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Of Old and New: The social texts and messages conveyed by Australian universities

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On arriving at the University of Queensland, I walked from where the taxi dropped me off towards the Great Court. As I walked I could see the carvings in the sandstone on the façade of the building in front of me. The carvings depict images of land, flora, fauna, settlers, and us. In the corner of my right sight of vision, I could see Mayne Hall. My mind flicked back in what was an instant to a time 30 plus years ago. I remember putting on some of my best clothes when my family would travel from the suburb of Inala to the Alumni book fair held in the Hall. We needed to act 'discrete' and like we were 'meant to be there'. Members of my family would work hard to save money to buy the books that had far more substance than the books at our local community or school library. This was my first interaction with the University of Queensland.

On the first day of *Courting Blakness*, I walked towards and then into the Great Court. I began to explore and engage with the artworks and allow them to engage with me. I was conscious of being in the University of Queensland as I had been on all my past visits. I was conscious of the public and the private aspects of the artworks along with the public observance and surveillance of the viewers of the artworks. The contradictions and struggles that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience are everywhere when moving in spaces and places, including universities. They contain prevailing social, political and economic values in the same way that other places do. The symbols of place and space within universities are never neutral, and they can work to either marginalise and oppress Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or demonstrate that they are included and engaged. The artworks in the Great Court were involved in this matrix of mixed messages and the weaves of time contained the borders of the Court and within the minds of those present.

We were always inside the gate, even when we weren't

There was a myth that when Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people entered into some places, we somehow become less Indigenous. For example, for a long time it seemed that when we entered through the gates of universities, we were expected to be simply 'staff', 'researchers' and 'students'. In the past Indigenous academics referred to the concept of leaving 'Indigeneity at the gate'. I don't see it in this way. I see that we were always in universities, even if we were not as human beings physically present.

The realities of Indigenous place and Indigenous ownership of place remain unchanged, even though the processes of colonisation in Australia have

dispossessed and displaced Indigenous peoples and may have altered Indigenous connections, access and control within and of place. There are Aboriginal people who are descendants of the Aboriginal people who occupied the geographic localities where universities have now been built. These Aboriginal people, like their ancestors, belong to the Country on which universities have developed and continue to operate. Universities could not exist on and could not continue to operate without the prior dispossession of Aboriginal people. For example, the University of Queensland could not operate on the land of the Turrbal, Jagara and Ugarapul peoples without the dispossession of these peoples from the land the University now occupies in Brisbane and Ipswich.

On the land on which universities are situated, as in other geographic localities, Aboriginal peoples still have Indigenous belonging and Indigenous ownership of place. This exists regardless of whether multi-story buildings housing laboratories, classrooms and lecture theatres, residential halls, pools, sports grounds, car parks, cafes, a refectory or chancellery and or even great court have been built. It exists regardless of whether individual Australians or a university claims ownership. Non-Indigenous territorialisation of sites and land holdings is only possible through the dispossession and de-territorialising of Aboriginal people from that land (Fredericks, 2009; Moreton-Robinson 2003).

Within universities, there can exist a multiple of realities and connections to place. This includes the Aboriginal ownership of place and the non-Indigenous attachment and connections to place built up over time. In the case of the University of Queensland, the attachments reflect a history made of people, activities and buildings and also reflect changes in government priorities and economic situations. All that is part of what we see now within the University comes from what has been. The Courting Blackness Symposium and Exhibition becomes part of all that is and all the will be. It joins with what becomes the mixture of complex realities of the relationships to the Great Court, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous (Sommerville 2007). The Great Court will be different in the future because the exhibition took place, because it did take place.

Spaces and places, including those of universities need to be understood as never being neutral or natural. They are extremely political. The processes that took place and the installation of the art exhibition within the Great Court and on the buildings of the University of Queensland demonstrate such politics at play. The politics as they are played out in universities often reflect cultural memory, belonging, identity and citizenship (Wallork and Dixon 2004) along with multiple forms of inherited rules and procedures which can at times bind and block the capacity for change. At other times, the politics can set up a form of 'us' and 'them' dynamics within what are seen as public spaces of the university. The problem with this set of dynamics is that they more often than not operate to make Aboriginal people 'non-locals' or 'strangers' on Aboriginal land. This is discussed in the work of Carey (2008).

Symbols of place and space within the university

Using the work of De Certeau (1984) we can delve deeper into the cultural meanings of place and space inscribed with an array of politics. For example, the layouts, designs and names of buildings can reflect the symbolic place that each individual holds within that university. These can act also as social texts that convey messages

of belonging and welcome or exclusion and domination, and produce and reproduce power and control relations. It is easy to see on most university campuses how an array of prevailing social, political and economic values of place and space exist. Memory, representations, symbols, signs and images have a role in showcasing who is of value and who is not, or the degrees of value people have in relation to others.

Within universities, Aboriginal people are active recognisers of places that, through their symbols, identify Aboriginal people by our presence, or identify us by our absence. That is when we are not included throughout the university, we are identified by our exclusion as is our value.

That is, Aboriginal people don't just 'make' place, places and spaces 'make' Aboriginal people (Fredericks 2009). Within the University of Queensland Great Court and associated buildings, there are many signs, symbols and representations that assert an emphasis on British and European settler history-the animals and crops carved into the sandstone, the columns and decorative pieces on buildings, and the pictures on the walls in the formal rooms. They all work to define who built the nation and who did not. They additionally work towards redefining ownership and attempt to erase Aboriginal sovereignty. They act as markers to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and centre power within the buildings themselves and within the Great Court. In this way, colonial representations, power, and social and political meanings are inscribed and conveyed without a word even being said. Aboriginal people do not even need to be physical present for the messages to be conveyed about us in the past and in the present. Within this cocktail of messages, Aboriginal sovereignty is suppressed and white Australians are able to exercise racialised power and their possessiveness of place (Moreton-Robinson 2007). Moreover, the possessiveness and whiteness is productive in that it constitutes both the white and the Aboriginal subject. This process continues to operate in the absence of Aboriginal people. Moreover, it results on us standing out when we are there, instead of us being heartfully missed when we are not.

Shifting the landscape

Places and spaces and their signs, symbols, images and representations of universities are neither innocent nor neutral. They are instruments of navigation, which help to tell all who is and who isn't meant to be or should be there. In Australian universities, this has developed over time via the dispossession of Aboriginal people and the everyday practices of non-Indigenous people (De Certeau 1984). It is going to take a long time to change the current status quo within universities and to have inclusion and engagement with Indigenous peoples as everyday practices to counter what has occurred. Documents such as Reconciliation Act Plans and initiatives such as embedding Indigenous perspectives can assist but without a thrust of activity which draws people along I anticipate that we will face a journey of two steps forward, one step back approach subject to the additional changing priorities of leadership.

Through the work that others do through such creative activities as Courting Blakness and the work that I presently do, I have to believe that we the journey to inclusion and engagement in and on sites up a notch of two. I have to believe that

non-Indigenous and Indigenous people can demonstrate this through utilising agency and creativity through such projects as Courting Blakness. It is extremely hard to do individually within universities, but we can collectively enact sovereignty through reconnection to places and landscape shaping, including the use of signs, symbols, images and representations to assert our connection and ownership. This would change the experiences of place and sense of space within universities.

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