Place, Personhood and Marginalization: Ontology and Community in Remote Desert Australia

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Abstract: Aboriginal Australians living in remote desert communities, usually far from centres of mainstream economic activity and employment, show little inclination to leave them for economic opportunities elsewhere. Some have argued that the tie is based on the ontological significance of place, while others have emphasized marginalization brought about by past government policies. In this article I question both of these views and suggest that emplacement is grounded in the centrality of the relational ontology and the need to live within a dense network of sociality. This raises the issue of whether there are desirable forms of long-term dependency.

Keywords: marginalization, personhood, Aboriginal Australia, relational ontology

Résumé : Les Aborigènes d'Australie qui vivent dans des communautés isolées du désert, généralement éloignées des centres dominants d'activité économique et d'emploi, se montrent peu enclins à les quitter à la recherche d'opportunités économiques. Selon certains, l'attachement aux communautés se base sur la signification ontologique du lieu. D'autres ont mis l'accent sur la marginalisation provoquée par les politiques gouvernementales passées. Dans cet article, je questionne ces deux propositions et suggère que l'importance de l'emplacement est plutôt fondée sur la centralité de l'ontologie relationnelle et le besoin de vivre dans un réseau dense de socialité. Ce qui soulève la question de savoir s'il y a des formes souhaitables de dépendance à long terme.

Mots-clés : Marginalisation, notion de personne, Aborigènes d'Australie, ontologie relationnelle

Introduction

In both Canada and Australia some Indigenous people live in communities that, while remote from centres of mainstream economic activity and employment and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, are in the region of their ancestral homelands. The residents of these communities show little inclination to leave them, despite the often poor living conditions and lack of adequate employment opportunities. This raises difficult questions about what lies in the future for people in these communities and whether there are desirable forms of long-term dependency (see Ferguson 2013:237). Is a satisfactory life possible in such circumstances, where collective health and social well-being are not a concern either for the people themselves or for others? Particularly where geographical isolation is likely to lead to underfunding of infrastructure and public facilities, because of the problematic economic status of the communities, it is necessary to understand what is keeping people so strongly in place.

One factor claims attention immediately: ties to traditional lands. But this factor, which is often referred to under the rubric of "culture," has not only undergone substantial transformation from the classical situation in Australia with sedentarization and institutionalization but also is continuing to transform under the impact of changes in the ratio of young to old and of new technology, from television to mobile phones, to mention only two important ones.[1] No longer is hunting and gathering central to most Aboriginal people's livelihoods, and the cultural practices and knowledge valued by the older population have less and less traction among the young, whether it is ceremonial celebration of significant locations (see Kolig 1981), technical skills or the detailed ecological knowledge that underwrote their subsistence economy. It is at this point, when long-standing practices and values are under threat and so are less obviously helpful in explaining what is keeping people in place, that it is attractive to turn to ontology (Candea

2010:175), as something understood to be more fundamental and often beyond consciousness, although nonetheless constitutive of practice (see Clammer et al. 2004:6).

The place of land in Australian Aboriginal ontology, identity and social life has been central to non-Aboriginal understandings of what it means to be Aboriginal for a long time.[2] Much about Aboriginal action in remote Australia is explained in terms of it, including people's ties to these remote communities. However, with everybody living in sedentary communities since the 1980s, foraging activity is quite limited, especially in the desert regions, and with few Aboriginal men now working as stockmen, which in some cases kept them riding across their own patri-linked country, most people do not have frequent contact with their own country.[3] While land has lost its subsistence economic significance, it remains important to people's identity, and with the past 35 years of land rights in the Northern Territory, it has generated considerable income for some Aboriginal people through rents and royalties, largely from mining activity (see Elias 2001).

Diane Austin-Broos (2009:5) has identified two ontological shifts among the Aranda[4] to the west of Alice Springs, the first brought about by this dislocation from the land. She argues that this dislocation has led to a shift from value invested in place to value invested in things and with it a second, more recent ontological shift from the "human subject ... [being] first and foremost a relative (kin) to one in which the subject becomes more a market individual" (6). Austin-Broos argues that these shifts, when combined with the government policy changes of the 1970s and 1980s, which actually encouraged a return to decentralized living in small satellite residential communities, generally of fewer than 50 people (known as the outstation movement), to reduce the stress and conflicts common in the large sedentary communities, resulted in marginalization, not simply on the basis of cultural difference but also of Aboriginal people "as unequal and disparaged within Australian society" (5). These residential changes raise questions about the old understandings of the ontological significance of place based on the time when people were living independently in the desert (e.g., see Munn 1970) and their relevance in understanding people's ties to the remote settlement localities today. If the old ontological ties are not so important, what accounts for Aboriginal people's apparent commitment to these remote places?

As Gaynor Macdonald has said (2010:50), there is no universal story that can be told for the whole Australian continent, so here I will explore the contemporary significance of ontology in understanding Aboriginal people's ties to remote places with a focus on the Warlpiri of central Australia. The Warlpiri live 300 kilometres or more to the northwest of Alice Springs, a homeland of the Aranda people. I begin by discussing the ontology of place and the way sedentarization has impacted on it. I then go on to consider the other consequences of the changes introduced by European settlement, before examining the location of the Warlpiri community of Yuendumu today. Finally, I consider the implications that this analysis has for invoking the concept of marginalization as important to understanding the present emplacement.

Place and Ontology

The extent to which Warlpiri people identified with places in the landscape and country more generally, often described in terms of consubstantiation,[5] is well known and reflects a pattern widespread in desert Australia. As Nancy Munn puts it, writing about the traditional situation among the Warlpiri and Pitjantjatjara of central Australia, "the country is the fundamental object system external to the conscious subject within which ... consciousness and identity are anchored" (1970:143). This identification was founded in their understanding of the process of conception. Ancestral beings in desert Australian cosmology emerged from the subterranean ancestral world to live out life on the surface of the earth and in so doing transformed themselves into the physical features of the landscape. She identifies three modes by which this took place: metamorphosis, imprinting and externalization (142). Having done this in one place, the same ancestors moved on, making other transformations of themselves as they travelled around and lived out their lives much like their human descendants until, exhausted, they sank back into the subterranean ancestral world. While all of the features created in this way are thought to contain something of the ancestor within them, at some places the life force is particularly abundant and can enter a woman, causing her to become pregnant. The locality at which the life force entered the mother is usually identified by some unusual behaviour of a natural species near it or in a dream by the father or some other close relative, in which they see the life force in the form of a spirit child. That locality, and the ancestral being that left behind the life force, becomes the person's conception dreaming or totem, and the place, their conception locality. This consubstantial relationship with places in the landscape was a fundamental aspect of desert Aboriginal ontology and ceremonial life, and it has also played a central part in non-Indigenous understandings of the nature of Aboriginal people's spiritual relationship with the land.

Being conceived at a locality not only came with an expectation of involvement in the totemic ceremonies related to the ancestor that created it, but also, as Theodore Strehlow (1947:139) pointed out in 1947 for the Aranda, the southeastern neighbours of the Warlpiri, was central to a person's identity. He emphasized the conception totem as a significant form of individuation in a social structure with a patrilineal emphasis. Fred Myers, writing of the Warlpiri's western neighbours, makes a similar point regarding people who do not possess such a patrilineal emphasis, describing the conception totem as founding a person's identity "on something unchanging and absolutely distinctive ... a part of each person [that] is owed to no other person" (1986:131).

Given the significance of conception locality, the assumption that leaving one's country would have substantial ontological, cultural and psychological costs is quite understandable.[6] But this is a view that can be maintained only by a loose use of language, because most desert Aboriginal people have left the area in which they or their forebears had grown up to take up residence well away from their own patri-linked estates and their conception sites, yet there is no evidence of a significant ontological cost specifically related to this disembedding from country.[7] Today less than 5 per cent of Warlpiri people live on their patri-linked land, a situation that would mirror most other remote communities. Indeed, Yuendumu itself is not even on Warlpiri land, although nearby, and about 25 per cent of the roughly 36 hundred Warlpiri speakers live well beyond Warlpiri land, making up the Warlpiri diaspora (Burke 2013:305). In most cases, people moved to a sedentary life by choice: in the early days often seeking protection from murderous Europeans, avoiding conflicts between themselves or attracted by the "super waterholes" (McKnight 1981, 1986) with their apparent abundance of new foods and tobacco. Of course, the many consequences of this choice and the impact that sedentization would have on their lives were, understandably, completely unforeseen.[8]

By the late 1980s, when Aboriginal people in central Australia began to have reasonably easy access to cars, a major demographic shift was starting to take place. Lifestyle diseases were starting to take their toll, and the ratio of old to young was changing. The younger Warlpiri generations were not oriented toward their estates in the Tanami desert but toward Alice Springs, some 300 kilometres away in the opposite direction. While cars extended the lines of travel, they also narrowed the knowledge of the countryside, as people rarely walk away from the roads.[9] This has been aggravated by a change in national gun laws following a massacre of tourists by an Anglo-Australian at Port Arthur in Tasmania in April 1996, which has meant that very few Aboriginal people now have access to guns for hunting kangaroos and emus, which often required walking across the country.[10] This is not to say that there is no foraging for small game, but it tends to be restricted to easily accessible places.

Thus, while in the past a conception locality was a key connection to country in the desert, with regionally varying degrees of recognition, and was central to identity, the situation has changed. Today, this kind of connection exists only among a few old people conceived in the bush, for whom it remains a basis of a strong culturally acceptable claim for recognition as being strongly connected to that place, something that has become important when a mine or some other income-generating activity takes place near their conception site. People with such linkages can make a legitimate demand to some share of the income, which is likely to be recognized by other people with stronger descent-based rights in the place. For the rest of the population, however, being conceived in what are now remote Aboriginal communities/towns, while of significance to personal identification with the community, is of no significance as a basis for claiming rights to the land of the township. This is completely explicit in some areas and clearly the case in most, if not all, areas (e.g., see Austin-Broos 2009:112; McConvell 2002). With the decline in the emphasis on conception, a much greater emphasis is now placed on a more socially oriented patrilineal descent-based identification with the country of one's father and father's father (e.g., see Hamilton 1982).

Remote Communities: The Locus of the Reproduction of Aboriginal Social Orders

The location of remote desert communities was decided variously by missionary organizations and the government, mainly on the basis of available locations on Crown land with adequate water supplies where there were substantial Aboriginal populations that were not catered for. Each settlement has a complex history, but broadly it can be said that, from the perspectives of missionaries and governments, the locations chosen in the desert brought Aboriginal people closer to the principal European centres of each region and, in northern Australia, concentrated people on the coast in settlements that could be supplied by sea. Both were seen as the initial step to incorporating Aboriginal people into the regionally specific Australian mainstream. Sometimes, as in the case of Hermannsburg Mission to the west of Alice Springs in Aranda country, the settlement

was on the land of the dominant linguistic group. In other cases, such as for Warlpiri people at Yuendumu, the site was just beyond the southeastern corner of their country, on the land of Anmatjira speakers. For most Warlpiri people this location was 100 to 300 kilometres from their own estates, although it was closer to Alice Springs, even if the latter was still 300 kilometres off. Some Warlpiri speakers who had earlier moved away from their country independently to be closer to the main north–south highway from Darwin to Alice Springs were shifted by the government to Yuendumu to remove them from the problems that being close to the road could create, such as easier access to alcohol, which remained illegal for them until the 1960s.

For most Warlpiri sedentization was a voluntary choice. Many first moved to live around the homestead of Mount Doreen Station, established on the heartland of the southern Warlpiri's country in the late 1920s. Others had moved to live around the Granites and Tanami mines in the late 1930s and 1940s. The attractions of sedentization are sometimes something of a puzzle, as the situation at Tanami in 1944 underlines. In that year, a government patrol officer was sent to the Tanami and Granites area and reported the following:

> Never have I seen people living under such appalling conditions. Food is so scarce that only the fittest may survive, which is probably the reason why so few old natives are to be seen. Medical attention is most necessary and I strongly recommend that a doctor and dentist be requested to visit the area at once. I suggest they would find at least three cases of granuloma, which is a most serious and infectious complaint and means certain death if not treated—bad eyes, bad teeth, sores and, in one case, an arm that needs urgent and speedy attention. [O'Grady 1977:143]

Exactly why people hung around the Granites and Tanami in such dire conditions is not clear, when they had been living entirely independently in the area previously and were still completely free to do so, without their land having been taken up by Europeans.[11] Their living and physical conditions were the key reason for the government to move them to Yuendumu, 350 kilometres closer to Alice Springs, the regional urban centre, in the context of an assimilation policy that planned for Aboriginal people to "attain the same manner of living as other Australians, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and being influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties" (Hasluck 1988:93). For people like the Warlpiri, this policy was largely at odds with the realities of their remote geographical, social, economic and political location, in which most jobs were make-work. While Yuendumu was to provide formal education and the skills thought necessary to equip Warlpiri to merge with the wider society, governments neglected to note that the size of the populations created by settling people in remote village communities often only served to make some aspects of Indigenous culture, social forms and practices more viable. Of course, there was considerable social change in many areas of life, but, at the same time, the state was becoming increasingly involved in the reproduction of the surviving Indigenous social orders, although largely unwittingly.

The origins of the state's involvement in the reproduction of Warlpiri social life and a distinctive social order lie in the lengthy period of segregationist policies and negative legislation. These isolated Aboriginal people and treated them as jural minors during a period of tutelage in which they were being prepared for incorporation through education, the disciplines of directed work and new living arrangements. The status of jural minors lapsed in the 1970s, and people began to receive directly the full social entitlements of citizenship; the fundamental individualistic ontological values common to the other citizens of the liberal democratic welfare state had no place in the Warlpiri world, however. Nor did the initial impact of access to social security payments create the kind of dependency described by Robert Paine (1977) as welfare colonialism but rather, as William Arthur (2001) has so felicitously called it, a "welfare autonomy." For almost a decade, the minimalist government spending on Indigenous people continued to protect Aboriginal people in remote regions from a consumer dependency. Indeed, they had no incentive to sell their labour, nor did they suffer from a sense of relative deprivation. Instead, the receipt of full welfare payments in cash provided a more-than-adequate income for people to pursue Indigenous agendas, leaving them free to produce social and symbolic capital without the necessity for the great majority to be involved in any conventional productive activity (Peterson 2005:11).

From the social exchange of drinking and card playing to identity-reinforcing supplementary subsistence pursuits and participation in ceremonial life, which was greatly facilitated by cars, whose purchase was made possible by the newly acquired access to cash, there was an intensification of a concern with Aboriginal agendas and a disengagement from the wider economy. This facilitated the reproduction of many aspects of Indigenous social and cultural life that a full-time engagement with the Australian economy would have made more

difficult. With their disengagement from paid labour, people became even more distanced from the mainstream.

This disengagement combined in unforeseen ways with policies of self-determination and self-management and a focus on land claims, leading to a neglect of the remote communities and a substantial underfunding by the government of the infrastructure appropriate to such large and enduring Aboriginal population centres as the former government settlements and missions had turned into (Dillon and Westbury 2007). A growth in the level of social problems and domestic violence in these communities during the 1990s led eventually to the dramatic Northern Territory Emergency Response in 2007, known as the Intervention (see Austin-Broos 2011). Key aspects of this policy were quarantining 50 per cent of social security income so that it could be spent only on food and approved items and taking control of the land in the township areas for a five-year period. These, and the many other aspects of Intervention, were highly controversial and enormously complex in their policy implications and changes, but one key positive consequence is that a lot more government money has been allocated for infrastructure in the remote communities.

If an individualist ontology is fundamental to the life of people in the mainstream, it is also the case that citizens of the Australian liberal democratic welfare state place a high value on fairness (see Merlan 2009). Ultimately, that and, more importantly, the need for certainty in economic matters led to the statutory recognition of aspects of tradition in the granting of land rights. So, after the abolition of all legislative distinctions relating to Aboriginal people by the mid-1960s, the state quite quickly started to re-create statutory Aborigines and distinctive rights again, only this time the legislation was positive (Peterson 1985). In the Northern Territory, this was principally reflected in the passing of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976, which has resulted in almost 50 per cent of the Northern Territory passing back into Aboriginal ownership in inalienable freehold, with the result that every substantial remote community is now on Aboriginal-owned land. It also reinforced a more tightly specified link between people and the patri-linked land, although not denying matrilateral links.

Central to the act is a statutory definition of a traditional landowner that makes reference to descent, sites, common spiritual affiliation to those sites, and primary spiritual responsibility for them, embracing a major facet of Aboriginal social and cultural life. Even if this is not an exact model of the Indigenous system of land tenure, it is close enough for it to encompass changing Aboriginal relationships to land, although, of course, it emphasizes descent over conception. So, state involvement in the reproduction of Indigenous social orders extends beyond the sociological support of distinct remote communities—through the crucial provision of security of tenure and the creation of Indigenously controlled incorporated structures—into the arena of a modified cultural reproduction, with other legislation protecting Aboriginal religious sites.

The Ontological Consequences of Sedentization

As has been emphasized, the decline in the significance of the link with the conception site does not equate with a decline in the significance of ties to country, especially as they relate to identity. However, the emphasis now is much more likely to be phrased in terms of the notions of shared identity based on descent and connection to an ancestral estate, or through connections to places created by the travels of ancestral beings (see Hamilton 1982; Sutton 2008). These connections are likely to be strongly activated in the context of mining and other activities that might be conducted on ancestral estates.

The significance of shared identity relates directly to a second aspect of Aboriginal ontology that has now received increased significance; that is, the highly relational nature of Indigenous personhood (see Glaskin 2012; Myers 1986; Poirier 2005).[12] Even before a child is conceived, it may already be betrothed; its conception may be due to any one of several close relatives, other than the biological mother and father, guiding the spirit child to the mother; its bodily substances are constituted from the blood and bone of particular matrilines and patrilines; its name will be given to it by a senior relative; and a range of debts, social commitments and ritual obligations all pre-exist its birth. A child is thus born into a web of connectedness, with many people having interests in the child that entail reciprocal obligations. This web, expressed mainly in the idiom of kinship, largely subsumes the individuals such that they are seen, and see themselves, mainly in terms of their relations with other people.

Writing on shared identity and personhood, Fred Myers comments that when one Pintupi calls another "kin" (*walytja*), a system of appropriate emotional responses is called up: one should be compassionate to the other and should help him or her (1979:348). Underlying compassion is a recognition of shared identity, empathy or closeness, which is the source of other people's legitimate claims on one. Not to respond to their demands is seen as not liking a person, as not recognizing relatedness (355). The meaning of walytja extends beyond this, however:

> The term *walytja* specifies a sense of belonging together, or shared identity. It is used to refer to (1) possessions, (2) "kin," (3) "one's own" (my own), (4) a wider sense of belonging, and (5) "oneself" as "he did it himself" or "she is sitting by herself." The concept asserts a relationship between oneself and persons, objects or places. [351]

Thus, objects, kin and oneself are all covered by a single term. This means that sharing things is an important opportunity to say something about oneself that is reflected in a continual negotiation about relations to objects and a willingness to include others as "co-owners" (Myers 1989:17). This willingness, Myers argues, extends to rights in land as well as moveable property. It is a person's rights in land that are the enduring and ensured dimensions of identity that give him or her the freedom to part with personal possessions so easily and that stand in such a marked contrast with societies where the accumulation of possessions is so important (1989:41). Now, however, as the link to land is largely conceptualized in terms of descent, physical ties to land in terms of residence near a place of conception, or on an area where one has a descent interest, are uncommon.

As a result of sedentization, nearly all Aboriginal people have now grown up in residential communities that are from 10 to 50 times bigger than those that their bush-living ancestors lived in. This has done nothing to weaken the relational ontology and has almost certainly strengthened it in some cases (Poirier 2005). These large communities of like-minded people help make a distinctive social world viable in conjunction with the social security payments received as a citizen's entitlement and the Aboriginal people's "extraordinarily high levels of tolerance for discomfort, frustration, inconvenience and hardship" (Tonkinson and Tonkinson 2010:69). That means people will put up with a low standard of living entailed by the fact that there is often no economic rationale for the location of these communities today.

Macdonald (2010:62) argues in a similar vein that the notion of the person among the Wiradjuri of western New South Wales survived the loss of land, although not unchanged. This was because the people had sufficient social and economic autonomy, as well as physical distance from, the encapsulating society that they had the space and autonomy to negotiate their engagement with it. Their practices of personhood and ways of relating to each other, although somewhat changed, still made sense to their social selves. An important question in this respect is, who was responsible for their spatial, economic and social separation from the Australian mainstream?

Marginalization

As typically understood, marginalization is a set of processes by which individuals or groups are relegated to the fringes of a society. That is, marginalization is actively brought about by policies or social practices of the dominant society. Thus, it could be argued that the state has marginalized people, such as the Warlpiri, through its past policies of creating reserves, controlling the access of outsiders to them through the permit systems and enacting legislation that, up until the 1970s, allowed Aboriginal people to be paid token wages. Understanding marginalization in this way is not particularly helpful in many remote areas. While there is clearly some truth to this view, it ignores the fact that Aboriginal people have had a role in keeping a distance between themselves and the mainstream, and, in any case, mainstream Australia is on the fringes of their desert world, not vice versa. Since the 1970s, there have been no legal barriers separating Aboriginal people from the mainstream. Indeed, the aim of policy has been to hasten the process of modernization to achieve greater economic, social and political integration. Yet Aboriginal people have not embraced this particularly enthusiastically outside of housing, cars and increased consumption, and certainly not in relation to selling their labour in the market economy. As David Trigger has documented with respect to Doomadgee Mission in the Gulf of Carpentaria, Aboriginal people in many remote communities, while politically and economically dependent, have maintained a somewhat distinct, socially closed domain of life that he describes in terms of "a system of habitual predispositions, tendencies, propensities and inclinations to think and behave in particular ways" (1992:221) or, one might now say, of ontology or ontologies. While he sees this domain in terms of resistance and opposition, which may have been of some significance at Doomadgee, the extent to which the white missionaries were both explicitly and implicitly involved in reproducing this separate domain has, I think, been underestimated. Certainly in the case of the Warlpiri, resistance was hardly called for, given the level of government neglect and the indifference of both parties, leaving people substantial freedom to go their own way.

Today, at least, it is a political embarrassment to understand the social and economic situation of Aboriginal people in remote Australia in terms of social exclusion, but it is convenient, as it can be blamed on the government. It is equally problematic to understand the situation in cultural terms, although this is a little easier if described in terms of Aboriginal agency. To emphasize either to the neglect of the other is to fail to deal with

the complex culture of engagement between Aboriginal people and the mainstream.

At a time when states in many parts of the world are divesting themselves of responsibility for providing security for their populations, often in the name of opening up or maximizing individual choice, Aboriginal people can rely on the state to maintain its responsibility to provide certainty and security if they stay in the larger remote communities.[13] This is because political pressure will ensure some certainty of ongoing support and achievement of reasonable basic standards. To do otherwise would be highly problematic politically and attract the attention of many interest groups and, more generally, the "moralising middle classes" who have influence on government (Mulgan 1998:184–185). In short, the state is in a position of acute moral hazard with respect to achieving success in encouraging people to move away from these remote communities that supply Aboriginal people with a level of certainty and security that is increasingly rare (see Standing 2011).[14] Yet, for many Aboriginal people, the only way to improve their material circumstances is to move closer to work, but that means moving away from the comfort zone of their kin, which threatens the sense of self based in the relational ontology—although this raises another complex issue about why people do not offer themselves for many kinds of jobs, even when they are available locally (see Austin-Broos 2003:128–129).

Conclusion

Thus, there are grounds for suggesting that the tie to remote communities is ontological but that the priority of the consubstantial ontological tie to place has given way to the dominance of a relational ontology, which means that, above all else, people want, *indeed need*, to live within the context of a dense network of sociality. Where that dense network of sociality is located is secondary, although not unimportant. The large residential communities of remote Aboriginal Australia provide this social density, reproducing the relational ontology and making a distinctive social world viable, although not unproblematic. It is this deeply sedimented ontology that underwrites the culture of engagement with government policy and the mainstream. Its most obvious manifestation is the speed with which homesickness[15] sets in when people are away from their residential community and kin. Currently, homesickness is manifested in the intense dependence on the mobile phone as a way to attempt to stay connected, even when absent for only a few days, but nothing compensates for physical co-presence, that is, being at home.

Michael Jackson has explored what it means to be at home in the world by spending time with Warlpiri people, concluding "that a sense of home is grounded less in a place per se than in the activity that goes on in a place" (1995:148) combined with a sense of existential control and connectedness (154). Exactly what a "sense of existential control" is in an intergenerational context and the world of youth today is more problematic than Jackson's understanding, derived from time spent with the older generations of Warlpiri men and women, might suggest.

Francesca Merlan (1998:76–113), writing of Aboriginal people to the north of the Warlpiri who have moved to the town of Katherine from up to 100 kilometres away, describes their relations with traditional country as ceasing "to be a part their everyday living space" and "receding in importance as an experiential medium" (76, 112), but nevertheless as significant in anchoring people in the landscape. The significance of this anchoring in the landscape has increased for all Aboriginal people across the Northern Territory as a result of land-rights legislation and the recognition of native title following the June 1992 High Court decision in the Mabo case. The change in relation to traditional country discussed here does not threaten Aboriginal rights in land, as is quite clear from the many successful land and native title claims across the continent.[16] However, slowly but surely, it does mean that besides the important part land plays in identity and ceremonial life, it is beginning to take on the additional attributes of the kinds of property rights that pervade the non-Aboriginal market economy, although these are constrained by collective ownership and inalienability. It is not, however, any income that might be derived from this land that prevents Aboriginal people from becoming part of the precariat, but rather the value they place on the density of social relatedness, their tolerance of a relatively low standard of living compared to other Australians, and the political entailment of being a small minority in a rich settler colony that did not do the right thing initially.

Although the location of many remote communities makes no economic sense today, and can maintain people only at a standard of living that is constantly in danger of creating political problems for the government, these communities clearly have a long future in front of them. Compulsory movement is out of the question, and even if it were attempted, the problems would be enormous, as shown by John Taylor's (2009) modelling of the consequences of moving all people from desert remote communities into their nearest urban centre. At the same time, improving the material circumstances of people in many of the remote locations is only likely to enhance

Aboriginal people's commitment to these locations even if there is no viable economy there. The denizens of these remote communities may not be particularly well off, but they are not marginalized in any ordinary sense of this term. Rather, they are emplaced in a complex cultural trade-off between, on the one hand, their desire for ontological security and, on the other, their acceptance of limited material circumstances, which they can be reasonably confident the mainstream will continue to underwrite for many years to come. The existential question is, will this remain a desirable form of dependency in the long term?

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Notes

1 At the 2011 census 36 per cent of the Aboriginal population was under 15 as oppose to 19 per cent in the non-Aboriginal population, and only 4 per cent were above 65 compared with 14 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012).

2 For example, see the *Canberra Times* March 12, 2015, front-page article. See notes 13 and 14 for the context of this statement.

3 Until the mid-1960s, there were still several dozen Aboriginal people leading completely independent lives hunting and gathering in the desert regions, in effect beyond the frontier. The last nine people, who had been isolated from contact with all other people for 23 years and who had never seen Europeans, were met with in 1984.

4 The spelling of this name is a fraught matter. There are three major and competing orthographies for what until quite recently was described as Aranda. The one being promulgated by the western Aranda is Arrarnta. Even though Austin-Broos worked with the western Aranda, she uses Arrernte, the preferred linguistic form adopted by the Institute of Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs that is associated with the eastern Aranda. I use the old form here as it is the one most likely known to anthropologists and readers outside of Australia.

5 This word has come into common usage in this context only during the last two decades and reflects a more general change in the theoretical orientation of academics writing about relations to land, now that Aboriginal people have ceased living entirely from it; this is also a result of a reaction to the overly legal language that land and native title claims that anthropologists writing land claims have been forced to adopt. Somewhat ironically, some anthropologists are now seeking to provide accounts of relations to place that are more "experience near" and to provide a poetic key to Aboriginal realities (Poirier 2004, 2005; Rose 1992; Povinelli's [1993] account is the most grounded).

6 A very clear bureaucratic statement about the social and psychological damage caused by leaving the land where one grew up is provided by Laurent Dousset quoting an official: "If deprived of [the connection to his land] ... by force, he is likely to die of homesickness. If he leaves it voluntarily, he quickly degenerates into the useless outcast seen, among other places, along the East-West line. In fact, he becomes de-tribalized" (2002:6). See also William Stanner (1979:4), who is critical of this kind of view. One way in which this view may be reproduced is through the relatively new expression of Aboriginal people being "on country," without it being clear on whose country. Katie Glaskin (2012:300) also comments on how this phrase does the work of obscuring the actual relationship with the land.

7 The question of exactly how such a cost can be ascertained is complex, although the official mentioned in the previous note attributes many social problems following from this disembedding from place. I do not think many anthropologists would accept that person's analysis.

8 These most obviously relate to their health, the difficulties of living permanently in communities many times larger than residential groups were in the past, the inability to resolve conflict by movement and, of course, all the consequences entailed by new ways of securing the requirements for survival.

9 Peter Sutton (2008:176) writes of the road system being the new skeleton of the country.

10 Among other things, the new laws require secure storage in lockable gun cabinets bolted to the floor and a separate lockable location for the ammunition and bolt, if there is one, as in many of the favoured .22 rifles.

11 J.W. Bleakley, the Chief Protector of Aboriginal people in Queensland, was appointed to review policy toward Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory in 1929. In his report, he comments that the Tanami area was one of the only areas of any extent where Aboriginal hunting grounds had not been encroached on (1929:33).

12 Although the word *ontology* does not feature in Myers' (1986) monograph on the Pintupi, a major portion of his analysis is about the way in which the notions of autonomy and relatedness underwrite the Pintupi notion of personhood. Glaskin writes of "embodied relationality," by which she means something more than the human-focused relational ontology referred to here, as she emphasizes the extension of consubstantiality to creatures and places (2012:305).

13 As I write this in the first two weeks of March 2015, there is a loud outcry in the press from the Aboriginal population and sections of the public about the Western Australian government's proposal to stop funding small remote communities (usually referred to as outstations) where the population is under 20 people. This decision is a result of the federal government's refusal to continue its supplementary funding for these communities, making ongoing funding a state matter.

14 For this reason, Aboriginal people in remote communities are not part of the precariat as described by Guy Standing (2011). There is a confusing public debate about not funding "homeland" communities that has been going on in

2014–15. It is confusing because it is unclear which communities are meant by this term, but it cannot mean the major remote communities, as the consequences in the regional urban centres would be catastrophic, creating much more expensive social, infrastructural, economic and political problems than exist at present (see John Taylor [2009], who has modelled what would happen in central Australia), and can thus mean only the very small communities, like outstations.

15 Interestingly, Strehlow lists homesickness as one of the themes of Aranda songs and gives a number of examples (1947:30–31). In the context of classical life, this seems to have focused on locality, but, of course, locality was also where some other kin were to be found.

16 Virtually all successful land and native title claims have been made by people who, at the time of the claim, were living in the communities that they still live in today. Under Part 2 Division 1, Section 13(5) of the Native Title Act 1993, it is possible for people to lose their previously recognized native title on the basis "(a) that events have taken place since the determination was made that have caused the determination no longer to be correct; or (b) that the interests of justice require the variation of revocation of the determination."

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