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People and the Land: Northumberland and Aboriginal Australia



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Written in collaboration with Tony Bennett

In recent years, the likes of John Pilger have raised awareness of the suffering that Aboriginal people continue to experience as a result of colonialism. This phenomenon of people being systematically dispossessed, dislocated and discriminated against in an apparently liberal democratic country is shocking.

As part of 'A Cross-Cultural Working Group on "Good Culture" and Precariousness (<http://wp.lanes.ac.uk/good-culture/>)', a collaborative project between academics and non-academic community members in Ashington, Northumberland, UK and Aboriginal communities around Brisbane, South East Queensland, we spent one month in Brisbane trying to identify and develop cultural responses to insecure circumstances capable of promoting well-being. In doing this, we were consistently struck by three related things: the invisibility of the Aboriginal population in urban centres, the continuing efforts of dispossession and dislocation of Aboriginal people in rural areas and the importance of land to the well-being of Aboriginal people.

We attended protests (<https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=1560727954208085>) against plans (<http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2015/04/01/indigenous-mp-linda-burney-condemns-wa-remote-community-closures>) to remove and resettle potentially hundreds of Aboriginal communities in rural Western Australia, which has been justified by the claim that living in such communities is 'a lifestyle choice (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/11/lifestyle-choices-is-abbotts-third-and-final-strike-on-indigenous-affairs>)'. For us, this highlighted how badly governments understand people's interests and how brazenly governments are willing to claim land for material exploitation.

The relationship (http://www.workingwithatsi.info/content/pi_land.htm) between a group of Aboriginal people, a particular piece of land and a particular set of laws is central to well-being in a fundamental sense. It's not just that people feel an attachment to a piece of land, it's that Aboriginal people were and are shaped by virtue of their specific relationship with that land. Aboriginal law, which governed the actions and interactions of people, is centred upon a custodial relationship between a particular group and a particular land. Without the land, people lost their law.

Quite aside from the loss of a sense of meaning and purpose, Aboriginal people lost a social structure that enabled them to predict and plan their lives. This structure allowed for a sense of development and progression as knowledge and status was gained. Additionally, the kin system ensured that people could draw on resources under periods of scarcity in what amounted to an informal welfare system. The skin group system, in which people were allocated a group at birth in order to prevent incest by prohibiting

people of the same skin group marrying, ensured that people could look forward to marriage and reproduction without the anxieties faced in a self-directed system such as ours.

This is not to say that we should romanticise traditional Aboriginal society in any way, shape or form. However, we should accept that there was something much more fundamental than song and dance about the loss of traditional shared understandings and identities. By making some big things predictable and controlling certain contingencies Aboriginal culture enabled people to achieve security.

It is in this broader context that we have come to appreciate the emphasis on and connection with the land among Aboriginal people. It is striking that they see their liberation as being bound up with being able to re-establish what they regard as an almost timeless relationship with the land.

For us, it is apparent that our relationship with the land is an ambivalent one. While, as Northumbrians, there is an emotional connection with the land and the various features which make Northumberland the area that it is, there is also a great sense of anxiety and uncertainty.

Where Aboriginal people were often forcibly removed from the land in colonialism, our ancestors were forced to work it in order to fulfill obligations to their superiors. Whereas Aboriginal people had a series of reciprocal relationships with the land and the other beings within it, our historical experience of being peasants, then farm labourers and then industrial workers was one of both dominating the land to pay debts and fulfil duties to land owners and being dominated by the land by virtue of being born, say, as peasants in a particular place under the control of a particular land owner.

While this is in our deep history, it is possible to underestimate the ways in which ideas or emotions can be conveyed and transmitted subtly over the course of generations. Archie Moore (<https://archiemooore.wordpress.com/>), a conceptual artist who, as part of the project (<http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/good-culture/events/relocating-land-memory-and-place-a-cross-cultural-exchange/>), created a show (<https://vimeo.com/137791382>) about his childhood land in rural Queensland, has talked of Jung's idea of 'archaic residue' – a collective unconscious grounded in the thoughts and feelings accumulated over humanity's development. Where people of Aboriginal descent may feel attuned, in some way, to features of landscapes, people in the North East may feel a certain foreboding about the land that is borne of this millennium-old subjection to the land. The trespass signs we see dotted around the land and the red coats and horns of the huntsmen can be anxiety inducing symbols of the dispossession and subjugation of people in our region.

While the Aboriginal people we met have a clear response to the question of the single biggest change which could improve their position in the continent – the return of land – our response is very different. In the wake of the electorate's decision to endorse another five years of austerity, the clarion call from the more organised among us in the North East is symptomatic of our relationship with the land and reminiscent of Yosser Hughes' 'gizza job' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2inSqo3Q3c>) demand: we request the right to work.

We feel disappointed when this right is denied and our loyalty questioned, as happened during the miners' strike. Being described as a 'fifth column' caused serious upset and disaffection for many of the older people who had fulfilled obligations to work hard and fight wars for the UK. Now, some younger people are no longer invoking this right. This is disconcerting for some as it undermines some of the old sources of predictability in our communities. However, chipping away at the Northumbrian 'archaic residue' of requesting the right to work for people and bodies who have the capacity to determine our future also opens up opportunities for new sources of predictability and security to be developed. In an uncertain world in which working hard has often been no protection against the whims of the market, we take from the visit to Australia the ambitious big thinking of certain Aboriginal people in trying to reclaim their land to secure their own futures. We need to adapt this big thinking to our own uses.

This article is part of 'A Cross-Cultural Working Group on "Good Culture" and Precariousness' (<http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/good-culture/>), a collaborative project between academics and non-academic community co-researchers in Ashington, Northumberland, and Aboriginal communities around Brisbane, South East Queensland, aimed at identifying and fostering cultural responses to precariousness capable of promoting wellbeing.

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