



URBAN RENEWAL AND THE CREATIVE UNDERCLASS: ABORIGINAL YOUTH SUBCULTURES IN SYDNEY'S REDFERN-WATERLOO

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ABSTRACT: *Redfern-Waterloo, on the edge of Sydney's CBD, has long been an important center for the city's Aboriginal population, as a place to live, socialize, work, and/or access services provided by the area's numerous Aboriginal organizations. State plans to regenerate Redfern-Waterloo, to realize its latent potential, far from seeking to displace the socially disadvantaged Aboriginal community and erase its cultural legacy, stress the importance of a continuing indigenous presence. Planning and policy documents generally suggest that Aboriginal people can contribute to, and reap the benefits of, the area's renaissance. This article will explore construction of minority cultures in planning discourse in Sydney and in particular the way indigenous culture and citizenship is delineated in the discourses of urban renewal. The vision of Aboriginal culture (and residual communal presence) is narrow and circumscribed by conventional "touristic" representations (fine art, dance, and other performance) around national heritage and consumption. This excludes many of the area's youth who, like their counterparts throughout the world, identify more with street culture—hip-hop, graffiti art, skateboarding, etc.—than with traditional arts/high culture. These activities have little place in the vision for urban renewal. This article will argue that civic booster strategies that fail to recognize the complex and ambiguous character of public spaces and their importance as sites of resistant/underground/avant-garde/youth subcultures will inevitably generate sterile landscapes; their vision of local communal heritage is little more than tokenistic.*

Many large cities have districts that remain as enclaves of social disadvantage defying the pattern of gentrification that prevails in surrounding areas. Redfern-Waterloo (RW) on the edge of Sydney's CBD is one such place.¹ Long impervious to the expected inflation in land values, it has failed to undergo the sort of urban renewal characteristic of many similarly situated areas in the city. Where market forces fail to generate the bounty to property capital—both to middle class homeowners and larger developers—the state frequently moves in to kick-start regeneration (Hackworth & Smith, 2001; He, 2007; Ley, 1996). As happened in London's docklands (Brownill, 1990; Morgan, 1993) and indeed in The Rocks, Sydney (Morgan, 1991) during the late 20th century, the planning powers of the local council responsible for the areas were removed. The

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Redfern-Waterloo Authority (RWA) was formed in 2004 to oversee a large-scale redevelopment effectively placing control of the area in the hands of the New South Wales (NSW) Labor government (which lost office in the March 2011 election) and specifically the Minister for Planning (Redfern-Waterloo Authority, 2007). Ostensibly moving to realize Redfern-Waterloo's latent potential in the interests of all citizens, the former government was amenable to the seductions of developers, particularly those who donated to party coffers (as was revealed by a series of scandals surrounding land development). Such liaisons have long been central to the processes where large cities change. Among academic commentators Smith (2002) in particular has stressed the aggressive character of recent gentrification as secured through state-capital alliances. Despite this, public authorities charged with undertaking urban renewal frequently have to deal with complex local cultural politics, to negotiate with residual communities in a way that was not so necessary in the wake of 20th century modernism.

In Redfern-Waterloo planners are compelled to acknowledging the significance of the Aboriginal people who have made the area the center of their metropolitan life as residents, or frequent visitors and activists/workers in many of the indigenous organizations based there. No plan to redevelop Redfern-Waterloo could afford to ignore postcolonial political dynamics, in an era where the celebratory mythology of settlement has been convincingly challenged by indigenous counter-narratives of invasion, dispossession, and genocide (Goodall, 1996; Reynolds, 1982). This is especially so in view of the fact that the growing number of affluent professionals who move to Sydney from overseas, many of whom are potential residents or workers in a gentrified Redfern, have little invested in the Australian national mythologies and are very receptive to the criticism of past treatment of Aboriginal people. Doing justice to the enduring presence of Redfern-Waterloo's disadvantaged indigenous minority, while at the same time laying the foundations for gentrification, provides authorities and developers with a complicated challenge.

In recent times much urban renewal policy has been influenced by the work of Florida (2002), who has argued that urban prospects depend on the presence of members of the creative classes: professionals, and in particular those engaged in developing new ideas/technologies or forms of symbolic and stylistic innovation characteristic of post-Fordism. While they can help to generate urban economic renewal, these people have to be wooed, Florida tells us, and they are likely to be attracted only to places that can accommodate their cultural and technological requirements (as well as needs for tolerance of social diversity). So in applying Florida's ideas urban policy makers have sought to assemble just the *right* combination of demographic ingredients (how many architects/web designers/jazz musicians/gay men are resident in the city?) in order to leaven the municipal loaf. This approach conserves the modernist centrality of the planner although it acknowledges that there are vernacular cultural processes that cannot be completely stage managed. Creative city planners view the creative class as the emergent community, providing the main source of economic and cultural dynamism. By contrast, long-term residents and workers are viewed as residual and culturally inert, tied to the declining occupations and ways of life of the Fordist era. They can only ever form a passive backdrop to the tectonic forces of urban change. In this article I will take issue with this characterization, arguing that far from being a passive remnant many members of established communities constitute an active force, a *creative underclass* engaged in resistant cultural practice that serves to undermine the processes of gentrification in their neighborhoods.² This can take a range of forms and presents a political challenge for those who seek to manage this resistance.

In taking Redfer-Waterloo and, in particular, the Aboriginal youth of the area as my case study, I will argue below that the urban Aboriginal presence—particularly of youth—is *subcultural*, bearing little resemblance to conventional touristic visions of the indigenous, with all of its exotic implications. Their resistant cultural expressions are very difficult material for planners, bureaucrats and cultural managers to incorporate and defuse. While Redfern-Waterloo's fate may appear to be determined in a game played out by powerful economic forces and those who

represent their interests in the political field, the struggle over how Aboriginality is represented is playing a crucial role in the prospects for gentrification.

REDFERN-WATERLOO: SETTING AND CONTEXT

The classification Aboriginal is an artifact of colonialism. Colonial authorities rarely acknowledged the distinctiveness of several hundred cultures and language groups that inhabited the continent prior to the establishment of British colonies from 1788. For much of the history since that point the great majority of Aboriginal people lived outside of cities and towns. Few enjoyed citizenship rights and those who lived on government reserves were subjected to intense and demeaning scrutiny and regulation of their domestic and family life. Many of those who came to the city during the mid-twentieth century were escaping intolerable conditions in rural areas, both official racist surveillance and diminished access to their traditional lands as several government reserves were closed or reduced in size. Much of this migration was not officially acknowledged. Until the 1960s the Aborigines Welfare Board of NSW administered indigenous affairs on the basis that those who moved into towns and cities implicitly agreed to assimilate and to renounce their indigenous ties. For much of the twentieth century, Aboriginal people were not separately enumerated in the Commonwealth Census and although it is true that some were prepared to “pass,” and burn their bridges with indigenous communities, most were not. Those who continued to identify as Aboriginal sought out family and friends who were already living in the city including many of those who had been removed from their parents as children (the “Stolen Generation”) and were in search of family members.

The history of Redfern-Waterloo (RW) is of an area of poor housing accommodating largely the Irish Catholic working class and, at various times ethnic minority groups (notably Lebanese). Importantly the area is the hub and center of the New South Wales urban Aboriginal community in the post-World War II period (Anderson, 1993; Morgan, 2006; Shaw, 2008). The coming together of indigenous peoples from different regions in the city laid the foundations for a larger post colonial consciousness and indigenous solidarity that transcended the particularities of place of origin. RW was the site in which stories were exchanged of common experiences of racism at the hands of authorities. Such exchanges were the foundation for the emergence of a Pan-Aboriginal politics and culture. RW was the site for the establishment of a range of important community and cultural organizations—the Aboriginal Legal Service, Aboriginal Medical Service, and the (now defunct) Black Theatre. From the late sixties RW became a hotbed of political activity, especially when the Black Power movement emerged in Australia to challenge the paternalism and liberalism that had characterized the administration of Aboriginal affairs. RW has long been (and remains) a meeting place, the symbolic heart of Aboriginal Sydney (Figure 1).

Access to affordable and adequate housing was long a problem for indigenous people in RW, and remains so. Chain migration to the area led to overcrowding in the run-down inner-city housing that provided the only genuine rental option. Few landlords and agents were prepared to accept Aboriginal people as tenants in anything but substandard housing. The neighborhoods in which Aboriginal people made their homes were often shared with members of the poor white working class—many from Irish Catholic backgrounds—and these districts were characterized by lively street culture and robust local social life. During the post-war decades RW developed a reputation as a rough area. Media reports of public drunkenness, violence and prostitution provoked considerable moral alarm and contributed to the public perception of Aboriginal residents as “fringe-dwellers” corrupted by modern society (Morgan, 2006, ch.3). By the 1970s, however, the emerging indigenous community politics challenged the stigmatized perceptions of Aboriginal districts of Australian cities (including Fitzroy in Melbourne and Fortitude Valley in Brisbane).



FIGURE 1

Map Showing Redfern in Relation to Sydney Harbor and CBD

In 1974, plans to redevelop the area around Eveleigh Street, Redfern for private housing led indigenous leaders to join with a group of local priests to petition the Federal Labor government, under Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, to set up an area of dedicated Aboriginal housing. The request was granted and the government purchased an area that became known as The Block and placed it under the control of the newly-created Aboriginal Housing Company. The original plans for redeveloping The Block were shaped by utopian principles—private gardens were to be turned into a communal green space and local decisions were to be taken by participatory democracy. This was the era of the counter culture, and Aboriginal activists saw the aspiration for alternative lifestyles and communal living as consistent with traditional Aboriginal social arrangements. The Block (which housed only a small fraction of the RW Aboriginal population) was a key symbolic space in the city, not just for those who lived there. The common ground around this area of housing has long been an important gathering place for Aboriginal people from Sydney and beyond.

But like many utopian visions the plans for The Block went awry. The Aboriginal Housing Company became mired in in-fighting and allegations of corruption. Crime levels rose and sparked periodic waves of zero-tolerance policing, which was culturally insensitive and heightened tensions between locals and authorities. The area became known as a center of drug dealing with high levels of addiction among young people. This was graphically and sensationally documented in media reports during the late twentieth century which revived popular fears about the “black ghetto,” social decay, and disorder. For a long period the Aboriginal areas of RW resembled the classic depressed city fringe areas described in Park’s classic concentric ring theory of urban development, amidst the comprehensive gentrification of surrounding suburbs (Park, Burgess, McKenzie, & Wirth, 1925).

During February 2005 a street riot erupted in RW, following the death of Aboriginal teenager TJ Hickey, that the local community believed had resulted from a police chase. The graphic media images of young people throwing bricks and Molotov cocktails at police brought to mind the riots of Brixton and Harmondsworth in Britain in the 1980s and Los Angeles in 1991. When in the wake of the troubles John Brogden the conservative New South Wales Opposition Leader called for the “slums” of RW to be bulldozed, and for the rioters to be dealt with severely, he joined a long line of moral entrepreneurs who have fulminated against the Aboriginal community in the area. Few urban minorities in Australia have been so feared or stigmatized for so long as the residents of RW.

In recent years all of the original housing in The Block has been demolished and the tenants relocated. This has happened in the context of a larger process of redeveloping social housing in RW and current plans indicate that the same number of indigenous households will be retained in this form of accommodation but that densities will increase substantially. This is consistent with the larger strategy of Housing New South Wales to enlist private capital to redevelop depressed public housing estates along “mixed tenure” lines. In late 2010 the New South Wales government announced that this would enable Redfern and Waterloo to be redeveloped to provide approximately 7,000 social, affordable, and private housing dwellings. The aim is to achieve a mix of 60% private and affordable housing dwellings and 40% social housing (Redfern-Waterloo Authority, 2010).

SHIFTING DISCOURSES OF URBAN RENEWAL

What will be the fate of RW’s Aboriginal residents as powerful forces gather to redevelop the area? How are they situated in the projections and plans? The role of the state in this process is not simply to manage the technical tasks associated with urban renewal but also to engage in the cultural politics of place making. The challenge of symbolically renovating areas of longstanding social tensions like RW can be formidable. In this section I will contrast two models of urban renewal: heavy-handed modernism, with its ambition for erasure of residual communities, buildings and landscapes, and the creative cities model that promotes local conservation and a more organic process of transition.

From the mid-twentieth century public authorities wishing to renovate and gentrify run-down neighborhoods would often set up urban development corporations which would take planning powers away from elected local authorities; develop a plan; undertake some token community consultation; offer tax breaks to investors; pull down old housing, factories and warehouses; relocate working class and minority communities to distant suburbs; and oversee the construction of office blocks or luxury housing. In this manner many blighted inner ring districts were incorporated into (or at least more functionally connected to) the Central Business District. Clear-fell modernism is best illustrated in late 20th century London where the down-at-heel Docklands region, especially around Canary Wharf, was remade into the financial center of Europe. However, the state’s role in civic remodeling is now much more complicated than previously, especially in times of recession. Economic restructuring, the emergence of the “new economy,” and the changing dynamics of gentrification have undermined the approaches of 20th century modernist planning.

Globalization is the master code for urban renewal as large cities, particularly in the West, compete to woo transnational capital (Sassen, 1991). The aspiration to enhance Sydney’s global status is central to the schemes for RW. The area falls within what is described as the “global arc”—stretching from Sydney’s airport to North Ryde to the north west of the city—yet it remains disjointed from the remainder of this region, a maverick, resistant, and scruffy presence (Figure 2). While other comparable inner urban areas of Sydney have been comprehensively gentrified RW remains transitional. Its political incorporation into the city came with the closure of South Sydney Council and the assumption by the City of Sydney of responsibility for the area. The State government formed the Redfern-Waterloo Authority (RWA) in 2004 to oversee the area’s redevelopment.

However, while some high-rise commercial developments are being built, RW’s renewal is not simply a matter of incorporating the area into the adjacent Sydney CBD, much of which is comprised of relatively featureless, generic office buildings. In order to make the area attractive to the creative classes as a place to live and work, planners are forced to recognize—by contrast with 20th century modernist ambitions for standardization—that it is the distinctiveness of urban

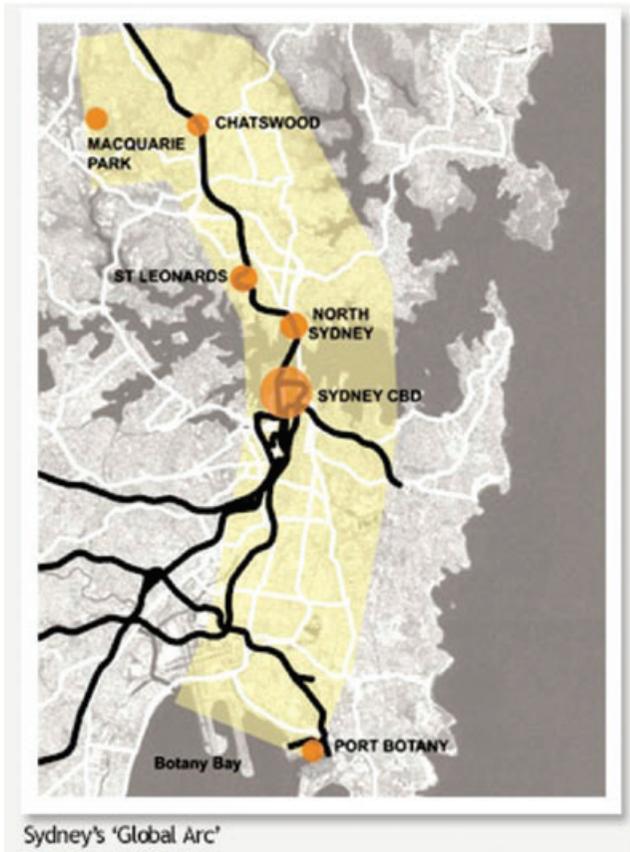


FIGURE 2

Sydney's "Global Arc" (NSW Metropolitan Strategy <http://www.metrostrategy.nsw.gov.au/dev/ViewPage.action?siteNodeId=52&languageId=1&contentId=-1>)

districts that outsiders and newcomers most covet. Inner-city areas like RW also stand in stark contrast with post war suburban landscapes of malls and project homes with very little street life. The development of Sydney over the last twenty years has accentuated the symbolic separation of inner city and suburbs. The Sydney for tourists, creative classes, and new economy entrepreneurs is remote from the city lived in by most of the city's population. Policy makers are increasingly aware of the danger that local cultures and landscapes will be destroyed by ham-fisted modernization involving destruction of local cultures. The new planning discourses appear to offer residual communities a stronger foothold in areas that once would have been taken from them. Such an approach has influenced some of the policy documents about RW. The *Sydney 2030* plan—the City of Sydney Council's vision for the next 20 years—acknowledges the dangers of clumsy development, recognizing that what is attractive about localities is their organic and multi-layered nature. These things cannot simply be concocted. As the *Sustainable Sydney 2030* plan recognizes:

Cultural quarters can also include residential and mixed-use quarters of some minority cultural groups . . . These quarters or precincts have generally grown organically over many years rather than being short-term regeneration activities. (*Sustainable Sydney 2030* p.233)

So the new model of post modern urban regeneration is about recognizing that planners should tread lightly and treat residual communities respectfully, in particular the offbeat larger-than-life characters that populate transitional areas.

Ideas about the creative city stand in contrast with the dystopian visions of gated communities and the shrinking public realm offered by writers as diverse as Davis (1990), Sennett (1970), and Gleeson (2006). Their work describes a shrinking of the possibilities of social mixing. The modernist city involved a retreat from strangers, the confinement of the functions of life into controlled, surveilled, and increasingly privatized spaces, and what Sennett calls the intensification of domestic life and the purification of identity (1970). In his explorations of Los Angeles, Davis (1990) described the fortification of the spaces of consumption, work, culture, and family and the brutal exclusion of the underclass and the evacuation of public space. The fringes of the neo liberal city evoked by Gleeson (2006) in his book *Australian Heartlands* are populated by freeway conservatives who only emerge from their master-built estates in late-model cars to go to work in office blocks, patronize shopping malls, or participate in user-pays leisure facilities and who, by paying for their education and health care, evade the possibility of dealing with those who cannot afford to do so. Numerous commentators—including notably Robert Putnam (2000)—have documented the decline in neighborhood life and social capital in these circumstances.

But the creative city vision appears to offer a more optimistic view of the public realm and the possibilities of social mixing. Its advocates hold that in order for the peculiar alchemy of gentrification/renewal to be worked amidst the various social groups inhabiting depressed but up-and-coming neighborhoods something of the public realm must remain intact. Commentators on the contemporary symbolic economy (Lash & Urry, 1994; Shorthouse, 2004) stress the importance of places in which a symbiosis between culture and capital can emerge. Such places permit the creative classes to escape the generic places, the artifice of their existence, and re-engage with the lively cultural environment of the locality. They also permit the recruitment of creative people with entrepreneurial ideas to the post-Fordist economy, in which the value of commodities is based more on intellectual and symbolic inputs than on fixed capital, manual labor, and raw materials. Ley claims that in “post-industrial cities . . . the exaltation of representation over function is far from the ethos of the industrial city and its muscular modernism” (Ley, 2003, p. 2529).

ABORIGINAL YOUTH CULTURES AND GENTRIFICATION

The idea of the creative city implies the possibility of conservation rather than wholesale modernist reconstruction, including the recognition of residual cultures and communities rather than their dissolution. So those who seek to bring such environments into existence must also represent the old communities to the newcomers. In gentrifying districts of Australian inner cities, the numerous migrant communities—in particular from southern and Eastern Europe, South East Asia and the Middle East—are often painted as a folkloric multicultural backdrop, rarely acknowledged as contemporary cultural subjects especially where they are socially disadvantaged. The creative city renovation appears to offer Aboriginal residents of RW better prospects of recognition than does slash-and-burn modernism, but it is only a particular vision of the Aboriginal presence that is foregrounded. This is consistent with the idea of indigenous Australians as cultural subjects but only in a very limited sense: as custodians of primordial traditions and as practitioners of fine and performing arts; a renovated and unthreatening vision of the first peoples. In this section I argue that young Aboriginal men in RW form a key part of the area’s creative underclass. They engage in subcultural activities, influenced more by global youth cultures than Aboriginal traditions, and bear very little resemblance to the idealized Aboriginality that is marketed to tourists and other outsiders. Their identifications, street cultures and symbolic



FIGURE 3

Aboriginal Tent Embassy 1972

creativity contradict the logic of gentrification. This research is based on semi-structured life history interviews conducted with sixteen young Aboriginal men in RW during 2009–10.

Indigenous youth have long been attracted to resistant cultural expression. Most of the young people who made their way to inner Sydney in the mid-twentieth century experienced a great sense of liberation. Many remember RW at this time as a place of the spirited Aboriginal gatherings that were held in pubs and clubs in the area (Plater, 1993). Although they often incurred the attention of local police—a pattern that has continued to the present day—the restrictions that were placed on young people in the city were much less stringent than those that they experienced in rural areas. The city provided a place not only where they could find better-paid jobs, but also where they could enjoy themselves free from the constraints which were imposed on them by the authorities, and indeed their own elders, back in their home lands.

In the period from the late 1960s, which saw the emergence of the politics of self-determination, young Aboriginal radicals from the RW were at the forefront of direct action and community campaigns. They took their lead from the Black Power movement in the United States and many adopted the dress, appearance and forms of speech from Afro-Americans who led the civil rights movement. Figure 3 shows young indigenous participants in the Aboriginal Tent Embassy protest of 1972,³ sporting Afro hairstyles and performing Black Power closed fist salutes. There was a good deal of contact and cooperation, too, between Aboriginal and Native American organizations in this period.

Most Aboriginal youth who grew up in RW participated in street cultures. Several young men told me that their street provided them with an alternative education. Jez,⁴ in his mid-twenties, for example said:

... the only way I have learned about my culture, I mean living in Redfern you know it is an Aboriginal community and being a black fella ... I grew up on the street learning about the culture you know.

Others told of how their sense of Aboriginality was strengthened upon moving to Redfern from other parts of Sydney or beyond. Richard in his late twenties recalled:

... growing up in the Western Suburbs [of Sydney] for me it was hard to really get a good grasp of my culture, it wasn't really until going to ... Redfern where I really got to learn a lot more about my culture, so it was really you know up to ... the age of eighteen where I got to really learn a whole lot more and really immerse myself.

While nonindigenous Australian suburban youth tend to be involved in collective activities in domestic spaces or key regional gathering places (especially shopping malls), Aboriginal youthful solidarities in RW are highly localized. The high level of relationship breakdown in urban indigenous families meant that many children grew up in households without fathers and with single mothers who found it difficult to monitor the activities of their children at all times. The majority of young people failed to complete high school and many were skipping school from an early age. After they left school there were few job opportunities for those without credentials, especially young men, in an area that had undergone rapid deindustrialization during the later decades of the 20th century. In these circumstances Aboriginal youth are particularly open to subcultural influences from the street.

Sociological interest in resistant youth street cultures can be traced to mid-20th century writers like Whyte (1943) and later Becker (1973). Theorists from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies wrote about youth subcultures in the seventies and eighties and were concerned with the role of territory and territorialization. John Clarke claimed that the English skinheads were using “magical” subcultural means to recover a lost community (Clarke, 1976). The decline of the ecology of the working class local culture based on a dovetailing of residential and workplace communities and the attenuation of opportunities available to young people produced a spectacular (and in some instances violent and xenophobic) subcultural repertoire. Cohen (1972) also explored the dynamics of subcultures in relation to the larger transitions in working-class life in postwar Britain. Subcultural constructions of place may be associated with violent reclamations of “turf” in response to gentrification and the attenuation of opportunities. Thus, it is with RW where Aboriginal youth—long marginalized and stigmatized—mark their territory through the repertoires of gang culture.

JT was part of this culture. Now in his mid-thirties, like many Aboriginal men, he has served time in jail. As a troubled Aboriginal youth in RW he eschewed conventional aspiration, dropped out of school, and became involved in street gangs:

In the Aboriginal community there wasn't many people working, ... but outside in the general population a lot of my friends worked ... I lost contact with them at a certain you know at an important stage ... at a time when I was going through my identity phase you know so I kind of stayed in the Aboriginal community.

JT suggests that the character of RW changed profoundly with the rise of the drug trade in the eighties, a development which had a corrosive effect on the Aboriginal community and led to the demolition of much of the housing in The Block and the relocation of residents (some to nearby public housing, others to regional, and suburban areas). When asked to contrast the RW of his childhood with today he responded:

the biggest change is the drugs and I was there from the start to the finish, I mean I can't say finish because it is still happening today but I was there before all the drugs were there on the street and I was there when it happened, that is the biggest difference ...

The state responded to the drug culture and the street resistance of Aboriginal youth with zero-tolerance policing—as a long-term strategy to “clean up” RW. Intensive police scrutiny is the cause of much local resentment among Aboriginal residents, especially among young men who spend time on the streets. Greg, in his early twenties, describes having to endure such attention regularly:

Like one night we had come back from like because we go to the internet cafe . . . come here to Redfern, and if the coppers see us we always get pulled over and get questioned for doing nothing . . . we probably get pulled over two times in one night.

Such experiences are in part the reason why many Aboriginal youth embrace American hip-hop (Morgan & Warren, 2010). The declamatory and oppositional style and, in particular, the anger toward the police struck a chord. The idea that hip-hop was rooted in street culture, in tight-knit disadvantaged neighborhoods, like those in parts of South Central Los Angeles, resonated with many of those who had grown up in RW. Rick, in his early thirties, was from a poor family in the area and he grew up with hip-hop. His parents were political activists, and he spent time in jail as a young adult. The belligerent sentiments of West Coast rap struck a chord with Rick as with many of his peers:

I remember round about 87 or 88 . . . the first NWA CD came out straight out of Compton and I remember I stole . . . the tape and I heard what they were talking about and it just spun me out because these people were using a lot of profanity . . . it was a bit of a revelation to me at the time, I remember being very naive when I was a child, even though I was very much aware of you know police brutality against me even at that age, I remember being assaulted by police at the age of seven and eight, but . . . we just accepted that that was what coppers did to us.

Where his parents had been inspired by U.S. soul and reggae music in the sixties and seventies and by the radicalism of Black Power—Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan, etc.—Rick was captivated by the resistant strains of Public Enemy and Niggaz Wit Attitudes (NWA). They described street conflicts, police harassment, and youth resistance. They provided a subcultural rationale for their situation and legitimized strategies of resistance.

The enthusiasm of Aboriginal youth for hip-hop has extended beyond listening to the music of others. RW has produced a thriving indigenous performance and recording subculture (as in other indigenous communities in Australia) much of which has yet to break through to the mainstream but has a significant online presence (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_BgWxSWiqxc). The community-access recording studio in the Redfern Community Centre is well used and there are regular outdoor performances. Aboriginal rappers like MC Wire, Brothablack, Street Warriors, and South West Syndicate have developed fan bases, and Redfern is the base for Gadigal Radio, an Aboriginal radio station, and Redfern Records, both of which support the indigenous music scene. Contemporary Aboriginal youth, especially young men, have embraced hip-hop culture, including graffiti art, much more than conventional indigenous modes of expression (Figures 4 and 5).

These are contemporary cultural forms with particular constructions of the idea of urban space as sites of the source of identifications, creative inspiration, and subcultural pedagogies. Many older Aboriginal people talk about Redfern in the language of land rights—constructing a (largely rhetoric and symbolic) Pan-Aboriginal claim that has no standing in native title law. However, the territorial constructions within youth cultures more closely resemble the semantic structures of locality found in hip-hop. The street, block, and hood are ideas that serve to organize solidarities



FIGURE 4

Graffiti/Street Art in The Block



FIGURE 5

Logo of Redfern Records

and oppositions. They are very different from the idea of the cosmopolitan social gathering that is central to the notion of the creative city.

One of the key brokers of oppositional indigenous youth culture is world champion Aboriginal boxer Anthony Mundine, who trains in the gym run by his father on The Block. He is something of a folk hero among young indigenous men in RW, and one whose radical politics and belligerence toward white Australia has led to him being demonized in the media. As well as his sporting accomplishments (he was a rugby league star before abandoning the sport for boxing) Mundine has dabbled in hip-hop and used music to communicate his resistant message. He has embraced the “gangsta” image/aesthetic associated with ostentatious displays of wealth, belligerence toward authority, and parodying of American individualism. He is featured in the video for a single by indigenous hip-hop artist Joel Turner called “Knock U Out” and recorded his own single, “Platinum Ryder.” The artwork for the record cover has numerous motifs connecting Mundine to a global subculture: subtitled “rags 2 riches,” it depicts a row of high-powered “pimped” vehicles (including a Hummer), as favored by LA rappers, and depicts Mundine

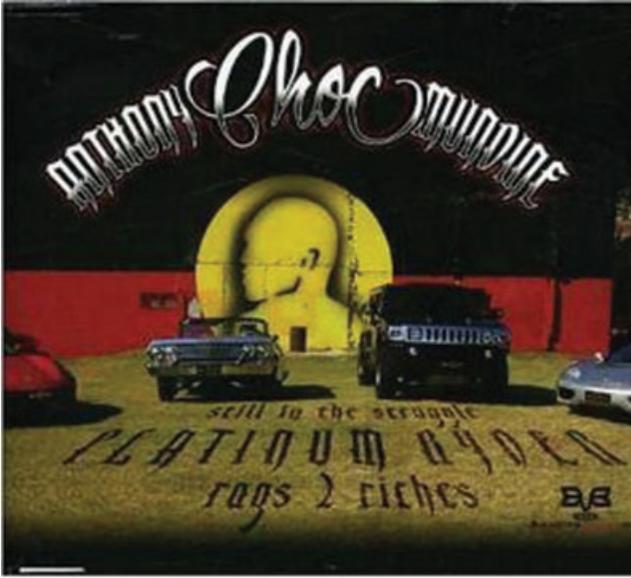


FIGURE 6

CD Cover of Anthony Mundine's Platinum Ryder

outlined in profile on the Aboriginal flag mural that marks the border of The Block (Figure 6). The film clip created controversy by depicting the burning of both the Union Jack and a photograph of Prime Minister John Howard. Like other aspects of his style, Mundine's engagement with hip-hop culture can be understood in terms of a spectacular performance of masculinity. This emphasis on a larger-than-life performance of the male self has its roots in impoverished African-American and Afro-Caribbean New York, but has been utilized and appropriated globally (Mitchell, 1996).

Like many young Aboriginal men, Mundine defines himself as a radical outsider to the imagined community of the nation. Exemplifying "protest masculinity" (Connell, 1995; Poynting et al., 2003) Mundine sets himself up to challenge some of the fundamental values of nation. A talisman for his indigenous brothers, Mundine is a polarizing figure, challenging the dominant construction of Australian settler masculinity around which national core values are built. He draws upon a range of influences, both local and global, to confront white Australia.

RENOVATED ABORIGINALITY IN REDFERN WATERLOO

I have shown that indigenous youth have a long-standing active collective presence on the streets of RW. While street life is central to the vision of the creative city, it is a very different vision of public places to that informing indigenous youth culture—one of social mixing among diverse groups. The established Aboriginal youth street presence has the suggestion of ghetto territoriality signifying the threat of disorder or crime and discouraging investment in both commercial and residential property. The authorities have generally responded to this by coercive means but such an approach can be self-defeating, exacerbating tensions and disorder, and producing negative media representations that will further discourage gentrification. Urban renewal provides the state with a range of softer strategies to marginalize the creative underclass, using ideological means to reconstruct the image of RW. The processes by which urban environments



FIGURE 7

Artist Depiction of National Aboriginal Cultural Centre

are planned, designed, and constructed are laden with assumptions about the place and role of the people who will inhabit those buildings and spaces (Lash & Urry, 1994). The various planning instruments projecting the renewal of RW generally depict Aboriginal people as practitioners of arts/cultural industries and as guardians of ancient cultures. Such cultures are central to contemporary myths of national heritage, accord with the common romantic preconceptions that tourists hold of Aboriginality, and offer the promise that a local artistic renaissance will accompany gentrification. For example, a plan developed by the Sydney City Council refers to the need for collaboration:

A detailed indigenous cultural plan undertaken in conjunction with the Aboriginal community is required to provide a Blueprint for the celebration of Aboriginal heritage and to foster contemporary arts and cultural practice.

The proposals include the establishment of an “Eora Dreaming Trail” (named for the original tribal group inhabiting the Sydney Cover area) which will end in Redfern at a planned Australian Indigenous Cultural Centre: “a landmark public space and building to attract visitors and nurture cultural regeneration.” Such institutions have the ideological effect of restoring a place for a wider constituency, situating it as part of the national heritage, and undermining local Aboriginality and Aboriginal constructions of RW in the process (Figure 7).

Such forms of recognition of Aboriginal culture do little to acknowledge contemporary indigenous symbolic expression, particularly as practiced by young people. Various public authorities (RWA, NSW State Government, City of Sydney Council) are encouraging Aboriginal people to contribute to the redeveloped landscape, but largely through the conventional and marketable forms of expression—art/artifacts/dance performance, etc.—that form the basis for the ways that tourists/outsideers conventionally engage with Aboriginal culture. Most young people are less interested in such forms of expression than they are in global cultures/subcultures. It is through these forms that they express their Aboriginality and they are as much a part of Aboriginal culture as traditional dot paintings or Dreaming stories. Such activities are resistant; they express

social alienation, and are not easily assimilable in the cultural economy. They will resist being incorporated simply as part of the local flavor, a stereotyped picaresque backdrop for the larger drama of gentrification.

The recent changes to the Aboriginal districts of Redfern-Waterloo have profoundly changed the area's local ecology. Familiar gathering places have been redefined and the symbiosis between domestic and street space has been destroyed. With the housing in The Block now demolished, and new housing (including social housing) and commercial development planned, the relationship of Redfern, and the Aboriginal people of Redfern, to the wider metropolitan community will change profoundly. This has been deeply disturbing. As JT remarked:

... now all the houses have been knocked down and you know I struggle to deal with it when I see houses and families moving and houses getting knocked down, yeah it is like your home is getting knocked down. Your own home.

CONCLUSION

When the contemporary state seeks to promote gentrification it cannot simply reconstruct neighborhoods as the *tabula rasa* of mid-20th century modernism. Rather, the creative city vision recognizes not just the idea of social mixing—a revived public sphere constituted through the particularities of place—but that residual communities will maintain an ongoing presence. Clear-felled modernist landscapes are much less appealing than culturally distinctive places, and advocates of creative city strategies argue that it is the particular chemistry of such places that encourages economic renewal. However, the process of representing and incorporating residual communities—particularly intransigent and disadvantaged communities—is complicated. I have demonstrated that young Aboriginal people are part of a creative underclass. They have a contemporary subcultural presence in RW that is not easy for the state to manage. Indigenous youth steeped in declamatory and iconoclastic street cultures are not easy to shoehorn into compliant roles in the renovated city. They do not identify with traditional symbols of Aboriginality around which the new tourist economy might revolve. Their culture is not easily commodified. They generally reject conventional aspiration and remain a drag on the process of gentrification and their presence appears dangerous and disruptive. The RW situation illustrates the importance of foregrounding social policies designed toward addressing the problems of socially disadvantaged urban minorities rather than dealing with them simply as an afterthought, an adjunct to the primary agenda of urban renewal.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Redfern and Waterloo are contiguous districts each of which has significant indigenous populations and high levels of social disadvantage. It is common to refer to them as a single district and they are treated as such in state-led urban redevelopment plans. Census data greatly understate the extent of the RW's Aboriginal residents because many refuse to complete forms.
- 2 The term underclass is controversial. It has commonly been used to refer to those without steady employment living in depressed urban districts, many of whom rely on semi-illegal activities and on welfare to survive (Anderson, 1990; Wilson, 1987). In the United States, underclass is usually used to refer to black residents of depressed inner-urban areas, although in Australia such concentrations of poverty and (what has commonly been seen as) social dysfunction are also found in multiethnic outer suburban districts (Peel, 2003). Several

commentators have rightly argued that the academic sociology of the underclass has been picked up by reactionary commentators intent on demonizing urban minorities—blaming them for their situation—and that the term has little value in grasping wider social and political relations (Gans, 1996; Wacquant, 2008), I use *creative underclass* in part polemically: to invert the conventional view of the urban poor as dysfunctional and inert; to reclaim the agency of marginal urban citizens; and to suggest that they are engaged in significant symbolic and political activities. It challenges the view of ghetto dwellers as abject/criminal/immoral, encouraging us to see them as authors of oppositional cultural practices and engaged with urban inequalities and change.

3 This protest took place in front of Parliament House in Canberra but involved many young people from RW.

4 All interviewee names are fictional.

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