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Taking it to the Street: Reclaiming Australia in the Top End

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ABSTRACT

Since Cronulla, racism and the resurgence of White ethno-nationalism is again contesting the diversity of Australian national imaginaries. This paper argues, however, that encounters with Aboriginality and connection to Country provide fresh perspectives that affirm difference. The paper focuses on Broome and Darwin, two urban centres in northern Australia with a visible Aboriginal population that have been the focus of little contemporary research on intercultural relations compared to southern cities. Such an optics from the Top End is necessary, given its unique histories of Aboriginal and ethnic minority contact that predate White settlement, as well as the ongoing resistance to dehumanising, interventionist and racially discriminatory practices and policies. This paper places affirmative 'events of commoning' at the core of emancipatory politics. Such a politics is informed by the theoretical conceptualisation of commoning as a relational process of 'being-in-common' that unfolds in cooperative practices and collective action. We focus on two events – a protest event in Broome as response to the closure of remote Aboriginal communities and a 'celebration walk' through the streets of Darwin during NAIDOC week. These 'noisy' and 'quiet' struggles reclaim the street and provide the possibility to think about how a common world can be recomposed through embodied potentiality.

KEYWORDS

Embodied potentiality; events of commoning; commons; intercultural encounter; intercultural contact; whiteness; Broome; Darwin; aboriginal

In July 2015, the steps of Parliament House, Melbourne, emerged as the stage for the second 'Reclaim Australia Rally' that saw a few hundred self-proclaimed patriots call for the exclusion of Muslims and the specific rejection of Islam. Adorned with Australian flags and placards reading 'no halal' and 'end non-White immigration' the group sporadically broke into nationalistic song, singing Waltzing Matilda and Advance Australia Fair. On the other side of the police line, protesters committed to a Multicultural Australia shouted 'you'll always lose in Melbourne' and 'Muslims are welcome, racists are not'. These street rallies have become regular nationwide events that epitomise the surfacing and escalation of simmering but deep interethnic/interracial tensions. Aggressive, angry, outraged, anxious, frustrated young bodies clash; the Australian flag is waved but also burnt, racist/anti-racist slogans are shouted; cardboard placards and banners express fiery passions; a large, vigilant, agile armed police force arrests the violence; barricades; tear gas, batons; mobile phone texts, Facebook comments, photo sharing. Perhaps this

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is a new expression of 'gangsta nationalism' (Johns 2015) when racist and anti-racists, including visible ethnic minorities, engage in an antagonistic and oppositional politics on the street far from the suburban beach that registers as the archetypal White space in the national imaginary and the stage for the Cronulla riots in 2005 (Wise 2009).

These Reclaim Australia events resonate with a toxic masculinity fused with a White ethno-nationalism 10 years on from the Cronulla riots – an event that offered little hope in reframing the White national imaginary. Instead of performances of ethno-nationalist patriotism – fuelled by bronzed, angry, Anglo-men donning Australian flags, drinking 'tinnies' (beer cans) and 'bashing lebs and wogs'[1] in a place of enforced togetherness – White power and privilege now is reproduced through a populism that consumes racialised caricatures to further divide along traditional right/left wing lines. Ten years since Cronulla, it is the overemphasis on Islam, most visible as Salafi Jihadism, that deepens this divide globally and stirs insecurity, fear and rage. Such negative affects stem from a besieged national identity in White majority cultures such as in the UK, US, Western Europe and Australia, attributed to immigrants and immigration policies that have produced ethnically diverse societies, so-called home-grown terrorism, and strengthened the brutality by the Islamic State. Brexit, the election of Donald Trump in the US, and the resurgence of right-wing European parties and the One Nation Party in Australia suggest a fatigue with 'political correctness' and pave the way for the heightened demonization of the ethical precepts of Islam as well as the racialisation of all Muslims. In Australia, since Cronulla, Muslim-looking people have emerged as 'potential terrorists'. The Reclaim movement, like Cronulla, calls for a patriotism against the 'enemy' of the nation and the wider world, legitimised by the savagery performed in the name of Islamic State. Manne (2016) argues that the battle lines are drawn: the war with the world waged by the Islamic State is evident in jubilant reports and gruesome photos in *Dabiq*, their official online magazine that expressed extreme enthusiasm about the siege at the Lindt Café in Sydney.

Battle lines, however, become blurred when bodies of colour become instruments in Reclaim events, which unlike Cronulla are more than 'a White civil uprising' (Lyons 2015). Ethnic minority migrants take pride in proclaiming their Australianness often fuelled by fundamentalist Christian beliefs. In addition, racist skinheads at Reclaim rallies use Aboriginality to legitimise their actions through exclamations such as 'How stupid are youse? We've got part-Aboriginal people supporting us!' (Hussien 2015). Who makes, stirs and shares this soup that makes up the nation and determines its bland or exotic multicultural flavour, however, continues to be determined by processes of whiteness rather than Aboriginality (Shaw 2007; Hage 2012). These processes are reproduced in daily life and gain strength when Anglo-Australians, Aboriginals and ethnic minority residents demonise Muslims and migrant newcomers who fail to conform to a normative 'Australian way of life' (Crockford 2016). Since Cronulla, however, it is the street rather than the iconic beach etched in the White Australian imaginary that is the stage for frictional cultural encounters.

This paper argues that encounters with lived Aboriginality and the acknowledgement of connection to Country in the Top End of Australia provide fresh perspectives that affirm rather than negate difference. In large southern cities, however, where riots/rallies are staged, lived Aboriginality is often invisible, racialised through negative representations, commodified or romanticised. For example, in gentrified areas of inner Sydney such as

The Block or Redfern, Aboriginality is associated with inferior social value; drunkenness, poverty and drug addiction (Shaw 2007). In Melbourne, the invisibility of Aboriginality surfaces and becomes part of the palimpsest of the city through expressions in the built environment; a luxury apartment with the portrait of William Barak, Wurundjeri/Woi-wurrung land rights activist and public art installations at Birrarung Marr along the Yarra River. Aboriginality here becomes a parody that incentivises a remembrance of a nostalgic space–time, in ways that re-impose and consolidate dominant spatio-temporal orders, instead of disrupting them (Dikeç 2012). In contrast, this paper is informed by a politics that unsettles habitual or commonsense 'ways of seeing, being and sense making' (Dikeç 2012: 274) and affirms new modes of relating to the nation and the wider world. It moves beyond an oppositional politics and the 'disciplinary logic of Whiteness' (Hesse 1997: 99) or White governmentality that claims space and attributes social value in determining who belongs.

At the violent Reclaim rallies where oppositional politics dominates, White governmentality is momentarily disrupted through the chanting of 'always was, always will be Aboriginal land'. Acknowledgement of Country through hopeful embodied chanting is a reminder of White supremacy and the exclusionary power of White privilege. Inflictions of White supremacy result in 'shattered lives', crushing imperceptible harms and 'exhausting struggles' (Povinelli 2011: ix), all epitomised in the state brutality at Don Dale Youth Detention Centre, Darwin.[2] Such brutality and exhaustion suggests that whiteness is a visceral force that stresses and fatigue bodies as they cope with the struggles of everyday life (Ahmed 2007; Hage 2010; Saldanha 2010; Lobo 2014). Resistance to such a force is expressed through more quiet rallies and candlelight vigils that acknowledge the negative affects of this visceral force (Burton-Bradley 2016). Such a force erupts when the exhaustion that racism brings is relieved through the unleashing of violence in public spaces of Cronulla beach or the city, or more silently through alcoholism and self-harm. These bodily responses that are the crystallisation of negative affects of anger, hurt and outrage make it difficult to move beyond an oppositional politics and imagine common ground. This is true of the Reclaim rallies in which Aboriginal people find themselves on both sides, deployed by White nationalists and anti-racists as instruments of separate movements that fail to articulate affirmative modes of belonging. Hage (2012: 18) argues that these groups conjure the 'nation as a space structured around a White culture, where Aboriginal people and non-White "ethnics" are merely national objects to be moved or removed according to a White national will'. How then is it possible to imagine an alter-politics that reconsiders settler–Indigenous–immigrant relations through an ethical stance of care and mutual responsibility?

In forging more affirmative settler–Indigenous–immigrant relations, Povinelli (2011) argues that Anderson's (1983) imagined community of the nation – where all people are deemed to belong to the homogenous space–time of nationalism – is problematic. This is because in settler-colonial contexts not all people occupy the same social tense of nationalism; Indigenous/Natives are placed in the past and foreigner/immigrants in the future. Instead, moments of care and responsibility are possible when all people occupy the same tense of belonging through ephemeral connections of immanent obligation. These obligations surface through the here and now of space–time in which bodies live, breathe, change, reshape and transform the world by intensifying and enriching connections that cannot be explained in terms of a sovereign will, rational choice or

critical reflexivity (Springer 2014). This paper argues that such immanent obligations emerge as events of commoning that crystallise embodied potentiality and enact an ethical stance. The paper focuses on 'noisy' and 'quiet' events of commoning that unfold in places on the periphery of the mainstream urban and national imaginary, and that embody potentiality in ways that animate and multiply sensibilities of the 'good life' and shared belonging in White settler societies like Australia. It shows that new life can appear from the 'bowels of the unlivable' through 'miraculous moments' (Povinelli 2011: 110) that provide the conditions of possibility for invoking alternative worlds and alternative social projects of shared belonging (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013).

This paper is informed by ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2015 in Darwin and Broome in the Top End of Australia. We, a young, male, migrant of Irish heritage and a mature-aged migrant woman of Indian heritage, engaged in participant observation in public spaces, and participatory action research at collective events that involved video recordings, photography and interviews. In addition, we conducted focus group discussions with community organisations and in-depth interviews with a broad cross-section of adult residents of diverse cultural backgrounds, including activists and prominent community members. We focus on two events that affirm Aboriginality through an acknowledgement of connection to Country that provide different understandings of the 'White nation'. The first event, a rally in Broome, calls for valuing Aboriginal ways of life threatened by the closure of remote communities. The second event is the annual Northern Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (NAIDOC) March through the streets of Darwin. These events are happenings that draw large crowds to streets and imperceptibly attend to open wounds inflicted by ongoing colonialism, racially discriminatory interventionist government policies and extractive resource exploitation. Such affirmations of Aboriginality in the Top End contrast with events like Reclaim, or riots like Cronulla, that fail to draw a crowd in Broome and Darwin even though they are constructed as frontier towns with 'redneck racism' (Ford 2009). Perhaps these ways of reclaiming Australia seem less important in the Top End and riots that do break out occur when life is unliveable in asylum seeker detention centres, for example, or juvenile detention centres or sites of racially stratified labour. Our central contention is that an optics from the Top End can reframe White imaginaries of nationalism and what it means to 'Reclaim Australia'.

Darwin and Broome: 'raw racism' and an optics from the polyethnic top end

Darwin (pop 72,930), the capital city of the Northern Territory, and Broome (pop 14,997), a regional town in the Kimberley, are coastal areas with a history of Indigenous–Asian contact. In northern Australia, annual international trade with Aboriginal people occurred for decades prior to colonial settlement (Macknight 2011). Proas (sailing boats) from the port of Makassar arrived at Kayu Jawa, the fishing grounds off the Kimberley coastline as well as the bays and beaches in the vicinity of Darwin (Ganter *et al.* 2005). These trading activities and convivial relations were affected when White settlers built the townships of Palmerston (now Darwin) in 1869, and Broome in 1883. The pastoral industry was established on Aboriginal land deemed *terra nullius*, and there were large cattle stations such as Wave Hill (near Darwin) and Roebuck Downs (near Broome). Vestey's, at that time one of the largest meat processing companies, had large factories in Darwin and Broome. Chinese

people were the first ethnic minority group to be recruited by the government in 1874 to work on the goldfields and build the railway line from Palmerston to Pine Creek. They soon established market gardens and engaged in commercial activities even though their freedom was curtailed by a small White minority population.

The discovery of the pearl Pinctada Maxima in 1861 at Nikol Bay saw Broome and Darwin emerge as centres of the largest pearling industry in the world (Martínez and Vickers 2015). The luggers (pearling vessels), owned by White pearling masters, employed indentured labourers such as Kupangers, Filipinos, Malays, Timorese and Japanese who worked as divers, sailors or servants (Ganter *et al.* 2005). At the turn of the century when the migration restriction act, the White Australia policy, was introduced, labour shortages provoked a special exemption from the Commonwealth (Moore 1994; Martínez and Vickers 2015). In spite of these exemptions, the privileges of Whiteness affected ethnic minority migrants and resulted in unruly street fighting, particularly in Broome. Three riots between 1907 and 1921 – borne out of the danger, frustration and injustice endemic to the pearling industry – saw hundreds of Asian men taken to the streets (Choo 2011). For decades leading up to events such as WWI, the great depression and WWII, the multicultural make-up of Darwin and Broome continued to be quite different from southern Australian cities. Both towns were consolidated as places with a 'unique multiculture' and a polyethnic population (Luckman 2011; Martinez 2006: 132).

Today, Broome and Darwin have several long-term resident populations with polyethnic backgrounds but also a transient or fly-in-fly-out population of tourists, social workers, professionals and bureaucrats. In Darwin, those who are hyper-visible in public spaces experience 'raw racism'. They include migrant newcomers from countries in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East (many of whom are Muslim) and a transient population of Aboriginals who 'live rough' in parks, sidewalks and shady groves along the beach. Nina, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman of Chinese heritage, however, describes Darwin as 'a cultural melting pot' that is quite different from cities 'down south' such as Melbourne and Sydney. She said:

> They [people down south] say Darwin people are so laid back, they are nearly horizontal, and it makes me laugh because we really are. Walk slow, we take our time, we run late, but I think we forgive quick, and, you know, down south all I remember is everything was so fast. At the shopping mall [when] people walked into me [six times], not once did they check to see if I was okay, or apologies, they just kept on going. Like it's rude, just say sorry.

In Broome, it is this slow rhythm of place that is sustaining and nourishing for Ebony, an Aboriginal resident of Broome, who feels upset, angry and exhausted by racist encounters. She says:

> Broome Time […] it's this weird little time warp where everything slows down and you can think and feel again. I'm happy to see faces, Aboriginal faces. Going into the rat race [in Sydney] and leaving the slowness of Broome is a totally foreign environment that is predominantly White where every single day is a battle, it's World War III as an Aboriginal person in the city. Whether it's overt or systematic racism – it never stops.

The slowness of time and the visibility of Aboriginality in the Top End is life affirming, in contrast to memories of everyday racism that Aboriginal women experience down south. Amreen and Ayesha, Muslim women, also spoke of memories of intimidation and exclusion that they experienced as migrant newcomers in Sydney after the Cronulla riots. They

found the English language limiting to express these sentiments and responded in Bengali. Amreen said:

> In Sydney when we lived there when people see black skin many say 'black people you go back to your Country' and this and that. In Darwin, we never heard or never felt this. We don't have that thing here, we don't have that thing here.

Amreen and Ayesha seem to suggest that they don't experience such overt forms of racism in Darwin even though their Muslim identity is visible through their physical appearance – their dark skin, *salwar kameez* outfit and headscarf.

It is interesting that although raw racism unfolds in Darwin and Broome and is experienced by hyper-visible bodies of colour, young women distinguish it from the racism experienced in southern cities. Rather than create a north–south binary in understanding racism, their feelings provide the possibility to think about an ethnographically rich spatial exploration of the commons that focuses less on what bodies are and more on their affective capacities that are enhanced through everyday encounters. For Amin (2013), insights into such capacities call for an optics that centres mutuality, obligation, commonality and interdependencies from multiple lifeworlds. It involves turning the telescope around or looking through the other side of the telescope if we are to think about the future of cities beyond the exclusionary processes of whiteness that sap energy and exhaust bodies. In Australian cities, perhaps, an optics from the Top End provides an insight into an alter-politics made possible through events of embodied potentiality.

Events of commoning: embodied potentiality in the top end

The concept of embodied potentiality decentres the liberal humanist concept of the subject and the biopolitical governance of populations, a form of White governmentality that controls, disciplines and attributes social value (Hesse 1997; Povinelli 2011). This potentiality is an excess that overflows the social and cultural discourses that construct the materiality of lived bodies of colour. It is an excess then that animates bodies and contributes to alternative forms of life. Here, life is not 'the life' of a particular human being or subject but 'a life' that is composed of moments and events that a living subject goes through (Deleuze 2001). It includes 'quasi events' of suffering, crises and catastrophe that 'saturate potential worlds' (Povinelli 2011: 13) and expose vulnerability, suffering and abandonment even though they never occur in an objective sense. But events of potentiality also focus on what bodies can do when they are moved by an immanent obligation. Such a vitalist philosophy of life provides fresh insights into complex geographies of shared coexistence when difference does not drive bodies apart but is a force that brings bodies together and stirs an immanent ethical obligation of responsibility through events of commoning.

There is a large interdisciplinary literature that focuses on the practice and governance of the commons (Hardt and Negri 2009; Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013; Bollier 2014). While Bollier (2014) focuses overwhelmingly on the equitable, sustainable, collective management of resources that centres the human, Hardt and Negri (2009), and Gibson-Graham *et al.* (2013) conceptualise the commons in terms of shared existence. For Hardt and Negri (2009), the commons is constituted by multiplicity and difference – it

involves a gathering of multiple forms of knowledge and ways of being that emerge from shared existence. For Gibson-Graham *et al.* (2013: 130), the commons is a constantly reproduced 'property, practice or knowledge that is shared by a community'. It includes the traditional forms of property such as land and natural resources, but also culture, language, ideas and identity that are always at a risk of being privatised and commodified by neoliberal practices of enclosure. Gibson-Graham *et al.* (2016), however, also use commoning as a verb to express the relational nature of this process of coexistence that often involves the struggle of negotiation that calls for care and responsibility. It is about 'being-in-common' and 'being-with' that assembles communities who do not share an essence but engage in collective action and cooperative practices, even though in other situations they might be 'locked in antagonistic relations' (Amin and Howell 2016; Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2016: 196). Events of commoning are therefore important to explore because they recompose the world by sustaining and nourishing shared coexistence through care, collective action and community responsibility (Latour 2014). The events that are the focus of this paper are therefore a kind of place-making that celebrate the diversity of life through assembling or sharing diverse knowledge or through ruptures in the order of things that challenges and enacts justice (Isin 2012; Carter 2013). Such enactments of justice involve a 'noisy' and 'quiet' politics.

Noisy politics: Aboriginal activism in the Top End

In November 2014, Western Australian Premier Colin Barnett announced that up to 150 remote Aboriginal communities, home to over 12,000 residents, may close. He stated in Parliament, 'they are not viable and the social outcomes, the abuse and neglect of young children, is a disgrace to this state […] this is the biggest social issue this state faces' (Barnett 2014: 892). Speaking on the proposed closures in March 2015, then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott, suggested that Aboriginal people living in such communities were simply indulging a 'lifestyle choice'. Provocatively, Abbott stated on national radio, 'what we can't do is endlessly subsidise lifestyle choices if those lifestyle choices are not conducive to the kind of full participation in Australian society that everyone should have' (Martin and Owens 2015). In response, since March 2015 there have been many global calls to action and large demonstrations in Australian cities, towns and remote communities – as well as smaller events in cities such as Auckland, Berlin and Dublin. This section focuses on the *Stop the Forced Closures* March in Broome, where Aboriginal custodians, residents, visitors and non-Aboriginal allies with diverse connections to Country came together to affirm Aboriginality and question the state's refusal of essential services to communities in the region. Through participant observation at this event and in-depth interviews conducted with activists, this section assembles narratives of noisy action played out in the Top End.

In late March, a crowd of 400 people[3] gather at Streeters Jetty, beginning their procession through Chinatown, the tourist precinct and commercial centre of Broome. It is early afternoon and the sun is high, the heat is approaching 35°C at the beginning of the dry season. Marching south on Carnarvon Street, the snaking mass of bodies pass Male Oval, the main open public space in town where an ever-present itinerant Kimberley population or 'long grassers' spend most of their days and nights. An Aboriginal man yells from the oval, 'what's this for?', 'the closure of communities' a woman from the

crowd replies. 'What! You wanna close them?', 'no!' she says, 'the government want to close them'. The man dips his head, slides his thongs on his feet, says 'alright then', and joins the crowd, dissolving into the milieu of colourful bodies. The crowd marches through the streets, chaperoned by a police car in front which halts the traffic. Black and white bodies walk steadfast, pushing prams, chanting, carrying placards, swatting the flies from their faces and posing for the numerous photographers. Unfurled banners read 'stop dispossession, respect land rights' and 'stop the forced closure of Aboriginal communities'. Local journalists scurry through the crowd getting sound bites for the evening news, and the national Indigenous television network (NITV) has flown in from Sydney just for the occasion. A group of Aboriginal women distribute activism material from large black bin liners – cardboard cut-outs of stencilled hands, painted in different colours, reading 'no gas' and 'hands off Country'. Within 20 minutes, the marching procession has reached the Civic Centre Reserve at the local government offices; organisers, helpers and activists set the stage for the second part of the demonstration.

At the reserve, busy bodies herd people to large coolers filled with iced water bottles; the elderly are directed to plastic chairs set neatly in front of the stage under a large tree; those carrying banners erect them around the perimeter of the reserve; and a group of workers set up small two-person tents in the void to the rear of the chairs. The tents symbolise the current homelessness problem in Broome – and the Kimberley more broadly – and the effect that impending closures will have on the town. A swirl of backstage workers set up PA and recording equipment as the media jostle for spots left and right of stage. Mitch, Aboriginal woman and event organiser, introduces the first speaker Ron, a Goolarabooloo man who figured strongly in the recent environmental activism campaign to stop gas processing at James Price Point. Janine, a Nikinya woman, reads out the official media release and Bart, Yawuru man, leaves the stage in rapturous applause after stating plainly, 'fuck Tony Abbott, fuck Colin Barnett, and fuck lifestyle choices'. Then-Shire President Grahame Campbell takes the stage as *hisses* and *boos* emanate from the crowd. He tells the gathering what they already seem to know, saying 'we are not sure what communities are going to close and how they are going to decide … the government hasn't told us anything, we haven't had any consultation yet'. The demonstration fizzles out over the next half an hour as Aboriginal people take the stage to vent their frustration and anger over loss of language, Country and culture.

Catalysing the event just a few weeks earlier, Nelson Bieundurry composed a call to action on social media site Facebook, for all 'Countrymen' living in remote Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Citing the 1967 federal referendum in which the nation voted on the alteration of the Australian Constitution, Bieundurry suggested that the perceived gains of that popular vote outcome are being undone by recent state and federal policies:

> […] the Australian Constitution is being re-constituted, for now there are special laws being made on our behalf, we are STILL being forcibly removed … and we, metaphorically speaking, are still not counted.
>
> […] do we speak out and do something about what's happening here right now??? Hmmm, maybe the best question to ask is this, do we even give a shit about what's happening to us now??? Because the truth is … if you're a blackfella and you live in the Kimberley … in one way or another … this is going to affect you.

Bieundurry is from Wangkatjungka, a remote Aboriginal community located 530 km south-east of Broome in the Kimberley region. This region (423,517 km^2) has the highest concentration of remote Aboriginal communities in the Country with 40 per cent of residents identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; Broome being the administrative centre, providing majority of health and social services to the Kimberley. The refusal of essential services has cast doubt upon the future of up to 150 remote Aboriginal communities along with the refugees that this will create (Howitt and McLean 2015). These closures will significantly affect towns such as Broome. Voicing these concerns, Yawuru man Bart, described his motivation for 'standing up' together:

> The reason why I protest and even say anything or help out for the protests is because we need these people on their Country, it's been too long, it's always been happening since the fucking boats first rocked up to Australia. But the removal of people from Country is the biggest, the worst thing you could do to a person […] what I really hope is that the people that are faced with the threat of these amenities being cut, I just really hope that people stand up and find ways [to stay].

Aboriginal people on the move in the Kimberley is felt in Broome as bodies come to stagnate and dwell visibly in the public spaces of Chinatown, Male Oval, and other public spaces. But this event that continues to 'reclaim' Australia is a moment of togetherness, becoming and commoning that imbricates historical and future imaginaries in ways that affirm Aboriginal connections to Country. As Rose (2013: 218) contends, '*[t]ogether* could recognize that our lives are entangled, and that we can be sharing purposes, while working where we are' (emphasis in original). Being together and protesting is also work in the service of Country, where diverse people and places become crucial to a politics that embraces difference and enacts belonging. Aboriginal activist Anne associates being with Country as an embodied potentiality that provides the possibility for an affirmative politics when she says:

> … just being able to be place based and get a sense of connection to that land seems to be very invigorating … when I feel really exhausted and drained I go to the billabong and I lay down, and I can feel the energy coming through me to re-energise me and give me a sense of peace, a sense of belonging, and to right size my thinking.

Event organiser Mitch echoes this embodied sense of Country that lends potential to an invigorated politics that brings people together in an event of protest:

> I know that there's no other place on the planet that I want to be. When I'm away, I just don't operate. I'm not in my space and my foundation that gives me all the strength and ability to operate as a fully functional human being and this is where it is, on my Country, where my connection is, where I come from.

Aboriginal activists like Mitch and Anne are participants in one of the biggest Indigenous-led social movements to emerge in a number of decades, a movement that began in the Kimberley and featured strongly in Broome. As the campaign has grown stronger, groups of diverse people also come together in the southern cities of Melbourne and Sydney and 'reclaim' these urban spaces by affirming Aboriginality (Davidson 2015). Chanting 'always was, always will be, Aboriginal land', black and white activists decentre White governmentality through events of being-in-common. The next section focuses on

the affirmation of Aboriginality and acknowledgement of Country through a more 'quiet' politics of celebration.

Quiet politics: The NAIDOC march in Darwin

National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week is held in early July and celebrates the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. In 2014, the events commenced on Saturday 5th July with a free dinner for Senior Citizens at St Mary's club, Marrara (known for the popular football team). It concluded with a Ball and Awards Evening at the Beachside Pavilion, Sky City, the luxury hotel-convention centre-casino along the touristic, and spiritually significant, Mindil Beach in inner Darwin. In 2014, the theme of the week-long celebration was Serving Country: Centenary and Beyond and recognised the contribution of Indigenous members in the Australian Defence Force. This includes their role in events such as the landing and retreat of the Australian and New Zealand Armed Corps (ANZAC) at Gallipoli during the First World War, the Japanese bombing of Darwin during the Second World War, rescue events when Cyclone Tracy gutted Darwin in 1973 as well as their participation in the ongoing 'War on Terror'. In this section, we particularly focus on the NAIDOC March in Darwin where Aboriginals of diverse backgrounds, curious onlookers, long-term Anglo-Australian residents and migrant newcomers, some of whom work as aged care/disability support workers, are co-present.

The March held on a weekday starts with a free breakfast at Bennett Park, a well-known landmark in inner Darwin. This is followed by a ceremonial dance performed by Aboriginal men with painted bodies who welcome people to Larrakia Country. The diversity of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity is expressed through singing and dancing. The sound of clap sticks and the didgeridoo mingles with clapping, cheering and convivial conversation. The Aboriginal flag waves in the wind along with colourful balloons and there is a festive air. Four members of HMAS *Coonawarra* lead the March followed by Indigenous members of the Army's North-West Mobile Force (NORFORCE), Veterans and members of Larrakia Nation. The March weaves it way down the paved area of Smith St Mall toward Raintree Park, a large public square, where we assemble. There are speeches followed by a free barbecue of sausages, steak and bread. Diana and Anne, young Aboriginal women who have lived in Darwin their entire lives, never participate in protest marches. Today, however, Diana, a young mother, travelled from the satellite town of Palmerston to celebrate this day. Anne asked for an extended lunch break from her workplace so she could be present. For both Diana and Anne this march was different; it was not a protest against racism or dispossession that involved an oppositional politics but a joyous occasion that celebrated the contribution of Indigenous peoples to society. They used my video camera to capture the mood on the day.

Diana: I come every year. Just because I'm Indigenous, it's my favourite day. I love this day more than I love my birthday. Nobody really hates each other today

While Diana does not explain this hate, many residents were critical of emergency measures of the state such as the Northern Territory Intervention in July 2007 – and its subsequent metamorphosis into the Stronger Futures Legislation – that criminalised Aboriginals. These 'interventionist' policies were not 'paternalistic arts of civilizational

care' (Povinelli 2011: 25) that sought to protect Aboriginal children from sexual abuse, but a continuation of White domination and dispossession, a familiar story that exhausts bodies and engenders tensions within Indigenous communities in their struggle for recognition. For an Indigenous member of the NORFORCE, the March was a moment of cultural recognition, reconciliation and pride that allowed silent voices and different stories to be heard. He said:

> Get the right story, we enjoy ourselves, and to be proud. NAIDOC it's all about Indigenous people coming together … .to stand up and present themselves. Yeah. Their voices to be heard. So, also, it's about the army, about recognising that Indigenous people are part of the army.

For Vincent, a mature-aged Anglo-Australian man who has spent his entire life in Darwin, it brought forth memories of this lack of recognition and injustice that Indigenous members of the defence force live with despite their role in defending the nation during the Japanese bombing of Darwin and rescue events, such as when Cyclone Tracey gutted Darwin in 1974 on Christmas Day:

> Aboriginal people have been involved, and a lot of them came back and weren't recognised, weren't even allowed to go to the RSL clubs and have a drink … hopefully the Indigenous Aboriginal situation will progress quickly.

Preetam, the supervisor of a team of disability and aged care workers, all migrant newcomers, who accompany Aboriginal elders at the March felt that it was important for people of ethnic minority backgrounds to celebrate this occasion:

> I am here to celebrate NAIDOC, this is the event to recognise people over here, especially the Indigenous people, and I am happy to support here those people, and that's a great celebration, and I think everybody should join it.

While Indigenous people have experienced the violence of colonialism, dispossession and desperation common in settler societies it is evident that this walk was not a protest or a demonstration but a celebration. Simpson (2011: 11), an Indigeneous Canadian woman argues that such celebrations are 'quiet collective acts of resurgence' or political mobilisations that transform and decolonise inner city space momentarily. It is an event of commoning that celebrates the diversity of a good life that is built from moments of joy, pride and courage.

Amelia, an Aboriginal elder, speculated about the changes that are possible through such events when she said 'consider yourself a ripple in the ocean to be, a big noise to be that connects us back to our feelings, our humanness and spirituality'. Nina initiates this ripple as one of the main organisers of the event. She says:

> Yep so NAIDOC is very important it's our one-week annual celebration and promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture throughout our community. We encourage not only our own people but members from the wider community to join in and promote and celebrate our culture

These words resonate with Merrifield's (2013: 63) call for collective action that is like 'rain that creates its own tidal wave', a critical force inside that can diffuse and radiate outwards from meeting places that are nodes of affective intensity in a landscape of affirmative politics. Such a politics emerges through embodied potentiality when individual bodies are not

fixed identities who place their survival as the most important concern but members of a collective who decentre White power and privilege through immanent obligations. Humans then are not just moral agents capable of evaluative judgements, responsibility and free will but 'sensate, moving matter' (Hynes 2013: 567) that is reenergised when we withdraw from consciously forging connections across difference that fatigues our bodies (Anzaldúa 2015).

Events of commoning: reclaiming the nation

In contrast to the Cronulla riots and Reclaim Australia rallies that crystallise negative energies of hatred and anger through habitual practices of racialising and demonising ethno-religious minority groups, the noisy and quiet politics of commoning discussed in this paper are quite different. It is a commoning that has the potential to inspire macro-political movements because individual bodies have not yet crystallised but are constantly being (re)composed through energetic forces that contribute to feeling and living otherwise – a notion of political becoming (Dikeç 2012). This paper shows that such becoming is underpinned by embodied potentiality or the energies and life forces that propel and resource movements from 'quiet' to 'noisy' – collecting bodies along the way. By 'taking it to the street', the reclamation of the commons needs such a rendition of political becoming if the felt immanence of crisis and conflict that transpires in everyday racialised moments and the biopolitical governance by mainstream whiteness is to be disrupted. An event of commoning then, spins like a vortex, enveloping bodies across difference within the social meshwork of the nation. It expels a notion of homogeneity that holds to its centre a supremacy of any one subjectivity. Instead, to use Haraway's (2008: 16) language, subjectivities take flight and materialise through a commons that is about 'becoming with' others.

An exploration of 'noisy' and 'quiet' politics of the Top End discussed in this paper provides a unique insight into encounters that have the potential to incubate a commons that is diverse but also inclusive. In places like Darwin and Broome sensuous, fleeting and ephemeral connections to Country counter the debilitating effects of racism that fatigue bodies. This is evident when Mitch describes how negative intensities slip from the body when life is nourished by Country:

> All of that stuff just becomes insignificant when you're out there [on Country], you just replenish your soul. It's a good life. That. To be able to just live in the present, in the now, that is a good life.

When a racialised and colonised subjectivity is stripped in ways that increase an embodied capacity to affect and be affected, an immanent ethical obligation, an 'excess' not captured by discourses of governmentality takes precedence. It then takes flight, resourcing the politics of a diverse commons through events that are always more than mere happenings (Deleuze 2004). For Larrakia elder Amelia, who often welcomes people to Country, these events are 'ripples' with far-reaching effects that animate, catalyse, multiply and scale-up reclaiming sovereignty, place and nation.

Conclusion

Events such as the NAIDOC March and the Community Closure Protest bring together people of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds in public spaces of the city and its environs

– people are moved and something happens. For Isin (2012: 131), what happens is a change in the state of affairs, a change in the order of things through a rupture or gathering in public space that questions and demands justice through solidarity – 'things will never be the same after'. The two events described here, however, also draw attention to a politics that privileges creative enactments rather than critique, and collective moments rather than national solidarity. The focus is not merely on describing or capturing the event but also trying to explore the 'thisness' of the events – the excess of feeling that overflows and cannot always be captured in words (Manning and Massumi 2014, Zwicky 2014). Zwicky (2014) argues that the thisness or the experience of singularity has the potential to strike us like a shaft of light – it feels like the resonant structure of the world is compressed in an instant or the weight of the universe is balanced on a single point and that point entered us – we are affected. When we are affected, these singular events are catalytic and have repercussions that exceed their performance (Simpson 2011). This is because singularity operates at a pre-personal level and incorporates points that are too small to be taken account of by a finite subject. These singular points that 'takes us off in a new direction' (Guattari 2000: 13) are immensely significant and have the potential to produce results of the greatest importance because they are produced by generative forces. Manning and Massumi (2014: 4) call for attention to these 'almost unidentifiable' forces that modulate events and give them expression. So rather than call for human beings to be attentive, or place human consciousness before the being of the world, events of commoning described in this paper enable the co-composition and regeneration of the world through attention to affective forces. Such events that punctuate the progress of individual and collective historicity can then be regenerative (Manning and Massumi 2014).

Merrifield (2013) also argues for more attention to the boundless kinetic energy and chaotic forces that enable us to know and feel the city as vivid, alive and growing. He compares it to taking a 'daring leap onto a moving train, not knowing quite where it's headed, only having a vague sense of where it's been' (Merrifield 2013: 9); there are risks. In this paper, we have taken this risk by describing events of commoning where people are moved and something happens – exploring affective forces that modulate these singular events and give it expression. These events are the making of a commons that changes the order of things by performative acts, the sharing of stories and traditional ceremonies that celebrate the diversity of life. Attention to such events offers a more hopeful rendition of politics, rather than the hopeless immobilising atmospheres of the Cronulla riots and Reclaim rallies that negatively affect bodies of colour. Perhaps then the capacity to live with difference can begin to be thought of in terms of moments of engagement, resurgence and rebirth that is an outcome of enacting and inhabiting multiple worlds and utopian imaginations of a 'good life'.

Within postcolonial literature, there is a call to move away from Western theories of commoning – and incorporate broader cosmologies that focus on embodied knowledges of place gained through sharing stories and performing traditional ceremonies (Simpson 2011). This paper has shown that inhabiting and sharing urban space with others enables Aboriginal people, long-term residents as well as migrant newcomers to begin to celebrate, affirm and value plural imaginaries of the good life that play a role in reclaiming Australia through an optics from the Top End. Such reclaiming differs from Cronulla and contributes to rethinking the potential that city streets have in enlarging the urban commons. But

if the benefits of these local practices of everyday commoning are to be transformative, their operation at multiple scales needs further exploration. A common world is recomposed when it is continuously shaped and replenished by a community that comes together in a 'collective adventure' that has no essence (Gibson *et al.* 2016).

Notes

1. Pejorative terms for Lebanese Australians and Australians of Southern European migrant descent, respectively.
2. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) broadcast a *Four Corners* report on 25 July 2016 that highlighted the abuse of youths, primarily of Aboriginal background, in the Northern Territory corrections system. The broadcast triggered nationwide protests and a Royal Commission into Juvenile Detention in the Northern Territory. Available from: http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/2016/07/25/4504895.htm
3. Noted by protest organisers.

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