



AN URBAN FRONTIER: Respatializing Government in Remote Northern Australia

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In 2007 Australia's Commonwealth government announced the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), a militarized intervention that aimed to transform the government of Aboriginal people and to address what its designers understood as a social crisis in Aboriginal Australia. Colloquially termed "the Intervention," the NTER followed closely on the heels of, and purported to respond to, a report commissioned by the Northern Territory government, titled *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle (Little Children Are Sacred)* (Wild and Anderson 2007).¹ This report described the widespread abuse of children in remote Aboriginal communities and sketched the outline of a humanitarian emergency that, designers of the NTER argued, required a radical and immediate response.

For Aboriginal people living in the seventy-three remote communities targeted by the NTER this meant a wide range of disciplinary measures, including the prohibition of pornographic material; restrictions on alcohol; the governmental management of welfare-supported spending; mandatory health exams for young children;² the transfer of authority over community spending to Commonwealth-directed government business managers (GBM); enforced school attendance; and the compulsory leasing of community land heretofore held as inalienable under an array of land rights and Native title provisions.³ Crafting legislation that so overtly targeted the lives and behaviors of Aboriginal people also required the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975, Australian

legislation which prohibits inequitable treatment on the basis of racial criteria.⁴ The NTER was followed by a separate redrawing of the spatial logics of Northern Territory local government, in which eight newly established shire councils (now termed super shires) joined the NTER's government business managers in displacing local Aboriginal community councils as loci of decision-making. Taken together, these measures went far beyond the immediate crisis by consummating a broader shift in Aboriginal policy away from a focus on the autonomy and self-determination of Aboriginal people and toward efforts to amplify economic participation and so-called mutual obligation.⁵ So although the NTER led to no prosecutions for child sexual abuse, the state of emergency it named endures, as many of its specific programs have been extended beyond the Intervention's original five-year term.

The immediate reaction in the Northern Territory was strong and characterized by both anger and anxiety as Aboriginal people responded to governmental pronouncements and an alarmist, scandalizing press. Newspaper headlines oscillated between figures of social pathology, in which a grog-sick population found itself helpless in the face of an epidemic of child abuse, and accounts of disarray in remote communities: "Terrified Families Flee in Panic" read one headline in the days following the Intervention's inauguration, describing the alarm at Uluru and other communities in the central Australian desert as Aboriginal people speculated on the possible outcomes of such radical interference (Murdoch and Peating 2007). Though alarmist, this headline registered a perhaps unsurprising anxiety in central Australian communities that the Intervention, with its overt focus on Indigenous children, could lead to a new Stolen Generation—a return to policies of prior decades in which the Australian state removed children en masse from communities and kin groups (see Haebich 2004; Read 2007).

Although the Intervention was widely understood to affect Aboriginal people living in remote and bush communities, its restrictions and jurisdictional mandates also applied to those living in and traveling through the Northern Territory's cities and towns, including Darwin, its capital. On the one hand, the Intervention included legislation around behavior and land tenure that directly implicated Indigenous town camps held under an array of freehold and communal lease agreements. These camps also became subject to the same prohibitions on grog, pornography, and the controls over welfare expenditure experienced in remote communities.⁶ On the other hand, the Intervention has been understood to amplify the migration of remote-living Aboriginal people into towns as people seek respite from the increases in disciplinary surveillance now operative in remote

communities (Fisher 2012; Holmes and McRae-Williams 2008). Although there is some dispute around the demographic analysis of Indigenous urban migration, with some seeing little substantive change in quantitative terms (Taylor and Carson 2009; but see Fisher 2012; Lea 2012a), in Darwin Indigenous people and settler Australians alike experience these camps and bush spaces as much more crowded today than a decade ago, and the town itself as overrun with these seemingly “homeless” Indigenous campers.

This essay draws on research with such Aboriginal campers and their advocates in Darwin to argue that governmental initiatives associated with the NTER and their mediatization in a broader settler-Australian domain as scandal and humanitarian anxiety both legislate and elicit the wild status that now accrues to such urban camps and settlements.⁷ To do so, the essay brings an ethnographic lens to the sociospatial complexity of government in the Northern Territory, placing an ethnographic critique of emergency response and intervention into dialogue with spatial dimensions of sovereignty and alterity. A broad scholarship on the spatial politics of Indigeneity has described the ways that multiple spatial regimes become entangled in contests around sovereignty and belonging in settler-colonial domains (Jacobs 1996; Gelder and Jacobs 1998; Kuhlenbeck 2010; Razack 2002). I also underscore that the deployment of governmental power in the social production of space is not the prerogative of the settler-state alone (see also Moore 2005; Simpson 2014). In the Northern Territory, for instance, Indigenous groups such as the Larrakia endeavor to be “seen as the state” through assertions of both sovereign interest and humanitarian concern vis-à-vis Darwin’s broader Indigenous population (cf. Scott 1999), and as I suggest here, Aboriginal campers themselves produce distinct kinds of spaces within the city through forms of movement, occupation, and oppositional enframings of social space.⁸

Yet disarticulating governmental power from the settler state can be difficult in a context so manifestly shaped by the NTER and in which Commonwealth and Territory governments present themselves as linchpins of a single, unchallenged sovereign order. As I suggest below, Commonwealth policies powerfully inflect other Indigenous agencies, which must reckon with the statistical creatures, financial interests, and broader disciplinary forces engaged by the state in its efforts to produce governable space. From this perspective, the NTER can be seen to mediate multiple sovereign claims on and social interests in the definition and production of space. My account pivots around such sociospatial reckoning to

explore the fractured character of sovereign authority, its multiplication and contestation even in those places where the state's claims seem most secure.

The Intervention, in part created for a settler-public audience by a Liberal Party coalition in the weeks before a charged election, was also always already a mediatized event taking shape in the domain of mass-mediated publicity (Hinkson 2010; Howard-Wagner 2012). This involved news stories, television documentaries, public protests, op-ed pieces, and at times impassioned academic debate for a public audience (see Altman and Taylor 2007; Morris and Lattas 2010; Toohey 2008). I suggest here that such media are thus constitutive factors of the Intervention and its consequences for Darwin—ingredient to the categories of experience and spatial politics the NTER entailed in this city, from its governmental materiality to its contestation in the street. Weaving together media accounts of Aboriginal social pathology and ethnographic accounts of camp life can suggest the complexity of governmental endeavors in Northern Australia, and the different ways these animate understandings of and anxieties around remote Australia and Aboriginal camps.

At this essay's core is an ethnographic exploration of transformed understandings of remote Australia and their implications for urban Aboriginal places and intra-Indigenous relations in the cities and towns of the Northern Territory. To analyze such issues in contemporary Australia requires asking after the changing character of the government of Aboriginal people, as interventions based on imperatives of justice and equity so prominent in the era of land rights activism give way to a durable state of emergency built on discourses of compassion and humanitarian concern (Lea 2012a; Povinelli 2011; cf. Fassin 2012; Zigon 2013). This embrace of figures of crisis and emergency, a phenomenon with worldwide analogues (see Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Roitman 2014), here takes shape as the respatialization of Australian governmental logics and the mediatization of Aboriginal violence and despair.

In describing the ways in which such mediatized enframings of social crisis propel the government of space in Northern Australia, I seek to illuminate something of what Audra Simpson (2014, 154) terms, writing of Kahnawà:ke Mohawk sovereignty, the productive power of juridical efforts that fail to contain their object. In Australia, however, the durable state of emergency ascribed to Indigenous Northern Australia produces both the state's authority to craft policy and distinct forms of spatial and social alterity. My aim here is to shift discussions of policy and its indebtedness to a contemporary politics of suffering (Fassin 2012; cf. Sutton 2009) away from broader discursive poles of neoliberal critique or

humanitarian necessity, and to underscore the NTER's deep imbrication with and instigation of those forms of alterity and turmoil that settler institutions seek to order. Policy in this perspective is not simply a neutral instrument applied (appropriately or mistakenly) to a social problem that can then be assessed in terms of transparent rubrics of efficacy. It is instead, I argue, animated by forms of imagination, mediatized narrative, and desire, forces that in their mobilization in the Northern Territory take material shape in and as space. This essay thus provides ethnographic coordinates for understanding how powerful figures of emergency and crisis acquire temporal durability and spatial form, and for understanding how that form is lived, contested, and occasionally refashioned.

CARING FOR CAMPERS

"A lot of our families too are out in the streets here, you know? You come across your family members here." GT,⁹ a night patrol officer in Darwin, underlined his investment in his work by reference to the frequent presence of his relations among the people he encounters over the course of an evening. Night patrols, as they are known throughout Northern Australia, are non-police-based patrols, often but not always staffed by Aboriginal people, established to remove Aboriginal people from harm and conflict abetted by alcohol consumption. This night patrol, run by the area's traditional owners, the Larrakia Nation, has two trucks patrolling Darwin and the neighboring town of Palmerston each night. It was established in 2008 in response to the Larrakia's concern with the large numbers of campers then in Darwin, a rise in population tied directly to the NTER.

Night patrol officers have no capacity to arrest or otherwise restrain campers, and they are instead dedicated to providing assistance and care. Their work should also be understood, however, alongside the Larrakia's broader efforts to be seen like a state. Larrakia-issued identity cards, forms of social assistance, and the night patrol all function as performances of Larrakia sovereignty over this country vis-à-vis other Aboriginal people and the Australian state itself. Patrol officers, most of whom are not Larrakia, thus mediate relationships between Darwin's traditional landowners, Aboriginal campers, and the state. Their work registers the difficulties of camping as well as a broader process that renders Indigenous camps an irruption of remoteness within the city.

In more immediate terms, however, the patrol aims to keep Aboriginal campers and drinkers from the more radical intervention of the Northern Territory police, which can entail arrest, incarceration, and conflict with police of-

ficers. Patrols thus endeavor to provide people with safe exit from situations where they might cause themselves or others harm, driving them to a city apartment, or more frequently, to a camp or a Northern Territory government-funded “sobering-up shelter.” If people are shouting and fighting, GT suggests simply driving up to the group can “settle things down”—“people stop and think,” he says. And while such policing does occasionally put night patrols and campers at odds, I found a strong sense of identification and compassion between patrol officers—some of whom have spent their own time in the long grass—and campers.

In 2013 I accompanied patrol officers through the camps and small communities that exist amid the suburbs and light industrial districts of the city. I know these camps through my long-term research with some of their regular residents, locally referred to as “long-grassers” or “long-grass campers,” named for the tall spear grass found throughout Darwin. My research with the patrol sought to better understand the forms of intra-Indigenous negotiation through which campers make an urban place into Aboriginal country (see also Fisher 2012). *Country* in this use contrasts starkly with most settler-Australian understandings of the term, and in Darwin it serves among campers as a widespread gloss on the sociospatial matrix of cosmology, law, and kinship on which Aboriginal understandings of autonomy and autochthony are based (Myers 1986; Povinelli 1994). What night patrol officers must accommodate, and what is amplified as scandalous in the mediatized constitution of camping as a focus of governmental concern, is widespread and extensive alcohol consumption, overcrowded Aboriginal housing, a corresponding surplus of people in parks and beside walking trails, and the frequent intervention of the Territory police. Together these phenomena contribute to making Darwin’s town camps a turbulent, often violent frontier, shaping the problem space of what can be figured as a permanent state of emergency in the Northern Territory.

The city is home to many camps, from long-established communities to informal clusters of people at the edges of parks, most folded cheek by jowl amid the growing settler-occupied suburbs. One Mile Dam, a three-decades-old Indigenous town camp, lies just steps away from the Stuart Highway in Darwin’s city center, directly across the road from newly constructed suburban development in Stuart Park and mere meters from Darwin’s central Toyota dealership. Other established places of Aboriginal residence in Darwin include Bagot, Minmarama, and Kulaluk further north along Darwin’s harbor coastline. These latter are also held under forms of freehold lease with homes rented to householders,

and they were the focal point of a charged land claim begun in the early 1970s. The Bagot community, from whose acreage Kulaluk and Minmarama were later carved, sits between the airport and Darwin's harbor. Colonial authorities initially established Bagot in the late 1930s in an effort to police Aboriginal people's movement in Darwin and to restrict the congress of so-called full-blood and half-caste Aboriginal people. In spite of such racializing discipline, the area later became identified as Aboriginal territory within the city, recognized by the Territory government but ultimately reduced in size from its initial allotment.

Aboriginal movement to and through towns has thus been a perennial focus of governmental concern and public anxiety, and this has been amplified in the period of policy shift that informed the Intervention. As some predicted (Altman and Taylor 2007), the NTER had the effect of increasing the number of campers in Darwin as people sought respite from the Intervention's disciplinary apparatus and a resulting increase in oversight in their home communities. Demographers and others thus claim that there are a larger number of campers in Darwin today, gathering in parks and bush spaces throughout town and living under greater pressures of surveillance and suspicion, than in preceding decades (Holmes and McRae-Williams 2008; Lea 2012b; Prout 2008; cf. Taylor and Carson 2009).¹⁰

Driving by Darwin's airport, GT pointed out a vast area of dry gum trees and bush to our left, stretching a kilometer or more before the fenced runways. "A lot of people get killed just here, trying to cross the road. People don't see them," he said. Aboriginal people camp in this wide stretch of bush land, and then try to cross the road to and from a large pub just on the other side of four busy lanes of roadway. Invisible both socially and to the headlights of fast cars, they are hit frequently by trucks and other traffic hurtling along toward Darwin's city center.¹¹ GT thus patrols the bush by the airport, encouraging campers to move somewhere safer. But other options, such as government-managed apartments, have their own limitations. GT sketched the dilemma many campers face, foregrounding familial obligation:

You can't stop your families coming in from the bush, you know what I mean? And the housing commission, with these new laws and no drinking signs on the places. If you *run amok*, what happens is a lot of the families get kicked out, because of their families.

One of me mates, he's come from Groote Eylandt, his wife's come from Groote Eylandt. And them people are with their traditional laws and are very powerful. They'll use it on anyone if they want to pay 'em back

you know? And me mate, what happened to him, he refused his wife's family 'cause they're drinking, coming around here. But he couldn't stop them. They're older than him, and that's his wife's family, and they *affect* him, "I'll sing you!" you know? And he did go mad in the head.

The difficulties facing campers who seek government housing are, minimally, twofold. From one side, there is police oversight and state discipline in such housing. From the other, the imperatives of kinship press some up against the strictures of the state, entailing unavoidable transgression and its consequences. LM, a camper I knew well, often left her apartment for the long grass—finding there freedoms to drink and socialize, and from the “humbug” of kin, that elude her in state-managed housing. And in GT's story, older men punished the transgressions of their affinal junior by “singing” him, a local gloss on the ways that sorcerers curse others. Here, a younger man's refusal to house his elders resulted in serious punishment.

Throughout Darwin, places that may look barren from the window of a passing car, an apparent suburban or light industrial “non-place” (Auge 1992), in fact constitute sites of ongoing Indigenous occupation and of deeply sedimented political aspiration and social imagination. Stopping briefly to look out over the beach at Darwin's Casuarina Reserve, GT suggested, as many others have before him, that zones of demarcated Aboriginal space within the city could provide alternatives to what he has come to see as the “sure death” of long-grass camping: “I've thought about it a lot. I reckon like around here, on the beaches here, for long-grass people, they should set up tropical sheds. A barbeque place, a fireplace, a security officer there so that if you're too intoxicated, well you can't come back you know? [If] they got a shower and a bed, [they can] start being a bit independent. But you got to be close to the sea.” GT's answer to the problems caused by drinking, occasional conflicts within kin groups, and the proximity of bush camps to traffic arterials is to nominate three areas near Darwin's coast for different groups that come to Darwin, places where people might sleep, socialize, fish, and even drink if they want to. This mode of imagining the Aboriginal occupation of Darwin has offered a recurrent utopian promise, a figure in which Aboriginal people craft spaces of autonomy and possibility, complete with infrastructure and policing, in areas of bush and foreshore within the city. Indeed, many of today's recognized camps and communities began as efforts to establish such spaces, or to transform older sites of confinement such as Darwin's Bagot reserve into sites of Aboriginal autonomy and security (Day 1994).

GT and the long-grass campers I introduce here, however, cannot themselves claim traditional ownership of this territory. GT's imagining stems from his perspective as an Indigenous resident of Darwin, a onetime drinker, and now an employee of an organization run by Darwin's traditional owners. And these owners' imaginings of Darwin's Indigenous future often differ from the image offered by GT's utopian reflections. Recent efforts to secure recognition of Larrakia status as owners include suburban development and a range of performative iterations of Larrakia sovereignty—of which the night patrol is itself one of the more visible manifestations. Efforts by activists in support of the long-grass occupation of Darwin's bush spaces must thus reckon with multiple forms of sovereign authority and governmental care.

While GT's imaginings partake of a broader historical effort to secure land rights, they also take shape in a mediatized world, as speech acts imbued with the publicity that accrues to long-grass camping. An imagined audience inheres in such comments and conversations that includes settler Australians, Aboriginal campers, and Larrakia landowners. Aboriginal camping receives regular, anxious press attention and has also entangled Larrakia in opposing views on how to remediate the problems associated with long-grass camping. The antinomial categories of the remote and the urban themselves partake of the auratic penumbra such mediatization entails, and inflect accounts of bush and town even in the material absence of a camera or a crowd (cf. [Butler 2012](#); [Weber 1996](#)). These categories and the stories they inform are a charged focus of public anxiety that, in their circulation, shape how Aboriginal and settler Australians come to know the city. Aboriginal campers and their advocates know this well, and have come to understand themselves through such media even as they often contest such damning accounts in their daily comportment and demeanor ([Lea 2012b](#)), in the ways they narrate their biographies and account for their occupation of Darwin ([Fisher 2012](#)), and in the narratives they address to one another, to reporters, and to anthropologists.

Another frequent interlocutor in my early research was both a camper and a vocal advocate for Aboriginal rights to live in Darwin's bush spaces unmolested by police. JB, in partnership with non-Indigenous activists and Larrakia friends, had turned to the small media of the photocopied magazine *Kujuk*, to public speaking at protests, and to community radio to publicize campers' right of occupation. JB and many other campers filled *Kujuk* with their testimonies, often angry at fines and the confiscations of property that could occur when intoxicated campers were taken to Darwin's sobering-up shelter, locally termed the "spin

dry.” Such efforts should be seen as coextensive with GT’s more recent comments to me, and as part of a broader effort to reclaim the terrain of publicity around camping. As such they highlight and contest the regard of a media apparatus that produces camping and a broad Aboriginal social pathology as a mediated object of settler concern, registering crisis and trauma in a remote North while foreclosing the possibility of campers as interlocutors themselves.¹² Darwin’s different camps and settlements have thus in part resulted from past efforts to assert distinctly Aboriginal forms of belonging and autonomy within Darwin, and they remain the focus of diverse forms of governmental intervention and media attention.



Figure 1. *Kujuk* lampoons the spin dry, cover of the *Kujuk* photocopied newsletter. Reverse asks readers to copy and redistribute, to “share *Kujuk*.”

ABORIGINAL COUNTRY IN THE CITY

Darwin is a small city at the top end of the Northern Territory and figures in national discourse as itself a remote northern city—a place far from the rest of Australia and existing just outside the norms of urban civility found in southern cities and towns. “Closer to Singapore than to Sydney,” goes a well-worn aphorism that places Northern Australia at a remove not just from Australia’s south but from Anglo-Australian cultural norms as well. Many settler Australians encounter Darwin through media representations before, if ever, they experience the city itself. The headlines of the Murdoch-owned *Northern Territory News* frequently feature aggressive wildlife such as crocodiles and snakes; aggressive Aboriginal people drinking, gambling, and fighting in the city’s parks; and an aggressive capitalism turning a resource-rich frontier into enterprise, possibility, and a settler-Australian future. Darwin’s remoteness thus receives an ambivalent gloss, one at times anxious, at other times celebratory.

Darwin is also a place to which Aboriginal people from throughout the Northern Territory travel. That movement is often toward the freedoms Darwin offers, not (or not only) as a zone of urban anonymity but also as a place governed less intensely by both community-authored and Commonwealth-imposed provisions against drinking, in which one’s ability to move across the city’s bush spaces and parks lessens the oversight of one’s immediate kin and community. Darwin is also an administrative center to which Aboriginal people are compelled to come to visit a hospital, attend a corporate meeting or court hearing, or participate in a cultural event. As Indigenous metropole and regional center, then, Darwin is filled with people from the remote communities and small towns that dot the Top End. They might stay with relatives or they may visit one of the city’s numerous camps or settlements. A shopping mall, a clutch of mangrove by the harbor, a beach, or a suburban football oval all provide places to sit and socialize, drink and laugh. And Aboriginal people simply travel through Darwin too, using its airport or bus station en route elsewhere—to communities to the south along the Stuart highway, or to catch flights to Alice Springs, Sydney, Melbourne, or Perth.

When Aboriginal people come to the city, they bring a range of spatial logics grounded in an understanding of ancestrally given autochthony, locally glossed in terms of “law” and “country.” Indeed, in the city one hears frequent Indigenous reference to Darwin itself as country—as in “this here is my country,” or “this place is the home of my countrymen.” This particular way of talking about Darwin mobilizes *country* as a claim of origin and ownership, which can be heard to talk

back to figures of Darwin's wildness with a sense of authority and responsibility, as country has become a widely recognized, intercultural assertion of Indigenous ownership, legible to both Aboriginal and settler Australia.¹³ Such Aboriginal understandings of country as a medium of social relatedness and belonging also shape Indigenous senses of the city, providing widely understood points of reference that order relations and expectations and that can shape forms of intra-Indigenous difference and social discipline.

This is a widespread and long-standing phenomenon informing Aboriginal movement through and to town space. In Katherine, for instance, [Francesca Merlan \(1998\)](#) describes how country affiliation orders town life, providing spatial markers of social identity within the town itself. In [Basil Sansom's \(1980\)](#) account of Darwin campers in the 1970s, relations that in remote places were ordered by originary law were refashioned around knowledge produced in the daily life of Darwin's fringe camps: the day's happenings joined access to resources and white sources of work as a currency through their restriction and selective circulation. In today's Darwin, as in the 1970s, country affiliation provides a means of understanding who camps where and with whom. As Sansom documented, campers often sought forms of protection from other Aboriginal people in the form of cultural brokers who could navigate the labor markets and regimes of policing in Darwin's Aboriginal fringe camps. That protection could still be mobilized in 2004, when one of my primary interlocutors sought to assure me that he could protect me from other law men and Aboriginal people living in the long grass who, he suggested, might wish to do me harm.

Historically Darwin's hinterlands and the Territory's cattle stations promised meaningful work for Aboriginal people. For men, work on horseback with cattle and sheep provided a site of difficult labor and inequitable labor conditions, but also a highly valued domain for the cultivation and display of masculine achievement. A broad campaign for equal wages in the early 1960s, and the lifting in 1964 of laws that prohibited Aboriginal drinking, paradoxically led to a dearth of work for Aboriginal stockmen, who then looked to towns such as Darwin and Katherine for alternative opportunities and for affirmation of their newly earned rights and autonomy. And they came to towns not simply as unemployed migrant labor but as men and women who reckoned their relations to each other through systems of hierarchy and patronage built on accumulated knowledge and mediated by country found elsewhere.

Such forms of relating based on distant country remain significant today. GT calls David Timber, a camp organizer and leader whom I introduce more

fully below, his cousin-brother. They each have kin-based ties to neighboring country south and west of Darwin. GT's family fishes on Timber's family's coastal country, and GT's family built a small tin shed there for the purpose. Timber, meanwhile, gets fresh water from GT's inland country. No matter that Timber gets to visit his country only rarely, or that GT has long made his primary home in a suburb of Darwin. Each understands his relation to the other through the ascription of country affiliation. Further, GT's employers in his work as a night patrol officer are the Larrakia, the socially recognized owners of Darwin's country, while GT is not. His mother, a member of Australia's Stolen Generation, had been taken from her country in the Daly River region as a child, while his father was a white orphan from Newcastle in New South Wales who moved to the Northern Territory as a young man in search of work. His claims to country, then, are complicated and made meaningful by a series of historical relations within Darwin proper but also reliant on his ownership of a remote outstation. Country here appears in the midst of the city much as it does in the bush—at once as a kind of claim to emplaced identity and as a medium for relations between people.

ONE MILE DAM: Wildness in Town

The ambivalent investment of settler Australians in complex categories of the remote, however, has obscured the visibility of such intra-Indigenous relations in town. In the context of governmental Aboriginal policy, remoteness today means removal from centers of economic possibility and indexes a disadvantage figured primarily in market terms. Policy arguments emerging from a series of Labor and Liberal coalition governments during the past decade have emphasized remoteness as a major obstacle to remediating Aboriginal communities' dependence on welfare payments, and have argued that people must move closer to urban centers. One outcome has been the proposal of planned "growth towns" across Northern Australia, which would concentrate service delivery, employment, and educational opportunities for Aboriginal people (Fisher 2013; [Morphy and Morphy 2013](#)). Such logics partake of an intensified, statistical production of remoteness as a measurable demographic classification. The Australian Bureau of Statistics's (ABS) Remoteness Classification Index, for instance, was created in 2001 as a way to differentiate and define remoteness in terms of distance from goods and services, on the one hand, and from concentrations of population, on the other, overtly distinguishing Aboriginal from other Australian populations in its assessment (see [ABS 2003](#); cf. [AIHW 2004](#)).

The Territory government itself, however, also attracts vast amounts of Commonwealth support based on its own remoteness from southern population centers and on the need to administer an “Aboriginal problem” that itself has become figuratively tied to remote communities. [Tess Lea \(2006\)](#) thus notes the irony that in a context problematizing Aboriginal people’s remoteness, the Northern Territory’s capacity to receive large amounts of Commonwealth financial support—much of it targeted to infrastructure and Aboriginal services—depends on its own remoteness from Australia’s southeastern states.¹⁴ There is, in short, a shift in the imagining of the remote away from a space of possibility, as it figured in earlier efforts to support Aboriginal self-determination ([Rowse 1992](#)), and toward a situation of disadvantage. Such logics make remoteness at once a diacritic of Indigenous social pathology and that pathology a powerful argument for attracting financial support from the Commonwealth for the settler-Australian occupation and administration of Northern Australia.

Aboriginal communities throughout Northern Australia also frequently figure in news reporting as sites of a social pathology born of alcohol abuse, boredom (cf. [Musharbash 2007](#)), or an economic malaise that often seem to derive directly from these communities’ distance from sites of economic productivity. Such truisms drive efforts to encourage urban concentrations of Aboriginal people in growth towns as well as efforts to shift Aboriginal land toward forms of marketable title in the service of capital accumulation ([Altman and Russell 2012](#); [Howard-Wagner 2012](#)). Remote lands won by Aboriginal people over the course of decades of legal contest have thus been placed under forms of long-term compulsory lease in the interest of their exploitation and incorporation into a putative mainstream economy. As a diagnostic of social suffering and violence, remoteness thus becomes a sociospatial rationale that can explain disparities of possibility and life circumstance and a biopolitical metric of racialized alterity.

Indeed, remote Aboriginal communities are iconic sites of violence—against women and children, between Aboriginal family groups, and between police officers and Aboriginal men.¹⁵ The highest profile index of such violence in recent years occurred in Far North Queensland’s Palm Island in 2004. Following an altercation with white police officer Chris Hurley, an Indigenous man was arrested and taken to the police lockup. There he was beaten severely and then died from his injuries, the death recorded by police security cameras. In a book-length, journalistic analysis of the events and Hurley’s subsequent trial, the novelist [Chloe Hooper \(2008\)](#) canvasses the ways in which many police and residents of such communities see this violence as a product of remoteness. Palm Island has a

widespread reputation as troubled and violent, and it was historically a place to which Aboriginal people were moved from other communities in mainland Queensland. In Hooper's account, Hurley appears beguiled by this image of remoteness, at once victim and master of a particular form of colonial bluster. In her essay of the same title, [Hooper \(2006\)](#) asks the question baldly, and with only a hint of irony: "In a community of extreme violence, must you become violent? If you are despised, as the police are, might you not need to be despicable sometimes?" In Hooper's rendering, Hurley not only understood the rough character of these communities, he embodied it, becoming a kind of monster himself. Local people called him "the Tall Man," a naming Hooper associates with a local bogeyman, tall as a lamppost and with shriveled white skin.

Much like Palm Island and other beset remote places, town camps also have become storied sites of violence and despair. For several decades, such camps were seen as zones of potential security and autonomy, cognate spaces to the remote outstations and homelands to which Aboriginal people began moving from more concentrated settlements in the latter half of the 1970s. This view began to change as Aboriginal disadvantage came to be seen primarily through the lenses of economic participation and humanitarian intervention, rather than through those of political participation and cultural autonomy. The NTER ratified this broad perception in 2007, and in the years following the Intervention's initial unveiling, its broader policy directions have been continued under successive governments, with new plans to centralize people in Aboriginal growth towns to enable easier access to a "real economy"—jobs, education, and managed housing. As part of this broader recentralization, the government has ceased to fund housing in outstations and homeland communities ([Morphy and Morphy 2013](#), 183).

In this new climate, Aboriginal camps within towns are generally off of the experiential grids of non-Aboriginal residents, but they remain ever-present as sites of discursive, public, and tabloid anxiety. One Mile Dam, for instance, sits on crown land, granted in a special purpose lease to the Aboriginal Development Foundation in 1979 after several years of land rights activism. Although title to One Mile Dam is held by the Aboriginal Development Foundation (ADF) as a freehold lease, the camp is managed by David Timber, a local Aboriginal man from the Daly River region. One Mile Dam is also almost impossibly urban—its very name evokes its proximity to Darwin's commercial center. Across a dammed creek from the city center, it shares boundaries with some of Darwin's priciest, newest high-rise realty as well as with the industrial relics of a working seaport. This proximity to the touristic, government, and business precincts of Darwin

make the land on which the community sits highly valuable, coveted by developers. It is also a storied place. Here Aboriginal fringe dwellers made one of several claims to land, demanding that it be reserved for Aboriginal people. It is for some still understood as an Aboriginal reserve in the heart of Darwin, won by and for Aboriginal people.

Sitting at the boundaries of Darwin's city center, One Mile Dam nonetheless often figures as remote—a bush space within the city. Settler Australians regard the open, rusting corrugated sheds housing some of the campers as the visual icon of the camp's disrepute. Such indices of despair act as what Roland Barthes (1981) might term a *punctum* in the broader image of Aboriginal crisis, a wounding detail that draws attention and elicits a kind of concern grounded in the subjectivity of the viewer (cf. [Lea and Pholeros 2010](#); [Mazzarella 2013](#)).

A news report of June 2013, titled “Our Village of the Damned” (a nod to the eponymous genre film of 1960), traffics in this broader apprehension of violence, despair, and grog-sickness, underlining that though the camp is less than a kilometer from Darwin's center, its conditions typify a “remote community” ([Northern Territory News 2013](#)). It tells the story of One Mile through two white campers who had been living there, one who drowned, and the other who now fears for his safety. The story suggests that the cause of death was suicide but nonetheless relates an alternative account, quoting the surviving white camper extensively. In this second account, the camper fears his Aboriginal neighbors and blames them for his mate's death: “I went to the toilet for two seconds and when I came back I found his hat just sitting there.” And though the police ruled the drowning a “non-suspicious” death—a term the reporter calls “police-speak for suicide”—the surviving camper tells the reporter that he sleeps with a knife: “I'm sitting here ready for the same deal. I just live here day by day.” Here an atypical white camper registers camping as trauma for the audience of the *Northern Territory News*.

In 2013 I visited David Timber at One Mile to talk about the pressures of city development on this Aboriginal space. Entering the community I drove past a tin placard posted at the head of the paved road that runs into and through the center of the One Mile lease, announcing the NTER's restrictions. The sign tells readers that the camp is a prescribed area that prohibits alcohol, drugs, and pornography. Opposite this index of negatively valued difference, another, older sign advertises the site as the “Association One Mile Dam Community,” a historical remainder of the camp's incorporation during a more optimistic governmental moment. A young man ambled over to meet me as I got out of my car, parked



Figure 2. Corrugated iron sheds, One Mile Dam. Photo by Daniel Fisher.

just outside Timber's tin house, and asked, "Can I help you?" For a moment I grew apprehensive, and found my own wariness disconcerting. Perhaps I briefly fell victim to tabloid headlines from the *Northern Territory News*. After I asked for Timber, I was greeted with exaggerated manners, friendliness, and interest.

In 2013 I found One Mile much more crowded than I had on my last visits a decade earlier. Some of One Mile's residents live in the long grass as an alternative to the institutional discipline of a shared house or apartment. Though frequently identified as homeless and as living on an urban fringe, just as often these are people keeping away from the house or flat of a relative in order to keep drinking. If they are intoxicated and unable to return home at the end of the night, they often ask the night patrol to bring them here. As Timber and I talk, I begin to see more and more people, people I had not noticed on my arrival. There are several groups sitting along the edge of the camp just under the shade of the bush and mangroves along the creek. A man and a woman walk past Timber's porch where we sit chatting, moving slowly across a lawn. Over the course of twenty minutes they build a fire in a shallow pit in front of a corrugated iron shed. The smoke floats across the lawn, transforming the camp into a still more welcoming space.

I came to see Timber to learn about the recent efforts to close the camp and a story I had read that the government-owned provider of power and water had turned off the electricity the previous year and was now asking (reports varied) for between \$50,000 and \$100,000 to restore it. The power company had left One Mile truly remote, cut off from the broader power grid and infrastructure surrounding its sheds. The press described this as purposeful neglect and drew a figure of callous disregard in its portrait of a camp marked by mass death and the miserly restriction of basic infrastructure. Timber himself saw the situation as more than a struggle over a utility bill, however large, and understood the restriction of the camp's access to electricity in the framework of urban gentrification. "They want," he said, "the land." This is now valuable, inner-city real estate. As a prescribed area it holds no development potential, but were it abandoned, its market promise might be realized.

I first visited One Mile in 2003 to see a film screening put on by advocates and campers then living at the camp. At that time I accompanied JB and an Anglo-Australian activist and advocate for long-grass campers, Vaughn Williams, who brought a generator, projector, and video player and hung up a sheet on the exterior wall of the camp's ablution block to serve as a screen. In this improvised theater I sat with perhaps twenty people, watching the bicentennial documentary *Australia Daze* (1988) with campers, their children, and their advocates as images of Australian icons, royals, and landmarks (Princess Di, dog races, beer-scutling contests, and the Opera House and Harbour Bridge) glowed from the screen. A decade later in 2013, Timber reckoned that 150 people live at One Mile, pointing out tents in the bushes, camps by the water, and moving through a register of occupation.

Before leaving I asked Timber about the whitefella who drowned in the dam. "A lot of people died back there, a whole lot of people," he answered. It was a matter-of-fact pronouncement, one that registers the extent of violence and death afflicting the camp's Aboriginal occupants, but one that also refuses scandal and further commentary. I could understand Timber's evident fatigue here as the consequence of living in what is, officially in Northern Australia, a constant state of emergency—a perpetual crisis that can register as the exhaustion of affect (Fassin 2012, 181–99; Howard-Wagner 2012). But perhaps Timber was tired of the need to think through the possible audiences his comments might address, tired of accounting for the publicity that continues to interrogate long-grass camping and One Mile Dam's viability. As he pointed out, it was not just one white man, but many, many people who had lost their lives in that camp to



Figure 3. Film night at One Mile Dam. Photo by Daniel Fisher.

suicide, violent conflict, accidental drowning, and illness. Living in the midst of so much death surely takes its toll on those, like Timber, who make the camps a focus of long-term, concerted advocacy. But so too does living with the presence of a settler-Australian media that sees but does not register its own effects on the scene it helps constitute (cf. [Weber 1996](#)).

A few days later I ride with the night patrol again. GT talks extensively of his own life in Darwin, and describes fishing, hunting, and aimlessly moving around the city and nearby bush land before finding the work he does now for the patrol. He is proud, he says, because it makes his children glad to see him working and because he can now take them to his own outstation, to his own traditional country in the Daly River area to the southwest of Darwin. There he has a house, “much nicer than any of these houses you see in the camps here.” And yet spending time there requires money for gas, food, and travel. Having the job allows him to live on that country, to claim it as a kind of estate. He is also angered at the poor accommodation in places like Kulaluk and One Mile, and joins Timber in seeing the cause as state neglect. Like Timber, GT avoids a scandal-based narrative, evoking not the remote “space of death” (see [Taussig 1987](#)) that often appears in camping’s mediatized iterations but, rather, Aboriginal

country; if grog is a fact of life, there may yet be room for Aboriginal people themselves to remedy the concerted neglect of an encompassing settler Australia.

The trucks from the Larrakia night patrol spend the latter hours of their shift picking up drinkers from around Darwin and nearby Palmerston, ferrying them back to One Mile and similar camps to sleep it off away from the eyes of the police. These returning campers often bring back the wildness of their grog-fueled arguments, which does not always suit other, non-drinking campers. Campers can turn on GT in such moments too, though their anger arises not in response to his intervention but rather from not receiving assistance. A new regulation prohibits the patrol from taking children in the back of their trucks, which lack legally required child restraints. This means that on occasion the patrol has had to leave children with their parents, in spite of the latter's efforts to have them removed from harm's way.¹⁶ I wondered more generally about how people responded to his interventions, and asked GT, "Do people ever get angry?" He answered by expressing frustration at the new law:

Yeah, well, with that new law, we used to help people with children you know, give them a hand or whatever. And because their parents are intoxicated you want to help the children get back to their home as well. So we used to give them a hand. But a few families have asked us to help [since the new law took effect] and we had to refuse them, and they end up being wild with us. The parents you know? And sometimes you do get abused, they'll get knives and guns, you know, and all this and that.

We've got one that was a job last week—got abused a bit. And then we picked up a few old ladies that were intoxicated and just wanted to get home. And when we dropped them off they said, "thank you very much and good night and God bless you!" And it made us feel real good, you know!

We toured through Stuart Park, driving slowly through the parking lot in front of the shops on Westralia Street, where a small food store, a doctor's office, and a chemist line a short strip mall across from a city park. There we found a few people sitting in the grass. They waved and GT called out to them, "You mob alright?"

"Yo!" they shouted back,¹⁷ "yes, thank you! Can you mob come back later?"

This group often spends the evening in the park, sometimes drinking or gambling if there is money for it, but otherwise just talking, watching people move in and out of the chemist and doctor's surgery across the street. "Where

else can they go?” GT asked, putting a rhetorical, melancholic spin on their situation. We came back later and found an older man in a wheelchair. “Hello Uncle, you alright?” GT asked. The man was sick with a bad infection on his leg. Poorly bandaged, the infection weeping, he was in pain and needed medical help. We loaded his things into the back of the night patrol’s utility truck and drove out to the Royal Darwin Hospital. There GT helped the man into the hospital’s emergency room, assisting him with the intake process. Later that night GT’s truck was called back to the hospital to collect him. They drove him, newly bandaged, through the darkened suburbs back to One Mile Dam.

CONCLUSION: Spatial Transformation and Compassionate Government

One way to understand the course taken by the Northern Territory Emergency Response, and, I argue, a broader shift in Aboriginal policy, is to see these as closely tied to a respatialization of governmental practice. Australia’s Department of Social Services lists the broad areas described as “prescribed” as follows, including most of what counts as Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory:

- Aboriginal land defined under the *Aboriginal Lands Rights (NT) Act 1976*
- roads, rivers, streams, estuaries or other areas on Aboriginal land
- areas known as Aboriginal Community Living Areas (a form of freehold title issued to Aboriginal corporations by the Northern Territory Government)
- town camps declared by the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (the Minister) under the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007
- any other area declared by the Minister to be a prescribed area. ([Government of Australia 2011](#): 56–57)

During the past decade, these efforts to redraw the political and administrative map of Northern Australia have made the homelands and outstations distant from the NT’s towns and cities politically invisible and practically unfindable ([Altman and Hinkson 2007](#); [Morphy and Morphy 2013](#); [Musharbash 2010](#)). Starved of funding, legitimacy, and basic resources such as electricity and water, town camps are rendered remote through both sociospatial ascription and systematic neglect. Large signs mark their entrances, warning of proscriptions against alcohol and pornography in the prescribed areas. These policies and their performative iteration through signage and the routine presence of white police officers

enforcing these exceptional legal restrictions make structurally explicit the juridical equation of town camps with remote communities. Such equation does other work as well, producing a racial ontology of space in which the domesticated and suburban sit just beside the dangerous and violent. Amplified by intertextual linkage with a cult horror film, camps become icons of an urban frontier in crisis, “villages of the damned” that require suspending discussions about equity and justice and demand forms of government built on emergency.

There are echoes here of Hurley’s colonial bluster, both in the “decisive” response to crisis that this policy was meant to perform and in the figures of wildness that provide its rationale. That settler-Australian policy conjures the very violence it seeks to govern registers today in the tabloid anxiety that continues to attend media reporting on these shifts in policy and their consequences for Aboriginal campers. The story I draw out here thus suggests analyzing the imbrication of mediatization, the politics of suffering, and the production of space in forms of humanitarian emergency; the processes by which such forms of emergency gain momentum and attain both a temporal and spatial durability; and the ways in which forms of crisis thus seem to both elicit and shadow intervention.¹⁸ Assertions of crisis or emergency might then be seen to create, through the government of space and the mediatization of intervention, their own referent and the grounds of their own reproduction.

Importantly, one can tell different stories about Darwin’s camps. Indeed, the equation of town camps with an unruly, remote wildness in need of urgent remediation ignores other ways of living in the city and caring for campers, other ways of reckoning with and responding to illness, violence, and death. That camps may yet house forms of utopian hope, and a sense of Aboriginal belonging in the city, might be glimpsed in the care with which Timber and GT approach their work with campers, performing both Larrakia sovereignty and long-grass belonging. It may also be seen in the image of One Mile Dam’s movie night in 2003 (figure 3). This is where one might understand Darwin’s night patrol and other long-grass advocates to work a kind of critical and actual magic against the violence of intervention. Under an open invitation to the rest of Darwin, campers, their children, dogs, and advocates socialized at dusk to engage, together and on Indigenous terms, with a cinematic Australia. This still typifies today’s Aboriginal efforts—Larrakia and long-grass alike—to invoke a different Australia through the everyday recognition of Aboriginal country in the city.

ABSTRACT

This essay draws on ethnographic research with Aboriginal Australians living in the parks and bush spaces of a Northern Australian city to analyze some new governmental measures by which remoteness comes to irrupt within urban space and to adhere to particular categories of people who live in and move through this space. To address this question in contemporary Northern Australia is also to address the changing character of the Australian government of Aboriginal people as it moves away from issues of redress and justice toward a state of emergency ostensibly built on settler Australian compassion and humanitarian concern. It also means engaging with the mediatization of politics and its relation to the broader, discursive shaping of such spatial categories as remote and urban. I suggest that remoteness forms part of the armory of recent political efforts to reshape Aboriginal policy in Northern Australia. These efforts leverage remoteness to diagnose the ills of contemporary Aboriginal society, while producing remoteness itself as a constitutive feature of urban space. [indigenous Australia; anthropology of media]

NOTES

Acknowledgments The research on which this essay is based would not have been possible without the generosity of my many interlocutors living and working in Darwin's long grass. I thank the night patrol officers, long grass advocates, and campers themselves who all took care to help me make some sense of life in Darwin's camps. A Wenner-Gren Dissertation Fieldwork Grant, an NSF Dissertation Improvement Grant, an SSRC International Dissertation Research Fellowship, and an SSRC Fellowship in the Arts supported the early research on which this essay is based. Conversations with Tess Lea in Sydney and James Pilkington in Darwin assisted my thinking greatly. Three anonymous reviewers also provided invaluable comments to my initial drafts and I extend to them my sincere gratitude. I also thank Cymene Howe for her insight and assistance as I completed the article, as well as the other members of the *Cultural Anthropology* editorial team, Dominic Boyer and James Faubion, for their collective expert guidance.

1. The title is in Arrernte, a language of central Australia.
2. Military doctors were meant to perform these mandatory examinations for children, but they were, in fact, never implemented. In the face of resistance from health professionals, the Commonwealth soon conceded that the physical examination of so many children entailed insurmountable practical, ethical, and legal hurdles.
3. Altman and Russell (2012) chronicle seven areas for reform implemented in the months following the NTER's announcement. In addition to those listed above, other reforms included increased policing; housing and tenancy reform; and dissolving the permit system that required visitors to receive permission through regional land councils prior to traveling to remote communities.
4. Specifically, quarantining Indigenous welfare payments was considered construable as discriminatory. The act was reinstated in 2010, with the expansion of such quarantine provisions to some non-Indigenous recipients.
5. Noel Pearson (2009), an Aboriginal lawyer and activist, has thus achieved renown in part by arguing that policies of self-determination have become a kind of "passive welfare" and by suggesting their replacement with governmentally encouraged economic responsibility.
6. In the years since 2007, the original seventy-three prescribed communities have been joined by more than five hundred additional outstations, pastoral camps, and town camps (Altman and Russell 2012, 5).

7. When coming to Darwin, people often stay with family members already living in the city in government housing or in one of several historically durable Aboriginal communities established just north of the city's center. They may also stay, however, in a "long-grass camp," a euphemism for sleeping rough in a bush camp amid the spear grass of Darwin's parks, suburban sports fields, and undeveloped bush space. Many see the long grass primarily as a place to drink and socialize, and may take up residence in a family home in town when not drinking (see Fisher 2013).
8. Khulenbeck (2010, 78–87) and Musharbash (2010) provide analogous accounts of the relational production of Indigenous space in remote Australia.
9. I use pseudonyms here to preserve anonymity and to accord with a widespread prescription against the use of deceased persons' proper names. I make exceptions for highly public figures.
10. Campers sustain themselves in these settlements largely (though not exclusively) through Commonwealth-derived welfare income, paid fortnightly through the offices of Australia's Centrelink, a national benefits payment bureaucracy that administers a range of social welfare payments to all Australians. While a percentage of such income is quarantined in the Northern Territory, dedicated to food purchases through a plastic Basics Card, individuals retain some money that can be spent on alcohol or drugs. Other sources of income include busking, begging, sex work, royalty payments (for those with claims to mining royalties in their home communities), and work for Aboriginal organizations in Darwin (see Fisher 2013; Holmes 2011).
11. Such invisibility is something practiced by both campers themselves, avoiding the oversight of legal intervention, and other Darwinites, who also learn to not see campers in the parks and trails of the city (cf. Lea 2012b).
12. While I draw this figure from Samuel Weber (1996, 103–6), Indigenous activists have attracted a substantial scholarship interested in their long-standing efforts to craft space in the Australian media (Fisher 2009; Ginsburg 2012).
13. The widespread significance for Aboriginal Australians of what Merlan (2007) calls "landedness" has itself taken center stage in both anthropological writing and in Australian public culture as native title and land rights have become paramount arenas for securing Aboriginal autonomy and recognition (see also Merlan 1998; Myers 1986; Povinelli 2011).
14. This has an individualized component in the remote zone tax offset provided by the Australian Tax Office to workers spending more than 183 days per year working in remote Australia and in salary bonuses and subsidies for individuals who must work in such remote locations.
15. Cowlishaw (2004) provides a book-length analysis of such iconicity and its significance for a New South Wales town.
16. Here, on a smaller scale, I see an analogue of the NTER, insofar as it is a legal precaution aimed at the protection of children that seems instead to leave them more vulnerable. One might extend the analogy to view such interventions within the economy of risk as marking a limit to the state's liability in its oversight of the Larrakia night patrol.
17. *Yo* is a Yolngu affirmative from the dialects of North East Arnhem Land. It also has broad currency in NT Kriol and Aboriginal English.
18. Roitman's (2014) analysis of the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007–2009 and the ways in which "crisis" more generally achieves self-evidence offers a provocative analogue here. Both in Northern Australia and in the North American financial and property markets Roitman examines, crisis becomes a durable, temporally extensive social qualification, one that signifies the truth of a situation and a moral need for transformation, yet one that obscures the ground on which that qualification itself rests.

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