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Spun Dry: Mobility and Jurisdiction in Northern Australia

This paper draws from ethnographic work on intra-Indigenous relations and new forms of sovereign claim 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 are not vested with 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, reach and limits of their dominion - 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 urban life. The paper canvasses ethnographically the ways patrols negotiate their authority and reckon its limits, extending figures of jurisdiction and movement to illuminate these new urban worlds.