The archaeology of ‘lost places’: ruin, memory and the heritage of the Aboriginal diaspora in Australia

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Introduction

The title of this paper invokes the phrase ‘lost places’, coined by historian Peter Read to describe the profound social attachment that people feel towards their former homes, neighbourhoods and homelands when they are divorced from them. 1 In his exposition of the connections people feel for lost places, Read was more concerned with the idea of attachment to place and the way in which this articulates itself in the face of threat or loss, than with the relationship between this attachment and the physical things that people leave behind them. Recently in a number of different disciplines, attention has moved away from the oral tradition of memory to the relationship between social remembering and the artefact, and the way in which objects act as memorials that shape the consumption of the past as a shared cultural memory. 2 This, coupled with an increasing global awareness of the phenomenon of diaspora, 3 suggests the need for a consideration of the relationship between the social significance of places from which people have been forcibly removed, and the fabric that remains behind them. Particular reference is made to a case study from western New South Wales, where I have been mapping the material remains and recording memories associated with a former Aboriginal reserve, abandoned in the period 1938-40. Since its abandonment there has developed a tradition of pilgrimage 4 to Dennawan during which the material traces of the past are interrogated and recontextualised in the light of the present. This tradition of pilgrimage and recollections of interactions between people and objects on the site forms the basis for my contention that the interplay between objects, ruin, landscapes and memory are part of the active ‘creation’ of locality 5 that forms the basis for an understanding of the social significance of such heritage places.

The Aboriginal diaspora in Australia?

In this paper I employ the word diaspora explicitly to suggest a new way of understanding the experience of forced removals for Aboriginal people in Australia. While the use of the term to describe Aboriginal people’s experiences in Australia is novel, being most often associated with the Jewish and Chinese diasporas, I am not alone in making such comparisons. 6 My object here is to emphasise the comparative potential of a study of the ways in which the experience of dislocation from a ‘homeland’ encourages a particular way of experiencing place, material culture, and identity. However, it is important to point out that where the Jewish and Chinese diasporas describe the movement of very large numbers of people across the globe, the usage I employ in this paper describes a much more micro-topological, although certainly no less significant, spatial shift. The term diaspora is used here to cover a range of different processes that dislocated Aboriginal people from their country, from official ‘concentration’ policies and forced removals, to less obvious but equally important processes of alienation of land which restricted Aboriginal people’s access to parts of the landscape. 7 There are certain ways of relating to place through the medium of material things which such a comparison enlightens, and which I contend form the basis for understanding the social significance of places ‘left behind’. The important point of similarity resides in the way in which Aboriginal people understand their ‘country’ and collective identity in quite specific geographic terms, such that removal from one’s estate encourages a similar relationship with the homeland as does the large-scale geographic movement of ethnic groups which is more often associated with the term.

Context of the study

The work discussed here was undertaken as part of a strategic cultural heritage research project which I developed for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service called Shared histories of the pastoral industry in New South Wales. The aim of this project is to develop new models of what constitutes pastoral heritage for the NSW NPWS, to move pastoral heritage out of the ‘woolshed and homestead’ and into the landscape and people’s relationships with it. The project uses the phrase ‘shared histories’ to highlight the fact that the heritage of the pastoral industry is significant to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in New South Wales. Indeed, this work has been in part a response to the construction of pastoral heritage as ‘white’ heritage, despite the fact that the pastoral industry in New South Wales was largely maintained for over 160 years by an Aboriginal labour force. In particular, my work has focussed on recording and mapping oral history, and looking at the way in which the work of the pastoral industry allows both Aboriginal and settler pastoralists to develop complex and intimate knowledge and relationships with landscapes through undertaking pastoral labour.

This work has also been archaeological in the sense that it has involved mapping material remains associated with people’s memories of work and place. Key facets of the new pastoral heritage model emphasise the way in which a study of the tangible heritage of the pastoral industry at a landscape level shows the way in which pastoral heritage fits together to evidence pastoralism as a land use system, rather than a collection of items. The links between places in the system are just as important to understanding pastoralism as the items themselves. Other emphases of this new pastoral heritage model involve understanding pastoral heritage as both tangible and intangible, residing as much in memory, history and people’s attachment to landscapes as it does in the physical traces which pastoralism has left behind. The history of the pastoral industry is a history of Aboriginal people and settlers working together, and Aboriginal people may have their own special relationship with pastoral heritage places. Pastoral heritage might be seen to document the continued attachments of Aboriginal peoples’ ancestors to particular landscapes, or allow a better understanding of their achievements and hard work. Finally, cultural modifications to
natural landscapes are also an important and often overlooked component of pastoral heritage, which must be assessed along with other 'cultural' values.

Dennawan

One of the case studies for this project has been at Dennawan, a former Aboriginal reserve near Wellmoringle, in western New South Wales, that acted as a labour pool for surrounding pastoral stations over the period c.1860-1941. These pastoral stations are now managed as part of Culgoa National Park. Dennawan's history goes back to the early 1880s, when a small white settlement began to take shape at Bourbah (as Dennawan was then known), focussed around a local pub and post office located at the convergence of two travelling stock routes. Aboriginal people had been camping on local pastoral stations before this time, including nearby Tatala, where in 1901 a census collector recorded twenty (adult) Aboriginal people camped.

With the growth of pastoral stations in the area and the declaration of a mail route along the Culgoa River, the hotel at Bourbah became the Diemunga receiving office in 1889. A fire at the turn of the century destroyed the hotel, and a new one was built approximately two kilometres to the south, near an area where Aboriginal people were camped alongside a small lagoon. At this time Diemunga receiving office became known as Dennawan post office. This name was probably based on the Muruwari word for emu, 'dinawan'.

In 1912 about twenty Aboriginal people were recorded as remaining camped at Tatala on part of the travelling stock route, not far from the Bourbah Hotel. It was argued that if an area was reserved exclusively for Aboriginal people and fenced that the constable could 'compel them to camp on it and prevent objectionable people trespassing on the reserve'. The reserve at Dennawan was gazetted shortly after this, and soon grew to the size of a village, with as many as 100 people camping on the reserve at a time. The settlement was serviced by the hotel and Dennawan post office and store, but was abandoned with the closure of these services in the early 1940s. Today Dennawan consists of a discontinuous scatter of rusty tin cans and broken glass shards pay testament to the experience there as a time when 'traditional knowledge and cultural life was sustained and integrated with participation in the local pastoral economy and the development of distinct skills, experiences, and interactions'. Betty Waites recalled that:

There were a lot of children at Dennawan. There was the West family, and they had children, they had a girl. The Cubby's, I played with them and Mrs Grimes and there was a woman called Granny Suzie, Donald Byno's sister, we knew they used to share what they gal. If one went out and got the wild meat, the others they'd share. 

Veale reminds us of the significance of Dennawan as a place of collective memory to the Aboriginal community when she recalls Essie Coffie's description of returning to Dennawan as 'coming home'.

Why did people leave?

One of the important aspects of the history of Dennawan concerns the reasons for its abandonment. In the context of a longing to return to Dennawan, people often cite many different reasons for an (unofficially) 'forced' abandonment. Increased powers given to the Aborigines' Protection Board through amendments to the Aboriginal Protection Act in 1936 had considerable impacts on Aboriginal communities in the northwest of New South Wales. In 1938 as part of a 'concentration' strategy they proposed to relocate Aboriginal people from Dennawan to Brewarrina Mission, approximately 150 km to the south. Ration support from the Aborigines Protection Board was uncertain and sporadic. Economic depression and a decline in the availability of local pastoral work due to widespread withdrawals of land from larger leaseholders (to be made available as additional areas for smaller leaseholders) also contributed to this move. The closure of the post office and store at Dennawan meant an effective closure of all services to the remote settlement; this, coupled with what anthropologist Howard Creamer recorded as an extremely bad drought occurring c.1940-41, probably forced Aboriginal people into larger nearby centres such as Goodooga, Brewarrina and Wellmoringle. Despite their resistance of the forced removal that had been attempted just two years before, Muruwari people were finally faced with the necessity of abandoning the settlement on the reserve.

Returning to nothing: pilgrimages to Dennawan

My interest in Dennawan was picked by two of my colleagues, Tony English and Sharon Veale, who undertook a project in Culgoa NP shortly after its gazetted on a pilot cultural heritage assessment for new park acquisitions. Their work identified Dennawan as one of the most important places to local Muruwari and settler Australians. They explained how they had been taken to the site and shown around by some of the people who remembered living there as children, and the dynamic relationship which people had formed with the material remains on the site. This presented an opportunity to spend a period of time studying in detail the relationship between the archaeology of this former reserve site and people's attachments to it as one of a series of places from which Muruwari people had been removed in the recent past. As an Aboriginal pastoral labour camp, Dennawan also acted as an important case study for the pastoralism project, in its ability to highlight such places as an integral aspect of pastoral heritage which we had not recognised before.

The performance of the 'return to nothing' is an integral part of the cultural and social significance of Dennawan. Indeed, almost as soon as the settlement was abandoned, people began returning to the ruins of the settlement of Dennawan, taking other people with them to tell them about the history and their memories of the place. The Post Office was dismantled soon after its closure, and re-used as building material on a nearby pastoral station. In 1943, the Aborigines Inland Mission (AIM) Native Worker Duncan Ferguson drove past Dennawan and noted his sadness to see all of the abandoned homes...
falling into decay. In 1953 the mission house was removed. In the late 1950s Duncan Ferguson and his wife Blanche had their photos taken near the remains of their first house built in 1936, its flattened kerosene tin walls and rough timber bush pole frames already fallen into ruin. I have recorded interviews with a number of people who were taken to Dennawan by Aboriginal people who had lived there, or ancestors of those who have lived there, and mapped and recorded the way in which they were shown the site during these returns.

Today Dennawan is an important and frequent site of pilgrimage. Since the time that the Cultural Heritage Division began working in Culgoa NP in 1996, the frequency of visits back to Dennawan has increased dramatically. In the light of a widespread feeling of loss, often articulated by Muruwari people as a loss of culture associated with the loss of language skills and the death of knowledgeable elders, Dennawan has become a site that is subject to increased visitation and scrutiny. The ruin of the site and the decay of the buildings is seen as a metaphor for perceived cultural decline - but interrogation of what is left behind is considered to be of great importance as a way of salvaging information and connections with the past. People often express the sentiment that if they could only arrest the decay of the site, they might be able to regain control of their cultural lives. Nostalgia for the way of life at Dennawan is articulated as a desire to regain control of cultural and spiritual life in the context of the increased development and reliance on manufactured goods and modern material cultures. The settlement and its decay are considered to be symbolic of the erosion of traditional economic skills and technologies.

Mapping the heritage of diaspora and loss

Muruwari people have a number of beliefs about relics and their relationship with ancestors that have contributed to the development of Dennawan as a place of pilgrimage. People who remove artefacts from habitation sites can become very ill, and particular parts of the landscape around Dennawan are known to house spirit beings. During field trips with NPWS staff, particular unexplained incidents that have occurred at Dennawan were considered to be consistent with the presence of spirits or ghosts at the site. One man who accidentally knocked over one of the standing frame posts of one of the buildings at Dennawan feared that he would be tormented with lack of sleep. The relics and ruins at Dennawan act as the focal points for interactions both between the present and the past, as well as between the living and spirit worlds.

Throughout the project we have been concerned with both the technical detail of recording the archaeology of the former reserve, as well as oral histories about visits or life at the site, and contemporary opinions about the significance of its relics today. Technical detail obtained from fine-grained differential GPS recording is being integrated with anecdote and memory to produce a multi-vocal, textured representation of the archaeological record, and to provide insights into its shared past. An artefact database linked to a hand-held computer and differential GPS has been used to record all of the approximately 8000 artefacts and structural features at the site to an accuracy of +/- 2 cm. Digital audio recordings taken in the field have been captured as a separate layer and integrated into the GIS. Dennawan emerges as a place that links together many other places in the landscape. It is the deep layering of memory and attachment, and the complex structuring of the archaeological record that becomes apparent in dialogue with the oral history, which makes Dennawan a significant place in the surrounding landscape.

Artefacts, memory and memorial

The work at Dennawan raises a number of questions that I do not have the space here to answer. What is the locale of memory? How does the contestation between the memory landscapes of different individuals allow us to better understand the problematic relationship between the materiality of ruins and the way in which people rework the memories of a place left behind? If we concentrate on the transformation of Dennawan from known place to heritage site,
it provides us with insights into the relationship between memory, attachment and what remains behind at 'lost places'. This contributes to an understanding of the ways in which people reconstruct the landscapes of the past within the context of exile and diaspora, as well as the role that this 'lost' landscape plays in creating identity and a particular collective mode of remembering.

It is interesting to compare Dennawan with those 'lost places' discussed by Read in Returning to Nothing. Many of the places Read discusses were destroyed or lost within the last 30 years, well within the period of living memory of people who were adults at the time each place was lost. However, we have only been able to locate a few elderly individuals who have primary 'lived' knowledge of Dennawan (abandoned some 60 years ago), and their experiences of the settlement were as small children. Their children and grandchildren are now taking interest in, and responsibility for looking after the site. The absence of people with primary lived memories of the place creates an absent space, and a desire to reconstruct memories around the ruinous and decaying fabric of the settlement. Within this space meaning and knowledge grow apparent through narrated and remembered things. Anecdote and bodily experience take on new forms of significance, as each story about recent returns to nothing signifies a denser texture of knowledge and memory about the site. People become fascinated with incidents, accidents, encounters, and the significance of confrontations, discoveries and slippages.

With time, the physical traces of the site become more important as a source for the creation of collective memory, as people's 'lived' memories of the place become less clear. Access to the site and an ability to people it with anecdote and incident becomes a form of cultural capital, and the primary way of re-creating memory in the abandoned space. Each new return to the site provides opportunities both for discovery, as well as to repopulate the place with newly created memories. On many trips out to the place with local Aboriginal people, frequent reference was made to occurrences during previous trips, both in terms of the significance of individual events, as well as to orient and map the absent spaces of the site as a peopled place.

There are important performative aspects of interactions with the physical traces of the site. Bodily experience of movement through the site and knowledge of the place formed through pilgrimages become memories. Through bodily experience the site comes to be re-experienced and re-evaluated during these ‘returns to nothing’. The place is recreated both in ways that it should have been should the occupation of the site have not ceased, as well as in ways that re-embodify the landscape with contemporary meanings.

**Implications: memory, objects and diaspora heritage**

Barbara Bender, in the context of a discussion of the way in which people 'on the move' relate to their physical (dis)locale, has noted 'in reality, dislocation is always relocation. People are always in some relationship to the land they move through'. Indeed, as Paul Basu points out, the 'homeland' itself is a construction contingent on the experience of exile or diaspora. While much of the literature on diaspora has focussed on the way in which displaced peoples establish a sense of community in their new landscapes, equally important, where communities can maintain a physical presence within their homelands, is the way in which they continue their traditional connections by creating new, communal people-land relationships. In the case of forced removals, there is always a dynamic relationship between the physical landscape and the landscape of the mind. Such a relationship can be particularly difficult in Aboriginal Australia, where claims to authority over country are land-based (as opposed, for example, to Middle Sepik cultures, where such claims are based on knowing both the public and esoteric names for places). However, like Weiner and others, I think it is incorrect to see this creative engagement with the physical traces of the past in the landscape as 'untraditional'. In creating new, communal memories at Dennawan, Muruwari people are continuing what Morphy describes as the 'triadic relationship between the individual, the ancestral past, and the world in which he or she lives'. As Redmond so elegantly explains:

Space and place have meaning and existence only in relation to the positioned, mobile, and intentional human body...Far from being 'frozen over' or 'outside time', human experience continues to draw lifeblood from, add clarifying detail to, and animate the mythic structures of country. Human emotional investment makes the landscape...grow.

Muruwari peoples' interactions with the physical traces of the past at Dennawan both reproduce and create anew, relationships with country and the ancestral past. It is the dynamic between memory, landscapes, objects and the performative qualities of interactions with them, which allow people to actively (re)create a sense of community and locality in this 'abandoned' place. The complex relationship between objects, landscape, people and memory is central to...
understanding the social significance of ‘lost places’ and the heritage of the Aboriginal diaspora in Australia.

Conclusion

The material remains at Dennawan are both memorial and memento.34 Material things form an inseparable link between oral history and place. The case study demonstrates that the ‘return to nothing’ is a complex experience, drawing on the aesthetics of ruin and decay, memory, and physical trace to conjure profoundly meaningful understandings of the landscape and the history of human presence within it. Artefacts and other material forms of cultural heritage are often an important conduit for Aboriginal people who have been forcibly removed from their homelands in their continuity of connection to place. While ‘social’ significance has been understated as largely intangible, this paper demonstrates the complex relationship that exists between material and memory in the context of forced removal and diaspora.

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Williamson eds 2002.

Endnotes
1 Read 1996; see also Read 2000.
2 Eg. papers in Forty and Kuchler eds 1999, Hallam and Hockey 2001, and
3 Eg. papers in Bender and Weiner eds 2001; Orford 1992; Clifford, "Traveling
4 Like my use of 'diaspora', I employ the word 'plagiarism' explicitly, to connote
the acxtual, almost ritual conduct of the body and its pattern of travel across the
former settlement when people return to it.
5 The idea of heritage as the active communal creation of locality is developed in
detail in Byrne et al. 2001, which particularly cites Appadurai 1995.
6 After I presented this paper to the Islands of Vanishment conference I was
interested to read Weiner 2002, who has taken a very similar approach in
suggesting the comparison of diasporic cultures with those of Aboriginal people
in southeastern Australia who were dislocated by closer settlement. This
comparison is also implied by the use of the term 'Exodus' in Richards et al. 2002.
7 See also Byrne, this volume
9 The history of the former Dennawan reserve has been documented in detail by
Sharon Veale 1997 and in preparation.
10 Veale 1997, 102.
12 Veale 1997, 105.
13 Goodall 1996, 186.
15 H. Creamer, Survey of Sites of Significance to the Aboriginal people of NSW,
"Dennawan burial", HCNHS/7/138. Report held in the NSW NPWS Aboriginal
Heritage Information Management System.
17 For a discussion of imagined spaces and nostalgia in a different cultural context,
see Huat 1995.
18 See further discussion in Harrison, Shared Landscapes.
19 The archaeology of the former Dennawan reserve is described in detail in
Harrison, Shared Landscapes.
20 After Stewart 1996, 205.
21 Argenti 1999.
22 Tonkin 1992, 127.
23 Bender, 'Landscape on-the-move', 78.
26 Mendoza 2001; Sheffer 2003; Ahmed 1999.
28 See discussion of similarities and differences between Australian Aboriginal and
tahm claims to land in Wassman 2001, 69.
29 Weiner 2002.
30 Eg. Murray 2000; Riches 2002; Williamson and Harrison 2002; Murray 2002.
31 See also Harrison 2000.
32 Morphy 1996.
34 See David Parkin's discussion of mementoes as transitional objects in the
context of diaspora, Parkin 1999.