

Indigenous persistence and entitlement: Noongar occupations in central Perth, 1988–1989 and 2012



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ABSTRACT

In 1988–1989 and again in 2012 Noongar Aboriginal groups occupied high profile riverside sites in close proximity to the centre of Perth, Western Australia. On both occasions they were claiming rights to land from which their ancestors had been removed in the early nineteenth century by British colonial settlers. During a relatively brief period of struggle and interaction between the Indigenous and settler groups following the proclamation of the Swan River Colony in 1829, the Noongar population of what is now the Perth Metropolitan Area were effectively dispossessed of their land. Indeed, from the mid nineteenth to the mid twentieth century Aboriginal people were required to obtain written permits in order to enter the urban area of Perth. In spite of this, the local Noongar population has maintained an ongoing physical, emotional and spiritual connection to their traditional country and, in particular, to certain sites within it. Two of these sites, Goonininup/the Old Swan Brewery, in 1988–1989, and Matagarup/Heirisson Island, in 2012, have been occupied by Noongar groups asserting their rights to this land. This paper will describe and compare both sites of occupation with particular reference to the methods and motivations of the occupiers and the attitudes and responses of the wider metropolitan population to these events. It will also place them in the wider context of ongoing debates over the acknowledgement of Aboriginal claims to and rights over sites of Indigenous significance and of land occupations as a form of protest.

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This paper concerns the efforts of the Aboriginal people who are the original inhabitants of the Swan Valley region in Perth, Western Australia to assert and obtain recognition. This struggle has involved the occupation of two sites of significance to them (Fig. 1). One of these sites, an area near a natural spring on the Swan riverbank at the foot of a bluff known to them as Goonininup and now called Mount Eliza, is immediately downstream from Perth city centre. It was occupied in 1988–1989. The second site, occupied in 2012, is on an island in the Swan River located immediately upstream of Perth city centre. The island is referred to as Heirisson Island by the settler group and as Matagarup by the Swan Valley Aboriginal people.

We begin by positioning these encampments in the context of scholarly inquiries surrounding land occupations as a form of

protest before providing a brief introduction to the nature of the relationship of Australian Aboriginal people to land that they claim as country. We then lay out a short history of the Swan Valley Aboriginal group and consider the ways in which this group has sought to achieve recognition of their traditional ownership of this area, and in particular of these two sites, by occupying them. Finally, we debate this struggle for rights in land in the broader context of entrenched imperial/post-colonial property systems and Aboriginal sovereignty.

Land occupation and indigineity

While scholarly writing on land occupation as a form of protest in major cities has been stimulated by the recent Occupy movement, an important lacuna remains.¹ Significant issues arise for

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¹ N. Klein, *Occupy Wall Street: the most important thing in the world now*, *Critical Quarterly* 54 (2012) 1–4; J. Pickerill and J. Krinsky, *Why does occupy matter?* *Social Movement Studies* 11 (2012) 279–287.

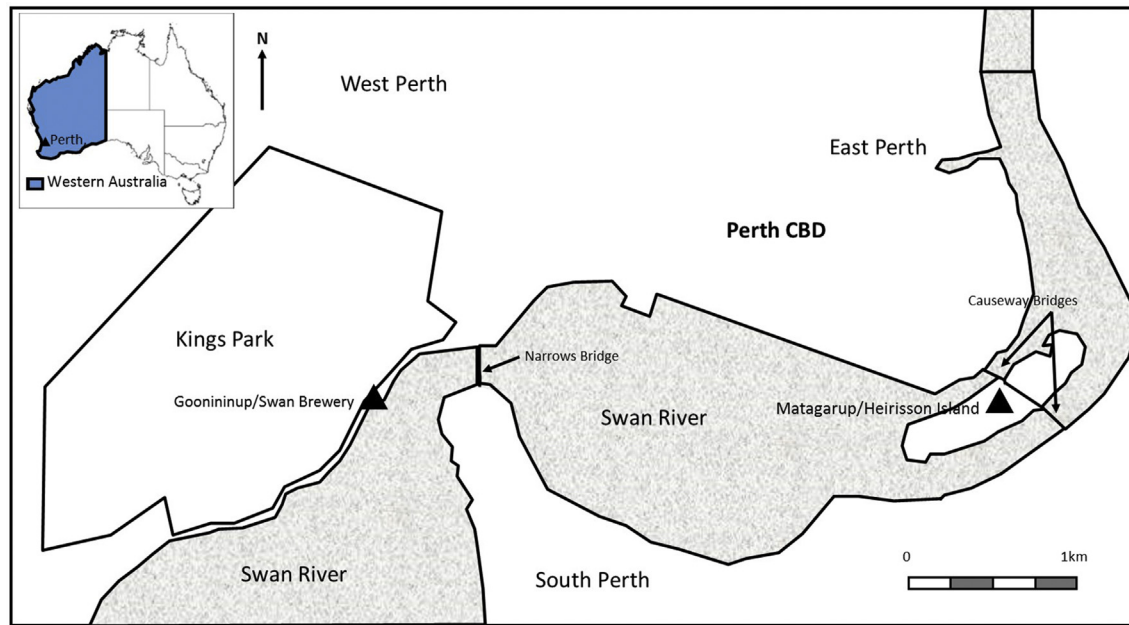


Fig. 1. Swan Brewery/Goonininup and Heirisson Island/Matagarup, Perth, Western Australia.

Indigenous groups whose grievances often emanate from gross inequalities in wealth and power, but for whom the battle against entrenched imperial/post-colonial property systems adds a further dimension to many Indigenous occupations.² While Pickerill and Krinsky argue that 'Occupy puts the issue of space at the core of its agenda', space is not the sole point at issue in many land occupations.³ Indeed, Barker points out that 'Indigenous occupations ... seek to reclaim and reassert relationships to land and place submerged beneath the settler colonial world'.⁴ His title – 'Already occupied' – serves as a caution suggesting that, in many cases, Indigenous peoples are experiencing a naturalised occupation.

A number of other scholars have also problematised the collapsing of Indigenous claims into broader social and political agendas.⁵ While many, if not most, urban land occupations have generally foreground the concerns of what is now termed the 99% as against those of an ever-shrinking wealthy elite, Indigenous occupations characteristically seek to publicise the grievances not only of the economically oppressed but also of small and culturally specific minority groups. Hage is, therefore, critical of how the settler-Indigenous dynamic is often lost within broader national accounts of multiculturalism within which the dominant culture has 'no Aboriginal question about which to worry'.⁶ He admits that such a tension is under-researched and therefore notes that critical engagement with Indigenous occupations has the potential to contribute to this inquiry. Land occupations therefore serve as an important reminder of the significance of place, particularly in the context of footloose capitalism and flexible accumulation. For example, Pickerell and Krinsky argue that the locational politics of

the Occupy camps reinforces the importance of place since they highlight the physical locations where capitalism happens and the places where wealth and power are reinforced.⁷ Equally, encampments demonstrating Aboriginal claims and challenges to colonial power in colonial and capitalist heartlands are locationally important since they reclaim and reassert the stories held within these sites of early and complete Indigenous dispossession.

Indeed, what is notable about the case studies under consideration here is that Goonininup and Matagarup are not only sites of spiritual and (group) experiential significance to the local Noongar population but they are also extremely visible and high value locations immediately adjacent to the heart of the major settler/colonial capital city of Perth. In Noongar terms, the occupations can be conceived as a (re)assertion of Indigenous rights but they also represent at least a questioning of, if not a threat to, established wealth and privilege.

In the subsequent sections we set out a narrative which highlights the challenges and changes that have occurred in Perth – and in Western Australia and Australia more widely – that commenced with Aboriginal dispossession and eventually led to the Brewery occupation in 1988–1989 and the Nyoongar Tent Embassy's gatherings at Matagarup/Heirisson Island in 2012. Through recounting of the initial process of dispossession, of its ongoing impact on the local Noongar population and of these two relatively recent examples of Indigenous resistance predominantly based on archival and media sources, our broader aim is to illuminate the differing conceptions of land and of the colonisation process held by Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, particularly those local to the area. In doing so we will also allude to both differences of opinion within these two groups and to changes that have – and have not – occurred in these conceptions over time. In conclusion we argue that these conceptual differences, together with intra-communal disagreements and several shifts in policy have thrown up barriers to the achievement of just and lasting solutions not only for these disputed sites but more widely for Indigenous and non-

² B. Egan and J. Place, Minding the gaps: property, geography, and Indigenous peoples in Canada, *Geoforum* 44 (2013) 129–138.

³ Pickerill and Krinsky, Why does occupy matter? 280.

⁴ A.J. Barker, Already occupied: indigenous peoples, settler colonialism and the occupy movements in North America, *Social Movement Studies* 11 (2012) 327.

⁵ G. Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, New York, 2000; S. Mickler, *The Myth of Privilege: Aboriginal Status, Media Visions, Public Ideas*, Fremantle, 1998.

⁶ Hage, *White Nation*, 24.

⁷ Pickerell and Krinsky, Why does occupy matter?

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