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Re-thinking the health benefits of outstations in remote Indigenous Australia

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ABSTRACT

The small, decentralised communities, known as outstations which satellite larger Indigenous Australian remote communities have often been conceptualised as places that are beneficial to health and well-being. This paper provides an exploration of the meaning of their outstation for one family and the benefits that this connection brings to them, which are expressed in a deep connection to the land, continuing relationships with ancestors and a safe refuge from the stresses of the larger community. We argue that the outstation provides a place for people to be in control of their lives and form hopes and plans for the future. These benefits are position in a context where the future liveability and sustainability of the outstation is both fragile and vulnerable.

1. Introduction

In her chapter on practicing hope, in her recent book *Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene* Lesley Head (2016: 77) comments that small scale, local initiatives such as community gardens are often criticised as "being too small, too local, too disconnected from the bigger more structural sources of economic power" but they are "one space and time in which barely visible progressive futures might be rendered visible and imaginable". This paper examines an outstation of a remote Aboriginal community as one such place. The ideals of the outstation movement of the 1970s may only be a memory, but the outstation remains a place where small moments of change and resistance are part of people's imagining of a better future. This account draws on extensive ethnographic engagement with the Ngukurr community as well as in depth conversations with two of the elders of the family; Daphne and her older brother Davis. The field work was carried out in July–August 2016 and July–August 2017 in the very small outstation of Nulawan.

In July 2016 Senior and her family drove to Arnhem Land to spend a month doing field work in the remote Aboriginal community of Ngukurr. She had been working in Ngukurr for nearly twenty years. This time however, the experience was very different. The death of a senior man in the community meant that his relatives felt vulnerable to the heightened level of sorcery accusations that accompany a death (Senior and Chenhall, 2013, see also Glaskin et al., 2008), so they left the community and travelled twenty kilometres to their outstation. As this family were her closest friends and informants in the community, they invited her family to go there too. The outstation, although physically close to Ngukurr seemed much more remote, due to the poor quality of the road, and the lack of phone connectivity, electricity or water. The following is from Senior's field notes describing the initial journal to the outstation:

> After a series of increasingly anxious phone calls, Daphne met us in Ngukurr. "Don't get out of the car" she said, "we are not staying". I had only hazy memories of the outstation, but was reassured when she said "it's not far, maybe ten minutes away". Twenty kilometres down one of the worst roads I have ever been on, towing a trailer, at dusk with my entire family on board, I felt less sanguine. At one point as we were perilously tipped over the side of a hill, I snapped. "We're going to tip over". "No you'll be right" said Daphne and then less reassuringly, she turned to my husband: "what do you think?" But we made it, set up camp and began to settle in to our new life. Sitting round the fire, I asked "what's that red light down there over the river" oh that's just a Debil Debil,[1] he watches this camp- he's worried about new people coming here. Don't go away from the fire..... be careful if you need to go to the toilet!

Three family groups lived in Nulawan; a fluctuating population of

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[1] Supernatural being, related by kinship ties to the family.

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8–20 adults and a large number of children and young people. The Department of Housing and Community profile (2017–2108) recognises two houses at the outstation, but there are three houses that are regularly inhabited.

Previously, and in common with many residents of Ngukurr, we had only ever experienced the outstations as a weekend retreat, or a place we passed through on the way to fishing trips. The difficulties of transport, getting children to school every day, going to work, or attending the clinic meant that very few people were able to make a permanent residence there. But in July, it was school holidays, everyone was on leave as part of their mourning, and for once it was possible to live in this remote location for an extended period.

1.1. Nulawan from the air (photo Google Earth)

In this paper, we want to explore what outstations mean to people; in terms of the security, well being and the health benefits they provide. We want to extend the way we think about the health benefits of such places. In this respect, we want to draw upon Ben Anderson's work on "becoming and being hopeful" (Anderson, 2006; Anderson and Fenton, 2008) and Victoria Burbank's (2006) work on the feelings engendered by engagement with, and disengagement from western institutions. Our focus on hope, however, is in contrast to the way that outstations are regarded in current Australian policy, where there is an emphasis on the development of the larger towns to the detriment of smaller settlements. A decision to live on an outstation was described by the former Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott as a "life style choice" which should not be "endlessly subsidised" (Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott quoted in ABC News 11th March 2015). Implicit in this is that a move to an outstation is a backwards one which involves a separation from all the benefits that living on a larger settlement can provide.

2. The homelands movement

Am outstation is defined by Peterson and Myers (2016: 2) as:

> A small decentralised and relatively permanent communities of kin established by Aboriginal people on land that has social, cultural or economically significant to them.

The homelands movement, from which outstations appeared, were born out of the self-determination policy of the 1970s, but also as Morphy and Morphy (2016) point out, as a result of increasing activism on the part of Aboriginal people to regain autonomy over their lives. The objectives of the movement included:

- Returning to traditional country to look after the land and sites of cultural significance
- A safer, healthier and culturally more satisfying lifestyle, free of the stresses of town
- Re-establishing the importance and the authority of the family
- Teaching young people about their cultural heritage
- Living a healthier lifestyle with opportunities for hunting
- Keeping young people out of trouble with the police (see also McDermott et al., 1988:653)

This is certainly in keeping with Daphne's memory of that time, as she showed me the place where her uncle taught the community children and talked about her father's mission to remove the family from the effects of the licensed club which was in Ngukurr at that time. As she said: "we were very lucky when dad was doing this for us, otherwise we could end up like all the other people in Ngukurr. I thank him for taking us away from Ngukurr, kids used to get abused"

Peterson and Myers (2016) have recently put together an edited book on the history of the outstations movement and many of the stories have a similar theme; Initial enthusiasm, a flourishing of new settlements and by the early 1990s, a slump into disrepair and abandonment.

The environment, with its searing temperatures, strong wind and regular inundation during the wet season is relentlessly destructive to infrastructure without regular maintenance. Funding for the outstation movement dried up with the abolition of ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) in 2004, and the reforms of the CDEP (community development and employment program) in 2005. By 2007, Outstations were described by the then Liberal senator of South Australia, Amanda Vanstone as "cultural museums", which heralded a continuing reluctance on the part of governments to recognise the value of such spaces and was a theme that continued in the withdrawal of support for many small communities in South Australia and Western Australia.