



Redfern as the Heart(h): Living (Black) in Inner Sydney

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Abstract

Before the arrival of the ‘white fella’ over 200 years ago, the Gadigal people and others of the Eora Darug occupied the place where the city of Sydney now stands. At the heart of this second tier global city, the inner-city suburb of Redfern has become a mainstay of urban Aboriginal identity. Yet, this troubled and stigmatised focal point of populist media representations and government policy does not reflect the diversity of urban Aboriginal life in inner Sydney. This paper draws on a range of sources about living in Redfern, from the difficult politics of establishing and retaining an Aboriginal urban space and place in the contemporary gentrifying city – achieved in large part through the establishment of now long-standing service provision – through to the rise of alternate visions and lives and many more ‘ordinary’ ways of living in the city. This paper seeks to highlight that Aboriginal people variously inhabit, occupy, and sometimes thrive in Australia’s first colonial city and the site of invasion. It also provides several of the author’s personal experiences of engagement with some of these processes.

KEY WORDS *Redfern; Aboriginal Australia; urban indigeneity*

Introduction

Before the arrival of the ‘white fella’ over 200 years ago, the Gadigal people and others of the Eora Darug occupied places where the city of Sydney, Australia, now stands (Kohen, 2000). As the site of the first colonial settlement, Sydney is also significant as the point for invasion and ultimately occupation of lands otherwise inhabited. More recently, this second tier global city has gained notoriety because of the inner-city suburb of Redfern, specifically ‘Aboriginal Redfern’. This mostly sensationalised and negative attention has maintained and reinforced an ongoing discourse of Aboriginal Redfern’s decline. Redfern has a reputation for housing Sydney’s only ‘black ghetto’ and has been widely considered, and portrayed, as a dangerous place (Anderson, 1993). Aboriginal Redfern has long

carried this reputation. Media reports continue to reinforce a discourse of decline, regardless of the rapid gentrification of the area (Shaw, 2000). This reputation has influenced government policy on policing, housing, and service provision. A recent example was the formation of the New South Wales (NSW) Government’s Redfern Waterloo Authority, which has threatened the ongoing existence of Aboriginal Redfern (Gulson and Parkes, 2010), or *The Block*, as it is known locally. Yet, Redfern – as a location that incorporates *The Block* but, importantly, includes the surrounding suburb¹ – remains a mainstay and focal point of urban Indigenous identity and community, and the provision of essential services. Redfern has long been a meeting place for various Aboriginal peoples. In the aftermath of the loss of identifiable country, this is particularly

so for many from the ‘stolen generations’ who were

[T]he estimated . . . 100 000 Indigenous children . . . taken from their families and raised in homes or adopted by [non-Indigenous] . . . families, up until the 1960s . . . [which was a] policy . . . designed to ‘assimilate’ or ‘breed out’ Indigenous people (RAN, 2007, n.p.).

For many, Redfern therefore remains the heart, a home, and country. Part of this focus includes the centralisation of service provision – services envisioned specifically for Aboriginal people, by Aboriginal people – and sometimes with the assistance of others.

The Aboriginal presence in Sydney may have crystallised within the wider Australian imaginary in the 1970s with the establishment of *The Block* but the institutionalising impact of the emergence of localised Aboriginal services in Redfern has tended to remain less newsworthy. The advent of health, legal, and educational services and agencies, and arts initiatives were all part of what Foley (2001) has dubbed Australia’s ‘Black Power’ movement, which continues to this day (not necessarily under this banner). Away from the spotlight of populist media representations that simultaneously highlight the troubles and stigma of Aboriginal Redfern, as well as the recently established cultures of gentrification (and associated capital gains), a rich diversity of urban Indigeneity exists. Building on existing discussions about the history of Indigenous occupation in the city, from the 1930s through the heady days of the 1970s and into the present Redfern, and *The Block* in particular, have been much more than housing or shelter for Aboriginal people. Yet daily life for Aboriginal people includes education, entertainment and everyday ordinariness (cf. Robinson, 2006). The early days of Aboriginal settlement, then the days of ‘Black Power’ politics that included the establishment of enduring institutions, may seem neatly tucked away in history or far removed from today’s Redfern but they set the stage for far more everyday presences and occupations to follow, endure and sometimes flourish. Aboriginal settlement in inner Sydney is far more than the dominant ghetto image.

The aims of this paper are to first revisit a history of Aboriginal Redfern and trace some of the pivotal moments in the struggle to establish and maintain an Indigenous Australian presence in inner Sydney. I particularly emphasise localised Aboriginal service provision and provide

several examples that acknowledge the role of such provision in cementing an Aboriginal presence in inner Sydney. The process of building Aboriginal services in Redfern was instrumental also in forging spaces of interaction and cultures of collaboration with non-Aboriginal actors and supporters. These kinds of relationships have also endured regardless of the apparent and often highlighted segregation of urban spaces in Redfern. While Redfern is widely imagined to consist of ‘black’ (the high-profile Aboriginal community known as *The Block*) and ‘white’ (gentrifying) spaces, a much more inclusive politics manifested long ago. The second aim of this paper then is to include a few moments of my personal experiences and observations of this politics of inclusivity and collaboration. I do this as a form of participant observation and build on my use of ‘auto-ethnography’ (Shaw, 2013), which follows Ellis *et al.* (2010, 1):

[Auto-ethnography] seeks to describe and . . . analy[s]e personal experience in order to understand cultural experience . . . [using the] tenets of autobiography and ethnography. . . . As a method, auto-ethnography is both process and product.

In this paper, I draw on aspects of my own history as a researcher *and* as a resident who variously collaborated with members of inner Sydney’s Aboriginal community through employment and activism, and perhaps less overtly, in scholarship. I lived in Redfern/Darlington from 1995 to 2008. During that time, I was immersed in several Aboriginal worlds. For part of this time, I was a teacher in the community welfare program offered by Sydney’s first Aboriginal College of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) at Eora College (1995–1996). I was also a member of the management committee (at various intervals) and long-term supporter of a community-based facility, The Settlement. In addition, as a non-Aboriginal local resident and house buyer, I observed and actively protested against some of the impacts of gentrification on *The Block* while personally engaged in the process of its first-stage, sweat-equity version. Building on my earlier discussions of the impacts of gentrification on the local Aboriginal community, *The Block*, and service provision (Shaw, 2007), this paper draws together a range of sources. I have included several personal recollections for the purpose of thickening the narrative with intimate accounts of aspects of urban Koori (the preferred collective term for many

Eastern Australian Aboriginal people) life, as well as my involvement in these moments as a non-Aboriginal person. However, I do not claim to 'know Redfern', or indeed all of its many agencies, nor do I wholly exemplify the discursive processes at work. Rather than claiming 'to understand personal and life stories in all their particularity', I have included some of my stories as 'a form of practice . . . [and/or] a mode of academic expression' (Cameron, 2012, 3). In this paper, I include my 'small (personal) stories' (Lorimer, 2003) to provide glimpses into more ordinary or daily workings of a location (cf. Lefebvre, 1974). My experiences of the Redfern Aboriginal community are also part of my own history, of living around the corner from the highly stigmatised community of *The Block*, for over a decade. This informed previous work on processes of whiteness, imaginaries of race, and the impacts of urban racialisation (Shaw, 2006). Although such processes continue, the daily workings of this location include the now well-established service organisations that have helped to embed Redfern's ongoing association with Aboriginality.

The formation of service provision in Redfern is also part of a wider history of political engagements between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people Australia-wide. From vantage points within spaces of such interactions, I have learned that myriad lives are often lived at least in part within 'othered worlds'² (cf. Massey *et al.*, 1999) such as *The Block*. This otherness persists because and often regardless of the context within wider dominant and often oppressive cultures. Generations have lived within such worlds and have operated in many ways *other to* majority cultures, particularly in daily life. Mudrooroo (1997), Moreton-Robinson (2004), and Nakata (2006) have all detailed the ongoing experiences of (post)colonisation in Australia and the marginalising legacies of oppressive institutions (Lea, 2009), such as the legal and education systems that reinforce the racialised othering of Aboriginal peoples. Writing on white privilege has also demonstrated that as an identifier of ethnicity, whiteness is sometimes completely absent within other(ed) worlds – as happens, at times, on *The Block* – but its influence as a process of power remains ever present, as has been repeatedly demonstrated in the case in the urban world of Aboriginal Redfern (see note 2). The onset of gentrification and its acceleration throughout the 1990s and beyond has emphasised the separation of 'blackness' and 'whiteness' by bringing their

distinction into sharp relief. In the following, I seek to demonstrate that this binary is but one and a very shallow reading of life in Redfern.

In the next sections, I return to Redfern, and its history, and its formidable and somewhat uncanny presence in the centre of Sydney (cf. Gelder and Jacobs, 1998). As an inner city location, Redfern is similar to many other inner-Sydney suburbs in overall appearance, with Victorian terraced houses in the process of renovation and former industrial sites in the throes of demolition or conversion into apartments/condominiums. However, this seemingly familiar place has remained foreign to many non-Aboriginal Australians who have had difficulty reconciling the existence of urban Indigeneity generally, but particularly in Redfern. This is partly because of the political history of *The Block* but also because of its overall run-down condition and overt poverty continuously reiterated in popular media. Together with the historical overview, which includes the institutionalisation of specific 'Koori capitals' in Redfern, I recount several events that touch also on this sense of uncanniness for many who, regardless of their own existences, remain associated with the racialised urban dystopia that signifies this small and embattled site in the wider Australian imaginary. I include personal stories that are based on relationships built on long-term associations with a place where Aboriginal worlds have existed within wider dominant worlds and with people who have spent much of their daily lives within other(ed) worlds or in close association with them. My personal observations speak of a more open, less sensationalist Redfern that prevails. For the purpose of privacy, I am the only one identified in these accounts.

The rise of Redfern (revisited)

There is no 'pure' [Aboriginal] culture at Redfern, no crisp boundaries of inside and outside . . . [This creates] an epistemological problem in that the boundaries of . . . communities . . . never exist as discrete entities (Anderson, 1999, 84).

Many Australian Aboriginal people live predominantly urban lives. The Australian Census (2006) identified that approximately one-third of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population lived in major cities of Australia, with an overall pattern of migration from more remote places to less remote areas,³ with most living in the south-eastern corner of Australia since the

early 20th century.⁴ Migrations to inner Sydney largely began in the 1930s. Many came from rural areas in search of employment (Anderson, 1993). Many Bunjalung and Dunghutti people came to Redfern from around the north coast of NSW (Kohen, 2000) and others came from all over western NSW, while groups from southern NSW tended to establish ‘traditional’ camps in more remote beach side suburb of La Perouse (and Botany) in south-eastern Sydney (Kohen, 2000; Morgan, 2008). Kohen (2000) also noted the ongoing, sometimes migratory presence of Aboriginal people in outer parts of what is now northern and western Sydney. Such migrations began during the 18th century, with destinations such as the Aboriginal Christian missions at Manly, until the 1970s. These urban occupations remained largely separate to mainstream Sydney.

There were, however, occasional moments of Aboriginal visibility in early to mid-20th century in Sydney. These included the ‘Day of Mourning’ protest in 1938 that marked the sesquicentenary of invasion (DMP, 1938). Approximately 100 Aboriginal people marched ‘in silent protest from the [Sydney] Town Hall to the Australian Hall in Elizabeth Street’ (DMP, 1938, n.p.). Then, during the years after World War II, rural push factors included unemployment and discrimination. The lure of employment became an urban pull factor, as did the advent of health and education services. Aboriginal and migrant identities were increasingly co-occupying otherwise ignored parts of the blighted, still-industrial inner city, while the growing, predominantly ‘white’⁵ middle classes settled in ever-expanding suburbia. By the 1960s, however, Redfern had become more noticeable to the wider Sydney population. It was a focal point and a conduit for Aboriginal migrations to western Sydney, particularly Mount Druitt (Kohen, 2000). However, as Kohen (2000, 90) remarked, ‘no part of urban Australia [was] more closely identified with Aborigin[al people] than Redfern’ (Kohen, 2000, 90).

For Gary Foley (and others), long-time activist, actor, and scholar, Redfern was the focal point of Aboriginal politics⁶ in Australia. While the achievements of Aboriginal activists should not be understated, some of the collaborations with non-Aboriginal actors, which supported this politics, have also been acknowledged. According to Foley (2001, n.p.) in 1973, the Chair of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, Herbert Cole ‘Nugget’ Coombs observed ‘the emergence of what might be called an Aboriginal intelligentsia ... taking place in Redfern ... a politically

active intelligentsia’. The activities of this intelligentsia included the recruitment of non-Aboriginal activists to assist in mobilising various projects, such as the establishment of the Aboriginal Legal Service (discussed below), and the rarely acknowledged emancipatory politics that resulted from the cooperation between the Builders Labourers’ Federation (BLF) and Aboriginal community leaders around Redfern, at that time. The BLF declared a ban on all work associated with the redevelopment of the site that was to become *The Block*. This work ban leveraged the sale by the landholding developer that enabled the purchase of what was to become Aboriginal land (Anderson, 1993). Yet, such collaborations have remained marginal to the discourses that clamour to reinforce and exacerbate lines of distinction between ‘black’ and ‘white’ Redfern. This more common populist focus rests on the belief that the (then Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam) ‘gift’ to Aboriginal Australia, the money to purchase the site of run-down Victorian housing to establish *The Block* at the heart of Sydney in the early 1970s, was squandered. The ensuing rhetoric, that as an urban community, *The Block* was a ‘failed human experiment’ in Aboriginal self-determination (Anderson, 1993), has become a ‘truth’ about life in Redfern, as repeated in media and local discourses for decades (Shaw, 2007, for overview). It has provided grist for the gentrification mill – real estate developers and marketeers have joined a mass media chant that seeks to erase the existence of *The Block*. Meanwhile, beyond the discourse of failure and impending decline, the importance of *The Block* has been acknowledged in other settings. For instance, on 25th October 2000, The Australian Heritage Commission listed *The Block* on their National Heritage Register of Australia as a site of Aboriginal significance⁷:

The Redfern Block has played a major role in the movement of Indigenous people between their country and the city. It is one of the first pieces of urban land to be purchased for Indigenous housing, and symbolises the ability of Indigenous people to maintain their identity in an urban situation (Lennon *et al.*, 2001, 37).

This moment in acknowledgement of the importance of Aboriginal Redfern to Australian Aboriginal politics rested on a history of events and activism. According to Foley (2001), a series of events coalesced and led to the

emergence of the Australian Aboriginal 'Black Power' movement:

1971 was a dramatic year [for the consolidation of the] Black Power movement in Redfern. The tour of the South African Springboks [and the associate anti-apartheid protests], the release from jail of Aboriginal poet, playwright and political activist Kevin Gilbert [and] the Aboriginal Medical Service of Redfern opened. [. . .] The Gove land rights case was handed down in the Northern Territory High Court effectively denying Aboriginal rights to land (Foley, 2001, 13).

As a movement, Aboriginal 'Black Power' was mobilised in many ways. Artistic expression has remained the most prominent and widely accepted form of 'Black Power', regardless of its recognition as such. For instance, in those early days,

The 1972 National Black Theatre Company, run by one of the fathers of Australian Black Power Bob Maza . . . produced and performed their legendary political revue *Basically Black* (Foley, 2001, 21).

For Maza, the Black Theatre was 'geared to communicate with people, not just to entertain . . . to make people commit themselves to social responsibilities' (LPA, 2007, n.p.). At the same time, the Redfern Aboriginal Land Council (1972) and the Aboriginal Housing Company (1973) were established and stamped Redfern as a location for urban land claims. Since that time, the politics of artistic expression has continued to tell stories that need to be told. For instance, The Bangarra Dance Company (see BDT, nd) has provided many examples of such story telling expressed through dance. Such activism has not only endured in the Redfern area (and beyond, in the case of Bangarra), it has also exhibited resilient adaptability and become a driving force in Aboriginal identity and pride. The 'politically active intelligentsia', that Coombs (and others) had observed in Redfern, has clearly operated at many levels and in many contexts. In the next section, I provide examples of the socialisation and institutionalisation of enduring Aboriginal presences in Redfern. The impacts of some of these have reached well beyond *The Block* and into the wider suburb of Redfern and, at times, beyond. The ongoing formalisation of a range of organisations has provided a backbone and ongoing force in Aboriginal Sydney. The consequent

establishment of Koori social and cultural capitals has enabled other, less overt but nonetheless equally political inhabitations. These more ordinary or day-to-day existences continue the reoccupation of land(s) seized during colonisation.

Building Koori social and cultural capital⁸ in Redfern

[Redfern is] a place that has always been drawn into broader socio-political change . . . there is no necessary correspondence between self-defined and assigned meaning, between 'inner' and 'outer' worlds (Anderson, 1999, 79–80).

During the 1970s, the Aboriginal presence in inner Sydney grew, which led to the emergence of a host of agencies around Redfern. Aboriginal medical, legal, and welfare services were established (Gilbert, 1971; Waltha, 1971), as was the Redfern Aboriginal Land Council (1972) and Aboriginal Housing Company (1973). The Aboriginal Medical Service was the first Aboriginal health service established and controlled by a local community. It was set up 'to address the blatant discrimination experienced in mainstream services; the ill health and premature deaths of Aboriginal people; and the need for culturally appropriate and accessible health services' (AHMRC, nd). High-profile eye surgeon, Professor Fred Hollows,⁹ agreed to be the Service's Medical Director (Gilbert, 1971).

Borne as a response to increasingly racialised policing, the Aboriginal Legal Service began in 1971 (Waltha, 1971). The NSW Summary Offences Act (1970), which regulated conduct in public and other places was a response to 'popular resistance to the Vietnam War [which] triggered a legislative response from the NSW Government under which general rights of assembly and protest became increasingly restricted' (Ricketts, 2004). This meant that street gatherings – for protests or other activities – were suddenly illegal. The associated 9:30 pm curfew for Aboriginal people around Redfern resulted in a dramatic increase in arrests. The Aboriginal Legal Service started out with part-time staff, then one full-time solicitor, field officer, and secretary. According to Waltha (1971, 3), a 'Professor of Law at the University of N.S.W., Professor J. H. Wootten . . . got the support of the Law Society and the Bar Council . . . 146 barristers (including 12 QCs)'. The service now has regional offices throughout NSW, and 'it was and

still is the embodiment of a generation of Aboriginal people's desire to control their own destiny' (Guwany, 1996, n.p.).

Community welfare services, such as The Aboriginal Children's Service (1975) and educational and child care facilities, including The Settlement (mid-1920s) (Molesworth, 2006), and Murawina (Redfern 1972, moved to *The Block* in 1974) have strengthened the Aboriginal identity of Redfern, as have sporting organisations such as the Tony Mundine Gym (1985) (SBS, 2010). Eora TAFE College opened its doors in 1987, and Mudgin-Gal women's place opened in the early 1990s (S. H., nd). In 2010, the National Centre for Aboriginal Excellence (NCIE, nd) was opened by the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd. Continuing the spirit of Redfern as a hub for Aboriginal expression into the future, the NCIE has been described as:

Located in the heart of Redfern . . . [it] is a place for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians from across the country to participate in life-changing programs in the pathways of arts and culture, health and wellness, learning and innovation and sport and recreation . . . facilitates programs for young people to help them achieve their dreams and aspirations . . . We are an Aboriginal organisation with local and national outreach (NCIE, nd).

From the early days of relative invisibility, through the days of struggle to provide services, the advent of NCIE is indicative of the wider acknowledgement of Redfern as an Aboriginal place that reflects a story of survival, recognition, and for some a striving for excellence, such as through sporting or artistic achievements. Redfern's social and cultural (Koori) capitals have been realised formally through the establishment, survival and achievements of its institutions, as well as informally through the lives of ordinary people. The enormity of such ongoing achievements cannot be underestimated, particularly in recent decades with the social upheavals associated with gentrification – which have included dramatic rises in housing prices and cultures of exclusion – has presented one of the most challenging periods to the Aboriginal presence in Redfern, to date. The late 1990s and early 2000s were also times of reliance on the continuation of service provision by agencies such as The Settlement and Eora TAFE College. Such presences and provisions have contributed to the

stability and ongoing identification of Aboriginal occupation in Redfern.

Koori Capital (around the corner from my place): The Settlement, Eora, and The Returned and Services League (RSL)

The Settlement is one of the oldest agencies in the Redfern area. In the 1920s, it provided welfare services to the local working class residents (Molesworth, 2006). Its mandate changed in the 1970s to the provision of care and services for the local Aboriginal community. Described as 'a magnet for drama and controversy from the outset' (Molesworth, 2006, 25), The Settlement's ongoing existence remains contested – it is located in a quiet, leafy, now highly gentrified backstreet, a few minutes' walk from *The Block*, and in a street that ran just behind the back fence of my house.

I joined The Settlement's management committee in the late 1990s through connections with members of *The Block's* extended community (gained, in part, through a teaching experience at Eora TAFE College, which I return to later in this section). During this time, I was involved in a range of community initiatives and activities, and general running of the organisation. I resigned over a management issue and in support of the staff position about this concern. I realised that the mostly non-Aboriginal committee members, at that time, did not listen to the voices of the Aboriginal staff or the community. Years later, in 2006, another of my concerns was realised when I learned of the plan to sell the property (which heralded the end of this somewhat messy presence in a swiftly gentrifying location). The possibility of selling The Settlement, realising the substantial asset for 'other programs', had loomed as an ongoing agenda for management committees. On this occasion, however, local facility users mounted a successful legal challenge and The Settlement remains *in situ* to this day (<http://thesettlement.org.au/>).

Regardless of its contested existence and troubled management, my recollections of the daily activities of The Settlement include heading off to *The Block*, nearby, to participate in cooking barbeque breakfasts for school children. Other activities included involvement in dance and music performances at The Settlement. One memorable event occurred in 1998 with the unveiling of a mural titled 'Say kNOw to drugs: for the next generation' (McGrath, 1998). This mural was planned to target those at risk from drug (mis)use. After much wrangling with

various authorities, the plan gained approval and the team painted a large mural on the railway bridge, next to Redfern Railway Station (Figure 1). The mural's message was clear: either 'say no' to drugs, or *know* what you are doing (to minimise drug use harm and know the risks). In the weeks that followed its completion, the mural was defaced several times but the artists painstakingly and repeatedly repaired it – they would not give in to the vandals. It was never clear (to me at least) who had thrown pink paint over the mural on several occasions. Clearly, someone had taken offence to its message and somewhat graphic imagery of drug use and its impacts. The more confronting images were 'modified' by the artists to avoid further vandalism. The mural survives to this day – it sits opposite the original mural, painted in the early 1970s (viewed immediately upon exiting Redfern Railway Station) with its depictions of colonisation, struggle, losses, and sadness. The 'Say kNOW' mural suggests resilience and hope even within the context of drug taking (referring specifically to heroin use).

True to cultures of celebration and performance (Breen, 1989, Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, 2006), the 'Say kNOW' mural launch included a concert on *The Block*. Famous Aboriginal musicians, Archie Roach, and (the late) Ruby Hunter performed and drew an enthusiastic crowd. As well as many performances on *The Block*, I watched the small stage at The Settlement come alive with singing, dancing, and other forms of performance, which starts at a very young age in Koori Redfern. Many performance-based theatre and dance groups had their origins in Redfern. The Bangarra Dance Theatre, founded in 1989 at the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association College (BDT, nd),



Figure 1 Say kNOW for the next generation.

was the most famous to emerge – it is now a globally acknowledged example of Redfern's Koori capital. The Settlement remains an organisation that provides a range of artistic education and training, as well as a venue for artistic expression, including filmmaking. *Fight for Blood* (2000) was based on the lives of various individuals from *The Block*, past and present, including the ghost of a deceased drug user. This film won three awards including the prestigious Griffith Film Festival Prize in 2000, which included \$10 000 in prize money (McGrath, 1998).

When Eora TAFE College opened its doors in 1987, it instantly became a landmark in Aboriginal (tertiary) education. The Eora TAFE College website states that 'Eora¹⁰ takes its name from the Gadigal language of the Aboriginal nation that originally inhabited the Port Jackson area around Sydney Harbour' (Eora Sydney Tafe College, nd). According to the College Director, Darryl Griffin,

Eora was the culmination of ideas by Aboriginal people ... [and] is dedicated to re-establishing lost pride in Aboriginal culture through the Arts and Access Education programs [within] an environment more accustomed to Aboriginal learning styles. ... Eora is also committed to helping educate the wider community in Aboriginal culture ... [and] to establish[ing] a national and international profile where Aboriginal people throughout the world can share their culture, knowledge and visions for the future (Eora, nd).

Eora is one of the six campuses within TAFE Sydney Institute. Through the early 1990s, I was a teacher in the community welfare program at the main campus in Ultimo. In 1995, I was engaged to teach in Eora's new training course in community welfare. This course had been designed for Eora, as an Aboriginal college, to 'hand over' community welfare services to Aboriginal people, as trained welfare workers. However, the Eora initiative was discontinued a year into the first year of the 2-year program. TAFE would not fund the 'replication of provision'. To finish their qualifications, the first intake of students at Eora College was required to attend the main(stream) campus at Ultimo. It was not an easy transition – the point of the Eora initiative, to provide an Aboriginal place for Aboriginal students to take control of community welfare provision for Aboriginal people, had been lost. During my time at Eora, I learned far

more about ‘race relations’ from the students than I could possibly teach them. However, a process of mutual trust building resulted in the establishment of connections and friendships that continue to this day. One of these former students worked at The Settlement, which was how I became a member of the management committee. These days, Eora College has become such an important educational force that it provides a specialist Certificate 3 course in ‘Community Services’, which has replaced the former, generic ‘Community Welfare’ courses run out of the main Ultimo campus of TAFE. This new course commenced in 2009 and graduates Aboriginal welfare professionals (Eora, pers. comm., 15 November 2011). The original idea, to handover welfare provision for Aboriginal people to Aboriginal welfare professionals, was finally realised by Eora taking control.

My involvement with Eora, The Settlement, and the Koori community more generally meant that I engaged in a range of activities around Redfern. Eora staff lunches and parties were held at the Redfern RSL club. The RSL was also a venue for birthdays and other events. Friday night at the RSL was Koori-oke (Koori-oke is the Koori term for Karaoke) night and everyone would dress up and dance to country music. Memorable characters would provide impromptu performances – everyone was welcome to ‘have a go’. As well as individual Koori-oke performances, bands would play and, sometimes, Aboriginal celebrities would appear. To me, the atmosphere sometimes resembled a club in a country town but, of course, the clientele was predominantly Aboriginal. However, everyone was welcome and made to feel welcome. I occasionally attended formal events, such as an 18th and 21st birthday party or a dinner. The invitations to events, large and small, have reinforced an ongoing sense of mutual respect, friendship, and inclusion.

A footnote to the story of the Redfern RSL club is that it was closed in 2011, as ‘work . . . started on a \$28 million project to turn it into an 18-storey residential tower, with shops, offices and a small club’ (Munro, 2010, n.p.). This new development has included space for a version of the Redfern RSL club on the second floor. The future of Friday nights and Koori-oke is largely unknown at this stage.

Around the corner from my place: The Block

As well as attending concerts on *The Block*, I participated in political rallies. I would attend

when invited to particular events or simply attend to show support at rallies. At one gathering, an Elder told me that something special would happen. When an enormous kangaroo was unearthed from hot coals, I was taken aback. I was then offered a piece of the tail in a gesture of friendship, as well as compensation for the laugh at my reaction to seeing the roasted ‘roo’. On another occasion, a group was about to depart for a rally on *The Block* when a ‘change of plan’ meant that I was to go alone. The rest of my posse were heading off to play golf. This was a group of men who were very happy for me (as a ‘sis[ter]’) to attend the rally but the timing had resulted in a clash with a Koori golf tournament. Koori golf is an integral social activity for some of the Aboriginal men I know, and they were all playing in a statewide competition that day. These golf tournaments were significant events in mentoring boys and young men from all over the state of NSW. On that occasion, it took me a while to appreciate the cultural importance of the Koori golf tournaments. This certainly challenged some of my preconceptions about the meanings of (Aboriginal) culture(s).

At yet another rally about the threatened future of *The Block* (this process was ongoing as threats were continually mounted) a man I vaguely knew took offence to my (‘white’) presence and threw a beer bottle at me from across Eveleigh Street. I had just arrived from the airport and had not had time to change into a more appropriate outfit for a rally. As it turned out, I resembled someone ‘official’. The hurled bottle missed me because another Aboriginal man (whom I did not know) quickly pulled me out of its path; it smashed on the ground beside him. This incident drew attention, which made me a little nervous – I was not standing with people I knew, and I was dressed inappropriately. Tensions were high that day and rallies on *The Block* had become volatile in the past. However, the bottle thrower was constrained and admonished by several Elders. He was then marched up to me, and he apologised. From a distance, he thought I was someone from ‘the government’. At close range, we had recognised each other. After that incident, I would see this man (whose name I have omitted to retain his anonymity) walking around, as I often had, and he would sing out ‘hello sis’, as usual. As with many others, he lived ‘rough’ on *The Block* or nearby, which, according to conventional definitions, meant that he was homeless (Birdsall-Jones and Shaw, 2008). However, he was far from without a home as many, particularly those

with conventional housing on *The Block*, cared for him. *The Block* has remained home regardless of the demolition of houses and the pressures of increased overcrowding in remaining and nearby households (Memmott and Chambers, 2005). On that day, my 'official'-looking presence had clearly antagonised at least one person regardless of my status as an invited guest – an Elder had contacted me about the rally. After the shock of the incident, the apologies and reiterations about how welcome I was, my sense of solidarity with the struggles faced on *The Block*, and my appreciation for the Elders and their community more generally were renewed.

On another memorable occasion, the aftermath of the death of a young man in 2004 resulted in the so-called Redfern Riots. Although I slept through the 'riot', I woke to concerned emails from friends and colleagues in other parts of the world. It was international news. I recall the scenes from the next few days, of the bricked-in windows at the railway station, a burnt-out car and other debris, and the memorial for the young man whose death remains controversial to this day. After this event, there was a memorial service on *The Block*, and support arrived from near and far. This tragedy and the events that followed reiterated the significance and power of a wider world that would declare that the death was an accident. I attended the memorial rally and had permission to take photographs (on the power politics of photography, see the Introduction, Michaels, 1993). I have included one photograph of the event (Figure 2) which, for me, is full of symbolism. In the shadow of the global city in the background, people are grieving and the placards display why. Overhead, a bird takes flight. The image has

reminders of the one who died but as well those who must live on do so in an urban place with very real connections to the city power brokers, just beyond. The death of the young man reiterated the message that regardless of the sense of removal from the world beyond, the survival of *The Block* was at the behest of forces beyond its control.

There are many events and moments I could recall, but my final observation is about gentrification that occurred during the time I lived in Redfern/Darlington. A most highly recognised attribute of gentrification is café culture. At the Eora College end-of-town, well-educated Koori professionals would frequent a café with and next to their non-Aboriginal counterparts. At *The Block* end of town, local Kooris would buy take-away soft drinks, burgers, and chips. The distinctiveness of the two styles of eatery provides a simple example of how the microcosm of life in Redfern is shot through with social and cultural differences that also cross the visual, racialised, divide. This is but one example of how everyday events continue to unsettle the oft-reiterated image of a monocultural Aboriginal Redfern.

Worlds within worlds?

In this paper, I have contributed to the social history of the inner-Sydney locale of Redfern, Australia, by emphasising the establishment and institutionalisation of a range of Aboriginal presences that go beyond the ghetto image. As part of this process, I have added several auto-ethnographic accounts to thicken the narrative about Redfern and its long-term association with overtly Aboriginal political expressions: through the early years and the times of Black Power, and the institutionalisation of service provisions to the establishment of the social and cultural capitals that are apparent today. I have drawn on existing sources to highlight some of the foundational moments in the shaping of the identity of Redfern that reach beyond the populist discourse of a 'failed human experiment' of an urban Aboriginal community. This judgement of Aboriginal self-determination has continued to dominate the mainstream focus of the mass media and policy makers. Yet, the diverse ways that Aboriginal people occupy and sometimes thrive in Australia's first colonial city – and site of invasion – have demonstrated an evolving politics of re-establishment and consolidation of Aboriginal identities that is more than a politics of postcolonial survival. This



Figure 2 A day of mourning in 2004.

includes a less overt politics of simply getting on with the day-to-day aspects of living that is not always an easy task. Regardless of the fraught existence of *The Block*, however, generations of Aboriginal people continue to settle in or otherwise occupy the site of banishment in the aftermath of colonisation.

In this paper, I have resisted reiterating a discussion of the powers of whiteness. Rather, I have emphasised a trajectory of Aboriginal survival, persistence, and daily living in inner Sydney. The establishment of Aboriginal institutions demonstrates that while a struggle over place for individuals on *The Block* continues, a more permanent recognition of Redfern's Aboriginal significance overall has been well embedded. My years of involvement in several of the long-term institutions, as well as living more ordinary moments of the everyday in Aboriginal inner Sydney, have been included to provide a more personalised view of some of the struggles in the politics of establishment and maintenance of urban Aboriginal cultural identifications. I have also included glimpses of how collaborations have been built, and the sometimes tricky notion of cooperation between Redfern Aboriginal people and [a] non-Aboriginal local[s]. Some of my experiences included participation in building Koori social and cultural capitals institutionally and through recognition of the importance of acknowledging the ongoing heritage of *The Block* and the associated struggles. By noting several first-hand observations of the endurance of educational and cultural institutions, I have identified that spaces of interaction between those who live mostly in other(ed) worlds and wider power structures sometimes do open. Of course, history has shown that not all engagements in such 'co-operations' have been successful. It was therefore not the task of this paper to consider the efficacy of negotiating such spaces. Nor have I judged the capacity of these interactive spaces that sometimes open. Rather, I hope to have identified some of the circumstances within which relationships have been built, particularly within the ordinariness of daily life. Methodologically, my recollections of living in Redfern (and leaving more than 4 years ago) began with remembering the sensational moments, such as the incident at the rally. However, my long-term association and the inclusiveness and generousities that reach well-beyond activist politics do not need to be recalled as they are ongoing. Such relationships are far more widespread and entrenched than the

vignettes I have offered here, but *this* politics tends to remain shadowed by more divisive, external agendas.

I have focused on a less sensationalised Redfern to highlight that while it is a 'troubled' place within the wider Australian imaginary, this understanding is mostly devoid of the recognition of the endurance of Aboriginal institutions and the lives that are lived in a myriad of ways. Such lived experiences often carve through common understandings of race and class. For me, daily life did not include some of the more difficult tasks faced by some of my Aboriginal neighbours, of finding housing and making ends meet while taking care of children, and so on. My experiences of place include the uncanny realities of being a non-Aboriginal gentrifier (of sorts), as well as the occasions of participation with Redfern Koori worlds, at that time. My insider/outsider perspective includes moments of participation in other(ed) worlds. Such worlds do exist, are messy, and thrive, regardless of wider pressures, and did so at that time regardless of my presence (mostly). The complexities of this inner-city location include the porosities between worlds, as well as the moments of living, of recreation, and of mourning in deeply private contexts. In Redfern, there are many stories of worlds within worlds that demonstrate that there are many who have 'lived (and worked) black' through time and in an urban space, where the daily context is (mostly) Aboriginal but where others are, at times, welcomed.

NOTES

1. Although I focus here on the suburb of Redfern that surrounds *The Block*, Aboriginal people reside in nearby suburbs, particularly Waterloo, Glebe, Marrickville and beyond.
2. African-American author Toni Morrison wrote about such worlds in *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970 (London: Vintage), and later in *Paradise*, 1998 (New York: Alfred A Knopf). Australian Aboriginal authors include Weller, Archie, 1981: *Day of the Dog* (Allen and Unwin, Sydney); Gibini, Ruby Langford, 1988: *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (Penguin, Australia) and Oodgeroo Noonuccal (for example the poem 'Municipal Gum', 1992, *The dawn is at hand: selected poems*, Boyars, New York). The Australian Broadcasting Corporation television series *Redfern Now* (<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/redfernow/>) provides examples of other(ed) lives through dramatised vignettes of Aboriginal life in and around *The Block*.
3. In 2006, approximately 43% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live in regional areas and only 25% in remote areas. Thirty per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population lived in NSW, 28% in Queensland, and 14% in Western Australia. Retrieved 23 September 2011 from <http://www.abs.gov.au>

- gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1370.0~2010~Chapter~Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20peoples%20%283.5%29.
4. The projected average annual growth rate of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population between 2006 and 2021 is 2.2%, much higher than the same rate for the total Australian population (1.4%). Retrieved 23 September 2011 from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1370.0~2010~Chapter~Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20peoples%20%283.5%29>.
 5. Following Wiegman (1999), I use the term 'white' reservedly as a flexible and slippery cultural formation rather than a biologically determined ethnicity or race. I do, however, acknowledge Aboriginal understandings of, for example, blood-memory, which, although often attributed to race, is far more complex than biologically determined understandings of lineage.
 6. There were earlier land rights struggles in the Northern Territory and, as Foley noted, the 'first Aboriginal political organisation to create formal links between communities over a wide area' occurred in 1925 when former drover, Fred Maynard, set up the Australian Aboriginal Progress Association in Victoria (<http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/timeline/histimeline.html>).
 7. Available in 2000 at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/Aboriginal/ab-25oct2000-10.htm> (link now disabled). Retrieved 25 September 2011 from <http://www.environment.gov.au/soe/2001/publications/themereports/heritage/heritage01-4.html> (link now disabled). I worked on the application for this listing with another non-Aboriginal local, Aboriginal Elders, and sympathetic government authorities.
 8. By 'Koori social and cultural capital', I refer to social capitals generated institutionally and cultural capitals that are generated as part of the Aboriginal heritage of Redfern (cf. Bourdieu, 1984).
 9. During his lifetime, Frederick Hollows was highly awarded and commended for recovering the sight of thousands of people in Australia and in Africa who would otherwise not have afforded treatment. His work lives on through The Fred Hollows Foundation (<http://www.hollows.org.au/>).
 10. Eora means 'this place' (Kohen, 2000) and is the language of Aboriginal groups that occupy/occupied much of Sydney, including the Cadigal, Wangal, Burramattagal, Wallumattagal, Muru-ora-dial, Kameygal, and Birrabirragal peoples (<http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/barani/themes/theme1.htm>).
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