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MAPPING MEMORIES: ORAL HISTORY FOR ABORIGINAL CULTURAL HERITAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA



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In May 2000 I drove five hours north up the coast from Sydney, Australia, to record oral history interviews with Aboriginal people in two communities. This would be the first of many such trips over the following two years, resulting in more than thirty recorded interviews and many more unrecorded ones. My task was not unusual. Since the late 1960s, a historical silence about the racial structure that shaped Australian society from the moment of first European settlement in 1788 has been replaced by an interest in learning about Aborigines and their relations with the colonizers. Aboriginal people's testimony, typically recorded as oral history, has been a critical source in this revisionist history project. In our project, known as "Mapping Attachment: A Spatial Approach to Aboriginal Post-contact Heritage,"¹ we were interested, like other oral historians, in people's lives and their past experiences, but we were especially curious about the spatial dimension of these. This interest in place or, more precisely, in the places that are characteristically embedded in life stories, stemmed from the fact that the project was part of a larger applied research effort aimed at ensuring that the post-contact history of Aboriginal people is properly represented in the state's cultural heritage, or in what might be called its "heritage landscape."²

In this chapter I discuss what the oral history interviews revealed about Aboriginal people's experiences of local landscapes. The chapter also considers how these oral histories challenge current cultural heritage practices that divide Aboriginal from non-Aboriginal history by instead drawing attention to the ways in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have coexisted in the

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same locales, at times in ways that reinforce the distance between them, at other times in ways that are close, even intimate.³ As part of the research project, the spatial dimension of the entanglement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people was made visible through a process of “mapping” the oral histories, which I briefly discuss in the final section of this chapter.

A Segregated Cultural Heritage System?

The project was funded by and conducted under the auspices of the New South Wales state government’s key natural and cultural heritage conservation agency, the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service.⁴ This agency has, since its inception in 1967, been responsible for recording and conserving Aboriginal cultural heritage, but until recently it had done so with only limited reference to the memories of living Aborigines. This was so because since the 1970s the practice of cultural heritage protection in Australia has been a somewhat bifurcated system.⁵ Within this system, the period since white settlement in 1788 (termed the “historic period”) is defined almost exclusively by structures associated with “settlers” and their descendants, including houses, homesteads, hotels, halls, hospitals, and the like. These buildings, sites, and associated objects, recorded on the historic heritage registers maintained by state and local authorities and deemed of sufficient value to require some form of legislative protection, are a testament to an Australian past characterized by pioneering and progress. Only a small number of buildings and places specifically associated with Aboriginal people are included in the heritage registers for the post-1788 period, and only occasionally do the registers note the significance to Aboriginal people of some of the thousands of other buildings and places listed.⁶

By contrast, the cultural heritage of Aboriginal people has been almost exclusively confined to the pre-contact period and includes such sites as shell-middens, rock art, and stone artifact scatters. These were considered significant—worth recording, preserving, and conserving—because they could be used to tell stories about an “authentic,” precolonial, traditional indigenous society and its technology.⁷ They had acquired considerable value in the late twentieth century when the field of cultural heritage rapidly expanded as part of a larger nation-building process because they provided evidence of deep time and of a unique indigenous culture, which were highly valued in a comparatively new nation like Australia seeking to strengthen its roots.

As a result of these professional practices, most cultural heritage work in New South Wales has painted a false picture of Aboriginality, of the nature of Aboriginal people’s attachment to the post-contact landscape, and of the colonial past more generally. As my co-investigator in this research project, Denis

Byrne, has observed, were one to rely solely on the state's heritage registers for a window onto the historical experience of Aboriginal people since 1788, one could be easily excused for concluding that Aboriginal people had simply left the scene the moment "whites" arrived.⁸ But in many parts of New South Wales, as elsewhere in Australia, Aboriginal people have remained a vital local presence, albeit one that has been diminished through frontier violence, disease and starvation, dispossession from land, forced dispersals from one place to another, and the removal of children from families. But despite this, or because of it, the "survivors" identify as a distinct cultural group expressing a strong sense of themselves as different from white Australians, in ways that draw on both notions of indigenism and shared experiences of oppression as markers of that difference.

That this was indeed the case was shown convincingly through the work of a generation of historians and anthropologists who, beginning in the 1970s, made use of archives, ethnographies, and oral histories.⁹ They examined the effects of colonization on Aboriginal people, particularly their dispossession from land; they exposed Aboriginal people's survival within settled Australia; and they conveyed the vitality of what came to be known as Aboriginality.

A strong theme in this historical and ethnographic work was the question of cultural identity. What did it mean, and what was it like, to be an Aboriginal person living in twentieth-century settled Australia? On what basis did Aboriginal people understand themselves as Aboriginal? Some of this research indicated that place, locality, or land played an important role in shaping and expressing identity. For instance, the anthropologist Diane Barwick drew attention to the ways in which Aboriginal people commonly defined and organized themselves in terms of the localities from which they came, as is evident by the fact that Aboriginal people meeting for the first time typically ask each other, "Where you from?"¹⁰ Historians and anthropologists debated among themselves whether or not this identification of Aboriginal people with place ought to be understood as a continuation of a pre-contact relationship to country,¹¹ or as a result of the experience of dispossession, segregation, and the continual threat of dispersal, or as both enduring tradition and a response to historical change.

For our purposes the point needs to be stressed that place, land, and locality as abstract concepts along with particular places, such as specific Aboriginal reserve settlements or camps on the fringes of rural towns, were clearly evident in the developing literature about Aboriginal people living in this part of the continent after 1788. But despite its obvious spatial themes, the scholarship produced from the 1970s onward was not widely utilized by those working within the field of Aboriginal cultural heritage. The archaeologists who dominated the cultural heritage field tended not to consult the work of historians,

sometimes on the basis that historians and anthropologists had not examined Aboriginal people's historical experience with sufficient spatial specificity to make it usable for heritage purposes. For history to inform heritage, it needed to plot its narratives in space as well as in time. A further complicating issue was the absence, or the ambiguity, of the places, objects, and other types of material remains associated with Aboriginal post-contact history.¹² The *absence* of physical traces in places occupied by Aboriginal people reflects their historical experiences of dispossession and dispersal and the seasonal nature of their work patterns.¹³ For most of the twentieth century, they have not generally had the means to own land and to build on it; and when they did, the likelihood that structures survived over time is minimal, given settler society's concerted effort to remove Aboriginal people not only from the Australian imagination but also from the Australian landscape.¹⁴ The *ambiguity* of the associations of the material culture that might be found is present because, as Byrne notes:

The majority of items in their [Aborigines'] post-contact material culture . . . ranging from clothing to cooking utensils, children's toys, building materials, and gardening implements were brought over in unadulterated form (though sometimes radically recontextualized) from the material culture of European colonizers. The objects themselves are likely to be unmarked by their ownership and use by Aborigines, so that this ownership and use has no visibility on or in the objects.¹⁵

But these difficulties are no justification for ignoring the post-contact period in Aboriginal cultural heritage, or Aboriginal people in Australian historical heritage.

Despite these challenges, by the closing years of the twentieth century some practitioners working within the cultural heritage field began to realize the obvious disjuncture between contemporary Aboriginal people and what the state's heritage registers reflected about Aboriginal people past and present, a disjuncture that allowed settler Australians to continue to perpetuate the myth that "real" Aborigines were remote, in temporal and geographic terms. At the same time, heritage professionals were increasingly dissatisfied with the ways in which the absence of Aboriginal post-contact history from Australian heritage reproduced a view of the past that denied the intertwined lives and histories of Aborigines and non-Aborigines. The 1988 bicentenary of white settlement, which Aboriginal people across Australia had protested with slogans such as "white Australia has a black history," followed by the 1992 Australian High Court's *Mabo* decision, which recognized the continuation of

native title rights in some lands, and the inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal children from their families that was initiated in 1995 and reported its findings in 1997, had resulted in a greater public appreciation that there was no Australian history without Aboriginal history.

The growing awareness in Australia of the largely twentieth-century practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families had especially brought this problem home to heritage workers. Some media coverage of these children, known as the “stolen generations,” had a strong spatial element to it: the “stolen” traveled back to the places from which they had been taken for emotional reunions with lost kin; and the government-run institutions to which they had been sent became sites for addressing the burden of that past. The politics of reconciliation that had come to dominate public debate in Australia in the 1990s provided further context for a shift to post-contact Aboriginal history in heritage work, particularly because it provided the language for those who had already identified the limitations of current practices to argue for change in the government-funded agencies where they worked. While some agencies responsible for recording and protecting Australia’s cultural heritage might have been slow to change their practices, in the current political climate it was difficult for them to continue the fiction that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal pasts (and indeed presents and futures) were separate. Yet gaining acceptance for changing current practices was only the first step. Models for how best to go about recording and interpreting Aboriginal post-contact heritage were also needed, which explains why I found myself driving north along the highway from Sydney with a tape recorder, large aerial photographs, maps, and a camera beside me.

For the “Mapping Attachment” research project, one of our goals was to show how twentieth-century Aboriginal history—whether based on documentary or oral evidence—could be mapped on the ground. We wanted to show where some of the historical events, processes, and themes recorded in those sources had occurred, or the types of places associated with them. Our other goal was to demonstrate that memories recorded as oral histories, in addition to material remains, were the evidence that cultural heritage workers needed to work with to bring the post-contact period into the field of Aboriginal cultural heritage. Achieving these aims would be the means for integrating into heritage work Aboriginal people’s attachment to the landscapes they occupy now, and to places they had occupied in the past.

It is worth noting that our project has proceeded at a time when historians in Australia, Peter Read most prominent among them, have turned their attention to how non-Aboriginal Australians form and express their attachment, or sense of belonging, to place. Read has examined this attachment both in terms of place as an abstract concept that applies to the imagined space of the nation

as a colonized territory¹⁶ and in terms of specific places, particularly ones that no longer exist but to which people still feel a strong emotional connection.¹⁷ His work demonstrates the central role that acts of remembrance and other forms of storytelling play in what is sometimes called “place attachment.” Read shows how settler Australians have long been telling stories about the country they occupy as part of the process by which they have made a home for themselves in it. In contrast to an earlier twentieth-century historical silence about Aborigines, in recent years some of this storytelling has been attentive to the dispossession of the country’s indigenous people. For example, the starting point for Mark McKenna’s influential book *Looking for Blackfellas’ Point* was his recognition that his own sense of belonging to a piece of land he had recently bought depended upon understanding what had happened to the Aboriginal people who had lived there before him.¹⁸

But what about the Aboriginal people who today occupy the same local landscapes as “settler” Australians? What stories do they tell about place? Do they focus on dispossession or on other recent historical experiences? If their own narratives are a means for creating and expressing attachment to the locales in which they live, how might they be interpreted, on their own terms and in relation to other public histories about the same places? In the remainder of the chapter I examine some of the oral histories we collected for what they tell us about Aboriginal people’s knowledge and experiences of, and attachment to, the post-contact landscape. In so doing I seek to contribute to a broader theorization of “oral history and belonging.”¹⁹ But before doing so I briefly outline the approach we developed to record oral histories of place and to extract the geography embedded within them.

People before Place: Notes on Methodology

Quite early on in our research, it became evident that making the immediate physical landscape the focus of the interviews was counterproductive, and that it was more effective to take a life story approach. This was so for a number of reasons, not least of which are the complex ways in which “place” or “landscape” is conceptualized and the almost indefinable quality known as “attachment” is expressed. Aboriginal people rarely talked about places as though they existed “out there,” separate from themselves and their memories. For instance, the question “Can you tell me about the places that have been significant to you?” often resulted in a prolonged silence as the interviewee racked his or her brains for a place that might qualify as significant enough to satisfy the interviewer. And, then, having perhaps identified a place that fitted this criterion, he or she faced the next question—equally perplexing: “Why is this place significant to you?” Very few people—other than the especially heritage-minded

perhaps—think about places in these rather abstract terms. More typically, expressions of significance, of attachment, of belonging, are embedded in stories and memories of lives lived in particular places.

As we saw it, another drawback of beginning an interview with specific places or “sites” rather than with people’s memories of their own pasts was that it risked reproducing the very practices that had marginalized Aboriginal people in the first place. Insofar as much Aboriginal cultural heritage work has privileged material remains from the past over the social experience of Aboriginal people themselves, it seemed to us that a person- rather than place-centered approach to oral history might redress this imbalance.

But while we began with questions about people’s lives and memories, we sought to tailor our oral history methodology for cultural heritage work by experimenting with ways to “capture” spatial information. One example was our use of large aerial photographs during the interview process. We would roll these out, usually after an initial interview had been recorded, and ask interviewees, sometimes with the assistance of other local Aboriginal people who had been present at the interview, to plot places and pathways that they had mentioned. Invariably such an activity would produce more spatial information and more stories. We also collected additional spatial detail by visiting places with the narrators who had mentioned them, and sometimes by retracing routes taken across the landscape. As will be briefly discussed in the final section of the chapter, this contributed to our effort to “map memories” and to the production of what we called “geo-biographies.”

Oral Histories of Local Places

Many of the Aboriginal people we interviewed for the project lived on, or had lived on, the Purfleet Aboriginal settlement, situated a few kilometers south of, and on the opposite side of the Manning River from, the regional town of Taree. This settlement, like others founded in the same period, had been a product of a late nineteenth-century desire among settler society for racial segregation.²⁰ With the formation of the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board in the 1880s, local Aboriginal people, particularly those who had been living in camps in close proximity to white settlements, were removed to reserves, which were small housing settlements for Aboriginal people only, usually located at a short distance from the township but sufficiently distant to be out of sight and to limit contact between blacks and whites. The reserve at Purfleet, which was gazetted in 1900, is *the* place within the local area most closely identified with Aboriginal people. This association is reflected in local histories, and it is reflected in public perception.²¹

Reserves like Purfleet were dotted throughout New South Wales during the

twentieth century. Some are still used as Aboriginal settlements, although the reserve era ended in the late 1960s and many are now controlled by local community organizations. But many others were revoked or abandoned during the preceding decades. Current and former Aboriginal reserves are among the few places unambiguously connected with Aboriginal people in the post-contact period for which there are some physical remnants.²² These places, along with the cemeteries attached to them—Aboriginal people were excluded from interment in the town graveyard²³—are prime targets for heritage preservation. However, our oral history research found that an emphasis on the reserve settlements, commonly called “missions” because some had resident missionaries, would be somewhat misguided. While such places certainly do feature in the memories of many Aboriginal people, many others spent little or no time on reserves, sometimes by choice, sometimes by circumstance. Moreover, as the oral histories revealed, for those who did live there, the reserve itself, its perimeter usually marked by a fence, is only one element of a much larger landscape that matters. This is because a considerable proportion of their time was spent beyond their settlement’s fence.

To convey this, we developed the concept of a “backyard zone” to describe the area that could be encompassed in a day’s walk from a government reserve.²⁴ In Purfleet, where we recorded many of our interviews, the surrounding countryside consists mostly of privately owned farms, some now subdivided for residential and industrial purposes. During the reserve era, Aboriginal people had many reasons to step off their settlement and enter this backyard zone. Some local Aboriginal men worked on a casual basis on neighboring farms. They also fished in nearby creeks and the Manning River. And they hunted in forest reserves that bordered the settlement. Some Aboriginal women worked as “domestics” for local white families in town or on farms. Aboriginal people also sought recreation beyond the confines of the “mission”: they went to the river to swim, to the bush to socialize and drink alcohol out of sight of the authorities, and to town for an afternoon’s entertainment at the local picture theater. They traveled further afield to visit kin living closer to the coast at a place called Forster or in the hills at Dingo Creek. What is important to note is that the backyard zone is experienced mainly through movement across it, rather than by permanent residence in it. It is a landscape of routes rather than, or at least in addition to, roots.

Once Aboriginal people went beyond the settlement fence, they were on somebody else’s land. And on that land they might be welcomed, or simply tolerated, or actively repelled. As some of the oral histories made clear, Aboriginal people’s movement through the “occupied” landscape could be a risky affair. Russell Saunders, who grew up at the Purfleet “mission” in the 1950s and 1960s, explained: “All the time you’d be looking over your shoulder, always

alert. Because nine out of ten times you'd hear this bang—a shotgun going off. 'Ah you blackfellas, get out of there.' They'd come flying down on a horse, or a car would come flying through. . . . We'd tear up through the bush."²⁵

With this in mind, Aboriginal people tended to organize their range of movement according to their quite intimate knowledge of friendly and unfriendly places within the backyard zone. Some local farmers, for instance, were known to be sympathetic to local Aboriginal people; some were even supportive, like the local farmer who grew a vegetable patch for the reserve residents. Others were known to be hostile, which might mean taking a longer route to bypass these properties and avoid confrontation and possible danger.

The oral histories draw attention to the finely calibrated ways in which formal and informal practices of racial segregation structured Aboriginal people's experience of the local landscape. Some geographic features become a "natural" border between "races." Aboriginal narrators who lived on the Purfleet Aboriginal reserve during the 1940s and 1950s typically made reference to the ways in which the southern bank of the Manning River opposite the township of Taree marked the boundaries of their normal range of movement. For instance, Warner Saunders explains a local curfew that required Aboriginal people to be out of town before dark in terms of which side of the river he was allowed to be on:

We used to have to be out of Taree before dark. We used to have to be home here [at Purfleet] before dark. Yeah. Wasn't allowed, wasn't allowed on the other side of the bridge after dark. . . . We'd just stick to this side of the river or if we went down there fishing, we'd fish this side of the river. We wouldn't go on the other side. More fish on this side of the river.²⁶

In a slightly different way, the river has also become an *aide-mémoire* for stories on the theme of racism and segregation. One in particular, told repeatedly by local Aboriginal people, contains a message about the high cost of transgressing racial divides in the segregation era. As we drove across the river, as we often did during our research, we were on occasion told a story about the death of a young Aboriginal man, Cecil Bungie, in the 1950s. He had drowned in the river after fleeing from police for fear that if caught he would be charged with possession of alcohol, which Aboriginal people were prohibited from purchasing until 1963. The story of Cecil Bungie was well known among local Aboriginal people, including the generation born after his death, in part because it had been preserved in print, in a memoir published in the 1970s by Ella Simon, a local Aboriginal woman.²⁷ But its preservation both in memory and in place can also be explained by its continuing resonance in the present.

In this particular locality, fear for the fate of young Aboriginal men harassed by police remains palpable. Cecil's story condenses a much larger, messy, and indeed continuing past into a memorable incident, the preservation of which is in part enabled by its attachment to a specific place.

In other stories of segregation, the local picture theater becomes the pre-eminent site used to explain the common experience of sharing the same space with whites but in ways that achieve a separation based on race. These theater stories capture the paradoxical experience of closeness and distance that lies at the heart of the logic, or illogic, of racial segregation. As Russell Saunders explained, local Aboriginal people were required to sit in a roped-off section at the front:

The picture theatre was another case where you paid for the ticket, given them your money at the front office, then you walked around the side. And there was a doorway on either side. And the first three or four rows, there was a chain across the corridor, or hallway, there. You sat in the first four rows with your head like this [demonstrates craned neck], and you watched the pictures. You looked behind you and there was people right up the back up in other seats, and also the top balconies that had a better view. Our view was like this [demonstrates again], looking up at the screen, and when it was finished you went out the side door. Not out the door where everybody else walked. And that was it. And there was a bus, a big red bus waiting for you, the Forster bus, and [you] jumped on that and come home. That was your pictures. Your money was good enough, but your bodily presence wasn't.²⁸

Almost all the interviews we recorded with people over fifty years of age included memories of sitting in the roped-off area at the local theater; and indeed such accounts are common in oral histories and published life stories by Aboriginal people across New South Wales. In many towns, the picture theater still stands (at Taree it is now used as a surf shop), and so, for local Aboriginal people, it is a constant physical reminder of past practices of segregation.

The picture theater is also prominent in accounts of Aboriginal people contesting segregation, or of a more generalized process of desegregation. In almost all Aboriginal communities across New South Wales, stories are told about an Aboriginal person or two, often women, who defied the "color bar" imposed at the theater. For instance, a recently published life story of Isabel Flick, an Aboriginal woman from a community some hundreds of kilometers inland from our study area, begins with her account of standing up to the local theater proprietor.²⁹ Patricia Davis-Hurst, an Aboriginal woman from Purfleet, recalls a similar event at Taree involving her mother: "Mum changed the policy at the local picture theatre. Their policy was that all Aboriginals had to

sit in the first five rows of the theatre, which was fenced off. She changed this one night by sitting in the back seats and refusing to move, thus making a stand for equality for all.”³⁰

By drawing attention to the fact that these stories are told by Aboriginal people across New South Wales, my intention is not to discount specific incidents of Aboriginal people contesting the ubiquitous if informal practices of racial segregation. Rather, I want to highlight the way in which various Aboriginal communities tell their own localized version (or versions) of an event centred on a specific site in their local landscape—the picture theater—as a means to explain a general historical process—in this case, desegregation. From this perspective, it is productive to interpret these oral histories both for the information they provide that can be used to tell *new* histories of *old* places and as a mode of storytelling that enables Aboriginal people to represent themselves not only as the subjects of history, but as the makers of it too. Importantly, in this type of remembrance the complex historical process by which explicit forms of racial segregation become a thing of the past get connected to a specific physical place. This helps to localize and ground a broader, delocalized, and at times depersonalized history about Aborigines, whites, and race relations, bringing it home, so to speak. Paradoxically, these oral histories of racial segregation with their attendant geographies provide an argument against (not for) the present practice of separating Aboriginal from non-Aboriginal pasts in the field of cultural heritage. The experience of racial segregation as narrated by Aboriginal people demonstrates precisely how intertwined the lives of Aborigines and non-Aborigines were and how frequently their paths crossed.

While the Aboriginal oral histories I have discussed so far focus on the experience of close contact with, but distance from, non-Aboriginal people, other accounts repeatedly refer to the pleasure of occasions that involved only Aboriginal people in places beyond the gaze of whites. Dotted throughout the landscape are places associated with Aboriginal people coming together to “be Aboriginal.” The place that epitomizes this theme in our research is a camping area called Saltwater, located on the coast a few kilometers south east of Purfleet, nestled among a thick littoral rainforest. Each Christmas holiday, which in Australia is a period of six weeks in December and January, families from Purfleet and other regional Aboriginal settlements would decamp to Saltwater for an extended stay. Many Aboriginal reserve settlements had a Christmas camp like this one. Time at such a camp was time away from the government reserve, at a place where Aboriginal people could live without the constant interference of the resident manager monitoring the movements of those under his charge. In oral histories, Saltwater is commonly described as a place where Aboriginal people returned to the old ways of doing things and where they could experience a type of freedom absent from their daily lives on their settlement, in

Taree, and in the backyard zone. This was often expressed in terms of owning Saltwater and feeling strongly that they belonged there. Russell Saunders explained: “Yeah, well you knew that was your place down there. You just knew every little nook and cranny.”³¹

Saltwater was a place where families went for extended stays, but there were many other places in the backyard zone where people would go to get away from constant surveillance, including beaches not frequented by whites. These places featured strongly in the memories of the oldest generation of people we interviewed, mainly women now in their seventies and eighties. For instance, Madge Bolt, born in 1922, recalled: “We used to go to the One Mile Beach when I was young. Every Sunday we used to take dinner out there and have dinner on the beach. But they don’t do nothing like that now. As I said, it’s not like it used to be.”³² The comparison between now and then is common in reminiscences about occasions when Aboriginal people would come together to get away from whites. Fond memories of these places suggest an image of the past in which the social group—whether family or community—was more cohesive than it is perceived to be today.

But these memories need also to be interpreted in the broad context of racial segregation because they are associated with the desire to get away from the strictures imposed on Aboriginal people’s freedom. Places where Aboriginal people went to be among themselves are part of the web of places that make up the narrators’ landscapes, and without them the most publicly recognized Aboriginal place—the government reserve—makes only partial sense. They exist in the backyard zone and are connected to the reserve by various pathways or tracks. Oral accounts of these places often focus on the experience of *getting* there, rather than or in addition to *being* there, drawing attention to the ways in which it is not only the government reserve as a bounded site, or the temporarily occupied Christmas camps and picnic spots, that matter. The routes between these “sites” and other places frequented by local Aboriginal people are an important part of Aboriginal people’s everyday experiences of the landscape, and memories of them detail the ways in which Aboriginal people constantly moved through a landscape owned and occupied by whites—sometimes in a manner that acknowledged that other ownership, sometimes as though they themselves owned it still.

Mapping Aboriginal Memories

Many of the themes that emerged in the oral history interviews were already well known from the extant literature about Aboriginal people, including their employment patterns and experiences, day-to-day life on the government reserve, and racial segregation in the towns. Yet the oral histories we recorded

provided detail, especially spatial detail, that would be impossible to gain from other types of historical sources and from published histories and ethnographies. Thus, they are a rich resource for cultural heritage purposes because they make palpable Aboriginal people's attachment to the colonized landscape and explicitly connect remembered historical experience to present physical place, even when material traces on the ground are absent.

To make oral history usable for cultural heritage work, we needed to find ways to geographically locate the stories we heard. It was not enough to say, for instance, that Aboriginal people had been dispossessed from their country and forced to find a place for themselves in the increasingly colonized landscape. We had to show where specifically they found refuge in a landscape that no longer belonged to them. Nor was it sufficient to argue that racial segregation became a defining feature of Aboriginal people's experience during the first half of the twentieth century. We had to illustrate the ways in which formal and informal practices of racial segregation specifically influenced their residence in, movement through, and experience of the local area they occupied.

As the discussion above has demonstrated, many of the themes critical to interpreting the narratives had a quite specific spatial dimension. To reflect this, we produced a series of thematic maps, drawing on a number of oral histories to build up a composite picture. For instance, nostalgia for a time when Aboriginal people pulled together in the face of a general hostility from local whites was often expressed through references to places where they congregated from time to time to get away from whites, such as sites of Sunday picnics at the beach or in the bush. To make these places visible, we produced an overlay on an aerial photograph that plotted some of them in relation to the reserve settlement and included the various routes taken, usually by foot, to get to them (Fig. 3.1). Transit lines radiating out from the settlement show just how diffuse and expansive the Aboriginal presence in the landscape was. Other maps reflect the ways in which Aboriginal people organized the local landscape into friendly and unfriendly zones; the latter, for example, indicated by a route taken across a hostile farmer's land as well as by an escape route into the bush worked out in advance in the event that the farmer chased the "trespassers" off. Others identified those places within the local landscape where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people were co-present in a confined (and, in some respects, intimate) space but in ways that emphasized distance between them, such as the picture theater and the local public swimming pool.

To reflect the spatial element of our research, we coined the term "geobiography." Expressing the combination of landscape and life story, "geobiography" conveys that the core of our work lay in transforming autobiographical memory into a textual and visual representation of the landscape, or from a slightly different perspective, in extracting the remembered

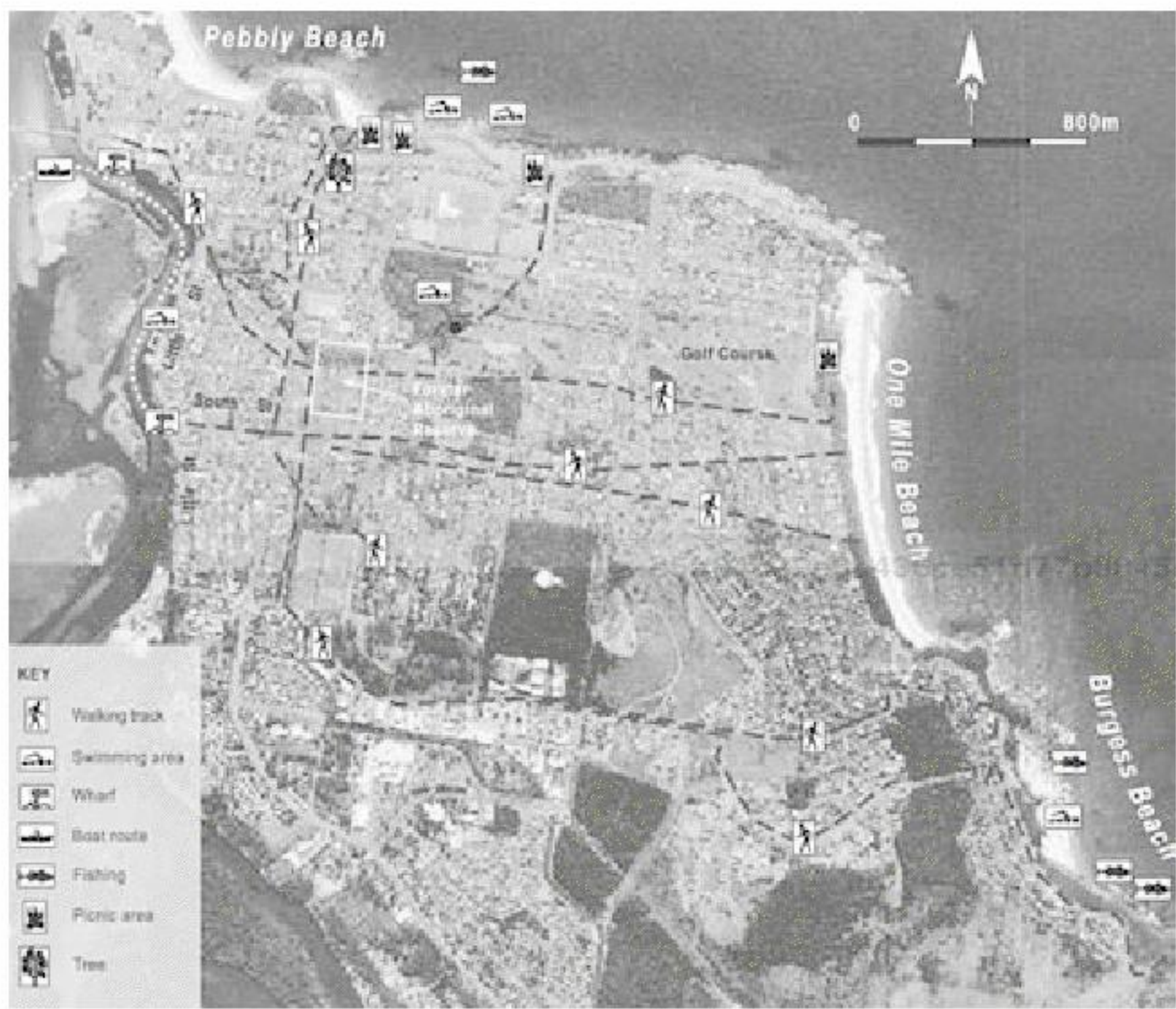


Fig 3.1 An overlay on an aerial photograph showing the various routes that residents of an Aboriginal community in our study used to reach fishing, swimming, and camping spots beyond the bounds of their settlement. (Photograph copyright of NSW Department of Lands, Panorama Avenue, Bathurst 2795/www.lands.nsw.gov.au; map copyright NSW Department of Environment and Conservation.)

landscape embedded in a life story narrative. When interpreted as the geography of a life, geo-biography gives authority to the individual and recognizes the integrity of the autobiographical narrative. This can be important in oral histories with Aboriginal people, who at times, for cultural and political reasons, claim to speak only on their own behalf. Alternatively, the concept of geo-biography can be deployed in collective terms, as the biography of a landscape. Woven mainly from Aboriginal people's memories, the biography of a landscape not only conveys something of a collective vision about the place in which the storytellers live; it also has the potential to disturb public histories of the same landscape that ignore Aboriginal people's memories. It exposes the ways in which parts of these locales are intensely shared, places where the lives and paths of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal are so inextricably intertwined that it is difficult to disentangle the history and heritage of one from the other. For these reasons, mapped Abo-

iginal oral histories have the potential to challenge ways non-Aboriginal people think about landscapes or places they imagined they had to themselves, because these histories reveal an intimate local Aboriginal knowledge of—and often presence in—those landscapes. In my mind, this is the flipside to the current practice of settler Australians articulating their relationship to Australia and to the land they own: exposing the historical presence of now-absent Aborigines.

This emphasis on the visibility achieved by mapping memories suggests its potential for various forms of public history, including cultural heritage. But such mapping of memories, especially when aimed directly at cultural heritage work, also poses some challenges. The map as it is used in cultural heritage work pretends to present a fixed reality—these places, *here*, are what matter—and in this context an oral history once mapped threatens to become a relic on the ground—what we have said is *all* that can be said about these places. The oral histories we recorded do tell *new* stories about *old* places, adding more to what we can know about them. But just as often they show the ways in which memories of the past are often only tenuously connected to “real” or “remaining” places on the ground. In the quest to fix memory to physical place, what might get obscured is the very impossibility of the task because the fit between these landscapes in the mind and a “real geography” can be tenuous as well as fluid as it changes over time.

Nonetheless, our purpose in producing these mapped memories was to challenge the ways in which contemporary cultural heritage practice reproduces a separation between the histories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that was never as complete or as certain as professional practices and bureaucratic processes suggest. Given that purpose, they contribute not simply to recording and preserving new places in the heritage landscape but also to producing new public histories about relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. They help to make visible both Aboriginal people’s presence in and attachment to the very same landscapes claimed, occupied, and owned by non-Aboriginal people and the entanglement of the pasts and the presences of both. The still-pressing need to make this known, not only at the level of the state, which manages the Australian community’s cultural heritage, but also in those local contexts where blacks and whites continue to live side by side, is sufficient to commend the approach and to recommend its further refinement in other contexts in Australia and beyond.

NOTES

This chapter emerges from a much larger research project. Denis Byrne initiated the project and was an inspirational and generous research partner. The project would not

have been possible without the support and guidance of Vienna Maslin and Robert Yettica, and the cooperation of the Purfleet-Taree and Forster Aboriginal communities. My special thanks to the people in those communities who shared their stories with us. Finally, my thanks to Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes for their encouragement and astute editorial advice.

1. Denis Byrne and Maria Nugent, *Mapping Attachment: A Spatial Approach to Aboriginal Post-contact Heritage* (Sydney: Department of Environment and Conservation, 2004), http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/npws.nsf/Content/mapping_attachment.

2. Throughout this chapter I use the term “place” in two senses: somewhat abstractly to mean “space in general” and much more specifically to refer to particular physical “sites” or geographic locations.

3. For a discussion of “racial intimacies,” see Gillian Cowlshaw, *Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas: A Study of Racial Power and Intimacy in Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1999), esp. chap. 5.

4. The New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service is subsumed under the Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW).

5. For a discussion of the development of Aboriginal cultural heritage in Australia, see Denis Byrne, “Deep Nation: Australia’s Acquisition of an Indigenous Past,” *Aboriginal History* 20 (1996): 82–106; Denis Byrne, Helen Brayshaw, and Tracy Ireland, *Social Significance: A Discussion Paper* (Sydney: NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2001).

6. According to Denis Byrne, more than 32,000 Aboriginal pre-contact sites are listed on the Aboriginal Sites Register (now the Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System) maintained by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, but only 200 post-contact sites are listed, mainly cemeteries. The NSW Heritage Office has listed on its State Heritage Inventory a total of 17,500 sites, of which only 7 are Aboriginal post-contact sites. Denis Byrne, “The Ethos of Return: Erasure and Reinstatement of Aboriginal Visibility,” *Historical Archaeology* 37:1 (2003): 79.

7. Byrne, “Deep Nation,” 92–94.

8. Byrne and Nugent, *Mapping Attachment*, 5.

9. The most notable work in this area for New South Wales includes Gillian Cowlshaw, *Black, White or Brindle: Race in Rural Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Barry Morris, *Domesticating Resistance: The Dhan-gadi Aborigines and the Australian State* (New York: Berg, 1989); Peter Read, *A Hundred Years War: The Wiradjuri People and the State* (Sydney: Australian National University Press, 1998); Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770–1972* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996), xv. Two important collections of essays about Aboriginality are Jeremy Beckett, ed., *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988); and Ian Keen, ed., *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in ‘Settled’ Australia* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988).

10. Diane Barwick, “Writing Aboriginal History,” *Canberra Anthropology* 4:2 (1981): 74–86.

11. The word “country,” following Heather Goodall, “refers to the area(s) for which Aboriginal people were the owners and custodians.” Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, xv.

12. Byrne, “The Ethos of Return.”

13. Ibid.; Denis Byrne, “Archaeology in Reverse: The Flow of Aboriginal People and Their Remains through the Space of New South Wales,” in Nick Merriman, ed., *Public Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2004), 240–54.

14. For a history of Aboriginal people's efforts to acquire land and repeated phases of dispossession, see Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*.
15. Byrne, "The Ethos of Return," 80.
16. Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
17. Peter Read, *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
18. Mark McKenna, *Looking for Blackfellas' Point: An Australian History of Place* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002).
19. Read, *Returning to Nothing*, x.
20. Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, chap. 7.
21. Byrne and Nugent, *Mapping Attachment*, chap. 10.
22. This is reflected in two current archaeological projects on Aboriginal mission stations: Jane Lydon's study of the Ebenezer Mission, funded by the Australian Research Council, and the "Living Places" project, based in the Cultural Heritage Division, DEC (NSW). On the Ebenezer Mission see Jane Lydon, "Imagining the Moravian Mission: Space and Surveillance at the Former Ebenezer Mission, Victoria, South-eastern Australia," *Historical Archaeology* (forthcoming); and Jane Lydon, with Alasdair Brooks and Zvonkica Stanin, "Archaeological Investigations at the Mission-House, Ebenezer Mission," report (Aboriginal Affairs Victoria and Heritage Victoria, Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, Monash University: Melbourne, 2004). For "Living Places," see http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/npws.nsf/Content/aboriginal_living_places. For an earlier project see Peter Kabaila, *Wiradjuri Places: The Murrumbidgee River Basin* (Canberra: Black Mountain Projects, 1995).
23. Heather Goodall, "Mourning, Remembrance and the Politics of Place: A Study of the Significance of Collarenebri Aboriginal Cemetery," *Public History Review* 8 (2002): 72–96; Denis Byrne, *In Sad but Loving Memory* (Sydney: NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1998).
24. Byrne and Nugent, *Mapping Attachment*, chap. 14. Denis Byrne coined the term "backyard zone."
25. *Ibid.*, 82.
26. *Ibid.*, 161.
27. Ella Simon, *Through My Eyes* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1978).
28. Byrne and Nugent, *Mapping Attachment*, 95–96.
29. Isabel Flick and Heather Goodall, *Isabel Flick: The Life Story of a Remarkable Aboriginal Leader* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2003).
30. Patricia Davis-Hurst, *Sunrise Station* (Taree: Sunbird Publications, 1996), 44, cited in Byrne and Nugent, *Mapping Attachment*, 97.
31. Byrne and Nugent, *Mapping Attachment*, 87.
32. *Ibid.*, 147.