Spun Dry: Mobility and Jurisdiction in Northern Australia

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This paper draws on ethnographic work on intra-Indigenous relations and new forms of jurisdictional contest in urban northern Australia. It explores the relationship between Aboriginal community policing and emergent forms and figures of urban mobility and morbidity in Darwin, capital of Australia's Northern Territory. While Darwin's Indigenous patrols have no police powers, and its officers disavow any authority as 'police,' they do have a certain status vested in them by the traditional owners of the country on which they patrol. These Aboriginal-directed efforts thus entail both an assertion of Indigenous jurisdiction, and an accompanying reflexivity about the substance and limits of its reach -- limits informed by settler colonial oversight, by the diversity of Indigenous claims to urban space, and by the poetic figures and mediatized narratives that trope the volatility of Aboriginal dispersal and displacement. The paper explores the ways patrols negotiate their authority and reckon its limits, extending figures of jurisdiction and movement to illuminate these new urban worlds.

Daniel Fisher is an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at UC Berkeley and director of UC Berkeley’s Center for Experimental Ethnography. He is author of The Voice and its Doubles: Music and Media in Northern Australia (Duke University Press) and co-editor of Radio Fields: Anthropology and Wireless Sound in the 21st Century (NYU Press). His most recent research, funded by the National Science Foundation, addresses the amplification of Indigenous urbanization in the Northern Territory and the predicaments of displacement and urban dispersal it entails. The project employs photography, film, and sound recording to produce a shared anthropology of an urbanizing Northern Territory, attending to the novel entanglements of ecological, communications, and legal infrastructure this has involved. This new research has appeared in scholarly journals including Cultural Anthropology and American Ethnologist.

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