



Signifying Aboriginal Identity, Culture and Country in Central Queensland Through a Public Art Project

BRONWYN FREDERICKS

University of Queensland, Australia

ABRAHAM BRADFIELD

University of Queensland, Australia

Abstract

Alongside Toonooba (the Fitzroy River) in central Queensland, a series of Aboriginal flood markers are embedded within the earth, commanding attention to the river that flows on one side and the colonial infrastructure of Rockhampton that lies on the other. The flood markers are part of an arts project commissioned by the Queensland Government in 2013 to mark Rockhampton's history and its relationship to the river. The flood markers, named *Honouring Land Connections*, assert Indigenous voices into discourses of place, particularly discourses about the significance of rivers on Country. This article explores how art represents wider socio-cultural and politicised contexts of Indigenous and non-Indigenous discourse. The authors discuss the artworks as a form of social action that signifies Rockhampton as an Indigenous space with a history that cannot be neatly divided into three time periods. Any suggestion that *Honouring Land Connections* represents Rockhampton's precolonial period disregards Indigenous people's ongoing connections with and responsibilities for Country. The artworks signify contested spaces, places and knowledge of Country, culture, and waterways. *Honouring Land Connections* maintains cultural connections and speaks back to White preconceptions of Indigeneity. The artists wage war on the selective readings and colonial amnesia in Australia to directly challenge notions of *terra nullius* and *intellectual nullius*. This article shows how art can facilitate interaction through which Aboriginal artists can affirm, negotiate, share, and explore their identities while challenging dominant Eurocentric preconceptions of place and identity.

Keywords: identity, Aboriginal, Indigenous Australia, art, public art

Dreaming Country

Long ago there was a young woman and a young man who fell deeply in love with each other. They wanted to marry but because of the very strict lores regarding marriages, knew they could not. Still they could not help themselves and continued to see each other.

Because the Darumbal totem kinship is as strong as their blood kinship, the relationship these two young people had could be punishable by death. The relationship was forbidden because each of them had a totem that belonged to the water, and culturally they were too closely related to marry, so the Elders told them that it must end.

But the Elders, having pity and not wanting to harm either of these two young people, decided that one of them would be sent far away to live with relatives that belonged to a different group and country.

On hearing this, the young couple vowed they would not be parted, so they ran away together, disrespecting the lores, the Elders and the creator of all the water in the land, the Munda-Gadda (Rainbow Serpent). The young couple set off on their journey to flee Darumbal country, but they did not get far before the Munda-Gadda came between them, pushing them apart and creating the two mountains, Baga (the young man) and Gai-i (the young woman).

The terrible punishment that the two young people would have to endure forever more was to always be able to see each other, but never again be able to touch each other.

—Darumbal Elder Nhaya Nicky Hatfield (in *Enoch*, 2018)

Introduction

This Dreaming account provided by Dharumbal Elder Nhaya Aunty Nicky Hatfield documents the creation of two mountains, Baga and Gai-i, which stand in Baga National Park near Rockhampton in central Queensland. This story is part of Aboriginal oral history, passed from generation to generation. It explains the physical makeup of Country, describing how the two mountains came to be divided by the river but also provides cultural knowledge about the importance of respecting Indigenous Law, Elders, and ancestral beings.

The story of Baga and Gai-i provides a fitting metaphor for the epistemic divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in settler-colonial settings such as Australia. While many Australians continue to disregard the cultures and ways of being of different socio-cultural populations, the Country will remain subjected to a punishment like that faced by the young Dharumbal couple who disrespected Aboriginal lore. Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations will co-exist and co-inhabit place, but without truly engaging; forever able to see each other but remaining separated by the stranglehold of colonialism, just as the river created by Munda-Gadda divided Baga and Gai-i.

In this article, we explore Indigenous identity and cultural connections to Country within the settler-colonial space of Rockhampton in central Queensland. We frame our discussion around a 2013 arts project called *Flood Markers*, which included an installation created by the Capricornia Arts Mob (CAM) called *Honouring Land Connections*. The article draws on the ethnographic observations of Professor Bronwyn Fredericks, an Aboriginal academic, artist and member of CAM, who took part in the project as both researcher and a member of the collective. It is co-authored by Abraham Bradfield whose research—as a non-Indigenous academic—focuses on art and the challenges of decolonising in settler-colonial settings.

We introduce Rockhampton as an Indigenous space which has encountered a history of frontier violence between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. In doing so we describe how CAM's *Honouring Land Connections* artwork emphasises a Country where rivers are embedded in the ways Aboriginal populations identify with culture and place. We consider how an

artwork can be both a means of maintaining cultural connections and a way of speaking back to white Eurocentric preconceptions of Indigeneity and presentations of a place which attempt to void or dismiss continuing Indigenous presence.

Indigenous Knowledges and memories are forever embedded in Country, haunting colonial narratives of a so-called peaceful settlement that brought about progress, modernity, multiculturalism, and a 'unified' Australian nation-state. In *The Transit of Empire* (2011 83), Jodi Byrd asks:

What does it mean to take responsibility for a historical present dependent upon Middle Passages, indentured labor, and the violences of conquest in which the explicit goal was not just to rupture in the name of enforced labor, but to chart the direct transit from life to death for certain peoples and not for others?

Although Byrd focuses on imperialism in the USA, we must similarly ask what responsibility non-Indigenous peoples in Australia must confront the truths of colonisation and address its impact on unceded Indigenous sovereignty? Country and the manifestations that arise from it – including the artwork discussed – highlight the incommensurability between how the settler-state and governments would like to envision the past as static and compartmentalised, and the contestations that haunt it through a continuing and fluid Aboriginal presence. Indigenous knowledges and Dreaming stories are far from transient, but rather flow through space and time. Like the art installation itself, in this article we argue that a shift in consciousness must take place to encourage greater awareness of a continuing and eternal Indigenous presence.

As both place and epistemology, we liken Toonooba to Tiffany Lethabo King's notion of a *Black Shoal* (2019). It is a 'place of contact and encounter' (King, 2019 4) in which settler-colonial habits of thought and action are ruptured, and new possibilities reached by availing oneself to Indigenous understandings of Country and place. Through metaphors of fluidity, and drawing connections between land and water, King describes a Black Shoal as a liminal space that 'requires new footing, different chords of embodied rhythms, and new conceptual tools to navigate its terrain' (King, 2019 4). This article explores how a public art project, which highlights the place of Toonooba for local Aboriginal populations, serves as one conceptual tool that seeks to encourage

non-Indigenous peoples to confront the reality of living on Indigenous Country.

Rockhampton as an Indigenous space

The city of Rockhampton lies on Dharumbal Country, while the wider central Queensland region also spans the Countries of the Woppaburra and Gungulou people. The Dharumbal language group is split into 22 clans, each with their own dialects and terminology relating to different aspects of Country, its histories, and the areas to which Aboriginal peoples have moral responsibilities. Each clan's name is identified through the group's spatial orientation and spiritual connection with Country, represented by the suffix 'bura' which translates to 'belonging to'. The word *kuinmer*, for example, translates to 'plains', and the *Kuinmurbura* dialect group from the Torilla Plains near Shoalwater Bay are identified as 'the people who belong to the plains' (Smith, 2007: 8).

Today, Rockhampton is a regional centre that is home to Aboriginal people from neighbouring nations and distant Countries. The greater urban area has a population of around 77,000. Approximately 7.2 per cent of the Rockhampton population identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). This is a significantly higher Indigenous population than most other parts of the country (4 per cent of Queensland's population and 2.8 per cent of Australia's national population identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

The geographical area of central Queensland includes tablelands, flatlands, open scrub, wetlands, river and creek systems, coastal areas, islands, mountains, cityscapes, and urban sprawl. The city of Rockhampton is built around a flood-prone river, known to the Dharumbal people as *Toonooba* (named the Fitzroy River by colonial settlers). Economically, Rockhampton is aligned with the cattle industry, and claims the title of 'beef capital of Australia' (Forbes, 2001: 7). Fishing is also socially and economically important, with the region's rivers holding an abundance of barramundi, which is a drawcard for the tourism industry (Turner, 2004: 232). Tourism is crucial to Rockhampton's economic prosperity, with the region promoted as a gateway to the Great

Barrier Reef.

European populations began to arrive in central Queensland from the mid-1850s, first settling in the location where Rockhampton now lies (Memmott, 1994; McDonald, 1995; Smith, 2007). Frontier wars in the 1860s–70s brought confrontation between settling pastoralists, governing authorities such as the Native Police, and local Indigenous populations (Bottoms and Evans, 2013; Evans, 2004). Frontier confrontations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations were initiated by both sides, with attacks, reprisals, and outright massacres. The force and degree of violence inflicted upon local Indigenous populations, however, was disproportionate. The Glenmore massacre in 1865, for example, resulted in 18 Dharumbal people being shot, burnt and dumped into the river after a local station owner named Birkbeck reported ‘menacing’ behaviour to the Native Police (Evans, 2004; Bottoms and Evans, 2013: 56). Birkbeck gave this report after witnessing a ceremony that involved Dharumbal men carrying lighted torches in what was, unbeknown to him, a peaceful ceremony (Bottoms and Evans, 2013: 57-8; McQuire, 2019).

Settler populations were plagued by colonial fear and anxiety about the ‘natives’, and misunderstandings similar to Birkbeck’s often had dire and violent outcomes. In 1860, for example, Lieutenant Bligh and the Native Police Force chased a young Aboriginal man into the river at Maryborough and watched him swim for his life before Bligh shot him in the back when he became too exhausted to swim further. Dharumbal journalist Amy McQuire (2018) also writes of her shock in discovering that police would chase and force Dharumbal people off cliffs.

Violent atrocities, the forced removal of Aboriginal populations from their homelands, and their imprisonment on reserves and other institutions (Evans, 1971) have greatly affected the ways Dharumbal people access and engage with Country. While connections to Country were disrupted through colonial violence, they were not severed and remain embedded within Indigenous peoples’ ontological being and personhood (Fredericks, 2013; Cowlshaw, 2012). This is explained by Sally Morgan (2008b: 263) who describes how ‘our country is alive, and no matter where we go, our country never leaves us’. Dharumbal and the other Aboriginal language groups of central Queensland

continue to affirm their cultural identities by engaging with Country in a variety of ways. One example of this is Honouring Land Connections, an art installation created by the Capricornia Arts Mobs as part of the 2013 Flood Markers project.

Capricornia Arts Mob and the Flood Markers project

The Capricornia Arts Mob (CAM) is a collective of Indigenous artists established in 2013 and based in Rockhampton. The group includes photographers, carvers, film and documentary makers, dancers, musicians and writers (Fredericks et al., 2014). CAM undertakes cross-cultural artwork that remains embedded within Aboriginal land and Country. By embracing mixed media and methods, CAM promotes awareness of an Indigenous presence on Country while exploring and affirming Indigenous identity and challenging Eurocentric perceptions of Aboriginality and culture.

CAM's members come from Dharumbal, Woppaburra and Gungulou Countries as well as from other areas throughout Australia. In 2013, CAM had 15 active members aged from 18 through to community Elders. Members' varying ages, Countries, life experiences, and knowledges add richness and diversity to CAM's work. While the diversity of CAM's members adds complexity to the task of imagining, negotiating, developing and implementing art projects, it ultimately creates a productive space of 'action learning' (2014). Through discussion and questions, CAM's members engage, learn and affirm their Indigenous identity, while maintaining control and ownership of how their knowledge is attained and presented.

In 2013, CAM successfully tendered for one of three public art projects commissioned as part of the Queensland Government's Community Development and Engagement Initiative, collectively called *Flood Markers* (Roberts, 2014; Roberts and Mackay, 2013; Robinson, 2013; Robinson and Mackay, 2013). The art projects were intended to acknowledge three eras of Rockhampton's history, the central place of the river for the Rockhampton community and the cyclical nature of river flooding. The three projects were *Honouring Land Connections* (CAM's artwork) which explores Rockhampton's precolonial era; *Mercantile History of the Fitzroy River* which addresses themes

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relating to the Victorian/Georgian era; and *Debris* which addresses issues relevant to contemporary Rockhampton.



Figure 1

Honouring Land Connections
[Local ironbark timber, text, resin
and found objects] 2013
Capricornia Arts Mob
Photograph: B.Fredericks



Figure 2

*The Mercantile History of the
Fitzroy River* [Sandstone, laser
printed stainless steel] 2013
Larsen, S.
Photograph: B.Fredericks



Figure 3

Debris [Stainless steel and
found objects] 2013
B. Waugh, C. Rouse and M.
Worthington
Photograph: B.Fredericks

Even though the artworks are designed to remember three distinct historical periods, an Indigenous standpoint recognises that such compartmentalised readings of history can be problematic, particularly within settler-colonial places such as Rockhampton. While CAM's artwork *Honouring Land Connections* was commissioned by the local council to commemorate the time before colonial settlement, its reference to the period as 'pre-colonial' involves accepting a Euro/colonial-centric positioning that bookends Aboriginal culture in relation to European settlement. The description offered by the council implies the artwork represents what Aboriginal cultural was like before white invasion and, in doing so, presents Indigenous cultures as belonging to a time past. Instead, CAM's artists sought to design *Honouring Land Connections* to acknowledge the eternal, enduring and continuing presence of Country and Indigenous cultures and identities.

The manner in which the artwork was envisioned by Rockhampton City Council exposes a tension relating to place and colonisation. As an expression of cultural affirmation, *Honouring Land Connections* attempts to counter colonial narratives and non-Indigenous preconceptions of Indigeneity. The art undertakes a 'transitional' or 'intersubjective' role that seeks to cut through colonial narratives by communicating that the recognition of Indigenous peoples must be ongoing and on their own terms (Coulthard, 2014). The installation attempts to 'speak back' to how dominant populations recognise Indigeneity (as historic/pre-colonial), and in doing so, reverse the colonial gaze by turning the wider environment into objects that are positioned within Indigenous contexts (Sartre, 2001). Its situatedness within a settler-colonial setting however exposes the predicament of affirming Aboriginal cultures in a manner that does not reinforce dominant narratives. In this case, limiting Aboriginal histories, narratives, and identities to an idealised primitive 'pre-colonial' past. Within this interface, Indigenous peoples are forced to assert that their cultures and identities are mutually ancestral and contemporary.

Honouring Land Connections is a series of flood-marker memory poles positioned on the banks of Toonooba (Fredericks and Bradfield, 2020b; a; 2021). To develop the artwork, CAM workshoped ways to symbolise the knowledge and connection Dharumbal people have with Toonooba and vice-versa. Their aim was to find ways to share their beliefs and values about Toonooba with the broader community of central Queensland, particularly with those who live and work in Rockhampton and the Capricorn Coast. Five Indigenous artists tendered for the project (Pamela Croft-Warcon, Kaylene Butler, Howard (Joe) Butler, Trey Butler and Bronwyn Fredericks), with four producing the memory poles (Pamela, Kaylene, Joe and Trey).

The memory poles portray images relevant to the Dharumbal people, including boomerangs, water lily, goanna, fish, snake, and turtle, which are carved, burnt, painted, and embedded into the large ironbark poles. The poles and their accompanying plaque include Dharumbal words such as 'wura' meaning kangaroo, 'dakandy' meaning goanna, 'barraru' meaning green frog and numerous others. The memory poles stand in Toonooba Park on the banks of Toonooba, on Quay Street in Rockhampton. They create a lasting reminder of Indigenous knowledges, voices, and perspectives which, in settler spaces, are

often drowned out by the overbearing 'White Noise' of colonialism (Carnes, 2011).

Contested places: country and culture

Despite the legal overturning of *terra nullius* by Australia's High Court in 1992 (Yunupingu, 1997), Indigenous claims to native title remain strenuous processes governed by European law. Indigenous populations must 'prove' continual cultural connection to Country in order to be 'granted' native title (Moreton-Robinson, 2015: 16; Marshall, 2014: 178; Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003: 204). Whilst Indigenous peoples have the right to claim ownership of Country, their claims are embedded within Eurocentric legal, political, economic, environmental and social structures. Indigenous ways of being, knowing and valuing the world are objectified by the pervasiveness and possessiveness of white colonialism (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). In this way, colonisation is more than an historic event; it is ongoing, with external and internal structural process that maintain Eurocentric authority through everyday thought and action (Wolfe, 2005; 2006; 2016; Bradfield, 2018). Country and culture continue to be contested in modern Australia.

For Indigenous populations, culture, identity and personhood are intertwined with Country. Rose (2014: 435) describes Country as an:

area associated with a human social group, and with all the plants, animals, landforms, waters, songlines, and sacred sites within its domain. It is homeland in the mode of kinship: the enduring bonds of solidarity that mark relationships between human and animal kin also mark the relationships between creatures and their country.

Country is more than the physical or natural environment; it is deeply embedded in the relationships between all beings and their place. It is inseparable from Indigenous peoples' ontological sense of self and personhood (Yunupingu, 1997; Langton, 2002). Bob Morgan (2008a: 204) acknowledges this when he writes: 'my culture and worldview are centred in Gumilaroi land and its people. This is who I am and will always be. I am my country'. Any attempts to deny Indigenous knowledge of Country and Indigenous responsibilities to care for Country also denies Indigenous cultural

existence and personhood. This denial is similar to what Rigney (2001: 4) calls *intellectual nullius*: a colonial refusal within non-Indigenous scientific and academic research to accept and embrace Indigenous knowledge and presence on Country.

Colonisation is predicated on controlling the knowledge and representation of person and place (Fanon, 1965). Settler populations maintain dominance over the ways that populations are represented, understood and responded to (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Rose, 2004; Smith, 2012). Just as Indigenous peoples have to prove continual connection to Country, many Aboriginal people are asked to prove their identity and respond to white preconceptions of what 'legitimate' or 'authentic' expressions of Indigeneity are or should be. They also face the daily reality of negative stereotypes imposed on them through dominant and racist misconceptions.

In Australia, Aboriginal peoples are commonly presented as belonging to remote locations, far removed from modern (white) urban centres. Malkki (1992: 29) observes how 'terms like "native," "indigenous," and "autochthonous" have all served to root cultures in soils'. Through colonial narratives that emphasise romanticised imagery of the 'wilderness' and the 'noble savage', Indigenous cultures become embedded in a place detached from modern Australia. When Indigenous peoples are positioned within such 'modern' places they are often envisioned as being 'uprooted'. Langton (1996: 19) notes how such depictions result in a form of colonial amnesia:

The very valorisation of Aboriginal art and other expressions of cultural life as a manifestation of the "noble savage" is also the fetishism and stereotyping which prevents understanding. The valorisation of "wilderness" has accompanied an amnesia of the fate of indigenous peoples.

Within non-Indigenous discourses, Aboriginal culture is also tied to preconceived notions of displacement, meaning that identity is regularly equated to *loss* and what it is not, rather than what it is (Kearney, 2018; Cowlshaw, 2012). The amnesia Langton (1996) speaks of corresponds to the lack of recognition of Indigenous resistance, survival and ongoing cultural connections as much as it refers to a refusal to understand the wider socio-historic history of colonisation (see also Martin, 2013: 195; Rolls, 2010). Too

often, urban places and regional centres such as Rockhampton are presented as spaces of 'displaced and disrupted lives' where Indigenous cultural connections are seen as severed or damaged versions of traditional cultures that once existed, or remain in remote locations (Cowlshaw, 1999; 2009). Indigenous people recognise that, while they might live within the Country of another Indigenous nation, they remain within Indigenous places (Fredericks, 2008). Country provides an important aspect of Aboriginal identity and being but does so in ways often invisible or contested by dominant discourses (Potter, 2012).

To equate urban locality with cultural loss and/or illegitimacy is to grossly overlook the eternal and emerging nature of Indigenous cultural expression. Cane (1989: 11-12; in Memmott, 1994: 93) observes this when he writes how 'such views are perpetuated out of ignorance and are a result of poor historical and anthropological literature which describes a process of culture loss amongst Aboriginal people (lost ceremonies, altered subsistence activities and life styles)'. In Rockhampton, members of the Dharumbal Hatfield family express the importance of recognising their continuing connections to Country (Junjuddi Research in Memmott, 1994: 94), stating that:

what Migaloo or white people should try to understand is that our reality deals with and includes our spiritual and cultural beliefs. Many people seem to believe our culture in this area is dead and ceased to exist a long time ago, I don't believe this is true. Our culture has been decimated and oppressed to a great extent by the dominant white culture, but we still retain some knowledge of and believe in our spirituality and culture, this is really very important to us.

Places are never neutral but are politicised and contested (Oakes, 1997; Sibley, 1995; Somerville, 2010). The meaning of each place emerges from intersecting knowledges and understandings of the world. In Rockhampton's Toonooba, the meaning of place is a product of pre-colonial activity by the Dharumbal people (represented through *Honouring Land Connections*), colonial and early settler activity (represented through *The Mercantile History of the Fitzroy River*) and modern agricultural, commercial, environmental, and cultural experiences (represented through *Debris*). The three Flood Markers artworks jointly demonstrate the contested and politicised aspects of Toonooba.

Indigenous identity and place within Country however remain something that many Aboriginal people feel they must justify. Rather than non-Indigenous populations openly accepting Indigenous knowledges, Indigenous identity is contested in ways where the burden of proof requires Aboriginal people to account for their very being. This releases non-Indigenous Australians from any responsibility to encounter, interact and learn from Indigenous populations, and continues the harm of colonialism. White Australian identity and knowledge are unchallenged and taken for granted, while Aboriginal people are often seen as being in a state of ambiguity and displacement. Despite this, Indigenous connections to place remain strong. Indigenous testimonies – such as those depicted in *Honouring Land Connections* – bear witness to the survival, resistance, tenacity, and continuity of Aboriginal peoples within the Rockhampton region and along Toonooba.

Contested places: waterways

Throughout history, waterways have been used strategically to control, prevent, or enhance the movement of people, goods, and communication. The Dreaming account of Baga and Gai-l demonstrates how rivers were used by Munda-Gadda to prevent Dharumbal lovers from engaging in forbidden kin relations. In settler-colonial Australia, rivers provided barriers, borders and transport routes that enabled colonisers to separate and control communities and keep Aboriginal people away from the 'desirable' places where settler populations lived (Goodall and Cadzow, 2009). Goodall and Cadzow (2009: 190) note that fringe 'black camps' were often positioned 'over the river':

Rivers, creeks and waterholes have not only been key sites of conflict because their resources were necessary to both settlers and Aboriginal people; they have also been seen by settlers as the means to mark out the dividing lines between them and the conquered peoples.

Waterways have also been used to separate people for quarantine purposes, with rivers creating borders in attempts to control disease by keeping the 'sick' away from 'healthy' spaces (Goodall and Cadzow, 2009: 190; Rowley, 1972). Within settler-colonial Australia, these definitions of sickness and health were often deeply politicised and racial (Fanon, 1965), creating a form of social quarantine (Foucault, 1979) that included social exclusion as means of

control, discipline and protection. An article in *The Moreton Bay Courier* (1859) clearly highlights colonial anxiety towards Indigenous sickness and presence in Rockhampton:

There are a few blacks, whose long intimacy with the town has not bettered their morals, who are constantly in the habit of seeking their camps long after nightfall; and it is far from pleasant for the wives and children of the outside settlers to encounter these barbarians when they are in a state of grog. As the town is known to be quiet, it would not be amiss if special service was made by the police for a few weeks in the outside of the town after five or six o'clock in the afternoon.

This extract shows that the European town of Rockhampton is associated with civility and health. It is a place where acceptable behaviour (as defined by the settlers) can *potentially* be learned by Aboriginal peoples but, despite 'long intimacy' with the town, they have failed to 'better their morals'. The town is a 'quiet' place, juxtaposed against the noise of intoxicated 'barbarians' who are presented as threats to women and children. These 'barbarians' reside on the fringes of town, outside its safe and healthy borders, on the other side of the river. In Rockhampton, Toonooba once served to divide the so-called Aboriginal threat from the people who resided in the otherwise quiet and peaceful town. Amy McQuire (2019), a Dharumbal and South Sea Islander journalist reflecting on her Country explains: 'I didn't know that the river Toonooba, which cuts Rockhampton in half between the north and the south, was a boundary line that blackfellas couldn't cross during curfew'.

Toonooba has always been central to the everyday lives of Aboriginal peoples in central Queensland – environmentally, socially, politically, and economically. Dharumbal Elder Uncle Billy Mann describes Toonooba as the 'lifeblood' of the traditional peoples (Fitzroy Basin Association, 2013), connecting person to kin, place, and Country. This connection to waterways is articulated by many Aboriginal language groups. For example, the Barkindji peoples in far western New South Wales hold the river in their identity: 'barka' translating as 'river', and 'Barkindji' referring to 'those who *belong to the river*' (Gibson, 2012; Bradfield, 2019). Barkindji refers to a deeply ontological synergy between human sociality and the river itself, reflected through phrases such as 'I am the River' (Gibson, 2012). For many Aboriginal language

groups, the river is associated with health and wellbeing (Gibson, 2012; Muir et al., 2010; Toussaint et al., 2005). It brings a sense of calm and purpose. It also provides spaces of congregation and interaction during rituals, cultural practices, and everyday activities such as fishing and camping. Rivers strengthen kinship ties and connections to Country.

Another example of how waterways link Aboriginal peoples to Country comes from Ngangikurungkurr, the Country in the Daly River region of the Northern Territory. Ngangikurungkurr translates to English as 'deep water sounds'. Ngangikurungkurr Elder Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr reflects on how water permeates local knowledge and thought and is evident through concepts such as 'dadirri', which she likens to a process of still quiet reflection and contemplation of one's presence and experience in Country (Ungunmerr, 1988; Atkinson, 2002: 16).

Non-Indigenous populations frequently struggle to recognise that rivers are ontologically embedded in Indigenous people's lives. They may interpret Aboriginal knowledge and explanations of waterways – such as the flooding caused by Munda-Gadda at Toonooba – as spurious, opportunistic, inauthentic or irrelevant. However, non-Indigenous populations need to remain open, receptive, and responsive to Indigenous claims and perspectives about waterways if they seek to understand Indigenous cultures and identities. Gibson (2012; 2002) notes that this requires non-Indigenous populations to accept Indigenous knowledges, voices, and contributions as authentic and legitimate representations of Aboriginal personhood. Speaking of water management in Wilcannia, Gibson observes how white populations often dismiss Barkindji knowledge and explanations of the sentient presence of waterways in favour of western notions of 'science' and 'logic'.

When non-Indigenous people deny Aboriginal participation in discourses about Country and its management, they prevent Indigenous peoples from enacting their moral responsibilities to care for, respond to, acknowledge and sing Country (Watson, 2008; Rigby et al., 2011; Yunupingu, 1997). Refusing Aboriginal people this right upsets the cosmological balance in ways where the harm caused to the river brings about a reciprocal action in Country. The Country itself and the beings that exist within it, such as Munda-Gadda in

central Queensland, will respond. Aboriginal people recognise that sentient beings like Munda-Gadda (the Rainbow Serpent) create the physical and spiritual make-up of Country, providing spaces in which it cares, provides for and nurtures all beings within it. Uncle Dougie Hatfield (in Memmott, 1994: 79) explains the significance of Munda-Gadda to the Dharumbal people:

our Aboriginal culture tells us that all the waterways, lagoons, creeks, rivers etc. and many landforms were created by and still are protected by the Moonda-nGutta, what white people call the Rainbow Snake. I've been told that there's water stored in those sand-dunes in the Shoalwater Bay area that was put there by the Moonda-nGutta. Nobody has the right to destroy the water-supply, to do that would be sacrilegious.

Writing on the 'place' of water, Jeff Malpas (2009: 16) observes how water's movements, forms, interactions with its surroundings, and the stories and narratives associated with it, brings the place of water into being:

Various forms of water, salt and fresh, transient and permanent, sea and river, are articulated through the actions and movements correlated with them, but those actions and movements, and so the character of those forms of water and their places, are also articulated through narrative, story, myth, metaphor and image and patterns of activity.

For CAM's artists, the flood markers of *Honouring Land Connections* represent the ontological and cosmological connections that Dharumbal and other Aboriginal people of central Queensland have to Country and place. They are living symbols that mark socio-cultural connections to Country through their physical presence. *Honouring Land Connections* extends this by manifesting the memories and lived experiences that shape Aboriginal peoples' connections with Country and the place where a sense of personhood, being and cultural identity is developed. The poles are symbols of culture and identity that reflect the memories and experiences of place and become eternal through their telling and retelling as stories and oral histories. Similar to the ontological embedding of Country reflected in phrases such as 'I am Country' or 'I am the River', *Honouring Land Connections* are positioned within a large social and cosmological order. Whilst the poles can be removed from the banks of Toonooba, just as Aboriginal people were removed from their homelands and imprisoned, the Country and memories signified by the poles are eternal.

Signifying through the Flood Markers artworks

The *Flood Marker* installations are categorised into three historic eras, designed to signify the role of the river for the people of Rockhampton. The categorisation makes sense for the two artworks representing more recent eras for they reflect European epistemic understandings of linear time (Muecke, 2004): *The Mercantile History of the Fitzroy River* pays homage to the pioneering spirit of Rockhampton that paved the way for the town's development, and *Debris* recognises the modern river and the environmental stresses it faces. However, the historical categorisation makes less sense for *Honouring Land Connections*, which is defined as a 'precolonial' representation of Rockhampton's history. This is problematic within an Indigenous context because it implies that the memories and stories portrayed in the work belong to a past that no longer exists. For Aboriginal people this is not correct.

Rather than interpreting time through Eurocentric frameworks where events progress in straight lines and can be arranged in compartmentalised categories (Ingold, 2007: 2), Indigenous understandings of history are best represented through the continual flow of interconnecting past and present events (Myers, 1991). As acknowledged by Stanner (2010) in his 1956 essay *The Dreaming*, time relates to the 'everywhen', in which the past and present remain in a state of emergence. Past events and the actions and memories of ancestors and ancestral beings remain embedded within Country and continue to inform people's lives in the current moment.

It is also problematic to suggest that *Honouring Land Connections* signifies the *reclaiming* of Aboriginal culture and tradition. This view negates the eternal presence of Country and its continuing importance to Aboriginal peoples. Although colonialism brought changing social circumstances with drastic and violent implications on Indigenous peoples' lives and access to Country, Indigenous connections to their homelands and cultures remained unbroken. Through *Honouring Land Connections*, Aboriginal artists signify their continuing and evolving identity that flows through the past and present and will continue to flow into the future.

signifying Country through public art

The memory poles of *Honouring Land Connections* signify different aspects of Dharumbal culture and identity and embed the different actions, narratives, and myths of Toonooba. This includes reference to social structures through totems (such as 'barraru' green frog or 'yugu' water lily), animals within Toonooba (such as 'dakandy' goanna and 'wina' or 'guya' fish), and everyday activities (such as fishing portrayed through spears and nets).



Figure 5

Debris and surrounding area. 2013
Photograph: B.Fredericks



Figure 4

Honouring Land Connections and
surrounding area. 2013
Photograph: B.Fredericks

Rather than standing independently, each flood marker stands in relation to others, forming interlocking threads and webs of connections (Hokari, 2011: 105). Collectively, each pole forms a wave-like pattern representation of Munda-Gadda, the Rainbow Serpent. Through the pattern, CAM's artists make a clear statement about Aboriginal identity and understandings of Country. All beings, objects, ecological features, animals, waterways, and activities manifest and embody a much larger holistic cosmological structure – in this case Munda-Gadda and Toonooba. To understand Indigenous cultural connections to Country as signified through *Honouring Land Connections*, requires acknowledging the interconnection of all beings and the moral responsibility for the wellbeing and care of others.

For Dharumbal and other

Indigenous language groups of the area, Toonooba is the 'life blood' that connects all beings to Country and each other.

Honouring Land Connections also signifies meaning through its geographical placement. It is physically separated from the two other artworks. *Honouring Land Connections* is placed in a park on the side of Toonooba, in a place that is highly visible to passing traffic. It strives to remind viewers that they stand on Dharumbal Country. The poles however stand in isolation in a park with dying grass and little seating. The other two artworks stand in a built environment that is paved, landscaped and well-maintained, with seating and picnic areas. This physical separation has the effect of representing *Honouring Land Connections* as 'other' – as disconnected from dominant understanding of place. There is a dilapidated coast guard building nearby, which intrudes on the space almost as if keeping a watchful eye on the Indigenous presence by the river. It is a beautiful space, but not one where people are likely to linger.

Conclusion

We opened the article with the Dharumbal Dreaming account of two lovers who broke Indigenous lore by pursuing a forbidden relationship, resulting in punishment by Munda-Gadda who separated them with a river, making it so they would always see each other, but never again be able to touch. This account is deeply meaningful to Dharumbal people. The Law contained within it should not be detached from its original Indigenous context or used in a trivial manner. While it is not our intention to synergize Indigenous knowledge within an overarching Eurocentric framework, the punishment inflicted by Munda-Gadda provides an interesting lens for assessing Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in Australia. Colonisation has created spaces in which non-Indigenous populations often 'see' Indigenous cultures in superficial ways, being aware of Aboriginal existence but not truly engaging or seeking to understand.

Indigenous cultures inform the lives, places and environments of non-Indigenous Australians, regardless of whether this is acknowledged or denied. To prevent the potential punishment of being forever forbidden from engagement, non-Indigenous Australians must listen and respond to the testimonies and lived experiences of Indigenous people. The memory poles of *Honouring Land Connections* are part of that testimony. Rather than being symbols of displacement or relics of lost cultures, the memory poles stand as 'black

witnesses', intended to disrupt, disturb and unsettle Eurocentric readings of place. CAM's artwork stands in opposition to the selective readings and colonial amnesia of white Australia and speaks back to the falsity of *terra* and *intellectual nullius*. *Honouring Land Connections* is a physical manifestation of Aboriginal voices that refuse to be silenced. They stand along the banks of Toonooba as reminders of the eternal and continuing importance of Country as a shared place through which we are all connected.

BRONWYN FREDERICKS is a Professor and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement) at the University of Queensland. She has over 30 years' experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Indigenous health organisations, NGOs and government agencies. Her research, based in the fields of health and education and grounded within the political reality of Indigenous peoples' daily lives, exemplifies her commitment to social justice and improving Indigenous health and education outcomes.

ABRAHAM BRADFIELD is a research assistant with the Office of the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement) at The University of Queensland. Completing his PhD in 2018 in Anthropology and Social Sciences (UNSW) his research explores topics relating to colonisation, decolonisation, identity, and the intercultural. He remains committed to developing and implementing morally responsible research that challenges colonial power structures and encourages new habits of thought and praxis.

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