

Savagery & Urbanity:

Struggles over Aboriginal Housing, Redfern, 1970-73

Kay Anderson



Savagery and Urbanity: *Struggles over Aboriginal Housing,* *Redfern, 1970-73*

Kay Anderson

Introduction

Among the numerous oversimplified judgments of Aboriginals in White Australian history and culture have been those designating their 'proper place' as the open spaces of country. Out there, in the 'back of beyond', Aboriginals have been seen as coming into their authentic own, tribal and natural. When set against the proud monument of 'the city', they have signified the embodiment of either (or both) pre-modern backwardness or primal innocence. Such judgments have been all the more invidious in representing Aboriginals not only as inferior peoples, somehow ill-qualified for the (high and low) culture that 'the city' came to signify in the long and uneven Western experience of urbanity; they were also construed by early Anglo settlers and scientists to Australia as bearers of an *anterior* stage of human development. That is, aboriginality (with a lower case 'a') became conceived as a *condition*, one synonymous with a nether-world of 'deep time' back 'then' when humanity lived in what was called 'a state of nature'.

Certain things followed from this evolutionary thinking for the 'urban' Aboriginal whose displacements and regroupings are of interest to this volume. The notion of an infantilised Aboriginality had implications for a diverse set of people, including the so-called fringe dwellers who lived on the margins of Australia's town centres from at least the 1930s; those brought into White homes as children from the 1920s; those scattered throughout public housing in the metropolitan centres; or those inhabiting 'city missions', as the Sydney suburb of Redfern came to be defined by Aboriginals from the 1970s (Gale 1972; Keen 1988; Rowley 1972). These people—'returning' to the city without, in a sense, ever having left it, or at least the lands that came to support urban centres—presented a rupture to some of the cherished spatialised imaginings of non-Aboriginal Australians. They signalled a disturbance to the progressivist myths and means through which White Australians registered their presence in the Great South Land.

The conceits that lay buried in judgments about aboriginality account in no small measure for the profoundly conflictual encounters throughout colonial Australia, about which so much has been written (e.g. Reynolds 1989, 1998; Rowse 1998). And yet, as I wish to suggest in framing an account of a recent struggle over Aboriginal entitlement to the sacred spaces of central Sydney in the 1970s,¹ more still can be said about the cultural character of colonialism when that foundational construct of ‘the city’ is itself interrogated more closely and critically.² This is the challenge I have set myself in this chapter. In substantive terms, the chapter records the conflict over an Aboriginal housing scheme at the site known as ‘the Block’ in the Sydney suburb of Redfern. Located at the heart of metropolitan, capitalist Australia, the struggle of Aboriginals to (re)claim the Block from middle class redevelopment was intensely contested.

But, as suggested, my interest is not only in charting the details and players in that heated battle, but also in contextualising the conflict over Aboriginal claims on central city space in the light of tensions between urbanity and Aboriginality. More specifically I wish to make sense of the intensity of that struggle, less within the (by now) extensively critiqued discursive field of ‘race’ and racism, and less still, within the paradigm of prejudice and discrimination employed by writers on urban Aboriginality in the 1970s (e.g. Stevens 1972). As post-colonial and other scholars have recently argued, such perspectives risk reinscribing the very racialised identities and stories of otherness that they seek to displace (e.g. Chambers & Curti 1996). I thus wish to explore, in an extended preliminary section of this chapter, the rhetorical oppositions of ‘savagery’ and ‘civility’ that informed colonialism in Australia and which I will be using to transcend (without discrediting) an earlier ‘race’ account of Redfern (Anderson 1993). These languages, operating in a broader discursive field of ‘culture’ and ‘nature’, rendered³ acutely troubling a politicised Aboriginal presence in central Sydney at a heightened moment in Australian political life.

Savagery, Civility and the City

To return, as I wish to in what follows—to the remote locales of ancient Greece and Rome, the courtly nobility of early modern France, and beyond in time to the inchoate ethnography of Europe’s Renaissance—in a story about a tiny city block in just one of the White hinterlands of European imperialisms, might seem unnecessarily ambitious if not wholly improbable. Certainly there are risks of over-generalisation, of distilling too cavalier a characterisation of complex genealogies of ideas surrounding ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ and their mythologised counterparts, ‘city’ and ‘country’. My intention is not, however, to chart a trajectory of such ideas as if to imply they possessed some linear, transhistorical and global continuity. Such an evolution of ideas might be possible, but neither does my learning permit it nor my aim require it. My concern is rather to supply some alternative discursive materials for driving plots about colonial encounters with

‘difference’ other than the customary scripting of race and racism (e.g. Anderson 1991; Cowlshaw 1988; Trigger 1992).

The body of thought that motivated British and other European extensions into the so-called ‘New World’ was animated by more than eighteenth and nineteenth century notions of racial/biological difference about which we now know a great deal. Nor is the ideological debt for this extension of power exhausted by the complex of beliefs that constituted Christianity, the faith that grew in influence in Europe from the fifteenth century and which provided the justification for many European empires to seek to reclaim the souls of New World Indigenous people. Additionally fundamental, I wish to argue, were early modern notions of ‘unaccommodated humanity’—forms of human existence deemed to be ‘unlearned’ or ‘pre-cultural’—and which were in circulation during the late Middle Ages and beyond to Europe’s Renaissance from the 1490s to the 1620s.

Even a broad-brush distillation of such notions enlarges the field of our imagining about cross-cultural encounters with the unknown. Other authors have already assisted this task. Raymond Williams (1973) and William Cronon (1991) have, in different ways and for different settings, shown how the distinctions of ‘city’ and ‘country’ built on powerful moral dichotomies of civility and savagery that endured well beyond their ancient beginnings. This work can be enlarged upon to explore how notions of savage peoples came to figure in a field of oppositions surrounding culture/nature, and out of which racialised models of humanity emerged.

The Inter-species Border: Delimiting the ‘Human’

The central concerns of Europe’s Middle Ages were articulated in discourses and attributions of savagery, civility, divinity, bestiality and demonism (Axtell 1981). A central axis of this symbolising world was the human–animal contrast and, while in the eleventh century the influence of the early Church was apparent in the premise of a sharp contrast between Human and Animal, confidence in so strict a boundary collapsed over subsequent centuries. By the thirteenth century in France and England, there existed a lively discourse about the inter-species border, one that was fully capable of registering ambivalence, confusion and curiosity. Ambiguous entities such as centurions, mermaids and other figures of sexual transgression entered medieval myth and fable (Davidson 1991). Local ‘freaks’ and ‘monsters’ were those part-human/part-beasts deemed to lack a ‘cultural’ overlay on their ‘natural’ selves. In other words, they were thought to have escaped the cloak of learning that, since ancient conceptions of the Human, was assumed to rest on the animal part of the self. There were also those ‘Wild Men’ of the medieval woods who, as ‘unaccommodated humanity’, led isolated, wandering lives (Dudley & Novak 1972). The ethnography of the early modern period was shaped by powerful curiosity indeed about such hybrid beings (Friedman 1981;

Salisbury 1997). Taxonomies were highly speculative, and informed by attraction as well as repulsion.

Animality, savagery and civility were concepts whose character cannot be separated from efforts to configure the 'human' in European thought. In Greek philosophical writings, especially of Aristotle, the Human had stood in rigid contrast to Animal because He [*sic*] possessed the attribute and agency of Mind. This was the tool through which human potential was presumed to be realised (Blundell 1986; Sorabji 1993) and, by extension, the instrument through which the abject animal state was transcended. Such a state connoted a site within the human self of bodily instincts, while the moral or cultural self was the oppositional self, able to regulate such impulses. The moral self was thus also the advanced self in this bi-polar model of human identity (Ingold 1994). This idea of the divided self—'split' into biological animal and cultural human—persisted into medieval thought, less through the confident speciesism and boundary-marking of the ancients, than through fearful and fanciful invocations of species transgression and hybridity. In this discursive context, notions of bestiality and wildness flourished (Friedman 1981).

In early modern usage, 'savagery' and 'civility' were nouns employed to characterise modes of human existence. They tended to be understood in time-space relation to each other. On the one hand, savagery connoted a rude and uncultivated condition that obtained in human existence before the formation of the 'civis' and stable social order (Hamlin 1995). As such, savagery comprehended 'ignoble' and 'noble' forms. The former, being close to the so-called animal state, connoted fierceness, promiscuity, and idleness. It also implied infantility: so just as the child was to the adult, so was the savage human to the civil. Ignoble savagery was also linked by tradition to views maintaining that remote parts of the world were places where the forces of nature reigned unchecked and the wild growth of plants and animals was matched by that of humans.

By contrast, noble savagery inverted the Judaeo-Christian value structure and equated life in a state of nature with innate goodness, sharing, simplicity, and innocence. Civil society, rather than nature, was understood as the source of corruption on earth. In emphasising positive human attributes, noble savagery approached the idea of civility (see below). But it was fundamentally different in stressing the *unlearned* character of these traits. To be savage was to be untaught. In either form, noble and ignoble, savagery was thought to apply to modes of existence in which there were no social restraints upon instinctual behaviour. Savagery thus prevailed in the absence, for example, of law, commerce, marriage, private property and other cooperative institutions that required settled habits of life. It followed that city living was the ultimate counterpoint of the savage state.

'Civility' by contrast to savagery stressed breeding, refinement and, above all, discipline over the instinctual self. In ancient and pre-modern thought, it was a fundamentally *acquired* attribute implying 'improvement' over brute existence through arts and learning. By the end of the seventeenth century, the concept had weakened considerably into a class-based notion of manners and affectation fine-tuned among

nobles in courtly France (Elias 1982). Such a notion of civility mutated into the idea of 'high culture' that is alive to today. But in the earlier, strong sense of the term, civility was assumed not only to entail capacities for rational thought and written verbal expression, but the practice of living in complex social formations. 'Civility' obtained where the forces of wildness were overcome. For example, the arts of animal husbandry and farming served to 'cultivate' otherwise wild natures and provide the basis for settlement. Civility thus came to imply 'freedom'; the more learned, the more free from the threatening forces of nature, and the more civilised the condition. By extension, and especially with the growth through-out Europe of Protestantism, the more regulation that one could mount over the Human's animal self—the so-called 'beast within' that represented sex and violence—the more 'civilised' the human (Midgley 1979). Laws and forms of political authority were in place in 'civilised' societies that enabled and protected social order, systems of exchange, and private property. In that regard, one might note the paradox that in erecting such elaborate social institutions and moralities around themselves, civilised people thought themselves 'free'.

The City: Freedom and Civility

Surrounded by cultivated land and a zone of 'wilderness' beyond, the city was conceived in Greek and Roman times as the space in which human potential found its supreme realisation (Owens 1991). Walls around the perimeter of city spaces clearly demarcated the 'urban' from the non-urban. 'Savagery' and 'civility' were evaluative attributions that relied on culturally bounded margins, and 'city' and 'country' were their primary referents. At the height of the ancient city's glory, the city was the proudest achievement of (Athenian) democracy where a community of diverse individuals had come to co-exist (Kitto 1951). Later on, Roman cities took on an imperial character as centres of military and political power (Pirenne 1925). Henceforth from Roman times, cultures of European urbanism evolved through complex and differentiated fits and starts that need not be detailed here (see LeGates & Stout 1996; Mumford 1961). But by the eighteenth century, the city was typically read as the embodiment of civilisation itself. The standard categories of Darwinian and colonial anthropology proclaimed that humanity arose from nomadic savagery through village-based barbarism to true civilisation, only when the first cities were established (e.g. see Morgan 1877).

Not that Western discourses of 'the urban' have been immutably triumphal. Under modernity and industrialisation, the city came to be figured less confidently and more complexly at the intersection of two symbolic axes: as the site not only of freedom and desire, but of alienation and decay. It was the space where liberation modulated into depravity; where, far from being realised, human needs could as easily be frustrated (see Smith 1980). The premise of cities as incubators of an advanced human condition persisted (including to today), but the city came to be depicted as a site of contradictory tensions.

The figuring of such tensions (between freedom and savagery) as somehow 'heightened' in the space of the city replay precisely the contradictions and repressions contained within the Western model of the human self described earlier. Recall this is a model in which the bestial self is latent within the civilised (now urbane) self. This 'divided self' is one that has animated increasingly popular psychoanalytic theorisations of the White oppressor's anxieties and desires in contexts of cross-cultural encounter (e.g. McLean 1993; Sibley 1995). Such tensions might, however, be productively understood without following Freud and the tools of psychoanalysis which trace repression of fear and desire back to the frozen chambers of the unconscious. Rather than explore the psychological roots of self-other tensions, the point of departure for this chapter's account is, after Ingold (1994), the *idea* of the divided human self. The characterisation of human identity as 'split' into cultural human and biological animal, with the cultural/moral self in command of the bodily self, can itself be set within Western culture and history. The model owes a debt to the ancient contrasts between mind and body, human and animal, over which became layered the oppositions I have been tracking, of civility and savagery. These networks of ideas require considerably more attention than is possible to devote in the space of a chapter. But my intention here has been to provide a fresh glimpse of a narrative infrastructure that conditioned cross-cultural encounters of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, savagery and civility, remote and urban, in Europe's so-called New World.

Aboriginality and the City

In the preceding sections of this chapter, I have been trying to enlarge the web of ideas that underpinned cultures of colonialism in Australia, by focusing on attributions of savagery and civility that figured in early modern understandings of forms of human existence in ancient and Christian Europe. The diverse encounters of European empires with the New World served to impinge on, and elaborate, these ideas and categories. In that sense, Aboriginality assuredly affected Anglo settlers to Australia; the relation was by no means one way. My intention is not, however, to suggest that classical and medieval traditions of thought flowed smoothly and evenly into all European colonial models of racialised humanity. It is rather to take the narrative resources offered by such discourses to shape new accounts of cross-cultural encounters.

The peculiar tensions presented, for example, by the savage in the city lend themselves to such fresh scripting. European understandings of the culturally unfamiliar relied on discursive systems other than 'race'. Alternative symbolic force fields turn a spotlight not only onto racialised rhetorics, but also provinces of meaning that opposed the 'cultural' and the 'natural', the civil and the savage, the city and the country. These fields were understood in non-Aboriginal thought as occupying a specific set of time-space positionings; that is, they were conceived not only spatially, but developmentally. Non-Aboriginal responses to those 'savages' seeking to assert a collective

metropolitan presence must also be understood against the back-drop of the contradictory figurings of the civilised face and degenerate underbelly of the city under modernity.

In what follows, I frame an account of a specific conflict over Aboriginal housing in an Australian city in the early 1970s around the cultural residues of savagery (noble and ignoble) and civility. For some non-Aboriginal allies, we shall see, the urban Aborigine offered to individualistic Australia an image of the noble face of propertyless existence. As for the vocal non-Aboriginal critics of the housing scheme, part of the intensity of their response can be explained in terms of the loss of hermetic distinctiveness of nature/culture, city/country oppositions for people who had themselves never been entirely convinced of their place in Australia. Unlike the zoos and parks that from the nineteenth century brought aestheticised nature to colonial metropolitan audiences, the urban Aborigine did not signify domesticated savagery (Anderson 1995). Such *untutored* city-dwellers entailed a most incongruous presence. Not only did they dislodge wildness from its linear scripting as a relic of pre-modern space, they ruptured the everyday conventions of domesticity and conduct (read civility) that had long been assumed as mundane to urban existence. Ultimately, I will be suggesting that the urban Aborigine triggered tensions that resided not in the collective settler unconscious, nor only in the discourse of race, but also within the model of the divided human self, one which can itself be confronted and changed. I wish to demonstrate these arguments by now turning from the broad-brush treatment of framing ideas, to the details of one conflict at the heart of Australia's premier city.

Aboriginal People in Central Sydney, c.1930-70

During the 1930s, as the myth of White Australia flourished and rural recession in New South Wales deepened, Aboriginal people in a number of reserves throughout the state migrated to Sydney in search of job opportunities and fresh beginnings (Parbury 1986). The movement set in train a flow of migrants from diverse backgrounds who were attracted to the cheap housing, unskilled employment, and transport opportunities afforded by central, working class neighbourhoods such as Redfern. By 1971, there were between four and nine thousand Aboriginals living in inner Sydney, the large majority of whom were 'living in the worst housing conditions', according to an officer from the local welfare organisation, South Sydney Community Aid.⁴ A Commonwealth Office of Aboriginal Affairs survey in 1971 discovered problems as serious as malnutrition among the city's Aboriginal population, attributing it less to discrimination in the housing market than to unsanitary living conditions.⁵ The attention of the first federal agency concerned with Aboriginal affairs was focused by these investigations but, as we shall see, no formal action was taken until a new government was elected late in 1972.

Not that South Sydney's Aboriginals were inclined to wait for bureaucratic interventions on their behalf. In 1971 the first Aboriginal community-based services to

be established in Australia were opened in Redfern by activists who sought to address through their own efforts the plight of inner Sydney's Aboriginals. Most notably, the Aboriginal Legal Service and the Aboriginal Medical Service were set up—in the face of much opposition from the Council of the City of South Sydney (about which more later)—to manage the urgent problems of police harassment and poor health of their clientele. These agencies provided the impetus for Aboriginal assertiveness and for a collective idea original activist Gary Williams could say: 'Redfern is the heart and Redfern is the community ... At the moment, Redfern is where it is happening'.⁶ It was the lack of access to shelter that was the primary source of vulnerability for inner Sydney's Aboriginals, however, as a group of concerned locals were to find late in 1972.

Violating Conventions of Civility: Savagery in the City

The practice of squatting in vacant premises was a popular mode of existence for many inner Sydney Aboriginals in the 1950s and 1960s. This precarious lifestyle brought them into frequent contact not only with land-interested groups, but also with law enforcement agencies including police and the courts. One encounter in late October 1972 saw police arrest and charge with trespassing a group of some fifteen Aboriginal squatters who had taken refuge in derelict premises awaiting redevelopment in Redfern's Louis Street. A bitter trial ensued, and a verdict eventually returned that would have, if unchallenged, confined the squatters to an extended period of shelter in the Redfern jail.

At the nearby Redfern Presbytery two non-Aboriginal priests known to the squatters' lawyer saw an opportunity to politicise the Aboriginals' plight in the context of rising concern, from some quarters of Australian society, about the status of Aboriginals. Aboriginal demands for land rights, employment, and access to education and health were also beginning to filter into media and government circles. The priests sought to connect themselves with critiques emerging in new Left politics in the late 1960s (Docker 1988), though their immediate concern was Sydney's Catholic Church establishment, an institution which in the priests' eyes had become insulated from human rights concerns. The convicted Aboriginals became the priests' *cause célèbre*, and on hearing the guilty verdict at the Redfern courthouse they offered to make available the church's school hall for the temporary shelter of the homeless men. An emergency refuge supplying food, medicine, shelter and acceptance was soon opened at the hall, funded by the proceeds of a bottle collection operation that the Aboriginals themselves undertook.

Before long the presbytery's unconventional hostel attracted the notice of other Aboriginals, and within weeks over fifty had made a new home of the church hall. The refuge also caught the attention of local non-Aboriginal residents, some of whom included members of the Council of the City of South Sydney. Vocal among them were

Aldermen Terry Murphy and Keith Challenger, who set out to break the alliances being forged at the church hall. Their strategies included scrutiny of the hostel for compliance with council by-laws, and within weeks council declared the hall a 'danger to children and community health' and had found a pretext in the lodging house by-law to serve an eviction notice on the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney.⁷ Consistent with White conventions of civility/savagery, there were charges of promiscuous behaviour and nudity; the hall was deemed a violation of privacy, self-respect, acceptable living arrangements, and 'proper standards of cleanliness and conduct'. The trustees of the church were given seven days to cease residential use of the school hall. In so doing, they provoked a campaign for Black housing that would defiantly bypass local (and state) government agencies and seek to attract to its cause more powerful allies in the national capital.

Noble Savagery in Redfern: Aboriginal Activists and Non-Aboriginal Allies

The priests and Aboriginal activists who ran the hostel operation at the Redfern presbytery knew well that they were plunged into a micro conflict with an entrenched social order. When South Sydney councillors refused to entertain a proposal for housing for the homeless Aborigines somewhere in their constituency on the grounds that 'encouragement of this nature would bring others into the municipality',⁸ a few members of the presbytery team sought to pressure the elected officials of South Sydney. Father John Butcher met with the mayor on 15 November 1972 to ask: 'What is this council going to do about this? What are politicians going to do? Rich developers are buying up land and forcing these people out ... What is anybody going to do about the Aborigines?'.⁹ Mayor Hartup insisted the matter was one for the State Housing Commission, but two weeks later, following a visit by the priests to the housing commissioner, Father Ted Kennedy told council in committee: 'The Aboriginal group regards itself as one family ... They do not want to be broken up but want communal housing'.¹⁰

Enquiries in the latter part of 1972 by the presbytery intelligence revealed that a single developer had bought a row of terraces in nearby Louis Street with a view to upgrading them for middle income residential use. The possibility the vacant terraces presented was quickly absorbed by the squatters and priests. Father Ted Kennedy saw the potential for an alternative model of housing for people 'not fully acquainted with city living' (echoes of untutored savagery) (Ted Kennedy, pers. comm., June 1991). The terraces also afforded the possibility of a territorial base from which to launch an agitation. Furthermore, the terraces were located, Kennedy observed, in full view of passing White passengers to Sydney's Central Station. The political significance of an Aboriginal settlement at the heart of Australia's premier city was not lost on the presbytery activists. In the ferment of the early 1970s, when communitarian thinking

infused many quarters (e.g. see Head & Walter 1988), the priests anticipated that a 'Black commune' (in the priests' words) would send a pointed message to individualistic White Australia. In Kennedy's view, the Aboriginal stood as a reminder (if not remnant) of a propertyless simplicity from which other cultures had departed to their detriment. The view fuelled the sense of purpose of the activists who quickly set about making strategic contacts to Commonwealth officials and to the New South Wales trade union movement.

The newly formed Aboriginal Housing Committee (AHC), consisting at this stage exclusively of Aboriginals, found a receptive ear in H.C. Coombs, Chair of the Commonwealth Office of Aboriginal Affairs, in an otherwise uninterested bureaucracy. Coombs' office had been formed in 1967 under the Liberal administration of Harold Holt and it had begun the task of compiling information, for the first time, on the status and conditions of Australia's Indigenous population. However, following Holt's death in 1967, there had been little support for the activities of the office from Holt's successor, John Gorton, nor his Minister-in-charge of Aboriginal Affairs, William Wentworth (Coombs 1978: ch. 1). Thus, by late 1972, when a mood swing was beginning to infiltrate Canberra's political circles, the frustrated members of the office were fully primed for action. A delegation from Redfern met with Coombs in December 1972, and there soon followed a written submission from the AHC calling for 'extended housing' in Redfern.¹¹

Just as Redfern's destitute Aboriginals were a *cause célèbre* for priests seeking to critique settler individualism and materialism, so did elements in the New South Wales trade union movement see an opportunity to etch their mark in the labour movement by supporting the Aboriginal oppressed. The class-based alliance was to prove particularly effective for the 'Black commune' initiative. Like the priests' projections, it connected with ideas within the persistent tradition of European thought described earlier as 'noble savagery'. Bob Pringle, president of the radical Builders Labourers Federation (BLF), was especially well versed in socialist critiques of capitalism that were increasingly influential in new Left movements. In the Aboriginal squatters, Pringle saw an opportunity to support a project that afforded a 'socialist alternative' to the proposed 'capitalist development' for Louis Street (cited in Bellar 1976: 23). Armed with this construct, Pringle placed pressure on Ian Kiernan, owner/developer of the terraces in Louis Street, to offer his houses for the temporary occupation of the presbytery evacuees (Ian Kiernan, pers. comm., June 1991). Indeed, Pringle went further, threatening Kiernan with a work ban on his future terrace redevelopment project—and all the developer's other Sydney projects—in exchange for some of his Louis Street terraces. The developer eventually capitulated to pressure, and signed documents freeing two of his houses for the squatters who now possessed rights to occupy the terraces and deflect police harassment.

The significance of this intervention in the trajectory of modern urban transformation was not lost on the AHC whose sense of defiance appeared to swell by the day. Bob Bellar, president of the committee, announced Kiernan's offerings were

'uninhabitable', and the squatters' own 'mop and bucket brigade' showed themselves quite capable of adhering to prevailing living conventions by bringing two of Kiernan's better terraces up to by-law standard. 'We are making a stand for Aboriginal land rights', announced Belleair to the press. 'This will be Sydney's Aboriginal Embassy.' Other houses would be 'taken over', Belleair threatened, 'until the Labor government gives Aborigines better homes' (*Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 30 December 1972).

The oppositional appeals from Redfern were not only heard but enthusiastically embraced in Canberra where a new Labor government under Gough Whitlam swept to federal office in December 1972. At the seat of federal parliament, the grassroots agitation registered with the emerging slogan of 'self-determination' that was creeping into official parlance and discrediting the older management philosophy of 'assimilation'. A new Ministry of Urban and Regional Affairs could also find merit in a project based on 'rehabilitation' of existing housing in Australia's cities. This was the language with which that ministry sought to distance itself from the discourse of 'slum clearance' prevailing in Australian planning circles since the 1950s. The Redfern agitation could thus be drawn into more inclusive political agendas, and by January 1973, Gordon Bryant, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, saw fit to view for himself the efforts of the local mop and bucket brigade.

By the time of Bryant's visit, some forty-five Aboriginal members of the clean-up campaign were occupying three of the developer's houses (*Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 2 January 1973). The minister gave the activists a favourable hearing, and before leaving the site encouraged the housing committee to lodge a formal application for Commonwealth funding for a 'cooperative housing scheme' in the block bound by Louis, Caroline, Eveleigh and Vine Streets. This it did, as well as recruiting an architect who, like other actors we have seen, sought to legitimise his involvement in language consistent with a remote and idealised aboriginality. Colin James, a graduate of Harvard University, appealed to the rhetoric of communalism in extending his support to the AHC. 'It is very natural for Aborigines to share their resources', said James, whose design proposed, despite the diverse regional and ethnic origins of Redfern's Aborigines, to combine all the backyards of the terraces in the block into a communal area.¹² Thus inscribed within the proposal were notions of pre-modern aboriginality that equated it with sharing and tradition, notions to which the Black activists in Redfern keenly appealed. (By 1980, when tenant complaints about violence and vandalism in the area were increasing, tall corrugated iron fences were restored to each backyard.)

Ignoble Savagery in Redfern: Non-Aboriginal Critics

What might have been a mark of pre-modern virtue in the eyes of the visiting federal minister was more ominous for other government officials. The unannounced ministerial visit from Canberra bristled the vigilant aldermen at the Council of the City of South Sydney, and within weeks they were rallying their own campaign of resistance that

invoked quite different constructs of savagery. The critics' interpretation of aboriginality departed widely from the resurgent Aboriginality being invoked by the activists, but it was one no less strenuously called up and wielded. For the Labor aldermen who formed a majority on the South Sydney council, and in particular Terry Murphy and Keith Challenger (whom we met earlier in the story), the proposal to house Aboriginal squatters foreshadowed an unruly 'ghetto' which would 'encourage Aboriginal people who are disadvantaged to come into South Sydney which lacks suitable accommodation for such people'.¹³ The council set about obstructing the project as follows. First, it required Ian Kiernan (the owner/developer) to 'clean up' all the buildings then in use by the refugees from the church hall. Second, Kiernan's application for renovations to the Louis Street properties was approved on the one condition that—echoes of Eurocentric definitions of civility and domesticity—each of the premises provide for single family housing.

The major effort of the aldermen, however, was directed at rallying the opposition of local non-Aboriginal ratepayers. At least two of the councillors did not merely react to local public sentiment, they actively sponsored it. A field officer of the New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Welfare noted the council's proactive role, observing that 'the council has as its images of Aborigines, age old stereotypes such as drunkenness [*sic*], immorality, lack of self discipline and community pride ... [T]he greatest amount of opposition toward the project stems from the aldermen themselves'.¹⁴ Note less the crude racism here (about which much Australian scholarship exists) than the more specific presumptions about Aborigines' lack of self-control, their base drives and absence of civilised manners.

By March 1973, the South Sydney Residents' Protection Movement had formed to fight, in its words, the 'festering sore' at Louis Street. A petition to the prime minister traded boldly in the historically established discourses of ignoble savagery that were circulating in Australian society in the 1970s. Aborigines were dirty, undisciplined, unable to overcome temptations to drink, promiscuous, and generally unlearned in 'proper' ways of living. These images were appropriated to support the movement's position as follows:

We the undersigned [226] residents of South Sydney vociferously protest, object and condemn the establishment of the ghetto in Louis and Caroline Streets by the Aborigines who have squatted in these properties ... We want the Aboriginal ghetto stopped now—for if allowed to continue it will spread like the plague throughout the entire South Sydney area.¹⁵

If the non-Aboriginal ratepayers of South Sydney were the Labor aldermen's hold on local power, a mutually strategic arrangement was certainly being struck in these negative portrayals of Aboriginality. One group of residents assured Mayor Hartup in April 1973, in words that were richly resonant not only of racism but also, more precisely, of animality allusions within discourses of ignoble savagery: 'We fully support you, sir, and

the South Sydney Municipal Council that a ... human zoo should not be allowed in this area'.¹⁶

Yet as we have seen, Aboriginal Redfern was being constructed out of federally empowered discourses as well as locally generated ones. Minister Bryant simply deflected criticism about the project from South Sydney with appeals to his government's self-determination platform, an agenda which took as one of its cues 'the re-awakening in Redfern of Aboriginal confidence'.¹⁷ A bureaucrat in Bryant's office went further and informed Mayor Hartup that the federal government was committed to the project 'whether Council liked it or not'.¹⁸

Not that local opinion was without effect. When South Sydney councillors learned that the owner/developer of the Louis Street holdings had held negotiations with Commonwealth officials over their sale, council invoked the image of mob rule in its locality. It recommended that 'the situation in the Louis and Caroline Street area be referred to the Commissioner of Police with a recommendation that the area be regularly and frequently patrolled to ensure that the local ratepayers are free from molestation and the impact of anti-social behaviour'.¹⁹ Police scrutiny of the occupied terraces was intense from late 1972 into 1973, with many violent confrontations and arrests (Kaye and Bob Bellear, Dick Blair, Colin James, Dick Hall, pers. comm., June 1991).

Council also used its powers to full extent by refusing building applications for further renovations to houses in the area—a move designed to prohibit the occupation and upgrading by Aboriginals of extra terraces in Louis Street. It also spoke out against the spectre of Commonwealth intervention in local affairs, as did branches of the Australian Labor Party in constituencies close to Redfern. Pat Hills, state representative for Redfern in the New South Wales parliament, also condemned the exercise of federal muscle in the area. So did the federal member for Redfern, Jim Cope, who refused to recognise Aboriginals as his constituents. Claiming that they could neither be expected to understand the virtues of city life nor cope with urban vices, he saw no future in a pocket of Aboriginal housing in central Sydney (Cope, pers. comm., 1991). 'I believe', said Cope, 'it is entirely wrong for any government to imagine that they can benefit the Aboriginal cause by creating ghettos which would, in my opinion, defeat the ultimate goal of true assimilation between Aboriginals and White people'.²⁰ Most ruptures to homogeneity could be absorbed (and neutralised) in the freedom of the city, but blocks of Aboriginal residence would only thrive on the city's degenerate underbelly.

The utopian projections cast upon the commune project continued to acquire support in circles with the ultimate authority to empower them until, eventually, on 14 April 1973, Minister Bryant triumphantly announced he would approve a Commonwealth grant for the purchase of forty-one houses in Louis and Caroline Streets. 'The project will become a showplace of racial harmony', stated the new president of the AHC, Dick Blair (*Daily Mirror*, 29 March 1973), while Bryant, in a press release long on polemic, declared: 'It [the scheme] will be a model for inner city communities who wish to preserve their homes and the identity of their area ... Small groups like this give strength to one another without developing a totally separate existence' (*Sydney*

Morning Herald, 16 April 1973). Strength in numbers was certainly what the new residents of Sydney's Redfern needed in the months following the Commonwealth decision. Between March and May 1973, there were some 410 arrests in the Louis Street area, most being Aboriginals on minor charges.²¹ Relations with the media grew equally sour, with numerous invocations to the 'human zoo' appearing in the press²² about a district that has long since continued to attract negative publicity (Cunneen 1990). A test of self-determination, Aboriginal Redfern has, in another sense, been deemed beyond the cultivation of 'human' self-government. By 1999 it was said to be a place imploding in its own decay and decline.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to understand the specific tensions surrounding urban Aboriginals in central Sydney in the early 1970s by placing them in a semiotic field different from the conventional frame of racism. In an attempt to further unsettle cultures of the settler Self, I have enlarged the narrative field of ideas through which the urban Aboriginal was conceived and treated. By drawing into my critique that hierarchy in European thought between non-human life forms and assemblages that carried the title of 'nature' and those adaptations assumed to signify 'culture', I have sought to show how the 'urban savage' came to occupy a wholly ambiguous position. In both noble and ignoble characterisations, 'he' was deemed to lack the necessary 'learning' that qualified citizens for that pinnacle of civility enshrined in the City.

Although I have found the narrative tools for my account in classical and early modern conceptions of the culturally other, I have not wished to imply there is some unbroken transhistorical lineage of ideas that connects ancient Greece and 1970s Sydney! My interest is less in chronological 'origins'; rather I have used the attributions of savagery and civility to tell the story of Aboriginal struggles over entitlement to the metropolitan heartlands of White colonialism through a lens that turns a more vivid spotlight on settler conceits of civility, privacy and domesticity. Redfern's squatters were defined and managed through these conventions, as much as those emanating from race discourses and impulses.

That Redfern's Aboriginal citizens managed to resist their 'natural' positioning outside the city, and to this day cling to the rapidly gentrifying spaces of the Olympic city (Anderson 1999), attests not only to their agency in the struggles of (post) colonialism; Aboriginal space at the heart of the city also holds the potential to be conceived more flexibly by settler Australians. Breaking with the model of the divided self, there is scope for less rigidity in the spatialised imaginings that mark out culture and nature, city and country, self and other. That which is 'not' self—the uncultivated other, 'the beast within'—can become less anxiously accommodated within a self that moves more freely across its various states of being, de-domesticated and unbound.



KOORIWEB.ORG

BRISBANEBLACKS.COM

INTERCONTINENTALCRY.ORG

NATIONALUNITYGOVERNMENT.ORG

FIRSTNATIONSLIBERATION.WORDPRESS.COM