

Sanitary citizenship in the settler colonial city: race, health and hygiene in interwar urban Australia

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In the early decades of the British colony of New South Wales, colonists danced between drought and deluge as their footprint grew from Eora Country at Warrane (Sydney Cove) to the Dyarubbin (Hawkesbury-Nepean River) of the Darug people. Off Port Jackson, the presence of the Gadigal stream that trickled into Sydney Cove had encouraged Captain Arthur Phillip to establish the first settlement there, instead of Kamay (Botany Bay), where Lieutenant James Cook had landed in 1770 (Lloyd, 1988). This waterway soon became known as the Tank Stream, after the three storage tanks that were dug into the sandstone to secure the colony's water supplies during the El Niño drought of the early 1790s. It soon became 'no uncommon circumstance', a visitor recalled, for Indigenous people to fetch water from the tanks to participate in the colonial economy (Collins, 1804).

To preserve this water source from erosion and pollution, Phillip enacted the first legislation to protect its catchment area by passing a regulation that forbade the cutting of trees within fifty feet of the stream (Collins, 1804). Phillip's successor quickly moved to prevent the Tank Stream's further pollution. Just a month after becoming Governor in September 1795, John Hunter prohibited raising pigs nearby or clearing paths to the waterway, threatening to tear down the house of the offender (Bonyhady, 2000). These orders seemingly fell on deaf ears, as he and his successors re-issued the order, and expanded its remit to prohibiting tanneries, slaughter houses, breweries, distilleries, and so forth, with punishment including heavy fines, destruction of homes, and flogging (*HRA*, 2 May, 1797). Despite these orders, the chorus of complaints about the pollution of the Tank Stream continued; by the late 1820s, it was 'doomed to become a filthy sewer' for the settlement (Houison 1901).

On the driest inhabited continent on earth, freshwater's importance long precedes British invasion, as Indigenous peoples have actively harnessed riverine, marine and groundwater resources as well as rainfall for thousands of years, as shown by sites such as the Brewarrina stone fish traps (Baiaame's Ngunnhu) on the Barwon River (Maclean et al., 2012), wooden and earth traps and weirs on the Darling (Baaka) River (Martin et al., 2022), and the World Heritage-listed Gunditjmara freshwater fishery at Budj Bim (McNiven and Bell, 2010). Water, as we have seen, also configured the earliest British incursions on the continent, as this maritime people sought out freshwater supplies, arable land, and navigable rivers to establish the furthest reaches of the Empire in what they would learn to be an extremely variable climate (Atkinson, 2016; Karskens, 2016).

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the British invaders followed a pattern of establishing their settler colonies near the confluence of fresh and saltwater courses, just as they had at Sydney Cove in 1788. Historians have charted the rise of the sanitary, networked settler city that followed, as colonial authorities responded to growing settler expectations that their water supplies would be clean and that their wastes would be removed from urban areas (see Cook et al. 2022). These expectations themselves had emerged from changing settler

understandings of public health and disease, which by century's end, blended earlier environmental conceptualisations of the human body with the ascendant bacteriological order. As this chapter shows, a particular form of hydropolitics emerged in Australia's settler colonial cities, whereby access to clean water supplies became a means for social inclusion and exclusion in the settler suburbs that cut across the familiar categories of race, class, gender, and that manifested in spatial terms.

The ways that freshwater supply has both spatially and culturally ordered *who* belongs in the Australian city, as this chapter demonstrates, reveals how settler cultures of cleanliness, health and hygiene became embedded in the urban form of Australian cities. In these emerging settler cities, freshwater as much as land was the object of, and means of, Indigenous dispossession: its quality, availability and accessibility vital to the settler project, whereby 'settlers sought new homes, fashioned new places of belonging out of the land they appropriated, and purposefully set about recreating its physical and ecological condition through domestic plantings' (Banivanua Mar and Edmonds, 2010, p. 4). Yet freshwater could also be a source of settler anxiety, in the form of the rivers and swamp wetlands that in defying cadastral and sanitary order, formed 'nervous spaces' in settler cities by providing opportunity for freer movement and sustenance for Aboriginal people. These fluid terrains thus afforded Aboriginal people the means to resist their displacement, and to live in closer proximity than newcomers desired (Byrne, 2010; Edmonds, 2010; O'Gorman and Morgan, 2021).

Within the settler polity too, the condition of the streets, household, and physical body were also sites that aroused considerable anxiety as to both the moral and physiological health of the colony. As the sanitary infrastructure of the settler city grew, the connection of the household to the pipes, drains and sewers facilitated further the moral association of public health and hygiene with the sanitary conduct of the occupants. In the British context, Thomas Osborne suggests, 'What was at stake was not just a Victorian fetish for cleanliness, but a strategy of indirect government; that is, of inducing cleanliness and hence good moral habits not through discipline but simply through the material presence of fast-flowing water in and through each private household' (1996, p. 115; also Joyce, 2003). Household access to such fast-flowing, clean water afforded occupants access to sanitary citizenship, to borrow from Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs (2002) in the context of a cholera epidemic in eastern Venezuela in the early 1990s, which rewards those who conform with modern medical understandings of the body and undertake hygienic practices. Additionally, sanitary citizens in Australian settler cities must be seen (by government authorities, in particular) to demonstrate their willingness and capacity to uphold and reproduce the moral sanitary order. Those deemed incapable of, or unwilling to, adopting such sanitary practices were rendered 'unsanitary subjects' from whom sanitary citizens had to be protected. In settler Australia, as in Venezuela, 'The implications of being relegated to the status of unsanitary subjects were profound, affecting people's access to the political, social, and civil dimensions of citizenship' (Briggs & Mantini-Briggs, 2002, p. 11).

Examining the access to, and practices of, sanitary citizenship in settler Australian cities builds on calls to expand the purview of the Blue Humanities to the study of the hydrosocial relations. In her 2020 study, *Hydrofictions*, Hannah Boast encourages the field to pursue waters and water cultures beyond the seas of the Anglo-American Atlantic world. Focusing on literary accounts of Israeli and Palestinian environments, Boast takes up the insights of political ecologists, who have articulated the ways that 'water is not simply acted on by humans but "is both shaped by, and shapes, social relations, structures and subjectivities"' (p. 3). Drawing on Boast's work, Matthew Henry has demonstrated through a range of literary and artistic forms the ways that

‘the settler logic of elimination has long inflected hydropolitical discourse in the western United States’ (2022, p. 20). This chapter argues for the closer integration of historical analyses of hydrosocial relations into the Blue Humanities, focusing on the expressions and consequences of sanitary citizenship in urban settler Australia.

This chapter studies the hydrosocial relations of the sanitary order in the settler cities of interwar Perth in Western Australia; Darwin in the Northern Territory; and Melbourne, Victoria. Across the continent, Aboriginal people during this period remained subject to legislation that enabled authorities to proclaim towns ‘prohibited areas’ for their presence and mobility, and allowed for their physical removal to spaces designated as ‘reserves’. Such legal restrictions on the personal liberty of Aboriginal people ‘reached a climax’ during the period between the Great Depression and World War II, (Rowley, 1971, p. 42). They, as well as other raced, classed and gendered bodies, were especially subject to close sanitary surveillance through the modern state’s tools of photography, enumeration, mapping, and surveys, which sought, as Matthew Newsom Kerr argues for Victorian London, ‘to guide conduct of the mass by means of placing the full range of possibilities under a silent, patient, distant, and steady watchfulness’ (2018, pp. 240-41). Attending to the hydropolitics of settler Australian cities, this chapter shows, reveals the fundamental role of freshwater in shaping the social relations of the modern state.

After the First World War, concerns were reignited among the British and Australian middle classes about racial degeneration and the decline of the Empire (Murphy, 2010). Roused by these worries, reformers from an emergent class of technocrats sought to overcome social ills through the application of principles of science and reason to domestic life (Reiger, 1985). Stimulating this movement were widely held anxieties about the influence of the environmental conditions inside and outside the (middle class) home on the mental and physical health of white Australians. Meanwhile, the body and its health had come to be seen as a closed system, distinct and separate from its material surrounds. These ideas point to the paradox that historian Linda Nash has observed in modern public health: ‘it insisted on the need for certain environmental changes while denying that the environment played an active role in the production of disease’ (2003, p. 113). Aligned with the interests of the modernist state, advocates of these environmental reforms were mostly male members of an emerging professional middle class seeking to reshape Australian suburbs, homes and families according to their vision of a modern settler society (Reiger, 1987).

In the suburbs of Perth, local advocates called for the improvement of parks and playgrounds to better the lives of Western Australians, particularly children (Gregory, 2009). Water was an implicit, but important tool to achieve such reform. By the end of the nineteenth century, a constant water supply had come to symbolise modern civilisation and these supplies provided the means to cultivate attractive open spaces (Taylor & Trentmann, 2011). Both indoors and out, water provided the means by which settler Australians could uphold and perform the ideals of suburban respectability, those disciplines of behaviour such as cleanliness, sobriety, and thrift. For those of more limited means, maintaining respectability meant living ‘with a perpetual sense of threat’, as historian Janet McCalman argues, such were its implications for ‘the integrity of the personality and the family, the good regard of the neighbourhood and employers’ (1998, pp. 19-20).

The expansion of Perth’s reticulated water supplies had coincided with changing expectations about the appearance of the city and its suburbs. The city’s town planning movement had emerged during the First World War and its influence on suburban development in Western

Australia was almost immediate. The leaders of the local movement widely advocated the importance of orderly planning, open spaces and aesthetic appeal in town planning (Gregory, 2009). In a 1918, the President of the Town Planning Association of Western Australia, argued,

We must do better than we have done in conserving our baby life by taking greater care of the mothers of the nation. We can augment our man power best by improving the workmen's homes, by beautifying them individually, and in the mass, by preserving the sanctity of the home and keeping the flag "one family, one house" flying by abolishing overcrowding; by getting the factories and the workers out into the environs of the city by rapid communication services to zones where land is cheaper, where air is pure, and where the children, in their garden villages, will grow up taller, stronger, deeper in the chest, freer from physical defects, happier, more likely to be stalwart effectives in the wealth-creating forces of the State, and less likely to be a burden on the community (Saw, 1918, p. 41).

Attention to these details not only reflected the ideals of the international town planning movement, but was also evidence of the prevailing anxieties about the influence of the environment on the mental and physical health of suburban settler Australians.

Creating the ideal environment for the healthy moral and physical development of white Australian children was the duty of the state's citizens, particularly mothers. Citizenship, therefore, was closely related to the upkeep of the home. In March 1920, the *Daily News* declared, 'Last night practically the whole city was without water, and the sorry spectacle was witnessed, even in Hay-street West, of mothers taking their pitchers to those who possessed wells, to obtain water with which to wash their children before putting them to bed' (p. 8). Reminiscent of the city's Great Water Famine of the late 1890s (Morgan, 2015), this account highlights the domestic relationship between women and water, and the ways in which gender relations shaped water use in suburban Australia in the early twentieth century. At the time of these shortages, nearly half the average Perth household's water consumption took place inside the home (Williamson, 1975).

As the *Daily News* account suggests, such episodes of water scarcity interrupted the domestic routines of Perth's housewives and domestic servants, adding to their heavy household burden (Evans & Saunders, 1992). After all, argued the local magazine *Western Homes* in 1929, they were responsible for making the ideal home: 'The parents of the West must strive to make a home of their house, and create that "Home Influence" which does not distort but beautifies; which makes *good citizens*, and not bad parasites or dangerous criminals' (cited in Gregory, 1997, p. 88). As sociologist Kerreen Reiger notes, women's daily chores had become transformed into 'scientific work of national importance' – of creating good citizens (1987, p. 507). Water shortages exposed the dependence of many suburban households on reliable supplies to maintain the veneer of civility, and exacerbated suburban anxieties on the domestic frontier.

Interactions with water in early twentieth century Australian homes and suburbs were deeply shaped by gender, class and race. As historian Anna Haebich argues, 'Building on their racist attitudes towards Aborigines, the [Western Australian] settlers used the Aboriginal presence as a useful negative definer of what the new communities believed they stood for; for example "cleanliness" and "orderliness" versus "disease" and "dirtiness"' (1992, p. 129). Since the turn of the twentieth century, Perth's suburban expansion increasingly encroached on the lifeways of local Aboriginal peoples, who the Western Australian government barred from the city's centre between 1927 to 1954 (Gorman, 2016). On the city's outskirts, Aboriginal peoples found

places to camp and pick up work, while maintaining connections to Country. Near Galmamaanup, the swamp on the other side of the railway in Claremont, lived a group of about twenty Whadjuk Noongar. Without access to the city's growing sanitary network, they obtained freshwater by digging wells, or as Corrie Bodney remembered from 'Neil's paddock close by because he had a pump there' (cited in Cook, 2016, p. 35). Another group of Aboriginal people camped each summer near a riverside beach on Freshwater Bay. They occasionally asked white residents for water, but mainly sourced 'brackish but drinkable' water by 'digging a hole in the beach sand a yard or two from the high tide mark anywhere along the beach' (cited in Cook, 2016, p. 131). Each morning before school, Robert Bropho recalled, 'There was no baths in them days for us. There was just a cat wash ... a couple of handfuls of water thrown over your face from an old kerosene tin cut down the sides to it like a dish' (1980, p. 8).

In the northern Australian capital of Darwin, the sanitary surveillance of non-whites had already provided the government grounds to order the demolition of the city's Chinatown on the eve of the First World War (Chua, 2010). The Northern Territory's newly appointed Medical Officer of Health had inspected the conditions of Chinatown in 1912, justifying his recommendation for its demolition:

Chinatown is [in] a dangerously insanitary state. All the conditions are present for the rapid spread of the disease viz., congestion of tenements which are dark, ill constructed and ill-ventilated; filthy living conditions, lack of proper drainage; utterly unsatisfactory condition of night-soil and refuse; a water supply which might easily become contaminated, and a general insanitary condition which lends itself, to the harbouring of vermin of all kinds and the breeding of flies and other disease carrying insects (Holmes, 1913, p. 4).

Sydney's *Tung Wah Times*, a Chinese language newspaper, reacted quickly to the Officer's assessment and warned Darwin's Chinese residents to conform strictly to local health regulations (Chua, 2010). Already attuned to the precarity of Chinese communities in Sydney and Melbourne, the newspaper regularly printed translations of hygiene regulations regarding washing their produce with clean water (Boileau, 2018).

After the demolition of fifteen tenements, the 1913 Administrator's report warned, 'it would be suicidal to allow [the Chinese] to continue to menace the health of the increasing white population of the same town by dwelling in overcrowded and insanitary tenements' (Gilruth, 1914, p. 8). Accompanying photographs offered a bleak assessment of the 'condemned ... Chinese hovel', as one caption read – 'Note height of house, barely up to man's elbow. No provision for light or ventilation. No sanitary accommodation' (Fig. 1; Gilruth, 1914, p. 56). Despite diplomatic interventions by the Chinese Consul General, only the outbreak of war slowed the demolition of Darwin's Chinatown as the government anxiously sought to populate the tropical north with Anglo-Europeans (Chua, 2010).

Fig. 1

A premises in Darwin described as a 'Chinese hovel'. Public Health Board, 1914-1915, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, NT1915/1028, 7802048.

Investigations into housing conditions in Melbourne prompted the creation of new institutions to eliminate slums and provide social housing. In 1937, the first report of the Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board found 3000 houses, most dating from the 1860s, to be unfit for habitation, with the city facing a shortage of between 25,000 and 30,000 low-rent

houses. Middle class commentary and photographs of these housing standards invariably extended to critical assessments of the inhabitants and their character (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3); as historian Tony Birch notes of slums in Melbourne's Fitzroy, they were portrayed as 'the antithesis of the decent family home environment' (2004, p. 8). Resident mothers were especially condemned as immoral and ignorant; their children would only thrive if 'rescued from the sordid surroundings and vicious influence of the slums', argued Melbourne reformer Frederick Oswald Barnett in the early 1930s (Barnett 1931, p. 48). The Housing Commission of Victoria was established under the *Housing Act* of 1937 to address the problem, although the social stigma of the environmentally determinist reform campaigns lingered into the 1960s (Musgrove, 2003).

Fig. 2

Closely scrutinised mothers, who reformers deemed unsanitary subjects in Melbourne's interwar slums. F.O. Barnett, c. 1935, State Library Victoria, 1777176.

Fig. 3

The challenges facing a household seeking sanitary citizenship. F.O. Barnett, c. 1935, State Library Victoria, 1777201.

The conditions of inner suburban homes in Melbourne also came under the scrutiny of Wilfred Prest, an economist at the University of Melbourne. After the 1941 census was postponed indefinitely because of the War, the Commonwealth Department of Post-War Reconstruction, the University, and a group of local businessmen funded the Prest Survey to obtain information about housing conditions to inform future policy. Almost 8000 households from across the metropolitan area were surveyed over a 17-month period, with interviewers recording details such as the type of dwelling, the condition of the garden and the extent of cultivated space, the location of the water closet, the presence of a sink and water tap in the kitchen, and whether the kitchen was 'ever used as a Bedroom' (Lack, 2019). The investigators encountered a broad spectrum of living conditions, such as homes that were 'well-built, attractive ... well-kept garden', while others were 'in bad state ... bathroom disgraceful. Kitchen and bathroom horribly untidy and dirty' (cited in Davison & Lack, 1981, p. 41). Although many of the householders interviewed for Prest's survey indicated a desire to move, wartime restrictions and the scarcity of housing stock limited their mobility (Darian-Smith, 1990, p. 91).

The Prest Survey revealed disparities in domestic water facilities throughout Melbourne. In inner city Collingwood, nearly 60 per cent of households in the sample obtained water from an outside tap, compared to 5 per cent in middle-class Camberwell. Ninety-five per cent of houses in Collingwood and working-class Northcote had no hot water service, and had to heat water for baths and clothes washing on a stove; in Camberwell the figure was nearly 60 per cent (Darian-Smith, 1990, p. 980). An investigator noted of a South Melbourne housewife that she 'had done her best to give her daughter a good start, but she wanted a house with a decent bathroom [that in the present house being outside in the wash-house]. She thought it would be a good thing if the daughter could have a bath every day – like the girls at work' (cited in Davison & Lack, 1981, p. 42).

Many Aboriginal people of Perth, meanwhile, were forced onto small reserves that were often situated near rubbish dumps and sanitary depots, where water supplies and sanitation facilities were inadequate (Haebich, 1992). Confined to the margins of white settlements on reserves and in camps, Aboriginal people could be better regulated and controlled under what historian Gyan Prakash has described in nineteenth century India as 'a discriminatory sanitary order'.

Protecting the health of white suburban Australians, as in colonial India, required the containment of the putative source of disease – the bodies, habits and homes of Aborigines (Prakash, 1999, pp. 132-33). Robert Bropho recalled that in the early 1940s at the Eden Hill camp on the city's eastern outskirts, the 'only water supply was from the local tip on the hill near the swamp' or from shallow wells they dug in the ground (1980, p. 27). In their tin billies residents collected water with 'tadpoles and the slime on the top', 'with a bit of flavour in it from human piss and human shit' (1980, p. 30). In more affluent Claremont, where the proximity of Aboriginal camps was a source of sanitary anxiety, some white households nevertheless employed Aboriginal people to relieve their own burden of sanitary citizenship. One resident, for instance, recalled Aboriginal women visiting his childhood home on Bay View Terrace to wash laundry on Monday, while in nearby Swanbourne, Aboriginal women also washed and ironed clothes (Bolton & Gregory, 1999; Bropho, 1980).

By the early 1950s, the local government could no longer abide the Aboriginal presence in the suburb, and ordered the Galmamaanup camp to be bulldozed. Of the council's decision, the *West Australian* reported, 'the Nedlands road district was not a fit and proper place for a native camp [because] the white population was spreading in the Swanbourne area and ... the board could not allow a "black camp in a white area"' (1951, p. 4). The camp's residents, like many other Aboriginal people that fell foul of such sanitary surveillance, were 'removed' to the Moore River Native Settlement, over 130 kilometres north of Perth (Delmege, 2014). Writing two decades later, historian Charles Rowley could observe in his *Outcasts in White Australia* that the policing of sanitary citizenship persisted in Australian towns and cities: 'Prejudice is still commonly defended as maintaining a "hygiene" and not a "racial" barrier' (p. 51).

This chapter has argued for the closer integration of historical analyses of hydrosocial relations into the Blue Humanities by attending to the expressions and consequences of sanitary citizenship in urban settler Australia. Focusing on interwar Perth; Darwin; and Melbourne, this chapter has revealed the ways that freshwater has been historically implicated in the social and moral fabric of settler Australian cities. In these growing cities, the availability of clean freshwater supplies was a means for authorities to govern both urban spaces as well as the raced, classed and gendered bodies that resided in them. Practices of sanitary surveillance allowed for the exclusion and inclusion of particular bodies, according to their perceived ability and willingness to conform to the expectations of the sanitary state. As the examples in this chapter suggest, this regime provided for the rise of a discriminatory sanitary order that especially marginalised non-white bodies in order to physically and morally protect the settler colonial city.

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