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Frontier imaginings and subversive Indigenous spatialities

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A B S T R A C T

One of the most powerful and enduring aspects of publicly projected Anglo-Australian national identities is part of what [Howitt, R., 2001. Frontiers borders, edges: liminal challenges to the hegemony of exclusion. Australian Geographical Studies 39, 233–245.] has referred to as frontier imaginings: the carving out of the Australian physical and socio-cultural landscape into familiar, settled, and productive spaces. These frontier imaginaries have been leveraged to exact social control and 'zealously order rural space' [Philo, C., 1992. Neglected rural geographies: a review. Journal of Rural Studies 8, 193–207, 197]. Government policy has historically been imbued with frontier imaginaries, privileging population movements that are constructed as appropriately bounded, and disciplining those which are not. Much Indigenous mobility falls into the latter category. This paper tells a story of competing rationalities about the purpose and nature of rural 'settlement', both past and present, and the implications of these rationalities for contemporary Indigenous population dynamics. In so doing, it creates a discursive space for examining the cultural content and hidden assumptions in constructions of appropriate 'settlement patterns'. Ultimately, it speaks of spatial struggles across the Australian geographical and temporal landscape. It also opens windows onto the fragile geographies of co-existence that need to be engaged with to shift the discourses of rural livelihood and well being toward discourses of accommodation, recognition and sustainable ways of being together.

1. Introduction

The mythic outback of Australia's bush poets and tourism promotion has always included elements of rurality – albeit often transformed by hostile and alien environmental conditions into the unfathomable strangeness that Gelder and Jacobs (1995, 1998) seminally rendered as uncanny. Settler narratives of successful expansion and occupation of the Australian frontier have nurtured images of harsh, arid, empty and unpredictable nature being subdued (somewhat problematically in relation, for example, to water and soil fertility) and harnessed. These narratives speak of a tough breed of battlers, workers and dreamers who laboured to establish a foundation upon which the nation could be built and by which it would survive. Such narratives and imagery are sustained and reinforced through iconic Australian art: through songs and poetry such as Banjo Paterson's legendary *Waltzing Matilda* and *The Man from Snowy River* (Paterson, 1924, 1953); and through the stories and paintings of infamous bush characters such as Ned Kelly (see e.g. Brown, 1980). Implicitly, Australian outback mythologies are rooted in heroic stories of settlement in adversity, and celebrate a process of transformation. From the untamed wilderness emerged familiar countrysides: ordered, owned, occupied and productive landscapes of rural endeavour.

Gill (2005) argues that while these 'outback mythologies' and settler narratives have been mobilised to invoke a sense of national unity, they are almost always exclusionary. As is the case for sub-populations that are not neatly accommodated within the persistent and powerful meta-narrative of the rural idyll (see for example Bunce, 2003; Cloke et al., 2000, 2003; Halfacree, 1996; Holloway, 2007; Matthews et al., 2000; Philo, 1992), those who do not conform to these images of Australian rurality are often marginalised, silenced and erased. Gibson and Davidson (2004, p. 389) note, for example, that although dynamic across time, notions of Australian rurality have 'ignored and/or erased indigenous meanings of place and landscape'. Indeed these images and outback mythologies often naturalise erasure, absence and denial of the Indigenous, precluding the concepts of persistent Indigenous presence and possession in rural Australia.

In North America, frontier narratives marginalised Native American peoples. For example, Native Americans were largely

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incidental to Frederick Jackson Turner's seminal 'Frontier Thesis' (White, 1994). For Turner, the American frontier emerged at the intersection of social and physical spaces: where progressive westward pioneering saw the taming of the wilderness and the simultaneous evolution of a distinctive and independent American identity (Turner, 1961). Native Americans appear only sporadically in Turner's analysis. There are references to the disintegration of a primitive Indian life as trading expanded across the country, and passing mentions of 'Indians' as 'consolidating agents' that unified diverse settling groups in an effort to control and contain them. However, as White (1994) argues, Jackson's emphasis was on the taming of nature. Native Americans were at the margins of his larger story of the birth of the America nation through the conquest of western wildernesses. By contrast, Buffalo Bill placed Native Americans at the centre of his frontier narrative, frequently casting 'Indians' as vicious villains and white settlers as heroic and ultimately triumphant in the epic but inevitably finite story of the American frontier (White, 1994). Although contrasting, both frontier narratives marginalised and caricatured Native Americans, positioning them as incidental or antithetical to American story and identity.

Similarly, enduring settler imaginings about the nature of Australian rurality – discovered, claimed, tamed, settled, transformed and economically productive – have authorised those whose presence they legitimise, to write, order and dominate space (see also Cloke and Little, 1997; Sibley, 1995). They give powerful, tangible expression to the realities of Indigenous 'Otherness' in Australian rural contexts. They also frequently constitute Indigenous interests and lived experience as outside of (and at times even hostile to) the national interest (Gill, 2005; Howitt, 1991, 2001).

In this paper, we argue that Australian landscapes have been written, ordered and dominated in particular ways that render Indigenous Australians as always out of place. In one of the more potent geographical imaginings of the Australian colonial project, three domains – urban, rural and wilderness – emerged in the early frontier consciousness and were designated as either Indigenous or non-Indigenous spaces. In large part, these constructed geographies – what we refer to as 'frontier imaginings' – persist in popular discourses which insist that the Indigenous Other is somehow antithetical to and inauthentic in the places that constitute both the urban and the rural. They narrate the Indigenous as authentic only in historical, 'wilderness' spaces; and as defined by dispossession and loss. And, in rendering Indigenous people always out of place, these frontier imaginings foster continuing erasure of Indigenous rights, lived experiences, and opportunities. This 'zealous ordering of the rural space' (Philo, 1992, p. 197) is pivotal in both defining and policing 'normal' and 'deviant' spatial behaviours (Sibley, 1995).

1.1. Subversive spatialities

Indigenous people's culturally framed spatial practices are often described and defined as particularly subversive to and problematic for the State. Contemporary Indigenous spatialities encompass continuing connections to family, country and culture, whether people live in urban, rural or remote localities, and regardless of the visibility or meaning of these connections within the interpretative frameworks of mainstream, dominant settler society. These complex Indigenous geographies are often represented as chaotic and irrational, juxtaposed with the imagined order and discipline of rural landscapes. Temporary mobility, in particular, is constructed in the dominant culture as characteristic of Indigenous non-conformity to mainstream norms.

Constructions of frequent and unpredictable (at least for the dominant culture) mobility as deviant are common to many nomadically-based cultures. Bancroft (2001, p. 147–148), for example, explains that the European ordering of space functions to exclude Gypsy-travellers and Roma because of their failure to conform to European settlement expectations. In fact, most historically 'nomadic' societies have been, and continue to be, constructed within their nation-states as deviant with common references to 'the Bedouin problem', 'the Roma problem', and 'the Aboriginal problem'. Surprisingly however, the relationship between mobility, frontier imaginings, and State censorship, has received little scholarship in settler-states with Indigenous hunter-gatherer populations. Here, there is a lingering disconnect between population geography and social construction theory (Wilson and Peters, 2005).

This paper seeks to address the schism. It connects contemporary Indigenous struggles for co-existence in rural Australia to the historical and enduring influence of frontier imaginings on State responses to Indigenous spatialities. We begin with a brief descriptive overview of contemporary Indigenous spatialities and how they are rendered Other within mainstream contexts. Then, following Little (1999, p.441) who has advocated a greater focus on the 'finer detail and complexities of marginalisation', we present a systematic historical analysis that builds on Smith's (1980) broad sketch of the relationship between government policy and Indigenous spatialities. Through four broad policy eras – which we refer to as 'Protection and Separation', 'Assimilation', 'Self-determination', and most recently, 'Mainstreaming' – we trace how Australian governments have assumed the right to discipline Indigenous spatialities. This historical device allows us to build a strong and focussed narrative of how State legislation and practice, driven by frontier imaginings and regardless of intent, has progressively and fundamentally undermined the spatial fabric of Indigenous society. We also explore how Indigenous responses to settlement, ordering, possession and ejection of their interests from both real and imagined landscapes, have challenged frontier imaginings and shaped contemporary spatial struggles.

This discussion of historical policy and Indigenous responses returns us to our present-day context. Here we connect historical frontier imaginings and subsequent State intervention with a contemporary context in which Indigenous Australians are metaphorically snookered: they are left with few legitimated spatial choices, effectively, always out of place. In concluding, we look to the future. In so doing, we hope to open windows of understanding on the fragile geographies of co-existence that need to be engaged with to shift the discourses of rural livelihood and well-being toward discourses of accommodation, recognition and sustainable ways of being-together in cultural landscapes that are shared – even when they have been narrated into being as spaces of erasure, exclusion and antipathy. The recent articulation of a national apology to Indigenous people by the Australian Prime Minister (Rudd, 2008) has opened such windows in the policy domain, and we seek to link our own efforts to the challenges represented by his gesture.

Woven through this narrative is a selection of interview excerpts from Prout's (2007) PhD research in Western Australia's Midwest. The research sought to illuminate the complexities of the entangled relationship between Indigenous temporary mobility and the delivery of mainstream services such as health, housing and education. Excerpts presented here are drawn from a pool of 52 interviews with Indigenous and non-Indigenous research participants who were asked about their own experiences and perspectives of Indigenous mobility in the region. Indigenous interviewees told their own spatial stories (through time) and provided their insights regarding the impact of government policy on their mobility practices. Non-Indigenous interviewees were asked specifically about their perspectives of Indigenous mobility in the region, and its relationship to service delivery (for more methodological detail see Prout, 2009).