existence experienced by a group'. She is critical of anthropology that interprets culture as

'exotic practices' (p.10). Similarly, Merlan (1998:169) claims Sansom (1980a) privileges an 'alternative reality' in the fringe camps. In Chapter Four, I present evidence that suggests that the uniqueness of 'Wallaby Cross' owes much to the fringe dwellers' cattle station backgrounds and their history of struggle for space in Darwin.

Sansom's (1980a) description of Darwin fringe dwellers, as though they are a 'self-managing entity in classic field work style' (Cowlshaw 1986:9), contrasts with Cowlshaw's (1993:184) view that 'one cannot represent Aborigines without representing the dialectical relations of domination'. Where culture is identified in an inclusive sense, as Cowlshaw proposes: 'The analysis of culture groups then depends more on the nature of the boundaries and relations between culture groups than on their defining characteristics' (Cowlshaw 1988b:89).

Cowlshaw (1988a:232, 1993:186, 1994:80) uses the term 'oppositional culture' to describe the 'active creation and protection of [an Aboriginal] arena of meaning in an embattled situation' (Cowlshaw 1988b:97). An oppositional culture subverts and challenges dominant systems of meaning (Cowlshaw 1993:185) through everyday acts of resistance, like drinking and socially disruptive behaviour. According to Cowlshaw (1993:187): 'The political aspect of mundane Aboriginal culture need not be due to any intention to be "political". Cultural expression can develop a sharp political edge because of the white response'. Indeed, Jack Davis the Aboriginal author has commented that, 'To be Aboriginal in Australia is to be political' (Shoemaker 1994:32). However, I will argue that fringe camps in Darwin exhibit a more active resistance to authority than Cowlshaw noted at Brindleton, where Aboriginal people are reluctant to directly challenge the Whites who rule the town (Cowlshaw 1988a:226).

In later chapters I suggest that the Darwin fringe dwellers' domain is generally marked more by a distinctive 'lived in' traditional culture and language than a reactive culture of opposition. Neither does the maintenance of Aboriginal language and beliefs amongst the Burarra fringe dwellers appear to have been

the crucial element of defence against missionary intrusion observed by Tonkinson (1974:67) and Trigger (1992:126) at Jigalong and Doomadgee Missions. Darwin fringe dwellers from central Arnhem Land, to the east (Map 2), have not experienced the history of dispossession experienced by both the Aboriginal residents of Brindleton in 'settled' Australia and the cattle station workers at 'Wallaby Cross' or the indoctrination of fundamentalist missions like Doomadgee and Jigalong.¹⁰

Contributing to the debate, Trigger (1997a:86) suggests: "continuity" is a problematic notion unless it is understood in the context of an ongoing process of reconstruction of culture and identity through an intensive history of relations with the broader Australian society'. In Aboriginal communities like Doomadgee, in Queensland: 'A researcher ... would have to be particularly romantic to conclude that everyday life reproduces, in any direct fashion, the pre-colonial culture of the region' (Trigger 1997a:101). Although some readers of Trigger's (1992) ethnography come to a different conclusion (see Turner 1993:146),¹¹ Trigger's description contrasts with my experience of the maintenance of traditions and language amongst the Aboriginal people in the Darwin fringe camps, where many groups have been spared the 'wild times' of the pastoral regions (see Trigger 1992:17-37).

Despite Trigger's (1986, 1988a, 1992) and Cowlshaw's (1988b:97) shared concept of a closed Aboriginal domain as a site of resistance against intrusion by the dominant society, Trigger differs with Cowlshaw's 'avowedly materialist analysis' (Trigger 1990:237). He emphasises the 'enmeshing' of Aboriginal culture with the historical experiences and commodities of colonialism (Trigger 1992:223, 1994:33, 1997a:101). That is, Trigger places more importance on Aboriginal accommodation within the intruding system (see Trigger 1988a). His statement, that there are major 'discontinuities' in Aboriginal tradition since precolonial times (Trigger 1997:88; see also Merlan 1998:168), implies a dichotomy between 'traditional' and 'introduced' cultural forms (see also Trigger 1992:102), which is less evident in either Cowlshaw's or Sansom's analyses.

In everyday affairs, Cowlshaw (1993:187) stresses that: 'Cultural expression can often develop a sharp political edge because of the white response'. Cowlshaw (1993:188) adds:

The fact that these remote communities are regularly being taught to fit in with alien practices means that ceremonial life, painting, language use, as well as everyday practices are marked as distinctively Aboriginal rather than as normal.

For example, fringe dwellers value their closeness to the soil, on which most of them sleep, as confirmation of their Aboriginality. Their lifestyle demonstrates that they belong to the land. As one man told me, 'My mother put me on the ground. My mattress [was] paperbark - not bed like Whiteman'. In response to authorities that claim that the campers do not belong in the city, the campers assert their identity as indigenous people. However, being harassed from place to place 'like dingo, like wallaby', as they told me, suggests to fringe dwellers that they are not regarded as human.

The elements of Aboriginality-as-persistence listed by Keeffe (1988:68, 1992:46) are: 'a belief in the persistence of an inherently unique identity; the continuity of cultural practices that originate in traditional Aboriginal culture; the common sharing of these by all Aboriginal people in Australia'. These are ingredients of the politicised public ethnicity also referred to as 'the politics of culture' that Hollinsworth (1992b:169) distinguishes from the 'private ethnicity', which is more typical of the Darwin camps. In this thesis I give examples suggesting that Aboriginal persistence is more likely to be exploited in the public realm by non-Aboriginal tourism and festival organisations, which otherwise oppose or do not appear to support fringe dwellers' complaints. More often, the lifestyle of 'bush people', as fringe dwellers sometimes call themselves, is used by opponents as a reason for excluding them from the town.

Where persistence of Aboriginal culture and social structure are required in claims under Australian land rights laws, the fringe dwellers are excluded. Because of this exclusion, the 'mimetic' or imitative representation of Aboriginality that Merlan (1998:150) believes is a result of land claims around Katherine, is not as applicable to Darwin fringe dwellers.¹² The following observation by Keeffe (1988:79) is therefore less likely to apply to fringe dwellers than it does to other Aboriginal people:

Aboriginality-as-persistence becomes equated with 'primordial ties', and the relationship between Aborigines and the larger social system within which they are encapsulated and by which they are dominated is eliminated from analysis.

1.5 The 'political' and the 'cultural'

Jones and Hill-Burnett (1982:223) label 'the two major competing ethnic ideologies as the "cultural" and the "political" ideology'. They continue:

These polar positions, we claim, are the basic symbols competing to form the basis of group-wide identity. Indeed, it seems that the history of the relationship between Aboriginal political demands and the government's response had been an attempt to reduce the full scope of these demands ... to the more limited demand of the rights of Aboriginals to retain their racial and cultural heritage.¹³

The analysis by Jones and Hill-Burnett appears to be applicable to the two anthropological approaches typified in my thesis question. That is, a bounded study of a culture portrayed as complete in itself is less likely to examine the issues which daily confront Aboriginal people, particularly fringe dwellers. These issues, which are often the material priorities of the fringe dwellers, are more likely to be examined in a study emphasising the interface of Aboriginal people and the dominant socio-economic system.

Because fringe dwellers' demands include recognition of their cultural rights to live as a community, their fight for space in the towns appears to represent an intersection of discourses of equal rights with discourses of identity politics. Prior to 1967, Aboriginal activists claimed an equal humanity as citizens of Australia (Stokes 1997:162; see also McGinness 1991:25). Stokes (p.162) adds: 'If there was any general Aboriginal identity, it was located within a shared history of oppression'. In that period, activists, unionists, and others identified with elements of Aboriginality-as-resistance, as again occurred in the fringe dweller protests during my fieldwork.

After 1967 in Australia, there was a shift towards emphasising the uniqueness of Aboriginality (Stokes 1997:164). Frank Hardy (1968) witnessed the changing paradigm as the Gurindji strikers widened their demands for equal pay to include claims for sacred land. As Langton (1981:19) writes:

[W]hen paternalistic restrictions and the stigma of Aboriginality began to lift in the mid-sixties, many Aboriginal groups, both in and out of the cities gained the freedom to express their own terms and idioms... By the later sixties, a series of successes brought Aborigines to the point of demanding equal but different access to material wealth and social, legal and political status.

My research suggests that the dichotomy between equal rights (expressed as resistance) and cultural rights (expressed as persistence) cannot be sustained in an analysis of the struggle by fringe dwellers for space in Darwin.

1.6 Transitive and intransitive resistance

Scott (1989:4) argues that studies of resistance have concentrated on formal protest such as 'petitions, rallies, peaceful marches, protest voting, strikes, and boycotts'. Scott (21-2) argues that everyday forms of resistance have not been seen as political. He states, 'if class domination is a process of systematic appropriation, then the measures devised to thwart that appropriation

constitute a form of resistance' (p.22). These issues are reflected in debates on Aboriginal resistance.

According to Rowse (1993b), there are two dimensions of Aboriginal resistance. The Dhan-Gadi people, as described by Morris (1988, 1989), use intransitive resistance 'in the sense ... of actions focused primarily among those doing the resisting' (Rowse 1993b:273). Similarly, the preference of fringe dwellers to live as a group in the town, barefooted, speaking their own languages and using open fires for cooking, are examples of this form of resistance. In contrast, transitive resistance is directed outwards and challenges the encroaching actions of others. Examples from my fieldwork are the refusal to pay fines for sleeping in a public place and continuing to camp illegally on vacant Crown land. Elsewhere, Rowse (1990:189) questions the effectiveness of the intransitive Aboriginal opposition described by Cowlshaw by asking, 'In what sense is the "oppositional culture" articulated as **political** interest?'

In response to Rowse's privileging of organised resistance over everyday intransitive resistance, Lattas (1993:244) states: 'Rowse de-politicises the oppositional culture of Aborigines by equating politics with formal institutionalised political processes'. Lattas (1993:243) adds that the high arrest rate for Aboriginal people points to 'a sense of moral panic in the white community'. For example, in Darwin Aboriginal 'antisocial behaviour' is a regular Local Government and Territory election issue (Schulz 1996; *NT News* April 30, 1996, April 6, 2000; see also Collmann 1988:51; Ween 1997:26).

Cowlshaw (1993:193) states that an oppositional culture is often the only alternative for Aboriginal people: 'To be heard by the white institutions [politically active Aboriginal people] must employ the language, metaphors and moral stance that are often not known, rarely accepted and certainly not the *lingua franca* of the black community'. However, Dyck (1985:14) notes changes that have occurred:

The traditional means of opposition undertaken by indigenous communities that have been dominated by colonial powers were indirect, symbolic and commonly expressed in terms which did not provoke a punitive response from governments ... In contrast the opposition tactics of today are open and, and often as not, decidedly provocative. The development of political organizations, the issuing of legal challenges, and the use of the mass media are all means by which indigenous spokesmen can appeal directly to governments and the public.

In this thesis I give examples that indicate that intransitive, hidden or everyday oppositional culture may quickly transform into open, formal or transitive resistance. My research also suggests that there is a political awareness behind fringe dwellers' everyday actions that blurs the distinction between transitive and intransitive opposition.

Although Keeffe (1988:72) includes elements of an oppositional culture, including school truancy, inattention and 'cheeky behaviour', Hollinsworth (1992b:169) and Keeffe (1988, 1992) generally refer to Aboriginal resistance as explicit public forms of 'transitive' action. Keeffe (1988:73, 1992:102) claims that Aboriginality-as-resistance has the advantages of being: interactive; conscious; dynamic; modern and political, in contrast to the limiting effect of a reliance on a unique cultural identity, as in Aboriginality-as-persistence. Resistance is also claimed by Keeffe (1988:73) as being: forward looking; does not reify culture; uses a universalistic language; and is inclusive in recognising non-Aboriginal support. However, the claim by Hollinsworth (1992a:149) that young, urban and Westernised Aborigines can identify more easily with Aboriginality-as-resistance does not appear to be as applicable today, as Chapter Seven indicates. Otherwise my research suggests that the features of resistance, listed above, characterise fringe dweller resistance.

Although Sansom (1995:276) has more recently given one vignette of fringe dweller protest, in *The camp at Wallaby Cross* (Sansom 1980a) there is no example of open resistance and little indication of who or what the 'mob' would be

opposing. Instead, at 'Wallaby Cross' Sansom (1980a) describes a persistence of Aboriginal ways that can be interpreted as a form of everyday resistance (see Glendinnen 1999). Elsewhere, Sansom (1982b:137) analyses the 'limited and constricted vision' within an Aboriginal commonality based on the cultural continuities of 'bordered communities' (Sansom 1982b:136). His argument is for cultural interpretations of Aboriginal oppositional behaviour, rather than interpretations rendered over 'to a Western world of discourse' (see Sansom 1985:40, 1988a:148). In contrast, in Chapter Four I give many examples of more open, consciously political resistance by the 'Wallaby Cross' mob.

1.7 The politics of culture

Sansom (1984a:41) interprets the 'politics of culture' as Aboriginal demands 'that value be allocated to their values', which he claims are maintained by Aboriginal people in a changing world. More commonly, the expression 'politics of culture' refers to a dialectic with the wider society that Trigger (1997b:118) describes as 'the politics of indigenism'. Trigger (1998a:155) demonstrates how 'identity politics has disrupted established [Australian] ideologies of civic unity and moral solidarity'. In contrast, Tonkinson (1999:137) argues that Aboriginal 'tradition' (his quotes) has intellectual and emotional appeal as a political and economic resource to a growing Aboriginal middle class, and as a component of an Australian national identity.

Tonkinson (p.137) distinguishes the persistence of the 'lived in reality' of Aboriginal tradition in remote Australian communities from the use of Aboriginal 'tradition' in identity construction, which requires 'a very much higher level of self-consciousness and objectification of the past and of culture than in remote Aboriginal Australia' (Tonkinson p.139).¹⁴ During my fieldwork between 1996 and 2001, the fringe dwellers often defended their right to camp in Darwin as a valued element of Aboriginal identity (see Illustration 5 and Section 5.11 of this thesis). My observations suggest that their argument was based on the 'lived in reality' of the fringe dwellers, rather than a construction of Aboriginality.

According to Tonkinson (1998:302), 'the dominant representations in Aboriginal rhetoric appear to be moving from a defensive or reactive tone to one that is more culture-centred, emphasising commonalities, continuity and survival'. In this 'more positive' and 'less confronting' self-representation, '[discourses of resistance] are couched less in direct opposition to white hegemony and historical abuses and more in terms of survival and the strength of Aboriginal culture as proof of successful resistance' (Tonkinson 1998:302; see also Tonkinson and Tonkinson 1998:13; Tonkinson 1999:137). Expressions of fringe dweller resistance appear to encompass both discourses.

1.8 Essentialism

Essentialism, which is described as '[I]mputing essences, fixed and necessary characteristics, to a category of people' (Cowlshaw 1993:187), is a debated topic in the anthropology of Aboriginality.¹⁵ Ironically the concept of an essential Aboriginal identity has its origins in the invasion of the continent in 1788. Langton (1993b:32) states: 'Before Cook and Phillip, there was no "Aboriginality" in the sense that is meant today' (see also Tonkinson 1990:191; Attwood 1992b, 1996a:3; Tonkinson and Tonkinson 1998:12; Tonkinson 1998:294). According to Stokes (1997:158) and Tonkinson and Tonkinson (1998:12), by categorising Aborigines as the 'primitive other', non-Aboriginal people asserted their superiority while rationalising dispossession. After 1972, the state began to 'rehabilitate' Aboriginality through special structures formed to stabilise and integrate Aboriginal political activity (see Jones and Hill-Burnett 1982:224; Beckett 1988:17).

Morris (1985:87) defines essentialism as 'the assertion that certain social relations are governed by some inevitable natural causality, independent of historical contextualisation'. Similarly, Hollinsworth (1992a:147) comments:

[T]he discourse of cultural continuity (or persistence) as an essentialist and universal commonality is typically predicated on some genetic or biological mechanism operating despite the vagaries of history and diverse backgrounds evident in contemporary Aboriginal communities.

According to Hollinsworth (1992b:169), his critique of Aboriginality-as-persistence questions 'the effectiveness of particular essentialised and universalistic discursive strategies in Australian cultural politics'. Hollinsworth (1992a:147) suggests that an assumption of an Aboriginal essence tends to isolate or ignore outside influences. In this way, I suggest that studies based on essentialist theories differ from those studies that examine the infrastructure influencing cultural superstructures.

If Morton (1998:375) is correct in claiming that to identify the key characteristics of something is to essentialise it, then it is not surprising that accusations of essentialism have often been made in the anthropological literature. Although Cowlshaw (1988a:279) directs her criticism against concepts that view Aboriginal culture as 'unchanging and exotic', others (Rowse 1990:190; Hollinsworth 1992a:148; Morton 1998:360) accuse Cowlshaw of 'political essentialism' for her discounting of 'interstitial' Aboriginal people who are not oppositional (see Cowlshaw 1988a:233, 253).¹⁶ Similarly, Morton (1998:361) states:

Surely, if an older anthropology contributed to the idea that Aborigines in 'settled' Australia had lost their culture simply by overwhelmingly emphasising (and therefore authorising) the idea of the traditional black, a newer anthropology overwhelmingly emphasising opposition contributes equally to the idea that those persons whom Aboriginal people sometimes refer to as [assimilated] have lost their history.

As I argue in a later chapter, the 'newer anthropology', to which Morton (1998:361) refers has been overtaken by a return to 'older', or 'neo-classic' forms in native title claims, under laws which may judge that fringe dwellers have no claims or that people like June Mills, who defended her right to identify as Larrakia, have 'lost their culture'. Or, as Wolfe (1994:122) claims:

The fundamental political consequence of the specifications attaching to traditional connection [in the *Native Title Act*], like its predecessor, traditional ownership, is that they shift the burden of history from the fact of expropriation to the character of the expropriated.

Lattas (1992:162, 1993:249) believes that Aboriginal people, in claims of 'persistence', legitimately adopt an essentialist view of themselves as a form of resistance. This point is also conceded by Keeffe (1988:77, 1992:90) and Hollinsworth (1992a:149, 1992b:170) in their essays expounding the advantages of Aboriginality-as-resistance over persistence. Perhaps more appropriately, Tonkinson (1999:134) suggests that resistance and persistence are 'analytically separable yet closely intertwined'.

With the notable exception perhaps of Sansom, outside observers do not usually view fringe dwellers as models of the persistence of Aboriginal traditions. Aboriginal town residents who have achieved a degree of acceptance in the dominant society (see Fink 1957:103) mostly view the fringe dwellers' drinking behaviour as an embarrassment. As letters to the Darwin press suggest, the lifestyle in the camps is more usually equated with a failure to adapt to the standards of White-dominated towns, rather than as opposition. An observation by Keeffe (1988:78), on education but applicable to this study, suggests an explanation for the failure to recognise fringe dweller resistance:

Aboriginality is being condensed into a form that can be incorporated into the dominant cultural tradition. The elements of Aboriginality that are resistant or oppositional are sanctioned and constrained, edited from the formal curriculum and denied the support of state resources.

In a study of a Central Australian Aboriginal employment program, Rowse (1993b:283) suggests an alternative to giving an 'ethnic personality' to resistance:

Now that Aboriginal people occupy positions of power at all levels of the administration of 'Aboriginal affairs', the structural 'frontier' that divides

the central apparatus of the state from its local capillaries may be a more significant topic for our study than the (increasingly abstract) 'frontier' which is said to divide Aboriginal from non-Aboriginal people.

Attwood (1992a:159) suggests that an alternative model for the construction of Aboriginality is 'Aboriginality as history'. Keeffe (1992:142) stresses the importance of Aboriginal oral history in constructing a 'community of memory', in resistance to what Stanner (1969:18) termed 'the great Australian silence'. By using history to construct space for a people otherwise marginalised, there is also the potential for Aboriginal people and other Australians to perceive that their pasts and presents are not necessarily opposed, but often shared (see Attwood 1992a:159, 1992b:xvi).

The fringe dwellers use their historical memory to defend their right to be in Darwin. Older campers often told me of their experiences walking to Darwin from Arnhem Land in the 1950s. An example of history conveniently 'forgotten' in Darwin public memory, but remembered by Darwin Aboriginal people in the camps, is the Aboriginal burial site at Mindil Beach that was exposed by earthworks (see *Bunji* May 1981). A Larrakia elder told Sean Heffernan (1996): 'That's where they dug all the people who were buried there. They dug [my sister] out too'.

I find that C D Rowley's arguments are relevant to the dichotomies of persistence and resistance. Attwood (1992a:159) also acknowledges the importance Rowley (1972c:8) places on history in understanding the Aboriginal predicament. According to Rowse (1993a:30), Rowley found anthropology to be 'redundant in its ahistorical concern with "cultural predispositions", and potentially apologist in its analytical promotion of "race" and "culture" over the historical structures of colonialism itself'. Rowse (1993a:30) cites Rowley (1972a:173):

If from their many origins there are indeed some cultural predispositions, as there may well be, it is not necessary to postulate

these as the *cause* of Aboriginal actions and attitudes; these may be adequately accounted for by historical and economic factors and by social factors arising from the relationship of the group with government and with non-Aboriginal society.

Despite Sansom's (1988a:150) critical assessment of Rowley's texts for being 'determinedly culture free' (discussed in a Chapter Four), according to Cowlshaw (1992:26) it was the 'encyclopaedic study of Aborigines in Australian society' by Charles Rowley (1972a, 1972b, 1972c, 1978) which heralded major changes in Aboriginal studies (see also Hamilton 1995). Inglis (1994:74) describes Rowley's focus on contacts between Aborigines and non-Aborigines as a break with anthropological studies that Inglis (1994:77) says suffer from 'theoretical myopia' by 'de-emphasizing both the role of the state and the resistance of Aborigines to colonial (and post-colonial) oppression'.

The separation of studies of 'traditional Aborigines' from racial, political or policy considerations is traced by Cowlshaw (1992:22) to the 1940s and 1950s when 'the anger and energy of students who were concerned about the position of Aborigines was deflected into other disciplines, or away from the academic arena altogether'. Today there is a wealth of historical texts on the Aboriginal protest movement (see Hardy 1968; Palmer and McKenna 1978; Lippmann 1981; Bandler 1989; Hawke and Gallagher 1989), including reinterpretations of early Aboriginal resistance (Reynolds 1982, 1995; Broome 1982). Other studies examine Aboriginal resistance to institutionalisation (Tonkinson 1974; Morris 1989; Trigger 1992; Rowse 1993a, 1998). However, only passing reference is made in earlier anthropological literature to the formal, organised protests that have influenced public and political opinion (Maddock 1972:15; Berndt and Berndt 1992:525).

More recently, anthropological debates on Aboriginal resistance centre on everyday, informal forms of opposition to assimilation (Toussaint 1987, 1992; Cowlshaw 1990, 1988a, 1988b, 1993, 1994; Rowse 1990, 1993b; Hollinsworth 1992a, 1992b; Attwood 1992a; Lattas 1992, 1993). Otherwise, when Aboriginal

protest is mentioned in the anthropological literature (Trigger 1997:84; Beckett 1988:16; Keeffe 1988:71, 1992:140; Tonkinson 1998:301), it is included to illustrate the functional role of protest in identity formation, or ethnogenesis (see Jones and Hill-Burnett 1982; Tonkinson 1990; Stokes 1997). A rare exception is an early analysis of Aboriginal protest by Ronald Berndt in a paper to the Adelaide ANZAAS Congress (Berndt 1969).¹⁷

1.9 Why do fringe dwellers resist?

Abu-Lughod (1990:41) notes that studies of resistance widen the definition of the political. She paraphrases Foucault (1978:95), to state: 'Where there is resistance, there is power'. Abu-Lughod (1990:53) concludes:

[I]t seems to me that we respect everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of the resisters but by letting their practices teach us about the complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power.

In this thesis I examine fringe dweller resistance in the framework of Rowley's division of Australia into 'settled' and 'colonial' regions and the tension where these regions intersect. In this section, I more specifically examine why Aboriginal groups living without land tenure in fringe camps around 'settled' Darwin are often more prepared than other Aboriginal groups to participate in open resistance. Later chapters of this thesis give examples from my fieldwork between 1996 and 2001 and of fringe dweller protest in the 1970s and 1980s that suggest a political dimension to fringe camps not shared by other urban Aboriginal groups.¹⁸

During fourteen years involvement as a political activist and personal friend of fringe dwellers in Darwin I observed that fringe dwellers like those at 'Wallaby Cross' and Kulaluk were notably prepared to take part in open protest despite outside pressure from police and more conservative Aboriginal people against their activities. Their living conditions were inadequate and they had no

security of tenure, which resulted in a vulnerability to prosecution; however, there appeared to be other factors that motivated their opposition.

It was often suggested by the public and in the media that I was instigating this unrest (see Gilbert 1977:221; *Sydney Morning Herald* February 11, 1973; *The Age* February 13, 1973), and my involvement is a factor that is considered in this thesis.¹⁹ However, formal, organised, fringe dweller resistance has been recorded by Eames (1983), Perkins (1998), Rubuntja (1998) and Shaw (1998) in their brief accounts of the Alice Springs campaigns in the 1970s.²⁰ Similar protests were held in Katherine and outside the NT Parliament House by the Katherine Combined Aboriginal Organisation of town camps (see 'Rally for more Aboriginal housing', *Green Left Weekly* October 12, 1995; *Land Rights News* October 1995, February 1996). As I will describe in Chapter Six, fringe dweller protest resulted in tragic consequences while I was absent from the NT in December 1996 and January 1997. In addition, the struggle for recognition by the group I describe in this thesis intensified after the completion of my fieldwork.²¹

Trigger (1997:116) examines 'Factors relevant to taking an oppositional or accommodationist position' and theories of power relations (Trigger 1992:8-16). He places an emphasis on the 'consciousness' of powerless groups (Trigger 1988b:236) and the hegemony of the powerful (Trigger 1992:9-11). However, there appears to be little analysis in the Aboriginal studies literature of the reasons a marginalised group are prepared at various times to move from informal, hidden everyday opposition to formal open activism.

I suggest that the paucity of analysis in Aboriginal studies literature reflects the predominance of 'cultural' interpretations. Therefore, to explain why some Aboriginal groups are prepared to openly resist, I have followed Trigger (1992:13) in applying theories of peasant resistance to Aboriginal studies. In particular, I have adapted ideas from Wolf (1971), Migdal (1974), Paige (1975), Scott (1985, 1986, 1987, 1989, 1990), Gutmann (1993), Ortner (1995), Korovkin (2000) and the comprehensive overview of the theories of peasant resistance given by Skocpol (1982).

As I have discussed, central to my analysis is Rowley's division of Australia into 'colonial' (more usually referred to as 'remote') and 'settled' regions. Rowley (1972b:12) emphasises that organised resistance can only come from 'colonial Australia' where 'small Aboriginal groups' have 'maintained some power to act, to make crucial decisions, and to adhere to them'. In 'colonial', or remote, Australia, 'two systems of legitimacy [Aboriginal and White] remain in juxtaposition' (p.12). The following chapters appear to illustrate this point. Rowley (p.12) argued that: 'What remains of Aboriginal culture [in] "settled Australia" can provide neither means of decision-making nor legitimacy for leadership'. As Tonkinson (1998:299) notes, claims of legitimacy for Aboriginal leaders are complex, but based largely on the possession of certain kinds of knowledge. He adds that the subtleties of who has the right to speak become more complex in the national political arena than in territorially defined actions, which are more typical in the remote north.

Rowley's earlier theory of Aboriginal leadership was later questioned by the actions of the Aboriginal Embassy on the lawn a outside Parliament House in Canberra in 1972 which began claims for recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty in capitals of 'settled' Australia. The Embassy activists did not claim authority through traditional structures, but gained legitimacy as leaders of Aboriginal resistance. By making the Embassy an impoverished, self-built structure on disputed land, the Black activists also projected the fringe camp into a symbol of national Aboriginal resistance to dispossession. As Rowley later comments:

When they looked at the Embassy, some of our legislators were stirred with that same indignation that has moved generations of country town councillors, contemplating Aboriginal shanties unlawfully built from materials acquired from the town tip, and unlawfully placed on the town common (Rowley 1978:1).²²

The Aboriginal Embassy is an example of how 'hidden' or 'everyday' resistance can become the basis of political action. The Embassy projected the fringe camp

into the national and international arena by making the self-built Aboriginal humpy a symbol of sovereignty and land rights. The construction of self-made huts in the fringe camps, and at the Embassy, also draws attention to the lack of adequate shelter comparable to the rest of the community. In addition, the shelters contrast with the popular image of nomadic itinerant Aboriginal people. Korovkin (2000:6) examines this relationship between hidden and open forms of resistance in rural Ecuador, where 'small acts of defiance can prepare the ground for organised [actions]' (see also Esman 1989:222). The testimony of Bob Bunba and Johnny Balaiya in Section 5.11 of this thesis and their subsequent participation in the protest described in Section 6.16 are perhaps evidence of this.

Rowley (1972b:12) assessed that organised resistance could only come from Aboriginal societies with a traditional structure in remote Australia, as in the Pilbara (p.12) and Gurindji strikes (p.338). However, traditional Aboriginal organisation may be linked to colonising structures through ascribed or elected leadership, bureaucratic structures, or 'false consciousness' (see Trigger 1988b:236). Trigger (1988a, 1992 :215) gives examples of Aboriginal accommodation to mission hegemony at Doomadgee and also describes how traditional decision-making authority has been used against Aboriginal activism by government and industry (Trigger 1997a:95, 1997b:119; see also Dixon 1990:67).

I maintain that fringe dwellers benefit from a lack of formal organisation, because their leadership is less vulnerable to being expropriated.²³ For example, Stewart Harris (1994) contrasted the bureaucratic restrictions he experienced on Darwin's Bagot Aboriginal Reserve with his relationship to fringe dwellers, and an Aboriginal social worker and activist, Vai Stanton, described confrontations inside Bagot when the reserve was dominated by a conservative Aboriginal council and employees (Kamener 1992).²⁴ In my experience, fringe dwellers consistently contrasted the relative autonomy of their camps with the problems of living at Bagot.

Evidence in Chapter Seven suggests that land-owning, institutionalised or wage-earning groups are inhibited by governing structures and may be dependent on unreliable government grants. Governments generally prefer the more manageable Aboriginal advisory bodies or the more co-operative and predictable institutionalised pressure groups (Weaver 1983:106; see also Weaver 1985). Jones and Hill-Burnett (1982:224) note that, since 1972, the emerging Aboriginal elite has become a part of the governmental structure. Their position limits their freedom to criticise continuing injustices without fear of reprisal (Tonkinson 1998:298). As Jones and Hill-Burnett (1982:224) suggest, the leadership became 'integrated into the very structure of oppression that they are attempting to combat' as positions in these organisations became salaried.²⁵ They contrast this with the Embassy protest where 'selection of leaders was not controlled by whites' (Jones and Hill-Burnett 1982:225).

Other Aboriginal commentators claim that government-sponsored Aboriginal organisations are an advancement towards self-determination (Cadd 1998). In the final report, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, states that Aboriginal organisations raise 'the status of Aboriginal people in their own eyes and the eyes of non-Aboriginal society' (Johnston 1991:23). Commissioner Johnston (1991:22) stresses, 'the existence of strong Aboriginal organizations does not lead to an exacerbation of community relations but to improvement in those relations'. If so, it appears to be at the expense of fringe dwellers' interests, as I later discuss.

Although few observers in Darwin recognise the actions of Aboriginal drinkers as resistance, I have cited anthropologists who view drinking as a culture of opposition. The freedom to consume alcohol in the camps contrasts with alternative Aboriginal places of residence in towns and at communities where alcohol is banned or restricted (see Sansom 1980a:51). Drinking also becomes politicised when it is the cause of confrontation between fringe dwellers and the administration in the towns. I discuss the relationship between alcohol and resistance at greater length in Chapter Nine.

The experiences of earlier struggles, and the links made with supporters during these struggles, are important in the formation of political awareness. Rangiri (1997) describes the ties that existed between NT unions and Aboriginal groups in the late 1960s. In the 1970s there were many Aboriginal veterans of the struggle for citizenship who lived in the camps and referred to White supporters as 'union' people. Those who had experienced the long campaign for Aboriginal equal rights knew that their victories had not come easily (see Sansom 1977:59, 1980a:49).

Although the Burarra people in fringe camps in the 1990s have worked with White supporters in the continuing actions for self-determination at Maningrida since the early seventies (see Gillespie 1982), by 2001 few Aboriginal residents in the fringe camps survive who have experienced the citizenship struggles of the 1960s.²⁶ The ending of this connection is compensated for by a greater awareness of Aboriginal land rights today, and the resultant development of political consciousness discussed by Trigger (1997a:95).

My experience indicates that organised Aboriginal resistance amongst Darwin fringe dwellers could not be facilitated without the leadership, channels of communication and solidarity of the traditional Aboriginal social organisation that was evident in most camps, including Wallaby Cross. However, the examples in Chapters Six and Eight of this thesis suggest that powerlessness, lack resources and cultural divisions between groups in Aboriginal fringe campers in Darwin ensure that an oppositional culture will not advance to organised resistance without outside help.²⁷ However, my study focuses on the willingness of fringe dwellers to resist and the political awareness of their actions, not whether they will openly resist the state unaided.²⁸

Despite Rowley's theories of Aboriginal leadership in remote Australia, Berndt (1969:8) appears to acknowledge a need for brokers in a reference to five examples from the region:²⁹

The stimulus to protest came from outside agents concerned in varying ways with Aboriginal welfare. Indications of discontent were already present; they awaited the necessary lines of communication, resources, and ability to organize, which the Aborigines themselves lacked but which the outside agents possessed.

A reliance on outsider activism in fringe dweller protest in Darwin may be because there is no overarching activist organisation like the Tangentyere Association, which serves Aboriginal town camps in Alice Springs. Coombs (1994:182) claims that the Tangentyere Association is a good model of 'bottom-up' federalism that 'does not compromise the identity or culture of individual groups, but give[s] common purpose and considerable effectiveness to Aboriginal aspirations and political action'. Unlike the Tangentyere Association, the Aboriginal Development Foundation, as the NT Government-appointed 'umbrella' organisation for most Darwin camps, did not originate from the fringe camps and is accused of being unrepresentative of them, as I later describe.

Glendhill (1994:190) discusses 'alternative visions of modernity', noting that social movements may contest 'normative models' of social practice (p.181), including interpretations of the past and future directions. Darwin fringe dwellers were influenced by the arrival of the counterculture in Darwin in 1969 and the change that was occurring within Australia and elsewhere before there was any real prospect of land rights. Many were familiar with the rise of black consciousness in North America (see *NT News* February 4, 1972) and anti-colonial struggles overseas.³⁰ The shared interests of fringe dwellers, alternative political parties and White activists continued between 1996 and 2001, as Chapter Eight of this thesis describes.

According to Migdal (1974:87), peasants remained 'inwardly orientated' unless an extraordinary crisis pushes them into an 'outward' engagement with capitalist expansion. Berndt (1969:6) also gives examples of Aboriginal 'movements' which have been 'inward looking and have drawn heavily on

traditional elements' (see also Kolig 1987a). In contrast with Aboriginal people on Aboriginal land, such as Arnhem Land, who may remain inwardly orientated, fringe dwellers have experienced a dramatic shift of location into the heart of the city, associated with an 'outward' re-orientation of their lifestyle, as I will later argue. In contrast with 'inward' religious movements, Berndt (1969:9) suggests that:

[Aboriginal protest is] outward-oriented, toward the wider Australian scene, in an attempt to achieve an equal allocation of various resources - economic viability, socio-political representation, access to sources of wealth, status and the right to be heard.

Away from the restrictions of the permit system which remains in operation for the more remote communities, and free of 'gatekeepers', the campers are able to choose diverse company, including many with political views which would not be welcomed by those in authority in the remote communities. Sometimes with difficulty, campers attempt to exclude unwelcome company, as is illustrated in a conflict with Mormon missionaries, recounted in following chapters. Also described is the formation of allegiances in times of threats from outside the camps that occurred between 1996 and 2001 (see also Sansom 1980a:185).

According to Berndt (1969:8), 'for protest to be effective ... publicity is essential'. Aborigines who may speak English as a second language have had their 'protesting voice ... heard indirectly through external agents' (Berndt 1969:9). In Darwin, the examples I give suggest that the introduction of local television news in 1971 empowered Aboriginal groups and continues to do so. However, my research suggests that Aboriginal groups now have to struggle against increasing public cynicism of their cause rather than 'jump[ing] on the bandwagon' to gain popular and political support as Berndt (p.9) claims Aboriginal protesters could do in the late sixties.

Not all homeless Aboriginal people formally resist. It appears that the construction of shelters on the land is a good indication of feelings of

proprietorship and willingness to defy authorities. This is a common factor with the camps at Kulaluk, Knuckeyes Lagoon and Railway Dam in the 1970s, and Lee Point, Fish Camp and Palmerston in the 1990s (see Map 2).³¹In particular, resistance to eviction at Johnny Balaiya's Palmerston camp in 2001 focussed on bough shades, old vans and a caravan (see Illustration 5).³² In contrast, Yolngu groups near Mindil Beach in the 1980s at a site they called 'Low Down' and the Burarra people living in parks and on the streets in the 1990s, with no fixed shelters, lacked stability and a focus for their protests.

Groups in Darwin with a long association to the land that they claim, or strong links to the traditional landowners of the area, also appear more likely to openly make a stand. This may explain why, according to Coulehan (1990:10), 'the [diverse accommodation] needs of comparatively recent Aboriginal migrants and transients in urban centres like Darwin, have been largely neglected'. In the 1970s, successful fringe dweller protests were endorsed by the traditional owners - the Arrernte in Alice Springs (see Eames 1983; Layton 1986; Rubuntja 1998), and the Larrakia in Darwin. Although there are historical links between many Aboriginal campers and the traditional owners of the land, I explain in a later chapter that the 'Larrakia Nation' in Darwin is reluctant to support fringe dwellers' claims.³³

As I have noted, 'status conscious' Aboriginal town residents and the 'interstitial' group which Cowlshaw (1988a:253) describes as living within the wider community usually disassociate themselves from assertive 'antisocial' behaviour in public places which heightens racial tension (see also Fink 1957:101). In my recent experience, people from these more acculturated groups visit the camps to ask for favours, but usually are reluctant to be associated with the behaviour of fringe dwellers or to publicly defend them. The camp residents are polite to their visitors, but privately scorn their aloof and sometimes exploitative attitudes.

Sansom (1977:61, 1980a:65) describes 'Masterful Men' who ensure drinking in the camps is conducted without incident. I refer to the dominant personality in

each camp as the 'doyen' (Day 1994:106), who, in my experience, is not always a man and does not necessarily drink moderately. The 'doyen's' authority, often strongly self-asserted, appears to come from the length of their connection with the site and their strength of personality. While they usually also have some form of traditional authority, their position is not recognised by the state. In every case in my experience, having a recognised and strong doyen is a prerequisite for organising formal fringe camp resistance. In contrast, in larger Aboriginal communities on Aboriginal land, processes controlled by others often select leaders, and open resistance is rare (see Day 1997b). On the other extreme, there does not appear to be any leadership or organised resistance amongst the solitary homeless.

In Darwin, confrontation with authorities appears to be generated by competition for land usage, brought to a crisis either in times of rapid suburban growth, as in the early 1970s in Darwin,³⁴ or through the persecution of campers, as occurred from 1996 to 2001. If people are relatively secure on Aboriginal-owned land, live on land where illegal camping is tolerated, or have the authority of the landowner to camp, they are less likely to join in open protests.

Recognition of indigenous rights gives courage to fringe dwellers' resistance. Heppell and Wigley (1981:184) note that the 'passive attitudes' of fringe dwellers in Alice Springs changed in 1976 after land rights became a possibility:

From the process of politicization and subsequent success of some of the leasehold applications, the town campers came to realise they were no longer impotent and that, through political action, they could obtain other desirable goals (Heppell and Wigley 1981:185).

As I will discuss, the results of open resistance are often in contrast to the original aims. Scott (1985:29) comes to similar conclusions in his analysis of peasant resistance. I give the example of the 'Wallaby Cross' mob whose success in gaining housing and land tenure facilitated deeper penetration by the

state and resultant loss of their autonomy. In most cases, those who fight for long-term aims do not survive to see the fruition, or a new generation of stable residents succeed the activists on the town camps leases. This is the background of many of my interlocutors who achieved an official camping place in the 1980s. When other groups moved into the houses provided, the original claimants returned to the relative autonomy of fringe camp life (see Appendix II).

As I will discuss, a strength of fringe dweller resistance is the nature of its secretive, 'underground' society, into which few Whites have access. Scott (1990:151) notes that subordinates have a tactical advantage in 'informal networks' that are 'opaque to outside surveillance and control' (Scott 1989:23). In secluded settings (Scott 1990:91), subordinate classes have an 'extensive social existence outside the immediate control of the dominant society' where 'dissent to the official transcript of power is voiced' (p.xi). Scott (1990) refers to the collective view formed in these locations as the 'hidden transcript', fostered in these locations by 'slights to human dignity' (p.7).

Gutmann (1993:86) asks, 'Why must everyday resistance always be hidden?' My thesis recounts many acts of open protest. However, I question whether there will be benefits those who take part. Scott (1986:21, 1987:422, 1989:6) notes that peasant groups avoid calling attention to themselves through everyday resistance. In one case, I describe how the negative effects of public, open resistance by Fish Camp people in 1997 eventually culminated in their eviction in 1999, where beforehand they were tolerated. The emphasis on individuals in open resistance also led to dissension, rivalry and possibilities for other interests to influence leaders and groups. In my fieldwork experience, and previously, the recognition of individuals in a fringe camp community by an authority figure, or the media, led to constant arguments in the camp. However, the disputes had a levelling effect and were confined within the group.

Fringe dwellers in the Northern Territory are perhaps uniquely placed to exploit the sometimes contradictory, overlapping administration by tiers of

government, statutory authorities and the law. The liminal status of a site often delays eviction. On the other hand, the separation of powers between Federal, Territory and Local Government can result in long delays in the negotiation for town camp leases and make targeting opponents difficult for Aboriginal groups. One camp claimed 'the city council' evicted them from Lee Point, near Darwin (Channel 8 News, October 18, 1996), although the area in question is outside the city council boundaries. Issues were further confused when the Darwin City Council refused to take responsibility for inflammatory statements against homeless Aboriginal people made by the Mayor of Darwin.

Apocalyptic visions or harnessing of supernatural forces are not as influential in the recent protests by fringe dwellers as they sometimes are in peasant resistance. However, Buchanan claims that a prominent Larrakia leader, Bobby Secretary, told 'quite a few people' in Melbourne in September 1974 that 'the spirit who watched over their land, had said that a very big cyclone was to come [to Darwin]' (Marginson 1975:8). A Larrakia woman, who was the elder at the Kulaluk camp during my fieldwork, also told Heffernan (1996) that 'one important reason for Cyclone Tracy coming to Darwin in 1974 was because her brother [Bobby Secretary] asked [Old Man Rock, a sacred site off Casuarina Beach,] to bring a big wind because the Government would not give the *Larrikiya* the *Kulaluk* land'.³⁵ Threats of sorcery are also sometimes made in anger against government figures. Fringe dwellers also threatened to use supernatural powers to revenge acts of discrimination by police and others (Day 1994:38).

Although a southern Aboriginal supporter of the fringe dwellers in the 1970s named his newsletter *Son of Namarluk* after an Aboriginal resistance leader of the 1930s, and later held a public servant hostage at gun point in Canberra (Day 1994:52),³⁶ 'primitive rebels', or outlawed individuals, do not appear to inspire visions of a just society, as they do in the cases of peasant resistance given by Hobsbawm (1959). According to Hobsbawm (1959:15) the social bandit 'does something which is not regarded as criminal by his local conventions, but is so regarded by the State or the local rulers'. Occasionally, people from central

Arnhem Land would tell me of their ancestors who used weapons against early attempts to begin cattle stations on their land (see Dewar 1992:9). More recently, I was told that the struggle of the fringe dwellers in Darwin inspired opposition to government policies at Maningrida. Another example is the popular song 'Tiwi Warriors', sung and composed by the Letterstick Band from Maningrida, which praises a self-titled group of Burarra-speaking 'warriors' who drink in the parks around the suburb of Tiwi, in Darwin (Letterstick 1999).

Ortner (1995:179) emphasises that 'individual acts of resistance, as well as large-scale resistance movements, are often themselves conflicted, internally contradictory, and affectively ambivalent' (see also Robinson 1994). In particular, she believes internal gender politics are not analysed in studies of resistance. Hiatt (1986:16) agrees with Cowlshaw (1978, 1979) that in Aboriginal societies, women 'are not in the business of domination but of resistance'. Hiatt (1986:16) sees Aboriginal women 'contributing more to the egalitarian and anarchistic tendencies in Aboriginal society than to its authoritarian components'. In the liminal and somewhat anarchic space of the fringe camps, women appear to have greater opportunity for a leadership role. During my fieldwork, the camps at Fish Camp, Knuckeys Lagoon and Kulaluk all had female 'doyens' and an elderly woman who died had been the 'doyen' of the Railway Dam town camp for many years.³⁷ As Coulehan (1995a:12) suggests, women may move to the city to 'access the better standards of living there and to exercise greater autonomy'. Collmann (1979b:210, 1988:118) also notes that women are advantaged by the move to the town because of their greater access to financial resources than the men. However, unlike the Yolngu women in rented housing who claim to be 'going their own way now' (Coulehan 1995a:128), women in the fringe camps do not appear to be advantaged more than the men with whom they share their lifestyle.

1.10 Resistance in 'colonial Australia'

Finally, I briefly place my discussion of fringe dweller resistance in the context of debates on the articulation of Aboriginal society with the wider Australian economic system. Although I have used Rowley's division of Australia into 'colonial' and 'settled' regions as a useful concept for an understanding of the relationship between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal settlers in Darwin, Trigger (1988b:235) is critical of Rowley (1986) for 'inadequate discussion in support this analytical continuum'. Similarly, Hartwig (1978:123) wonders, '*when relations between Whites and Aborigines in any part of "settled" Australia cease to be "colonial"?*' Despite this query, Hartwig suggests that Rowley's concept of 'colonialism' is essentially similar to the concept employed in the general literature on 'internal colonialism', which he claims best reveals how bourgeois ideology masks the expropriation of the Aboriginal means of subsistence (p.132; see also Edmunds 1994:19). In addition, Hartwig (p.122) asks, 'What is the relationship between the system of class exploitation and domination and the relations of racial and ethnic exploitation characteristic of internal colonialism?'

More specifically, Bagshaw (1977) analyses Black-White relations at Maningrida, in central Arnhem Land, where many of the Darwin fringe dwellers have ties. He argues:

[In bourgeois society] economic processes generate cultural meaning both in themselves and through the goods created by them. However, in 'primitive' society, with its lack of specialised economic subsystems, symbolic production is necessarily located in the overarching set of kinship relations through which all activity is articulated (Bagshaw 1977:61).

At Maningrida, Bagshaw (1977) examines the way 'European political forms' are imposed on Aboriginal social life, and claims: 'The political interests of the Australian bourgeois polity were clearly served by the creation of European-style Councils in Aboriginal communities' (p.74). The 'cultural incongruity' of the bourgeois mode of material production and Aboriginal kinship relations

prevents successful articulation of the two systems (p.67). Furthermore, the movement away from Maningrida 'is indicative of a firmly held collective desire on the part of Aborigines to return to an environment in which the normative genealogical proscriptions regulating traditional social relations can again become effective' (p.71).

Cowlishaw (1997b:108) discusses the 'cultural resistance of Aboriginal communities to insistent modernising processes'. And Benn (1994:178) cites a man who now lives in the Darwin fringe camps. The man was interviewed on film when he was a teenager at Maningrida in 1970:

Finity expressed his dislike for the school, the settlement staff and 'all' white man's things ... He wants to go 'bush' never to return. All 'white man's things' will be discarded. For food he intends 'singing' buffaloes and crocodiles - 'an old man told me how'. He said he has no need for Maningrida, its people or its material things (*Maningrida Mirage*, May 15, 1970).

In a discussion of economic development and dependency theories, and other theories of the articulation of modes of production, Altman (1987:9) claims: 'The obvious fact that social beings are not merely the products, but are also the producers of their social and economic environments is recognised but largely ignored'. In his text, Altman examines the possibility that indigenous minorities may regard themselves as exploiters of the capitalist system (p.9). However, Beckett (1988:14) believes a system of 'welfare colonialism' through special government structures has now incorporated the indigenous minority.

Peterson (1998:106) criticises theories of welfare colonialism for focusing on the undifferentiated delivery of entitlements rather than on their reception and use, which varies. For example, Aboriginal people on outstations (and fringe camps) use social security benefits to support their chosen life style (see Bernardi 1997:40). They avoid the 'bureaucratisation of the Aboriginal domain', which is

integral to 'welfare colonialism', by opting out of the special Aboriginal structures and institutions (Bernardi 1997:42).

Pearson (2000c:21) argues strongly that welfare is a 'method of governance [which] is increasingly becoming a method of managing marginalised groups at minimal cost without even maintaining the fiction that a lasting solution to their problems is sought'. While the latter part of Pearson's statement appears to apply in Darwin, the lifestyle of the fringe dwellers suggest that they take advantage of government entitlements, while attempting not to compromise Aboriginal sovereignty. As Collmann (1988:84-102) notes, the campers 'restrict their material demands' and structural involvement with the town to maintain their independence while retaining access to white-dominated resources. In later chapters, I apply these arguments more specifically to fringe camps and suggest that their aspirations for land tenure may have unforeseen consequences for fringe dwellers. In the next chapter, I discuss the confusing array of categories and terms for Aboriginal people living in an urban environment and examine these terms in the context of the arguments expressed in this chapter.

Endnotes:

¹ See Day (1993). The period is recounted in *Bunji: a story of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement* (Day 1994; see also Buchanan 1974; Henderson 1984; Macinolty 1994; Walsh 1994; Povinelli 1995c; Ralph 1995; Wells 1995a).

² I include Sansom's textual representations of fringe camps as a 'site' in my multi-sited study. Similarly, although relatively uncritically, Toussaint (1996, 1999) has included a re-examination of Phyllis Kaberry's 1939 text to effectively enrich the ethnography of Aboriginal people of the Kimberley region of Western Australia common to both studies.

³ Drakakis-Smith (1981:35) redraws Rowley's boundary to encompass an area where the Aboriginal population is approximately 20 per cent of the total, according to the 1976 census. Drakakis-Smith (1981:37) calls the northern section "'Aboriginal" australia' (his quotes and lower case) (see Map 4).

⁴ The division has been further blurred by the recognition of native title across Australia. However, the majority of successful claims are likely to be on unalienated land in 'remote' Australia. Map 4, showing Australia's freehold land in 1992 (see Trigger 1994:38), suggests that the alienated areas are mostly within the region of settled Australia in Rowley's map.

⁵ The Larrakia founders translated *gwalwa daraniki* to me as the more inclusive 'country belonga we'. Heffernan (1996:16) spells the Larrakia words as *gwoyalwa darrinigi*.

⁶ A compilation of ABC television news reports and other film on a thirty-minute videotape includes a historic segment showing Darwin fringe dwellers meeting the Commissioner at the Kulaluk camp (see Day 1997e).

⁷ The fringe dweller protests were reported in the *NT News* July 7, 1973; *Bulletin* July 21, 1973; *Nation Review* July 19, 1973; *National Times* August 6, 1973; *Australian* August 1, 1973; *Financial Review* August 7, 1973).

⁸ According to *Land Rights News* September 27, 1979, p.5: 'If it weren't for the courage of the Larrakia, particularly their leader, Mr Bobby Secretary, and his able supporters, such as Bill Day, Fred Fogarty and Cheryl Buchanan, there might not be an NT Land Rights Act today'.

⁹ For example, the long-running Kenbi claim had its origins in this period (see McNally 1974:53-6; Willey 1980).

¹⁰ Despite these different histories, Cowlshaw (1990:246) claims that *all* Australia is 'settled'. Tonkinson (1999:135) emphasises the different cultural bases, histories and socio-political conditions of Aboriginal people in settled and colonial Australia.

¹¹ Turner (1993:146) comments: 'there are hints in the text of another world hidden beneath the agenda the author has set for his inquiry', suggesting that Aboriginal traditions have been sustained at Doomadgee.

¹² In a review of the book which Merlan (1998:vii) describes as an 'avowedly intercultural ethnography', Trigger (2000:371) notes Merlan's aim 'to dissolve what she regards as the conventional dichotomy between cultural persistence and change'. Trigger (2000:372) then claims that Merlan does not adequately address indigenous agency in her discussion of the mimetic 'mirroring relationship' in the context of land rights legislation - a relationship which Merlan (1998:150) states, 'often requires from Aborigines demonstrations of the autonomy and long-standing nature of what is seen as cultural production'.

¹³ Merlan (1998:164) finds Jones and Hill-Burnett's view to be debatable in the context of the demand for land rights 'which is not just a "cultural" claim', but has considerable 'materiality'.

¹⁴ Sansom (1984) shares with Tonkinson (1999) the differentiation of a 'lived in' persistence from other less authentic forms. However, Sansom (1984a:37) criticises the 'retrievalism' formerly practised by anthropologists to preserve a reified Aboriginal culture. While Sansom (1984) criticises anthropologists' failure to interpret change in Aboriginal societies as cultural continuity, the dialectical view by Cowlshaw (1993:187) advocates 'exposing the forms of colonial power that saturate Aboriginal social life' to save Australian anthropology from becoming an anachronism.

¹⁵ See Morris 1985:87; Morton 1989:12, 1998; Keeffe 1988:76, 1992:86; Cowlshaw 1990:246, 1993:187; Trigger 1990:237; Rowse 1990:190, 1993:283; Hollinsworth 1992a:147, 1992b:169 and Lattas 1992:160, 1993:248.

¹⁶ In a spirited defence, Cowlshaw (1993:192-3) claims that her comments were misread.

¹⁷ Useful analyses of 'inter-ethnic politics' have been written or edited by Howard (1978, 1981, 1982). Hawke and Gallagher's (1989:331) detailed account of the Noonkanbah dispute is critical of Kolig's (1987b, 1990) cultural analysis of the same events.

¹⁸ For accounts of the activism of the 1980s, see *NT News* (October 2, 3, 31, 1978, February 12, 1982); Hayward-Ryan (1980:14); *Darwin Star* (April 23, 1981) and *Bunji* (March 1982).

¹⁹ In a chapter titled 'Darwin pub talk' (Gilbert 1977:221), a man called 'Kenny' says: 'Fred Fogarty went about it the wrong way. Should've used the media. Voice your opinion to the public. Get a petition. Bill Day made a mistake when he said he was fighting for the Aboriginal people. He went out and wrote a bloomin' whatsername on how to make a Molotov cocktail. Now that's not right.'

²⁰ Wenton Rubuntja (1997) describes a later campaign to protect Aboriginal sacred sites in Alice Springs.

²¹ Stella Simmering, a friend of the campers since 1997, has continued to document the struggle for space by Darwin fringe dweller groups and individuals until the time of writing. A newsletter called *Kujuk*, published and edited by non-Aboriginal activists, was printed in July and September, 2001, and further editions were planned. The title is a popularly used Kriol word for sexual intercourse. See <http://www.geocities.Kujuk2001/>

²² In 1973, Fred Fogarty from the Darwin fringe dwellers staffed the second Canberra Aboriginal Embassy for several months (see Harris 1994:vii).

²³ In 1975, I emphasised this point in an article in *Aboriginal and Islander Forum* that suggested tactics for Aboriginal groups making land claims (Day 1975:1).

²⁴ Vai Stanton, describes a protest by Aboriginal women at Bagot Reserve after she advised them that office staff had no right to open private mail. She claims 'it was the very beginning where people took a stand against that administration office' (Kamener 1992:24). Vai's description is an example of the minor acts of Aboriginal resistance that are often not recorded in contact history.

²⁵ See the interview with Cheryl Buchanan by Marginson (1975:8) for her analysis of the split between 'welfare orientated blacks and the militant ones'.

²⁶ The very high mortality rate amongst Aboriginal fringe dwellers has left myself and several other Whites as some of the few living participants in the actions of the 1970s.

²⁷ See footnote 24. In the 1980s a coalition of Yolngu fringe dwellers was assisted by social workers inquiring into the needs of fringe campers. Hayward-Ryan (1980:14) mentions the formation of an organisation to represent northeastern Arnhem Land campers, noting that: 'These meetings were tape-recorded and transcripts are available for perusal'. In Katherine, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs fostered the formation of a combined Aboriginal town organisation (Merlan 1995b:70, 1998:8).

²⁸ Povinelli (1995:327) comments on 'the complex alliances and singular strivings of a large number of Aboriginal communities' in the Darwin protests of the 1970s. I replied: 'why does Povinelli exclude non-Aborigines? ... I do not remember any racist ordering of the alliances formed' (Day 1996:501). In my examples, it is mainly White brokers who have been responsible for open, organised fringe dweller protest.

²⁹ The Pilbara strikes, the Warburton Range controversy, the Wave Hill strike, the Gove land rights dispute and the Weebo affair.

³⁰ Two Darwin Aboriginal leaders had earlier visited newly-independent Kenya (see Hardy 1968:47).

³¹ All these locations are indicated in Map 2. See also Appendix II and Appendix III.

³² In 2001, Johnny Balaiya told me the story printed in *Kujuk*, July 2001:

One afternoon as Johnny was walking back from the shops he saw his bushland was on fire. Subcontractors had lit the dry long grass without notifying Johnny or helping him protect his camp. Johnny spent all night with a metal rake defending his camp from the bushfire. Following the fire the bulldozers started work near Johnny's camp. Nobody came to talk to Johnny about what was going to happen... Family and friends helped to move the caravan, water tank, two old vans used for sleeping, cooking gear and mattresses.

³³ According to Layton (1986:30), the absence of traditional owners in Darwin contributes to the 'spontaneity and anarchy' of the Darwin camps described by Sansom (1980a).

³⁴ There was an 80 per cent increase in dwellings constructed in the greater Darwin area between 1966 and 1971 (ABS 1974:44).

³⁵ See 'The revenge of Old Man Rock', *NT News* April 30, 1994. Also *NT News* July 11, 1975; Cole 1977:183 and *Bunji* March 1982).

³⁶ Mounted police pursued Namarluk and his band for months before Namarluk's capture in the Daly River region. He escaped from the Darwin prison and returned to his country before being recaptured and eventually dying in gaol (see Idriess 1947).

³⁷ The women leaders at the camps were Dulcie Malimara, Louise Bangun, Topsy Secretary and Ruby One. After a failed traditional marriage, Dulcie moved to Darwin and married a White man. Burbank (1988:111) notes similar cases of women moving to Darwin.

CHAPTER TWO

'Itinerants' or at home in their land? Defining the fringe

2.1 Introduction

In 1982, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs Inquiry into Fringe Dwelling Aboriginal Communities (HRSCAA 1982) decided that 'fringe dweller' was not an appropriate category for Aboriginal groups living in self-made shelters on vacant Crown land around Australian towns. Following submissions that claimed that 'fringe dwellers' should be viewed as part of the town, the inquiry decided to use the term 'Aboriginal town camps' in preference to 'Aboriginal fringe dwelling communities'. However, in Darwin, since 1979 town camps have had a different legal status to fringe camps, as I will explain. The use of other terms such as 'itinerants', 'transients' and 'long grass people' in the report and later investigations, articles and reports, suggests a confusing array of terminologies.

Examining the way fringe dwellers are represented is pertinent to my thesis, as I explain in this chapter. For example, the debate over the use of the category, 'fringe dweller', which I discuss in a later section of this chapter, illustrates the perceived negative or positive inferences that this term can signify. I will discuss the appropriateness of various terms that are used in investigations into the needs of urban Aboriginal communities and individuals, in media reports and in general use. I also demonstrate the influence anthropology has had in the selection of those definitions. I will argue that the nature of 'the problem', and the definitions of it, are contested by my interlocutors, who believe that they have yet to experience the benefits of the recommendations of the many reports and investigations into their needs - from the Woodward Report to the present.

2.2 Clarifying definitions

Special purpose leases with services and designed housing for incorporated Aboriginal communities are usually referred to as 'town camps'. This terminology began in an era of transition recorded by Heppell and Wrigley (1981), Eames (1983), Rubuntja (1998), Coombs (1994:177-182) and others. Before the establishment of 'town camps' in the 1970s, ethnographers and others referred to Aboriginal communities who camped on identifiable urban sites without services as 'fringe dwellers' (Rowley 1972a, 1972b, 1972c; Sansom 1977; Collmann 1988, 1979a).

Robert Bropho, who has described a lifetime in the Aboriginal camps around Perth, Western Australia (Bropho 1980), submitted to an inquiry: 'All Aboriginal people became fringedwellers the day the white man set foot upon this continent. All Aboriginal people are fringedwellers until land is given back' (HRSCAA 1982:3). In an alternative interpretation, Collmann (1979a:47) describes the first Whites as living on the fringes of Aboriginal society. More recently, Coulehan (1995a:338) describes Aboriginal groups who live 'on the fringe of both Yolngu and [non-Aboriginal] systems of care and control when they become "lost to grog" in Darwin'.

Gale (1972:3) describes the 'fringe dwellers' as the fourth group of six 'widely differing [Aboriginal] adaptations to [urban] European society'; however, I suggest that regional differences blur Gale's categories. For example, 'Aborigines who live and think as members of a traditionally orientated group' (Gale 1972:2) are also the majority of those who inhabit the fringe camps of Darwin. Young (1981:14) suggests one reason why traditional Aboriginal people may be marginalised:

[M]ost Aborigines in urban and metropolitan communities aspire closely to equality of living standards and employment opportunities with non-Aborigines while those in rural areas, particularly where the tribal background remains strong, do not necessarily value these material needs as highly.

Spradley (1970:106) observed in his ethnography of 'urban nomads' in the United States:

In one sense those who live in cities share many facets of urban life, including climate, scenery, streets, parks, law enforcement agencies and other institutions. In another sense, members of the same city do not share these things since their function and meaning is different.

People in the same town can be 'cultural worlds apart' because physical space and objects are socially constructed and mean different things to different groups. For example, an Aboriginal woman who circulated between the urban camps drew me a diagram on the sand illustrating how homeless Aboriginal people divide the city between various groups (Figure 1). These urban regions tend to be spatially orientated to the homelands of the linguistic groups who claim them, as Heppell and Wigley (1981:55) noted in Alice Springs and Merlan (1991:269, 1998:1-2) observed in Katherine. For example, the region my informant marked for 'Daly River mob' straddles the highway leading south to the hinterland of cattle stations where the Daly River people and other allied groups work (Sansom 1980a:5). The Wagaitj area at Railway Dam is located near the wharf where the ferry plies to the Cox Peninsula, on the far side of the harbour. People from the Catholic Mission at Wadeye (Port Keats) gravitated around the old Stuart Park mission headquarters that operated the radio communication to their homeland. Along Darwin's northern beaches the coastal people of northeast Arnhem Land and Groote Eylandt have their camps, in addition to the airport area where charter flights provide a quick service to their distant coastal communities. The inner city is an area for 'mixed' groups.¹

Many of the Aboriginal homeless remain hidden from view and seldom have conflict with the law. Some belong to large groups, others live as loners. Some sleep out, some build shelters, some return to hostels and houses at night. Some have a commitment to certain places while others move from place to place. Some groups share common languages while others are linguistically mixed. As Coulehan (1990:10) claims, 'urban-dwelling Aborigines are not a homogeneous

group'. For example, Wells (1995a:6) cites Sansom's view that, because they are traditional owners, the Larrakia people camped at Kulaluk in the suburb of Nightcliff, 'had a very different and extra super duper special status in terms of their camping site'. Sansom submitted to the HRSCAA (1982:13) that there are two types of campers: those who have a long association with a particular area which he called the 'local community' and the 'hinterland Aboriginal community' who belong to a wider region and are absent for extended periods.

2.3 Long grass people

Homeless Aboriginal people who sleep in hidden locations around Darwin often refer to themselves as 'long grass' people (see Langton et al 1998; Day 1999a). Like the word 'parkies', describing the homeless drinkers in eastern towns (see Hale 1996), it is a supposedly racially non-specific term, although Aborigines are the more visible majority in both cases. 'Long grass' is a regional term, describing the speargrass that grows more than two metres tall on vacant land around Darwin in the monsoon months from October to April. The long grass then dries and is flattened by 'knock 'em down' storms and is usually incinerated in dry season burn-offs. Cleared areas in the grass could be used for illegal drinking sessions or hidden places to sleep for people threatened by vagrancy laws. Since drinking rights were granted to NT Aboriginal people, drunkenness decriminalised and vagrancy laws abolished, the 'long grassers' have moved into the parks and beaches or amongst the rocks, 'coffee bush' and neglected buildings of the town.² They prefer not to camp in the speargrass where the breezes are stifled and insects thrive.

Rather than signifying a particular site, when the Parliamentary Standing Committee reported that 'there were about 500 transients living in the long grass area around Darwin' (HRSCATSIA 1992:156), the committee was using the term as a metaphor for homelessness. I suggest that the description also historically locates the homeless as hidden and 'wild', although their drinking and their lifestyle is more open than the citizens who drink inside homes and hotels.³ Langton et al (1998:24) suggest another level of meaning: 'The so-called "long grass" people, resident along the beaches and on the edges of the town in Darwin

[are] a reminder of Australia's hidden "black" history' (see also Langton 1993a; Day 1997a).

In the past, Aborigines regularly burnt the long grass in the north for hunting and sometimes as a tactic of resistance. Kerr (1971:144) notes a case that occurred during the surveying of Port Darwin. With the establishment of colonial administration, Aborigines lost the power to burn the grass in all but remote areas. According to Langton (1998:9), Aboriginal people and their land management traditions have been 'rendered invisible' in Australian landscapes, in particular their use of fire. Without the power to burn the grass in the towns, the Aborigines are symbolically concealed in their long grass camps. Power resides with the 'short grass' people, surrounded by their mown lawns. Even at the remote Maningrida Aboriginal community, Annette Hamilton (1975:169) observed 'a neatly mown white Anglo-Saxon suburb dropped by a twist of fate at the very edge of the last of wild Australia'.

At a time when authorities were tightening controls on sleeping in public places, the cartoonist Wicking drew a wall of flame threatening two oblivious long grass drinkers to illustrate the start of the dry season (*NT News* May 3, 1997; Illustration 1.1). It appears that an environment they used to manage now threatens homeless Aboriginal 'long grassers'. Another Wicking *NT News* cartoon has a worried householder peering out a window complaining, 'I don't feel safe in my own home'. A ragged man looking up from long grass answers, 'You should try it out here' (Illustration 1.2). For the short grasser, the 'wilderness' with its untamed savages remains as a threat, while for the long grasser what was once a managed 'wilderness' has become an unpredictable place with the dangers of eviction or arrest.

Identity is removed from 'long grass' people, who are seen as beyond the structures of Black and White societies. For example, when 'long grass' Aborigines protested in Darwin for rights to shelter and services in 1997, they also carried banners referring to conditions at the settlement of Maningrida (*NT News* March 18, 1997). A Gunavidji couple, who were traditional owners of the

Maningrida area, complained to me that the televised banners had made them 'shamed'. Although most of the protesters originated from Maningrida, the couple reflected the liminal status of the fringe camp when they said, 'Don't say Maningrida people - they are long grass people' (Later the couple joined other protests and lived in the fringe camp for long periods). Confirming the liminal position of the camps, Brandl (1981:99) states: 'We know very little about the problems of the town camps. Undoubtedly this is a result of their Orwellian state of "non-exist"'.

2.4 The itinerants and transients

In the 1980s, 'the transient problem' was debated by politicians and the media (Cooper 1985; Day 1994:121; Wells 1995a:72). At the time, I contributed to this debate in a Darwin newspaper:

So we are told the need is 'transient camps' without a clear explanation of what a transient is - an all-encompassing word that has become meaningless, overused by an insecure population desperately trying to earn the envied label of 'Territorian' (Day 1983:2).

The mayor had campaigned on a promise 'to relocate illegal Aboriginal camps' to Bagot Reserve or Kulaluk (Wells 1995a:72) and plans were made for two government-sponsored camps to accommodate up to forty 'transient' Aborigines on the Kulaluk lease under the airport flight path (*NT News* October 14, 1981; *Darwin Star* October 14, 1981; *Bunji* October 1981), and later on the old Ludmilla dump, now occupied by the Minmarama Aboriginal village (*NT News* March 19, March 30, 1983; *Advertiser* April 7, 1983).

In the same period, the influential report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs inquiry into fringe dwelling Aboriginal communities (HRSCAA 1982) categorised homeless Aborigines in towns as 'permanents', 'transients' and 'homeless drifters'. By 1992, another parliamentary report, *Mainly Urban* (HRSCATSIA 1992:152), used Beckett's (1965) and Sansom's (1982b) descriptions of Aboriginal mobility patterns to

stress a 'complex and purposeful' itinerancy that fulfils obligations and maintains links between people along a 'beat'.

All the above categories fit the definition of homelessness by the Australian Council of Social Services, cited by the latter report (HRSCATSIA 1992:157):

The absence of safe, secure affordable and adequate shelter, as perceived by the individual. This can be defined by a person being in any of the following situations, or combinations of them:

- having no shelter
- being threatened with loss of shelter
- having to move constantly between residences
- having limited choices of alternative housing
- having inadequate accommodation because of
 - * overcrowding
 - * insecure occupancy
 - * lack of emotional support or stability
 - * threat of physical, sexual or emotional abuse
 - * eviction or threat of such
 - * payment of high proportion of income in rent

Drew and Coleman (1999:17) emphasise that homeless people are not rootless: 'They are people who are connected, and who value those connections as much as we more settled community members do'. Langton et al (1998:24) believe describing indigenous people who live in urban bush communities as 'homeless' or 'camping' implies their failure to live in 'acceptable' ways. Reser (1977) also draws attention to a European preoccupation with houses as 'home'. However, although some Aboriginal people have consciously rejected the costs of housing, I suggest that it cannot be assumed the residents of camps in towns are at home where they reside. In many cases the people are living in unsanitary sites not of their choosing, are constantly threatened with eviction and have not been free to

select better sites with access to water and services since the establishment of the town.

Both 'unhoused' and 'homeless' are terms that suggest a link between my interlocutors and the wider society that can be developed in a multi-sited study. The terms draw attention to the needs of the fringe dwellers in comparison to others. In contrast, the parliamentary report, referring to Sansom (1982b), discusses Aboriginal itinerancy as a natural condition, a cultural continuity of people who were 'itinerant in this country prior to British colonisation' (HRSCATSIA 1992:151).⁴ An account by Heppell and Wigley (1981:11) is applicable to many campers:

Many of the older people in the camps have watched the town grow and found themselves inexorably pushed from campsite to campsite, each time further away from the centre. Moreover, there have been many occasions when camps have been dismantled by the authorities and their members forcibly evicted. These movements might have given the camps an air of impermanence, but it needs emphasising that the core populations of town camps do not consist of itinerants; only, until very recently, of landless and dispossessed people.

An anthropological text (Sansom 1982b) is used by the parliamentary inquiry to argue that Aboriginal itinerancy is an *individual* choice of movement within a cultural pattern of behaviour that is purposeful and not 'aimless wandering' (HRSCATSIA 1992:153). Discussing homelessness, Mackie (1998:17) believes an emphasis on individuals typically deflects attention from the public domain to the inadequacies of the person in the private domain. According to Mackie (p.17), homelessness is thus seen to be a pathological condition of individuals rather than a result of a structural problem within society.⁵

2.5 Media representations of 'itinerants' from 1996

In keeping with the 1992 parliamentary report, the Darwin media now refers to the anonymous and voiceless group of 'transients' as 'itinerants'. The description

includes a diverse group, including some who have been born in Darwin (see Appendix II). Cowlshaw (1988a:106) believes: 'The politics and economics of a small town enmeshes the people in a particular historical process which each tries to shape in their own way'. With the coming of land rights in the north, race becomes a signifier of the special rights of Aborigines that are carefully avoided by using the non-racially-specific category 'itinerants'. The term 'itinerant' avoids an association with dispossession or the specific needs of homeless Aboriginal people and is justified by a supposed desire not to appear racist.

In 1996, Wicking's cartoon headed 'clean up day tomorrow' (*NT News* March 1, 1997; Illustration 1.4) showed ragged men being carried from the long grass and loaded onto a truck. 'Drunks' were blamed for Darwin's litter problem and 'itinerants, both black and white' were named as a major cause (*NT News* February 9, 10, 1996). Itinerants were said to be spitting, urinating, defecating, fornicating and masturbating in public (*NT News* February 10 and 16; April 5, 1996). The mayor claimed council workers often had to clean excreta off barbecue plates (*NT News* February 10, 1996). In 1999, he claimed a man had 'pulled down his daks and had a crap' on a pathway in his view (*Australian* April 29, 1999). Ween (1997:46) comments: 'The European Australian inhabitants of Darwin had something close to an obsession with Aboriginal bodily functions'. In a later chapter, I suggest that the annual Darwin Beer Can Regatta serves to contrast uncontrolled Aboriginal drunkenness with controlled and purposeful White drinking.

It is no coincidence that the campaign against the itinerants began with the Clean Up Australia launch in 1996. I suggest that culturally-specific attitudes to litter are markers of the racial divide in the Northern Territory. Bourgeois ideology can be used to justify expropriation of land (Hartwig 1978:133) and groups who are different are made deviant in 'the search for the true essence of Australianness' (Cowlshaw 1997b:179). The 'itinerants' are to be swept from the parks with the litter that has branded them as unAustralian, without civic pride and environmentally unaware (see also Trigger 1998a). As Edmunds (1994:106) notes, civic tidiness becomes another basis for defining Aboriginal behaviour as

non-conformist. Commenting on the litter associated with groups using the parks, the Mayor of Darwin stated: 'I think one of the myths that we are told is that Aboriginal people are the world's most concerned environmentalists - in fact we never see that at all' (*NT News* February 10, 1996).

2.6 Transients', 'itinerants' and 'homeless drifters'

The HRSCAA further divided town campers into 'permanents', 'transients' and 'homeless drifters' with different strategies for each, although the committee admitted there is overlap and movement between these groups (HRSCAA 1982:6). Transient visitors have been identified as a problem for more permanent Aboriginal residents in towns (Woodward 1973:25; Young 1982:1754; Coulehan 1990:9; Memmott 1990:35). Typically, the Tangentyere Council which represents Alice Springs town camps asked in their submission to the HRSCATSIA (1992:155) for 'visitors camps' to provide for transients to 'decrease the disruption caused by visitors to town camps'. The disruptive effect of visitors results from the changed nature of camps that have achieved land tenure, housing and services. The NT Department of Lands and Housing noted: 'many of the town camps, originally established to cater for transients, have become preferred places for permanent residence' (NT Government 1982:50).

Most transients can be accommodated in the self-managed fringe camps that have shelters that can be expanded to accommodate visitors who are attracted to the site by a common language and kin. An NT Government report (NTG 1981b:3) states:

The elusive presence of these shelters is normally indicative of the lack of tenure over [temporary camps]. However, many Aboriginals prefer accommodation of these types as they may be laid out to reflect social organisation, kin relationships, and do not compromise serious avoidance relationships. A sudden increase in population does not pose a problem as these structures are lived 'around' rather than 'in'.⁶

Outside the fringe camps, housed Aboriginal urban dwellers are pressured to accommodate the homeless (Coulehan 1990:9, 1995a:255, 1995b:217). For the more stable residents with increasingly fewer links to hinterland people, transients are perceived as a problem, as they are for Darwin residents who compete for the public spaces contested by homeless people.

The parliamentary report defined the 'homeless drifter' as 'frequently destitute and frequently alcoholic people who live in parks, under bridges or in deserted buildings' (HRSCAA 1982:11). Although homeless Aboriginal people are not as likely to be social isolates as other groups (Eggleston 1974:59), it appears that 'the drifters' are likely to have weak ties to kinship structures and cultural heritage. Their networks of soup kitchens and welfare agencies are concentrated in the inner city where their lifestyle is likely to be closer to that of the urban nomad described by Spradley (1970).

2.7 'Sit down' and 'lie down' camps

Two important reports, one by an anonymous researcher for the NT Government (1981b:2) and another prepared by Hayward-Ryan (1980:8), view 'sit down' camps in Darwin as camps of convenience. As Hayward-Ryan (1980:7) points out, the sit down camps 'are often the targets of criticism by the wider community, ostensibly because of the amount of accumulated litter which characterises such sites'.⁷ The term is commonly used by Aboriginal people for favoured locations that are known to be safe, close to conveniences, and with shelter from sun, wind and rain. The location may therefore shift throughout the day. In Darwin in 1996 and 1997, large numbers of Aboriginal people gathered at 'sit down' camps on the foreshore and near the hospital to play cards, in what police described as a 'positive social gathering' (*NT News* April 12, 1997 and May 27, 1997). Card playing continued into the night under street lighting but people did not sleep in these very public, open locations. It is the well known 'sit down' drinking sites which are regularly raided by police patrols (see 'Hundreds held in Darwin grog blitz', *NT News* April 18, 1997).

The HRSCAA (1982:13) defines the 'sit down' camps as temporary and the 'lie down' camps as 'more or less permanent'. Overnight 'lie down' camps are divided by Hayward-Ryan (1980:6) into those with facilities and those without facilities. The NT Government report (1981b:3) prefers categories of permanent, or 'major camps', and temporary camps with lack of tenure. However, under present policies, to be illegal, or without tenure, equates to temporary occupancy. As John Tomlinson (1982:104) comments, camping is criminalised other than on a few sites approved by Local and Territory Government. In Tomlinson's (p.104) view, the criminalisation of Aboriginal campers is enacted by Darwin authorities who are 'totally lacking a sense of history, an understanding of Aboriginal culture, and who are totally devoid of humanity'.

Young (1982:1756) believes that the leasing of land to the 'illegal' campers is essential: to provide amenities, preserve the identity of groups who wish to live in town and to allow the option of living a life-style which may differ significantly from that of non-Aboriginal town residents (Young 1982:1755). Brandl (1981:101) also stresses the need to recognise fringe camp communities as autonomous bodies. She claims that, although Aboriginal groups have always camped near settlements, the townsfolk have 'consistently seen [Aboriginal camps] as temporary phenomena'(p.94).

Tomlinson (1982:104) claims there are 'over thirty places where Aboriginal people coming to Darwin sit down', while Sansom (1980a:8) describes eighteen 'on-and-off' sites, used on an irregular basis, which are 'owned' by a similar number of out-of-town Aboriginal groupings. Sansom (p.8) states that although the land is not legally owned by the campers, permission is needed from the Aboriginal 'owners' to camp at these sites. In more recent years, it appears that police action has resulted in smaller groups in more locations. Gradual takeovers, in minor 'turf wars', do occur between groups. In 1997, Daly River people were moving into the area around the shops in the suburb of Tiwi, long-dominated by a Burarra group of homeless men and women.

2.8 Reserves

Until the 1960s, Aboriginal people in some northern towns were still confined to Aboriginal reserves by a curfew (Jackson 1996:9). Prior to World War II, in Darwin, the Aboriginal population on the reserve also supplied domestic labour to the town (Wells 1995a:27, 2000:64). As I have discussed, until the mid-seventies, the town reserves were tightly controlled by a government superintendent and compliant councils, with entry permits issued by government officers. Before being converted into Aboriginal land under Aboriginal control in the late 1970s, reserves were sites to train Aboriginal people for assimilation, with 'transitional housing' preparing residents to move into the wider community.

During the assimilation period, according to Wells (1995b:220): 'The bus did not leave each morning to take Aboriginal workers to town - there was no longer a place for gangs of Aboriginal workers in Darwin and most Aboriginal wards worked in training schemes at Bagot ... Opportunities for personal relationships to develop were, therefore, few'. By 1959, when Darwin was declared a town with its own municipal council, 'The gap between the increasingly affluent settler community and the impoverished [Aborigines] living at Bagot [Reserve] had widened so much that the two communities almost never came together' (Wells 1995b:119). Both the unserviced fringe camps built by Aboriginal people who refuse to live at Bagot and the bounded domain of the Bagot Community were indicators of the state of race relations in Darwin in the late 1990s.⁸

At Bagot Reserve in Darwin, and the Amoonguna Reserve near Alice Springs, Aboriginal people in towns were compelled to live in an 'undifferentiated area in which it was impossible to maintain traditional boundaries' (Heppell and Wigley 1981:24). This remains true for the Aboriginal people in Darwin at the Bagot Community, as the old reserve is now known, who have been unable to find suburban housing, or who do not belong to the few groups with town camp leases. In 1964, promises were made by a Federal Minister that one house in three in the new suburb of Ludmilla would be set aside for Aboriginal people; however, the promise was not kept (Woodward 1974:62). Wells (1995b:229) suggests that the failure was partly because 'Aborigines at Bagot repeatedly

made clear by their actions that they were not particularly interested in moving into Darwin away from kin and friends’.

‘Wallaby Cross’ is described by Sansom (1980a:51) as a ‘free grogging’ community, unlike the missions and government reserves which were organised as ‘total institutions’ (Sansom 1980a:45, citing Long 1970:6). In an interview, Vai Stanton, an Aboriginal social worker and activist, claims that ‘there were basic rights violations [at Bagot]. She attributed the lack of resistance to the fact that ‘people were so institutionalised that they didn’t know ... they just accepted it as the norm’ (Kamener 1992:20). Similarly, Rowley (1972a:278) describes the Aboriginal residents of institutions as ‘inmates’ (see Rowse 1993a:27). With the granting of a lease, the incorporated Bagot Community council has permitted the drinking of alcohol on the old reserve land, resulting in a common complaint of fringe dwellers that there is ‘too much trouble’ at Bagot, where Aboriginal people of many language affiliations are housed side-by-side in overcrowded homes, without the night patrols of the past.

2.9 Town camps

The House of Representatives Standing Committee assigned to investigate the needs of ‘fringe-dwelling Aboriginal communities’ preferred the title ‘town camps’ in their final report. The committee defined 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 that does not conform to that of the majority of non-Aboriginal residents and are not provided with essential services and housing on a basis comparable to the rest of the community (HRSCCAA 1982:xii).

The report usefully divided Aboriginal living areas in towns into ‘tenured’ and ‘non-tenured’. Non-tenured campsites were unlikely to receive essential services (HRSCCAA 1982:26). They are also more prone to harassment. Both were included under the terms of reference, despite the NT Government claim that

tenured communities on special purpose leases should be described as 'developed urban leases' (HRSCCAA 1982:57), or 'group housing projects' (HRSCCAA 1982:41), rather than town camps. The NT Government claimed that Aboriginal town camps on a lease, 'because of their development' were best seen as 'part of the town' (HRSCCAA 1982:16) and therefore excluded from the terms of reference of the inquiry.

The Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC) argued that the camps with land and services should be included as 'fringe dwellers' because they are a 'positive model' of what could be achieved by similar Aboriginal groups (HRSCCAA 1982:16). The parliamentary committee agreed that all types of camps might benefit from the strategies to be recommended, although the needs may be different. They decided to exclude from their inquiry only those few Aboriginal groups in towns 'which have been provided with essential services and housing on a basis comparable to the rest of the community' (HRSCCAA 1982:5).

Heppell and Wigley (1981:14) reject the term 'fringe-dweller' as one of 'opprobrium'. They suggest a more positive definition of 'town campers':

[G]roups of people who have largely rejected the European suburban way of life, desire to live in small closely knit homogeneous groups which exalt certain human values above those held and expected by white society (such as kinship obligations) and, above all, want to pursue their chosen lifestyle away from any possible interference by outsiders who little understand the values and aspirations of the town campers.

Heppell and Wigley (1981), Drakakis-Smith (1980, 1981), Rowse (1988) and Collmann (1988) describe some of the changes taking place in the late 1970s and early 1980s as 'town camper' groups became incorporated associations to manage land and make improvements to previously unserviced camps in Alice Springs. As a result of these changes, 'town camps' are now more specifically seen as incorporated communities on leases with housing designed for the

perceived requirements of the Aboriginal residents. Despite the good intentions of the HRSCAA to find an all-inclusive term, the official town camps now have different needs to the illegal camps and a distinction is therefore made in this thesis.

2.10 Fringe or town camp?

Comments by fringe dwellers suggest that the persistence of cultural values in the 'illegal' Darwin camps is a focus of resistance. For example, Johnny Balaiya says:

This is not for a White man country, because this is the country for the Blackfella country. They born here and I born here, true story. My son, my brother, my cousin, they born here ... I don't like that Balanda way, no. I want to look after myself Blackfella way, that's the really one.⁹

Wallace (1979:144) notes: 'An essential prerequisite to any investigation into Aboriginal housing schemes is a knowledge of the religion, culture and philosophy which the Aborigines concerned are striving to maintain'. These points are considered in the objectives of the 'Fish Camp Community Housing Project' (Appendix III). A recurring theme is the preference for outdoor living, where 'sleeping inside occurs only when absolutely necessary' (Larbalistier 1979:193; see also Appendix III, p.6). The isolating nature of a 'more conventional European residential environment' is also noted by Reser (1977:52).

With good intentions, while perhaps underestimating the resistance role of fringe camps, contemporary social scientists have sought to incorporate fringe dwelling Aboriginal communities into the urban society. Reser (1977:58) gives an example of 'benign statements' advocating housing for all which can be 'used to justify the wanton destruction of existing and psychologically meaningful traditional living environments'. Reser (p.52) notes that: 'A physical environment which departs from the European model is too readily seen as squalid, dirty, unhealthy'. He suggests that there is a correspondence between 'a culture's dwellings and its values, lifestyles and institutions'. He argues that 'Aboriginal

communities are inevitably expected to adapt to European dwelling environments, rather than adapting environments to people' (p.52).

Similarly, Cowlshaw (1988a:221) is critical of 'do gooders', who she describes as, 'The purveyors of the new enlightenment theories ... struggling in the pool of their own middle class mores'. However, in another chapter I describe the developing relationship between two Darwin Aboriginal fringe camps and White alternative lifestylers and activists who share with fringe dwellers a rejection of many of these mores, in preference for a more communal, less materialistic style of living.

Rowley (1972a:231) believed: 'The fringe area has to be established in the minds of townsmen as *part of the town*'. Langton et al (1998:24) state: 'Understanding the distinct camp culture which has emerged is one important step in devising necessary policy measures to benefit camp residents and meet the objections of non-indigenous Darwin residents to their lifestyle'. These are worthy replies to the popular concepts of detribalised, demoralised people clinging to the edges of towns. Similarly, Diane Bell told a parliamentary inquiry:

The term 'fringe' gives the idea they are peripheral, transient and somewhat haphazard... It makes people look as if they have no rights, where they are, as if they are on the fringe. It suggests that in some sense they have different sorts of claims whereas the term town campers locates people within the town. It indicates that they are camping there and camping in Aboriginal terms means living (HRSCAA 1982:5).

I suggest that by not recognising the long and unaided resistance role of fringe camps, the above researchers may unintentionally assist the incorporation of fringe dwellers into a social and economic system that the campers have resisted without assistance in the past. That is not to deny that the campers want better housing. As Tonkinson and Tonkinson (1979:198) point out, the basic problem is making improvements to living conditions without seriously disrupting the positive aspects of life in Aboriginal camps. According to Tonkinson and

Tonkinson (p.204): 'Aborigines can no more appreciate the eventual ramifications of a move into new housing than they could their move into contact with Europeans'. Reser (1977:57) states that building codes 'are one of the most crippling sources of community deterioration in Aboriginal Australia'. My fieldwork suggests that these are topics for further investigation.

2.11 Fringe dwellers

Homeless Aborigines in Darwin today resemble the people of Bourke who 'lived on the fringe of the town, on the fringe of the economic system, on the fringe of the education system, and ... on the fringe of adequate health' (Kamien 1978:45). Despite the view by Heppell and Wigley (1981:14), that 'fringe dweller' has little currency amongst those to whom the term refers, Collmann (1988:13) and Bropho (1980) claim that either the term 'fringe-dwellers' or 'fringedweller' reflect the people's view of their existence. An attribute defining the fringe dweller is the 'rudimentary shacks' they build for themselves (Collmann 1988:6). During Sansom's and Collmann's fieldwork these structures were on vacant Crown land.

The camps could maintain the degree of autonomy described by Collmann and Sansom in various urban bushland locations before NT self-government in 1978 ended the more tolerant and distant Federal administration of vacant Crown land. However, despite the changed regime, some fringe camps that resemble those described by Collmann and Sansom in the 1970s remain on vacant land within and around most northern towns. They are often tolerated until the land is required for development.¹⁰

Darwin Aboriginal 'long grassers' do not describe themselves as 'fringe dwellers' and are unfamiliar with the description. However, as I have outlined, the term is useful in distinguishing from other groups the people whom I describe in camps around Darwin. Gare (1961) and other writers have popularised the Aboriginal fringe dweller as an Australian icon. In keeping with anthropological tradition, my research suggests that the term remains appropriate for Aboriginal communities living without tenure on vacant urban land in self-made unserviced

shelters. These camps are therefore distinct from temporary 'sit down' camps. Fringe dwellers are also distinguished from 'town campers' that have tenure to the land where they live in architecturally-designed serviced huts.

In the next chapter I describe how a particular fringe camp in the northern suburbs of Darwin became the base for my fieldwork in 1996. Complicating my definitions of fringe dwellers, the group had been evicted from Crown land earlier that year and were living under tarpaulins on land held by an Aboriginal Association (see Map 3). I discuss their relationship with the landowners in Chapter Seven. In Chapter Five, I discuss at length the origins and affiliations of the campers. In the following chapter I examine the 'finding' of a field site and the earlier forced relocation of the fringe dwellers in a historical and political context. The role of the anthropologist as a committed witness is also defended.

Endnotes:

¹ The informal division of the town into Aboriginal areas of interest possibly helps control conflict and competition for resources amongst people from the many language groups living in the 'long grass'.

² The Mayor of Darwin said that fining 'long grassers' was like cutting down coffee bush: 'It just comes up again' (*Australian*, 'A new kind of sleeping sickness in the Top End', April 29, 1999)

³ A photograph illustrating a newspaper article on the Northern Territory Chief Minister Shane Stone's zero tolerance laws pictured two Aboriginal men sitting around an open beer carton on the lawn of a public park, under the heading: 'Long grassers feel the hand of Stone' (*Weekend Australian* May 30-31, p.6).

⁴ Sansom (1985:78) discusses how his submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee Inquiry (HRSCAA 1982) uses 'processural modelling' (p.72) to craft 'special and novel purpose-built models for use in court' (p.75). In a more politically engaged essay, Sansom (p.70) cites Hobbes' discussion on making 'Systemes that are Private and Irregular' into 'Systemes Political and Regular'. Sansom (1982) is also quoted in Volume 2 of the National Report, Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1989:83) as a reference confirming a systematic Aboriginal itinerant lifestyle.

⁵ An article in the *Bulletin* (February 26, 1996) titled 'Down and out in Darwin' and headed, 'Itinerants', has an accompanying photograph of a black woman asleep in a city park. It could be said that the heading 'down and out' suggests the problem lies with unsuccessful individuals.

⁶ Researchers describe similar advantages of the self-designed, self-built 'humpy' (Smith 2000:180, 198; White 1977:104; Tonkinson and Tonkinson 1979:199; Wallace 1979:148; Sansom 1980a:111; Doohan 1992:79) and their layout in a camp (White 1977; Larbalistier 1979; Wallace 1979; Memmott 1983, 1991; Ross 1987). Stanton (1981:32) points out that 'humpies' are 'difficult to keep clean, were damp in winter, lacked secure cupboards ... and lacked any supply of water'. Also see Memmott 1988, 1990, 2000; Reser 1977.

⁷ Tomlinson (1982:102) reproduces a newspaper story picturing one of these camps at East Point under the heading, 'Darwin's dirty problem baffles chiefs'.

⁸ In 1998, at the single vehicular entrance to the Bagot Community (the old reserve), a sign forbade 'Unauthorised entry'. During my fieldwork, I rented a room in a street of predominantly White residents in the suburb of Ludmilla that surrounds the Bagot Community. In a scene that was visually reminiscent of Belfast or Jerusalem, the street, which continues into the Aboriginal housing area, is barricaded at the boundary.

⁹ From 'Freedom to sleep' (Media release, Darwin Longgrass Association, September 5, 2001).

¹⁰ At the time of writing, a camp of old car bodies and tarpaulins in bush near Palmerston, on the outskirts of Darwin, is threatened with eviction to make way for the continuing expansion of the satellite town.