Managing cultures into the past

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And on top of the box sits this white man and he knows where the key is because he’s the one that put the people in the box and hid the key. Every now and then the white man changes masks. Sometimes it’s benevolent and sometimes it’s indignant. But always the persons underneath remain the same no matter how many times he changes his masks. (Excerpt from Hyllus Maris, ‘The Concrete Box’ in Paperbark [1990: 124])

As long as whiteness remains invisible in analyses ‘race’ is the prison reserved for the ‘Other’. (Aileen Moreton-Robinson Talkin’ Up to the White Woman [2000: xix])

INTRODUCTION

Hyllus Maris’ parable The Concrete Box encapsulates the relationship between power, knowledge and colonialism experienced by Indigenous people living in contemporary settler societies such as Australia. It could be argued that the concrete box symbolizes the prison created by racialized, anthropological conceptions of culture as played out in the Yorta Yorta native title claim and the Kumarangk (Hindmarsh Island) Royal Commission (see for example: Hemming 1996; Seidel 2004). I am interested in the ways that culture as a concept works with historical discourses to devalue and subjugate Indigenous knowledges and elude the political interests of Indigenous people in southern South Australia. First Nations such as the Ngarrindjeri of the Lower Murray, Lakes and Coorong are struggling with a rapidly expanding invasion of their lands and waters as the agencies of the State seek to manage what they believe is their space, and a complex array of reports and developments continue the alienation of Ngarrindjeri country. Central to this process is an unspoken assumption that white knowledges and white property interests are rightfully part of the modern Australian nation-state and that Indigenous knowledges and property rights, particularly in southeastern Australia, are at best part of the past. One of the keys to opening Maris’ concrete box is the unmasking and naming of the ‘whiteness’ pervading the dominant institutions of Australian society (see Frankenburg 1993; Moreton-Robinson 2000). The Ngarrindjeri and other southeastern First Nations are challenging this contemporary invasion of Indigenous space. Significant human and financial resources are needed, however, if the engagement with this contemporary form of colonialism is not going to further decimate Indigenous people through the enormous stresses produced by the inherent inequities.

Since the mid-1990s there has been an explosion in the number of management plans impacting on the lives of Indigenous people in southern South Australia. This invasion and re-mapping of Indigenous space is happening with such rapidity and with such force that Ngarrindjeri leaders have invested enormous energies into understanding, engaging with, and in many ways resisting this new form of colonization. This paper attempts a reading of this phenomenon and identifies a racialized logic that exists in the discourses that construct the newly mapped and managed space of southern South Australia. Through focussing on this region the power of Australia’s South-East in the national story of whiteness can be better understood. The South-East operates as an unspoken home for the white Australian nation – the domestic space of national identity. Constructions of Aboriginality, Australian history and heritage play a central role in the process of nation building. Chris Healy (2001) has written about the increasing prominence of these discourses in Australian institutions of power and public histories. This paper seeks to expose some of the consequences for Indigenous people engaged with a struggle for survival in the face of the increasing intensity of government and development interests in the creation and management of the Australian space. Maris’ concrete box is still dependent on the old foundational myths of identity and nation that more recently political leaders such as John Howard have sought to shore up.
The Ngarrindjeri are conducting a running battle with a mind-numbing array of complex incursions into their country. The unequal power relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous interests are stark and depressing. Along with uneven financial and human resources comes a series of management discourses imbued with assumptions about the superiority of western knowledges and informed by stories of the Indigenous ‘Other’ emerging directly from Aboriginalist discourses (see Attwood & Arnold 1992). This mapping of the contemporary Australian landscape by consultants and their management reports is largely structured by traditional, white, patriarchal regimes of seeing and is used by government at all levels to navigate through the emerging landscapes of natural resource management, local development, tourism and heritage. There is no place in these white, settled spaces for ‘modern’ Indigenous people with continuing political, economic, social and cultural connections to country. For Indigenous people such as the Ngarrindjeri, interests in country are described in terms of heritage value and highlighted in management reports as tourism commodities. In these spaces Indigenous people and their knowledges are managed into the past by white discourses such as town planning, natural resource management, heritage, archaeology and tourism. These strategic discourses, to use Michel de Certeau’s (1984) concept of the strategic, map into existence an Australianized landscape of increasingly complex governmentality. Indigenous people such as the Ngarrindjeri are being swamped by this new wave of colonialism. The subject positions available for them in this context are represented by labels such as ‘stake-holders’ and ‘participants’ and the ‘real Aborigines’ of the past become tourist objects tied to heritages ‘sites’, usually categorized as archaeological. These ‘real’ ancestors are now to be found in the museums, in the ground, or represented in the works of historians, archaeologists and anthropologists. These engagements between developers, governments and Indigenous people might be better understood as being played out in inter-national zones dominated by white power structures and framed by white possibilities rather than intercultural zones (see Healy 2001: 285). This is part of a continuing struggle over land, identity and Indigenous nationhood. In South Australia it is a continuation of Edward Gibbon Wakefield’s scheme called ‘systematic colonization’.

Critical readings of the imperial practices of ‘discovery’, mapping, of explorer journals, of anthropological fieldwork, of travel writing can be applied to the recent burgeoning practice of management plans (see for example: Pratt 1992, Ryan 1996, Phillips 1997). Modern-day explorers or consultants, in the tradition of the monarch-of-all-I-survey, ‘order the universe for progressive improvement under their benevolent tutelage’ (Ryan 1996: 1). The colonial space constructed by the early explorers and their ‘explorative gaze’, their ‘cartographic eye’, is further developed and mapped using old and new technologies of power – for example the management report. Individual authors are seldom identified in these reports. Consultants ‘gather’ together community perspectives, interpreting them for governments, and privileging ‘expert’ reports in their construction of maps for the government control of new ‘places’ such as a water-catchment zone or a wetlands area of global significance.

NARRATIVES OF EXTINCTION

For several years I have been working as a researcher with the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee, the Ngarrindjeri Land and Progress Association and the Ngarrindjeri Native Title Management Committee. These organizations are engaged daily in the defense of their lands and waters from an increasingly complex wave of management culture or contemporary colonization. In many ways the Kumarangk (Hindmarsh Island) issue marked the seriousness of this modern influx of colonizing interests and turned the Ngarrindjeri, and in particular something labeled by the media as ‘secret women’s business’, into what might be described as a metonym for unauthentic southern Indigenous claims to land rights (see for example Ryan 1996). Marcia Langton (1981) described some of the roots of this characterization of Indigenous cultures as the ‘anthropologist’s great deception’. The power of this national narrative of whiteness – dependent on black extinction - can still be seen in the work of senior Australian academics such as archaeologist Tim Murray. In a recent, influential Oceania monograph, ironically dedicated to native title and postcoloniality, and written for a national and international archaeological community, Murray gives power to this white mythology of an Australian South-East lacking ‘authentic’ Indigenous tradition. In a particularly devastating passage he writes Ngarrindjeri traditions out of existence:
…it should be self-evident that the temptation to create a seamless link between past and present where none is there, or to produce convenient pasts to support Native Title claims, will serve to do little more than to bring both history and archaeology into disrepute. The consequences of the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission for the heritage of South Australia are a pretty dramatic case in point (Murray 2000: 76).

Murray provides no evidence that he is familiar with the Kumarangk (Hindmarsh Island) case, no references to support his assertions, no ‘empirical’ evidence to bolster such an authoritative, sweeping statement. Importantly, he fails to seriously reflect on the political positioning of archaeology as a cultural policing discipline in Australia’s South-East. His article is a privileged, colonizing intervention. It clearly highlights the critical role that archaeology plays in the Indigenous struggle for land rights and self-determination in South-Eastern Australia, through its occupation of the scientific ‘high ground’, and in the last few decades through its dominance of Aboriginal heritage ‘management’.

Genealogical links between Murray and the old ‘Aboriginal Protectors’ can be clearly discerned. The experts patrolling the spaces of Aboriginal ‘protection’ transferred their cultural capital into the new regimes of Aboriginal heritage protection. In the late 1960s in South Australia archaeology became the dominant discipline in the ‘protection’ and ‘management’ of Aboriginal ‘relics’. The ‘real’ Aborigines, with their ‘real’ culture and traditions were now seen as extinct in southern South Australia – it became the job of non-Indigenous experts such as archaeologists to identify, protect and manage their ‘relics’. The Director of the South Australian Museum became the ‘Protector of Relics’ under the Aboriginal and Historic Relics Preservation Act, 1965 (Ellis 1975: 7). In Australia today archaeologists such as Murray, other non-Indigenous experts, and the law courts make judgments and determinations as to whether Indigenous people and their traditions have been swept away by the ‘tide of history’ (see for example: Stevens 1988, Yorta Yorta 1993, Partington 2003). This contemporary colonial context frames the burgeoning management culture that is sweeping through southern South Australia. This new space of whiteness rests on the archaeological displacement of Indigenous knowledges, histories and contemporary interests in country (see Hemming & Rigney 2002).

At a personal level, Murray’s statement about the Ngarrindjeri made Tom Trevorrow, Chairperson of the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee physically sick – its epistemological violence is direct and personally felt. It denies the lived experiences, beliefs and traditions of Tom Trevorrow, his family, his ancestors and his community and it does so in a raw act of seemingly disconnected, scientific, power (see Hemming & Trevorrow 2001: 126). This is a comparatively sophisticated version of archaeological colonialism, in management reports archaeologically constructed cultural landscapes often rely on arcaic, ‘prehistories’ as their baselines.

A recent natural resource management plan for the Lower Murray region identifies ‘Blanchetown, Fromm’s Landing, Devon Downs and Nildottie’ as key ‘sites of indigenous cultural and historical significance’. In making this selection of ‘sites’ the authors of the report justify themselves by arguing that, ‘... they [the sites] are known to have aboriginal artefacts more than 6,000 years old.’ (South Australian Murray-Darling Basin Integrated Natural Resource Management Group 2002: 24) This common act of privileging the archaeological significance, and in particular what has been described in archaeological discourse as ‘pre-historic’ significance, has extremely damaging consequences for contemporary Indigenous rights and interests to country. It continues to locate ‘real Aborigines’ in the ‘pre-historic’ past and erect archaeologically constructed barriers between contemporary Indigenous people, their ancestors and their spiritual homelands (see for example: Langford 1983; Pardoe 1990; Hemming 1995; Lightfoot 1995; Byrne 1996; Colley & Bickford 1997; Torrens and Clarke 2000).

There has been a long history of writing and managing Ngarrindjeri people into the past. The historian Graeme Jenkin (1979: 274) wrote the following about the Ngarrindjeri in his book Conquest of the Ngarrindjeri:

Most Ngarrindjeri now live in precisely the same way as many of their fellow Australians and appear to be distinguishable from them only by a distinctive surname, or a slightly darker skin, or possibly not even these. A few still make traditional artefacts as a hobby, but no one alive can speak more than a
few words of the language. There can clearly never be any going back now, even though some Ngarrindjeri descendants are trying hard to find out as much about the old culture and language as they possibly can. A dying language or culture can be kept alive, but once it has died there can be no resuscitation.

Tragically the Ngarrindjeri have been pronounced dead by generations of Indigenous experts. The existence of restricted women’s knowledge associated with a place such as Kumarangk (Hindmarsh Island), the existence of traditions that are perhaps too ‘traditional’, perhaps too black for this white space, has been attacked as a ‘fabrication’ (see Bell 1998). For senior scholars such as Murray it appears that the mythologies of cultural extinction, or perhaps put more politely, radical disjunction, lead him to uncritically propose that Ngarrindjeri women’s sacred knowledge is the archetypal example of illegitimate cultural fabrication.

Once managed into the past Indigenous people undergo what could be described as metonymic freezing (see for example: Fabian 1983; Appadurai 1990). For example an anthropologically constructed image of a southern Indigenous person in a possum skin cloak comes to represent a ‘unique’, but extinct Indigenous presence in the heartland of the white Australian nation (see Hemming 2003). A symbol of the past frontier of settlement (see Anderson 1995). Featured prominently in the entrance hall of the South Australian Museum today is a photographic mural of Kaurna elder, Ivaritji and Antarctic scientist, explorer, Sir Douglas Mawson both wearing animal skin clothing juxtaposed without explanation. Ivaritji became known as the ‘last of the Adelaide tribe’ - a symbol of the extinct ‘Aborigines’ and the completion of the project of settlement. This is a powerful image to select for such prominence in the SA Museum’s entrance hall. The intertextual associations between the images of Ivaritji and Mawson, the dark skin, the age, the gender and the animal skin clothing all play a powerful game of reinforcement of the white histories of South Australia.

When I started working at the South Australian Museum in the early 1980s there was a black, wooden, coffin-like box kept in the anthropology storeroom called the west crypt. I was told that it contained the bodies of Aboriginal people ‘collected’ by the Museum in an attempt to preserve ‘specimens’ of the so-called ‘extinct full-blooded Aborigines’ of south eastern Australia. At least this was one of the stories circulating amongst Museum staff. This story turned out to be largely true. The box housed the remains of four Indigenous people – a representative, ‘full-blood’, southeastern, family group. At least two of them appear to have been Ngarrindjeri people. These Old People’s remains were re-buried at Raukkan (formerly Point McLeay Mission) on the shores of Lake Alexandrina. Ngarrindjeri elders such as Doreen Kartinyeri had heard about the existence of this box and she was pretty certain of the identities of at least some of those whose bodies had been ‘collected’ by the Museum. For Indigenous people in South Australia the museum was associated with a long history of grave robbing and body snatching. In the 1930s Ngarrindjeri elders complained to the anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt about the museum’s desecration of burials along the Lower Murray (Berndt, Berndt & Stanton 1993).

According to the authorising disciplines of anthropology and history Ngarrindjeri culture had become extinct with the so-called ‘full-blooded’ southern South Australian Aborigines (see for example Jenkins 1979; Berndt, Berndt & Stanton 1993). The remains of these people had been ‘preserved’ in the Museum for white posterity. These anthropological ‘specimens’ were supposed to preserve vital information about this extinct race. The bodies, the museum’s artefact collections, anthropological notebooks and other records became a ‘record’ of a ‘race’ of people who were constructed as extinct – of the past. In 1995 Justice Iris Stevens, an aging, white Royal Commissioner found that Ngarrindjeri people had fabricated sacred women’s traditions to halt a bridge to Kumarangk (Stevens 1995). The more recent judgement by Justice Von Doussa (2001) has largely vindicated the accused Ngarrindjeri women and men, and contradicted the Royal Commission’s findings.

Since the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission in 1995, the Yorta Yorta, and Windshuttle’s Tasmanians have been added to the modern-day Australian narrative of nation (Windshuttle 2002). The authenticity of Howard’s Australia rests on the resurrection of the pioneer myth and the shoring-up of the myth of a ‘settled’ South-East as the foundation of white Australia. This settled, South-East is the heartland of the white Australian nation. It is the normalized, mainstream Australian space that sits at the centre of the Australian State’s contemporary engagement with Indigenous people. In this white space
Indigenous First Nations can only be unauthentic; what is described as their ‘cultures’ are mapped and managed into the ‘past’.

The backyards of ‘settled’ Australia have been symbolically threatened in public debates such as the ‘History Wars’ (see Attwood & Foster 2003). The centre of the white Australian nation-state has been challenged and the broad reach of management culture has worked in unison with the law courts to strengthen rather than weaken the legitimacy of the Australian State. This ‘settled’ heartland is a place where Indigenous rights to country have been transformed into something called Aboriginal heritage – a past-oriented discourse. It is in this space, apparently furthest removed from the realm of the ‘cultural’, the remote, where the myths of Aboriginal heritage are so strong and unquestioned. Constructions of the ‘Dreaming’, ‘traditional’ culture, authentic Aboriginality, have been developed by traditionalist disciplines such as anthropology and underpin the contemporary archaeological displacement of South-Eastern Indigenous nations (see for example Langton 1981; McDonald 1998; Rose 1999).

‘MANAGING’ CHANGE, FRONTIERS AND HERITAGE

The bridge to Kumarangk has been built, damaging and desecrating Ngarrindjeri traditions. The local council has, of course, commissioned a Hindmarsh Island Management Plan (Alexandrina Council 2001). In today’s management language everything is transformed into a resource available for the project of contemporary nation building. These resources need, however, to be properly and responsibly managed and as many Indigenous people observe, this is to be done by the very people who have so effectively brought them to a point of collapse. In the Hindmarsh Island Management Plan Ngarrindjeri interests in their country are transformed into cultural heritage and in particular, tourism resources. Economic, political and social interests are not considered relevant to the ‘historic’ Ngarrindjeri people – they are translated into resources to be made available for the benefit of the broader community and to the tourists.

The Indigenous people of southern South Australia have been historically located in a particular place in relation to the story of settlement and Australian nationhood. Early in the Colony of South Australia’s history they were constructed as becoming rapidly ‘extinct’ in the face of European settlement – a settlement that was conceived of as part of the inevitable progress towards a British, white future (see Woods 1879). In ‘Moving’, Chris Healy’s interview with Stephen Muecke, Muecke discusses the work of French theorist Jacques Donzelot (1999: 181). Muecke draws attention to Donzelot’s discussion of a new relationship societies have with time – he argues that there has been a move away from the ‘will to progress’ towards a ‘management of change’. It seems to me that the management of change is an extension of the will to progress – good management of change can be performed through events that memorialize the achievements of pioneer Australians. The interior feminized space of the South-East requires better management (see Ryan 1991). The explorer has to return home to travel inside the frontier to rediscover the domestic space – perhaps made unhomely, uncanny to use Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs words (Gelder & Jacobs 1998).

Major public events such as the Wooden Boats Festival staged at Goolwa, adjacent to Kumarangk (Hindmarsh Island), celebrate the history of the conquest of the Australian landscape, the river systems and the ingenuity and adventurousness of the early settlers. This is a public enactment of the pioneer legend and it reinforces the history of modernization of the southeastern space - the Australian nation-state. It reminds ‘us’ that change is ‘inevitable’ in a modernizing space. This story of modernity excludes Indigenous people. It produces a set of foundational myths that are written by signs of development such as the bridge, the jetty and the marina. They all represent the power of western technology to overwrite the ‘natural landscape’. This is the landscape in which Indigenous people and Indigenous interests have been traditionally located. It is assumed that the Indigenous place has been obliterated or covered over by the layers of progress. Time and progress are represented by built environs and the layering of the landscape – archaeology underpins this story by scientifically authorizing this reading of the progress of time, civilization and development. Tony Bennett has recently referred to this as the ‘archaeological gaze’ (Bennett 2004: 37).
Historian Tony Birch has written about the western districts of Victoria and the re-inscription of this landscape by the discourses of heritage and tourism with the myth of pioneers and progress. The physical remains of the white, historical landscape have begun to disappear through decay and depopulation. In their place are memorials and monuments that re-inscribe the landscape. The giant Koala is one of these. Birch argues that by ‘identifying, naming and textualizing such places, they remain “claimed by Europeans”’ (Birch 1999: 64). Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs (1998: 40) when discussing Tracy Moffat’s film BeDevil argue that the ‘story does not offer a fantasy of loss or dispossession in order for us all then to resemble each other; rather, it tells us that modernity is in a state of (dis)possession, never lost to itself but never properly secure either’. That modernity is never properly secure may not help with developing tactics and strategies for engaging with the rapidly expanding interests of development and management.

Gelder and Jacobs’ (1998) reading of the Kumarrangk issue, and the repatriation of Indigenous human remains and sacred material, highlights the continuing binary of remote/traditional/unsettled and proximate/urban/settled. The South Australian Museum’s fascination with the sacred centre and its demolition of the sacred south is emblematic of the continuing whiteness of southeastern Australia. The politics, power and violence of this act is, however, largely lost in Gelder and Jacob’s ‘postcolonial’ account (see Trevorrow 2003; Saunders 2003; Moreton-Robinson 2003: 29). The state museum through its entanglement with the Kumarrangk issue confirms the ‘real’, modern south, through its disconnection with the unsettled, ancient ‘cultural’ heart. In this story the South-East is not threatened and the frontier is reinforced. The South Australian Museum is made pre-colonial according to Gelder and Jacobs (1998: 92-93):

The South Australian Museum becomes a home in the midst of unhomleness for Aboriginal people, a position of ‘smiles’ rather than ‘worries’. The museum imagines itself as place where Aboriginal people can become familiar with themselves, as if the effects of dispossession are all around them, but no longer here. …after the postcolonial event of responding to Aboriginal claims – a modern event which impacts most directly on metropolitan collections – the museum is able to displace itself into a precolonial imaginary. In effect, the South Australian Museum is imagined as a sacred site in the midst of the profane.

The South Australian Museum with its exhibitions and collections becomes perhaps the only sacred site in the profane, white, Ngarrindjeri, Kumarrangk south. The Museum’s ‘archaeological gaze’ encourages visitors to its exhibition halls to look northwards to the ‘outback’ or downwards through the layers of history for a glimpse of the authentic Aboriginal past. The Museum is a focal point in the contemporary story of the nation and its frontiers of authenticity. The National Museum, of course, functions in a similar way and has found itself in a related authenticating space in relation to the ‘History Wars’ (see Foster & Attwood 1993). In this public debate the authenticity of the settled south was challenged through the ‘revisionist’ histories of Henry Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan and others (see for example: Reynolds 1982; Ryan 1982; Evans & Thorpe 2002). Massacres in the ‘outback’, however, in the unsettled centre, on the ‘real’ frontier may be more acceptable to so-called ‘white-blindfold’ historians because they fail to mount a challenge to the authenticity of the ‘real’ unspoken Australian home, the South-East of the continent (see McGrath 1991). This is the location of the ‘Aussie backyards’ that stand outside the claims of native title. This is the place that is beyond question, this is the normalized centre of Australia and any challenges to this space are fiercely contested.

‘STAKEHOLDERS’: RESISTING WHITENESS

Following Moreton-Robinson’s (2000) critique of Australian feminism and its reliance on the unspoken privilege of whiteness I want to ask similar questions relating to the discourses circulating in management reports and their associated ‘culture’. What subject positions are constructed for Ngarrindjeri people in the language of management reports? What identities are open to Indigenous people in this rapidly developing Australianized landscape. Indigenous interests are not included in the political, economic, social space of the contemporary. Only through associations to heritage ‘sites’ and places in ‘past’ landscapes can Indigenous people have an identity in the contemporary. Indigenous knowledge can be ‘collected’ and included in the management plan as an archaic object of interest to the tourism industry. Indigenous knowledges are always less valued than the non-Indigenous languages of science and
management – Indigenous knowledge is characterized as cultural whereas western knowledges are
naturalized. Authentic Indigenous people seldom exist in this system of archaic tradition – only the most
revered elder may approach this subject position in the eyes of the consultant. Indigenous people are
dislocated from the contemporary sites of power – the economic and the political. Their interests are
characterized as archaeological, historical and sometimes cultural. Culture here is a concept understood
by management cultures as a tool for working on the social (see Bennett & Carter 2001). In cultural
heritage practice it takes on old bounded, anthropological connotations and is the subject of an
‘archaeological gaze’ reducing contemporary Indigenous society to remnant layers of archaic traditions
(see Bennett 2004).

During the development of a management report Indigenous people are usually ‘consulted’ as part of a
series of community ‘stakeholder’ meetings. Sometimes this occurs with Indigenous organisations but
often the preferred model is to subsume Indigenous voices in the space of broader community views –
one voice amongst many. Having a place on a community reference group provides no opportunity for
challenges to the whiteness of the process. Local agreements have been one tactical response employed
by the Ngarrindjeri. The Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee and the Ngarrindjeri Native Title Management
Committees have negotiated, using their own lawyer, with local councils over issues such as land
management, natural resource management and Indigenous heritage. They have taken the position that
prior to any engagement with the management culture they require formal recognition of their identity as
traditional owners of the land and waters of the Lower Murray, Lakes and Coorong region of South
Australia. Without this as a starting point the Ngarrindjeri recognize that they have no control over the
subject positions developed by the dominant discourses employed by the various institutions of power
that seek to incorporate them into the new management regime. Once recognition of identity has been
agreed, the Ngarrindjeri negotiate the rules of engagement – the protocols within which discussions and
negotiations will take place. The Ngarrindjeri have to rely on minimal powers given to them by pieces of
legislation such as the Aboriginal Heritage Act, SA (1988) and the federal Native Title Act. These legal
powers combine with varying amounts of goodwill and an almost complete absence of an understanding
of the whiteness structuring the discourses that govern the language of negotiation. The non-Indigenous
‘owners’ of the country see the Ngarrindjeri as having tenous native title and heritage rights that are
translated through the language of archaeology into identifications with archaic ‘sites’ – the Ngarrindjeri
have a stake in the substrata of the Australianized landscape. This substrata is usually accepted as
existing in spaces outside of cities and towns. It needs to be physical, part of the soil on which the
modern nation is built.

The Coorong and Lakes Alexandrina and Albert Ramsar Management Plan (South Australian Department
for Environment, Heritage and Aboriginal Affairs 2000: 2) recommends:

Increased opportunities for participation by the Ngarrindjeri people in the planning and management of
the Coorong and Lower Lakes Ramsar Wetlands, subject to South Australian Government policy
relating to the resolution of native title claims.

This newly ’mapped’ global space of the Ramsar wetland brings with it a management regime dominated
by environmental resource management discourses such as integrated natural resource management
(INRM). The plan hopes that more opportunities can be made to increase Ngarrindjeri participation in the
planning and management of their own country. This powerful language of dominance assumes the
rightness of the power of those who introduce these systems of governance – they continually confirm
their status as bosses of the unnamed centre of Australia.

The huge pressure on Indigenous leaders and organizations to respond to this new wave of colonialism is
producing adverse effects at many levels. In a recent report to the Murray Darling Basin Commission,
Tom Trevorrow, the chair of the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee and Matt Rigney, the chair of the
Ngarrindjeri Native Title Management Committee had the following to say about the impact of the closure
of the Murray Mouth on Ngarrindjeri people:

…it is not often understood that the Ngarrindjeri have few resources and little infrastructure to
respond to the growing pressures on them from a wide range of Government departments and
agencies. To properly engage in the process of ‘natural resource’ management the Ngarrindjeri need substantial resources and infrastructure. A considerable portion of what the Ngarrindjeri do as part of their ‘responsibilities’, as a result of heritage and native title legislation, is still largely voluntary. This creates enormous pressures on individuals, families and communities and significantly adds to community stress and general poor health. The decision to take part in the development of this report has posed serious difficulties and created considerable stress for its Ngarrindjeri authors. The short time-frame and lack of resources has not enabled broad community consultation, placing the authors in the difficult position of having to explain and justify their decisions and involvement in the report process to the broader Ngarrindjeri community (Hemming, Trevorrow & Rigney 2002: 17-18).

Developing new systems for ‘managing’ and ‘protecting’ the Murray Darling Basin, and seeking to ‘involve’ Indigenous people in these white plans, has serious implications for Indigenous First Nations such as the Ngarrindjeri. This new form of colonialism brings with it impossible burdens of responsibility for Indigenous leaders. The white space of southern South Australia is being re-discovered, re-mapped and re-made by new management practices such as integrated natural resource management and Aboriginal heritage management. Responding to this rabid form of colonization adds significantly to the stresses on Indigenous people that produce early deaths and poor health (see Smith, Thorpe & Chapman 2003).

CONCLUSION

Development, environmentalism, tourism and heritage management may appear to be different in their ideological positions but often their impacts on Indigenous people are much the same. They are management discourses engaged in a process of mapping into existence a new, fundamentally ‘white’ nation. Indigenous people are being transformed into tourism objects, objects of heritage interest, or ‘relic’ populations with connections to an archaeological past – a substrata of settlement. In Australia’s South-East the Indigenous place in this story of modernity and progress is the ‘past’. Science, business and best-practice management produce the proper Australian space and the proper Australian bodies to inhabit it. At present these bodies are not Indigenous. Indigenous First Nations such as the Ngarrindjeri are, however, creatively resisting these white management cultures through the development of local agreements and the strengthening of First Nation governance. In a consideration of the whiteness of place in Australia, the power of the unrecognized centre, the South-East, is crucial to the system of governmentality and associated discourses that seek to manage Indigenous nations such as the Ngarrindjeri into the past. It seems that Indigenous political, social, economic and cultural rights and connections to country can only be allowed outside of the Australian ‘home’ territory – the territory of modern whiteness – the South-East. Indigenous lawyer Irene Watson (2002: 6) writes about a place outside of the white order, a ‘place of my lawful being’:

Mabo No. 2 continues to legitimise a violent brutal landing. In a context of violence there is no possibility of dialogue on the conditions of entry. Today there is continuing violence and there remains with it little possibility of dialogue, which is truthful and ‘real’, beyond the rhetoric and political propaganda of the state. There has never been a dialogue. There is an assumed constituted power over Nungas, but I never came into the muldarbi’s [non-Indigenous] order. I was never invited nor ever consented. I am still living in the place of law, a ‘non-citizen’, preferring the unsettled myall frontier: in respect of the place held by the ancestors. A place of my lawful being.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Tom Trevorrow, chairperson of the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee, Matt Rigney, Chairperson of the Ngarrindjeri Native Title Committee, Daryle Rigney, Director of Yunggorendi First Nations Centre, Flinders University and Bill Thorpe, adjunct senior lecturer in Australian Studies at Flinders University for their support, ideas and advice. Tom Trevorrow and Matt Rigney spend most of their time dealing with the complexities of the Aboriginal heritage and native title regimes and their patience, ingenuity, and courage is an inspiration.
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1 Ngarrindjeri prefer the respectful term ‘Old People’ to the scientific label ‘human remains’.