

# Contested homelands: Darwin's 'itinerant problem'

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There is no greater sorrow on earth than the loss of one's native land.  
– *Euripides*, 431 B.C.

## 1. Framing the fringe dwellers

**D**ARWIN has the largest Aboriginal population of any Australian city at nearly nine per cent, and the Northern Territory has nearly 28 per cent of the indigenous population. While the greater majority of the indigenous population in Darwin lives in circumstances not unlike their non-indigenous neighbours, a number are, out of necessity, more transient, moving between remote communities and the city, visiting friends and relatives who may be in hospital or prison, seeking work or escaping unenviable conditions in the interior.

It is important to preface the present study with a word on social and historical context, as the representation of indigenous issues in 'the Territory' is founded upon historical and cultural constructions of Aboriginality. What underpins this long-running moral panic about homeless indigenous people?

First, the history of Aboriginal people in Australia has been one of dispossession, cultural genocide and displacement.

During the period of conquest, indigenous people were deprived of their most basic rights, their society and culture were destroyed, and their populations were decimated. Survivors were forced onto reservations and controlled by missionaries and special welfare bureaucracies. They were seen as racially inferior and expected to 'die out'. (Castles, & Davidson, 2000, p. 73)

Second, there is a long-standing and well-recognised cultural defensiveness

– the ‘cultural cringe’ a deference to European and British culture (‘the old country’) which has been recently re-invoked with reference to the stolen generation and the current Liberal government’s refusal to make an official apology to indigenous Australians. Howard has used the term ‘black armband view of history’ to characterise what he regards as a negative and morose reading of history which reflects ‘a belief that most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination’ (Howard’s 1996 Robert Menzies speech – see McKenna, 1997; Mayne, 1997).

Third, in the context of the re-positioning of social theory since the 1980s, the exhaustion of the narratives of modernity and the deconstruction of previously unchallenged foundations of national identity have all thrown historical events into sharper focus which had been buried in commonsense ethnocentric credo of Australia as the ‘lucky country’ (although Donald Horne who popularised the epithet made it with pointed irony – ‘Australia is a lucky country, run by second-rate people who share its luck.’ Dec 1964).

This recent scrutiny and documenting of Australian history has challenged a more ingenuous image of Australia as a land of sunshine and opportunity, and led to debates about the intentions behind (as well as the actual extent of) acts which fit international definitions of genocide (see e.g. Windschuttle, 2004). Such new readings have also produced works of literature like Robert Drewe’s *The Savage Crows* (1980) which draws on the 1829 journals of George Augustus Robinson – about the last days of the Tasmanian Aborigines, Robert Hughes’ *The Fatal Shore* (1987) a history of Australia as a penal colony, and more recently films like *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002) which powerfully portrays the forced removal of Aboriginal children as part of a systematic eugenics policy. Through these and many other works, a more realistic and plural identity began to emerge. At the same time the multi-ethnic composition of Australia was also being recognised and previously coercive assimilationist policies were being criticised and multiculturalism emerged as a progressive discourse, despite warnings from conservative historians like Geoffrey Blainey (1984) who argued it would lead to a weakening of national culture.

Fourth, there has been a conservative backlash to these shifts in discourse. It seems that there is a popular view, stridently xenophobic, that carries a deep sense of being disenfranchised by liberal, multicultural rhetoric which

## THE INDIGENOUS PUBLIC SPHERE

is perceived as challenging the hegemony of white Australian popular mores. The surge of popularity which swelled behind Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party tapped into these very sentiments. In this context the need to demonise Aborigines serves a long-standing function of re-affirming the civilisation and culture of white Australians, particularly in rural areas and away from Sydney and Melbourne. Hanson was able to effectively exploit this feature of angst, while pointing to benefits which Asian migrants and Aborigines received.

... One Nation was a tragedy. By creating a block of one million voters strategically placed between Labor, the Nationals and the Liberals, it tempted the parties to pander to its prejudices. The Liberals adopted much of its refugee policy. More importantly they pursued their own similar agenda against multiculturalism and Aboriginal reconciliation. (Jupp, 2002, p. 139).

Fifth, at the same time that the national climate concerning indigenous politics has encouraged conservatism, economically Darwin has become a premier tourist spot, ironically founded on its frontier character and the many popular outback venues: including Kakadu, Uluru, the Olgas, Kings Canyon and, of course, the crocodile parks and river cruises. Tourism in 2003-4 saw '...visitor spending increased by eight per cent (to \$1.2 billion), injecting an additional \$81 million into the NT' (Northern Territory Tourist Commission, 2004).

Culturally-oriented tourism is heavily promoted as a vital part of this success. Tourists can

... meet members of the local indigenous community for an educational experience in bushland setting. Learn of the Aboriginal culture through the wide range of exhibits. See demonstrations of boomerang and spear throwing and learn about traditional sources for food and medicine. There is opportunity to sample bush foods such as Witchetty Grubs, 'Bloodwood Apples, Bush Bananas and various seeds. Following a morning tea of damper and billy tea, learn about tribal life, languages, art, dance and music, where you can be taught how to play the didgeridoo.' (Goway.com)

As a tourist to the 'Top End' this is typical of the rhetoric one is exposed to. It

appears that the static imagery of traditional life-styles unchanged and timelessly pursued in remote settings is the preferred image, the one which is thought to attract tourism. The imagery used in the card in Figure 1, is very appealing and unproblematic, yet for many Aboriginal people these images of traditional life are a far remove from their day to day reality living in urban settings often very similar to their white compatriots. This is not to deny the survival of rich and varied traditions of indigenous culture – only to state that the culture is one which like all cultures, grows and develops adapting synthesizing and making sense of a changing world.

However the visibility of impoverished urban Aboriginals runs counter to the images of carefree natives in bush settings (see Figure 1) which is the only available image presented for tourist consumption – and since 2003 the Northern Territory government has stepped up measures to remove so-called ‘itinerants’ from the city.

### Aboriginality

Muecke’s work on Aboriginality is a useful starting point in a discussion about the historical and cultural construction of Aboriginality in Australian society. In such a construction, Aboriginal people are represented as imprisoned by a timeless view of culture. This view of culture is romantic and static and highlights the lack of real communication between indigenous and white populations in Australia.



**Figure 1: Postcard: ‘Australian Aborigines’  
Nucolorvue, 12972, Northern Territory.**

...they are constantly called upon to display this essence, or this or that skill, as if culture were an endowment. This is an enormous burden, and it is the Western version of culture which gives them this, not the Aboriginal. (Muecke, S, 1992, p. 40)

Sonia Smallcombe (Head of Indigenous Studies, Charles Darwin University)

in a recent interview supported this view of indigenous people tied to a primordial ethnic identity.

Some of the legislation is so draconian. To satisfy a land claim you've got to have lived a life-style that occurred before 1788 – of course we've changed a lot since 1788! – But the legislation doesn't recognise it – the government doesn't recognise that cultures change, and also we have to change if we want to survive. They look at indigenous culture as static they don't look at any other culture – but they certainly see indigenous culture as it has to be static which we're certainly not...'(Sonia Smallcombe, 2004)

Directly racist constructions of Aboriginality have used this form of essentialism (based on blood quantum, genealogical test, or ideas of an Aboriginal 'race' ) to define Aboriginal identity and membership and eligibility to benefits (see Gardiner-Garden, 2003). It is clear then that concerns about developing tourism and prevailing trends of ethnocentric self-interest have developed an approach to Indigenous culture which divides the 'timeless cultural values' which seem most marketable from the cultural resistance of 'itinerant' life-styles which are antagonistic to the aims of profit maximisation. The latter life-styles and communities are a threat which has attracted an extraordinary amount of concern, such that the NT government has allocated \$5.25 million since June 2003 to try and resolve the issue. However the money has not gone towards improving the accommodation for Aboriginal communities which is wholly inadequate in area and in gross disrepair.

## **2. The 'itinerant problem': Community conditions**

The idea of home and of being homeless has powerful cultural and normative power. The less formal aspects of the homes of 'long grass' people (generally referred to in Darwin as 'itinerants' an emotionally loaded term) are a cause for concern to white Territorians, and hard to equate with neat suburban blocks which most Australians inhabit. To accept homes as being temporary, makeshift or transient spaces is seen as a rather threatening concept. Yet from the work of writers like Bill Day and Marcia Langton, it appears that these 'itinerant' camps are highly organised and structured with complex relationships and rules by which the campers live (see Day, 2002; Langton, 1997; Sansom, 1980).

One Mile Dam is a small Aboriginal community with informal status five minutes from the city centre. The lack of services here was very apparent when I visited in July 2004. The camp was set up for indigenous people in the 1970s and has received little help or improvement since then. This camp can swell to accommodate nearly 200 people. However, it has only 2 toilets, piles of refuse fester in the heat and recent reports have cited faulty wiring exposing residents to danger of electrocution there. In addition, nearby fuel storage tanks overlook the community presenting an ever-present threat from volatile fumes. There are ranks of new luxury apartments overlooking the community which signify another threat to the community – as developers look to expand and use the community land for future developments.

The continual pressure on these small parcels of land has become intense as local government refuses to build new community sites to accommodate so-called ‘itinerants’. The resultant over-crowding and other social problems associated with poverty and difficult living conditions have blighted Aboriginal communities for a very long time. Different groups are thrown together in these shrinking communal spaces and arguments and violence are not uncommon. Consumption of alcohol, and high incidence of illnesses, domestic violence and child abuse have all been associated with these ‘itinerant’ communities. While these behaviours are undeniably a part of life in the cramped and under-resourced areas apportioned to ‘itinerants’ they receive much more public censure than when they occur in the white community. There are a number of possible reasons for this – including the obvious one that this is a group which is much more exposed to public scrutiny, barred from pubs so forced to drink in public. More than this, however, it appears that any ‘official’ approach to Aborigines is always from a point of historically constructed paternalism, which projects the aboriginal as a ‘childlike’ and indisciplined Other.

### **3. Law and order**

In 2003 the city council began to look seriously at a number of initiatives which it saw as potential solutions to what had become characterised as the ‘itinerant problem’. The government concern reached a peak around early – mid 2003. There was even consideration of a permit system for Aboriginal people which would have to be produced in the city centre, so great was the perceived threat to the law and order of the city. Draconian policing laws

## THE INDIGENOUS PUBLIC SPHERE

under the previous Liberal Party government had included mandatory sentencing which led to some extraordinarily harsh penalties for the most minor offences.

In 1999, an unemployed homeless man was sentenced to 12 months in jail for the theft of a bath towel valued at \$15. The court record states that the man took the towel from the backyard of a Darwin suburban house 'to use for a blanket' because he was cold. This was his third property offence since the introduction of mandatory sentencing and he was therefore given an automatic term of 12 months imprisonment. The man had a history of 13 other property offences, mostly for the theft of food and similar items for his personal survival. He saw no alternative to entering a plea of guilty as he realised 'there was no choice for him but to do his time'.

His lawyer, Kirsty Gowans, said that the penalty far outweighed the minor nature of the offence. 'We have not come very far from transporting people for stealing a loaf of bread,' she said. (Territorians for Effective Sentencing <http://ms.dcls.org.au/> and PARIAH [http://www.country-liberal-party.com/pages/incarc\\_p5.htm](http://www.country-liberal-party.com/pages/incarc_p5.htm) )

Even with a Labour government in office, the policy of aggressively targeting young male Aborigines who were often unemployed or students has continued. In 2003, over 80 per cent of the prison population in the Northern Territory were Aboriginal people. The popular tabloid presented this fact thus:

... of 756 prisoners in jail in Darwin and Alice Springs, 612 are indigenous. This equates to 82 per cent of the prison population being black. And this means they still show little or no respect for the laws of this country. (*NT News*, Col Newman. October, 2003)

### 4. Media manifestations

During 2003, The Northern Territory developed a perennial theme through its daily newspaper *Northern Territory News*. The theme could fairly be classed as a moral panic in the original use of the term whereby 'a condition, episode, person or group of persons [who] become defined as a threat to societal values and interests' (Cohen, 1987, p. 9). Indigenous groups have been a constantly demonised – and as already shown – criminalised group. The news headlines indicate also possible resolutions to the problem. The use of the

term ‘itinerants’ clearly treated here as a thinly veiled euphemism for Aborigines, is cast aside and almost parodied in the second sample. Looking at these and other headlines a transparent campaign of moral sanction and censure reached a peak around April 2003 when the following headlines occurred. Many of the stories, like those below, show the tabloids’ tendency to reduce complex stories to ‘rabble rousing’ slogans, and seem aggressive and antagonistic about Aboriginal issues.

**Permits for Aborigines** (*NT News*, April 2003)

**ITINERANTS TOLD BY THEIR OWN PEOPLE – GO HOME**  
(*NT News*, April 2003)

**Gang of 30 bashes three teens** (*NT News*, April 16, 2003) featuring a photograph of an Aboriginal male, and the inset box ‘**Why? Because there was nothing to do.**’ – **Darren Duncan pictured at court yesterday.**

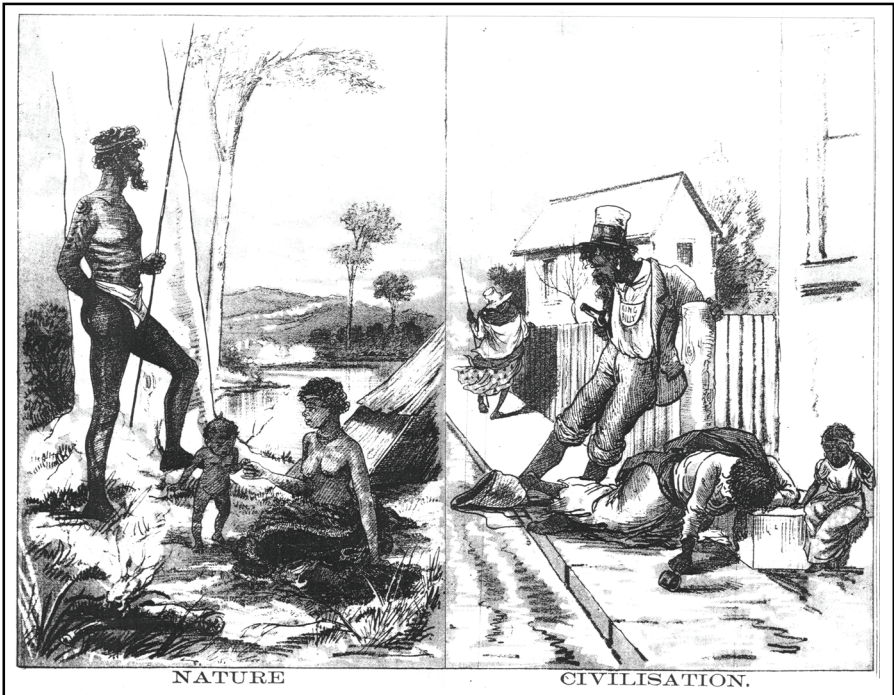
**Black v White**

**Aborigines try to remove white workers** (*NT News*, April 26, 2003)

Cohen and others (e.g. Young, 1971 Hall, et al 1978, Critcher, 2002) have shown how a desire for moral consensus may underpin moral panics focussing on a group which comes to embody – for a period – evil or moral corrosion in society. Figures of authority, agents of social control, particularly the police responding to media demands for action are led to ‘amplify’ the occurrence of deviance. The media are a central agent in this process of amplification (and are at times sheer fabrication) of deviance and threat to a moral order. The headlines from the *Northern Territory News* present indigenous people as a threat; repeatedly portrayed as violent, drunk, homeless, beggars who are a civic nuisance.

There is – it could be suggested – an ambivalence about these portrayals, because firstly the conditions in which Aborigines are living are in the case of some communities shameful and squalid. Second, the derogatory stereotypes about Aboriginal drinking (which have a long history) also draw attention to the NT parallel excesses and alarming rates of alcoholism. Third, many tourists are visiting the NT to visit Aboriginal sites and enjoy the timeless ‘cultural performance’ of Aboriginality. Chas Critcher suggested in a recent in-





**Figure 2: 'Nature/Civilisation.'** *The Queensland Figaro* (6 August 1887, p. 225).

interview (June, 2004) that moral panics often represent the need for moral unity 'particularly at times when moral consensus is hard to come by'. In Australia it could be argued that the moral consensus about historical treatment of indigenous populations and about attitudes of white dominance have gradually shifted and been exposed to critical scrutiny as has Australia's less than glorious colonial past as a penal colony.

### **Public drinking**

A key element in the construction of urban Aborigines in Darwin is the discourse around public drinking. There is evidence that the perceptions of Aboriginal Australians which are prevalent today have their origins in derogatory stereotypes created in the early years of the colony.

The caricatures from 1887 editions of *The Queensland Figaro* (see Figure 2) portray drink as a central and morally corrosive feature of aboriginal urban culture. The effects of drinking on indigenous culture have clearly been



**Figure 3: 'England – Blackfellows at Home.' *Sydney Punch* (15 August 1868, p. 98).**

used by white Australians to affirm their place on higher moral ground, and as a means of racist ridicule and paternalism, bemoaning a loss of noble 'natural' attributes. Ironically it was these very attributes of 'naturalness' which were so despised by early settlers in the frontiers of America, Canada and Australia. As David Sibley suggests science and Christianity asserted white dominance over indigenous peoples – arguing that 'peoples closest to nature, in a primitive state needed saving. Salvation often involved not only accepting Christianity but also adopting European style of dress and discipline of a Christian education in the mission school. ...The civilising mission distanced them from nature' (Sibley, 1995, p. 25).

Further there is the suggestion that Aboriginal people are at best poor mimics of white society. They are portrayed as so far removed from the civilised mores and refined etiquette of English culture that the very suggestion of Aborigines adopting such a life style is presented as ridiculous (as shown in Figure 3).

## THE INDIGENOUS PUBLIC SPHERE

This contrast between the raw ‘nature’ of Aboriginal existence and ‘civilisation’ recalls another popular discourse – that of Rousseau’s ‘noble savage’, a romantic discourse stemming from a strand of Enlightenment thought. The suggestion that Aboriginal people should remain true to their ‘nature’ is as I have illustrated very much alive and well and is still the abiding ‘safe’ image of indigenous Australians which white Australians and tourism affirms.

This tradition of stereotyping Aboriginal people as depraved drunks is obviously the basis of the gross stereotypes available to white Australians – who often have little or no contact with indigenous people throughout their lives. Aboriginal drinking is always looked at as a problem. Yet there is a contradiction involved when the Northern Territory (especially) is clearly proud of a frontier tradition of excessive drinking. Sonia Smallcombe drew out this point in a recent interview:

It’s basically a contradiction. It’s quite celebrated the fact that the city has a huge consumption of alcohol...while they’re celebrating they’re also saying that indigenous people are the ones who should really control their drinking (July, 2004).

In Darwin, the Beer Can Regatta is a public celebration in which rafts and boats constructed from thousands of beer cans are raced at Mindil Beach (see Figure 4). Aboriginal people (indeed people from other ethnic groups) are notably absent. Anthropologist Bill Day suggests that the festival serves a crucial function.

...in the Beer Can Regatta the Darwin non-Aboriginal settler society conceals its cultural dislocation and dispossession of Aboriginal people, while constructing settler myths on the urban landscape. In my analysis, I suggest that the festival mediates the disjunction between culture and place typical of immigrant people. In contrast, I suggest that Darwin fringe dwellers believe that they are at home on their own land, while their drinking is associated with Aboriginal resistance to dispossession. (Day, 2002, Introduction)

Further, Day suggests that the origins of the ‘regatta’ refer back to British culture (as in the regatta at Henley-on-Thames) which further imbues white drinking behaviour with ‘civilised’ values in contrast to the image of Aboriginal drinking which is presented as out of control. The Beer Can Regatta is



STEVE SPENCER

**Figure 4: Detail of Beer Can regatta and 'tinnies' at One Mile Dam.**

presented as a purposeful and constructive reason for drinking. Originating in the 1970s as a 'Keep Australia Beautiful' campaign and creative solution to the mountains of tin cans strewn around the city – the regatta was founded on the idea of a constructive and civic-minded activity which would improve the environment. Day suggests that the act of drinking and hence making more cans available for this family-oriented activity is given a positive value.

Heavy drinking was excused as preparation for the beer can races. One team said they had drunk 3000 cans of beer in a week. 'If we win we'll get rid of a few more cans of beer – to use in next year's race, of course' (*NT News*, August 6, 1997). Day makes the point that the festival serves as an unspoken affirmation of white domination, since Mindil Beach is an area which has significance to local Larrakia people as a burial site.

In postcolonial Darwin where public expressions of racial superiority are illegal, the festival makes a powerful unspoken statement authorising task-directed white drinking in public places. Aborigines, who are noticeably absent from the Mindil Beach festival, are further displaced by the appropriation of the supposedly empty landscape for the predominantly White festival. (Day, 2002, Chpt 9, 11-12)

Drinking then is at the heart of the construction of the 'itinerant problem' and of dominant perceptions of Aboriginal people in Darwin. Aboriginal drinking is seen as an example of the corruption of Aboriginal culture (see Noel Pearson 2000) a view which accords with dominant white constructions of Aboriginal culture as tainted by contact with 'civilized' values. Conversely a number of

analysts have equated heavy drinking cultures amongst 'itinerant' communities as a form of resistance to white hegemony (see Day, 2002). This is not the place to analyse this claim, but suffice to say that the treatment of Aboriginal people for very minor offences (for which a blind eye is turned if the person is white) such as public drunkenness appears to be out of proportion and suggests that urban Aborigines are seen as a threat, not merely to civic order but to symbolic order. This is a feature of the moral panic, which has led the white authorities in Darwin to focus on 'itinerants'.

### **5. Deconstructing 'the itinerant problem'**

In June 2003, the Northern Territory government announced a \$5.25 million budget allocation to develop a strategy dubbed the 'Community Harmony Strategy'. The overarching aims of the strategy were:

- a significant reduction of the incidence of anti-social behaviour by 'itinerants' in all major Territory centres;
- and the delivery of infrastructure, intervention programs and health services responding to identified needs of 'itinerant' groups. (DCDSCA. NT.Govt. Harmony Strategy)

While the ostensible aims of this strategy seemed laudable – a focus on health and well being and a sort of assisted passage back home for people stranded and penniless in city areas – the terms of reference and the definition of implicitly inclusive and exclusive categories of citizenship raise several concerns.

First, the term 'itinerant' entails assumptions of degradation and exclusion which are never made explicit. Itinerant appears to be a euphemism for Aboriginal Australians who stray into the city limits, and do not choose to live in the ghettoised suburban developments where social housing is provided. Mick Lambe – a vocal opponent of local government schemes and racist attitudes towards indigenous groups in the Territory – commented that the term 'itinerant' was 'Territory-speak for Aboriginal people who choose to live traditionally' and '.. Aboriginal people who have escaped from their remote communities...' (Lambe, 'NT Labor continue traditional Dry season racism' [Part 1] <http://www.country-liberal-party.com/pages/Go-Home.htm> 15 April, 2003)

Second, the term ‘itinerant’ with its connotation of “ever-shifting” has been applied to groups who are relatively settled in areas around Darwin city centre. It is possible to argue that some sites are more mobile than others, but even the ‘long grass’ camps on Darwin’s foreshore have there for many years. As Sonia Smallcombe told me: ‘The government has labelled these people as itinerants, although a lot of them have been around 20 or 30 years so they’re actually not itinerants.’

Third, the term ‘itinerant’ clearly reflects judgements about life style as well as origins and length of habitation. Indeed, those people known as ‘itinerant’ appear to maintain some vestiges of a traditional life style and be resistant to the model of citizenship offered by the representatives of the Larrakia nation. Sonia Smallcombe commented: ‘They’re a group of people who for various reasons are not keen to live in houses, and a lot of people will say things like the reason I don’t want to go and live in a state house or a housing commission flat is because I can’t – I’m not allowed to have my extended family visit me or stay with me – I’m not allowed to have my animals (Aboriginal people like to have their dogs) they’re not allowed to have their dogs with them’ (Interview, July, 2004). Reviewing these discursive shifts, Anthropologist Bill Day suggests that ‘itinerant’ is a signifier which removes the threat the privileged white society of Darwin feels towards Aboriginal people.

In Darwin, homeless Aboriginal people who might evoke by their very condition the brutal realities of racism are made less threatening and more responsible for their own state through the mobilisation of terms like ‘transients’ or ‘itinerants’. These categories are often used as the equivalent to the iconic ‘drunken “Abo”’, as described by Langton (1993a). However, as Cowlshaw (1994, p. 80) claims, the refusal of Aborigines in towns to be passive and silent ‘stimulates the fears and feeds the paranoia’, which many town residents feel towards the significant minority (Day, 2002).

Fourth, the term disguises (effectively denies) the agency of dominant white Australians in dispossessing Aboriginal groups from their traditional lands, forcible removal of groups to missions and the removal of children from their families. Ironically the approach stemming from the euphemistic ‘itinerant problem’ is arguably related to the earlier policies characterised by the title ‘Aboriginal problem’.

‘The aim of these assimilationist policies was that the Aboriginal ‘prob-

lem’ would ultimately disappear – the people would lose their identity within the wider community, albeit through continuing restrictive laws and paternalistic administration.’

The government approach to homeless Aboriginal people today appears to be of the same order, removing Aboriginal people from the city centre and using a variety of coercive methods to return them to their ‘homelands’. As stated in the *Northern Territory News* (editorial, March 11, 1996): ‘Pulling down of makeshift camps and moving people on certainly doesn’t work. The itinerants just shift to another spot in town. Disliking them and their lifestyle won’t make them go away. Positive ideas are needed’.

The most recent scheme has involved the collaboration of the government with a newly formed Aboriginal group – the Larrakia Nation – to give the job of policing itinerants a more ethical and apparently culturally sensitive approach.

## 6. Larrakia Nation

The newly formed Larrakia Nation has received the \$500,000 backing from the state government. The Larrakia Hosts were formed in order to persuade ‘long grassers’ or itinerants to go home, and reduce ‘anti-social behaviours’. Cultural protocols were foregrounded asking non-Larrakians to respect traditional values when on Larrakia land. The host scheme was fairly ineffective, but signs were put up around the centre, setting boundaries and times for public drinking (see Figure 5). This approach is supplemented by intensive policing of the few Aboriginal people who now set foot in the park.

To an outsider it seems hard to imagine that Darwin has a significant population of indigenous people, as they are noticeably absent from the city centre. A few groups of Aboriginal people were seen in the Bicentennial Park on the Esplanade, small clusters sat conversing and sharing beers. It was hardly the riotous assembly the tabloids had portrayed. There was a

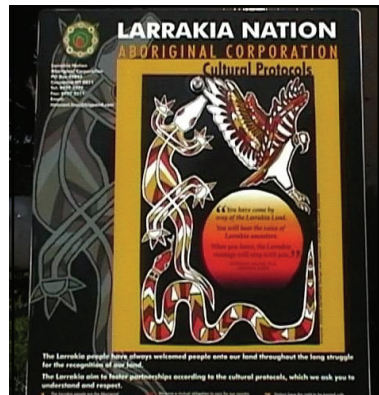


Figure 5: Larrakia ‘Cultural Protocols’ Signposts like this have sprung up across the city area.



**Figure 6: Breathing While Black** – image from PARIAH website. Caption: *‘Prior to their being “moved on” by NT police, these people were peaceably assembled in Darwin’s city centre, instead of their isolated and (according to ex-NT Chief Minister Shane Stone) “dysfunctional” communities. Don’t you love the Aboriginal art (for the tourists) in the background.’*

very significant police presence in the park; one evening I counted 15 officers with motor bikes and patrol wagons gathered informally near the Esplanade. Paddy wagons move in and out of the park during the day checking on the small knots of Aborigines especially where there are white tourists who are sunbathing. Mission Australia also patrols the park, stopping to investigate Aboriginal needs, distributing fresh water, and giving contact details

in case they want to use any of the services that the mission provides – including an assisted passage back home (tickets are purchased for them and the money is reclaimed from their social security allowance). In short, this surveillance and monitoring seemed inordinately focused on a few transient people who were causing very little fuss.

The underlying policy focus is on the regulation of public drinking and protecting tourists and retail businesses in the city from harassment by ‘itinerants’ begging or ‘humbugging’. These are the issues which city aldermen insist require drastic measures to counter. The photograph (entitled Breathing While Black) from the polemical PARIAH website (Figure 6) captures the sense of oppression experienced by Aboriginal people in the city centre. The new police laws allow for ‘itinerants’ to be ‘moved on’.

When asking about the Larrakian Nation and its origins, I was told that it represents a newly incorporated umbrella group which collectively defined groups who have long-standing land rights claims in the Darwin area and the Cox Peninsula.



## THE INDIGENOUS PUBLIC SPHERE

The Larrakia are unique in the sense that we are identified as the traditional owners and custodians of the greater Darwin area, Palmerston area, rural area which is unique in the sense that most large urban areas, particularly city areas, throughout Australia share a joint ownership of two or more Aboriginal groups but we're certainly recognised as the only Aboriginal group in the greater Darwin area as custodians/traditional owners: within that there are eight identifiable family groups that represent the 1700 Larrakia people.' (Calvin Costello, Larrakia coordinator, interview, July , 2004)

These are people who have struggled for many years for recognition of their lands and, as with all Aboriginal groups, are marginalised and impoverished. The government's Land Commissioner, Justice Grey, in December 2000 recommended over the 'Kenbi Land Claim' that a large area of land on the Cox Peninsula should be handed back to the Larrakia after a 23-year struggle.

Among other Aboriginal groups there is a general suspicion about the Larrakia's involvement in city council schemes to send itinerants home. The recent founding of the Larrakia Nation (1997) is viewed as a political bargaining tool. Larrakia members act as hosts who inform other Aboriginal people of the sort of behaviour that is respectful on Larrakia land. This was perceived by some 'itinerants' as divide-and-rule tactics, by a group who have been lured into collusion by promise of shared bounty.

The scheme was featured on the ABC's *7.30 Report* (January 6, 2004)<sup>1</sup> where it was portrayed as an effective panacea to help Aboriginal people who get marooned in Darwin and cannot afford the fare back home. No mention was made of the long-standing 'long grass' and other communities in Darwin. The Larrakia scheme was presented as a brilliant enterprise which avoids the rough handling that was associated with the Liberals' attitude. The story was presented in the usual magazine style by McLaughlin's commentary and a few indigenous voices – interestingly never dialogues or exchanges but unitary utterances in terse, almost broken English. The coordinated and orderly work by many service providers renders the story one of success for the voice of reason, civic pride and responsibility. The itinerants are described as befuddled natives who can think no further than their immediate needs. Keeping them actively employed making paintings and carvings might keep them off the streets. It is paternalism dressed up in the discourse of timeless Aboriginality. There was no attempt to highlight or even address the issue of

‘itinerants’ – they have no voice here, in contrast to the Larrakia ‘leaders’ and white Australians. However, the division between Larrakia and others is certainly not clearly defined. Smallcombe commented that the Larrakia had

... somehow been recruited by the government, not all of them – I’ve met a lot of Larrakia people who don’t agree with it – being recruited by the government to tell other Indigenous people that your behaviour on our country is not good enough, and you really should respect Larrakia ways of doing things – when you going up here and drinking, and going up and asking tourists for money... fortunately it’s not been a decisive policy, a lot of Larrakia people actually support the itinerants, and there is an itinerant organisation that’s been set up – and there’s a lot of Larrakia people in that. ..I think indigenous people are aware that the government uses those kind of strategies to try and divide indigenous groups. (July, 2004)

The attempt to use Larrakia claims and voices strategically is also echoed by Mick Lambe:

An enormous presumption is being made about the impact of Aboriginal people in Darwin, dressed up in terms such as “cultural protocols” to conceal its innate contradictions. Does the ‘impact’ of Aboriginal people on the Larrakia compare in any way (for example) to the cultural and physical impact of European invasion? What right has the government to dictate, when and how Larrakian voices will be heard? And more importantly – which Larrakian voices will be heard. As June Mills stated in court. The Larrakians did not give permission for the NT Parliament building to be constructed on their land. (Mick Lambe, PARIAN website)

Lambe’s comments draw out the extraordinary ironies implicit in this scheme. The apparent divide between two relatively underprivileged groups further amplifies the deviance of the more loosely defined ‘itinerants’ while the Larrakia ‘Nation’ becomes a viable partner with the state government and council to share in financially lucrative schemes. Furthermore as with any effective colonial administration it sets subject ‘races’ in an antagonistic relationship while reaping the benefits and maintaining control yet disguising the true conditions of domination.

Despite the desperate needs of other indigenous groups around the outskirts of Darwin, Costello takes a pragmatic view of their welfare and struggles with officialdom. Realistically this situation is not a simple polemic – the waters are much muddier. The Larrakia have struggled for over 24 years for the recognition they have achieved. The issue of lifestyle is extraordinarily divisive; even within the ranks of Larrakia people there are a diversity of views. Certainly many Larrakia are keen supporters of groups like the Kumbutjil Association (One Mile Dam Community).

However, Larrakia people, Costello argues, make up a tiny minority of these less formal communities – like the Bagot (he claimed only 2 people there). Instead they have been dispersed into public housing. Again I asked him about the Community Development Employment Programme – Marcia Langton has called this ‘labour apartheid’ – Costello simply stated the popularity of the scheme and the fact there was a waiting list of several hundred. If skills and experience are needed does this scheme provide these? Others have argued the scheme is merely a means of providing labour under the minimum wage – and that the majority of the tasks are menial and degrading and hardly constitute growing a skilled community. Sonia Smallcombe emphasised that developing skills and growth in the community is the only way out of the appalling conditions faced by generations of indigenous people in the NT.

To the Larrakia who are more cooperative, membership appears to have potential benefits. Calvin Costello, Larrakia coordinator, proudly showed me a model of the proposed cultural facility which is planned to be built on Larrakia land near the airport. The multi-million dollar development is designed to attract tourists to share in Aboriginal culture, and will offer employment possibilities for large numbers of Larrakians. This development, however, is not for outsiders or ‘itinerants’ as the following promotion for a Multi-Purpose Cultural Facility makes clear. Calvin is quick to point out a different side to the plight of One Mile Dam – explaining that they haven’t paid rent on the site for more than four years (one would perhaps feel that the suggestion of ‘rent’ was an insult given the appalling conditions they have to contend with). Calvin gives a wry smile and suggests that also they have choices – moving into public housing is also an available option to them. There are two sets of values informing this divide, two discourses which give competing readings of the role that itinerants play in NT society. All Larrakia people are encouraged to attend a viewing of the concept model for the proposed Larrakia

Multi Purpose Cultural Facility. All Larrakia Nation members and non-member Larrakia families are invited to provide input into the development of this major Project ([www.larrakia.com/thewebsite/future.html](http://www.larrakia.com/thewebsite/future.html)).

The implications of this are clear when aligned with a policy of policing the boundaries of shared ownership and disseminating information about Cultural Protocols. There are effectively two competing groups: one defined by homelessness, poverty, dispossession, and anti-social behaviours, the other with official approval and recognition has bargaining power a successful land claim and relative affluence but a less traditional life style.

These projects represent a financially lucrative arrangement between some of the Larrakia, Councillor Ah Kit (himself of Larrakian origin) and the Labor government. 'Essentially a plan to remove "itinerants" (Territory-speak for Aboriginal people who choose to live traditionally) has been given a politically-correct fillip by the use of some of the less "traditional", but far wealthier Larrakians' (Mick Lambe, 2003).

When I asked Costello about the contrast in lifestyles, he reinforced the fact that the negative impacts of alcohol on 'long grass' communities was having impact on young children, with he suggested, increasing incidence of violent abuse to women and sexual abuse of children. He was unequivocal about the need for indigenous people to move into housing to gain employment and hence self respect. While speaking with him I felt the pragmatism he exuded was probably one positive antidote to a very hard and demoralising existence. However there are other ways in which a state which had genuine concern for cultural values could give Aboriginal people of all origins and life-styles a sense of belonging rather than to cast some as pariahs. The suggestion of several groups has been to re-zone areas which include the less formal camps and allow those who wish to live less formally with extended family and their animals.

## Conclusion

I read somewhere during the Bosnian war... I think about 'ethnic cleansing'. Well I'm beginning to think that that's what's happening here. (David Timber, coordinator of the Kumbutjil Association, One Mile Dam Community)

To an outsider from the cramped confines of urban England it seemed extraordinary to me initially, that such vast areas of land could not accommo-

## THE INDIGENOUS PUBLIC SPHERE

date a few thousand Indigenous people who wish to determine their own lifestyle and resist being squeezed into new and regulated suburban spaces. However, I came to the conclusion that the recalcitrance of the city authorities is more purposeful and fuelled by the need for a moral consensus – that the affluent white population wishes to reaffirm its hegemony and that the result has been a moral panic which over the decades has demonised and pressured this group. Aboriginality is being used as a ‘floating’ signifier (see Hall, 1997) drawn upon expediently where there is cultural or economic capital to be gained; tourist dollars, and a compliant and manipulated Indigenous community. Aboriginal people are portrayed when it suits as ‘noble custodians of the outback’, ‘the embodiment of ancient traditions’, or dirty drunks who are an embarrassment to the civic authorities and a potential threat to business who must be banished from the city environs. Aboriginal people are reminders of collective guilt to which national and state response has been collective denial.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from the ABC, *7.30 Report* Transcripts, 6 January 2004:

MURRAY McLAUGHLIN: Since May last year, 530 Indigenous itinerants have chosen to leave Darwin and go back home, 300 in the past two months alone.

Many of them have been encouraged to return by their own leaders, who’ve come to Darwin to identify and round up their countrymen.

TRIBAL LEADER: We have to go home.

MURRAY McLAUGHLIN: Anywhere else, the return home program might be seen as social engineering.

TRIBAL LEADER: We’re not drinking.

We go home.

MURRAY McLAUGHLIN: In Darwin, it’s part of a government-driven strategy to reduce the problem of itinerants in town.

TRIBAL LEADER: These mob, and that mob, they’re coming home, one way.

MURRAY McLAUGHLIN: Do they want to go home?

TRIBAL LEADER: They’re all my family.

JOHN AH KIT, NT GOVERNMENT MINISTER: What we’ve said is anti-social behaviour is no longer acceptable and we have to have to start turning it around because this has been happening for some 20-odd years and all we got from Shane Stone was, ‘Monster and stomp on them’.

SHANE STONE, FORMER CHIEF MINISTER: People who are out there causing havoc on our streets, who are defecating in our car parks and our shopping centres, deserve to be monstered and stomped on.

MURRAY McLAUGHLIN: The Larrakia people are the Aboriginal traditional owners of the greater Darwin area.

They've taken a leading role in the plans to reduce anti-social behaviour by itinerants around Darwin.

At night, they stake out shopping centres and other gathering points to educate visitors from distant communities to respect local cultural protocols.

LARRAKIA WOMAN: We go to their country, we respect their country.

They come to our country and we want them to respect us.

### Interviews

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2. Sonia Smallcombe (July, 2004). Indigenous Studies, Charles Darwin University, Darwin.
3. Calvin Costello (July, 2004). Larrakia Nation HQ, Darwin, NT.
4. David Timber (July 2004). Kumbutjil Association, One Mile Dam, Darwin.

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