

Nervous Landscapes: The Heritage of Racial Segregation in New South Wales, Australia

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Introduction

The geographical focus of this paper is the Manning Valley on the lower North Coast of New South Wales (NSW), Australia.¹ I should mention that the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in NSW is accountable for Aboriginal heritage across the whole state, not just on-park, and that explains my involvement in a project whose focus is mainly outside the park system.

My paper addresses itself to the segregation of Aboriginal and white populations that took place in the Manning Valley, in one form or another, between the 1820s and the 1970s.² At a global level, racial segregation has occurred in a surprisingly large number of countries at some point in their history. The history of segregation is perhaps best known, or best researched, in the United States and South Africa, in each of which, especially over the last couple of decades (less in the case of South Africa), it has been the subject of heritage discourse and the focus of various acts of commemoration.³

Racial segregation, by its very nature, is a spatial practice. It is about the separation of people in space and the rules and devices that are set up to achieve this. It has been the spatiality of segregation in Australia that has been the particular subject of my interest. As heritage practitioners we operate not just in the field of place, but also in the field of space.

The “Lightness” of the Aboriginal Presence

I would argue that segregation was not merely a historical reality in NSW but that, taken in its broadest sense, it is the key to deciphering and understanding the whole spatial pattern of Aboriginal life in the post-1788 NSW landscape (1788 marking the beginning of white settlement in Australia). The absence of any major infrastructure of segregation, apart from the Reserves system, accords with a general sparseness of obvious physical traces of the Aboriginal presence in the post-contact landscape overall. Like their

ancestors, Aboriginal people in NSW after 1788 lived fairly lightly on the ground. Their dwellings were also liable to be demolished, burned, or removed by the authorities. Relatively speaking, where the white heritage of the post-contact period is fabric-heavy, Aboriginal heritage is fabric-light and the odds are stacked against it surviving into the archeological and architectural heritage record.

Another difficulty is posed by the increasing use by Aboriginal people through the post-contact period of a material culture borrowed from Europeans. Aboriginal people used teacups and spoons, hammers and nails, bicycles, and steel rabbit traps. While the objects themselves may not be distinctively Aboriginal, we can assume that the distributional pattern of the objects at any one site will reflect distinctive behavioral patterns. But how do we find these sites? My present project evolved out of a concern that Aboriginal post-contact heritage sites were radically under-recorded relative to non-indigenous heritage places for the same period. The project aims to develop principles for finding Aboriginal people in the historical (post-contact) landscape. It is looking for the logic that explains where Aboriginal people were in the colonial landscape, and that logic, I contend, is the (highly illogical) logic of segregation.

In-between Space

When we think of racial segregation in Australia we normally think of the institutionalized racism of the latter part of 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.⁴ I suggest

we need to look earlier than this. In my study area, the Manning Valley, the first land grants and sales were made to white farmers in the 1820s. What we see is the familiar rectangular grid of white land holdings spreading along the alluvial flats of the valley and then expanding into the grazing country back from the river. The fertile ground in the valley was all taken up by the 1880s. What had begun as a mosaic of rectangular farms became a continuous carpet of white-owned land along the bottom of the valley and over the foothills.

The concept of private land ownership was itself an instrument of segregation, a key separator of the two races. The exclusionary effect was not immediate, though. In the 1820s and 1830s, white settlers simply did not have the technology to clear more than a paddock or two around their homesteads. The forest and woodland covering the rest of their holdings remained more or less accessible to the Biripi people. Even though the white population of the valley grew from 400 in the early 1840s to about 3,000 by 1860, the valley remained substantially bush covered.⁵ Ring-barking changed that. Widely practiced in the valley from the 1860s, ring-barking produced landscapes that look like scenes from an eco-disaster. Over large parts of the Manning Valley the native tree cover was wiped off the map, producing, in a sense, a clean slate for the lines that would be drawn by the wire fences, which were introduced from the 1870s. Wire fences made the cadastral grid a visible, tangible reality on the ground where, previously, it had for the most part been real only on paper.

These developments radically curtailed Aboriginal freedom of movement through the countryside. It is now appropriate to ask the question, "How, in a practical-spatial sense, do you live in a landscape that no longer belongs to you?" This is to say, how do you live inside a cadastral grid which you have no proprietary state in? As white settlement spread, from the 1820s, many or most of the customary Aboriginal camp sites, ceremony places, and food resource places became inaccessible and unusable. The rectangular farms increasingly cut across customary Aboriginal

lines of movement. There were, however, gaps and opportunities in the grid which Aboriginal people could occupy and move through. These openings included water reserves, traveling stock reserves, and town commons. They included narrow strips of land reserved for roads that had not yet been built as well as terrain too steep or boggy or sandy to have ever been cleared for agriculture.⁶ Aboriginal people often could and did camp in these gaps and negotiate their way through the colonized landscape by means of them. It is thus possible to think of the Aboriginal presence in the colonized landscape in terms of in-betweenness.⁷

Oral and documentary history sources provide fragmentary evidence of an Aboriginal life lived "in between." We have supplemented this by what you might call an audit of gaps and openings in the cadastré. For sample areas of the valley, we have reviewed the series of cadastral maps going back to the 1880s in order to identify road reserves. There were always far more of these than ever had roads constructed on them and in the days before cars replaced horses they provided networks for white as well as Aboriginal movement through the landscape. Narrow bands of reserved land along some of the waterways provided another opening. For Aboriginal people living on the Aboriginal Reserve gazetted at Purfleet in 1900, the water reserves in the nearby Glenthorne area allowed access for line fishing from the shore as well as the mooring of the fishing boats some Aboriginal families owned (and often built) and sites for drying fishing nets. These continue to be used into the present. Other water reserves along the river allowed the river itself and its wide estuary to become something of a zone of free movement for Aboriginal people who had access to boats. The cadastral grid stopped at the shoreline and, to an extent, the water was a neutral, unsegregated zone and, from an Aboriginal point of view, a gap in the cadastré.

Segregation and Tactics for Testing It

As the title of my paper suggests, I am

interested in the idea of racial segregation as a spatial regime that was always, to borrow Michael Taussig's term, a "nervous system."⁸ The Manning Valley over the last 150 years or so can be seen as a cultural landscape that vibrated with the tensions set up not just by the strictures of racial segregation and their enforcement, but by the numerous ways that those strictures were tested and undermined by people on both sides of the highly unstable racial divide. So, while the ideal or objective of segregation was a neat—and one might say, clinical—separation of black and white lives for all but economic purposes, the social-historical reality of segregation was somewhat the opposite: the black and white populations existed in a state of mental and behavioral entanglement. My purpose in taking up racial segregation as a heritage theme or topic is partly to highlight this entanglement and, in doing so, lend support to those arguing that Aboriginal and non-indigenous historical heritage should not be kept in separate boxes.⁹

One of the main reasons segregation may speak more about racial entanglement than real racial separation is that people resisted it. I have pointed to the ways in which the cadastral system was replete with cracks and openings that enabled Aboriginal people to live inside it, in a state of in-betweenness. These gaps, in the form of various types of reserves, were a formal, proper part of the cadastral system and Aboriginal people were merely taking advantage of the opportunities they offered. In a different category are what might be called the anti-cadastral practices of Aboriginal people. I refer here to the jumping of fences, the raiding of orchards and corn fields, the short-cutting across a hostile farmer's lower paddock in order to get to the river, the sneaking onto a property by Aboriginal children in order to swim in a farmer's dam-pond. Historical records indicate that incursions such as these were common across the whole of NSW and were an on-going source of interracial tension. They are also a major theme in oral histories recorded from Aboriginal people. Listening to the way Aboriginal people in our own study area recall and narrate these acts of trespass, often carried out against the

real threat of shotguns and dogs and the specter of the police, I'm inclined to think of them almost as a systematic refusal of the boundaries of cadastral system, a refusal to acknowledge its legitimacy, a constant prodding and testing of its resolve. These experiences and the relating of them are a significant part of Aboriginal folklore, as are the stories, particularly from the 1970s, of how individuals defied boundaries in segregated picture theaters and the previously racially bounded space of white bars and discos. All these experiences are spatial and therefore eminently mappable as heritage.

They are, in quite a real sense, already mapped by Aboriginal people. Something I noticed early in our fieldwork in the Manning Valley was the extent of Aboriginal knowledge of white land ownership. As we drove through the valley with local Aboriginal people they frequently noted, in passing, not just who a particular farm belonged to but often who had owned it previously, the names of the parents and grandparents of the current owner, etc. This knowledge was almost always backed by information about how friendly or otherwise these white people were to Aborigines. Narratives about fence-jumping and orchard raiding had their counterpart in narratives of farmers who had always let them cross their fields, or who had given them fruit, or even, in one case, a white family who planted extra vegetables specifically for them to come and pick. Or the shop in Taree in the 1950s where you could always get served and be spoken to decently, or the doctor who could be relied on to treat you well. All of this comprises a mental map of the valley that is an alternative to the official "white map." It is a map maintained and updated and passed on from generation to generation. So an answer to the question, "How do you live in a landscape that no longer belongs to you?" may be that you maintain your own map of that landscape. We've tried to record parts of this alternative map on paper (actually on GIS).

In this area of research I have found the work of the French historian, Michel de Certeau, to be particularly helpful and provocative.¹⁰ Certeau drew a comparison

between reading and walking. He observed that no matter how tightly written a particular text might be, you can't control people's reading of it. The agency of the reader lay in the unique interpretations he or she could bring to the text, but also in the way it could act as an unpredictable springboard to his or her own lines of thought—not as something external to the text but as taking place in the spaces between and around and even inside its words and lines. Similarly, no matter how densely built an urban environment might be, people walking through a city or neighborhood would devise their own personal patterns of movement.¹¹ People would find ways to inscribe their everyday lives, their whims and desires, in spaces whose design made no allowance for them.

Sites of Segregation

In a different category from those described so far in this paper are those places where Aboriginal people were subject to segregation inside the built space, and thus potentially inside the built heritage of white people. In the Manning Valley these include the old public swimming pool and the Boomerang picture theater, both in Taree. Aboriginal children were allowed into the public pool but were required to keep to their own end of it. In the case of the picture theater, they had to sit in a roped-off section up the front. When the Boomerang Theatre is mentioned to older Aboriginal people in the area today, the first thing that springs to their minds is the humiliation of having to sit in those front rows and of only being allowed in after the lights went down. For them this is what the Boomerang Theatre means, but that meaning has no direct physical expression in the fabric of the place and would only become visible through an assessment of the place's historical or social significance.¹²

The Boomerang Theatre is also significant as a site of desegregation. Aboriginal people in the early 1970s simply refused to sit in the roped-off section any more. They took their seats up the back, discovering that in the face of their defiance this part of the "color bar" collapsed. In other cases it did not depart so

quietly.

In the Manning Valley these events are neither attested to nor commemorated by physical fabric. The heritage of segregation—like the rules governing its enforcement—remains mostly in the realm of the unspoken.

Segregation and Visibility

I turn now to the issue of visibility, always a critical factor in racial segregation. Aboriginal people, and others who have experienced racism, often describe how effectively the disapproval of white people—their sense of superiority and control over you—is conveyed in the way they look at you. They speak of the effect of living under this disapproving gaze on a daily basis and what that does to you. We saw, how from the 1860s, through the practice of ring-barking, great tracts of the Manning Valley lost their tree cover. The situation of the Aborigines was not just that they were dispossessed of their land—they also became visible in it in a new and presumably quite disturbing way. They were subject to white surveillance.¹³

No surprise, then, that Aborigines often sought to remove themselves from the white gaze. And here the term "bush cover" takes on new meaning. It is clear that several of the places and pathways we have mapped during oral history recording sessions were valued for the privacy that the bush cover afforded. It appears that many of the places that people walked, fished, swam, and picnicked were chosen either for this reason or because they were specifically not the places white people walked, fished, swam, and picnicked. An often-overlooked aspect of segregation is that by the time it became a feature of white public policy in the late 19th century, Aboriginal people were already to an extent, and where practicable, voluntarily withdrawing their presence.

Endnotes

1. Several of the themes in this paper have been developed in more detail in Denis Byrne, "Nervous landscapes: race and space in Australia," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 3:2 (forthcoming 2003).

2. This area has been the subject of a study of post-contact Aboriginal heritage by myself and others at the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. My co-researcher at NPWS has been Maria Nugent (now at the School of Historical Studies, Monash University). The study has been carried out in partnership with the Taree–Purfleet Local Aboriginal Land Council (represented by Vienna Maslin) and the Forster Local Aboriginal Land Council (represented by Robert Yettica).
3. For the U.S., see, for instance, Owen J. Dwyer, “Interpreting the Civil Rights movement: place, memory, and conflict,” *Professional Geographer* 52:4 (2000), pp. 660–671; for South Africa, see, for example, the District Six Museum in Cape Town (www.districtsix.co.za) and The Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg (www.apartheidmuseum.org).
4. David Hollinsworth, *Race and Racism in Australia* (Katoomba, Australia: Social Science Press, 1998). Hollinsworth and others point to the period after the 1860s in southeastern Australia as one in which a decreased reliance on Aboriginal labor was accompanied by “the construction and naturalisation of hegemonic ideas of racial exclusivity and superiority” by white settlers (Hollinsworth 1998, p. 87).
5. For white population estimates, see W.K. Birrell, *The Manning Valley: Landscape and Settlement 1824–1900* (Sydney: Jacaranda Press, 1987), p. 118; John Ramsland, *The Struggle Against Isolation: A History of the Manning Valley* (Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1987), p. 29.
6. Much of this resonates with the marginal existence of the hill people of West Virginia as described by K. Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
7. See T. Minh-ha, “The undone interval” (in conversation with Annamaria Morelli), in I. Chambers and L. Curti (eds.), *The Post-colonial Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 3–16.
8. Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
9. Denis Byrne, “The ethos of return: erasure and reinstatement of Aboriginal visibility in the Australian historical landscape,” *Historical Archaeology* 37:1 (2003), pp. 73–86.
10. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated from the French by Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
11. Certeau used the term “tactics” to describe the means that the disempowered employ to create space for themselves. The tactic, as Certeau (1998, p. 36) says, “must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them.”
12. An interior photograph of the Boomerang Theatre (ca. 1923) appears on the cover a recent publication by NPWS promoting social significance assessment: Denis Byrne, Helen Brayshaw, and Tracy Ireland, *Social Significance: A Discussion Paper* (Sydney: NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2001). In this photo Aboriginal people can be seen occupying the front rows of seats.
13. Michel Foucault showed us how important visual surveillance became in the 19th century as a way of the modern state controlling and modifying the behavior of people who are outside the definition of the “model citizen,” e.g., in his *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Viking, 1979). The visual observation of the colonized (the need to “keep an eye on them”) is part of the process of building up a body of knowledge about them which, as Nicholas Thomas points out in *Colonialism’s Culture* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994), “is intimately linked with a classification and diagnosis of the inferiority or inadequacy of the latter, that establishes the need for management” (p. 41).

