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Mapping Australian Postcolonial Landscapes: From Resistance to Reconciliation?

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Abstract

From the earliest point of the white invasion of Australia the process of colonisation has been inextricably interwoven with an attempt to deny or erase any signs of Indigenous² presence in the landscape. This article examines the manner in which the meanings accorded to space and place in post-colonial Australia are constructed. As Ashcroft et al (1997: 353) put it: 'Place and displacement are crucial features of the postcolonial discourse.' Importantly they emphasise the fact that the term place is not merely synonymous with landscape. There are a host of meanings that can be attributed to the writing of the stories of place in Australia. From the outset it should be noted that the experience of the settler societies can be distinguished from other colonial nations such as India or Jamaica, in that the colonisers have remained, there has been no return to the metropolitan centre. A consequence of the enduring presence of the colonisers is the fact that there remains disquietude, a tension between those who have been displaced and those who have replaced them. In seeking to explain how non-Indigenous Australians have sought to reconcile the erasure of Indigenous Australians from the Australian landscape and history W E Stanner, the eminent anthropologist, reflected that it is: ... a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. We have been able for so long to disremember the aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so (1972: 25).

Mapping Australian Postcolonial Landscapes: From Resistance to Reconciliation?¹

Mark Harris

Meanings of place and space

From the earliest point of the white invasion of Australia the process of colonisation has been inextricably interwoven with an attempt to deny or erase any signs of Indigenous² presence in the landscape. This article examines the manner in which the meanings accorded to space and place in post-colonial Australia are constructed. As Ashcroft et al (1997: 353) put it: 'Place and displacement are crucial features of the post-colonial discourse.' Importantly they emphasise the fact that the term place is not merely synonymous with landscape. There are a host of meanings that can be attributed to the writing of the stories of place in Australia. From the outset it should be noted that the experience of the settler societies can be distinguished from other colonial nations such as India or Jamaica, in that the colonisers have remained, there has been no return to the metropolitan centre. A consequence of the enduring presence of the colonisers is the fact that there remains disquietude, a tension between those who have been displaced and those who have replaced them. In seeking to explain how non-Indigenous Australians have sought to reconcile the erasure of Indigenous Australians from the Australian landscape and history W E Stanner, the eminent anthropologist, reflected that it is:

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That part of Australia occupied by Indigenous Australians (Stanner's 'quadrant of the landscape') has been ignored for a large part of the non-Indigenous occupation of the continent. In turn this has given rise to a 'cult of forgetfulness' which allows for the erasure of any Indigenous presence, be it in history or the landscape.

In considering the meanings of place and space in post-colonial Australia it is important to stress that the nature of Indigenous claims upon space/place cannot merely be viewed as a competition for legitimate property rights or ownership, although this was clearly the premise for the wholesale appropriation of the new colony in 1788. The central tenet of the British claim to sovereignty over the continent was that the land was *terra nullius*. Based upon the Lockean notions of property rights, Aboriginal people were deemed to have no claim upon the land because they had not improved it by virtue of their labours. An example of the colonial and masculinist justification for the appropriation of land in the new colony of South Australia appeared in the editorial comment of a newspaper in 1839, stating that:

... we assert the right of the white man to locate himself in South Australia ... From the moment they (Aboriginals) arrived, until the present, they have not sought and therefore not acquired as tribes a property in the soil — nor, as individuals, the ownership of things which grow or roam upon its surface (Reynolds 1989: 71).

In his groundbreaking work, *The Road to Botany Bay*, Paul Carter (1987) demonstrates how the Australian landscape — the place — was brought into being through the agency of exploration, settlement and naming the country. The intervention of colonists was required to bring the place into being. Yet it should not be thought that the moment of

colonial enunciation, with its fictional dimension of ‘discovering’ the ‘new land’, represents the final declaration of meaning for the landscape. In describing place as a palimpsest ‘a kind of parchment on which successive generations have inscribed and re-inscribed the process of history’ Ashcroft *et al* (1997: 392) recognise that the story of place is continually being written and re-written.

This article considers a number of sites where the narratives of place are in the process of being inscribed and re-inscribed, traced and erased. Generally they can be grouped into two main types. The first type are those sites that exemplify the dichotomy between non-Indigenous representations of Indigeneity in the urban and rural (‘bush’) settings. The presence of Indigenous Australians in urban centres such as Fitzroy, Redfern and Canberra is often seen by some members of the non-Indigenous community as unsettling. The urban Aboriginals are seen as being somehow deficient in comparison with the reified images of the ‘true’ Aboriginal, who is usually depicted as being from a remote, far northern part of the continent. Consequently the Indigenous presence in urban centres is constructed as being dangerous and disposed towards the excessive consumption of alcohol. The Indigenous presence in urban centres generates a response that involves surveillance, over-policing and attempts to regulate the Indigenous presence through the enactment of proscriptive by-laws. Within these urban sites that are of importance to Indigenous Australians it is possible to read the articulation of a connection to place that is premised upon resistance and survival. It is not the conventional narrative of Indigenous spiritual attachment to land that has come to be embraced by some quarters within the non-Indigenous community. Generally speaking these sites of ‘spiritual significance’ are located in the more isolated, rural regions and confirm the view that Indigenous Australians in an urban setting are either out of place or not ‘real’ Aboriginals. Sites such as the Aboriginal Tent Embassy demonstrate how Indigenous Australians have constructed a narrative of belonging to a particular place that is not grounded in a traditional connection to the land that pre-dates the arrival of white settlers.

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The second group of sites can loosely be termed monuments to reconciliation and include sites such as the Reconciliation Place in Canberra and the Myall Creek massacre monument in country New South Wales. On the centenary of Australian Federation in 2001 Kim Scott, the Nyoongar novelist, was asked to write on his conception of the Indigenous connection to land. Scott wrote:

As an indigenous person — albeit one only awkwardly categorized as ‘the other’ (that is, not traditional, not remote, but necessarily engaged with and implicated in this Australian nation) — my sense of who I am primarily derives from a specific area of land, its language and those who have grown from it.

While clear in his own connection with the land, Scott went on to confide in the article his temptation to dismiss the other claims made upon the land. He reflects on the claims made by the pastoralists who ‘talk of a special bond with their leases’ and the New-Agers ‘with their cries of “mother earth”’. Although somewhat sceptical, Scott ultimately concludes in ‘this one Federation [that] ... there are many lands within it’. The recognition of the possibility of ‘many lands’, the re-inscription of the quadrants of the landscape that have hitherto been hidden suggest the way forward. Hinkson (2002: 75) has written of how the ‘inscription of places as meaningful in new ways proved to be integral part of the reconciliation process in the 1990s’. For this inscription (and re-inscription) of place and space to have any meaning however there must be a commitment to dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Such dialogue will only be possible, however, where negotiation occurs through what Langton (1993: 32) terms ‘intersubjectivity’, where ‘both the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal are subjects, not objects’. In aspiring to this type of ‘dialogical relationship’, which Plumwood (2000) sees as integral to any sort of place sensitivity, it is also important to recognise the diversity of experience in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. As Cameron observes:

Generalisations about Aboriginality can obscure the fact that there are many Aboriginalities — the Yolgnu of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory had many centuries of trade with the Macassans from what is now

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Indonesia, and differ greatly in inter-cultural history from middle class suburban people of Eora descent in Sydney. Generalisations about non-Aboriginality can conceal the great differences between first and sixth generation Australians, and between immigrants from England, Southern Europe and Southeast Asia (2001).

In recognising such diversity of experience and the attendant dangers of cultural essentialism it is useful to draw from the conception of ‘hybridity’ that is utilised in postcolonial discourse. Certainly the colonialist discourse tends to view constructions of Aboriginality that emerge from the condition of ‘hybridity’ as being deficient or ‘inauthentic’. Post-colonial writers such as Ashcroft et al (1997: 183) define hybridity as occurring:

[I]n post-colonial societies both as a result of conscious moments of cultural suppression, as when the colonial power invades to consolidate political and economic control, or when settler-invaders dispossess indigenous peoples and force them to ‘assimilate’ to new social patterns. It may also occur in later periods when patterns of immigration from the metropolitan societies and from other imperial areas of influence (eg indentured labourers from India and China) continue to produce complex cultural palimpsests with the post-colonial world.

While Ashcroft gives a benign reading of the interaction of distinct groups, constantly being re-generated by further connection, Bhabha (1994) presents a more challenging reading. The hybrid (post)colonial presence ‘turns’ the discriminated subject into a ‘terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification — a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority’ (1994: 113). In creating an Aboriginal Tent Embassy and creating an Indigenous ‘Block’ within an inner-urban suburb, Indigenous Australians have not merely assimilated to the social patterns demanded by the coloniser. The declaration of an Aboriginal Embassy on the lawns of the Parliament House is both ironic and destabilising to the coloniser. It sees Indigenous Australians adopting the form of representation of another sovereign state in Australia, despite the fact that the Tent Embassy inhabitants are members of the nation’s Indigenous peoples. In the assertion of an identity that refuses to conform to the ‘repressive authenticity’ demanded by sections of

the non-Indigenous community (such as the Federal Government) Indigenous Australians invest the landscape and place(s) with their own symbolic meanings.

Importantly the narratives of place are not couched solely in terms of Indigenous Australians as marginal figures in the story of place and space, bereft of any agency or autonomy. While the dispossession of Indigenous Australians remains central to any understanding of the meanings of place and landscape in this country, this article is concerned with the myriad ways in which stories about connection are told and the possible meanings of each alternative telling. In reflecting upon the manner in which tales about place/space are written (and re-written) it is also important to reflect upon the extent to which the legal system is imbricated within the process. The metaphor employed by R T Latham in 1941 (in Reynolds 1988: 1) is that when the first settlers arrived ‘their invisible and inescapable cargo of English law fell from their shoulders and attached itself to the soil on which they stood. Their personal law became the territorial law of the colony’. The sweep of Latham’s vision of English law — inhabiting and laying claim to the furthest reaches of the new continent — is an echo of the observation by Sarat (1990) that ‘the law is everywhere’.

Urban locations: sites of conflict and resistance

While there have been at least tentative steps towards rapprochement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the last 30 years, evidenced in the belated recognition of native title and the creation of statutory authorities such as the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, there remains an abiding gulf between the two. The experience of Indigenous Australians who have shifted to cities is a prime example of a group who are considered to have no claim to space and place. Even after the dismantling of the government legislation that could proscribe the area that Indigenous Australians should occupy, the law is still implicated in the creation of a spatial segregation that is intent upon removing Aboriginal people from the public gaze. Incontrovertibly, as Razack (2002: 1) puts it, ‘race becomes place through the law’.

Policing race/place through alcohol-free zones

One of the most obvious examples of the creation of racially segregated spaces around Australia is in the increasing tendency of local governments and shires to introduce by-laws designating certain areas as alcohol-free. The local councils argue that these by-laws are non-discriminatory since they apply to all citizens, yet the designated non-drinking zones are invariably located in the areas that the local Aboriginal population have congregated over a long period of time. In 1991 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) conducted an Inquiry into Racist Violence that examined at length the extent to which the Indigenous people around the country were subject to harassment in public places by police and local government officials. Most poignantly the Townsville Aboriginal Legal Service recounted the example of an Aboriginal person who was allegedly told that he was being arrested for being 'black in a public place' (HREOC 1991: 85). The final report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody makes the observation that:

Non-Aboriginal Australian society has never been able to accommodate the essentially public nature of Aboriginal life nor the ways in which this renders much behaviour visible. The kinds of appropriate behaviour that belong to Aboriginal definitions of the use of public space are often precisely the kinds of behaviour that bring them into strife with the police; socializing and drinking in the open, lingering outside shops, sitting on the ground in the street and fighting are all behaviours which, in conventional law, fall into the category of street order offences (Johnston 1991: 200).

The link between Aboriginal consumption of alcohol in public places and their arrest for a range of public order offences, including public drunkenness, led the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody to include in its final report specific recommendations relating to the decriminalisation of the offence of public drunkenness and the introduction of appropriately funded schemes to care for intoxicated persons (recommendations 79 to 85 inclusive). In spite of the recommendations of the RCIADC many local councils continued to utilise the by-law making powers as a means of controlling the presence of Indigenous Australians in public places. By 1993, for example, 30 councils in Victoria had passed public drinking laws under the *Local*

Government Act 1989 (Vic). Citing the examples of Roebourne in Western Australia, the Todd River in Alice Springs, and Townsville and Cairns in Queensland, Cunneen (2001: 184–5) comments that: ‘It was not drinking alcohol per se which was defined as the problem in these instances, but rather the public location of Indigenous people’. In June 2003 the treatment of the Aboriginal population who lived in Townsville prompted Dr Jonas, the Social Justice Commissioner for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, to observe that:

It seems the treatment of Indigenous people who live in public spaces around the city and local government efforts to exclude them from these areas have given a licence to some people in the community to harass, threaten and even assault them (HREOC 2003).

Dr Jonas went on to observe that the situation in Townsville was not unique and that the manner in which local governments sought to control the presence of Indigenous people in public spaces was not confined to Queensland. Within a few months of the release of the HREOC media release regarding the conditions in Townsville it emerged that the presence of ‘long-grass people’ had led the Martin ALP Territory government to co-opt the Larrakeya people, the traditional owners of the area now occupied by the city of Darwin, to try and deal with the population of displaced Indigenous people (Rothwell 2003). This most recent attempt to remove the ‘eye-sore’ of people camping rough is only the most recent example of the regular campaigns conducted by the Darwin City Council and the Northern Territory Government to drive ‘homeless’ Aborigines from the city (Langton 2003). The construction of the ‘long-grass’ people as ‘homeless’ and a threat to the city’s tourism industry is also seen by Langton as profoundly ironic, given the extent to which the tourism industry has ‘no qualms over profiteering from and marketing Aboriginal arts and crafts’. The displacement of Aboriginal people from Darwin is, Langton maintains, a continuance of the attitudes and policies that were used against the Aboriginal nations in the 19th century without, she argues, ‘the unfettered murder’. Ultimately the effect of such policies is the re-creation of Darwin as ‘an enclave of settled Australia, a “home” now for whitefellas’. It is a theme that is echoed by historian Peter Read (2000: 223) who observes that,

‘Non-Indigenous Australia currently excludes urban Aboriginals from belonging in the country of their cultural inheritance’. Much of non-Indigenous Australia is discomfited by the presence of Aboriginal people in the urban setting. The assumptions that follow are that the Indigenous peoples in the cities are somehow ‘less’ Indigenous and that the ‘real’ Aboriginals are not just in the top-end of the continent, but are now located in the wilderness areas, far from the urban setting.

Re-inscribing the city: Fitzroy and Carlton

Despite the efforts to circumscribe, limit and remove any Indigenous presence it is still possible to identify examples of how Indigenous people continue to challenge the presumption that they are either passed away, invisible or have no place in the city. In the same way that Carter (1987) traces the manner in which the landscape became ‘known’ to the first white explorers through the process of naming of natural features, so too is it possible to see how the marginalised urban Koories engage in the re-inscription of place and space. Consider the example of the parkies — the homeless Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) itinerants who sleep rough in the parks and gardens around Fitzroy and Carlton in inner Melbourne. The streets and lanes that they frequent were, over a period of time, re-named; the street directory names replaced by more descriptive terms that related to their personal experience. Archie Roach, the Aboriginal singer, recalled the different places in an interview. One of the places re-named, Charcoal Lane, was in fact the title to a song by Roach.³ In an interview conducted in 1999 Roach observed that:

Gumi Lane’s still there. That’s down Little George Street, no not George street. That lane further toward Palmer Street. A little on way street ... Gumi, because basically that’s what it was⁴ ... There’s places like Charcoal Lane ... Charcoal Lane was, we call it Charcoal Lane because at the end of it, behind the Cadbury Street School... at the end of the lane there used to be this old factory. And people that worked there, some lads that worked, maybe not ourselves, but some blokes that worked there that we knew. You’d be shoving bags of briquettes like that. And that’s where they made it. It was a small factory, tin sort of factory and people would be bagging briquettes or coal, or charcoal. So that’s Charcoal Lane ... When I hit town it was mainly Charcoal Lane, or Lopez Lane or the Hole in the Wall (Evans & Romanis 1999: 4).

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In re-naming the streets of Fitzroy, where they met and socialised, the ‘parkies’ were presenting a different perspective of space. The challenge is not made overtly. It is, in many ways, indicative of what Scott would term a ‘hidden transcript’. Scott (1990: xii) defines it thus: ‘Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a “hidden transcript” that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant’.

A seemingly innocuous thing such as re-naming the streets of the suburb that the Koories feel is their part of Melbourne is significant for the fact that it affirms an alternative claim to the space. Drawing from the work of bell hooks, cultural geographers Keith and Pile (1993: 5) put it that ‘for those who have no place that can safely be called home, there must be a struggle for a place to be’. The parkies who meet in places that do not exist in the street maps of non-Indigenous Fitzroy are presenting what Keith and Pile (1993: 37) term an ‘an alternative spaciality’ and it is in this space that: ‘A different sense of place is being theorized, no longer passive, no longer fixed, no longer undialectical.’

While ‘Charcoal Lane’ and the parkies’ names for the other lanes and alleys of Fitzroy represent a ‘hidden transcript’, an alternative, invisible re-mapping of the cityscape, there are other examples where the presence of a concentration of Aboriginal people represents a clear challenge to the attempts to erase any Aboriginal presence from the urban setting. Historically, the suburb of Fitzroy in Melbourne was an example of a suburb where the Koorie population congregated and lived. Alick Jackomos (1995: 32) has noted that: ‘during the mid 1930s the Aboriginal community of Melbourne consisted of about 10–12 families living in Fitzroy with one or two families living in Richmond and North Melbourne, approximately 100 people.’ It was from this concentration of people living together that many of the main Aboriginal organisations originated. While there is still a link with that part of Melbourne today in the location of many organisations, there is not the same concentration of population that was evident during the period from the early 1940s onwards. Nonetheless, Fitzroy remains a suburb that is considered a meeting spot for Koories who travel to Melbourne from the rural parts of the country.

Indigenous urban resistance: Redfern (Sydney)

Like Fitzroy in Melbourne, the suburb of Redfern in Sydney has long been the focus of the Aboriginal population in Sydney. While Aboriginals have lived in other suburbs Redfern, like Fitzroy, has become the focal point for Aboriginal organisations and symbolic of the ongoing contestation of place and space in this country. Button (1997) described the importance of the area in the terms that: ‘As Harlem is for black Americans, Redfern is the defining symbol of urban Aboriginal life’. Since the handover of a block of land in Redfern by the Federal Government in April 1973 the area that is known as ‘the Block’ has become a site of ongoing contestation. On the one hand, Redfern is viewed as a ‘sphere of indigenous protest, an heroic site of resistance to European culture’ while it is simultaneously portrayed elsewhere as a ghetto that is representative of the ‘breakdown of traditional Aboriginal culture in the city’ (Anderson 1993: 81).

The Redfern Aboriginal community is located around an area known as ‘the Block’, which is bounded by Eveleigh, Carol, and Vine Streets and was created through funding provided by the Whitlam government in 1972. The area, comprising many buildings that are either vacant and partially demolished or in need of repair, has been embroiled in an internal power struggle between those Aboriginal community members who have formed an organisation called the Aboriginal Housing Company and want to sell the inner-city sites and relocate the residents and those residents who oppose any shift from Redfern. The Redfern dispute illustrates the complexity of space and place and the fact that there is not just a simple binary articulation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous interests. The tendency to engage in such simple representation ignores the complexity of positions from within both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. In 1996 Joyce Ingram, a long term resident of Redfern, described Redfern as the ‘black heart of Sydney’ and stated: ‘This is like the heart. Once you take the heart out of a person’s body that person dies ... Once they move this block and take the heart out of this place, it will die’ (Neill 1996). It is also in Redfern that there is clear evidence of the manner in which the policing of space

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is predicated upon racial factors. In the period from May 1981 to February 1990, for example, there were no less than 10 major police incursions into Redfern, focusing on 'the Block' (Cunneen 1990: 5). Of particular concern to the HREOC 1991 Inquiry into Racist Violence was a raid that was conducted in February 1990 when 135 police officers (including Tactical Response Group members) descended on the Aboriginal community of Redfern early in the morning. The raid resulted in the arrest of eight people, for a range of trivial offences including unpaid warrants, breach of bail and the possession of an implement for the use of drugs (Cunneen 1990: 13–4). In justifying the raid the Sydney District Commander, Chief Executive Chief Superintendent Peate, argued:

... our normal surveillance activities can't operate in a place like the black community. You stand out like you know what. Where do you survey the activity of people when they are all the one breed?

The raid upon the Redfern Aboriginal community on 8 February 1990 was clearly premised upon the policing of 'one breed' and, more particularly, one community. There can be few more potent examples of the manner in which the presence of Aboriginal people has been subject to police harassment and intimidation.

While there have not been any recent reports of such large scale police incursions into the Aboriginal community of Redfern, the location of 'the Block' in such a prominent area in the Sydney CBD has continued to excite controversy. In the major cities of the country the presence of Aboriginals in areas that are the focus of tourism or large sporting events has led to attempts to re-locate the local Aboriginal population. In recent years this has occurred in Melbourne, with the shifting of the Koories⁵ who congregated near the Catani Gardens prior to the Melbourne Formula One Grand Prix (Kermond 1996). Once it was decided that Sydney would host the Olympic Games in 2000 there was also widespread speculation that the residents of the Block would be re-located (Harris 1995). The rumours surrounding the proposed relocation of Redfern's Indigenous community became so strong during the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics that the member for Keira, Colin Markham (1998: 5700–1), felt compelled to make a statement in the New

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South Wales Parliament in June 1998. Significantly the queries that were directed to Mr Markham, in his capacity as Parliamentary Secretary for Aboriginal Affairs, were from the residents of rural places such as Corowa. The spectre of native title was seen by one letter-writer as being behind a policy, 'which would see Aboriginal residents of areas such as Redfern located to areas such as Corowa, where successful land claims have been lodged' (Markham 1998: 5700). An integral part of the rumour is that the State government is 'clearing' inner city areas of 'less desirable and embarrassing' citizens in preparation for the Olympics. While denouncing the rumours for 'setting the non-Aboriginal community against Aboriginal communities', Markham (1998: 5700) also categorically asserted that 'the Government has no intention of returning to past policies and practices of forcible relocation or dispersal of Aboriginal people'. While the rumoured re-location did not occur, the question remains as to whether the intention was for it to be achieved not through government intervention but through the agencies of the Aboriginal Housing Commission. The attraction of the Block was clearly that it was close to the central business district and was prime real estate. According to Beth Jewel, the coordinator of the Redfern Legal Service:

It was in the late 80s that it became obvious to many Aboriginal community members and housing activist that the plan of Government was to clear the area. After all it was close to the central business district, prime real estate and Sydney was in the beginnings of its Olympics bid for the year 2000. Both Federal and State governments and some very influential businessmen, allegedly, formed a long term strategy to 'clean up' the area, relocate the Aboriginal residents and build high cost apartments with 'tasteful' Aboriginal artifact shops.

While the eviction resistance campaign of the Redfern Koorie community ultimately proved successful, it provides a clear example of how the Indigenous presence in the urban environment is seen as confronting and an affront to the sensibilities of the tourist trade. Jewel's reference to the plans for 'tasteful Aboriginal artifact shops' is a clear indication of the type of Indigenous presence that is being sought, the 'authentic' Indigenous artwork and crafts from the top-end. Equally as

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disturbing as the plans to ‘re-locate’ the Redfern Aboriginal population is the response of the communities where it was rumoured that they would be moved to. Native title is clearly seen as the catalyst for disturbing the social order of country towns through the arrival of a flood of ‘less desirable and embarrassing citizens’. The Indigenous residents of Redfern do not fit in the plans for a gentrified urban geography, conversely they are similarly rejected as being ‘less desirable’ in the countryside.

Sites of Indigenous resistance: the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra

Another example of the struggle by Aboriginals to assert their rights over place can be seen in the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra. Michael Anderson, Billy Craigie, Bertie Williams and Tony Corey first erected the ‘Aboriginal Embassy’ in 26 January 1972. The establishment of the Embassy was in direct response to the statement on the previous day by Prime Minister Billy McMahon that had rejected any notion of freehold land rights. After the site had been occupied for six months Prime Minister McMahon passed an ordinance on 20 July 1972 that outlawed camping on unleased Commonwealth land in the Australian Capital Territory. The police attempts to remove the members of the Tent Embassy provoked a series of confrontations over the ensuing days, until the Embassy was finally dismantled on 30 July. The extent to which the Embassy site became identified with the Aboriginal struggle was illustrated by an event recalled by Gary Foley, a long-time Aboriginal activist who joined the Embassy from the earliest days. Foley (Tuohy 1995) remembered that ‘[s]ome wit put up a letter box, and within a couple of days the then PMG started delivering mail to the Aboriginal Embassy — it came in from all over the world, it captured the public’s imagination’. The protest at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy became a potent symbol for the struggle of Indigenous Australians and the extent to which that struggle re-inscribed the site on the lawns of the old Parliament House was evidenced by the fact that the Australian postal service commenced delivery of mail there. The site was not just claimed by

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Indigenous Australians, perhaps even more importantly, it was recognised by non-Indigenous Australians as being a significant place for the Indigenous struggle.

Although the tent site was dismantled in 1972 it remained a potent symbol of the struggle for rights of Indigenous Australians. In 1992 the Tent Embassy was re-established on the same site, to commemorate the fact that there had been little in the way of positive recognition of Indigenous rights in the ensuing 20 years (Easterbrook 1992). In 1995 the Australian Heritage Commission recognised the place as being of special cultural significance and added it to the Register of the National Estate. As a consequence of being placed on the Register the Federal Government is constrained under section 30 of the *Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975* from taking any action that would adversely affect the place. The provisions of the Heritage Commission Act do not, however, apply to either State or local governments. A fire at the site of the Tent Embassy in June 2003 provided the Federal Heritage Minister with the opportunity to authorise the removal of the damaged shipping container that had served as an information booth. The Tent Embassy members sought to prevent the removal of the structure by using the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act*, however it was deemed that the Heritage legislation did not have any application to the Tent Embassy site. In August 2003 it was announced that the Federal government would seek to close down the Embassy by the end of the month (Fickling 2003). The decision to close down the Tent Embassy was criticised by one of its founding members, Michael Anderson, who rejected that the existing buildings should be replaced by some sort of memorial in recognition of the important history of the site. Anderson emphatically rejected this proposal, stating ‘They’re trying to sanitise it for the government ... You put memorials up to the dead and we’re not dead. We’re a living people’ (Fickling 2003).

While the members of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy argue that the site is a ‘sacred site where we have ceremony’ and where the ‘sacred fire’ of justice burns, its location is subject to challenge from other groups apart from the Federal Government. The multiplicity of meanings

that can be ascribed to the Tent Embassy is further complicated by the fact that both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and representatives of the traditional owners of the area on which the Embassy is located, the Ngunnawal people, have supported the removal of the permanent camps in favour of the establishment of some form of memorial. Within the last few years, for example, there have been claims that the Ngunnawal people oppose the Embassy being on the site and refer to its inhabitants as 'the Redfern mob'. In response Isobell Coe challenged that: '... how they attack us is they usually hand pick one of these so-called local elders around here' (Watson 2000: 18).

The fact that there is not unanimous agreement within the Indigenous community as to the meanings that should or can be ascribed to any one place, or the history that can be written about a site, should not be in any way surprising. Just as there is disputation, conjecture and debate within the non-Indigenous community as to how history can be told about place and space, so too is there a similar diversity of opinions, beliefs and stories within the Indigenous community. Any expectation that there should be a consistent voice of resistance that insists upon the sacredness of importance of certain sites merely seeks to resurrect the vision of Indigenous Australians as a homogenous group, reified through the projected desires of non-Indigenous spectators. The reality is much more akin to the image of the palimpsest, where the meanings and significance of the land is constantly in a process of being inscribed, reviewed, and reinscribed ... ad infinitum.

Monuments: offering shared meanings of 'place'?

The representation of Aboriginal people during the colonial period and after the establishment of the mission stations increasingly drew upon the image of the dying race. Just as some white settlers sought to validate their claims to land through writings which studiously ignored the existence of Aboriginal people, so too were the monuments erected to Indigenous Australians around the country a testimony to the view that they had ceased to exist. This is exemplified in the memorials to

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Aboriginals who died at the Ramahyuck cemetery near Sale in Victoria. As Phillip Pepper recounts:

Nathaniel was the only Aborigine who had a headstone on his grave. All the other people had wood crosses with their names on them, but they're all gone now. Nathaniel's stone is still over the place where he was buried (1980: 26).

In the same way that the colonisers sought to inscribe and 'claim' the bodies of the 'acquiescent' natives, the mortuary monument to Phillip Pepper evidences the desire of Hagenauer at the last to appropriate and colonise the body of Nathaniel, who was his most successful convert to Christianity. Throughout Australia there are equally eloquent testimonies to the 'loyal servants' who accompanied explorers on their travels or were conspicuous successful converts to the proselytising of the missionaries. Inglis (1998: 24) characterises the monuments raised to Aborigines in colonial Australia as being of three types: 'they were represented as killers of the innocent, as loyal helpers and as a race doomed to extinction'. In the New Cemetery at Ballarat, for example, there is an obelisk which marks the last resting place of 'Frank, last of the Ballarat Tribe of Aborigines' (Massola 1970: 299). At Coranderk, near Healesville, there is also a monument to Barak, who is named as the 'last of the Yarra tribe'. These colonialist representations of Indigenous Australians as a dying race were integral to non-Indigenous interests seeking to legitimise their own genealogy of ownership to the land. The effect of such monuments was that any Indigenous Australians residing in the area where the monuments were erected were constructed as less than a 'real' Aboriginal person. The experience of representatives of the Stolen Generation in the process of consultation leading to the construction of the Reconciliation Place memorial in Canberra (discussed below) suggests that non-Indigenous Australians will still seek to impose their own version of history upon Aboriginal peoples. Conversely, the erection of the Myall Creek Massacre memorial can be viewed as a clear example of how the identity of a place can be transformed, allowing for the creation of new and different interpretations of the relations between peoples and particular locations (Kneafsey 1995: 135).

The Reconciliation Place memorial: symbol of healing?

On 27 June 2001, the House of Representatives, under section 5 of the *Parliament Act 1974*, approved the proposal to construct 'Reconciliation Place' in Canberra. The 2001 annual report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (2002: 202) noted the potential of the memorial to provide 'long overdue acknowledgment to the place of Indigenous Australians in our history'. The original plan to open the national reconciliation landmark in June 2002 was marked by protests from the representatives of the separated families after it was revealed that the landmark would include an etching on stainless steel of Indigenous children playing the fife. The opening of the landmark was originally scheduled for late 2001 but it was postponed after representatives of the stolen generations raised the possibility of a protest over the lack of consultation with them as to images on the memorial (Metherell 2002: 6). The official opening of the site took place on 22 July 2002 after the Federal Government had made a commitment to consult with the Federal and State Sorry-Day Committees on the depiction of the stolen generation on the commemorative 'sliver'. The plan for Reconciliation Place incorporates a number of such 'slivers' that range in size, but are generally around two metres high and four metres long. The slivers that have been installed to this point depict different aspects of Indigenous Australian culture. While the debate about the appropriate form of the Reconciliation Place monument continued the Minister for Territories, Wilson Tuckey, made a renewed call for the Aboriginal Tent Embassy to be removed from Canberra (MacDonald 2002). In announcing the release of new guidelines for monuments in Canberra that required their assessment on the basis of their cultural significance for Australia, Minister Tuckey concluded that the Embassy did not meet the newly drafted criteria and was not an appropriate commemorative symbol. Clearly the unsightly image of the Tent Embassy was at odds with the vision of Minister Tuckey of how the story of Indigenous Australians should be told to the world.

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In June 2003 it was finally announced that the Federal Government and the National Sorry Day Committee had reached agreement on the commemoration, with the artwork text acknowledging the fact that many thousands of Indigenous children had been removed from their families as a result of government assimilation policies. The statement from the Indigenous Affairs Minister, Philip Ruddock, recognised that ‘the separation of indigenous children from their families was a tragic and terrible part of Australia’s history’ (*Herald Sun* 2003). While both Ruddock and the Prime Minister, John Howard, remained adamant that there should not be a national apology for the past assimilation policies, Ruddock nonetheless expressed the hope that the display at Reconciliation Place would ‘contribute to the healing of the wounds of the past’ (*Herald Sun* 2003: 10). The presumption of Minister Ruddock is that the creation of the ‘Reconciliation Place’ renders any further consideration of the stolen generations irrelevant. In failing to consult with Indigenous representatives of the stolen generation and then making the hyperbolic assertion that the creation of the landmark would heal the wounds of the past, there is a clear illustration of the extent to which space is filled with politics and ideology. The landmark/memorial is a potent reminder of how, as Soja (1989: 6) puts it, ‘space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology’. The extent to which Minister Ruddock attempted to cloak the Reconciliation Place in such ‘innocent spatiality’ can be seen in his retreat from the initial characterisation of the site as a ‘memorial’ in December 2000 to the less confronting description of ‘a place of healing’ (Metherell 2002: 6). While it seems that the Reconciliation Place will ultimately take account of the views of representatives of the Stolen Generations, some Indigenous community members see the project as a means of replacing the politically significant site of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy with a more aesthetically pleasing marker that is less confronting to non-Indigenous Australians. Isobell Coe, who was instrumental in the establishment of the original Embassy, observed that: ‘They reckon we are an eyesore.

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But we say we are concerned about the eyesore that our country is turning into in this 212 years' (Watson 2000: 18). Within the Federal Government's mapping of the available meanings of the Reconciliation Place any form of meaningful consultation would seem to have been either ignored or initiated as an afterthought.

A shared narrative?: the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial

Given that the creation of the Australian nation has been grounded so fundamentally upon the dispossession of Indigenous people it is small wonder that there are so few shared narratives of place. While much of the story of the Australian continent is about contested narratives of ownership and belonging, there are at least a few examples that could be said to exemplify a shared or mediated meaning of place. One such place is located in what would appear, at first instance, a very unlikely site. The site is the location of a massacre that occurred in the early days of the colonisation of Australia. At Myall Creek on 10 June 1838 a group of stockmen carried out a raid upon an Aboriginal camp and killed at least 28 women, children and old men. In the aftermath of the massacre seven men were charged with murder (Reece 1974: 148). Although there was evidence of the death of at least 28 individuals the accused could only be charged with the murder of an Aboriginal person known as 'Daddy'. The verdict of not guilty in the initial trial was reached after only 15 minutes and a contemporary newspaper account of events quoted one of the jurors as stating that:

I look on the blacks as a set of monkies [sic], and the earlier they are exterminated from the face of the earth the better. I would never consent to hang a white man for a black one. I knew well they were guilty of the murder, but I for one would never see a white man suffer for shooting a black (quoted in Reece 1974: 149).

Despite this setback the Attorney General managed to argue that the accused should be held on remand while further charges were laid. The accused were subsequently tried for the murder of an Aboriginal child known as 'Charley' and, in spite of virulent opposition from certain sectors within the colony, the jury ultimately found the accused

guilty. Although 10 members of the second jury signed a petition for mercy Burton J sentenced the guilty parties to death by hanging and on 18 December 1838 the seven accused were executed. The Myall Creek massacre was certainly not the last instance of atrocities perpetrated at the frontier but remains notable for the fact that it was the first time that the courts upheld the principle, enunciated by Burton J in his sentencing comments, that: 'Whether few persons or many are concerned, whether one or twenty, whether black or white, the law will be upheld equally' (in Reece 1974: 155).

Given the notoriety of the Myall Creek massacres the decision at a statewide reconciliation conference that had been held at Myall Creek in 1998 to erect a memorial on the site would appear somewhat perplexing, save for the fact that it was initiated by members of the local Aboriginal community. It was at this site that a memorial was placed, comprising a walkway bordered by seven small granite boulders, each with an engraved image and text in the local Aboriginal dialect of Gamilaraay and English, leading to the main memorial that overlooks the Myall Creek (Goodall 2002: 21). The main memorial is large granite rock that was brought from 60 kilometres away, with a simple plaque affixed. The text on the plaque reads:

In memory of the Wirrayaraay people who were murdered on the slopes of this ridge in an unprovoked but premeditated act in the late afternoon of 10 June 1838.

Erected on 10 June 2000 by a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in an act of reconciliation and in acknowledgment of the truth of our shared history.

We remember them. Ngiyani winangay ganunga.

For the descendants of the families, both Indigenous and white, involved in the massacre the memorial represented a cathartic experience. Sue Blacklok, whose ancestors were massacred at Myall Creek, was initially surprised that there were still descendants of the perpetrators of the massacre still living in the area. She explained the importance of the place to her in the following way:

There was two brothers that were saved from the massacre. One of those little boys was my great-great-great-grandfather. My dad always told me about that. It was passed down from his great-grandparents right down to him, and he wanted to hand it down to his family. But I remember Dad when he'd speak about it. His voice cracked just like the memory just sort of hurt. I hear him now telling his grandchildren all about what happened out there, and how it was burnt ... and were killed and then burned. We just kept it all hush-hush. We didn't want to talk about it because of how dreadful it was. And, um, I remember when we used to drive past that place. It ... just had a feeling about it that I can't explain (ABC 2001).

For the descendants of those convicted for their part in the massacre their desire to be involved was tempered by the understanding that their overtures might be rejected. Des Blake, the great-great grandson of John Blake, a convict involved in the massacre, observed what his acceptance by the Indigenous descendants meant:

I think that the fact that we were there really did help to bring it together. And, um, while it is completely their show, their memorial, and everything is theirs, the fact that we were willing to stand up there with them and admit that we were descendents of those who carried out murder and mayhem on the slopes below — I think that it made it for them as well.

While the construction of the memorial represented a personal reconciliation between the two groups of descendants, the broader meaning of the Myall Creek massacre memorial was identified by Des Blake, who believes that: 'This whole business, I think, can be the nucleus of ... right throughout Australia'. Goodall similarly argues that the meaning of the memorial can transcend the specific events that occurred on the site more than a hundred years ago and become a site of dialogue and communication. Goodall sees the strength of the simple memorial site as the manner in which:

... it is in itself a creative history with open endings, encouraging people into thoughtful reflection of both past and future ... Not fixed or finalized, it continues to draw people each year on 10 June, and their contributions will allow the memorial to develop as a rich site for communication (2002: 23).

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While not involving events of a horrific nature such as the Myall Creek site, McKenna (2003: 218–20) recounts a similar process of reconciliation, relating to the mediation of meanings of place and space. This process of reconciliation followed a decision in 1998 by the Bega Valley Shire Council to order the destruction of a willow tree that had been a focal meeting point for the local Aboriginal community and had been identified as such by the local Aboriginal Council. Following the removal of the tree and the ensuing public outcry (supported by the local media) the Shire Council apologised and a blue gum seedling was planted in the place of the willow in a gesture that was described by the local press as being ‘a symbol of the spirit of reconciliation’.

Conclusion

Since the earliest days of white colonisation the experience of Indigenous Australians has been one of denial and dislocation. To return to the metaphor of W E Stanner, Indigenous Australians have occupied the ‘hidden quadrant’ of the landscape and have been forgotten by non-Indigenous Australia. In a tentative fashion, usually only on a very local basis, there are signs that the palimpsest of Australian space and place is being mediated and re-inscribed anew. The presence of Indigenous Australians in urban centres such as Redfern, Fitzroy and at the Aboriginal Embassy confirms the diversity of Indigenous experience and challenges the tendency towards ‘repressive authenticity’ — demanding that Indigenous Australians conform to a particular representation of Aboriginality. Similarly the construction of monuments such as the Myall Creek massacre memorial exemplifies the sort of dialogic relationship that mediates a shared meaning of place. It is through recognition of the fact that ‘the identity of a place is not fixed, but is composed of layers of different interpretations and relations between people, their actions, the environment and social structures’ (Kneafsey 1995: 136), that there exists the possibility for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and, ultimately, the development of a sense of place that accommodates a diversity of meanings.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank the anonymous referees for their helpful comments.
- 2 The terms Indigenous Australians and Aboriginal are used throughout this article in reference to the original inhabitants of Australia.
- 3 Archie Roach, 'Charcoal Lane', Hightone, 1990 – CD titled *Charcoal Lane*.
- 4 'Gumi' or 'Goomi' is a term used by Koories (Victorian Aboriginals) to refer to a heavy drinker, usually of fortified wine or methylated spirits.
- 5 Koories is a term of general identification for Aboriginal inhabitants of the States of Victoria and New South Wales.

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