16. True Ethnography

Gillian Cowlishaw

Anthropologist Needed

It is autumn 1999 and the vigorous crashing of the metal knocker on the front door of my house in Glebe has me in a state of alarm as I leave the quiet study and run downstairs. I open the door to a dark, dishevelled figure, wild hair, lean and edgy. A gravelly, menacing voice says, ‘I’ve come to make a land claim on this property’. The grim expression dissolves as I exclaim, ‘Frank Doolan!’ He shakes my hand with a flamboyant black man’s double gesture, still tense, ready to cut and run, ready for a fight—or fun. ‘How are you?’ I ask, and he says, ‘I’m still goin’. But more important, [dramatic pause] how are you?’

He stays all afternoon. Frank was a friend from earlier research in Bourke and university in Bathurst, but I had not seen him for some years. He explains that Mt Druitt in western Sydney is now his home. ‘This is my tribe now’, he says. ‘True warriors they are too. Despite what you think.’

I leave it, knowing what he means (Cowlishaw 1988).

Frank has much to tell. He is in town to deliver a document to the District Court to support a young fellow’s appeal against his 18-year sentence for murder—he killed a man when out ‘cruisin’ for a bruisin’. Frank explains, with care and precision, the reason for his plea to the court—his belief that this boy does not deserve the long prison sentence. With passionate feeling breaking through in his language, Frank places the boy’s plight within the specific violence and pain that the family experienced. These are Aboriginal experiences. It is Indigenous conditions that made this lad vulnerable to becoming a victim of his own anger, violence and confusion. Punishment on top of punishment, a wasted life that could be reclaimed. Frank has a handwritten statement that he has presented to the court, but does not offer it to be read. Does he not trust me? I am conscious that my comfortable terrace house in Glebe could appear a place of wealth and self-indulgence, well protected from the rigours of life as Frank knows them. Yet there is no accusation or comparison in Frank’s importuning, no disguised moralising about whitefellas’ practices. He knows I am interested in what he tells me and that I could make something of it.

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1 In 1980, I began long term ethnographic research in Bourke, a country town notorious for tempestuous race relations. I conducted further research there in the 1990s (Cowlishaw 1999, 2004).
His stories are elaborate, attempts to reveal complex and profound social meanings. They also reveal Frank’s creative vision—each event is vested with emotional immediacy. He dangles anecdotes as hooks that link elements of his world to contrasting public and political perceptions.

Frank’s talk is challenging and beguiling because his intentions are never obvious. He seems more purposeful and in control than he’s been at some times in the past. He shows a mordant wit, is often charming and usually dramatic. Again and again, between his poetry and parables, and large mugs of black tea, he urges me to come and work in Mt Druitt. He says he does not want to eat, but when I make myself a sandwich for lunch, I make one for him too, and eventually he eats half of it. Food seems a distraction, a necessary fuel for the body only. Smoking rollies, cradling his tea, he sits outside on the back step, but is never still for long. He paces, building a narrative, anxious to complete a particular point, to show the significance of an event, or a life, or a report in the paper. I have little control over the conversation, but there is no passive listening. If I lose track, I am likely to be ambushed with a question. But like all true storytellers, Frank will also readily retell the tale; these are not material artefacts to be fashioned once and then fixed in time, like written words.

The Great White Hope

20 years earlier in Bathurst, I was teaching one of the early courses, called ‘Aboriginal Studies’. After politely asking my permission, Frank Doolan, who I had recently met in Bourke and who was enrolled in other courses, sat in on a tutorial to support his mate who was making a presentation. I engaged in some critical discussion with the students and later, in the winter dusk, I heard Frank shouting contemptuously outside my office: ‘You think you’re the great white hope, but you’re just another white woman who does not understand.’ Frank’s perception of a slight to his mate was, needless to say, unintended. I don’t know if Frank’s mate felt slighted, but I was made sharply aware of sensitivities that I had given little thought to. When I got over the hurt and anxiety caused by this one-man demonstration, I saw that other Koori students also displayed sore spots that needed to be taken into account. What was liberating, anti-racist, controversial, funny or subversive exposé for Anglo students was not necessarily seen in the same way by Aboriginal students. Rural and urban students also responded very differently to topics and issues in Aboriginal studies. Further, Frank’s anger abated and the incident furthered our budding friendship.

2 An explosion of academic interest in Aborigines had evoked demands for generalist courses, often concentrated on historical sources rather than studies of classical Aboriginal traditions by anthropologists.

3 Local designation for Aboriginal.
Frank was right to be wary of the well-meaning whitefellas, armoured with their goodwill (Berlant 2004). I could not be seriously affronted at being put in this category, as the Great White Hope is a familiar figure, and one with whom I have quite a lot in common. There are many who have offered advice, assistance and solutions to the difficulties Aboriginal people regularly experience. Many Aboriginal people are also now on this treadmill, co-opted into proffering insider expertise to solve what is often seen as the nation’s problems with Indigenous people, or at least the statistical evidence of these problems.

While Aborigines everywhere are familiar with whitefellas, the reverse is not the case. Despite their assertive symbolic presence and the familiar claim that Aborigines are the most researched people in the world, the lives of Aboriginal Australians are largely concealed from the urban majority. They are ‘known’ through shocking images, worrying statistics and concerned discourses that flood the press. As well, Indigenous art is renowned. Public consciousness remains stubbornly oblivious to anthropologists’ accounts of intricate kinship systems, philosophical sophistication, intriguing social structure and the rich Indigenous language environment.

**Anthropology**

‘You’re an anthropologist? How interesting.’

And later, ‘Did they accept you?’

This frisson of excitement evokes what is now absurd nineteenth-century imagery about what is us and what is other, but also hints at a deeper interest and desire. It is hard to think of an appropriate answer to the old images of hostile natives. I want to say, ‘There is no “they” there’. Perhaps it is the guilty knowledge of dispossession that leads so many to imagine Aborigines as unwelcoming. Or maybe it is simply the difficulty of understanding why people would accept a curious stranger into their lives, especially one who was actually studying the abject hosts as depicted in the satirical film *Babakiueria* (BBQ area). When working in remote Arnhem Land I could quip, ‘They loved my 4WD’, hoping the irony was understood. Or explain, ‘Lorna and Nellie are my sister and cousin, blackfella way’. Or tell a long tale of how they have come to know us.

So what was that question again?

But later I had to answer the question, ‘Where do you work?’, with ‘Bourke’, and more puzzled, anxious responses emerged, often a sympathetic, ‘How bad is it now?’—people know about the racism that defines the country town of Bourke.
Nowadays, when I confess that I am working with Aborigines in the outer Sydney suburb of Mt Druitt, a certain sceptical discomfort relieves me of further explanation. It is assumed that I am on some kind of mission to do good, to expose injustice, to offer a sympathetic account of pathetic lives in Sydney’s own suburban western desert. All these responses are ordinary outcomes of public ‘knowledge’ of anthropology, of Aborigines and of Australia. I am both contributing to, and contesting, that knowledge and the anxieties and ideologies that suffuse it.

When the ‘invasion of Aborigines’ country’ began to take a central role in the interpretation of Australian history, anthropologists’ interest in traditional Aboriginal culture came under scrutiny. Had that interest adequately represented contemporary Aborigines? The verdict, to which I made a small contribution, was a resounding no. Had it added to Aborigines’ burdens? Yes. Historians, glowing with virtue at having belatedly included Aborigines in Australia’s history, were seldom concerned with cultural questions. Cultural studies scholars severed their work on Indigenous issues from the contaminated ethnographic studies; Aborigines’ traditions were their own and western scholars should not be undermining their authority (Mudrooroo 1997; McDermott 2002). One implication was that others’ traditions were not relevant to interpreting the past or the present of Australian society. As an impassioned rewriting of the contours of Australian history emerged, the scribes of the day were interested in old wounds and brave new worlds cleansed of a superseded racism. Warnings against whitefellas messing in Indigenous matters became part of public discourse in the 1980s and anthropology is the discipline seen as most marred by this transgression.

**Ethnography**

I was a student during the 1970s groundswell when the epistemological underpinning of anthropology—to understand and legitimise traditional cultures—was abruptly inverted into just another form of hegemony. Anthropologists studied these people (what arrogance); anthropologists took knowledge from them without recompense (how exploitative); anthropologists wrote books about them to advance their own careers (so dominating). In popular and much academic discourse, the desire to understand was judged to be a misunderstanding, an enterprise fundamentally flawed by its underlying condition: colonial dispossession.

Yet few appreciate or grapple with the messy core of ethnographic practice—immersion in, and intimacy with another social world, in my case a remote Arnhem Land community in the 1970s and since, Bourke in the 1980s,
and Mt Druitt from 2000. Ethnographic writing does not seek a quantifiable truth. Its empirical evidence is a melange of recorded speech and action, opinion and emotion and evidence of material and imagined realities. Emotional judgments and moral reactions are always present as the observer participates and the participant observes and the informant and researcher share their interests. Let me be clear. Disciplined and careful observation is central to this, as to any research. Part of what I tried to reveal in *The City’s Outback* is the unique strengths— as well as the limitations— of informal, idiosyncratic and subjectivist ethnographic practices, such as my relationship with Frank Doolan. I deliberately depict early stages of the process of loitering with intent in other people’s lives. This practice has something in common with other kinds of social encounter, although the intent and the consequences differ in important ways.

Ethnographic research consists of practices that many forms of enquiry pride themselves on avoiding; immersion and intimacy with a particular social domain over a long period of time. Personal relationships are at the core, with all the risks and responsibilities they entail. The ethnographer willingly experiences a destabilisation of her familiar everyday world and some loss of self. As the social sciences have increasingly affirmed, subjectivity, affect and complexity can be the objects of methodical analysis. This approach rejects the fantasy of ‘finding order in events by putting events in order’ and accepts ‘the inseparability of knowledge from its knower’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992).

In the course of her analysis of white hegemony in Australia, Aileen Moreton-Robinson makes the pointed claim that ‘Indigenous people have been among the nation’s most conscientious students of whiteness and racialisation. Participant observation was our method’ (Moreton-Robinson 2004). I endorse her assertion that Indigenous people have a specific way of knowing whiteness because it supports a view of knowledge as positioned while allowing that legitimate knowledge is not confined to the identity position of the knower. We can know something of others’ worlds initially and primarily through everyday personal interaction, discovering otherness at the subjective interface of the social world. This is the epistemological foundation of anthropology’s basic method.

Anthropology always nurtured much greater ambitions than simply recording the culture of others. At the core of the discipline was a desire to overcome the barriers that cultural difference erects to human understanding. When we examine the term ‘radical alterity’, we find it refers not to different human beings, but to radically different ways that equivalent human beings live in the world. Ethnographers provide evidence of amazing variation in the social worlds human beings have created, encompassing dramatic differences in everyday habits, material creations, authority structures, and systems of knowledge and belief. The discipline was thus founded on a powerful humanism which asserted that cultural, class, racial and other systemic differences are not
insuperable barriers to shared knowledge or to sharing the social world. Aware of their interest, to me at least, the Mt Druitt informants opened themselves to be seen in ways they retained control of, at least until I picked up my pen. While bookish pursuits mark a realm of power that my informants have little knowledge of, this does not preclude their pleasure in being represented in that world. Few of them are likely to read this work, yet the consciousness of one or another of them looking over my shoulder as I write has spurred me on with nervousness and excitement.

Now that categories of primitive and civilised, prehistoric and modern have partially dissolved, fieldworkers come from anywhere and study everything. Those who were once others now study us. The boardroom and the clinic, minority groups and cults, remote places, the suburban street and the internet are all objects of ethnographic attention. What remains central to these renewed, robust and inquisitive forms of anthropology is ethnography, that is, the researcher’s insistence on experiencing particular social conditions and specific social relationships. The ethnographer goes among people and relates to them as far as possible on their own terms. S/he tries to live as they do in order to use this personal experience as the foundation for describing, analysing and explaining social phenomena. This is a close-up experience of people who are likely to change your mind.

**Frank**

Frank Doolan changed my mind. I see Frank as embodying a crucial dynamic in Australian public life. He represents one among a range of subjective orientations concerning Indigenous identities, as these struggle to be expressed and implanted. He wants the Indigenous world to remain one where social relations are valued more than individual achievement. I perceive in Frank a blackfella struggling to reject, eject and disempower the white man within himself, refusing recognition and respect to its alien inhabitation. Frank’s vision of what it is to be Aboriginal is fired by the sense that Aboriginal people are being drowned, submerged, swallowed by a largely indifferent world. He resists the aspirations people read into him—to be a leader, a political strategist, a social worker.

The internalised shadow of the white man means that Frank knows how the white world works; he has had various romances with elements of that world and has sought ways to deal honourably with its people and its institutions. He has had some stunning successes, but he has also been repeatedly disappointed.

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4 Mudrooroo and, quite differently, McDermott have explored the difficulties Aboriginal writers face in having to write for the world of the invader (Mudrooroo 1990; McDermott 2002).
and despairing. It is not the whiteness in white men that troubles him; they are what they are. It is the black man that interests Frank, and his considerable passion, intellect and poetry are focused on being and becoming one and, perhaps, inspiring others to do so.

The significance I take from Frank’s endeavours, and the stories he helped me obtain, is not just about the damage done to Aboriginal people in the past; it is also about how selves are formed, reformed, sometimes deformed, in conditions of social upheaval. There is a sharp contradiction between the way the nation is so ready to plead guilty to specific crimes in the past and its inability to cope with their effects. In _The City's Outback_ I document some of these effects in a fragmented community, in broken kin networks, in individualised lives.

### The Untidy Backyard

Frank’s visit to Glebe led me to toy with and then develop the idea of a research project in western Sydney after my Bourke book was completed (Cowlishaw 2004). I was in profound agreement with Frank that these lives are as meaningful as any others, and that there is tremendous and unrecognised significance in the definitively Aboriginal drama they are living out. Not that Frank would put it quite like that. I wanted to explore Frank’s vision further. For one thing, was he fair dinkum? His sense of mission and his talk of warriors and struggles often seemed like romantic hyperbole rather than any realistic sense of what people want or need. His criticisms of the Mr Bigs in Aboriginal affairs seemed unfair: ‘If he came out to Mt Druitt we’d find him a black girl. He doesn’t need that white one’, said in a tone leavened with humour and with ironic self-awareness of his own past liaisons. But it was his pained and explicit search for meaning in everyday events that I found utterly compelling, and which led to the research project of 2000.

There is an often cited statistic that the largest concentration of Aboriginal people in Australia lives in western Sydney, yet the people who live there are largely unknown. Is this ‘bogan’ area, among ‘westies’ and the cultural deserts of western Sydney, the place where the culturally deprived of the Aboriginal population belong, out of sight among the least fashionable people of the city? What do such unspoken evaluations hide? And do these Aboriginal people form a defined community, despite being scattered among the suburban streets populated by other public housing tenants and people of many ethnic backgrounds? Of what significance is being Aboriginal, or for that matter, not being Aboriginal? Such questions underlay the research I undertook in 2000.

A year after the western Sydney research began, and after months of visiting, recording and photographing, driven by my ‘informant’ Frank Doolan
(although I drove the car), I became strung out and depressed, intellectually and emotionally. The research terminology about ‘the intricate dynamics of everyday life in Mt Druitt’ began to seem incongruous and the research had ceased to make sense. Frank was involving me in tragic personal dramas he believed to have immense significance: Annette, for instance, whose life-long distress seemed to be abating, recorded an account of her life of pain and stubborn hatred, of family destruction and minimal comfort, trying, she said, to love, and asking for my help. I hurried to transcribe the story she told me, but when I took the pages back, shaped into a coherent sequence, I found the house deserted, with bits of broken furniture strewn in the front yard. I tried but failed to locate her. What was I to do with that?

What was research to achieve? Was this what Aboriginal lives were about?

It took some years and a series of false starts to see coherence and value in that research project. In the end I told the story of the research, its failures and its successes, with other purposes in mind, particularly to infiltrate and disturb the public discourses that assume we know how to know these lives. In *The City’s Outback*, I explored the practice of ethnographic fieldwork in western Sydney in tandem with certain aspects of Indigeneity, relying on depiction and minimising sociological explanation.

**The Research Story**

The ethnography of *The City’s Outback* was shaped by Frank and by the people he took me to visit and to record. At the end, I felt obliged and driven, haunted by the sense that these stories meant more than appeared on the surface and that my experience of them also had significance beyond the mere fact of recording them. ‘Stories’ seemed such an inadequate term for the fragments of memory, the brief recorded disclosures of these extraordinary lives.

It will be clear to academic readers that I have a very bad case of the ‘diary disease’ (Bourdieu 2003; Geertz 1988). This self-induced condition exists because a reflexive, diary-like form can break down a common distinction between the research practice and the findings or data. The relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds, their overlapping and interweaving, their co-constructedness, their self-knowledge, and their everyday reality, has been my focus independent of the research site (see, for example, Cowlishaw 1999).

Long threads of disciplinary frameworks, institutional histories, ideological and theoretical paradigms, connect any research project to its past. One beginning is

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5 Annette’s story appears in chapter three of *The City’s Outback*. 
the grant application where we present our intellectually cogent and confident intentions as sincere, objective—and modest. Outlining my intended research in 1999, I became convinced of the significance, indeed the magnificence of the investigation I was proposing. With contacts from the Bourke research, and infected by Frank’s fervour, I felt I could achieve a good deal in Mt Druitt. Only when the work began was the construction revealed as artificial and brittle in the face of the world’s complexity and recalcitrance. My plans were too elaborate and ambitious for the 12-month project I called ‘Urbanising Aboriginality: The dynamics of racial identities in urban and suburban Sydney’. I intended to conduct

extensive ethnographic research in Mt Druitt, western Sydney. This project will document what it means to be an Aboriginal person in urban conditions and what external obstructions or internal resistance exists to the full realisation of indigenous citizenship … At the heart of this research is the notion of organic intellectuals, that is, those who articulate conceptions of the past, present and future of Aboriginality as it emerges within the community.6

These words are appropriate for the seminar room, but their presumptuousness was out of harmony with this fieldwork. ‘Urban Aboriginality’ and ‘what it means to be an Aboriginal person’ refer to labile, dynamic entities, matters of contestation and assertion, rather than self-defined things waiting to be observed and described. While Frank fitted the idea of an ‘organic intellectual’, what he ‘articulated’ would require considerable translation to fit the rest of the description.

The application also assumes a congruence between the value of the research to the researched and to the funding bodies. I promised to ‘shed light on a recognised national problem’, assuming the desire and the ability to solve or ameliorate these problem lives. The nation’s ‘recognition’ is cunning, and does not deliver what it promises for reasons that are both complex and intractable (Lea 2002, 2008; Povinelli 2002). Nor is the nation a unified entity with unitary intentions, separate and independent of the university, the Australian Research Council, the citizenry and all who might identify as ‘us’. Can the mythic ‘we’ actually offer Aborigines, ‘them’, equality, self-determination, ‘our’ respect? Or even much in the way of understanding? Frank clearly thinks we could do much better with a little help from our Indigenous friends.

6 Some elements of this project were incorporated into a successful application for an Australian Professorial Fellowship to continue the Mt Druitt research. The new project began in 2006, leading to the writing of The City’s Outback.
Racialised Knowledge

More directly, the application assumes that the ‘characteristic self-images, discourses, cultural forms’ of Indigenous people are available in recognisable form. In Arnhem Land, it was soon clear that the ‘experienced realities’ of Indigenous people had to be translated to become meaningful to a wider audience. But the lives and language of western suburbs Aboriginal people are not recognised as in need of translation because they are using familiar tools such as English. Thus, rather than render them familiar, I wanted to show their mystery and strangeness.

While there is a clear contrast between Frank’s poetry, stories and essays and the kind of writing I do, we both pursue something I think of as truth. These truths illuminate social dynamics by counteracting accepted understandings of the social world, understandings that reify and normalise the forms of power and authority that appear to bind it together. Frank’s work remains closely linked to those it is about and for, whereas mine is produced within an academic and establishment framework that it is Frank’s deliberate political practice to avoid. Frank writes by hand on paper and has no desire to revise his words. The ‘word processing’ has gone on in his head beforehand. Interestingly, though, there were moments in our informal interaction where each of us hinted at a suppressed desire to embrace the other’s audience.

Ethnography is well placed to illuminate the cultural politics that enables some people to be heard and condemns others to ‘talking under water’. It does this by bearing witness to the significance of lives so often assumed to have none, other than as objects of the aesthetic or sentimental interest of those closer to the powerful forces that shape all our worlds. While none of us can avoid what Moreton-Robinson called ‘racialised ways of knowing’ (Moreton-Robinson 2004, p. 2), I aim to bring elements of these racialised ways into focus and wonder whether our desire to condemn and expunge them may not create further silence and mystification. The boundaries between these specific ways of knowing are part of asymmetries that were established in an earlier era, but are not fixed and/or stable. Recognising them has the potential to dissolve barriers to relationships of exchange and debate. The work done by me and Frank is located where social, ethnic and racial identities are intertwined.

Besides the importuning of Frank Doolan, I have reasons for invading the Indigenous realm that go far beyond that realm itself. I do not seek the details of Aboriginal culture or Indigenous lives for their own sake; what I seek is an understanding of how social differentiation works. How is a racial dichotomy reproduced when the concept of race is rejected? How does a social identity work in itself and for itself? How does Australian history get settled?
How is what I think of as the white neurosis about Aborigines expressed in this suburban environment? These questions are as germane to non-Indigenous people as they are to self-defined Indigenous people, and to the extensive interaction between them.

Given the general acceptance that colonial history was destructive of Aboriginal society, how is it that destructive effects are only recognised in general and impersonal terms? Should there be attention to the identification, diagnosis or treatment of wounded Aboriginal people, as Judy Atkinson recommends (Atkinson 2002)? Is it patronising or arrogant for others to identify particular historical damage, and will such exposure feed negative racist stereotypes? Is the sympathetic public now sated with stories of Aboriginal suffering? Professionals who are closely embroiled in the cultural dynamics of health and other service delivery have internalised these anxieties. But since the Commonwealth Emergency Intervention of June 2007, such perceptions have been superseded by a rhetoric that demands urgent responses to what is now stamped with the label of social pathology following publication of a plethora of horrendous images and stories (Altman & Hinkson 2010).

**Auditing Ethnography**

The ethnographer becomes dependent on the people whose lives she is discovering—in this case Frank and those he is sure will cooperate in my desire to know them. They are given the technical term ‘informants’ in ethnographic research because they allow the researcher some way into their social lives and become co-researchers, to a degree determined by their interest and engagement. Ideally these are people with something of a sociological imagination, a sense of the contingencies of their own social worlds. Far from being informers, disloyal to their own realm, they are, like the ethnographer, interested to represent, semiotically, their own social world.

The rewards for those who participate, interact and engage with the ethnographer and the research are multiple and complex. For some there is the fun of it, or the serious pleasure of recording their own opinions or stories. Many, in my experience, enjoy a chance to talk, explain and perform before an outsider who is eager to listen. A rare few might find absorbing interest in the work as work, and become inspired to think differently and to engage with transcripts and with further analysis. My rewards are obvious: I get to know people whose lives are different from my own and sometimes form longstanding relationships that continue to enrich my life, and, I venture to say, those of these friends.

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7 I use the term ‘neurosis’ to refer to the intense attention, emotional weight and confusion that surrounds Aboriginal issues in public and in private debate.
My ethnographic fieldwork in Mt Druitt proceeded in a fluid and unstructured way, shaped by forceful individuals and willing participants as well as those more reluctant or hostile and those who went missing. I found no ‘objects of study’, but human beings pursuing social objectives through complex attachments. Rather than me being the active fieldworker in a passive field, my ‘informant’ Frank has been an active agent in the research process. This was a negotiated encounter, in which all parties were engaged in different ways. The caricature of the fieldworker as colonial master may reflect one element of structural relations but has little relevance down among the interpersonal relationships that constitute fieldwork.

Thus, university ethics committees, particularly the superintendents of Aboriginal research protocols, are seriously misguided when they try to judge the moral trustworthiness of the fieldworker without taking the views of the subjects of research into consideration. The ethnographic research itself is threatened by attempts to legislate some formula to control researchers’ practices. Ethical judgments are part of a constant process of reflection about living relationships with people who are themselves engaged in other ethical domains. The normative regimes that ethics committees seek to impose try to take responsibility away from the researched as well as the researcher and foreclose on the dilemmas that confront both in their encounters. Were they successful, the whole endeavour would cease to be a dynamic relationship, with moral, emotional and political contradictions, and would instead become a formal playing out of a set of pre-ordained rules, producing nothing original.

This particular ethnography is part of a disciplinary history at the same time as it is trying to overcome some of its evasions by being quarrelsome and awkward. For instance, I want to know why this social realm attracts less interest and analysis than others. Why does a small army of anthropologists, myself included, work with black people in the north of the continent while virtually none have been attracted to places such as Mt Druitt. Perhaps it seems obvious that the suburbs are not a fascinating cultural domain of difference. Is this a judgment the social sciences stands by? Perhaps a more significant question is why ethnographers take virtually no interest in the suburban population that is not Aboriginal?

At the least, The City’s Outback is a reminder that a quite other social realm is right here on the city’s doorstep. The western suburbs are not separate from the wealthy city of Sydney that conceived and bore them. But this mother seems ashamed of her western offspring. Heading for weekends in the Blue Mountains, city dwellers speed past on the motorway, neatly avoiding any relationship with these vast suburban reaches. These suburbs are the focus of a certain cosmopolitan concern and periodic deprivation scandals, but they represent what and where the city’s sophisticated citizens do not want to be.
Frank’s liaison work did not stop when he moved from Mt Druitt to live in an old caravan on the riverbank outside Dubbo, acquiring the nickname Riverbank Frank. On Police Remembrance Day in November 2006, he walked into the Dubbo police station and asked the nervous young sergeant at the desk for ‘one of them ribbons’ that officers wear on this day to mourn colleagues who have died in the line of duty. Frank wore the chequered ribbon all day, saying, ‘If we want them to respect our pain and our rituals we have to show that we respect theirs’.

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