

FRINGEDWELLER: A STRATEGIC INTERVENTION AT THE INTERFACE

SHARON DELMEGE*

The position of Aborigines is changing in Australia and I do not think this is attributable to an evolving state of benevolence in itself. The intervention of Aborigines has been an essential force behind these innovations. It is they who are establishing progressively greater control over the constructions of Aboriginality.¹

When Robert Bropho's *Fringedweller* was published in 1980, it represented a striking intervention in a European medium of communication *par excellence*. What interests me is how a member of the most disadvantaged, marginalised and powerless class in Australia succeeded in producing a marketable commodity aimed directly at a 'white' audience. Since *Fringedweller* is included,² but has not been examined, in the canon of Aboriginal writing, this paper will explore how it communicates the personal and particular experiences of Indigenous 'fringedwelling' to its intended readership.

Drawing on Malcolm Bradbury's assertion that "[a]ll human beings are narrators, seeking to reconcile what they see and what they say, seeking to make whole and credible the world they speak into existence,"³ it is possible to assume that writers and readers are bound by a desire for meaning. Therefore, since narratives are expressed in language that constitutes texts, situating readers and their reading positions, and any meaning is shaped by readers' entire experiences at the point of reading, I shall assume that meaning is negotiated and only realised

* Murdoch University, Western Australia.

¹ Robert Ariss, "Writing Black: The Construction of an Aboriginal Discourse," *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, ed. J.R. Beckett (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988) 132.

² See, for example, Lyndall Ryan, "Reading Aboriginal Histories," *Meanjin* 1 (1986): 50; Ariss 141-2; Colin Johnson, "White Forms, Aboriginal Content," *Aboriginal Writing Today*, eds. Jack Davis and B. Hodge (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985) 21-34; Colin Johnson, "Captured Discourse, Captured Lives," *Aboriginal History* 11 (1987): 31. With 'white' editorial intervention an issue concerning the authenticity of Aboriginal texts, the inclusion of *Fringedweller* within the canon of Aboriginal writing appears to be because it maintained a rare editorial control over the text, which is almost directly transcribed from tapes.

³ Cited in Hugh Webb, "Black Words on a White Page: Colin Johnson's *Long Live Sandawara*," *Not the Whole Story*, ed. Ian Reid and Sneja Gunew (Sydney: Local Consumption, 1984) 112.

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during this interactive process. Through a close reading of the Introduction and the first chapter of Bropho's book,⁴ I will show that although *Fringedweller* must assert the very differences it seeks to interpret, it is able to mediate the experiences of 'fringedwelling' because its marginalised voice is, necessarily, already in dialogue with dominant discourses.

It is important, however, to first clarify the way in which the term 'whiteness' is used, and its relation to 'dominant discourses,' because this clarifies the audience appealed to from the outset. Bropho's text regularly refers to 'white' society, 'white' public, and 'white' man, using them interchangeably for several purposes. First, it is clear that 'white' does not merely refer to skin colour but, more particularly, to the offices predominantly occupied and authorized by white men, for when *Fringedweller* was recorded in 1979, Perth society was still dominated by an Anglo-Celtic population and its attendant cultural, legal and religious mores. The term 'white' therefore also includes and refers to dominant European discourses that may or may not be taken up by 'non-white' persons. It is not surprising then that it also represents the non-Indigenous Other and all the historical baggage associated with British 'settlement' in this State.

Robert Bropho begins his introduction by reciting his credentials:

I've been a fringedweller all my life in and around the metropolitan Perth area, living near the local junk tip at Eden Hill, under sheets of tin, lived with my mother and father in the Swan Valley area in places such as Widgee Road, South Guildford Reserve before it became Allawah Grove, lived in a camp at Caversham in the mid-thirties, lived in bush breaks at Bayswater, tin camps at Swanbourne, lived on the fringes of Allawah Grove when it was run by Peter Coleman who used to have the place policed ...⁵

Although it is customary to refer to living 'at' an address, Bropho begins by stating that he lives 'in' and 'around' the metropolitan area, immediately establishing the itinerant existence of a 'fringedweller.' Indeed, within the first sentence we are informed of seven different localities. Where he locates places by name, his connection is qualified by declaring that he merely lived 'near,' 'under,' or 'with.' He allows no sense that he was directly connected with any place. He indicates where these places were, but distances his relationship at every turn. For example, he mentions Eden Hill but informs us that he didn't merely live 'at' Eden Hill, but "near the local junk tip at Eden Hill, under sheets of tin." We learn later in the book of the ways in which he attempted to live the 'white' way,

⁴ The Introduction and Chapter One exemplify the discursive interventions used in *Fringedweller*.

⁵ Robert Bropho, *Fringedweller* (Sydney: Alternative Publishing Co-Operative Limited, 1980), 1.

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holding down a job and living in a house in the suburbs with his immediate family, but since these confirmed his fringedweller existence, he chooses to ignore them here. Nevertheless, what is established is that he lived within the metropolis of Perth. By reclaiming urban spaces and overwriting the (white) relationship between place and identity, the text thus disrupts the erasure of Aboriginality from the urban landscape.

However, the text then shifts focus to place Peter Coleman at the centre of fringedwelling existence: "His bylaws set down that any Aboriginal man or woman with children who didn't have a home there would be goaled if the police caught them after six o'clock." As a reader, I empathise with Bropho's antipathy toward Coleman. The idea that adults could be punished like schoolchildren caught after curfew is shocking. That he adds: "My wife and I never had a place there so we'd be forced to run away and hide after six o'clock and sleep in the scrub," verifies the claim. But it also begs the question: why did they have nowhere else to go? We do not immediately learn the answers to this question but we do learn that in Perth in the 1960s, some people were not able to mix with friends or family at their own home after six o'clock at night and that the police not only patrolled the area but enforced the State's directive by arresting such visitors.

Since the only individual named in this section is an outsider - a powerful Anglo-Australian bureaucrat - the text effectively triggers an historical antipathy towards bureaucracy long cherished within Anglo-Celtic Australian culture, with its espousal of egalitarianism and 'barracking for the underdog.' Although the reader may not really understand what it is like to live under sheets of tin near a tip, or in bush breaks, or tin camps or in a settlement regularly policed, when we are positioned to share common ground *via* a culprit we can identify with, we are able to empathise with the powerlessness associated with running away and hiding.

Also, by speaking in the first person and drawing on the authority of the personal pronoun and the authenticity of personal, individual experience in suburbs which are familiar to many readers, as well as by using the formal Anglo expression 'my wife and I,' and by referring to his mother and father and respecting the sanctity of marriage and the significance of family, the text satisfies the conventions and values of its intended readership and thus establishes a corridor of communication between their different experiences of life.

By beginning with "personal and family histories which to some extent assume the proportion of community and local histories," *Fringedweller* clearly shares similarities with the works of Aboriginal historians observed by Bob

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Reece.⁶ For example, because Bropho is more concerned with sharing the collective experiences of fringedwelling than with documenting his life, when he says: "One winter night we slept in the bush, my wife and I and our children. We laid in the pouring rain ... My son Harvey was taken to hospital with double pneumonia ... I shall never forget that happening," what is important is that readers identify with sleeping outside in the winter rain at night.

However, while this is not an autobiography and it does not matter which particular night is referred to, places and events are frequently detailed. For example, the shift from personal associations such as *I've been*, *My wife and I*, *We laid*, *My son*, *I shall never forget*, *I shall always remember* and *My son*, to the case of "Mary Nettles, who was a pensioner who had heart trouble, who was evicted from a house in Cope St, Midland," is to attribute responsibility for their situation to the State. Yet in apportioning blame to "the white government," he cites "pure ignorance ... looking on these people and not recognising them as human beings." Thus readers learn what the "native welfare officer" did: "... he threw her case out on the verandah, and locked the door" and after she cried, "Where will I go?" he replied: "I will give you a ride to Guildford Park." With efficiency and dramatic effect, he cuts to the results: "Some several months later she was found dead in a well-used tent in the bush near the South Guildford Cemetery."

By emphasising the relationship between memory, place and identity, the full force of what it means to be a fringedweller is then compounded with a litany of deceased family and friends. But drawing on the past is also an intervention that invokes the legitimacy of 'History' to rewrite local history, pass on individual oral histories and reconstruct identities. Indeed, contrary to the Aboriginalist discourse that presumes history has no meaning for Aborigines – on the grounds that it derives from a peculiarly European appreciation of sequential or linear time – history has significant political value.⁷

The final paragraph of Bropho's Introduction provides one such example. In an appeal to readers to help prevent further loss of life, the text begins with present circumstances: "In the Swan Valley at the present moment there are five campsites ..." and then draws on the past to predict the future. By referring to the least powerful members of society, "... kindergarten children, young mothers with young babies, pensioners," and appealing to Anglo-Australian notions of chivalry, gallantry, democracy and a fair-go, the question, "[w]ill the existing population

⁶ Robert Reece and C.T. Stannage, ed., *European-Aboriginal Relations in WA History* (Perth: U of Western Australia P, 1984) 131-40.

⁷ See Stephen Muecke, "Aboriginal Oral Narrative in 'Ideological' Contexts," *Southern Review* 16.1 (1983): 88; Ariss 134; Ryan; Suzanne Baker, "Magic Realism as a Postcolonial Strategy: The Kadaitcha Sung," *Span* 32 (1991):1.

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stand by and let history repeat itself where the population of people is concerned in these five campsites?" demands some response. But this demand is strategically couched in the form of an interrogative, as it offers a less explicit and therefore less confrontational position than the embedded statement: "... if society allows this neglect at this place and time to continue they will be repeating the history of 200 years of relations between the dominant community, government and Aborigines." Given that the speaker is concerned to engage readers, this clearly acknowledges that the legitimacy of the speaking subject is subordinate to the particular speaking position from which it must speak in order to be heard.

However, by showing continuity between the past, present and future through high modality such as simple present tense markers, the speaker also appropriates an authority that verifies present events. Since this allows the simple past to be temporarily classified in terms of the simple present, and adds weight to future predictions, the speaker is able to align reading and speaking positions that effect some social affinity to assert a clear and proud statement of identity: "If the present government is going to ignore the welfare of these fringedwellers ... a lot of children and old men and women will die simply because the government refuses to recognise them as human beings. I am Robert Bropho of Lockridge campsite."

Moreover, because *Fringedweller* is an unedited transcription of a 'lifestory' drawn from personal experience, eyewitness accounts and anecdotes, its immediacy glosses the specifics expected in autobiographical texts. And since the intended readership already associates this mode of communication with the traditionally oral cultures of Indigenous peoples, and is familiar with the primacy of the spoken word in contemporary mediums of mass communication such as television 'chat shows' and 'talkback radio,' it seems to bear the mark of authenticity. Though the speaking position alternates between the personal 'I' and the general 'Aboriginal people,' it does not therefore appear to speak 'about' Aborigines, or generically for them, but from a shared fringedwelling experience.

However, from the first sentence, "I've been a fringedweller all my life," to "I am Robert Bropho of Lockridge campsite," the speaker's first priority is to establish a speaking position at the interface between Aboriginal and 'white' culture. But while this mediation accommodates key expectations and conventions for this intended readership, it does not promise an entirely comfortable channel of communication. By refusing to allow the spoken voice to be polished and presented in a completely palatable and easily-digested written format, with ideas pruned and rearranged into clear, concise, and grammatically-correct standard paragraphs, it challenges readers' expectations of literature. And by drawing on experience to re-interpret history, to redefine the concepts of 'welfare' and

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'protection,' and to refute the received notion that 'white' authorities know what is best for their future, it confronts readers with an outsider status.

Nonetheless, the opening sentence of the first chapter re-confirms that the speaker is concerned to engage the reader: "The camp life of the fringedwellers of Swanbourne, as I remember it: we lived in camps." The restatement of the obvious hints at the laboriousness of trying to explain life to a white audience through a white lens, yet the description that follows is clear and concise, and focuses on the key conditions of material life:

The camp was made up of old galvanised tin or wheat bags and chaff bags and the railings cut from peppermint trees, stinkweed. Our beds was also made of peppermint trees forks, stinkweed railings. We couldn't afford mattresses, it was old clothes or the leaves of the peppermint trees chucked up on those railings to make it soft. There was no furniture around. What the fringedwellers used was old kerosene tins to sit on, old tins we used to boil tea in. We had tin pannikins to drink out of, no cups.⁸

The use of declarative statements immediately sets an objective tone, establishing what is said as bald statements of fact, while knowledge of 'white' norms is starkly demonstrated by the absence of such norms.

However, as if to explain the material condition of the camp, the second paragraph shifts the focus to the key material condition of life: employment. Beginning with "[w]ork was hard to get," readers learn that Bropho's father was a hard worker who "used to walk miles to find straight trees which he'd pick out and cut, clothesline props." The time and effort involved is thus detailed to enable readers to understand that they were poor through circumstance rather than idleness. He recounts philosophically, "[s]ome days it'd be good to him, some days he'd walk miles," but the scarcity of employment and a regular income recurs as a central theme. Details of the range of jobs and amounts earned therefore reveal the signal importance of money: that it was never sufficient is evidenced by repeated references to "sympathetic white people." For example: "These sticks would be sold for two and sixpence or three shillings. Some sympathetic white people then would take pity on him and give him five shillings. Two pound in them days would buy a lot of things we'd call tucker."⁹ Yet in detailing what could be bought for how much, the text also demonstrates an acute awareness of the value of money. And, in detailing the way in which their income

⁸ Bropho 5.

⁹ Bropho 5.

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determined how much they would be able to eat, it also assumes that the availability of food does not dominate most readers' finances.

Finally, the fourth paragraph begins in the same matter-of-fact fashion: "The life of a fringedweller was very hard. He'd do all his props selling in summer in the dry spells. Things would get pretty hard in winter." In this instance, the effect of "things," which refers to nothing in particular, bears the truth of the non-presented subject, presented as a fact of life. But because it is clarified by, "[w]e never seen new clothes. All we have to take was handouts. Some days Mum and us kids would go round areas such as Mosman Park, Cottesloe, go to houses, knock on doors, cadge, we'd call it cadging, for old clothes,"¹⁰ readers are once more directed to make connections between unemployment and hardship.

What these first four paragraphs establish is a *culture of poverty*. Each deals with a different aspect of material life – housing, employment, food and clothing – to demonstrate that without a steady source of income, fringedwellers had no disposable income for even the perceived necessities of life. This is no coincidence. They are issues central to the dominant Western culture and their foregrounding is significant because Aborigines, especially fringedwellers, are renowned for ranking low in these indicators. The point is, of course, that because 'fringedwelling' is thoroughly defined by relations with the dominant western capitalist culture, it cannot *not* be marked by them. But while fringedwellers necessarily always exist in relation to them, 'fringedwelling' functions as a marker of existence at the intersection of different cultures rather than merely at their margins.

The asymmetrical nature of these relations is however obliquely expressed in terms of white Christian charity: "[t]here was a fair amount of Christianity around then." The addendum "[y]ou'd get several people in different areas that didn't have so much Christianity in them. They'd tell us to get off the premises, they'd want no boongs or niggers, niggers in them days, or they'd call the police," does not therefore respond to the unspoken racialised discourse underpinning this abuse. Instead, by invoking a Christian discourse, the text appropriates and actively invokes virtues that allow the speaker to be read as charitable.

This is reinforced in the following paragraph, which establishes the relation between poverty, poor housing and ill-health: "Our mother's life as a mother to us living under those bad conditions was real rotten ... My brothers and sisters would be in and out of hospital. Myself as well."¹¹ But because reader response is limited to a position that demands either sympathy or its rejection, proximity to the previous paragraph favours the former. And by extending this concern with family

¹⁰ Bropho 6.

¹¹ Bropho 6.

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to include his grandmother and the woman on whose property they were staying, a woman they called Granny Briggs who "was a white lady, but she was kind to us" and her daughter who "was a good woman too,"¹² the speaker's credentials as a fair and reasonable person are sealed.

Turning to speak of experiences at the local Primary School, Bropho says:

We weren't regular attendants in them days, because the excuse we had then because half the time we were starving, and Dad couldn't sell his props or the weather got too wet. He'd fall back on going to the Swanbourne golf course to do some caddying for a well known white man in them days, who was Charlie Bunnings, who was a sympathetic white man, to Dad specially. He'd pay him extra ... He'd come home with the money and then we'd have a feast ... four loaves of bread, a tin of treacle, half a pound of butter, a packet of milk arrowroot biscuits, and if there was any change ... some lollies.¹³

Once again there is a circularity of significance between Dad, work, the sympathy of white people, food and pleasure. No work also meant a visit to Perth to see the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Mr. Neville, at the Department of Native Welfare. Their reluctance is evident in the choice of "we'd *turn back* to the Native Welfare" (emphasis added), but there is no view expressed about the most powerful man affecting their life. Instead, declarative statements gloss such incidents: "[t]he Native Department was then in Murray Street, the east end of Perth. The rations would be for a fortnight. The ration order would be made out to John Mills in Wellington Street opposite the railway station." Nevertheless, these details catalogue the way in which white bureaucracy and culture were deeply implicated in the lives of Aboriginal people.

What is elaborated, however, through the eyes of a child, is how he and his eldest brother Tom looked forward to accompanying their father because they would ride "... in old steam trains" and eat "biscuits" from their rations. On the return journey readers can almost visualise sugar bags full of rations as they walked through the lush grounds of Scotch College, past Butler's Swamp and back to their camp: "... buried away in the hills with its surrounding of peppermint trees and stinkweed, and Johnny Colbungs, like a wild fig growing in the ground, in the face of the ground ..."¹⁴

¹² Bropho 6.

¹³ Bropho 6.

¹⁴ Bropho 7.

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This highly visual, almost filmic quality of writing is characteristic of reminiscences throughout the book, allowing readers to see the Aboriginal figure in the urban landscape, on the one hand, and the landscape through Aboriginal eyes. But they are brief and quickly followed by a return to more mundane activities such as water-gathering: "[w]e'd walk half a mile to get our water from a well that was set down in the ground with a pump on top." Reinforcing this philosophical attitude to life, he does not remark on their hardship other than to say that the well "was on the property of another sympathetic white man, Mr. Neal ... who had an old full-blood Aboriginal man living on his property, looking after the place for him ... named Sammy Broomhall ..."¹⁵

Like Mrs Briggs, Mr. Neal is characterised as sympathetic because his generosity was crucial to the family's survival. But he also serves as a link to Sammy Broomhall, who used to "... sing us these Aboriginal songs, his dreamtime he called it," which "... in his Aboriginal lingo would put us to sleep." This in turn enables recollections of his father and Broomhall's friend, Uncle Wandi, sitting around the fire singing until "... we'd forget about our worries and our misery ... We'd go to sleep to the sound of their songs, of their dreamtime."¹⁶ So, on the one hand this passage mediates traditional culture for 'white' readers, while the phrases "fullblood Aboriginal," "Aboriginal songs," "his dreamtime he called it," "in his Aboriginal lingo," "their songs" and "their dreamtime," also demonstrate the speaker's limited contact with 'traditional' language and culture.

When Bropho recalls his narrative task to briefly document their few white childhood friends, he is reminded that his mother's life "... wasn't all easy." With characteristic irony he foregrounds the relationship between personal hygiene and school admission, and readers learn that getting children ready for school was difficult:

There was no baths in them days for us. There was just a catwash we called them, a couple of handfuls of water thrown over your face from an old kerosene tin cut down the sides to make it a dish. If we had no water there in the morning ... my brother Tom and myself used to run through the bush. We'd pick the thickest part out if it was a frosty morning and the dew was on the bushes ... and get our cat wash on our hands and on our faces.¹⁷

An awareness of the disparity between their appearance and others is then illustrated by the following: "[w]e'd come back and comb our hair. We'd put on

¹⁵ Bropho 7.

¹⁶ Bropho 7.

¹⁷ Bropho 8.

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our patchy trousers, patchworks all over it, put on our faded shirts. We never seen shoes in them days, we couldn't afford it. Then we'd take off along the bush track through the peppermint scrubs up to Swanbourne School."¹⁸ Using the 'innocence' of childhood, this strikingly vivid description allows readers to reflect on the burden normative values place on children. It illustrates the ways in which poverty rather than ingenuity, and unemployment rather than lawful and systemic discriminatory practices, are mapped onto the site of race. And it clearly acknowledges the markings of their deviance from dominant normative values, particularly those associated with 'hygiene,' in order to demonstrate that, despite the children *looking* 'unkempt' or 'neglected,' Mrs Bropho strove to send them to school as clean and tidy as their circumstances allowed. By noting that she also walked them to school on her way to work as a 'domestic,' she is established as a responsible parent. Thus the reader is disposed to empathise with the discrimination they suffered at school:

We didn't get on well at school. The barriers was always there, such as '*nigger, nigger pull the trigger, bang, bang, bang*' from the white kids. My brother Tom and my sister Ruth and myself didn't last long at the school ... One day in my class (First Standard) an incident happened. Someone pinched two shillings off the teacher's desk, and I was the first one to be questioned over it by the teacher, Miss Hill. I was scared being the only black kid in class. I was crying. When I came home I told Mum about it and Dad, but nothing was done about it. I think it was then I started to get afraid to go to school.¹⁹

In this passage the speaker is able to distil the pain of discrimination, and the shocking awareness that his parents were powerless to protect him, with great economy, thus allowing readers to empathise with the injustice and hurt felt by a little boy. What the passage also demonstrates are the layers of difference already clearly articulated, each laced with fear. And school is also presented as a site of shame when the children did not have lunch. But while Robert Bropho and his sister Ruth "... used to feel real shame over it" and hide, their brother Tom had already learned the coping stratagem of denial: "[h]e'd get a ball and start playing and make believe he wasn't hungry."²⁰

It is instructive then, that when they "ducked school" to "play all day in the sandhills and the swings," and when Robert stole a packet of biscuits one day,

¹⁸ Bropho 8.

¹⁹ Bropho 8.

²⁰ Bropho 9.

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Bropho details the hiding their father would give them: "not a clout in the earholes or a strap, it would be a switchy stick broken from any tree so long as it was switchy, all round the legs. It would leave marks."²¹ By also recalling that their father took to walking them to the end of the road, waiting until they reached the school gate and suggesting that when they had no dinner money they should come home "... just for the walk so they could pass the dinner hour over," readers learn that Thomas Bropho was clearly intent on raising honest, educated children.

Having thus established that the speaker and readers share a comprehensive range of similarities, differences then begin to assume more significance. The periods when friends and relations joined them, due to their proximity to the Royal Showgrounds, are presented with fond memories when they would:

... track the turtles up from the edge of the swamp into Mr Seed's paddock, but he had no time for Aboriginal people, we had to be cautious, he'd chase us off his property if he seen us. We'd follow the turtle tracks through his fence and find where they'd buried their eggs.²²

By contrasting Mr. Seed, who evokes the 'crusty old man' familiar to most children, with his clever friend, readers identify with the harmless, healthy fun of childhood adventures. But because they introduce new elements, a man who "... had no time for Aboriginal people," and a friend who lived according to more traditional Indigenous ways, the stock imagery associated with visiting friends and relatives takes on new significance. Later, when describing life in the inner city, the drawbacks of kinship obligations are shown in terms of the lack of privacy and overcrowding, compounded by the destructive effects of unemployment and alcohol, but here their effect is salutary inasmuch as it keeps them in touch with Aboriginal cultural values.

The significance of the 'white man' is then re-introduced from two perspectives. The first addresses the 'sympathetic white man' at the Royal Show, who would let them in for free with an "I never seen you."²³ But the second expresses anger when two friends were given an opportunity to sing overseas but, "that was stopped by the then Native Department, Mr. Neville, because they was full blood Aboriginal people ..."²⁴ Given that the size of this department and its budget ensured that Neville dealt with Aborigines on a personal basis and took responsibility for all such decisions, this personalisation and transference of the

²¹ Bropho 9.

²² Bropho 10.

²³ Bropho 10.

²⁴ Bropho 10. The friends' names were Harold and Donny Jackson, who "sang at the Tivoli Theatre once."

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considerable powers of a government office to Neville is quite accurate. Moreover, the conjunction 'because' clearly rejects such power over "full blood Aboriginal people." Yet having demonstrated pride in their friend's talent and anger at Neville's power to thwart their success in the dominant community, the passage also expresses pride in their friend's parents for being "... real grass roots Aboriginal people. They'd wear clothes but no boots, no hair comb."²⁵ This is significant as it introduces readers to the central theme of the book: the fringedwellers' desire to retain their Aboriginal cultural personhood but to also be included as ordinary citizens.

Thus while the narrative always returns to the question of work, and each explanation is a prelude to another consequence of this precarious existence, the sentence "[m]y grandmother had little to offer us in the ways of food when the hard times really was,"²⁶ signals a shift. By inverting the conventional order of 'when times were really hard' to "when the hard times really was," to stress 'really' instead of 'hard,' the text calls attention to more than the 'hard times' that were the norm of their existence. And it is at this point that the chapter shifts to consider the effects of these desperate times:

The exact spot where we camped at Swanbourne is covered over now with a school sports ground ... I see the camp with the old scraps of tin on the roof, and the chaff bag linings on the walls and the side and the wheat bags. They can cover over the camping ground where it was but they can never shut out my memories and the visions of my mother and father and my sisters and brothers because we the fringedwellers will never forget that, because the hardships, the suffering and the torment we went through living under those conditions is like a scar in our memories.²⁷

Until this point, readers are presented with images of a family living at an urban swamp. They are identified as English-speaking Christians who use the same kinship terms as the dominant community and are generally familiar with urban life, but whose relations with less-urbanised Aborigines also form a significant part of their life. The text has articulated the multiple effects of unemployment, the sting of discrimination and how their worries, misery and suffering were alleviated only by the sympathy of some white people and their social activities with other more traditional Aborigines: bright spots in an

²⁵ Bropho 10.

²⁶ Bropho 11.

²⁷ Bropho 12.

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otherwise grim life. But what we see here is a shift from details about memories of the past, to the present.

Bropho situates himself at the site looking back on the past with the sharp clarity of bitterness and rage. It is as though recalling desperate times brings this sharply into focus for him. And it allows him to elaborate on the life of his grandmother who "lived in the scrubs at Darglish," and how they'd go to the local tip with her to look for bottles, rags or anything to sell, and how they'd find "specks" at the dump to take home to eat. The vehemence of the humiliation that this caused is expressed in the following: "Granny would always say to us *When you're desperate and the white bastards don't want to help you, then you've got to do things like this.*"²⁸

When detailing the 'really desperate times' (walking miles to gather smokebushes to be sold in Subiaco, in shops or on the streets) he adds to the food list, "there'd always be a few bottles of whiteman's poison ... a few bottles of wine to give us courage to go around asking for stale bread from the baker's shop."²⁹ Where he formerly referred to "sympathetic" white people and was at pains to explain how his family strove so hard to live as honest, hard-working people, now he refers to "white bastards" and "whiteman's poison." In other words, Bropho shifts from highlighting their 'good habits' and those practiced by 'sympathetic white people.' At this point, Bropho interjects to explain directly to readers:

Up until now what has been written down I've tried to explain the grassroots of the fringedweller in my own uneducated way, but what I'm going to say from here on in I'm also going to write down the bad habits that we've learned to pick up ... so you can paint what picture whatever you like after reading this about the fringedweller of this continent of Australia. It will be your freedom of choice.³⁰

It is an explicit warning that he is about to say things that white readers may not wish to hear, that he will make no attempt to apologise or soften the blows, and that he accepts that readers may not agree with him. But in offering them "the freedom of choice," he is also offering that which he seeks: the freedom for fringedwellers to be masters of their own destiny. He begins:

²⁸ Bropho 12.

²⁹ Bropho 13.

³⁰ Bropho 13.

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I spent 20 years of my life in prison on a number of occasions. When a fringedweller is desperate he'll steal. All crimes have been paid for in full by the black man. He'll start stealing fruit. When there's no food around he'll steal from houses. But the biggest crime I'd say was the coming of the white man with his bad habits, and he is yet to pay in full for the biggest crime of all time. I'd say that he's broken nearly all of the ten commandments in the beginning.³¹

Without apology Bropho inverts received notions of criminality so that his petty crimes seem involuntary and almost pale into insignificance against the legal and conventionalised fiction of 'settlement.' Having introduced his father as a respectable role model, he leaves his crimes till last:

My father used to steal when he was destitute ... If he found a purse he'd take out half the money, and he'd leave half, just to buy food, but his crimes have been paid for in some way. He'll come face to face with the judge of judges on that final day of judgement that is to be judged by the King of Kings and that is God, simply because he was born a fringedweller and he was not accepted for what he was by the white community.³²

Once it is established that destitution leads to criminal activity, his father's crimes become an inevitable product of a process that began with "not being accepted." This is a significant point as Bropho is again appealing to readers to understand that he and his father accept the laws, norms and religion of the dominant white community. Yet, having engaged the dominant discourses of equality, family, tolerance, a fair-go, citizenship, history, culture, and so on, to demonstrate their desire to be incorporated as citizens in this community, the text has simultaneously marked their sites of marginalisation. The point is, in order to reconcile their desire to maintain a separate cultural identity with their ordinary citizen claims, Aboriginal people recognize that they need the support of the dominant community.

Reinforcing their Christian credentials by trusting that justice will prevail at Judgement Day, Bropho makes no apology for his father:

I am not ashamed of what he did to get a crust of bread for us then, and I am not ashamed of what we was born to be. The fringedwelling life is no bed of roses. If you're born in the high mansion on the hill then you've got a good

³¹ Bropho 13.

³² Bropho 13.

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chance of surviving in this human rat race. If you're born in a pigsty then you've got a fight on your hands, that fight is to be recognised as human beings.³³

This defiant statement draws on colloquialisms and a working class antipathy to the wealthy that works to consolidate a type of proletarian solidarity. But in situating fringedwellers as subordinate and oppressed, he does not suggest that they are passive victims. On the contrary, in a self-confident statement of identity, he asserts:

I was born in 1930 on ninth February at a place called Toodyay in a camp not far from the Coorinji Wine Saloon. I've been a fringedweller in the metropolitan area for forty seven years, coming in to the Swan valley when I was two years old. I was an alcoholic when I was fifteen. I give it away when the drinking rights came out for Aboriginal people, my own freedom of choice, no treatment ...³⁴

Strident and clear, he wears his alcoholism and prison record as a badge of honour. He was a victim of a system in which the "public in general" was master of his destiny, but now he exercises his own "freedom of choice." Demonstrating the courage to publicly acknowledge his own transgressions thus provides the license to directly attack readers:

Why I am writing this down is because I want you, the public in general, to know what makes a fringedweller tick. It is your bad habits that you're shoving down our throats. It is your white ideals that has kept us on the fringes of towns. It is your belief that you are master of your own destiny and the Aboriginal people's. It is your belief to set yourselves up as foster parents to black children and brain wash them into the white man's way of thinking ... The Aboriginal problem of today is at its peak now ... And the only way it can be solved and (sic) that is land to be set aside all over this continent of Australia for Aboriginal groups who are living in any one area or areas so they can live as a community of people ... The only way the white government is going to solve this problem is with black ideas, because the white government has had 150 years and he's failed to solve this problem with his white ideas.³⁵

³³ Bropho 13.

³⁴ Bropho 14.

³⁵ Bropho 14.

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In other words, by attacking white values and situating the Aborigines as victims, he acknowledges the 'Aboriginal problem' in order to create a counter-discourse that allows him to introduce a new solution. But to strengthen this, he invests the 'black man' with pride and integrity:

The Aboriginal man was once a proud man. He helped the greedy gift of the gab, lust for power, station owners in the north of Australia to build his empires. Now ... he turns around and says to the black man *'Well Jacky, you've been a good stockman. Well Mary, you've been a good housemaid, you've kept me warm also on many cold winter nights. You've served me well, but I'm sorry to say I have no more use for you ... Jacky, I can replace you with a motorbike, a landrover, or a helicopter.'*³⁶

By referring to Aborigines as the foundation of the pastoral industry in the early days, he then argues that "this forcing the proud stockmen and proud housemaids to start their movements into the fringes of towns" gives the white man no cause to start "bellyaching" about their being "dole bludgers." He rejects received stereotypes of Aborigines on the grounds that:

There's no such thing as an aboriginal (sic) dole bludger ... their country was taken by the white man which was priceless from the Aboriginal point of view. He looks on the continent as his home, his mother, his father, his brother ... and all his kinship that have died in the past who's buried in this mother earth in this continent of Australia, thousands of years, not 150 years, long before the white sickness came to this continent and spreaded all over it, forcing the black man's dreamtime to vanish, forcing him to be what he is today, a lost black soul on the face of this earth.³⁷

Bropho then shifts from this stridently aggressive counter-discourse to present a more benign and accessible (conventional) account of their 'spiritual' connection with the land: "[t]o the Black man each tree, a gum tree, a white gum, a banksia tree, a sheoak, a woolybush, a stinkweed, a paperbark, a blackboy, a palmbush, a rock, a hill, a cave, all these things mean something to him, the thing he's loved and cherished from generation to generation, long before the coming of the white man."³⁸

³⁶ Bropho 15.

³⁷ Bropho 16.

³⁸ Bropho 16.

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What these passages illustrate is that without written records of Aboriginal culture prior to the British invasion, and due to the ensuing fragmentation of Aboriginal societies, writers such as Bropho have little option but to respond to European constructions of Aboriginality in order to re-construct and assert a separate identity. However, as this identity is already marked by the loss of difference, any moves are already marked by the very contradictions they seek to disrupt. Consequently, there is a clear contradiction in claiming that "the black man" is now "a lost soul" because "the white sickness" forced "the black man's dreamtime to vanish," while also claiming an ongoing spiritual relationship with the land that suggests immutable differences. The point is of course that although such contradictions are an effect of mediation – by an identity doubly constrained by dominant protocols for speaking – it would be misleading to dismiss the interventions they entail.

On the one hand, the claims that "the black man was once a proud man" and an ongoing 'spirituality' invoke a strategically necessary pan-Aboriginality. As Ariss argues, and *Fringedweller* shows, by constructing continuity via a common suffering that is always shaped by the "tensions between the traditional-contemporary and the particular-universal," Aboriginal culture is portrayed "as dynamic, adaptable and the product of struggle."³⁹ As victims, Aborigines are therefore presented as actively resistant to colonial intrusion and as repossessors of "a fragmented culture."⁴⁰ In other words, since moves to validate (an essentialised) identity⁴¹ are an inevitable response to marginalised positionings, as a means of survival,⁴² they provide important expressions of group solidarity and politically useful counters to received stereotypes. The point is, received constructions of Aboriginality must be appropriated and subverted in order to situate fringedwellers' claims as ordinary.

It is instructive then that the following paragraph asks:

Why is the white man trying to destroy our beliefs? Why is he trying to train us to be something that we know we cannot be? Why is he forever criticising and master-minding and using up the Aboriginal people? Aboriginal people would never have been like this in this modern day and time now, if the white man would have helped the black man from the word go ... We would

³⁹ Ariss 135.

⁴⁰ Ariss 134.

⁴¹ See Carolyn D'Cruz, "Identity Politics in Deconstruction: Politics, Philosophy and Ethical Investigations," Ph.D. diss. Murdoch University, 1997. Chapter One and the Conclusion provide a stimulating discussion of identity politics in terms of the difficulties associated with speaking positions and the sites in which to subvert relations of power.

⁴² See Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 17-18.

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have had black ministers up in Parliament, ministers who'd understand the Aboriginal people's problem from a black man's point of view.⁴³

In a society dominated by particular discursive practices that frame the range of questions and answers, setting the legitimate limits of thought and behaviour, it should not be surprising that those most marginalised interrogate the contradictions of these discursive practices in their own terms. *Fringedweller* not only demonstrates the profound affects, and resistance to, the inequities associated with marginalisation, but engages the legitimised dominant discourses of equality, family, tolerance, a fair-go, citizenship, history, culture and so on, in order to do so. Fringedwellers clearly understand the ethico-political dimensions of dominant discourses with a clarity born of their contradictory relations with them, and that it is imperative to address the protocols of power that constrain them. In other words, having recognised that it is not possible to secure the ordinary rights of citizens – to self-determination – without the dominant community's validation of their claims, *Fringedweller* is a conscious attempt to re-educate the wider community to understand the legitimacy of their claims, by initiating readers into the ways that cultural memory, place and identity continue to mark their Aboriginality within the urban landscape.

The chapter's final moral statement therefore demands a response from readers:

The Aboriginal people have got to be respected for what they were and how they lived off the face of the earth ... you made him this (a dole-bludger) by coming to this continent, invading it, took it by force, then you turn around and set down your by-laws saying *Thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not kill.*" The trouble with the white man today, he didn't practice what he preached, today or in the beginning.⁴⁴

But then again, maybe what is said is so self-evident, so burdened with significance that readers have no recourse but to agree.

⁴³ Bropho 16.

⁴⁴ Bropho 17.