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The shape of absence: Community Archaeology and the heritage of the Queensland Native Mounted Police, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the notion of absence as a key, but elusive, element in the contemporary recognition, perception and reception of Australian frontier conflict. It derives from a four-year-long community archaeology project to document the lives and legacies of a devastating frontier paramilitary policing force – the Queensland Native Mounted Police (NMP). The sources of absence in the heritage of the NMP are complex, deriving from silences in historical records, the partial nature of archaeological data, and the vicissitudes of memory work. We offer an introductory taxonomy for the kinds of absence that characterize the NMP and use this to consider the potency of absence in theorizing, reconstructing, defending and interpreting the heritage of Australian frontier conflict.

KEYWORDS

Native police; frontier conflict; difficult heritage; absence; interpretation

Introduction

Archaeology and heritage, both anchored by material presence (fabric, artefacts, structures and places), have long been concerned with absence: that which is not directly observable, buried, taken for granted, silenced and marginalized, or otherwise tacit, disqualified, repressed, removed or hidden from contemporary view. In Australia, a heritage of absence is powerfully present in relation to the Frontier Wars. When grappling with frontier conflict we are, for the most part, dealing with atrocities for which there are typically no first-hand testimonies – no direct oral histories from Indigenous survivors in their own words, no living witnesses, extremely limited historical records of specific events and, to date, no unequivocal material traces at locatable massacre sites (Litster and Wallis 2011; Smith et al. 2017). The source of these absences is manifold, deriving from silences in historical records, the partial qualities of archaeological data, and the nature of personal histories and social memory. These are crucial absences that complicate not only the definition of the scale, scope and form of conflict that occurred on the Australian frontier but also its present treatment, exemplified by continued resistance at the Federal level to acknowledging this dark history (Barritt-Eyles 2019). It is these absences that often create the appearance of ‘facts’ on which ‘real history’ is supposedly based. In reality, there are other facts – suppressed by language, politics, institutions, practices and property rights – that create a history that is equally real but often different.

In this paper, we explore the notion of absence as it emerged during a four-year-long project to document the lives and legacies of a frontier paramilitary policing force in Australia: the Queensland Native Mounted Police (NMP). We probe some of the ways in which the perception, reception and importance of absence and its complement 'presence' are given recognition in studies of conflict on the Australian frontier. We offer here an introductory taxonomy for the kinds of absence that characterize the NMP and use this to reflect on the intertwined nature of memory and heritage. We offer the following as a preliminary but by no means exhaustive reflection on the potency of absence in theorizing, reconstructing, defending and interpreting the heritage of Australian frontier conflict and as a contribution to understanding the nature of archaeological narratives.

Frontier conflict and the archaeology of the Queensland Native Mounted Police project

As a paramilitary force established to quell Indigenous resistance to European usurpation of their traditional lands, the NMP was a powerful instrument of colonial frontier violence in Queensland. Organized into detachments of Indigenous, predominantly Aboriginal,¹ troopers under the command of White officers, and progressively shifting to follow the vanguard of settlement and exploration across the colony the NMP operated for more than 80 years (1848–1929). Their role was both to respond to requests for assistance from pastoralists and other settlers and pre-emptively patrol usually large areas around base camps established in suitable locations. As a government-sanctioned and financed body, their actions were widely endorsed both publicly and privately, although they were not without detractors.

Historian Henry Reynolds (1987, 27) described the NMP as the 'most violent organisation in Australia's history', emphasizing their role in the physical destruction, repression and coercion of generations of local Indigenous peoples. Their actions were commonly cloaked behind the nineteenth-century euphemism of 'dispersal', an act usually accomplished at gunpoint. Although debate over the scope, scale and nature of frontier violence came to the fore in Australia in the early 2000s (see Attwood and Foster 2003; Lydon 2005; Windschuttle 2002), whether or not 'massacre' is the most appropriate term for particular forms of dispersal enacted on the frontier is not a question we pursue here (but see Dwyer and Ryan 2013; Ryan 2008, 2013). Instead, we simply note that it is difficult to dispute the reality of the violence that underlay the NMP's purpose and presence in Indigenous territories. Such violence was both endemic and long lasting, rooted in what came to be Darwinian worldviews of Indigenous peoples and therefore often viewed as an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of colonization. It thereby helped to contour many of the habitual ways in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous people related to one another during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continues to shape ongoing dialogue around identity, belonging and truth-telling today.

The Archaeology of the Queensland Native Mounted Police (AQNMP) Project was designed to record the traces of the NMP via the most abundant material indicators of their presence: c.150 of their camp sites across Queensland. A core goal of our project was to locate and record these camps, excavate a select few, and collect oral stories of the NMP, leading us to directly engage with more than 200 members of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal local communities – including descendants of troopers and officers, as well as of massacre survivors – local historians, landowners and managers, school and university students, and museum and other professionals across the state. Many scholars trying to understand the phenomenon of the NMP in the past have concentrated on only one or a few of these sources (Rowse and Waterton 2020). In trying to understand the multitude of sources ourselves we came to recognize that the NMP is characterized more by absence than by presence, or rather, by an array of voids of differing form. There is, nonetheless, a variety of traces that hint at the shape of absent things, including historical documents, physical artefacts, collective memories and individual family histories.

A taxonomy of absence

If we treat absence as a phenomenon worthy of study, then we need to direct as much theoretical attention to what is not there as to what is. Somewhat paradoxically, absence and presence are always entwined co-dependently: each being animated and given form by the other. In terms of heritage Harrison (2013) once argued for the value of reviewing the heritage decisions of previous generations in order to re-examine the value of disposal to the ongoing process of remembering. This led him to argue for an ‘ethical form of forgetting’ (Ireland 2015, 115), predicated on the notion ‘that forgetting is a necessary form of cultural production, a vital decision-making process by which we choose to emphasize and memorialize events that have social value, and forget those which are irrelevant’ (Harrison 2013, 589). Although his perspective was informed by the material traces of conflict, Harrison did not frame his argument within the messy pragmatics of settler-colonial contexts. It is almost a cliché to point out that what constitutes historical knowledge is as much a product of what is chosen to be forgotten as remembered. Through a critical lens, processes of remembering and assigning value to what is remembered and what is forgotten can create axiological and epistemic violence by upholding the agenda of vested interests with power. In short, in conflict situations, it is often the losers who do the remembering and the victors the forgetting.

We focus here on four types of absence as they relate to the heritage of the NMP, noting that these categories are not mutually exclusive:

- Empirical absence: A lack of material and immaterial traces of the past (archives, oral history, artefacts, memories), either absolutely or because the sources themselves are partial or selective.
- Axiological absence: The ways in which values and value judgements construct elisions, silences or other gaps in the choices that render certain traces visible and therefore construct particular interpretive acts.
- Epistemic absence: Formed in the absence of knowledge (ignorance) and/or through analysis or representation that closes off or obscures certain forms or sources of knowledge. Epistemic absence relating to the NMP falls into both of these, which is not coincidental.
- Ontological absence: The displacement of things from everyday reality, removing the possibility of knowing about them. ‘Foundational absence’ (LaCapra 1999).

We subscribe to a position that heritage is socially constructed (Smith 2006), emerges in dialogue and encounter (Harrison 2015), is therefore only clearly delineated in response to various stimuli or irritations (including the interplay of presence/absence, see Felder, Duineveld, and van Assche 2015) and is, in many ways, a declaration of faith in a past that thrives on fabrication (Lowenthal 1998). It nonetheless anchors us within our social worlds by providing a shared sense of familiarity and understanding. In briefly discussing each category of absence in relation to the AQNMP Project, we emphasize how the different forms of absence help to create, reinforce and shape each other.

Empirical absence

There are three obvious empirical absences in the heritage of the NMP: a lack of specific knowledge of massacre sites; a lack of historical documents related directly to the actions of the NMP in connection with such killings; and a lack of direct archaeological evidence connected to such events. A fourth is the inevitable erasure of traces of NMP camp sites – always frugally constructed and therefore largely ephemeral, to begin with (Barker et al. 2020) – as urban, pastoral and agricultural areas have expanded.

Massacres in the Australian context are unlike those that took place in other countries, which often resulted in large concentrations of bodies in a single location (e.g. Greene and Scott 2004). The typically widely dispersed camps of relatively small groups of highly mobile gatherer-fisher-hunter peoples contributed to the Australian frontier conflict developing its own particular character

(Litster and Wallis 2011). Many killings were a result of punitive expeditions that targeted small numbers of people over large distances, in what Barker (2007, 10) called opportunistic ‘hit-and-run’ attacks. The archaeology of such small-scale, short-lived events is further complicated by taphonomic and other processes: were direct traces of violence preserved on the skeletal remains? Were victims’ bodies left on the ground where they fell, perhaps to be retrieved and interred traditionally by survivors, or were they burnt or buried by those who had inflicted the deaths? Added to the challenge of identifying the locations of such events in the first place, there is only a slim chance that direct evidence of massacres will ever survive archaeologically (Litster and Wallis 2011).

The historical record is no less partial or ambiguous. After the 1838 Myall Creek massacre in NSW, when seven Europeans were hanged for the murders of 28 Aboriginal people (Lydon and Ryan 2018) – the first and last time that non-Indigenous perpetrators of a massacre were convicted – White offenders became more circumspect. This fostered a clandestine culture (an interpretive and to some degree epistemic absence) around acts of violence against Indigenous people and, to date, no detailed, first-hand, direct written accounts of violence in Queensland are known. In relation to the NMP, although there is a wealth of primary archival evidence available, little of this relates to specific instances of frontier conflict. Rather, the bulk of it details the bureaucratic framework within which the NMP operated. In this regard, the most obvious absence is the daily journals that were required to document a detachment’s activities. The keeping of official journals was mandated in various regulations beginning in the 1850s, and in 1866 was expanded to require the keeping of one diary by the officer who acted as camp keeper (who tended to remain in camp to look after supplies) and another by the officer who undertook patrols. Historical research points to a minimum of 150 camps across Queensland over the lifetime of the NMP (Burke and Wallis 2019). Assuming that each Sub-Inspector and camp keeper after 1866 kept the requisite journals, then the camps operating in that period should have generated a minimum of 260 journals documenting NMP activities over the latter part of the nineteenth century. Archivaly, however, only four such documents survive, all of which relate to the camp keeper’s role and thus internal domestic routines. Although some loss may be expected to have accrued from the transient nature of camps and the frequent shifting of detachments, the absence of most such journals from the archives begs the question of whether this was a deliberate act to remove evidence of the NMP’s activities from the official record (Ørsted-Jensen 2011, 100–101). The absence in particular of all journals providing information on the patrols during which violence would have taken place is highly unlikely to be solely an accident of preservation.

The archaeology of NMP camps, like the historical record, highlights a similarly ‘present absence’. The demonstrable presence of >15,000 artefacts from the seven excavated camps attests to the daily reality of the NMP, but largely their domestic life (Figure 1). This archaeology is almost entirely mundane, reflecting the medicines, drinks, foodstuffs, dining practices, clothing, weaponry and maintenance of horses and equipment that were essential to supporting the NMP (Barker et al. 2020). The very ‘incidentalness’ (Pollock et al. 2020) of these objects creates dissonance between what they are and what they connote: a range of banal purposes that enabled the NMP to carry out their activities. This material record is almost an alibi for the events that took place elsewhere, obscuring the violence under layers of ordinary habits and practices that reflect the bureaucracy and administration of policing. Only the ammunitions and weapons-related artefacts potentially imply something more visceral. This particular form of absence is confronting precisely because it is almost entirely silent on the reasons for these assemblages existing in the first place.

Epistemic absence

The most obvious epistemic absence is the invisibility of the NMP in the current orthodox public narrative of Queensland’s history. This is most clearly reflected in the two main State heritage lists: the Queensland Heritage Register (QHR) and the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Register (ACHR). The first inscribes only places held to be of significance at a state level for non-Indigenous people, unless that

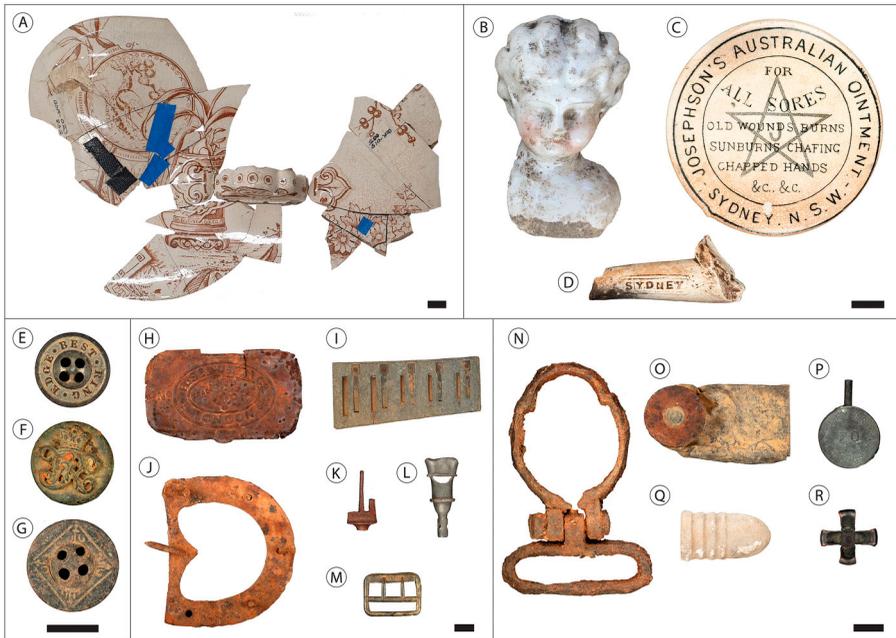


Figure 1. Artefacts typical of domestic life in NMP camps; weapons-related items bottom right. Scale bars 1 cm. Photographs by Kylie Macey, Heather Burke and Lynley Wallis. Figure by Lynley Wallis.

place can also be demonstrated to hold significance for Indigenous people; the second only includes places of significance to Indigenous people. The QHR contains only one place relating to the NMP – the site of the first Rockhampton NMP camp, now part of the city’s Botanic Gardens and a site which is listed for its contemporary amenity values rather than its NMP association. It also suffers the



Figure 2. Absence in the Rockhampton Botanical Gardens in the vicinity of the former NMP camp. Photograph by Heather Burke.

empirical absence of any signs of the former camp (Figure 2). In contrast, the ACHR contains 24 places connected to the NMP – 13 camps, one rock art site with paintings of police, two refuges where people hid from the NMP, and eight places of massacre (or ‘murder places’) involving NMP dispersals or reprisal raids. It is worth noting that the QHR also lists one massacre site: the pastoral station of Hornet Bank, where a family of non-Indigenous settler colonists was killed by Aboriginal people in 1857 (Reid 1982).

While the epistemic absence in the QHR may simply be a consequence of benign neglect and the largely ephemeral nature of the majority of NMP camps, it may also reflect a desire to forget (and/or deny) rather than remember on the part of non-Indigenous Queenslanders – still the principal beneficiaries of the NMP’s actions today. Indigenous peoples’ desire to publicly acknowledge the NMP as a devastating mechanism of settler-colonial conquest, alternatively, connects directly to family stories of massacre survivors that continue to animate people’s relationships to place. Moreover, the disjunction evident between these two forms of corporate memory points to their parallel nature: they do not overlap because they constitute two alternative frameworks for remembering settler-colonialism. In many ways the term ‘settler’ is itself a form of ontological absence, predicated as it is on the core foundational absence of *terra nullius*, which declared the Australian continent free of prior ownership. The situation on the frontier was, in most cases, very far from ‘settlement’. Rather, it was won and contested, and ‘settlement’ achieved through upheaval. It may be an example of ‘ontological absence’ that is determined by vocabulary.

The other persistent form of local memory that presences the NMP is Indigenous oral history. A powerful example is knowledge held by Yalarrnga man Lance Sullivan regarding the killings of four stockmen at the Wonomo waterhole in western Queensland, and the NMP and settler reprisals against Aboriginal people in the months that followed (Davidson et al. 2019), although there are also others (e.g. Bottoms 2013; Roberts 2005). Indigenous peoples’ experiences do not cohere with the orthodox narrative, giving rise to alternative local histories and highlighting the differing nature of knowledge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies. Howard Morphy (1995) argued that Aboriginal people’s attachment to Country reflects an underlying stable relationship (and therefore a durable cycle) between ancestral past and place, overlain by fluid relationships (and thus more intermittent cycles of memory) between actual groups of people and place. Even where people leave, are shifted or, in the case of frontier violence, were killed, significance in the landscape persists because people share a mode of interacting with it. Aboriginal collective memories of the NMP flow into larger cycles of durable knowledge, especially in relation to NMP camps – nodes of threat in previously safe and secure Indigenous spaces – and ‘murder places’ or other locales of historical trauma and contemporary sorrow. For some non-Indigenous people, however, who fail to recognize the mutually constitutive relationship between durable and fluid cycles of knowledge, Indigenous collective memory is perceived as being suspect and devalued as partisan and political. Indigenous oral histories can thus be viewed negatively as a (mis)representation of the world, reproducing a conservative bias that maintains the status quo and places an emphasis on Eurocentric standards of forensic ‘proof’ to the exclusion of other forms of knowledge.

Epistemic absence in light of either collective narrative is perhaps most problematic for the descendants of NMP troopers, who grapple with modern interpretations that may reconstruct these men as ‘collaborators’ (Richards 2008, 125). At the time of the NMP’s existence, however, cultural differences between groups were regularly weaponized by colonial governments, who co-opted existing cultural logics of ‘the other’ into the structure of Indigenous policing forces (e.g. Nettelbeck 2014; Watson 1996). While many were coerced into joining, others volunteered, sometimes more than once, creating a complex and shifting field in terms of perpetrators and victims (Burke and Wallis 2019). In addition, several NMP officers had children by Indigenous women, at least some of whom were themselves probably survivors of dispersals perpetrated by those same officers (see Davidson et al. 2019 for one example). Family histories for their descendants raise questions of intent, agency and possibility on behalf of both their ancestors.

Axiological absence

Values lie at the core of most cultural heritage practice, codified in Australia through the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, which assesses sites according to their aesthetic, historical, scientific, social and spiritual value. The perceived interconnections between different types and scales of value, in turn, shape interpretive processes intended to express those values, extending to what is considered to be a 'trace', which traces are made visible and how, and the political ramifications that arise from such choices (Ireland 2015, 110). Traces, as present things that 'stand for an absent past' (Ricoeur 1985, 264), can extend from the obvious (e.g. interpretive signs) to the immaterial and mundane (experiencing something from the past in any other way, see Crossland 2015). Axiological absence can thus be construed as the reverse of a Burra Charter typology: created through the loss or denial of value, as well as the articulation of 'anti-values' leading to destruction or omission (McClelland et al. 2013, 596).

Axiological absence in relation to the NMP is most obvious in the context of public interpretation, since such practices – or at least the popular commodified sort – are commonly tied to places held to be of importance to people on a macro-scale. In the course of our project, we visited and recorded 33 NMP camp locations and made attempts to locate several others, in the process finding only three camps with any form of public interpretation.

The first, Traylan in southern Queensland, is commemorated at a rest area some 12 km distant from the actual camp as well as via several objects retrieved from the camp and now on display in the Eidsvold and District Historical Society Museum. The interpretation of Traylan focuses on the presence of a barracks building and its subsequent removal, as well as the officers stationed there, but without mention of the NMP's activities (Figure 3). The second is near the town of Boulia in western Queensland, where an interpretive sign erected at the Burke River NMP camp site also presents a neutral and erroneous narrative. Focussing on the civil police, the sign omits any indication of conflict between the NMP and local Aboriginal peoples, despite the presence of known conflict in the region and oral histories of conflict preserved by Yalarrnga people (Davidson et al. 2019) (Figure 4). The Burke River NMP site is one of the few local tourist attractions, featuring shaded picnic facilities beside the waterhole that bely the violent associations of the locale. The third

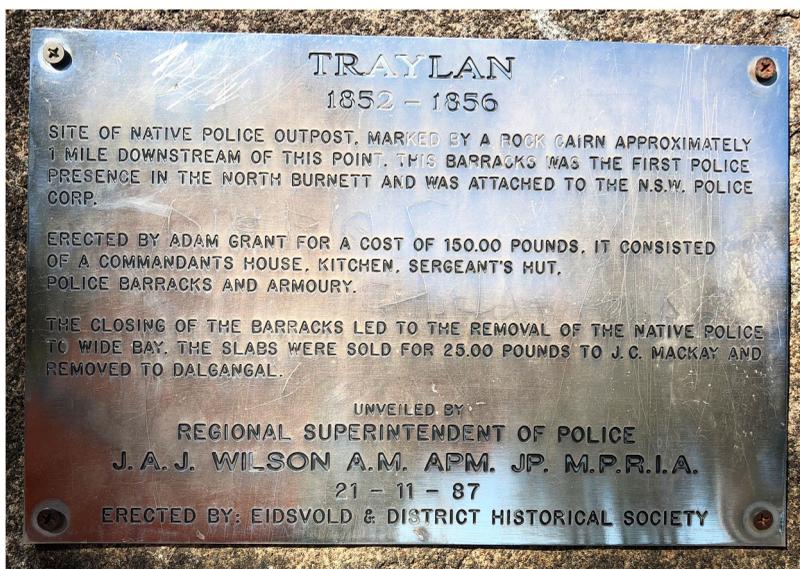


Figure 3. Interpretive plaque commemorating the Traylan Native Mounted Police camp. Photograph by Heather Burke.

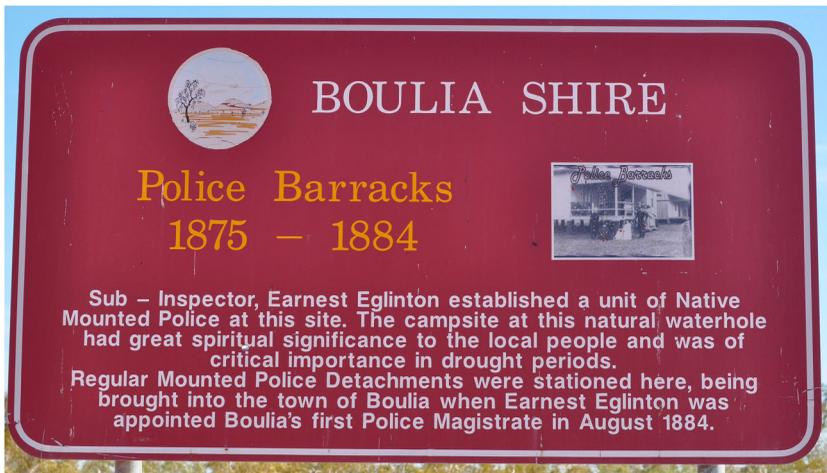


Figure 4. Interpretive sign at the site of the Burke River Native Mounted Police camp. Photograph by Iain Davidson.

site is the Port Curtis NMP camp in Gladstone, central Queensland, and is the only one to openly refer to the impact of the NMP on local Aboriginal groups (Figure 5).

The three NMP camp signs represent over 30 years of interpretation (1987–present) and so reflect changes in the wider politics around the presence of White people on the land. Their content echoes the problematic histories represented by other frontier memorials, which often remain silent about the effects of White settlement on Aboriginal people or skate across the surface of interaction to emphasize accommodation rather than conflict (Bulbeck 1991). Only the most recent sign at Gladstone occupies a less evasive space by openly acknowledging frontier conflict and its effects on Aboriginal people. Nonetheless, the three signs are rare visible local presences in contrast to the pervasive absences in the state historical narrative. The commemoration of even three NMP camp sites

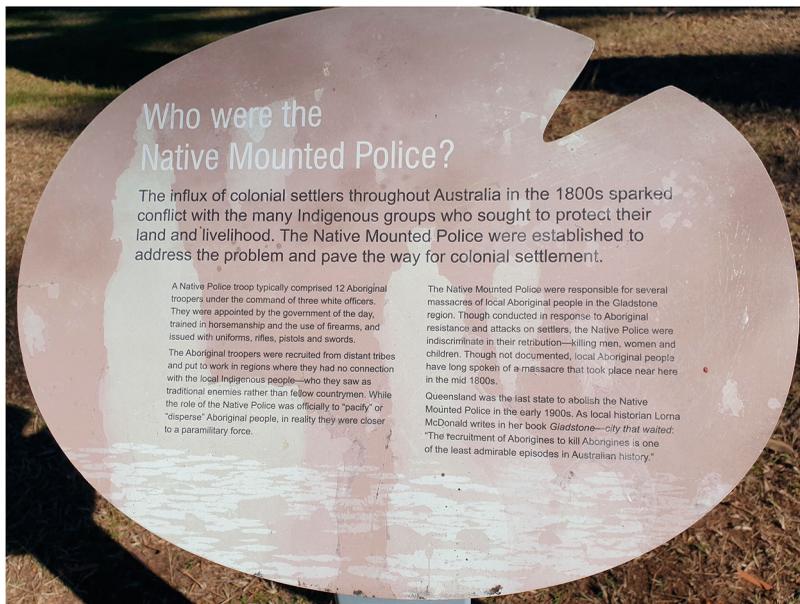


Figure 5. Interpretive sign at the site of the Port Curtis Native Mounted Police camp. Photograph by Heather Burke.

presents the current end of a long process of collecting non-Indigenous local knowledge to discover the traces of violence and points to a tenacity within at least some non-Indigenous regional communities to remember, even if only selectively.

Ontological absence

Empirical absences give rise to epistemic ones that, in turn, create axiological absences. Collectively an absence of physical and interpretive traces can create ontological absence, or the displacement of things from everyday reality. In the context of our argument, it is perhaps more accurate to say that ontological absence points to the disposal of ideas, rather than to their absolute non-existence: in other words, the deliberate forgetting of the NMP as reflected in the failure to remember their fundamental role in creating and sustaining the colony of Queensland. For contemporary non-Indigenous Queenslanders remembering the NMP would highlight the violent histories that enabled the alienation of properties they now regard as their own and perhaps re-ignite the often-fraught nature of Indigenous-non-Indigenous social relationships.

This has repercussions for temporality, since things that are being disposed of are in the process of having their ontological status changed, albeit slowly. Moreover, something disposed of can be called back into being if a trace is recognized to exist to which a meaningful contemporary connection can be established (Frers 2016). As Frers (2016, 287) has noted, we have to care about something in order to connect with it. It is the ‘attachments, sentiments and residues’ we affix to traces that ‘grant impermanent things a hold on bodies, imaginations and places. And those holds have a way of pressing into the present and futures of those who must navigate them’ (Fennell 2018, 520). The form of the thing retrieved, however, will not be identical to its predecessor. The longer the interval between disposal and retrieval, the greater the difference between its former and current state; in other words, the more the thing ‘will be reshaped by the process of remembering itself ... [and] altered because the subjectivities which remember ... are not the same anymore’ (Felder, Duineveld, and van Assche 2015, 464).

Objects may also be disposed of in some realities but not in others, creating different publics (communities of memory or ‘agentive assemblages’ [Matthews 2019]) in the process of remembering and forgetting, who are therefore constructing different temporal relationships between themselves and elements of the past. Individuals can be, and are, members of more than one community, pulled together or apart according to overt political allegiances and various notions of personal, family, and larger collective identity. This is intimately related to the ways in which we tell stories about ourselves – ranging from the autobiographical (how the collective memory of a family is formed and linked to personal identity and experience), the auto/biographical (local, straddling personal and family histories, creating the collective memory of a town or region) and the biographical (a more removed and abstracted framework for memory within which the smaller scales should, but do not always, interact).

The greater the distance in scale and plane between collectivities, the more contention arises, and the less coherence is possible. Contention for us most regularly surfaced in public commentary, especially in light of media interviews, pointing to a number of empirical, epistemic and ontological absences:

Unfortunately, based on your comments, there was not a shred of evidence ... The article is yet another example of FAKE NEWS. This is in part supported by your comments based upon your own preconceived ideas. This FAKE NEWS is promulgated by ‘journalists’ ... who unfortunately have their own agenda. It is very poor science, to draw conclusions without evidence ... Your work is not science, it is an attempt to distort and taint history. Find some evidence to support your claims, or better still and more importantly, use the science of archaeology for what it is intended—to ascertain the truth. (Email to Heather Burke 23 September 2018, emphasis in original)

For some Queenslanders, the NMP was not an agent of mass destruction but a protective force, undertaking a difficult job in perilous circumstances. For others, any links between the archaeology

of NMP camps and frontier violence can only ever be 'fake news' because they do not adhere to a Eurocentric standard of 'truth' in which evidence of all aspects of a process have left their mark. In reality, archaeology always operates to identify the missing elements that make the present material components understandable, albeit from a variety of not necessarily compatible theoretical viewpoints (for an illuminating take on this, see Antczak and Beaudry 2019). DeGloma (2015, 179) counterposed 'mnemonic bridging', or the existence of a cause-and-effect chain that connects the past and the present, with its opposite, 'mnemonic closure', or the construction of exclusory temporal boundaries around the conditions of the present. Ricoeur (1985, 266) expressed this as the difference between the past still (*encore*) and the past no longer (*ne plus*), or, to put it more crudely, the distinction between 'never forget' and 'get over it'. Each temporal position opens up different sets of relationships between people, making possible different demands and actions (Strakosch and Macoun 2012), and calls into question whether a non-contradictory (or more evenly tensioned) plurality of memory is even possible. DeGloma (2015), rather than focussing on the polarity, argued for a more constructive middle ground that 'set[s] the parameters of our experiences with regard to these issues. In other words, the polar opposition of subversive and reactive strategies may create a more sharply defined 'background of reality' against which the stories of communities and individuals can be interpreted and evaluated' (DeGloma 2015, 182–183).

Discussion: making absence present

Each form of absence sketched here can only be glimpsed at the margins of a variety of intermittent, overlapping and divergent presences: historical documents; NMP camp sites; occasional interpretive signs; the >15,000 artefacts collected by the AQNMP Project; or locales identified by Indigenous people as murder places. The archaeology and heritage of the NMP simultaneously possesses a hard, three-dimensional form and more elusive elements that are unrepresentable and unknowable in a material sense (some would argue unknowable at all), but which may be grasped emotionally through genealogies, 'sticky' heritages (Olsen 2010, 162) in local communities and the cycles of Indigenous memory.

The absences probed here, composite and interwoven as they are, are both accidental and deliberate: products of natural decay and occluded knowledge (Stoler 2016). Historian Ann Laura Stoler (2011) preferred the term 'colonial aphasia' for such lacunae, since they arise from the labour of active and continued disassociation to reveal 'the irretrievability of a vocabulary, a limited access to it, a simultaneous presence of a thing and its absence, a presence and the misrecognition of it' (Stoler 2011, 145). For Stoler, aphasia is rooted in the will, in those absences that are continually being constructed and that have been variously characterized by others as amnesia (Ricoeur 2002), disavowal (Delrez 2009; Veracini 2008) and denial (Hall and Pick 2017).

Any attempt to render such absences present in the context of the NMP reveals multiple communities of collective memory existing simultaneously but in different temporalities. Operating at different scales, and often on different planes, they rarely articulate (or rarely articulate well), and their temporal relationships to the NMP past are equally heterogeneous, episodic and uneven. Stoler (2016) highlighted the 'multiple temporalities in which people live' as one of the core problems of colonialism, since it raises questions of 'what is past but not over; how the articulation of past and present may recede and resurface; how colonial relations are disparately and partially absorbed into social relations and [how] disparities are productive of very distinct dispositions toward how – and, indeed, whether – those histories matter today' (Stoler 2016, 25–26).

Heritage lies in the relationships that bind individuals as well as the frameworks that measure time differently, especially for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Whether these can be, or should be, stitched together into something larger that matters in the context of the NMP raises the question of what might result if the invisible was ever to be made visible. While perhaps less extreme than the 'difficult transitions' that characterized post-Holocaust Europe, post-communist

Eastern Europe or post-authoritarian Latin America (Lehrer and Milton 2011), the shift may be no less profound and unsettling for those who experience it.

On the flip side, there are ways in which absence may become a strength. Other studies have argued that absence can be a fundamentally creative space for the construction of heritage values, especially in cases where individuals can forge a strong and dynamic interpretative community through shared imaginative interpretations of something lost (Burke et al. 2011). An orthodox, Cartesian reading of such places would view these values as 'weak' because the loss of fabric and shallow basis in physicality renders them uncertain, if not illusory. Read against the theoretically accepted, but rarely practically implemented, socially contingent model of heritage that recognizes the power of social ties (e.g. Byrne, Brayshaw, and Ireland 2003); however, these values become strong because the limited fabric encourages the construction of meaning.

Somewhat paradoxically, the connection between frontier conflict and historical trauma might also give absence potency. Trauma is something that can never be completely or easily represented because it is at root an emotional experience that often defies coherent articulation and is characterized by a variety of presences and absences. Memorializing past trauma is even more difficult since enabling another to come close to perceiving it requires an emotional connection to something outside of current experience. In turning over this conundrum in relation to the World Trade Centre memorial in New York, Micieli-Voutsinas (2017) theorized the importance of affect in allowing people to empathetically grasp the thread of past trauma. Affect relies on embodied experience, both psychological and physiological, activated through movement, performance, sensation, atmosphere or encounter rather than monumentality or materiality to expose the value of the unsayable (Micieli-Voutsinas 2017; Sturken 2020). Embodied experience as a form of 'more-than-representational' heritage (Waterton 2014) thus has a revelatory potential to build empathy that cannot be captured in words. At the same time, not all communities of memory will be equally open to the opportunity, because 'different bodies, differently imagined, will have certain affective responses already mapped onto them, defined by social expectations and structures of feelings that have built up around issues of gender, class, race and so forth' (Waterton 2014, 829).

In the face of absence, Harrison (2015, 24) urged us to consider heritage practices that will 'enact different realities and hence work to assemble different futures'. This is easier said than done, particularly in the post-colonial context, and the future is far from predictable. In the context of our project, the many absences in the current story of the Queensland NMP may shift in the future. The Queensland Government is interested in inscribing a suite of NMP camp sites to the QHR, and the AQNMP Project artefacts will be housed and eventually exhibited in the Queensland Museum. An allied project begun in 2021 intends to explore alternative ways to present these artefacts through a variety of forms of emotive and affective engagement. Using laser scanning and photogrammetry to build 3D digital models of select, iconic NMP artefacts, enhanced by augmented and virtual reality, the project aims to create an immersive experience that can be incorporated into online modes for engaging with frontier conflict. What effect such heritage practices might have on ways and modes of remembering or forgetting the NMP is open ended. It is entirely possible that the outcome will be the opposite of cohesion since anything that is perceived to impinge negatively on the stock of collective knowledge and the boundaries that safeguard personal identity can foster insecurity, discomfort and tension. It is only by facing such difficult knowledge, however, that we can begin to respond to the ongoing political challenge inherent in all settler colonial nations with similar contested heritages of violence against Indigenous peoples (see, for example, MacDonald 2015; O'Malley and Kidman 2018) and reconfigure our relationships to the absences and presences of the past in ways that shape alternative, more ethical and communal futures.

Note

1. We use 'Indigenous' to refer to people of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, and 'Aboriginal' to refer to people from mainland Australia.

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Data Availability Statement

All data from the Archaeology of the Queensland Native Mounted Police project is publicly available via frontierconflict.org. doi: 10.25957/5d9fb541294d5.

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