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Kay Anderson and Jane M. Jacobs

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From Urban Aborigines to Aboriginality and the City: One Path Through the History of Australian Cultural Geography

Kay Anderson
Department of Geography and Oceanography, University College, University of New South Wales, Canberra

Jane M. Jacobs
Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Melbourne

Abstract
This paper charts one idiosyncratic and rather personalised path through the emergence of cultural geography in the Australian context. It takes as its example the transition from research which examines a category group identified as ‘urban Aborigines’ to more recent research of our own which looks at the theme of how Aboriginality is articulated in and through the space of the city. This transition provides a way of registering some broader changes within the sub-disciplinary field of cultural geography. The paper also reflects on recent criticism that a cultural emphasis detracts from the political edge of geographical research. The influential work of Fay Gale suggests that this claim is somewhat misplaced in the context of the development of the subdiscipline in Australia.

Exploring the genealogy of one’s professional endeavours offers much more than a stimulating exercise. In looking back, in taking up a reflexive position in relation to one’s disciplinary identity, it is possible to excavate the modalities of knowledge which have come to structure perspectives in the present. Such a task may be nowhere more necessary than in the disciplinary strand which came into being under the bold title of new cultural geography. In this paper we do not wish to outline, yet again, the general lineage of the new cultural geography: how it differs from that of the Berkeley School or how it draws on cultural studies, postmodernist and feminist conceptualisations of identity and meaning. This lineage has already received adequate documentation (see Jackson, 1989; Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987; 1993; Price and Lewis, 1993). Instead, we would like to take a rather idiosyncratic, somewhat personal, and by no means comprehensive, path through one Australian tradition of cultural geography. Such localised archaeologies of knowledge are far more than just nationalistic (or even regionalistic) claims for a version of the same. They point to the undeniable significance of local contingencies, such as distinctive political imperatives, unique historical conditions (and even charismatic teachers), in shaping disciplinary practices and perspectives. Geography matters, even in the making of geography!
For those of us who became cultural geographers long before postmodernism made fashionable the study of culture, difference and otherness, there seems something unduly forgetful about the claims of some critics on the Left that cultural geography lacks a sense of politics. In a recent editorial titled ‘Is all that’s Left Right?’, one critic laments the relativistic void left by studies of ‘polyvocality’ (Chouinard, 1994). Apparently they deny geographers ‘politically engaged ways forward’. Another geographer pits cultural perspectives (on gentrification) against economic ones, aligning the cultural with agency, contingency, consumption and the local, and economic positions with the harder poles of determination; that is, of structure, stability, production and the global (Lees, 1994). Another critic still, reprimands the new cultural geography ‘for evacuating the social’ and substituting the study of ‘lived social relations’ for representations of them (Gregson, 1995). Such charges have a number of problems in our view. First, they lack a sense of the genealogy of cultural geography, conflating postmodernism, the cultural turn, and the critique of Marxist geographies. A longer view would acknowledge the debt of contemporary cultural geographies to older, non-positivist philosophies of meaning. It might also acknowledge that the new cultural geography, especially in its British form, was strongly influenced by the Marxian historical materialism of Raymond Williams and others. The paradigmatic integrity of cultural geography has been carved not only in opposition to political economy perspectives, the influence of which on contemporary cultural geography (we at least think) can only continue to enrich it. Second, the charges appear to be conditioned by an ambitious, universalising northern disciplinary perspective which seems oblivious to the fact that there were other styles of cultural geographies in other places. At least some of us from southern spaces who identify as cultural geographers were implacably imbued as undergraduates with a political cultural geography.

We vividly recall our time at The University of Adelaide in the late 1970s and early 1980s under the tutelage of Fay Gale. Gale had been schooled in Sauerian cultural geographies by Ann Marshall, a former student of Sauer at Berkeley. During our time with Fay Gale we became acquainted with the various interpretive grids through which the Australian environment was perceived and fashioned. We also came to learn of the distinct, and often severely disadvantaged, conditions in which migrants, indigenous Australians and other minority groups lived. Not only were we taught that there were different ways of seeing the Australian landscape but we were also made well aware of the fact that these perspectives, and the people who held them, were differently empowered. In short, our understanding of cultural geography had something in common with what is now thought of as the politics of difference. Our sensitivities to difference sharpened, our colonial legacy laid bare, it henceforth became impossible to conceive of a politically innocent cultural geography of Australia.

By the 1980s developments in social theory made it possible to elaborate a more rigorous epistemological critique of the colonial tradition from which we (white Australians) stemmed. Our learning at The University of Adelaide had not been cast quite so critically. There we had focused on Australia’s ethnic and indigenous minorities, to the neglect of the identity and power of the Anglo majority of which we were a part. ‘They’ — Aborigines, Greeks, Vietnamese and so on — had been objects of study by dint of their ‘difference’. In this sense our initial encounters with ‘otherness’ (never conceived of in that language) conformed to more widely held
perspectives common to social sciences like sociology and anthropology. These various cultural groups doubtless entered into our emergent sense of the world as exceptions, as unproblematised objects of study, even possibly as curiosities. And while we might now lament the politics of such research and pedagogical practices, there is little doubt that it alerted us to the possibility of alternative geographies and histories. More concretely, it familiarised us with the uneven spread of resources and power, and instilled in us a sense of the politics of rights and justice.

The assumptions of knowledge building which underscored our learning at Adelaide underwent a radical reappraisal through the 1980s as the verities on which identity — whether of race, gender, ethnicity and so on — had been traditionally based, were undercut by fresh explanatory schemes. Identities once assumed to rest on the bedrock of fact were now understood to be suspended in narratives of origin. That is, identity was no longer assumed to be pre-given, but to be socially and discursively constituted. Such narratives of identity enter institutional arenas where, it was recognised, they acquired material force and effect. The problem was ontological as well as social. If ‘they’ belonged to ‘our’ frames of mind, then who, precisely, were ‘we’? The call to a politically-charged cultural geography was now explicit and emphatic. After all, it was not only that ‘they’ revealed ‘our’ cultural lenses. ‘Their’ variable positioning within Australian society and space also held up a mirror to ‘our’ (dominant) modes of social action and institutional practice. The narrow and constricting essentialisms of one tradition of cultural geography began to give way to new research questions, forms of analysis and writing.

The transformation in thinking about identity and power which resulted from these theoretical shifts have influenced Australian geography rather unevenly: some strands of the discipline have remained immune to these changes, others (and we think specifically of feminist and cultural geographies) have embraced them. In the case of cultural geography, it is possible to register this transformation by charting shifts in the work on indigenous peoples in Australian cities. This is not an entirely arbitrary, or marginally significant, example by which to demonstrate these broader conceptual changes. Not least, it is one area of research which we and our first cultural geography teacher have in common.

It is a quarter of a century since Fay Gale published her influential book *Urban Aborigines* (1972). And it is perhaps more than coincidence that both of us, as former students of Fay Gale, have returned, albeit in different ways, to the theme of the place of Aborigines in the contemporary Australian city. But the significance of this specific theme moves beyond this common ground between teacher and pupils. This apparently minor strand of academic inquiry allows us to address broader features of cultural geography in Australia. It points, for example, to the way in which cultural geography in Australia has been intensely political, engaging in national political questions and campaigning for policy reform. Furthermore, it allows us to map the important change in perspective which is signalled by the title of this article: the transition from a cultural geography which sees as its purpose the description of a

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1 Both of us were brought into abrupt contact with the practice of such theoretically informed geography at overseas institutions (and although such departments were far removed in distance, it is perhaps significant that our doctoral supervisors had both studied ethnic pluralism at The University of Oxford).
given subgroup (urban Aborigines) to a cultural geography which is concerned with the complex processes by which Aboriginality is defined, managed and contested (Aboriginality and the city). In our review of this transformation, we return first to *Urban Aborigines* (Gale with Brookman, 1972). We then offer some reflection on our own work on Aboriginality and the city.

Indigenous Australians in cities: tracking a tradition of research

In the 1988 *Australian Geographical Studies* review of the state of the discipline in Australia, there is no mention of a sub-disciplinary category called cultural geography. This absence is notable for it marks the distinctive structure of Australian geography compared with other English-speaking centres of the discipline. For example, in North America, cultural geography had survived as a strong (if increasingly archaic) strand of the discipline, while in the British scene it was experiencing unprecedented interest as it reformulated into the new cultural geography. It is not that cultural geography was not being practised or taught in Australian universities at the time of the AGS review — the programme at The University of Adelaide provides just one example of how it was an active strand of the discipline. But in the telling of the story of Australian geography in the late 1980s such pockets of cultural geography claimed their place in the disciplinary framework under other headings — as development geography, historical geography or otherwise. The predicament of cultural geography is well illustrated by the way *Urban Aborigines* was placed within the discipline’s oeuvre. *Urban Aborigines*, for example, warrants but one brief mention in the entire AGS review which appears in Clive Forster’s overview of urban geography (Forster, 1988:73). Here it is referred to as a rather bemusing and parochial urban monograph which departed significantly from either the rigidly positivist social areas analysis or the Marxian-influenced theories of urbanisation which then dominated urban geography in Australia. Of course, the difficulty of placing *Urban Aborigines* within the sub-discipline of urban geography came precisely from the fact that this was a book whose rationale was built around something other than theorising urbanisation *per se*.

It was the question of how Aborigines lived in the contemporary moment which provided the basic starting point for Fay Gale’s research. Answering this question produced the first systematic study of Aborigines who lived in the city, in this case the city of Adelaide. This alone gives the book immovable significance. What might be thought of as Aboriginal research had been dominated by the discipline of anthropology and tended to focus almost entirely on rural-based communities. To be sure, anthropology had moved from reconstructing traditional patterns of livelihood to documenting change within Aboriginal communities; a few had even begun to focus on Aboriginals in larger rural towns. But *Urban Aborigines* was the first study to document the presence of city-based Aboriginal communities, to comment on the diverse circumstances by which they came to be city dwellers, and to outline the variable conditions of their lives.²

² C.D. Rowley’s (1970) book *Outcasts in White Australia* included a chapter on the urbanisation of Aborigines. In formulating his framework for this chapter Rowley drew heavily on Gale’s earlier PhD work which charted the movement of Aborigines from rural South Australia to the urban centre of Adelaide (pers. com. Fay Gale, 1996).
Urban Aborigines was written on the cusp of a change in national policy towards indigenous Australians, that point between assimilation and self-determination. There are traces of an assimilationist perspective in Gale’s book, but overall the political direction is to advocate Aboriginal self-determination. Gale argued that although Aborigines had moved into cities, they were a distinct and culturally specific ‘subgroup’ in the urban environment and had their own distinct forms of social organisation (along kinship lines) and their own specific servicing needs. At a time when mainstream Australia was still coming to grips with the fact that Aborigines were ‘no longer a dying minority’ (p. 259), let alone that they may not want to assimilate, this line of argument was radical indeed. Furthermore, Gale strongly advocated that this specific group of urban Australians be given more control over their own affairs and that welfare services be restructured to ensure that they were more sensitive to the importance of kinship links within the urban Aboriginal population.

There are things about Urban Aborigines which today would seem alien to cultural geography as it has come to be. For example, its positivist framework stands in contrast to the interpretive methodologies preferred by most cultural geographers today. This serves to remind us that cultural geography, like other parts of the discipline, had its own positivist phase; also, perhaps, that quantitative methodologies are not inherently foreign to the practice of cultural geography. Relatedly, few contemporary cultural geographers would engage in a project which largely consisted of describing the spatial and social patterns of settlement of a pre-given cultural group. Indeed, it is this feature of Urban Aborigines which sets it most starkly apart from contemporary cultural geographies which would, from the outset, problematise the given-ness of a category such as ‘Aborigine’, and point to the processes by which such concepts are constructed. Similarly, a contemporary cultural geographer might have some difficulty with the taxonomy of six urban Aboriginal types with which the book opens. Yet, at the time, this taxonomy was fundamentally important in dislodging many of the homogenising stereotypes which then circulated about Aborigines.

This brief revisiting of Urban Aborigines serves to demonstrate some of the significant distinctions between cultural geography then and now. For the most part these distinctions are evidence of changes for the good: the questioning (though not necessarily, abandonment) of positivist methods, the problematising of cross-cultural research, the shift in emphasis from description of a different subgroup to a politics of difference. Many of these changes conform with trends and developments in cultural geography in other English-speaking centres. But this return to Urban Aborigines also hints at how the history of Australian cultural geography diverges from trajectories elsewhere. In the first instance, this monograph emerged at a time when it appears that cultural geography itself was a barely recognised feature in the sanctioned national topography of the discipline. It is not surprising, then, that many in the discipline look with amazement at the current growth of interest in cultural geography. Moreover, this return to Urban Aborigines serves to demonstrate that the cultural geography which was ‘invisibly’ being practised in the 1970s and 1980s in Australia (and specifically in Adelaide) was intensely political. The urgency of the situation which gave rise to Urban Aborigines is palpable. It mattered — materially and symbolically — that policy makers heard what Fay Gale was saying even if, in hindsight, her
In this context, it seems pertinent to note that the publication of *Urban Aborigines* coincided with the first major Aboriginal land rights victories in urban Australia. Within a year of its publication, legal title over a block of Aboriginal housing situated at the heart of metropolitan Sydney, was bestowed upon an Aboriginal Housing Company based in Redfern. The then newly elected commonwealth government — seeking to legitimate itself in the languages of welfare, equity, pluralism and self-determination — granted black activists funds to purchase some 70 terrace houses in the block bound by Eveleigh, Louis, Caroline and Vine streets. They formed Australia’s first housing cooperative, dedicated to the provision of shelter for the most destitute of Aboriginal peoples disenfranchised by the relations of colonial capitalism. Agitation over Aboriginal welfare in Sydney had steadily grown following the migration from rural areas in the 1950s and 1960s, and by the 1970s Redfern had become the base of a ‘subgroup’ of peoples with diverse dialects, many with kin ties in shatters, and all with poverty and service needs in common (Scott, 1973).

Today, the district clings to the edge of the rapidly expanding commercial frontier of Australia’s premier city, with dramatic views north to the impressive skyline of Sydney’s central business district and within metres of the wave of gentrification sweeping Victorian terraces. During 1991–2, the apparently eccentric juxtapositions of people and place prompted me (Kay) to investigate the formative processes that brought the Aboriginal settlement into existence. Consistent with cultural geographies of the 1990s, I sought to historicise the narratives of identity and place that had been invoked in the bitter struggle to secure the block for Aboriginal shelter (Anderson, 1993). I was less interested in documenting the social profile and experiences of the Redfern ‘subgroup’, though to be sure the acute material poverty of the tenants impelled in me a strong sense of research purpose.

My focus was rather the discursive contestation surrounding constructs of the Redfern housing project on the part of black activists, white allies, white critics and other parties to the founding of the settlement in 1973. Using archival materials from three levels of government, I developed a constructivist perspective on the material and symbolic making of that place at a flashpoint in Australian political history. In such a way, I hoped to contribute a more rigorous understanding of the district’s history to the public record than that offered up by media representations of it as a detribalised ‘slum’. I sought to distance myself analytically from images of Redfern that presumed, rather than historicised, its difference and disadvantage.

Such critical geographies go some way toward demonstrating how social process is constituted in and through space and place. Redfern itself was not the object of study, but rather its socio-political definition. And yet, there seemed something insistently absent in a neighbourhood study whose engagement with residents had only been registered through the activists who claimed to speak on their behalf. My earlier work *Vancouver’s Chinatown* (1991), had also been removed, for its own theoretical reasons, from the frames of mind of the district’s (Chinese-origin) residents. In a

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3 See also Waitt (in this issue) for examples of influential representations of Aboriginality in the cultural definition of Australian nationhood.
subsequent phase of research on Redfern, therefore, I sought to get to grips with the multiple perspectives on place of the tenants of the Aboriginal Housing Company.

Again, my purpose was less to single out urban Aboriginal experiences for the academic and policy attention they certainly deserved. Rather, I attempted to displace the grip of essentialising notions of a unitary Aboriginal voice that had come to bear the title, in 1990s social-science-speak, of ‘resistance’. For all the validity of critiques against research that claims to speak on behalf of ‘others’ (see Spivak, 1988a), resistance stories written from the perspective of the racially marked subject appeared to me to suffer from their own political essentialism. I sensed they lacked the necessarily sustained contact with real subjects in concrete circumstances to hold the analytical power they claimed. In other words, the narrative position of resistance seemed to me to rely on a script of domination/resistance and a politics of race polarity that had become fatally abstract by the mid-1990s.

Any serious engagement with the tenants of Aboriginal Redfern cannot help but acknowledge how divisions of ethnicity, language, social class, gender and so on unsettle the authority of the analytical grids we seek to impose on them (whether of resistance, oppression etc). With the help of an Aboriginal research assistant and at the request of the Aboriginal Housing Company, I set out therefore to convey some insight into the contingencies and complexities of everyday life on the block (Anderson, forthcoming). For me, this became no ‘thin’ or ‘thick’ description of a victimised subgroup. Nor was it a strained exercise in auto-critique. It was the imaginative work of rethinking the thoughts of research subjects whose everyday worlds in turn required their own contextualising. Not only did I rely for this on the insights of the tenants themselves, their neighbours, their landlords, their spokespeople etc. My interpretive leaps also drew upon, and were disciplined by, the materialist sensitivities and cultural sensibilities I acquired as an undergraduate: in lectures, interviews with Vietnamese refugees in Adelaide, and one unforgettable visit to an Aboriginal mission in central Australia.

Part of the transformation which occurred in social theory in the 1980s was a new alertness to the politics of working cross-culturally and the problematic of speaking positions. The critiques of anthropological practices and knowledge-building which emerged at that time made only too clear the difficulty of, say, a non-Aboriginal academic speaking on or about Aborigines. As it turns out, I (Jane) had more uncomfortably reached a similar conclusion before I had any of the benefit of these critiques. My decision to stop doing ethnographically-based research with Aboriginal communities came from the same spirit as these critiques but was based on a far more personal experience of this crisis of representation.

It was when I was ‘in the field’ conducting research into Aboriginal land rights in Port Augusta that I first met the Aboriginal politician, Gary Foley. He asked a question I have never been able to satisfactorily answer: ‘What are you doing here with us blackfellas in Port Augusta? You must be either a mercenary, a missionary or a misfit!’ Whether Foley was right or not, his interrogation was powerful enough to convince me that if I really was committed to Aboriginal self-determination (to take up the terms of 1980s Aboriginal politics) then I should pack up my research bags and move on. It has always surprised me (but probably not Foley) that, almost a decade later, I find myself once again thinking and writing about Aboriginal issues. Have I
come to terms with being a mercenary, a missionary or misfit? Or are there other available positions from which to speak?

Like *Urban Aborigines*, my own recent work on cities has reflected the theoretical and political imperatives of its time. This is perhaps most apparent in the way my urban work has drawn upon recent developments in critical colonial studies and postcolonialism. These closely related fields offer new ways of thinking through the idea of race and the associated politics of identity and power. They take as a starting point Edward Said’s landmark thesis on the social construction of racialised identity (his notion of Orientalism) (Said, 1978). Said’s contribution to thinking about race and identity has been extended and challenged in many ways. Most notably, a range of social theorists, many of whom speak from positions once on the ‘margins’, have radically restructured the way in which the relationship between identity and power is understood (see as examples the work of Bhabha, 1994; Hooks, 1991; Minh-ha, 1994; Spivak, 1988b). These theorists have not simply inserted the voice of otherness as some incommensurate, oppositional force. Rather, they have challenged binary structures — like that of self and other — which formed the basis of imperial power. Attention has now turned to the far more fluid and intersubjective processes which operate in the structuring of difference.

Many of the new developments within critical colonial studies and postcolonial theory draw on a spatialised language. As has been noted in relation to other developments within critical social theory, this reference to space is often more metaphorical than material (Smith and Katz, 1993). But imperialism has always been a fundamentally spatial project, which is, as Said (1993: 271) put it, ‘an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control’. Cities are implicated in this spatial project: serving either as the metropolitan heartland of imperial expansion or as important nodal points in the establishment of colonies. If the city was so important to the imperial project then why was it that contemporary analysts of cities so rarely registered this imperial inheritance? If, because of modern patterns of migration, former imperial heartlands are now inhabited by those who had once lived on the colonised edges of empire, why was it that studies of race and the city rarely drew upon postcolonial theory?

My project in the book *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism in the City* (Jacobs, 1996) attempted to answer some of these questions by forging a productive encounter between postcolonial theorisations of identity and power and the space of the city. My assumption was that many contemporary cities have imperial or colonial pasts which still influence political, cultural and material formations within them. I sought to demonstrate that in such cities transformations which are routinely understood as postmodern — gentrification, mega-scale developments, spectacularisation — are inextricably tied to these colonial legacies and the postcolonial formations to which they give rise. In the case of Australian cities the legacy of colonialism is often patently clear. The grid city attempted to give spatial expression to the ordered rationality of colonial intent: creating a known and familiar place out of an unknown land; providing the spatial infrastructure for the distinction between the colonial self and the colonised other. Although the regulatory regimes of colonial cities in Australia attempted to sustain this ordered ideal, the desired ‘purity’ of the colonial city has, as Gale’s *Urban Aborigines* so clearly showed, always been productively compromised by the continuing presence of the colonised.
In my work on Australian cities, the formation which specifically attracted my attention was what I call the Aboriginalisation of urban space. By this I refer to the various processes through which urban developers and planners self-consciously attempt to incorporate some expression of an Aboriginal presence. The modern Aboriginalisation of urban space takes many forms. It may include a starkly oppositional, counter-colonial politics as was the case in the Aboriginal protests against the proposed redevelopment of the Old Swan Brewery in Perth. But it can also include the regimes of non-Aboriginal desire which produce developments and planning initiatives which actively seek to include some type of Aboriginalised aesthetic or content. Such spaces are appearing in cities across Australia, as memorial sites, as heritage trails, as placemaking projects, as eco-tourist developments. In short, I sought to document a range of unruly processes which speak to a quite specific (post)colonial predicament.

There is an ambiguous cultural politics associated with these engagements with Aboriginality. Are they the result of a new phase of non-Aboriginal enthrallment with the nation’s Aboriginal inheritance? Are they simply new expressions of imperialism, with urban developers and planners cleverly appropriating Aboriginal imagery to produce an inclusionary, legitimating skin for their developments? It is tempting to return to a familiar critique which aligns such formations with colonialism: pointing perhaps to the way they appropriate and commodify Aboriginal imagery, or to the way they feed non-Aboriginal desires, or to the way these gestures of inclusion are regularly built around primitivist stereotypes. Yet it is also important to see that such developments may give rise to formations which are far more radically postcolonial than might be first thought. And this carries with it both gains and losses.

At least some of these Aboriginalised developments may provide important sites for the insertion of images of urban Aboriginality which undo some of the more negative stereotypes of Aborigines. Many of these sites produce a productive hybridity by mixing traditional and contemporary Aboriginal imagery as well as combining Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal imagery. If these processes of Aboriginalisation of urban space are truly inclusionary then they can provide mechanisms by which Aborigines can actively participate in the making of urban space. Such new urban spaces may simply be gestural — they are a far cry from urban land rights — but they can and do unsettle the colonial authority of cities. But it is in this unsettlement of authority, that it is possible to detect one of the less positive dimensions of postcolonial Australia. This is the return, under a new logic, of non-Aboriginal racism towards Aborigines. This is a racism which is not, as was colonial racism, built around the idea that Aborigines are ‘lesser’, ‘other’, ‘uncivilised’, but around a view that Aborigines, despite their economic and political marginalisation, now have too much (too many special government benefits, too much special legislation, too much land). This is postcolonial racism, a racism which, uncannily, arises in response to the various political efforts which have been made to compensate for the injustices of our colonial past.

**Conclusion**

If we take this idiosyncratic academic journey along the path from *Urban Aborigines* to Aboriginality and the city as one antipodean trail in the recent development of
cultural geography, then what might we conclude? In the first instance, it might help to give those of us who practice as cultural geographers in the Australian context a sense of at least one local lineage. It is, of course, not the only path that cultural geography in Australia has taken. For example, Hilary Winchester has provided an impetus for the emergence of cultural geography at the universities of Wollongong and Newcastle. At least some of this work has itself turned to the theme of Aborigines and the city (see as examples, Gorrin, 1994; Waitt, in this issue; Winchester et al., 1996), although it has generally focussed in other areas, some of which are demonstrated in this volume.

Nor has the cultural geography emerging from The University of Adelaide confined its attention to urban settings. Richard Baker (1993), for example, has documented traditional Aboriginal resource use as part of a broader project of extending the contribution geography might make to environmental issues (see also Baker, in this issue). Baker’s work follows in the tradition of other cultural geographers who have concerned themselves with issues of development, heritage management and resources use in relation to Aborigines in regional Australia (see as examples the work of Lesley Head, 1993; and Elspeth Young, 1992). There is also the long-standing Australian tradition of historical geography which shares many themes, perspectives and concerns with new cultural geography (see as examples Jeans, 1988; Powell, 1978; 1988). It is not possible within the confines of this paper to do justice to these varying examples of an active and diverse cultural geography in Australia. There is no doubt that each of these paths taken by cultural geography in this ‘southern space’ reflects their own contingencies and contexts.

Drawing on our own research experiences, we have attempted to chart some of the significant changes which have occurred in cultural geography in the past quarter century. We have also attempted to draw attention to some of the specific political issues which are pertinent to a cultural geography which operates within a settler nation like Australia, where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians struggle to find a way to co-habit. Within cultural geography more generally, there has been a significant shift in what might be thought of the ‘object’ of research. In its Australian expression, this shift has meant that cultural geography is no longer confined to the study of ethnically or racially distinct ‘subgroups’. Although the strands of our work which we draw on in this article may suggest that cross-cultural research is still the norm, it will be clear that our concern is as much with dominant cultural forms as it is with the conditions of life of racialised minorities.

Not that we suggest the gaze of the non- Aboriginal cultural geographer be safely confined to the way in which Aboriginal people and images or Aboriginality are defined by (non-Aboriginal) urban authorities and interests. Neither of us has managed or wanted to stay in that safe zone. In the tradition of *Urban Aborigines*, our work with Aboriginal communities has specified the experiences, intentions and conditions of life of indigenous Australians. To do this is, of course, to be open to the charge of speaking out of place. Not to do this, however, to remain within the safety of speaking only about how Aboriginality is ‘made’ by non-Aboriginals, may well work to give further voice to those who for too long have had the last say.

There is of course another strategy open to the cultural geographer who seeks to avoid transgressing cultural boundaries: and that is to retreat into a geography which looks
only at one’s ‘own’ culture. While this might provide moral certainty, it is hard to imagine where this culture of the ‘self’ might exactly exist. Australia is a nation which moves self-consciously, somewhat falteringly, towards a multicultural and postcolonial future. If we take these political agendas seriously, if we seek to document these major points of transformation in the cultural architecture of the nation, then we cannot retreat so assuredly to studies of the ‘self’. If we do, it is likely that we will find a self that is as much about ‘them’ as it is of ‘us’. Recognition of the thoroughly entangled experiences that make up the entity we know as Australian society is no call for a ‘polyvocal’ relativism. It is no benign agenda designed to give melodious voice to exoticised difference. Nor does it everywhere entail a ‘retreat from political engagement in struggles outside the academy’ (Chouinard, 1994:3). On the contrary. It is an appeal for a geographic practice that seeks to blur the boundaries between centre and margin, with all the ardent story-telling and will to political reform that this challenge commands.

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