

INTRODUCTION



WHAT CAN ART DO  
IN A UNIVERSITY?

## I

# Recalibrating knowledge in the sandstone university

Fiona Nicoll

I can't imagine another setting in the whole of our huge, beautiful country that is so fitting for this exhibition ... To see a sandstone university, to see this place, absolutely telling the story of identity is extremely powerful ... Courting Blakness is about relationships between Aboriginal people and the university; it's about reinterpreting space in the Great Court of this university. It's about reshaping all of our identities as Aboriginal and Australian people. It's also about challenging our political thoughts; it's about creating dialogue. For me redefining place and space and identity is something that all of us, no matter what our story is, is absolutely fundamental for a country where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not recognised not as some little add-on, not some little enclave, but absolutely fundamental to every institution and fundamental to the very basis of this country.

HON. LINDA BURNEY MP, 2001<sup>1</sup>

Courting Blakness: Recalibrating Knowledge in the Sandstone University was a platform of cultural and political experimentation that culminated in a unique program of original art, research, teaching and staff training at the University of Queensland (UQ) from 5 to 28 September in 2014. The recipe was deceptively simple. Take Australia's leading public artist to curate an exhibition of eight Aboriginal artists and mix with an institution with a population of over 7000 staff and 46,800 undergraduate and research higher degree students. Then stir. The results of this experiment were as rich as they were challenging for the sandstone university.

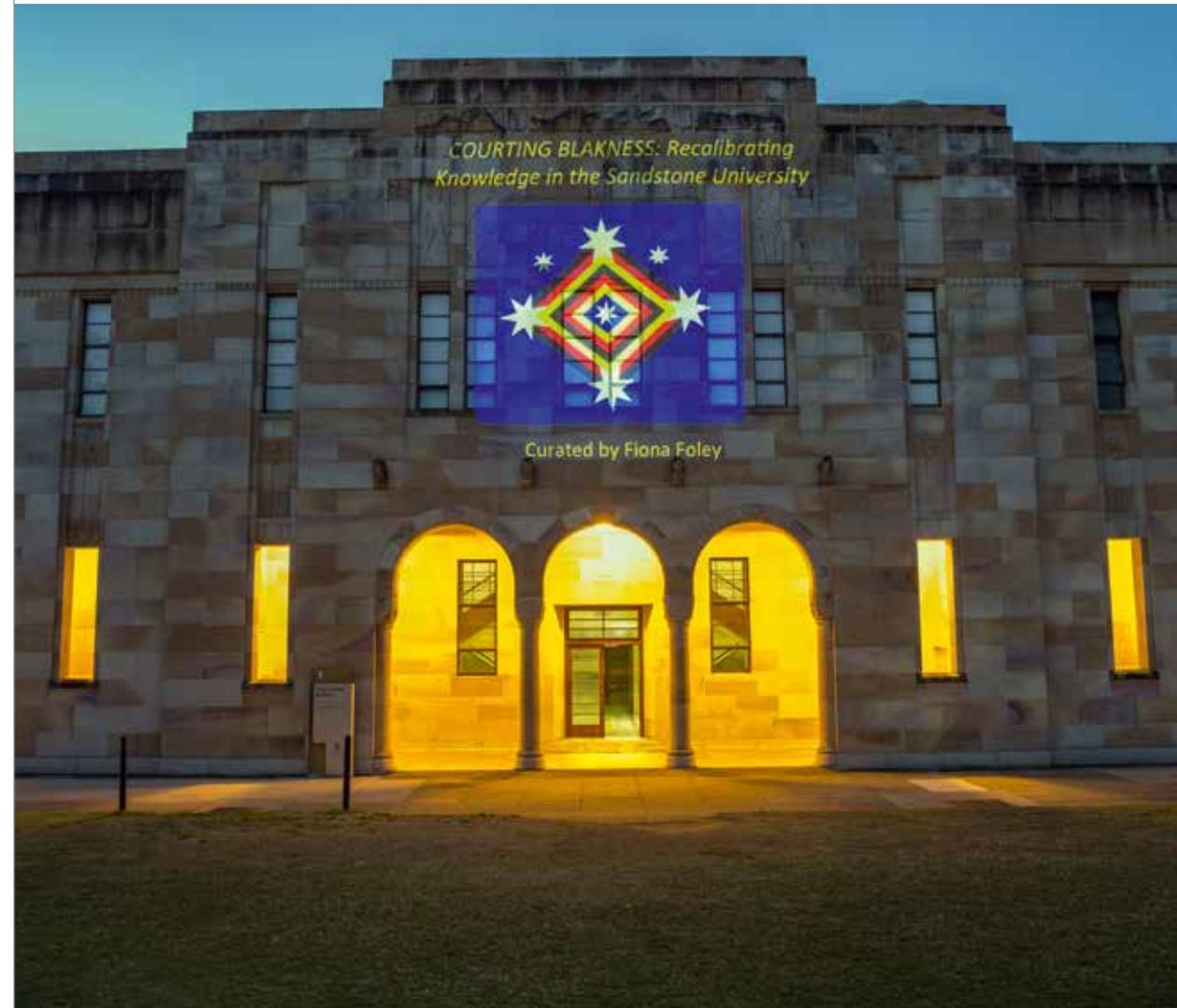
'Sandstone' is a distinctly Australian term for a select group of higher education institutions, most of which are well established and explicitly celebrate European cultural heritage through their architecture and landscape design. In

everyday discourse, Sandstone is roughly equivalent to the terms ‘Ivy-league’ and ‘Oxbridge’ in the United States and United Kingdom, and these universities are all, to varying degrees, replete with ‘invented’ traditions.<sup>2</sup> A notable example at the St Lucia campus is the annual Great Court Race, inaugurated for UQ’s 75th anniversary, based on the race at Cambridge University depicted in the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*.

UQ’s Great Court is a unique architectural space. Designed by Jack F Hennessey and constructed between 1938 and 1962, it was intended to form the literal and symbolic heart of the university – reflected in the commissioning of friezes and sculptural reliefs on the interior and exterior of the buildings.<sup>3</sup> It was into the centre of the Great Court that three major art installations by Archie Moore, Michael Cook and Ryan Presley were erected, while multimedia works by Christian Thompson, Megan Cope, Karla Dickens, r e a and Natalie Harkin were screened over carvings of Aboriginal people on the interior walls.

*Courting Blakness* emerged from and engaged with a set of historical and institutional frictions that are inextricable from broader issues that are national in scope. These frictions were to continuously reposition the project as being in and out of time, and as being in and out of place.

The appointment of Fiona Foley as an Adjunct Professor in the Schools of Political Science and International Studies and English, Media Studies and Art History was timely for several reasons. Over several decades the efforts of Indigenous academics in Australia and other settler-colonial nations had placed Indigenous knowledges on the global academic map.<sup>4</sup> Foley is a prominent Aboriginal artist with a track record of producing provocative public art addressing hidden histories of Australian race relations. A curated public art exhibition at UQ of cutting-edge art provided an opportunity to expose Aboriginal ways of seeing,



Projection on the Forgan Smith building at the opening of the *Courting Blakness* exhibition, 5 September 2014.

knowing and being to a large audience of academic staff and, most crucially, to students – the future leaders of our state and nation. It was also timely as an extension of successful efforts by the UQ Art Museum team to become an integral component of academic life on campus – through exhibitions developed together with academic staff and used intensively as a resource for classroom teaching and public engagement. And it was timely as an exhibition with a significant digital component, including a dedicated website and multimedia works available for individual access and classroom screenings.

Courting Blakness was also timely in the context of structural changes to the delivery of higher education in Australia. In particular, since the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in 2012, Australian universities have been encouraged to engage with Indigenous knowledge in a more holistic way across academic disciplines.<sup>5</sup> This was reflected at a local level with the establishment of a dedicated executive position, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous education) and the development of a university-wide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Plan (2013–17) to ‘ensure UQ is an embracing environment for Indigenous students, staff and the community’ (engagement), to ‘provide opportunities for all students to provide inclusive perspectives’ (learning), and to ‘Increase the profile of UQ’s Indigenous research’ (discovery).<sup>6</sup>

In spite of these timely components of the project, Courting Blakness arrived at an awkward moment for the university, and for the nation of which it forms part (even as it operates in a global marketplace for students and researchers). Whether there will ever be a ‘right’ moment for a project like Courting Blakness will be discussed in the conclusion, but it would not be an overstatement to say that Courting Blakness entered an inhospitable political environment. The National Apology to the stolen generations of Aboriginal children by Prime Minister Kevin

Rudd in 2008 opened Australian hearts and minds to the tragic outcomes of racially discriminatory policies and practices; his words acknowledged that, regardless of benevolent (or otherwise) intentions of individuals and institutions to act in ‘the best interest of the child’, the consequences of such policies were profound and enduring.<sup>7</sup> Yet his government’s continuation of the previous administration’s ‘Intervention’ into remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory seemed to persist with the very paternalistic approach repudiated by the apology.<sup>8</sup> History appeared to be repeating itself.

## Courting Blakness emerged from and engaged with a set of historical and institutional frictions

In contrast to the shrill ‘history wars’ and ‘culture wars’ of the late 1990s, the situation played out in school and university classrooms over the past decade is better described as a ‘cold war’; its usual mode is diplomatic silence. Topics framed as ‘Aboriginal’ are often experienced by non-Indigenous students as uncomfortable at best, and threatening at worst. It is challenging to create a classroom environment that is culturally safe for Indigenous students to identify or be identified as such when the majority of teachers and fellow students are non-Indigenous. While the sophistication of Aboriginal knowledge systems prior to British arrival in the 1770s, and the diversity of historical interpretations of that fact had been celebrated and disseminated in documentaries, including Rachel Perkins’ powerful *First Australians*,<sup>9</sup> public statements by Prime Minister Tony Abbott seemed to regress to earlier, racially framed ways of seeing Aboriginal

people and their countries. Whether motivated by ignorance or a cynical attempt to appeal to certain attitudes within the electorate, his recent reference to the nation prior to British arrival as being ‘unsettled’<sup>10</sup> was extremely unsettling for researchers and teachers engaging with Indigenous matters.

The need to recalibrate knowledge relationships, at a moment when national constitutional reform was on the political agenda of both major parties, seemed self-evident when Courting Blakness was planned. On the one hand, deleting racially discriminatory provisions and recognising Indigenous people in the nation’s foundational document is centuries overdue. On the other hand, such revision and recognition might obscure the persistence of important legal distinctions with reference to which Indigenous sovereignty claims have been developed in both national and international contexts. At the time of writing, a referendum to remove racially based provisions from the constitution appears to be fading from the horizon of political possibility. And significant recalibration of knowledge is arguably impossible in institutional environments that preclude serious and considered reflection on broader questions of sovereignty. Nevertheless, the occupation of the Great Court for three weeks in September 2014 by the art works *14 Nations*, *Debt* and *Through My Eyes* provided imaginative resources for staff, students and members of the public to participate in one of the nation’s most important political decisions.

If Courting Blakness was simultaneously in and out of place at the national scale, it was also in and out of place at UQ. It was very well placed in a space of major public art commissioned to embody the meeting of academic disciplines. Yet it found itself somewhat out of place in an institution defining its value in global terms, at a moment when digital spaces of learning and research like massive open online courses (MOOCS) are transforming the meaning and experience

of campus life. Courting Blakness also took place while UQ – with every other Australian university anticipating the impacts of foreshadowed government policy change – was in the process of redefining the space of a university, from embodying twentieth-century ideals of universal and publicly subsidised higher education to a provider of a branded product delivering private amenity to individuals expected to pay for the privilege.

Perhaps the most obvious way that Courting Blakness belonged in place at UQ was as a creative response to earlier commissioned public art, prominently located at the heart of the campus. Over 30 carvings depicting Aboriginal people prior to, during and after the colonisation of Australia were specifically commissioned by architect Jack Hennessey.<sup>11</sup> These carvings are a keystone of his architectural vision for the Great Court. Together with friezes by John Theodore Muller, historical scenes, and the coats of arms of universities in the Commonwealth and other parts of the world, the sculptural reliefs and the grotesques (stone portraits) of individuals involved with UQ tell a story of institution-building at four levels: the British Empire, the nation, the state of Queensland, and the university. With two exceptions (discussed in the conclusion), Aborigines are depicted within the Great Court as anonymous individuals in pre-colonial scenes and scenes of exploration and agricultural and industrial development. These depictions are a striking and literal materialisation of the state of knowledge that informed government policies at a time when Australia was explicitly and proudly a ‘racial state’.<sup>12</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were firmly in place as objects of European disciplinary knowledge, rather than recognised as knowing subjects capable of making unique contributions to universal knowledge.

At the time the Great Court was constructed, Aboriginal people did not have citizenship rights; in order to qualify for these they had to apply to authorities for

‘exemption’ from the legal state of being Aboriginal. Racial governance positioned them as ‘black’ in a hierarchical society where ‘whiteness’ was the apex. Fiona Foley and the artists in *Courting Blakness* spoke back to these carvings as subjects of their own knowledges. Their personal and political insights, conveyed through the medium of art, arose from a self-defining identity as ‘Blak’ rather than as mute victims of over two centuries of racially discriminatory policies. Hennessey’s Great Court was certainly the most appropriate place for a dialogue in public art about what it means to be Aboriginal as a member of the British Commonwealth, in Australia, in the state of Queensland and in a university. As we will see, however, this did not make it the most comfortable or accommodating space for such a dialogue.

There is one more important sense in which *Courting Blakness* was literally out of place. Removing the ‘fourth wall’, which contains art within the institution of the museum, transformed the Great Court into a theatre of visual creative expression. Dramas involving dispossession, Indigenous sovereignty, racial violence, identity politics and nationalism were played out for an audience of over 25,000 people during the life of the exhibition. While such themes are unexceptional in exhibitions of contemporary Aboriginal art, there were risks involved in bringing them into an open and iconic space of a university, where knowledge is represented as authoritative, traditional and universal in scope. After several warnings by veteran UQ staff members that the works were likely to be vandalised, a small brigade of staff and student volunteers was placed in the Great Court to engage with individuals who might be more affronted than intellectually stimulated by the works. While the predicted vandalism did not eventuate, one visitor did apparently complain to volunteers that Michael Cook’s re-presentation of Australia’s prime ministers was ‘disrespectful’.



Michael Cook, *Through My Eyes*, 2014, inkjet prints.

Photograph: Carl Warner.

As an experiment in socially transformative education, Courting Blakness produced valuable insights about what art can (and cannot) do beyond museum walls in a university. In the essays that follow, Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors produce new knowledge about the interface of politics, art and knowledge in the sandstone university. The writers include curators, participating artists and Australian academics from different universities and disciplines, including architecture, anthropology, literature, law, cultural studies, political science, Indigenous studies and cinema studies.

### Notes

- 1 Burney, L, Speech for the opening of Courting Blakness: Recalibrating Knowledge in the Sandstone University, Great Court, University of Queensland, 5 September 2014.
- 2 Hobsbawm, E, 'Introduction: Inventing tradition' in E Hobsbawm and T Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 1–14.
- 3 East, J, 'The Great Court as a Place of Public Art', 2014, cited at [http://courtingblakness.com/the\\_great\\_court/](http://courtingblakness.com/the_great_court/).
- 4 For approaches to knowledge drawing on critical race and whiteness paradigms, see Moreton-Robinson, A, 'Whiteness, Epistemology and Indigenous Representation' in A Moreton-Robinson (ed.) *Whitening Race: Essays in social and cultural criticism*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2004, pp. 75–88; for a discussion of Indigenous knowledge in relation to academic disciplines see Nakata, MN, *Savaging the Disciplines: Disciplining the savages*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2007. In New Zealand, see Smith, LT, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*, Zed Books, University of Otago Press, 2012, London, New York, Dunedin.
- 5 See Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final report, July 2012, pp. xii and 94–131, cited at <http://docs.education.gov.au/documents/review-higher-education-access-and-outcomes-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people-o>.

- 6 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Plan: 2013–2017: Learning/Discovery/Engagement, University of Queensland cited at [www.uq.edu.au/about/strategic/ATSI-Strategic-Plan.pdf](http://www.uq.edu.au/about/strategic/ATSI-Strategic-Plan.pdf).
- 7 See Nicoll, F, 'Reconciliation In and Out of Perspective: White knowing, seeing, curating and being @ home in and against Indigenous sovereignty' in Moreton-Robinson, *Whitening Race*, op. cit., pp. 17–31.
- 8 'Intervention' refers to a suite of laws imposed on communities by the *Northern Territory Emergency Response Act 2007* (NT).
- 9 Perkins, R (director/writer/producer), *The First Australians*, Blackfella Films, 2008.
- 10 Hutchens, G, 'Tony Abbott says Australia benefited from foreign investment because it was "unsettled" before the British' in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 July 2014, cited at [www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/tony-abbott-says-australia-benefited-from-foreign-investment-because-it-was-unsettled-before-the-british-20140703-zsvby.html?rand=1404438443200](http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/tony-abbott-says-australia-benefited-from-foreign-investment-because-it-was-unsettled-before-the-british-20140703-zsvby.html?rand=1404438443200).
- 11 East, op. cit.
- 12 Goldberg, DT, *The Racial State*, Blackwell Publishers, Malden MA, 2002.