

Title: Darwin After Dark: Illuminating Suburban Atmospheres

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Biography

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Darwin After Dark: Illuminating Suburban Atmospheres

Abstract: In Australian cities, culturally diverse suburban landscapes are often sensed as discomfoting sites of fear and anxiety, particularly after dark. Imagined risks of encounters with bodies of colour easily policed during the day when vision is clear, but who escape biopolitical regimes of securitisation and surveillance at night contribute to such atmospheric qualities of place. These affective atmospheres of fear and anxiety that haunt bodies and limit their ability to inhabit public space, however, can provide a sense of freedom for bodies who claim suburban spaces of darkness through tactile and sonic senses. This paper draws on the contemporary literature on affective atmospheres to show how racialised Indigenous and asylum seeker bodies become present in different ways in suburban places in Darwin after dark. The paper focuses on two events – spontaneous dancing to Indigenous music at Mindil beach market and a Vigil commemorating asylum seeker lives in a suburban courtyard. Drawing on ethnographic research I explore these affective intervention that illuminate dark suburban atmospheres in Darwin. Such interventions that draw attention to the attunement of bodies to difference unsettle biopolitical regimes that victimise and patronise visible non-white bodies and contribute to rethinking racism and darkness in suburban Darwin and the Top End.

Keywords: Darwin, whiteness, affective atmospheres, Indigenous, asylum seekers, suburban space

Introduction

Emerging literature within human geography and urban studies centres affective atmospheres to explore relational encounters in and with place (McCormack, 2008; Anderson, 2009; Bissell, 2010; Amin, 2012). This paper argues that such a focus on atmospheric qualities of place provides the potential to explore breathability in culturally diverse Australian cities where whiteness is sensed as a dominant cultural norm and a bodily orientation (Hage, 1998; Ahmed, 2007). The paper focuses attention on suburban public spaces of Darwin, a tropical city in the Northern Territory at the centre of public debates on asylum seeker policy, migrant integration and Indigenous wellbeing. This is a city where the visibility of disadvantaged Aboriginals, recent migrants and asylum seekers from countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East in public spaces circulates fear and anxiety among a small population of 75,000 in the Top End (Cowlshaw, 2005; Lea, 2006; Ford, 2009). Surveillance cameras, regular night patrols, brown bodies, sensationalist media stories of violence and everyday gossip about drunks, come together to create atmospheres of discomfort. Bodies that inhabit white space with comfort during the day are haunted by risks and fearful encounters that limit their ability to move freely after dark. The outcome is that public spaces of culturally diverse northern suburbs of Darwin deserted after dark can often be sensed as unbreathable. Brennan (2004) uses the metaphor of contagion to argue that affects such as fear and anxiety that arise within a person or emerge from interactions with sensory bodies can be transmitted in the environment. Such a focus on the transmission of affects between sensory bodies that are not self-contained captures a process that is social in origin but has biological and physiological effects, and contributes to differences in the breathability of public space. Amin (2012) argues that the atmospheres of particular public spaces can be variable and are mediated by interactions that occur in other spaces of the city. He argues that it is necessary to have a 'crowd of breathable spaces' (Amin, 2012, p. 81) in the city if the stranger is to be welcomed. This paper draws attention to two events that create such breathable spaces and illuminates suburban Darwin after dark.

Research on the intensity of intercultural encounters, whiteness and race has drawn attention to how different atmospheres emerge through the entanglement of sensuous bodies, objects and surroundings in culturally diverse urban neighbourhoods where the intensities of light vary (Swanton, 2008; Wise, 2010; Amin, 2012). Wise (2010) in a study of a multicultural suburban neighbourhood in Sydney shows how changes in the urban environment visible through shops with Chinese language signs, the smell of fish waste and poor lighting results in bodily disorientation among elderly Anglo-Celtic residents who sense the atmosphere as unfriendly. She argues that although sharing public spaces is often difficult, attention to bodies, affect, emotions and the senses can provide an understanding of how we can learn to live with difference in the city. Swanton (2008) in his study of the multicultural town of Keighley in the United Kingdom argues that multicultural atmospheres are created through architecture, smells, sounds, newspaper headlines, gossip and stories about Asian bodies 'taking over' or white bodies being abused, but also intensities of sunlight that make streetscapes 'swirl' with terror, hate, fear and loathing.

The focus on affective qualities of light is also evident in another strand of literature that explores playful social practices in public spaces of the city after dark (Edensor, 2012). Edensor (2012), for example, draws attention to a tourist town in the United Kingdom to ground the concept of affective atmospheres. Focusing on an event known as the Blackpool Illuminations held every autumn since the 1920s at the popular beach town, Edensor (2012) argues that lighting plays a crucial role in creating playful and convivial atmospheres in public spaces at night. The palpable and immersive nature of these illuminated atmospheres is captured through ethnographic description, interviews and photographs that focus on bodily attunements after dark. Stewart (2011) argues that such attunements entangle affect and emotion and provide a sense that something is happening in the atmosphere even though these moments are often hard to capture in words. Her view is that such bodily attunements to the affective quality of everyday life calls for descriptive methods that can provide an insight into how atmospheres that are charged and generated through swirls of circulating forces alert the haptic senses. Stewart (2011) argues that haptic descriptions can provide an insight into how we inhabit atmospheres or force fields of multiplicity where bodies affect and are affected in different ways. Such haptic descriptions of happenings or events allow worlds to come alive and be generative with promise rather than emerge as dissipative and dead through social constructivist approaches that inscribe bodies and fix meaning (Stewart, 2011). In this paper such a focus on atmospheres, illumination and attunement provides the possibility to explore how dark spaces of fear and anxiety are unsettled by temporal events where bodies are moved by their tactile and sonic senses in ways that contribute to the dynamic character of place.

Carter (2009, p. 5) in his discussion of place-making argues for the need to read and write public spaces in ways that do not take the ground for granted and 'mummify its dynamic character'. He argues that the dynamic character of the ground emerges through attention to traces of absent and mobile bodies who have the potential to enrich space by drawing the world together. In Darwin such 'absent' and 'mobile' bodies are migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and disadvantaged Aboriginal peoples whose presence contributes to cultural and economic insecurities. To become aware of the traces of these absent and mobile bodies that can enrich place it is necessary to become a tracker who can become part of their movements (Carter, 2009). In this paper I try and become part of such movements through two events - spontaneous dancing to Indigenous music at Mindil beach market and a Vigil service to commemorate the lives of asylum seekers lost at sea held at a suburban courtyard. I draw on ethnographic research conducted in Darwin in 2011-2012 that involved participant observation in public spaces such as beaches, community centres, open-air markets and bus transit centres. Such participant observation is informed by 47 in-depth interviews and 13 focus group discussions with residents of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds who took 86 photographs to express their feelings in public spaces of Darwin. The paper draws on this ethnographic research to show how attention to affective atmospheres of place provides the potential to rethink darkness and racism in Darwin and the Top End.

Affective atmospheres and public space

This section uses McCormack's (2008) reflections on atmosphere as a space that is processual, distributed and sensed, as a starting point to conceptualise dark atmospheres of the city. McCormack (2008) emphasises the dynamic materiality of the atmosphere that has both meteorological and affective qualities. He argues that in the meteorological sense, the atmosphere is a gaseous zone that sustains human and non-human life on earth. In Darwin the nature of such an atmosphere is conditioned by its tropical location marked by turbulence or stillness - gusty cyclonic winds, thunder and lightning, a gentle sea breeze, hot winds, steamy humidity, torrential rain and calm. When darkness falls such sensing of the materiality of the atmosphere and environment is embodied, palpable and immersive because vision is poor and intensities of light vary. But the dark atmosphere is also a field of dynamic and kinetic affective relations that can deplete or enhance the potentiality of bodies. Inspired by the work of Spinoza, McCormack (2008) argues that such potentiality can be understood in terms of what bodies can do and varies with two axes – the kinetic and the dynamic. The kinetic axis defines the relationship between bodies in terms of movement and rest and suggests that bodies that communicate with each other move at the same speed and are united. The dynamic axis defines bodies in terms of their capacity to affect and be affected and has outcomes for modifying bodily intensities during encounters

Affect, emotion and feeling are concepts that are central to understanding such explorations of bodily potentiality and intensities. Affect is usually associated with pre-personal bodily intensities, feeling is the conscious registering of such intensities, and emotion is the expression of felt intensities that are socially and culturally informed (Anderson, 2006; McCormack, 2008; Bondi and Davidson, 2011). These concepts provide an insight into the differentiated nature of affectivity that is sensed by moving bodies and has outcomes for exploring the atmosphere as a field of dynamic and kinetic relations. Anderson (2009), however, argues that there is an ambiguity about atmosphere as a concept that suggests its determinate as well indeterminate nature. Atmospheres aim to capture what exceeds clear and rational explanation and therefore provides insight into the unsayable, vague, ill-defined and indefinite nature of place. But affective atmospheres of place can also be sensed as qualities by singular bodies who fix the unsayable (Anderson, 2009). In Darwin, bodies who inhabit whiteness through their social and cultural bodily orientation fix the multiplicity of affective atmospheres through emotional expressions of fear and anxiety. The challenge is therefore to draw attention to how 'mobile and immersed' bodies (Carter, 2009, p. 13) that rely on their sonic and tactile senses can lose control and come together to participate in events that unsettle white space and embodied experiences of fear and anxiety that permeate dark atmospheres. This paper shows that while darkness can make some public spaces unbreathable through fear, anxiety and exclusion, dark atmospheres that obscure vision also provide the freedom for sensory bodies to be attuned to difference through events that unfold in unexpected ways.

Dancing in the dark – Mindil market

On most weekday nights, beaches in Darwin are deserted except for Indigenous people camping in the bush whose movements are monitored by regular night patrols. Such policing is legitimised by Federal and State Government policies popularly known as the 'Intervention' that aim to contribute to Indigenous wellbeing and feelings of safety among urban citizens by regulating everyday practices in public spaces such as the consumption of alcohol (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012). For example, Darwin City Council's Alcohol Management Plan supports the consumption of alcohol only in designated sites on beaches, foreshores and reserves between 4pm and 10.30pm on weekdays and 12 noon to 10.30 pm on weekends and public holidays. Consuming alcohol in popular public spaces like Vestey's beach, the Nightcliff foreshore, East Point Reserve and Mindil beach in suburban Darwin without a sanctioned permit is a criminal offence that is punishable (City of Darwin, 2012). These public spaces, in particular Mindil beach are crowded on Sunday and Thursday evenings during the dry season when an open-air Asian-style market attracts tourists and residents of all ages. There is excitement in the air on the opening day at the end of April that heralds the arrival of cooler weather after the humidity of the 'build-up' and the stormy weather of the rainy season.

The market with approximately 300 illuminated makeshift stalls is set up in a large open space behind the sand dunes. The stalls sell food, clothes, handicrafts and souvenirs reflecting Darwin's polyethnic history, an outcome of Larrakia settlement, trade with Asians and Aboriginals of diverse cultural backgrounds and White occupation (Larrakia Aboriginal Corporation, 2006; Martinez, 2006). Bright signboards display the choice of Asian food available such as Japanese, Malaysian, Chinese and Thai food as well as tropical fruit juices and delicacies such as paw paw salad. 'Aussie food' such as pancakes, hamburgers and French fries are also available. Territory seafood such as mudcrab, barraumundi, crocodile and prawn rolls attract a large crowd. 'Top End jerky' or snacks made of beef, camel, buffalo and kangaroo meat provide tourists with a taste of the wild north in this city that registers as a frontier town and a remote outpost in the Australian psyche (Luckman, 2011). Crocodile stockwhips and kangaroo leather belts are Territory souvenirs that also emphasise Darwin's image as a city in the remote Top End.

Stalls with brightly coloured sarongs and jewellery are interspersed with shops selling Aboriginal paintings, slate carvings and didgeridoos. For example, David who I interviewed is a local artist who has been selling his paintings on canvas, wood carvings, slate souvenirs and painted didgeridoos at Mindil market for the last ten years. Most of his customers are local and overseas tourists. Such an assemblage of brightly lit shops together with the 'buzz' of voices, the beat of Aboriginal drums and the deep sound of the didgeridoo creates a festive atmosphere. Luckman (2011) has drawn attention to this tropical cosmopolitan atmosphere at Mindil beach market, but underlines the absence of Aboriginal food and traces of Aboriginal occupation except for a monument that marks this burial site of historical significance which is not clearly visible. Larrakia people, traditional owners of the land and visitors from the neighbouring northern islands such as Tiwi and Groote Eylandt met, traded, fished, collected fresh food, engaged in ritualised fights and buried family members on this beach which has a special significance for Aboriginal people (Luckman, 2011). The monument of sculpted and painted funeral poles that marks the presence of Tiwi Islanders, however, is obscured by several shops that encircle and back on to it. Today, a living Aboriginal culture is visible in many spaces of the city such as dark shady groves of Mindil beach where Aboriginals camp and meet friends. These are places where Aboriginals face harassment by police, are subject to glances and stares as well as acts of humiliation or avoidance. Lea *et al.*, (2012) have drawn attention to such dehumanising acts in public spaces of the inner city in Darwin and Alice Springs. I witnessed such incidents as well as heard about these experiences from Aboriginals I interviewed who live in Darwin or camp in public spaces.

Young men like Sam as well as mature aged residents, 'long grassers' who camp on the beach and self-identify as Aboriginal are regular visitors to Mindil market. They enjoy "having a feed" or "getting tucker" from the Asian food stalls but are less likely to visit other open-air markets where such food is also available. Perhaps this suggests that Aboriginals enjoy the 'feel' of Mindil market even though they under express their sensory experiences. Marcos, who arrived from Adelaide eight years ago and identified as belonging to a non-English speaking background expresses the sensory atmosphere of the market when he says:

It's bright, colourful, busy and noisy. It smells like hippies - sandalwood and sweat. There are plenty of local crafts to look at, as well as food I can't find anywhere else, like honey puffs from the Greek stall, or tempura banana prawns

from the Japanese stall. You can hear the noise of food blenders everywhere as they whip up tropical fruit drinks. A lot of people are on holiday or just outside enjoying the warm weather so everyone is very relaxed and laid back (Interview, 12/10/2011).

Marcos draws attention to sounds and smells to capture the tropical atmosphere of the Asian-style market and the sense of excitement in the air once the cooler dry season arrives. Residents arrive early, watch the sunset sitting on the beach and then move towards the market after dark. By this time bodies of strangers brush against each other in narrow market aisles or stand together in winding queues in front of food stalls. Conversations and bodily gestures connect stall vendors and customers but bodies move away once the sound of the didgeridoo is audible.

The sound of the didgeridoo emanates from a makeshift stage set up under the shade of tall trees at one end of the market. In this space members of a well-known independent band from the Top End play the didgeridoo, drums and bass often in sessions that run every half hour (Figure 1). The rhythm and sound of the music by two men, one seated playing the drums and the other standing while he blows through 4 didgeridoos attracts a large crowd. The deep but melodic sound of the didgeridoo together with the rhythmic beat of the drums produces music that is energetic but soothing – one can hear bush animals, the chirping of the birds, the sound of the ocean and the rustling of leaves in the breeze (Figure 2). Spectators usually clap along with the music or at the end of each session as well as tap their feet. From participant observation, informal conversations, focus groups and in-depth interviews, it was evident that this end of the market attracted many Aboriginals of diverse cultural backgrounds – including those who camped temporarily in public spaces such as shady groves on the beach, those who lived in Aboriginal town camps and visitors to Darwin from remote communities in the Northern Territory. It was a space where bodies of strangers communicated and united with each other through phases of movement and rest that were determined by the kinetic axis of their bodies (McCormack, 2008).

Figure 1: Music at Mindil market



Source: Photograph by author

Figure 2: Playing the Didgeridoo



Source: Photograph by author

The tropical atmosphere of the open-air Asian-style market changed suddenly on a cool Thursday evening in May when an Aboriginal woman stood up in the dark space near the band and began dancing. On-lookers like me watched as she swayed her body to the rhythm of the music and raised her hands; there was a smile on her face. Before long she was joined by others who were barefoot, wore faded clothes and had tousled hair, all embodied visible markers of difference and disadvantage that elicit fear and anxiety in public spaces such as neighbourhood streets, public car parks, bus transit centres and parks in Darwin after dark. In this space, however, where illumination was faint and the pounding beat of the music drew bodies together, such fear and anxiety seemed to dissipate momentarily. Aboriginal bodies were joined by strangers less familiar with such a style of dancing and soon there were more than 50 bodies jumping, raising their hands and moving their torsos to the music. I have observed and participated in such spontaneous dancing at monthly dinners in suburban community centres supported by grass roots organisations and annual festivals on the beach foreshore supported by Darwin City Council and the Northern Territory Government. My experience at such events is that visible Aboriginal bodies rarely participate; they are on-lookers who sit away from the crowd. Those who are dancers, perform at planned events of welcome held at community centres. During such performances that welcome non-Aboriginals to country, Aboriginal authenticity is on show and nobody joins the dancing.

The dancing at Mindil beach seemed different because it was initiated by Aboriginals who perhaps were not professional or trained dancers but felt free and comfortable to claim the dark space of the market when they heard the sound of music. They were the leaders and were joined by dancers trying to emulate their movements. The cool, dry atmosphere of a May night and the sound of the music in the dimly lit space brought their highly visible bodies together with residents of diverse cultural backgrounds and unsettled the flow of fear and anxiety that usually circulates in dark spaces. Such moments are important in thinking about what Amin (2012) calls the 'ventilation' of public space that allows bodies wrought and drawn apart by fear, anxiety or exclusion to affect and be affected in different ways. Atmospheres of place with meteorological and affective qualities brings dancing bodies together to produce a breathable space-time in a dark suburban environment (Anderson, 2009; Amin, 2012). Amin argues that the city of strangers needs a crowd of such breathable spaces to provide ventilation. The next section that draws attention to the absent bodies of asylum seekers shows that bodies use their tactile senses to move to a different rhythm.

Dancing in the dark: Keeping vigil

The few open-air but shady neighbourhood cafés in the inner city and suburban Darwin are popular meeting places during the day and early evening but often close or are deserted after dark. When the sun sets, 'eateries' in well illuminated shopping malls tend to be more popular among residents and

visitors to the city. However, some residents keep away from such spaces that have an “arid” and “soul-less atmosphere” attributed to “bad design”, “glaring lights” and “awful music” and miss the café culture of southern cities. Tonight, however, is a special day because a popular open-air café in a culturally diverse northern suburb of Darwin is open late and there are more than thirty people present. It is the tenth anniversary of the sinking of the SievX (Suspected Irregular Entry Vessel), a tragedy that occurred on 19th October 2001 when a small fishing boat from Sumatra with 421 asylum seekers on board sank. Although 45 survivors were rescued, 146 children, 142 women and 65 men died. Their lives are being commemorated at this event that includes short speeches by residents in positions of leadership in asylum seeker advocacy networks. This is followed by the screening of a documentary film titled ‘Hope’ that focuses on personal experiences of a woman survivor and a candle vigil in an adjoining public square.

The news of this event was circulated through posters, e-mails and informal conversations by residents/activists in positions of leadership in the community committed to supporting asylum seekers. Such commitment among local residents also involves visiting asylum seekers who live in high security detention centres in Darwin and experience considerable trauma after risking their lives on stormy seas. On a visit to a high security detention centre, I became aware that many detainees are young single men from Afghanistan, Burma, Sri Lanka, Iraq and Iran. These detainees also called ‘clients’ by detention centre staff usually wait for a favourable security assessment that will enable them to live on a small income within the community, often on a bridging visa. Many of them live in public housing or affordable private rental housing in proximity to the suburban café in the northern suburbs of Darwin. Couples and families who live in detention centres rather than detainees who are young men are more likely to get the opportunity to visit public spaces like water parks, beaches and community centres. For example, today, the public pool along the Darwin waterfront is no longer accessible to asylum seekers following reports of an alleged sexual assault of school girls by an Iranian asylum seeker (Raper, 2011). In Darwin, atmospheres of hostility, fear, suspicion and threat cultivated through newspaper reports and government policies that limit hospitality and compassion towards asylum seekers is echoed in such policies in other white majority societies too (Frost, 2007; Perera, 2009; Haggis, 2012). In Darwin emotive public debates about asylum seekers and humanitarian migrants materialise through car stickers and posters that say ‘fuck off we’re full’ and sensationalised headlines in newspaper reports that read ‘Asylum seeker touched girls at Darwin swimming pool’ (Ford, 2009; Bevege, 2011).

The visibility of asylum seekers that circulates fear and anxiety in public spaces in Darwin is less evident today in the space of the suburban café where the lives lost at sea are remembered. As a newcomer to the city I received news of this event at an informal meeting of volunteers. Today, however, many of the volunteers seem busy setting up the projector for the screening of the film. I notice some people sitting around tables sipping coffee or a cold drink and others eating a light western dinner. Food and drinks are expensive in Darwin and some of us just sip cool water. I sit alone and later share a table with an elderly man who perhaps wandered in when he saw the café illuminated. I notice the familiar face of a woman who I interacted with at a focus group in a multicultural community centre that runs programs for newcomers to the city. Many of these newcomers are asylum seekers or humanitarian migrants from South Asia, Africa and the Middle East. I also notice Aboriginals who usually camp on the sidewalk or take shade under the awnings of shops or large trees outside the café during the day - tonight they wander in.

The atmosphere in the café seems sombre rather than convivial - everyone is rather quiet. After about an hour of listening to speeches, stories and watching the film that seemed fairly long, some people come around to the tables and distribute small white candles. We then move silently into the dark courtyard where red and orange wax burners are arranged along a swirl etched on the ground with coloured chalk as well along the words ‘Lest we forget’. The bodies of women, men and children move together and occasionally touch as we crouch and light the wax burners placed on the patterned ground. Some of us sit on the ground and watch the flames dance in the darkness and illuminate the square. Occasionally we rekindle flames extinguished by the evening breeze. Sometimes we sit still, our bodies in contemplation as we think about the asylum seekers who lost their lives at sea. Through tactile senses our bodies are affected in a suburban courtyard and the absent bodies of asylum seekers become present in a different way in this dark space. (Figure 3, Figure 4).

Figure 3: The candle vigil in a suburban courtyard



Source: Photograph by author

Figure 4: Bodies come together in the dark



Source: Photograph taken by author.

Spinoza (cited in McCormack, 2008) argues what bodies do cannot be explained merely by their substance but by their speed of movement and moments of rest. In the suburban courtyard our bodies moved slowly together and sometimes rested recalling the tragedy. Such periods of movement and stillness are tactile performances, a dance perhaps, that made the absent bodies of asylum seekers present in this public space of the city.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper is to move beyond negative critique that recreates stable identity categories of the migrant, the refugee, the asylum seeker and the Aboriginal. Engaging in thick description of two events I have shown how affective atmospheres of fear and anxiety are unsettled so that bodies that are routinely racialised in public spaces can breathe. Such a focus on atmospheres of place is central to more-than representational understandings of place that focus on the 'excess' of affect that flows from the immediacy of lived experience (McCormack, 2012). This paper has tried to capture this affective excess by focusing on two events that create spaces of bodily connection inspired by sonic and tactile sense in dark public spaces of Darwin. Duffy *et al.*, (2007) argue that sounds such as music or background noise invades physical spaces and create rhythms that affect and connect bodies. The emotional responses to music, however, are difficult to explore unless bodies express or communicate this rhythm through their bodies during spatio-temporal moments that are event-ful. These are moments when sounds, spaces, things and tactile practices come together to charge the atmosphere so that are bodies become better attuned to difference (McCormack, 2005; Duffy *et al.*, 2007; Stewart, 2011). Such charged atmospheres in public spaces have the potential to affect the bodily unconscious of fear and anxiety in dark public spaces of Darwin and open up possibilities for ethical spaces of generosity and interdependence (McCormack, 2012).

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