Segregated landscapes: the heritage of racial segregation in New South Wales

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Introduction
Segregation is the spatial face of racism. It is racism mapped onto the landscape. Its concern is to determine and enforce various degrees of spatial separation between people. The landscape dimension of racial segregation brings it squarely within the purview of archaeology and cultural heritage practice.

At a global level, racial segregation is a practice that is possibly unequalled in terms of its capacity, even over the span of just the last century, to produce places which people associate with humiliation, fear, misery, or trauma. In the United States racial segregation was present through the era of slavery and emancipation through the Jim Crow years to the desegregating era of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Especially since the 1960s, each of these eras has been the subject of heritage discourse and the focus of various acts of commemoration. Some of the most innovative work in the heritage of racial segregation is currently being done in post-apartheid South Africa. One of the things that distinguishes the experience of segregation in the US and South Africa from that in Australia, especially southeastern Australia, is the differing extent to which the physical infrastructure of racial segregation existed here.

New South Wales had its Aboriginal schools and reserves, but the infrastructure of segregation never extended to explicitly designated park benches, drinking fountains, railway waiting rooms, dining rooms, beaches. Curiously, in New South Wales many sites of segregation only became known to the wider public consciousness in the act of being desegregated. How many white people in Sydney, for instance, would have known that Aboriginal people were commonly barred from public swimming pools in country towns until the violence that occurred in the town of Moree in 1965 when members of the Freedom Ride attempted to desegregate the swimming pool there?

The ‘lightness’ of the Aboriginal presence
And yet I would argue that segregation was not merely an historical reality in New South Wales but that, taken in its broadest sense, it is a key to deciphering and understanding the whole spatial pattern of Aboriginal life in the post-1788 New South Wales landscape. 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 New South Wales 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 its surviving into the archaeological 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? A project I have been carrying out in the Manning Valley, on the lower North Coast of New South Wales, was initiated 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

Figure 1 Map of study area in northern New South Wales.
Aboriginal people in the 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. My focus here will be that part of the project which concerns itself with the segregation of Aboriginal and white populations that took place in the Manning, in one form or another, between the 1820s and the 1970s.4

In-between space

When we think of racial segregation in Australia we normally think of the institutionalised racism of the latter part of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.5 I suggest we need to look earlier than this. In 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 1860s, ring-barking produced 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 1860s, ring-barking produced even though the white population of the valley grew from 400 in the 1860s, ring-barking produced even though the white population of the valley grew from 400 in the 1860s, ring-barking produced even though the white population of the valley grew from 400 in the 1860s, ring-barking produced even though the white population of the valley grew from 400 in the 1860s.

Widely practised 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 that 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 in which you have no proprietary state? As white settlement spread, from the 1820s, many or most of the customary Aboriginal camp sites, ceremonial grounds and food resource places became inaccessible and unusable. The rectangular farms increasingly cut across customary Aboriginal lines of movement. There were, however, gaps or openings in the cadastral grid which Aboriginal people could occupy and move through. These openings included water reserves, travelling stock routes and reserves, and town commons. They included narrow corridors 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 colonised landscape by means of them. It is thus possible to think of the Aboriginal presence in the colonised landscape in terms of in-betweenness.9

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 cadastrum. For sample areas of the Valley we have reviewed the sets of Parish Plans 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 the edges of 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. Bands of

Figure 2 Map of Bohnock Parish showing cadastral grid and various categories of Crown Reserve land.
Segregation and tactics for testing it

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.' The Manning Valley over the last 150 or so years 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 behavioural 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.

One of the main reasons segregation speaks 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-cut across a hostile farmer's lower paddock in order to get to the river, the Aboriginal children sneaking into a property to swim in a farmer's dam. Historical records indicate that incursions such as these were common across the whole of New South Wales and were an ongoing source of inter-racial 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 spectacle of the police, I am 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 theatres 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, and so on. 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 which 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 recorded parts of this alternative map on paper.

In this area of research I have found the work of the French historian, Michel de Certeau, to be particularly helpful and provocative. Certeau drew a comparison between reading and walking. He observed that no matter how tightly written a particular text might be, you could not control people's reading of it. The agency of readers lay in the unique interpretations they could bring to the text but also in the way it could act as an unpredictable springboard to their 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 and structured an urban environment might be, people walking through a city or neighbourhood would devise their own personal patterns of movement. People would find ways to inscribe their everyday lives, their whims and desires, in spaces whose design made no allowance for them.

Interlinear Taree

The streetmap of Taree, the main town of the Manning Valley, shows an orderly arrangement of places to live, places to work, shop, play, and learn. Also a grid of formal routes between these places. This grid, the streetscape is, of course, a continuation of the same orthogonal cadastral grid that exists in the surrounding countryside. Certeau would have been interested in the way the citizens of Taree - particularly those with less power - personalised this map. Up until the 1970s Aboriginal people did not live in the streetscape of Taree and were discouraged from walking in it. And yet they managed to maintain a residential presence in the area of the town continuously from the mid-nineteenth century. This was possible because the town had an 'underside' of unregulated space (or less regulated space) - the space of the old town common and the old showgrounds, the railway easement and the banks of the creeks. Aboriginal fringe camps were present in several of these places at various points in time and there is evidence that the linear quality of some of this underside space (for instance, the railway easement and the creeks) enabled alternative lines of movements for the residents of the camps. One of the many illogicalities that go to make up what I call the 'nervousness' of the segregated landscape is that Aboriginal women were allowed into the personal domestic space of the white townsfolk of Taree as domestic servants but were not allowed into the public space of the town.

Use of the term 'underside' points to the alternative, unregulated and somewhat despicable nature of such space, qualities which also make it attractive to children and explains why in so many jazz and blues songs things go down by the railway tracks, down by the pylons, down by the levee.
Significantly, these places often really are physically down below the streetscape of the white town where the best houses have the best views. When you are in the streets of Taree you tend to look over the top of some of the spaces that Aboriginal people have used. In most cases these underside areas to some extent have a protective bush cover.

**Segregation and visibility**

This brings me 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 in a way that they had not been in the early years of white invasion and settlement. On the Aboriginal Reserve at Purfleet this surveillance extended to the white manager and his wife inspecting the inside of people’s houses and even the inside of their cupboards. More generally it meant that when Aborigines moved through the landscape, white people kept an eye on them.

No surprise, then, that Aboriginal people 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 afforded by bush cover. It appears that many of the places where 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 in. An often overlooked aspect of segregation is that by the time it became a feature of white public policy in the late nineteenth century Aboriginal people were already to an extent, and where practicable, voluntarily withdrawing their presence. But one of the historical trends of the last century or so in places like the Manning Valley is the gradual shrinkage of spaces that you could withdraw to.

There has been a steady privatisation of the various categories of reserve land that had been the key to the in-betweenness of Aboriginal life in the colonised terrain. In Taree you can see how the bush-covered areas ‘down by the creek’ and ‘down along the river’ are gradually being colonised by playing fields, public gardens and promenades. Those places where Aboriginal people, kids, and vagrants were able to inscribe the unregulated script of their lives are being written over with the grid-like lines of the football fields and basketball courts, and by concrete paths, and various other civic amenities.

**Sites of segregation**

In a different category from those described so far in this paper are the 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 theatre, 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 theatre, 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.

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 colour bar collapsed. In other cases it did not depart so quietly. In August 1979 a group of young Aboriginals were beaten up for daring to attend the previously white-only disco at the local Taree sailing club. A protest rally held by Aboriginal people a few days later in the park next to the club turned into a riot when police aided by local white men and youths tried to break it up. It was one of the few times in its history that Taree achieved national press coverage. Again, 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.
References


Byrne, D. 'Nervous Landscapes: Race and Space in Australia,' Journal of Social Archaeology 3.2 2003.

Byrne, Danis: 'The ethos of return: erasure and reinstatement of Aboriginal visibility in the Australian historical landscape', Historical Archaeology 37:1 2003, 73-86.


Endnotes

1 Dwyer 2000.
2 See for example the District Six Museum in Capetown (http://www.districtsix.co.za) and The Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg [http://www.apartheidmuseum.org].
3 Curthoys 2002.
4 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 colleague 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-Purlleet Local Aboriginal Land Council (represented by Vienna Maslin) and the Forster Local Aboriginal Land Council (represented by Robert Yemeta).
5 Holinsworth, and others, point to the period after the 1860s in southeastern Australia as one in which a decreased reliance on Aboriginal labour was accompanied by "the construction and naturalisation of heteremonic ideas of racial exclusivity and superiority" by white settlers (Holinsworth 1998, 87).
6 For white population estimates see Birrell, 1987, 118 and Ramsland 1987, 29.
8 Much of this resonates with the marginal existence of the hill people of West Virginia described in Stewart 1998.
10 Taussig 1991.
11 These themes are explored in more detail in Byrne 'Nervous Landscapes'.
12 Byrne 'Ethos of return'.
13 The results of this work will be available in a book by D. Byrne and M. Nugent to be published by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service in 2003.
14 Curthoys 1998.
15 Certeau used the term 'tactic' to describe the means that the disempowered employ to create space for themselves. The tactic, as he says, "must quietly 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" (1998, 36).
16 Michel Foucault showed us how important visual surveillance became in the nineteenth century as a way of the modern state controlling and modifying the behaviour of people who were outside the definition of the modern citizen (e.g. 1979). The visual observation of the colonised (the need to "keep an eye on them") is part of the process of building up a body of knowledge about them, as Nicholas Thomas points out, "is intimately linked with a classification and diagnosis of the inferiority or inadequacy of the latter, that establishes the need for management" (1994, 41).
17 Unused road reserves were sold to farmers, town commons were subdivided for housing etc. In the case of the Christmas camp at Saltwater, most of the older people who reminisce about it lament the way it was spoiled for them when the local council decided to "clean it up" in the 1970s. This involved clearing the undergrowth and the vines that had given people privacy.
18 The photograph of the Boomerang Theatre c.1929 appears also on the cover of a recent publication by NPWS: promoting social significance assessment (Byrne et al. 2001).

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