Micropolitics in the Desert
Politics and the Law in Australian Aboriginal Communities

Interview with Barbara Glowczewski, 27 November 2008

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EM: I would like to begin with the question of transpositions of cultures as you experienced it when you lived in Lajamanu in the late 1970s. This is exemplified in the story you tell about coming to Lajamanu and wanting to make an experimental film about dreaming practices within the community. Once your film was made and viewed in the community, however, you were surprised to find that Aboriginal people in Lajamanu took umbrage and asked you why you made them look stupid. They key problem seemed to be a disconnect between different aesthetic practices and uses of cuts to create rhythm. I thought we might begin by talking about that experience and then bringing into it the current experience of the multi-media work that you've done in and across Aboriginal communities in Australia to foreground spiritual and creative practices within communities.

BG: The film was cut in quick succession and played with superimposition and jumps, foregrounding rhythm. This was before we were accustomed, in popular culture, to quick cutting techniques, superimposed images and rhythmic play. At the time in 1979, Aboriginal people in central Australia, in the desert, the Warlpiri people I went to live with, had never seen images like that and neither had non-Aboriginal people because it was not developed like it is now. So today if you ask a Warlpiri man or woman, who have seen such images for many years now, if they like to be represented that way they would say immediately that it's not a problem, in fact they produce themselves on clips in that way. But in those days all the images that they had seen were films like Westerns, maybe Kung-Fu films which were shown by the missionaries in the open-air cinema in the old reserve which they had just started to govern themselves through Aboriginal council.

I was doing experimental films in France before I went into the field, when I was 18-20, and those films were made frame by frame, playing on different kinds of perceptual sensations. For the film I made in Lajamanu in 1979, I thought to use that technique because of a stupid analogy: I thought the use of time condensation through rhythmic cuts would be like the condensation in dreams. Dreaming is so important for Aboriginal people, and I thought if we condense a lot of visual information into one image it should sort of explain visually what the dream is about. The second reason was not just conceptual;

I did not have much film stock and so I thought I am going to use the film like a fixed frame camera and then we'll see what happens!

Ritual life was extremely intensive when I arrived in 1979. Day after day the women were doing their own ceremonies, dancing and painting their bodies, singing. This was a 16 millimeter camera, which was still mechanical, where you had to rewind it manually every 30 seconds, and no sound, so it was already an experiment in itself. Anyway, I was able to process this film, show it to the women, and they said, as you mentioned, "Why do you make us look as mad, why?" Their dancing – it's not the only kind of dance – often involves jumping on two feet as if making a track, a parallel track, in the sand. They don't jump very high, they just jump a little bit so it creates a sort of a curve in the sand and they do it in lines. This creates different designs on the ground which represent in a way the traveling of the ancestors that they embody during their rituals, and the crossings of the lines, which are left by those different ancestors on the land. With my camera, I was filming the dancing with small frames that, in translation, made the dancing look like discontinuous, rather than seamless movement. It made it look like the Aboriginal women were in more than one place at once, moving at a very fast speed. Their response to the film made clear that the representation "in time" of their movement was a key aspect of the content of their ritual. For them what was important was the real speed of the performance, of the enactment, of the dance because the speed at which you enact the traveling from one place to another is itself carrying an information.

Take, for instance, the rainy season. During the rainy season you can travel very slowly because you will find water holes in many places, which are full of water because the rain has brought water in places where there are not permanent water holes. Now if it's the dry season and there's no water left, for the same distance you have to travel very fast, otherwise you will die. This means you have to dance the ritual fast. Dancing is a way of carrying the message of survival to the people who participate in the dance and who watch the dance. All these meanings are inside the performance itself and it's through rhythm that you can learn these things without it being explicit.

EM: Fascinating. Later, when you were designing the multi-media DVD "Dream Trackers" were you thinking a lot about rhythm in the design itself?

BG: At the time, the issue was a little bit different because in the meantime I had filmed the women at normal speed (24 frames for a second), so I had the proper rhythm for the ceremonies but what was more important, what was very striking for me, was the fact that the whole system of knowledge of the Warlpiri people and other Aboriginal people in the desert, has its own system of multi-media. So along with the development of multi-media technology in the West, I wanted to foreground and enhance what might be called "Aboriginal multi-media technologies" – networked forms of thought and rituals – to create a conjunction of the two systems. My goal was to use new technology to foreground already existing crisscrossing lines and hyperlinks

active within Aboriginal culture. I found the two technologies, or modes of thought, very compatible.

For the interactive CD-ROMS, I created an interactive map which I called a cognitive map, or a mental map, which would show just a selection of a few Jukurrpa (Dreamings), a few sacred sites for the Warlpiri people (they have hundreds of places which are named, but I only chose a small sample of 70 places). I wanted to show how these places are connected. Many of them are connected through a line, which the Warlpiri call Jukurrpa, but also the different lines are crisscrossed in some places, which are the meeting places of the different heroes who create those lines by leaving different features of their bodies in the landscape. The main point was to let the user create his or her own rhythm by traveling on those lines, changing the voyage and arriving at a specific place, moving to another story, another ritual, another song, another film.

BM: The way you're re-thinking the role of the anthropologist in relation to this project, you describe as an approach of anthropological restitution. I was wondering if you can talk about that concept?

BG: Yes, it was a challenge when arriving in the field in 1979 in the 1980s to hear Aboriginal people saying: "What are you here for? We constantly have anthropologists who come and ask questions, many books have been written on us, but for our own advancement in relation to justice, to self-government, to recognition to our rights to the land, to recognition for our spirituality, all this work doesn't seem to be necessary." Very recently, the Warlpiri have had some happier experiences with anthropology because they won some of their land back going into a specific tribunal to claim back their land and there anthropology was used partly to justify those links even though most of the evidence was coming from the people themselves. The danger was that testimony of Aboriginal people could be questioned by anthropological books, which were not saying the same thing as the Aboriginal people in court. People who were using those books were not the anthropologists, but some of the lawyers who were representing the state, mining companies, or any other conflicting interest who would want to take the written word against the live, oral word. My position as an anthropologist in this situation was to criticize the old books which are stating things which are not just for the paper or for intellectual debates, but which have a huge consequence for the life of the people today. For instance, Radcliffe Brown who was the founder of Social Anthropology and the first Chair in Australia, has said through his work that most of the Aboriginal people have a patrilineal system, where land goes through the father-line. So, today if a group is claiming land and there are lots of women who have children for instance with non-Aboriginal men, does it mean that these children are not Aboriginal anymore and they have no right to the land? Now, it has been shown through lots of studies that in fact this patrilineal sort of dogma was biased and that relation to land, transmission and heritage was much more complex and when the first land rights issues started very often in court Aboriginal people said: "Yes,

we can have responsibility for father's land, but we also have responsibility for our mother's land and for our spouse's land." So the judge would say "Yes, but you have to choose: which land do you claim?" This bring us back to the mapping of the Dreamings because we can easily understand visually that lands criss-cross – we can question the point, does it belong to line A or line B? Well in some cases it's A, in some cases it's B, in some cases, it's both. Now our Western relation to landownership doesn't accept this way of thinking. In the West we have a very exclusive way of considering property : it either belongs to A or to B and between A and B there is a boundary. What Aboriginal people say is that ownership depends on the context and it's negotiable. Again, if we are in a time of easy climate, then everybody's got their land and they have to use the resources of their land. But when the drought comes, which can happen every year, or when something extraordinary happens, lots of people will have to come to the same water hole and they'll have to negotiate their rights. And how do they negotiate them? They will do so through very complex references lived and reenacted through Dreaming rituals which are inherited but can also be re-developed. They can be dreamt through new interpretations and it's this dynamic side which is very important. So to answer your question, restitution for me was two things.

First, it was to criticize the old data, to say that what has been written is not fixed and that oral testimony today is not re-inventing tradition, but is an example of a dynamic system where people always have to survive to negotiate and re-interpret. Within Jukurrpa there is always both inheritance and change**.** There are things which don't change, but what is not changing is more a feeling rather than the shape it takes. In dreams there are certain shapes, which are constant. There are different ways of combining them and different ways of interpreting them, but there are some basic elements which are fixed. There is a language in the shapes, which is used, but the way it's connected and interpreted is almost infinite.

Beyond what makes you recognize this language or that language, or this group or that group, there is a system of connection which I would say is human, but is not given to everybody to use. In the Western world, it's the same thing. We can connect things, but not all of us do it, or not in all circumstances. Now of course there are some philosophers who prefer that way of doing rather than other ways of doing, so there is a familiarity, a system of recognition of the way it works, a pregiven way of connecting.

This links back to the CD-Rom project. When I was conceiving a way of speaking transversally across cultures, I wanted to find modes of connection which might open up new ways of seeing and thinking. I wanted to bring forth a whole cosmology, a mapping of the knowledge of place as connected by stories. I wanted to find a mode for making apparent the way the Dreaming works as both a site and a mode of recombination. This is why I chose multi-media, a way of seeing which in my opinion was very close to the mode of living of Aboriginal cultures in Australia.

The restitution through the CD-Rom had two objectives. One was to give access to the Warlpiri people what had been collected about them by anthropologists some of the interpretations that I presented through my publications.[1] There is, for instance, a section which is called "The Field Notes" where I give my interpretations, excerpts of what I wrote as an anthropologist. Second, there is a sort of mental infrastructure, which is constructed strictly based on the recordings that I have done of stories, dream stories, songs, and rituals. This has been used in Warlpiri schools since 1998. The second objective was therefore to create a curriculum to be used at once by children and by those who don't read and write but were happy to have the CD-Rom as a form of patrimony.

Now the question was "Well, this is a fixed work. So what sort of restitution is it? Life has been mapped and frozen. How can this be a cartography of the culture and the knowledge of a society which is constantly moving?" I see this as the problem of the archive. All archives are just an instant in time, while what makes a feeling of culture is how it connects to other archives and how you use it in the present. Which is exactly what the Warlpiri people do now when they re-appropriate these kinds of images and produce new usages through them and new discourses, not just in school but in their daily lives. This, for me, was one way of thinking restitution. The other restitution is for non-Aboriginal people, or Aboriginal people who don't live in the central desert of Australia. This project provides them with an opening to Aboriginal culture. The challenge of this multi-media project was to say that if you go inside the local knowledge and try to withdraw from it its mode of thought, you provide the opportunity for creating new modes of connection rather than imposing some sort of universal model and then trying to fit a local situation within this framework.

BM: I just wanted to pause for a minute around the question of the dreaming because I think it's easy for a Western audience not familiar with Australian Aboriginal culture to misunderstand the term by taking it as one of those universals, like it's mythology, or a system of symbolism. Dreaming also means law and you've been talking about how it's negotiated and brought forth. When you talk about the dreaming, you often describe it as a virtual space-time and you emphasize how there are these negotiated practices bringing into actualization. That means it's a living and changing set of practices and ideas. Could you go into this a bit more?

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[1] For the Dream trackers CD-Rom go to http://portal.unesco.org/science/en/ev.php-URL_ID=3540&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
It will soon be republished as a DVD-ROM with one hour and a half of my film archives of 1979 and 1990's. Go to:
http://www.archivesaudiovisuelles.fr/FR/_video.asp?id=849&ress=2748&video=96828&format=68

BG: I used to explain to students that the dreaming is a bit like a science-fiction matrix. So it's virtual in the sense that everything is already given, in the dreaming, in terms of possible combinations which are not yet imagined but where all the elements are there. It doesn't mean that it's a finite world. The elements are there and when you dream, for a Warlpiri person, man or woman, those elements will be connected into new forms. Now, these new forms can resonate with forms which are transmitted through the tradition and repeat a motif which has already been interpreted many many times, or they can resonate slightly differently. But no matter what there a this feeling of resonance or recognition as being something that belongs to a story of which you are part. The Dreaming is both about recognition and sharing, and about co-creating. Any new Dream will pick up indexes in relation to your life as Dreaming spirit (a spirit child you embody which comes from a specific place in the land) that will be interpreted collectively it in such a way that other people recognize it too. This is often misunderstood, leading people to accuse Aborigines of inventing new Dreaming when it suits them, such as by suddenly suggesting that a mining site has always been a sacred site.

What is misunderstood here is that everything in the landscape is meaningful. Interpretation is not simply built on what has been actually transmitted. Interpretations change because actual and virtual alliances change. Let's take an example. In the heart of the Tanami desert there is a place where from the beginning of the colonization there were strong clashes because of the gold rush. Somebody found some gold and immediately lots of white people came and this was a very violent contact for the Warlpiri people at the turn of the 19th to 20th century. The, both the gold and the people disappeared. When the Warlpiri got their land back in 1978 immediately big multinationals came, and 12 big companies signed contracts with the Warlpiri to explore, digging much deeper for gold with new technologies. And in that specific case around the Granites there was gold. Only some Warlpiri groups were initially concerned for this site, but because it was a place of contact where lots of people had contacted them previously, including Europeans when they came for the first gold rush, and because it was a place where lots of people knew there was permanent water, the place was also, in some sense, a site of multiple crossings and allegiances. Now that there was to be permanent income from mining, almost all the Warlpiri laid claim to the site, which raised many debates and conflicts. In the end many groups got a share in that place and royalties were balanced between the different groups.

EM: I would like to continue with the question of micropolitics. I understand the micropolitical as stemming in large part from Félix Guattari's idea of the three ecologies, where the political surfaces in a relational network or relational context that is never given in advance. I would be interested to explore with you how the movement through and with Lajamanu has affected your politics. It seems to me, in reading your work, that you begin as an invested young person, on the cusp of becoming an anthropologist, and you emerge as an activist. Perhaps you can talk about the transversal linkages that move

you and your politics and allow you to continue learning as an artist, activist and thinker in an ecology which is itself always changing.

BG: Well, certainly my first meeting and sort of bath inside camp life in Lajamanu changed my life. But at the same time, I remember having the feeling, when I was walking in the desert after a bush fire with the women on a day of big heat with lots of flies, that I had been in this place before. Now what was that feeling of déjà vu? Well, it was a mental image. It was that image I had had three or four years before, no, I think I was seventeen so it was more than that, six years before, when I was in the south of France in a specific landscape and I had taken LSD, and under LSD the whole landscape had transformed and was elastic. This is a very classic vision when you're under LSD, but everything was connected by lines, colourful lines which were breathing, and every step I took was making the environment breathe and there was a continuity between my body, the land, the sky, and there was also a very strange sound which I recognized later as the flies in the desert, which was what brought back the association with the landscape. And here I was walking in the heat looking at my feet, because it's the only thing that you can concentrate on when you're really hot, and there was this beautiful red earth and small, little dots of black, the grass being burned, and already sprouting in some little spots very bright green grass, the new grass coming in, and I was thinking about this elasticity of the landscape, and it's exactly that feeling that I was also feeling when I was sitting with the women in ceremonies and all the women would touch each other to paint their bodies and I was squeezed between two big breasts with my camera and I was trying to film and everybody was speaking in Warlpiri, and I was trying to understand. Even in the beginning I had the feeling that my body, although it was white and the women were black, was part of a touching, elastic, collective body.

And then I came back to France, in the early 80s, and there was a big feminist movement and lots of things going on, with many people questioning what is it to be a woman, trying to define feminine essentialism, and it was a big shock for me. I showed those ceremonies that I had filmed of the women to an audience and the reception from the more essentialist type feminists was to say that they could not recognize themselves in the women with their big painted breasts dancing and holding big sticks which look like phalluses; it's not us. And I was saying well, it was me when I was in the field so am I going native?? No I am not! My activism stems from learning with Warlpiri women, with whom I felt something which I think is very fundamentally human and has to do with the experience of sharing a collective body. This is what Félix Guattari is referring to when he talks about 'agencement collectif' and 'territoire existentiel." It became a sort of mission, an intellectual mission for me to prove that what the Aboriginal people had to say today was very contemporary.

Soon afterwards a huge spread of Aboriginal paintings started being recognized through the market of contemporary art. I was active in France in

that period, promoting of the Aboriginal paintings through exhibitions and conferences and films and so on but even more so I was concerned with the issue of land and the question of the legitimacy of Aboriginal politics. What struck me was that it was OK to take paintings because they look beautiful and they make us dream, but not to take with them the message which is that these people are anchored somewhere. The answer was: —well, too bad, they were anchored and now they will have to move because the whole world is moving. After all, no one can stay in one place and all this discourse of indigeneity is no good if it's essentialist.

Now, I wrote a bit about that and at the time, in the 80s, I had no real problem with the notion of essence. This changed a bit after a discussion Félix Guattari who told me to be careful. He suggested that there might be a difference between a singularity and an essence, pointing out that everything I had written was underlining the complex singularities at the heart of aboriginal culture. So I started to pay attention to the relation between singularities and politics. This new approach also followed from Guattari's ideas about micropolitics.

In the 90s I married an Aboriginal filmmaker, composer, singer and musician, who was one of the activists who was at the tent embassy in the 70s as a very young man. We had two children and got very involved in the promotion of a different way of performing culture to make it exist on the global scene as well as locally in Australia. We worked with lots of festivals where different language groups met and re-designed ceremonies for the public. Also here in France and in Europe we organized many events not just art in galleries but also stagings of art in its relation to political discourse.

So this was the 90s, and then in 2000 I found myself in another region of Australia, in Queensland. During the 1990s there was a royal commission on death in custody which was organized with workshops held in many Aboriginal communities and in many cities. I took part in some of these events including the day before my first daughter was born in Derby.

It was incredible to be in those workshops on death in custody because I was actually witnessing a whole rhizomatic way of building a new idea of society – a society which would have a place in the Australian state. And it was absolutely incredible working in an environment of Aboriginal people of different generations with different experiences with the generation of the elders not knowing how to read and write, and others who did do schooling but not much because in those days, in the 90s, not many Aboriginal people had finished university or anything, and watching them invent answers to all the constraints that the state was bringing to them. In the end the process didn't restrict itself solely to the theme of death and custody: they were rebuilding everything, education, health justice system, police, housing, environmental issues. And they proposed this incredible sort of weaving, throughout the continent, of more than 360 recommendations, which were

given to the parliament and voted by the parliament and out of 360 recommendations maybe only 30 were applied ten years later.

I just happened to be in town in Queensland in 2004, invited by James Cook University and there was a scream on the radio, and I learned through that scream, that some 20 minutes by plane, or two hours by boat from Townsville, on an island called Palm Island, the whole population was in turmoil because, again, there has been a death in custody. One week after the death, the population was told that the man was found with his liver cut in two and with four broken ribs. And apparently there was not going to be any inquest. This was common practice: there had never been any charging of police for all the other deaths in custody. The last statistics, it's hard to have official statistics in Australia, but the last official statistics were 343 deaths in custody and jail in 15 years, which is a lot. And never a policeman was arrested. These people who die in custody, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, there is more Aboriginal people who die but there is also non-Aboriginal people who die, never has a policemen been charged for any violence. But this time there was an inquest because it was the right time for a wide protest across the country and even overseas. I got involved in that whole issue doing my own research with some families of Palm, analyzing the process of the court evidence and media reports. A policeman was charged but only two years and a half after the campaign. And well, two steps forward one step back, he was acquitted during his trial in June 2007.

EM: And it seems to me, I'll let you tell us the story, but it seems to me what we end up with in 2008, is a real schism between the pragmatic reality of a collective body that is working through issues collectively, not necessarily straightforwardly, but still collectively on the Aboriginal side, and a western or white system of law which still wants to give the responsibility to an individual which has a result of a new incarceration of a black man. Maybe you could talk about that a little bit.

BG: Yeah well, what happened was that the population on Palm Island was very angry when received it received the diagnosis of the autopsy. The population of Palm Island is about three thousand people. After the results of the autopsy a few hundreds walked toward a police station and there was a violent exchange of words and stones thrown at the building and it ended up being burned after the policemen were asked to leave the place. Now nobody really knows who set the fire to this building. There are actually even rumours that maybe there was help to burn this building. Anyway, it was the first time that Aboriginal people manifested in such an open way without any weapons. I mean, the media at the time talked about weapons and showed an image of one man called Lex Wotton carrying a shovel. But are we really to believe that "weapon" signifies "shovel"? This is the kind of rumours that were carried out.

The fact that Aboriginal people were shown as resisting news that they did not agree about, was enough to create a shock. Because of the threat of terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11 the Palm Island resistance was responded with special emergency intervention squad. The squad was sent to Palm Island to deal with "a national security threat."

During the night, seventeen men were arrested very violently with tasers pointed on them, their families asked to lie down on the ground. The wife of one of the men who was arrested had a premature baby, and many still suffer from that experience. These things done illegally in the name of police were told in the aboriginal court case. But they were not very well presented in the media as a result of which, later, when the policemen were finally on trial, none of this data was put forward. For instance, the famous video made in the cell of the prisoner's death was not used at the trial, was not shown to the jury. The pretext was that you don't show dead people's images within Aboriginal culture. But was this just a pretext? Had the jury seen those images – which did shock lots of people when they were shown at the inquest in Townsville two years before – if the jury had seen the images, perhaps the result would have been different.

In the end, it became a battle where on one side you had the police defending the system – so called justice and democracy – and on the other side were those who threaten it. For many years, Aborigines have been depicted as being a threat to peaceful democracy and this trial supported this view. The irony is that in this case the tools for self-expression were the tools of so-called democracy: a protest in the street, a petition, a call for justice.

To turn the case into what it became, it was necessary to depict Lex Wotton as a danger to the state. Here is a man, walking with a shovel, not drunk, not violent. Observed closely, the image that Wotton represents does not correspond to the stereotype that has been built about what an Aboriginal person is supposed to be today. So not being this image that is expected, he becomes a double threat because I don't think Australian media are prepared for this kind of complexity within Aboriginal culture.

Of the many trials that took place over the following two years, many were freed of charges. But not Lex Wotton, who ironically was seen by the community as a man who had tried to negotiate with the police, and who was filmed calming the crowd asking them to stop throwing stones on the shelter. Yet, only two weeks ago (October 2008), he was declared guilty and prosecution demanded twenty years of jail because of the image that he represents. The judge later on gave him 6 years.

At the time, what really shocked me was the reaction of the media. The same newspapers, like *The Australian, The Age, Sydney Morning Herald,* who covered the initial trials seemed suddenly to have no memory of the events. So I was wondering, what's the issue there? Why is it that there is such a short

memory? This reminded me of Australian novelist Gail Jones's book *Sorry (2007)*. Her main character is a little girl, who, when she's twelve, starts to stutter and eventually is shamed into complete silence. The whole book unfolds as the story of what made her stop talking. It turns out that the memory she has repressed is of killing her father when she catches him raping her best friend, who is Aboriginal. And when she finally manages to remember - toward the end of the book, her Aboriginal friend is in jail and she tells her "now I remember, why didn't you say?" "Nobody would have believed me" is the Aboriginal girl's response. I think this book is a very nice way of trying to say sorry for the amnesia of Australian history and politics, which is a collective one.

EM: I wanted to finish on a last closing and opening question, which would return us to the question of singularities. I want to propose three different ways to think about the micropolitical in the context of what you've told us. You might want to comment on one or more. One of them it seems to me, is an interesting singularity that has to do with the complexity of the collective body that includes "other bodies," including your body. It seems to me that in a politics to come that would radically take seriously the kind of political initiatives brought forward by the Aboriginal people, there would also have to be a taking the temperature of these new singularities (bodies in process) rather than lumping all Aboriginal people in one box. That would be one singularity. The other singularity would be to do with the issue of memory. It seems to me that the Aboriginal cultures that I have looked into have a very important way of thinking spacetime where memory is not conceived as a simple linear passageway to a discrete past and a proposed future but is thought instead as a complex nonlinear topological field with transversal linkages. And the third singularity you might comment on would be a gesturing toward the global politics to come through the election of Obama with respect to the fear that I think a lot of left-leaning political groups have that people might perceive that with Obama's election the important work has been done: We have now elected a black president. We have done our work. So there isn't more work to come in any of those registers.

BG: I agree absolutely with what you say and those three levels. Just on Obama, I think the same thing happened in Australia when the new government was elected, last November, from Liberal to Labor. And Kevin Rudd, for the first time after many years of public pressure accepted to give an official apology to the Aboriginal people. This was done last February. It was like you say, like in USA: a black man is elected and it is done. And here the apology was done, which means the Aboriginal issue is sorted out. Well today, we know it is not the case. Immediately after Obama's election there have been people saying: don't forget, this is just the beginning, there is more to do. And it is actually giving hope to a lot of people, who think that the fact of being black opens a huge Pandora's box which is giving them a new stage to act. And in Australia it is the same. Lex Wotton was sentenced on the 7th of November, just around the elections. And every article pointed to the

irony that it remains possible to sentence a black man who did not kill while a white man who killed goes free, even while we elect the first black president. There is still much work to be done.