Dispelling the myth of urban Indigenous dispossession - Indigenous recovery and agency in the city

Introduction

Recent research in the United States, Canada and New Zealand is dispelling the myth of urban Indigenous dispossession and pathology, showing empirical evidence that, as opposed to the depiction of urban areas as 'depositories and pathology' (Anderson and Denis 2003), urban areas are a locus of social transition and social change for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous people are creating new transformational spaces of Indigenous recovery in urban areas (Lobos 2001; Todd 2001; Sisson 2005; Craig 2007; Howard and Proulx 2011). This scholarship also demonstrates that Indigenous people are active agents of social change in urban contexts (Todd 2001). Moreover, despite Indigenous culture being depicted as an 'obstacle to successful adjustments in the city' or as lost in urban settings, this research demonstrates that Indigenous culture is central to creating these new transitional spaces (Todd 2001: 50).

For example, Jeffrey Sissons' book *First Peoples: Indigenous Cultures and Their Futures* (2005) discusses Indigenous urbanization as not simply a process characterized by Indigenous peoples becoming urban workers, but as a process of relocation and recovery of Indigenous identity via a process of cultural change in which new organizations are formed, new concepts are invented, new identities are negotiated, and new material environments are assembled (Sissons 2005: 63). Furthermore, Sisson argues that 'organizations, concepts, identities, and material environments are always expansions and

elaborations, in new contexts, of the wider Indigenous culture' (Sissons 2005: 63). Relocation entails new forms of social organization and leadership (Sisson 2005: 64).

Todd draws on a study of the city of Vancouver in Canada to demonstrate that:

> There is … a growing and increasingly stable core of Aboriginal cultural and political activity in the cities which tends to support the maintenance and renewal of Aboriginal cultural identity and which co-exists with varying degrees of integration in the dominant economy (Todd 2001: 55).

Similarly, Canadian scholars Howard and Proulx (2011: 5) point out that relocation does not necessarily entail loss of land and culture. That is:

> Aboriginal people [relocating to cities] anchor themselves to an abstract, largely symbolic, sense of land thereby linking themselves to traditions and place despite the fact that they 'may occupy materially "deterritoralized" zones' (Buddle 2005: 9; Howard and Proulx 2011: 5).

The paper engages with data from a three-year in-depth case of the Australian city of Newcastle titled Indigenous societies, governance and well-being: a study of Indigenous success in addressing Indigenous disadvantage and improving Indigenous well-being.[1] It specifically considers the issues of urban Aboriginal recovery in the Australian city of Newcastle via the building of Aboriginal social and cultural infrastructure locally, the establishing of new forms of governance, and the recovery of Awabakal language, as

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[1] The project is an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher Award, which is a three year award based on a research fellowship.

well as how culture, and how local Aboriginal people consider such factors to be the basis of success in addressing Aboriginal disadvantage and improving Aboriginal well-being. The majority of Newcastle's Aboriginal population has migrated or relocated to Newcastle from western and north-western New South Wales, but also other localities around Australia. Aboriginal people that have migrated to Newcastle maintain strong connections with kin and country in rural localities – areas with high levels of racism, high unemployment rates and low Australian Bureau of Statistics SEIFA rankings.

How Aboriginal collective agency has contributed to improvements in Aboriginal disadvantage locally is evident in a comparison of Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data over the last ten years among 29 urban localities in New South Wales with populations of 2000 or more Indigenous peoples. This data indicates Newcastle sits among the top three across socio-economic indicators with higher levels of employment, wages and educational outcomes among its Indigenous population.

Specifically, the paper introduces key themes relating to Aboriginal recovery from 60 in-depth interviews with Aboriginal people in management or service delivery positions in twelve different Aboriginal organisations, and local, state and federal government departments, and eight different not-for-profit organisations in Newcastle to tell a story of social transition and social transformation that has led to Aboriginal recovery locally. A longer version of this paper will consider in more depth the concepts introduced here – for example, Aboriginal recovery (see Sisson 2005), agency (see Todd 2001; Howard-

Wagner 2009; Petray 2012), success/failure and entrepreneurship (see Foley 2000, 2006, 2008).

Aboriginal recovery in Newcastle

Although not formally recognized by the state, the city of Newcastle is located in Awabakal Country. Aboriginal people living in Newcastle include a small percentage of direct descendants of the Awabakal traditional owners, who were displaced and dispossessed by historical laws, policies and practices.

Relocation to Newcastle has entailed and provided opportunities for cultural, social, political and economic recovery from the adversities of dispossession, marginalization and deeply entrenched racism, for example. Similar to other urban localities, Aboriginal people who relocated to Newcastle came to pursue interests, aspirations, needs, goals and objectives offered within the urban landscape, resulting in strong and diverse Aboriginal identities existing in Newcastle (Newhouse and Peters 2003: 10). Historically migration occurred as a state sponsored initiative in the 1950s and 1970s.

While a complex and in ways fraught form of Aboriginal co-existence occurs between Aboriginal people who define themselves as direct descendants of the traditional Awabakal owners and Aboriginal people who migrated to Newcastle two to three generations ago, both act as custodians of Awabakal country. This custodianship extends, but is not limited to, the protection of Awabakal history, sites and stories, and the recovery of Awabakal language.

As Interviewee Fifty One notes:

> [We've] produced our own publications – the Awabakal dictionary, *Teach Yourself, Understanding, A Grammar to the Awabakal Language, Introduction*.
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> … The language coordinator, she does the national anthem in Awabakal, so she goes and performs that when needed. That's been huge lately, and she does a lot of workshops with the schools, just teaching that as well, just so they can sing that in their assemblies.

Aboriginal people living in Newcastle, and the organisations that they have set-up, are actively engaged in the recovery of local Awabakal culture and language and the protection of Awabakal sites. Recently the Awabakal Local Aboriginal Land Council's was successful in formally nominating an Aboriginal women's site known as Butterfly Caves as an Aboriginal place for the purpose of recognition and protection under New South Wales' environmental and heritage laws. Awabakal stories are still known and told, such as the story of the giant Kangaroo that lives under headland at Nobby's Beach or stories about the culturally significant Mount Sugarloaf. Awabakal male initiation sites at the culturally significant Mount Sugarloaf remain active sites of initiation. The Awabakal totem of the sea eagle is respected and regarded as a significant local totem, and such respect for the Awabakal totem is evident in the fact that the Wollotuka Institute building at the University of Newcastle is an architecturally designed building in the shape of a sea eagle. This involves a form of reclaiming of Aboriginal culture and a re-

territorialization of land within the city, which challenge '"hegemonic constructions of place and identity" that restrict Aboriginal peoples to land outside of urban spaces' (Howard and Proulx 2011: 5). This is evident in the fact that, as Interviewee Fifty One goes on to note, "The [Newcastle] council are actually looking at renaming eight main suburbs around Newcastle...". Aboriginal place names, stories and sites are recognised in various inner city spaces (Howard-Wagner 2009).

Local Koori stories about Aboriginal recovery in Newcastle evidence how local Kooris have negotiated recovery in the context of specific cultural, social, political and economic circumstances. That is, Aboriginal stories of recovery are stories of Aboriginal agency and community-led empowerment in Newcastle, which are situated in a set of particular structural circumstances. Yet, while stories reveal that Aboriginal agency is made possible by the material and social conditions that exist in Newcastle, such as progressive local government or particular historical moments when the New South Wales state government has got behind local initiatives such as the development of the Awabakal Aboriginal Co-operative, Aboriginal agency is not simply produced by or an artifact of particular structural circumstances. Aboriginal agency produces new forms of social relations and structural circumstances. Aboriginal agency brings about social transformations.

Hence, Aboriginal recovery in Newcastle is a story of working together, of Aboriginal agency, of political activism, of engaging Aboriginal culture, of Aboriginal entrepreneurship, and of strong leadership. As Interviewee One comments: "I think

there's probably been a strong history of political activism and some really strong leaders in this community, that got together to make change themselves. So a lot of that's from there.”

While some Aboriginal people living in Newcastle would dispute the use of the term 'community' to describe Newcastle's "mixed-mob", the story of Aboriginal recovery in Newcastle is a story of community, unity and community-led empowerment. As Interviewee Fifty Seven: "…especially through the seventies and I think - and through the eighties and parts of the nineties - I think there was this concept of unity within the community and that we need to be united people in order to advance the cause.”

This theme of 'community" – unity, working together, and community-led empowerment – is also evident in the following extract from an interview with Interviewee Twenty Two: "… what I've learnt from in the last four or five years, from [Aboriginal] workers from BHP donating money each week and stuff to form Awabakal, just as always committed to their heritage, to working, to their families.”

Aboriginal entrepreneurship epistemologically and ontologically differs from white mainstream entrepreneurship. For example, it is not individualistic. It is community-based and is about working together to bring about social change for Aboriginal people as the following quotes from Interviewee Fifty Eight evidences: "We create! Indigenous people - local indigenous people come into the area, who were quite entrepreneurial,

developed employment prospects [for Aboriginal people] in that regard. …There's been some amazing enterprise - indigenous enterprise…".

Similarly Interviewee Seven notes**:**

> **…**So there's that entrepreneurial stuff, I can make a difference by forming this corporation and we can do something together about drug and alcohol abuse, about domestic violence, about cultural heritage and talk about the cultural heritage and language and history and that kind of stuff. That's all real strong. There's a real strong basis, so that we can tap into that strength-based approach.

Aboriginal entrepreneurship is a reference to the building of 'community' and Aboriginal organizational development and growth in Newcastle. Strong Aboriginal organizations established by local Aboriginal people have and continue to build the capacity of the local Aboriginal community and facilitate Aboriginal recovery. They provide and enhance services to Aboriginal people, as well as lobby and pressure local, state and federal governments, and the wider mainstream communities that local Aboriginal people live in, to work with local Aboriginal communities, organizations and peoples to address the disadvantage experienced by local Aboriginal people.

Working closely with sectors of the non-Aboriginal community and government organizations, local Aboriginal people have gone on to forge a strong foundation of Aboriginal organisations, infrastructure and community entrepreneurship in Newcastle.

This is not one or two local Aboriginal people, but a range of local Aboriginal people who have come forward and worked together to form a solid foundation of nearly fifteen local Aboriginal organizations, addressing not only the service needs of local Aboriginal people but also their broader governance, cultural and advocacy needs. This is similar to findings of Canadian scholarship (Todd 2001; Newhouse and Peters 2003). Todd, for example, found that 'Aboriginal organisations are negotiating locally in ways that show signs of having a transformational effect upon some of the circumstances of Aboriginal people in the city' (Todd 2001).

Thus, as interviewees' note, a major contributor to Aboriginal recovery and success in overcoming Aboriginal disadvantage and improving Aboriginal well-being are local Aboriginal organisations set-up by local Kooris. For example, Interviewee Seventeen notes:

> I think a major contributor [of local recovery and success] would be actually the establishment of such organisations as the Aboriginal Co-op. They have the elders program, the Aboriginal medical service, the Aboriginal Medical Centre and lots of stuff, so a lot of associated programs with that; the Aboriginal Co-op and the Aboriginal Lands Council, so they've been a leading sort of organisation at the front that has been more or less a flagship as to addressing all these issues and that sort of stuff on closing the gap. …You've got a fair few organisations that have really sort of stood up and said, yeah, look, this is what we want to do.

Also Interviewee Three commented**:**

> Look I think when you've got organisations like the Awabakal co-op. You know Muloobinbah Family Support Services. I think when you've got that strong network of Aboriginal organisations and in some of those Aboriginal specific services that are provided through health I think they've been very successful in getting positive messages out to people and providing good services. Providing transport, getting people to services… I think having the Wollotuka Institute and the programs that Newcastle Uni has run, I think that has been a major factor. Because there are a number of Aboriginal students who are graduating from Newcastle Uni and they're getting out there into teaching and health and other professions. I think that's been very positive. … Having Aboriginal doctors has made a difference. …There is an Aboriginal specific out of home care service. In terms of trying to ensure that cultural connections are maintained [for Aboriginal children] …the other thing at the moment is, the work of some of the land councils has been really very positive...

Yet, it is far more than having strong Aboriginal organisations. It is about how Aboriginal organisations do business that makes them a success. As Interviewee Fifty Five notes, a Manager of one of the local Aboriginal organisations, local Aboriginal organisation success can be attributed to the fore fronting of Aboriginal culture and knowledge of community:

Knowledge of community, knowledge of who's in the community and

understanding of our own culture first… We're all Aboriginal but we all have

varying language, varying dreamings, the whole thing. So I think knowledge

and understanding of communities ... The biggest quality we have in here is

our knowledge of who we are, a knowledge of community and

communication being open and being very transparent.

To me, culture - if you've got the culture part, you're wellbeing's going to fit

in under there. As long as that culture's taken into consideration and it's

respected, then your governance and leadership will follow… You learn from

your Elders.

The creating of a diverse Aboriginal community that acknowledges the differing

languages, cultures and practices of its Aboriginal people is a key contributor to local

Aboriginal recovery.

The infrastructure of Aboriginal institutions and organizations that exists today evidences

the desire to maintain distinct Aboriginal cultural identity and ways of doing business.

Recovery, maintenance and the sustainability of Aboriginal language and culture are

important issues for Aboriginal people and organisations in Newcastle (Newhouse and

Peters 2003: 9-13). Aboriginal ways of doing business is the practice and the way of

being that epistemologically and ontologically differs from white mainstream programs

and services. It is a normative model that differs from western service delivery.

Aboriginal people developing and delivering programs and services to and for Aboriginal peoples differs from white services and programs and how a white person, such as a white health care worker, a white doctor, a white social worker or a white public servant providing housing or employment services would. This goes well beyond having culturally appropriate programs and services. It is about having the cultural sensitivity based on shared identity, history and cultural references, understanding of kinship structures, understanding the languages, culture and varying dreamings of those Aboriginal people that make up the community, and understanding protocols. Local Aboriginal ways of doings business are based on respect and understanding of complex values and identity issues. Aboriginal ways of doing business often operate at a community level involving and engaging the community – from engaging the community in promoting a program such as the Awabakal Newcastle Aboriginal Co-operative's Deadly Choices program to how Wandiyali Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation engages Elders in pre-natal programs involving young women. Cultural forms of understanding not found in mainstream organisations exist in Aboriginal program and service delivery provided by Aboriginal organisations in Newcastle. It is about being Aboriginal is a heterogeneous identity and acknowledging this heterogeneity is an acknowledgement of the diversity of identity and doing things that enable you to be Aboriginal in its diverse forms. It is about how cultural identity features in these programs and services, which makes these programs and services a success. That is, the fact that Aboriginal culture contributes to more effective program and service delivery is evident also in the success of these programs and services; for example in the numbers of Aboriginal people that access them, as well as how these programs and services are

addressing Aboriginal disadvantage and improving Aboriginal well-being evident in the lower gap in socio-economic differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people living in Newcastle. Success is evident, for example, in the fact that as one interviewee who works for a local Aboriginal organisation providing out-of-home care services notes: "95% of 120 Aboriginal children that are part of our out of home care program are fostered by Aboriginal families" (Interviewee Sixty).

Conclusion

A key message that can be taken from this paper is that urban areas are a locus of social transition and social change for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous people are creating new transformational spaces of Indigenous recovery in urban areas, which emerge from sustainable social transformation. However, Indigenous recovery is dependent on the building of Indigenous social infrastructure, and systems of services, networks, and facilities, which meet the cultural, social, governance, educational, service and other needs of Indigenous peoples.

The paper established this through its discussion of Aboriginal recovery in the Australian city of Newcastle, demonstrating how local Aboriginal people are agents of social change, who have established Aboriginal social infrastructure, systems of services, networks, and facilities, which meet the cultural, social, governance, service and other needs of Aboriginal peoples locally. The building of broad scale improvement in socio-economic standards for Aboriginal people living in Newcastle has followed. Important contributory factors underpinning Aboriginal recovery in this urban locality, some of which are not

covered in this paper, are racial tolerance, social mobilization, Aboriginal recognition, strong Aboriginal organizations, Aboriginal innovation and leadership, Aboriginal relationship and community building, and economic opportunities flowing from lower levels of racism and discrimination.

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