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### Home on 'the block': Rethinking aboriginal emplacement

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# Home on 'The Block': Rethinking Aboriginal Emplacement<sup>1</sup>

Ceridwen Spark

'It is no accident that homeplace ... is always subject to violation and destruction'.<sup>2</sup>

'The block' refers to a small area of Aboriginal-owned terrace housing bounded by four inner-Sydney streets, near Redfern railway station. Purchased by the newly formed Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC) in the early seventies, with money provided by the Whitlam government, the block has been described variously as a 'dream for self-determination' and a 'shameless slum'.<sup>3</sup> In 1996, the *Australian* newspaper called it 'Sydney's shame'.<sup>4</sup> Recently, the block has been associated in the non-Aboriginal press with heroin, as well as with crime, dilapidation and various forms of conflict — not least of which has been between Aboriginal people who wish to remain living here and the AHC who want to redevelop the land.<sup>5</sup> The AHC suggest that this area should become the locale for an Aboriginal-owned enterprise and/or cultural centre. However, this has been opposed by some tenants on the grounds that 'we should just have housing for families on the block'.<sup>6</sup>

The benefits of Aboriginal cultural centres are many and they can play an important role in wresting place from other non-Aboriginal forces of territorial domination. On the other hand, emptying the landscape of the people who reside there paves the way for redevelopment.

Uneasy Aboriginal-police relations are a daily fact in Redfern. There are locals, Aboriginal and otherwise, who say that the heavy police presence and the proposed redevelopment comprise part of the attempt to 'clean-up' Sydney in time for the 2000 Olympics.<sup>7</sup> Or as Rose puts it, 'Renewal' projects target the very bodies they are implicated in producing: by denying the wounding impact of colonialism on present Aboriginal bodies, the powerful perpetuate the violence against these bodies, contributing to their status as pained.<sup>8</sup> If the so-called 'clean up' vision is realised, Everleigh Street — the 'main street' on the block, described in the non-Aboriginal press as 'the street whites fear to tread'<sup>8</sup> — would become more accessible to Redfern's non-Aboriginal inhabitants and visitors. It is posited that such a result would amount to neo-colonialism.

In 1997, a real-estate leaflet distributed to potential buyers advertised a 'highly desirable' terrace house in East Redfern.<sup>9</sup> Depicting the house as in a street with 'no boarding houses or Kooris', the leaflet clearly implied that Redfern Kooris detract from otherwise 'lavish' and 'immaculate' homes.<sup>10</sup> The threat of development and the problems associated with 'the diseases of deprivation'<sup>11</sup> in Redfern mean that the Aboriginal body, criminalised and ravaged by drugs and police violence, functions as 'the privileged target of power relations'.<sup>12</sup>

The disturbing element of settler occupation of Australia has always been Aboriginality because (even displaced) indigenous persons embody a distinctive claim to homeplace, 'making home' has never been straightforward for non-Aboriginal Australians. For more than two centuries the effort to create places which

engender white security and belonging in contrast to alienation and fear has frequently involved conflict that has impacted negatively on Aboriginal bodies.<sup>13</sup> In Redfern, this conflict centres on notions of home and possession in a far from 'post-colonial' cityscape.

Places are not easily transformed. There are no presents without pasts, no places of self-determination that exist outside places produced through colonialism and assimilation. Nevertheless, it is vital to create strategies for renewing ruptured and wounded landscapes.<sup>14</sup> Wresting the concept of home from the Eurocentre for the 'margin's recovery and healing' is a necessity in the context of the block.<sup>15</sup>

### **'Routing the Body'**

Having interviewed tenants on the block, Kay Anderson comments: 'one intriguing thread to emerge from conversations with tenants is the sense in which the Block — over and above concerns about housing conditions — has consistently been a meeting place for (ethnically diverse) Aboriginals, many of whom base themselves with relatives on the Block during visits to Sydney'.<sup>16</sup> Anderson reimagines Redfern as 'a nexus through which people circulate'.<sup>17</sup> Recognising that Aboriginal visitors to Sydney 'base themselves with relatives on the Block', Anderson acknowledges the significance of dwelling to Aboriginal people in Redfern by suggesting that a 'few shelters for temporary visits and Aboriginal-run enterprises' should be included in a revamped Redfern.<sup>18</sup>

But 'shelters for temporary visits' are different from homes. If Aboriginal placement is conceived only as a temporary phenomenon, in Redfern these more permanent and ongoing connections to place are difficult to sustain and articulate. Privileging transience, 'flight', 'flow', 'crossings' and 'travel' over the (at least partly) embedded (im)mobility of bodies and places which are crucial aspects of home and belonging, Anderson may be underestimating the significance of the stability provided by Redfern's long-term Aboriginal residents.<sup>19</sup> I am suggesting that it is the permanent Aboriginal presence which enables these more temporary belongings. It seems pertinent to question whether there will be anything left to come into if this 'meeting place' forgets its reliance on the base provided by those who actually live on the block. Indeed, tenants' emphasis on 'meeting place' while acknowledging mobility and mutability appears to reflect a desire to continue granting visitors a place. This is something which they have been able to do, despite the structural oppression manifest in the inadequate housing conditions.

Anderson's 'geographies of relating' could be mobilised to support the further displacement of Aboriginal people who resist the creation of a 'Black Chinatown' precisely because it would mean the block no longer housed any Aboriginal people permanently or, I argue, temporarily.<sup>20</sup> A revamped Redfern may well bring into view 'networks that complicate models of rooted identity for us all', however, in many instances, it is the serially displaced who stand to lose most from such deconstructions.<sup>21</sup> It is germane to recall that the attack on rooted identity has not tended to serve indigenous people so much as those 'seeking to erase' their existence.<sup>22</sup> Sensitive to these displacing motivations, Anderson aims to counter them. Her intervention serves as a reminder that caution is necessary when home is not conceptualised as a 'fixed point in space'.<sup>23</sup> There are significant differences between articulating home in ways which are centred but not circumscribed and

destabilising the boundaries between home and passing through such that the former is characterised as almost pure flux.

### **Bodies-Spaces**

Anderson's theorisation of Redfern connects with other attempts to dismantle restrictive ways of defining identity, place and belonging. The effort to resignify space has occurred in a parallel and mutually informing relation to retheorisations of the body. Because the body of the 'other' has been essentialised, marginalised and constituted through a 'set of violations',<sup>24</sup> rethinking it has been crucial to feminist and anti-colonial theory. Colonial history attests to the fact that the suppression of place and the demarcation of space rely on the denial of bodies which are racially-marked in ways which we code as 'other'. Signifying both empty ground and the absence of bodies, *terra nullius* is one of the more obvious instances in which the denial of place is bound up with devaluing inhabitation. Dundi Mitchell has argued that racism is 'experienced as an attack on the whole fabric of one's being, including both past and future generations of being'.<sup>25</sup> Aboriginal women interviewed by Mitchell conceptualised ill-health as the penetration of racism into their bodily beings. This suggests that conflicts around the purification of space are 'not just about the control of space' but 'mutual violations' of bodies and spaces.<sup>26</sup> The ongoing dispossession of Aboriginal people through the construction of them as the improper inhabitants of domestic and city space and the resilience of images which associate Aborigines with so-called 'outback' space, attest to the imbrication of discourses about the body and space, as well as to the abjection associated with the body of the 'other' in certain spatialities.

Contemporary theorists have focused their critique on passive and non-dialectical concepts of space.<sup>27</sup> Aiming to undo the notion that space is an emptiness which exists separately from subjectivity, power and knowledge, they have emphasised its mutability.<sup>28</sup> Contingent rather than intrapsychic identity, as it is conceptualised under the rubric of postmodernism, tends to reflect a social and political commitment rather than an essence. This has applied as much to the identity of places as people, and for good reason. 'Exclusivist claims to place — nationalist, regionalist and localist'<sup>29</sup> need to be confronted with their reliance upon that which they designate as other, marginal and subordinate. If 'centres' are to be challenged it is necessary to demonstrate that the boundaries between here and there, home and travel, self and other are inherently unstable. Foregrounding the continuity between place, Aboriginal culture and identity in Redfern validates indigenous emplacement at the 'centres of civilisation',<sup>30</sup> thereby challenging the notion that Aboriginality is 'properly' located elsewhere.

### **Home Bodies**

Stuart Hall argues that 'coming to constitute oneself as black is not a simple process, not "a coming to rest in some place which was always there waiting for one"'.<sup>31</sup> He evokes the metaphor of homecoming only to argue that this is an inappropriate way to apprehend identity. This view ignores the fact that indigeneity is constituted by the notion that one is already at home. The 'real histories'<sup>32</sup> belonging to indigenous subjects involve a claim to place which is premised upon the right to have sovereignty

in 'real' terrain, not merely theoretical territory. Australian Aboriginals have frequently argued from the position of being simultaneously indigenous *and* displaced. Deconstructing home has proved useful for those who configure their identities around diasporic practices and an avowed placelessness. However, indigenous claims rest for their discursive power on the claim to be at home, however tentative the construction of home may be.

Aboriginal writers, musicians, directors and artists have drawn on the concept of home to powerful effect.<sup>33</sup> The *Bringing Them Home* report is one context in which 'home' is cast as the right of many Aboriginal individuals and families.<sup>34</sup> Ian Anderson provides another example in his exploration of the themes of healing and homeplace. Having scrutinised the history of violence associated with his white ancestry, Anderson foregrounds his Aboriginality through the image of an island home where he and his ancestors were born. In relation to this home and *because* colonialism fragments and dismembers, Anderson asserts that 'my body is an Aboriginal body'.<sup>35</sup> Premised on his belief that 'to resist the colonial project is to reconnect or make whole'<sup>36</sup> Anderson's assertion affirms a strategically unambiguous identity. Acknowledging the violation of Aboriginal identities, Anderson forges his own subjectivity through a rejection of the idea that white history has left him fractured. Homeplace as a long-established entity provides this argument with a centre and lends it cogency.

It is necessary to ask 'who is creating this ... "home", for whom and for what purpose?'.<sup>37</sup> It is valuable to recall how infrequently indigenous people dwell on problematising identities associated with home.<sup>38</sup> Block tenants who have refused to move from their houses make nonsense of the idea that abandoning homeplace is an answer for Aboriginal people in Redfern.

The statement 'home is ... in my migranhood'<sup>39</sup> does not always subvert existing power relations. For indigenous people, whose survival seems to depend on securing and retaining land,<sup>40</sup> it may instead be necessary to say that 'home is here, in the relation between my body and this place'. Though it 'unsettles' sanctioned notions of possession, this claim may be crucial for Aboriginal people currently seeking to heal, rather than further rupture 'home' in Redfern.

### Home on the block

Aboriginal people talk about Redfern as (a) home.<sup>41</sup> In an interview for *Guwany*, a photographic exhibition about Redfern, Shane Phillips, born and raised on the block avers: 'this place is a great place but we have to rebuild it'.<sup>42</sup> Phillips' reference to this 'great place' relates to both the block and, through a generic metonymic relation, to Redfern more generally. Phillips' reference reveals that in Redfern, notions of homeplace, belonging and identity are conceptualised in ways which are simultaneously bounded and unbounded. That is, the block as an 'intense' manifestation of emplacement affirms and enables more general Aboriginal claims to 'home' in Redfern. The block 'belongs' to the AHC who run it. However, it also 'belongs' to the Aboriginal people who live here, none of whom are members of the AHC.<sup>43</sup> The unsettled nature of Aboriginal ownership is encapsulated in the current impasse, where tenants by refusing to move from their homes until new ones are built confound the AHC's desire to renew the block.

In her contribution to the *Guwany* catalogue, Gadigal radio manager and community affiliate, Cathy Craigie, states:

There was a real sense of caring and sharing in Redfern. That sense is still there even though the place has changed ... In the case of West Redfern, there are no mass housing estates and this makes the west side of the railway line an attractive place for investors and new home buyers. Unfortunately for those property investors, or fortunately for the aboriginal community, "the Block" is the obstacle. Remove the Blacks and your house prices will go up!

Frequently, Aboriginal people 'have emphasised emotional "sharing and caring"' in order to constitute their 'difference to whites'.<sup>44</sup> Mitchell considers this is done to counter the 'internalised inferiority' that (because of racism) is often felt to be inseparable from being Aboriginal'.<sup>45</sup> Craigie's formulation of place, which emphasises 'caring and sharing' constructs the bodies of Aboriginal people on the block as 'generating' a particular place — namely a Redfern which is constituted in and by their presence. This embodied togetherness as Edward Casey describes it, is crucial to the creation of homeplace in Redfern and has many of the same positive outcomes as the Aboriginal suffering/caring community identified by Mitchell.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the amorphous nature of this Aboriginal presence cannot be 'captured' within tidy non-Aboriginal frames of reference. Non-Aboriginal attempts to deny the existence of homeplace through the designation of the block as an unlivable ghetto, or drug-infested hell-hole are subverted by the continuing sense of home produced in and by the bodily/placial practices of Aboriginal people. Furthermore, as long as Aboriginal people refuse to concur that the block is the *only* locus of home in Redfern, the block continues to represent not home's containment but a concrete denial of this possibility.

This formulation of place, the unbounded yet solidly embedded belonging, can be related to contemporary theorisations of third space or third time-space. The third time-space is said to signal 'phenomena too heterogeneous ... and discontinuous for fixity, while remaining anchored in the politics of history/location'.<sup>47</sup> Aboriginal people in Redfern have created (what can be conceptualised as) a third time-space which occupies an interstitial position between 'non-synchronic fragments and essentialist nostalgia'.<sup>48</sup> Confounding prescribed notions of place, this designation suggests a refusal to resolve issues of home and belonging in any final way. Through its definite content and form, the block lends a resonance to Aboriginal claims to homeplace in Redfern. The people who have lived, worked and visited here have a focus around which to articulate their attachment to the area as a whole. Native title law echoes and is challenged in this place which exists in the gap between bounded and unbounded, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

### **Dwelling Persons/Lived Places**

The different mappings of belonging, identity and place in Redfern highlight the need to theorise homeplace in ways which allow for a meeting of the concrete and the unbounded. Casey's focus on the body as itself a heterogeneous place and condition of emplacement assists this project. Casey suggests a focus on 'persons-

in-places', a phenomenon which can be intimately connected to concepts of Redfern as an Aboriginal homeplace:

Instead of thinking of places as causing people to have certain individual and social characteristics, or simply the reverse, we should concentrate instead on the single complex unit, "persons-in-places". Persons who live in places — who inhabit or reinhabit them — come to share features with the local landscape, but equally so, they make a difference to, perhaps indelibly mark, the land in which they dwell.<sup>49</sup>

Casey proposes that 'a home can be experienced at one and the same time as perfectly amicable, at another time as hostile, yet it remains one and the same place *through* these vicissitudes and not just despite them' (his emphasis).<sup>50</sup> As with the third time-space, this categorisation sees 'home' as that which borrows but does not replicate essentialist notions — that is, home is 'one and the same place'. In addition home is experienced as such *through* mutability or vicissitudes: and in Casey's view, these vicissitudes are bodily.

Demonstrating the crucial role of the body in implacement, Casey suggests that through the late modern effort to associate place with the human body, place comes into focus in a manner which is 'virtually unprecedented'.<sup>51</sup> Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's concept of the customary body, Casey argues that there is an 'intimate link' between places' own abiding familiarity and our corporeal habituality. He suggests that bodies (ascribed intentionality by Merleau-Ponty) know 'places by virtue of their direct (and continuing) acquaintance with them'.<sup>52</sup> Casey argues that it is by virtue of this customary body that I can know my way around all the familiar places of my 'habitat', that is: 'habitual bodily memory (which underlies an entire set of accustomed and skilful actions) combines with awareness of place to bring about a circumstance in which 'being is synonymous with being situated'.<sup>53</sup> Analysing the mutual sets of relations between bodies and places, Casey shows how here and there, near and far, right and left, front and back, up and down are given shape and meaning through the lived body in place. Far from being static and fixed these will differ between and even within bodies. Furthermore, they are as much a part of the place-world as of the body's dimensions and directions.<sup>54</sup> Implacement has bodily origins, however, because the animated and changing body is the means by which we move into and around in place, it is not possible to conceive of place as a static, simply positional or pre-given entity. Far from being a mere thing or a determinate presence in place, the lived body is that which enables and indeed is an active and constitutive presence in the places in which it also moves.<sup>55</sup> The many individuals who return repeatedly to the block confirm that 'it is the remembering body ... which brings us back into place'.<sup>56</sup>

Counterposing place against both time and space, Casey argues that the 'subordination of place to space culminates in the seventeenth century' and that the 'subordination of space to time continues during the next two and a half centuries'.<sup>57</sup> This subordination helps to explain *terra nullius* as the denial of persons-in-places, Australia's foundational lie. Moreover, the view of the eighteenth century non-Aboriginal invaders that land not used for agriculture was undifferentiated and homogenous space<sup>58</sup> can be seen as a precursor to the current denial of Aboriginal homeplace in Redfern. In viewing the land as *terra nullius* the colonisers constructed Aboriginal bodies as insignificant precisely because they were seen as bearing no



relationship to place. When Aboriginal bodies in the city are interpreted as signifying displacement, such assumptions are repeated and the attack on Aboriginal persons-in-places continues. It is continuity, rather than severance which characterises the relation between incipient and contemporary responses to Aboriginal implacement.

Rose avers: 'the past is not so much that which has already happened, as it is a label to be applied to that which we wish to finish and forget'.<sup>59</sup> 'Past' and present discourses — philosophical, political and personal — reflect the fact that place is almost invariably suppressed in our apprehensions of and responses to the world. The threat of Aboriginal placement and the subsequent devaluation of this, in and through discourses about Aboriginal persons' bodily relation to place, binds together the only seemingly variant threads of colonisation.

Indigenous rights advocate Michael Dodson has pointed out that the 'relationship we draw with our past is not to be confused with the relationships with the past that have been imposed upon us. One is an act of resistance, the other is a tool in the politics of domination and oppression'.<sup>60</sup> Casey's notion of co-habitancy usefully applies to this concept and the situation on the block. The term describes a 'special kind of co-existence between ... humans and the land ... the natural and the cultural and between one's contemporaries and one's ancestors'.<sup>61</sup> Involving the effort to 'make peace'<sup>62</sup> with the 'past' — including the past which is invariably 'present' in places, co-habitancy belies distinctions between the traditional and the modern, allowing 'new forms of possession'.<sup>63</sup> Demonstrating that Aboriginality, as well as being produced through discourses about home, is an embodied circumstance, co-habitancy might be implemented to articulate the connections between contemporary Aboriginal implacement in Redfern and long-established versions of Aboriginal land-belonging.

From this perspective, there is no romantic return to pre-colonial land-people relations, nor any going back on the fact that non-Aboriginal people — unwittingly or otherwise — have taken part in the fostering of Eurocentric ideals of place-affiliation which appear to have more to do with bodies-in-space than persons-in-places. Rather, it becomes necessary to reflect on the nature and quality of place-animation in places such as Redfern.

The physical fabric of the block discourages romanticising. Nevertheless, Casey exhorts us to recall that while the reality of home may be tyrannous, 'it can also be the place of most effective and lasting resistance to the tyranny of sites'.<sup>64</sup> Place contained within a lived and animated body is expansive and open, rather than fixed and closed. Thus, Aboriginal implacement in Redfern need not be thought in bounded and unambiguous terms. Through its relation to the lived body, the block can be thought of as a homeplace, which, though mutable, enables Aboriginal belonging.

### Conclusion

In Redfern, denying persons-in-place serves some more than others. As such it is right to be sceptical when places like the block are reductively represented either as slums or 'sites' devoid of 'culture'. The denial of persons-in-places is almost invariably related to the desire to usurp what is in fact known and recognised to be a place for those who, by virtue of their particular and particularising embodiment, are an intimate part of a place's *genius loci*. Because 'home, for many people on the margins ... is that which (they) cannot not want',<sup>65</sup> I have sought to demonstrate how the concept

persons-in-places may assist efforts to rethink some Aboriginal people's desire to remain living on the block.

Smadar Lavie notes: 'some homes become borderzone tents and then disappear. Other homes do not exist in the first place, as far as the dominant group is concerned. It is precisely because such homes do not exist that the Eurocentre dynamites them'.<sup>66</sup> In Australia, where home has been highly contested for more than two centuries, perhaps it is dynamited because it *does* exist. For all its vicissitudes, the block is not a disappearing borderzone tent. In order to develop strategies for healing 'wounded landscapes' and suffering bodies, it is necessary to attend to home as this is evinced in Redfern.

*Notes on pages 187-189*