'COURTING BLAKNESS': ENGAGING THE VOICE OF VOLUNTEERING STUDENTS PARTICIPATING OF ABORIGINAL ART PROJECTS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

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Declaration by author

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text.

I have clearly stated the contribution of others to my thesis as a whole, including statistical assistance, production assistance, survey design, data analysis, significant technical procedures, professional editorial advice, and any other original research work used or reported in my thesis.

The content of my thesis is the result of work I have carried out since the commencement of my Master’s degree and does not include a substantial part of work that has been submitted to qualify for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution.

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'COURTING BLAKNESS': ENGAGING THE VOICE OF VOLUNTEERING STUDENTS PARTICIPATING OF ABORIGINAL ART PROJECTS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

ABSTRACT

The present study elaborates on the process of assessing, through the provision of voice with tools of contextual enquiry and participatory interviews, the experience and affiliation of students at the University of Queensland that volunteered in the context of the Courting Blakness: Recalibrating Knowledge in the Sandstone University installation of contemporary art: whether their perception about Aboriginal Australian Identity has been shaped because of the art installation, and the importance is placed upon the inclusion of Indigenous matters in University life. Among the key findings has been the yearn expressed by the students inquired, for more frequent exposure and incorporation of Aboriginal art to University affairs, as well as for greater opportunities available to the public to interact and discuss the ideas and new insights surrounding Australian Aboriginality, in response to the mainstream institutional culture, which seemingly continues to deny and avoid the right to Indigenous insertion.

KEYWORDS
Aboriginality, art, courting blakness, indigenous, participation, students, university, voice.

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INTRODUCTION

By social principle, race serves power relations. Indeed, Indigenous Australians have been subjected to the construction of differentiation: in the midst of the collective imagery, Indigenous people still face the imperialist fictions that speak of political domination and racism (Cowlishaw & Morris, 1999). In this context, the Courting Blakness exhibition of contemporary Aboriginal art (September 5th to 28th, 2014) sought to create a dialogical space in the University of Queensland's Great Court, in order to engage both audience and precinct through new conversations about humanity and racial difference (Courting Blakness, 2014). The Great Court represents a place where different academic disciplines meet, as well as artists and thinkers have through the years (Courting Blakness, 2014). The curator for the project was UQ Adjunct Professor Fiona Foley, who was also named Australia Council artist of the year for 2013. Foley brought together works by prestigious artists: Ryan Presley, Archie Moore, Rea, Natalie Harkin, Karla Dickens, Christian Thompson, Megan Cope and Michael Cook (as it will be indicated through the findings and illustrated in the appendixes of the document study at hand, the creations of only three of them were approved to be installed on campus). The artistic collective's attempt, through sculpture and performance, photography, poetry and multimedia, has been to incorporate public art and cultural heritage into the potential dialogues they can provoke from students. This
was aimed to be achieved by exhibiting Aboriginal art, using such important premise as the Great Court, which is also a symbol of intellectual institution in the city of Brisbane (Courting Blakness, 2014).

Through the study here presented, I argue not only as Jorgensen (2008) supports, that the legacy of a colonialism that once silenced Aboriginal representations continues this silence surrounding Aboriginal art; moreover, I appeal to the notion that the unspoken testimonies of University students involved in the context of Aboriginal art introduced on campus have the power to reveal such silence. My research is focused exclusively on the students -mostly from the Museum Studies and Art History majors at UQ- that volunteered for the art installation in mention. The project is participatory due to the nature of the research, conducted by a member of the group of volunteers (the author of the document in hand), on the basis of trust and honor of day-to-day reality as knowledge, and transform such information on the basis of a better understanding of what was really important to my peer volunteers, which an outsider would most likely not have previously considered (Gelfand & Godefroy, 2010). In sum, the overall aim of my thesis is to provide students in the University of Queensland with voice on how engaged their participation in Courting Blakness, whether their perception about Aboriginal Australian Identity has been shaped because of the project, and the importance they place to the insertion of Indigenous art [matters] in academic life, particularly as it challenges the dominant visual space of the sandstone University. I will underpin my thesis through the groundwork elaborated in the literature review.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

UQ - The University of Queensland

REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

In the course of this section, I seek first to frame the problem of the study by understanding social factors of race differentiation, which is the grassroots of present day struggle against the injustices faced by Indigenous people. I report then on the role of Aboriginal art to encourage discussions about Aboriginality and such struggles. Then more specifically, since university students are the focus of research, I look at information regarding their participation in the form of the resulting discussions. Correspondingly, I assess what is known
about voice as value -as theoretically developed by Nick Couldry-, and its provision to university students. This concept later on will support the theoretical approach for this study, and will also justify the methodology strategies chosen for data collection.

Racialized conception of the Aboriginal Community

The social construction of race in Australia as Turner (2005) recalls, became ostensibly marked by the establishment of a definite position on racial diversity encouraged by the White multiparty national policy during the 1950’s. In the process, ‘the country’s monoculturalism not only distanced the country from its chromatically diverse neighbors in the region, it also left “unassimilated”, “traditional” Aboriginal people disenfranchised of basic citizenship until 1967’ (p. 463). Bit being race a social construction then and in the Australian’s case, is composed by discourses and imageries of ‘the Others’ as hostile, as Fisher (2012) observes: the matter of race is seen as a problem and it is attempted to be ignored by society outside academia, in the hopes that it disappears in a utopian equal future. Actually and as supported by Cowlishaw and Morris (1999), the matter of race ought rather to be acknowledged as the resulting construction of social and economic inequality. In Australia, racial consciousness is seen as a -distortion of public life processes in a portrayed multicultural scenario, which is viewed as one of the key elements for reason towards progress and equality (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). In this context, it is read that Indigenous Australians in general still experience life conditions much below the standard of well-being that most non-Australians enjoy (Cowlishaw & Morris, 1999). In response and as Smith (2001) states, there is in the midst of the 21st century, a growing aspiration of an ideal society, in which race will not be a factor of differentiation (or marginalization). On this regard, the problem is that society (and to a great extent, also Australia) is prone to advance as if race did not matter from person to person. This leaves the significance and importance of the Indigenous Australian oppressed history and identity still not sufficiently addressed and acknowledged -in this case, to university students (Cregan et al., 2002).

The use of Art to encourage discussions

According to Fisher (2012), the social stigma of racialism can in fact be alleviated in the form and content of art, the realm within which the struggles marginalized people face in society
-including their histories being manipulated or silenced- can be confronted and combated, but also reconciled. In addition, art is the space where individual and collective acknowledgement and emancipation can be pursued (Fisher, 2012), and its importance lies in setting an interface between peoples that transcends language: art embodies the ideas, identities, aspirations and feelings of the community (Smith, 2001).

More specifically referring to academic life, the importance of exposing students to art with the purpose of generating discussions is covered in depth in reviewed sources: for instance, Fisher and McDonald (2004), who advice on incorporating other instructional standards to the curriculum, such as art, in order to increase direct student interest, understanding, open-mindedness, and active involvement in academic life. Barrett (2004) supports the mainspring behind Courting Blakness, by stating that learning to interpret art products is more important than learning to judge their value. Interestingly, Barrett (2004) also adds that the meanings of artworks are not constrained to what their authors intended them to mean, which would extend the exhibition's main invitation to observe and engage the works through spaces of knowledge, like the Great Court (Courting Blakness, 2014). Nevertheless, such sources mostly go on to guide educators and artists on how to develop on the subject and content of artworks, and they do not really deal with the potential social and cultural dialogues that can be generated among their students, and particularly those involved in art initiatives.

In this respect, there are only light mentions in the existing literature. For example, the facilitation of art projects in various regions of Eastern Australia related to language and culture from mid-2007, yet they focus exclusively in serving curricular education (Yunkaporta & McGuinty, 2009). Just the same, and from the scope of Participatory Development, Aboriginal art establishes a common interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge that is culturally safe (Cregan et al., 2002). Such is the purpose of innovative manifests like Courting Blakness, since in principle the space between ancestral and western systems is political and highly contested (Cregan et al., 2002).

**Reception of Aboriginal Art by the non-Indigenous**

Generic literature on projects where Indigenous arts are used to reach out to fill in such gap in rapport with non-Indigenous audiences is limited in sources, yet the content is sharp in its
claims as follows. A topical approximation is found in the study by Koenig, Altman and Griffiths (2011) which addresses mainly the economic factors that influence the commodification of the Indigenous visual arts sector in a predominantly non-indigenous market, yet it does not directly assess the potential of Aboriginal art to foster social and political change. On the other hand, Turner (2005) highlights the ground notion of the sociopolitical relevance of art production – as well as reflection of the world and denounce to the public - in the region:

Many artists in the Asia Pacific region have protested colonialism and neo-colonialism, global environmental degradation, cultural loss, illness due to poverty, sexual exploitation, social and political injustice, war, violence... and racism. Their work is in the broad area of social justice. In confronting such issues, artists have addressed their art to, and involved, whole communities in order to help them confront poverty and trauma (caused by both natural and human disasters) and preserve traditions and values: in other words, their art contributes to cultural survival. (p. 4)

In that respect, it is necessary to look back at the work of Jorgensen (2008) who is critical of the transition that Aboriginal visual production made between anthropology and art, since as he argues, it became an expression for the public, of the political space that is merely built on colonial representations of colonized cultures.

On a more positive note concerning object and interpretation, Morphy and Perkins (2005) state that art offers a superior understanding of historical and political reality. Art does so through the creative intent of its producers, the artists, as they show up the values and hopes of their community, and of humanity (Turner, 2005). However, in regards to the effects of contemporary art forms on the audience, Lukes (1991) questions such stream of examination of the effects of art as ‘poor and tainted with advocacy’ (p. 70), when looking for a direct political reaction of the art consumers. Since the major art outbreaks in history, as Lukes argues, have occurred after societies -have experienced major periods of political and military upheavals, he suggests art is better at facilitating change (in this case, at rethinking Aboriginality and its place in Australian identity) when audiences become exposed to it, rather than at originating desirable responses of opposition to the status quo. And on a different scope, it is inferable that audiences have not yet been capable to receive Indigenous Australian art in its genuine intention, since Nicoll (2000) talks about an imposed reconciliation for a 'new republic'. Her analysis reads that the discipline of Aboriginal art has attempted to be accommodated in what cannot yet be a
postcolonial momentum in the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, since "the gaze of the other has not ceased to play a role in the constitution of the colonial subject." (p. 116).

I estimate worthy pondering for a moment the element of Australian reconciliation in literature, since as I mentioned Fisher (2012) states, reconciliation is nowadays perceived as probably the most comprehensive motivation to expose the art of the oppressed (in this case, from the Aboriginal Australian to the non-Indigenous). According to Altman and Hinkson (2007), when it comes to reconciliation, a policy-approach is ideologically driven, with a rhetoric of taking action in the best interest of Indigenous people, which in fact perpetrates denial and assimilation, by "masking a broader policy agenda unrelated to the ostensible focus of policy" (p. 18). In accordance to this addressed and urgent need for effective policy-making towards reconciliation, the words of Dobson (2008) became a textbook example of a calling to the nation for participatory partnership that honors Aboriginal in Australian nation building:

As a nation we must be prepared to recognize the truths of the Indigenous people and to put into place strategies that aim to bring some equity into their lives. It will take considerable resources and it will take considerable time, as the gaps are so great. Most importantly, we must be prepared to enter into a genuine dialogue with the Indigenous community to determine the way forward in addressing the challenges that lay before us. Unless the engagement and dialogue between us is premised on the concept of 'the listening heart', then our relationship will remain out of balance and our endeavors will be doomed.

Now such spaces of reconciliation have not been extensively linked with Academic life through student Participation, let alone the provision of student voice through art, in the existing literature. Precisely, by studying the communicational implications of artistic initiatives within a university context, is to ultimately serve the engagement of students in renewing their knowledge and understanding about Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, which is to a major extent, another form of celebrating and wide-spreading Aboriginal culture (Courting Blakness, 2014).

**The Importance of Participation**

In accordance with the rationale above, a predominant component on this topic is assessing the Participation of non-Indigenous students as they relate with Indigenous art, and therefore, the potential of such involvement for originating Social Change. In the literature, Huby (2001) has observed that involving students in a Participatory activity fosters discussions on the
meanings and interpretations of the contents they have been exposed to and taken note of. Moreover, that same source praises the potential of Participation in the academic context, since it engages students to listen more attentively to their colleagues’ insights (Huby, 2001). Salmon (2007) even goes on to say that prioritizing Participation in research diminishes the risks of misrepresentation and appropriation of the beneficiaries’ experiences. However, Cornwall and Jewkes (2010) affirm that most Participatory research ought to generate "knowledge for action", as opposed to just "knowledge for understanding". In fact, I suggest the pattern of Participation to be demonstrated challenges such order of events: in the case of Courting Blakness, the involvement of students as volunteers (action) could or could not be followed by reflective dialogue (understanding).

**Participation and the matter of Student Voice**

Most consulted literary sources agree upon the fact that Participation does not work the same way from one development initiative to the other. Bessette (2004) accurately observes that this exercise -of inviting the volunteers to deliberate on how the exhibition would have [or would not have] the power to provoke discussions- would be incomplete without using some instrument or technique that promotes Participation. Indeed, and as Botes and van Rensburg (2000) also note, applying a Participatory approach “challenges [traditional] practices, while hindering people from releasing their own initiatives and realizing their own ideals [individually, or not as a community]” (p. 53).

In that sense, the notion of Voice and its provision to volunteering students is the core element of the problem statement for this particular study. More specifically, identifying their voices can potentially guide academic authorities to support subsequent and meaningful learning steps. At any rate, it is not enough to aim art spaces at inspiring discussions; it is also about listening, and choosing to value personal accounts (Couldry, 2010). Bolstad (2011) addresses student voice from a constructivist point of view, in arguing that “students actively build their own meanings from their learning experiences” (p.31). This tide of reason is supported by Couldry’s (2009) referral to a second-order value of voice that is embodied in the process of mutually recognizing our claims on each other as reflexive human agents (p.580). Indeed voice, also in the case of the student involvement that is sought by placing the Courting Blakness
layout, deserves minimally to be listened to. Couldry (2009) stated: "for it is through the process of listening that the value of voice is mutually registered between us" (p. 580).

**Theoretical Framework: Constructivist and Social Cognitive Theory of Learning**

Consequently, the fact of pointing at the notion of Participation as a key component for this study—and translating such notion into its methodological execution as it will be explained in the pertinent section—responds to the idea of “listening to students” or “consulting young people” being highly neglected (especially in traditional school contexts where the difference of power between adults and the youth is tightly embedded). Indeed, according to Bolstad (2011) the concept of 'student voice' has the potential to limit the youth’s involvement only to providing an outlook or perspective, "with no guarantee that their input will be taken into account or that they will have input into subsequent decisions" (p. 32). In this sense, this frame of thought views the process of learning (in the students) neither as a curriculum, nor as the mere transmission of knowledge. Rather—and instead of framing learning as an imposition-, the Constructivist Theory of Learning proposes the construction of understanding through accommodating new information to existing knowledge structures, which are internal to the individual learner (Barrett & Long, 2012), who in turn must "actively participate, by 'building' content and new knowledge, and that information exists within these built constructs [internal to the learner] rather than in the external environment" (P.76). On the other hand, from a Social Cognitive principle, students are encouraged to express their voice in order to enhance their self-awareness and ability to intentionally influence their own functioning, behavior and thinking (Singhal et. al, 2003)

Regarding how the volunteers engaged with the art installation and the works themselves, both theoretical approaches support the idea that we construct the meanings of social life through representations, as Sturken and Cartwright (2009) claim about them, and which are embedded in the process of understanding objects and images in their specific cultural context (which entails the grassroots dilemma of whether the Great Court counts as cultural context because it is a vivid representation of the British domination, so embraced and internalized in the Australian culture, or if it does not make a proper cultural scenario, because of the race struggles rooted in that same domination). Such process does not simply entail we see the world reflected (copied) in the art. Furthermore, it produces meanings (and as audience we construct them) through the ways the art "is composed and rendered, and not just in the choices of objects depicted" (p. 14). This will be
made more comprehensible as the interpretations the volunteers attributed to the artworks unfold, and through their accounts in regards to the *Courting Blakness* exhibition.

Most academic texts provide relevant theoretical insights regarding Participatory Communication and Methodology. However, a recurrent gap in the existing literature is that it links the notion of Student Participation almost exclusively to the student's performance in curricular activities. For example, Huby (2001) stresses the aim of reinforcing the doctrine, and even prescribes the inclusion of as many students as possible in participatory exercises. This is incongruent with the notion of smaller groups of people in the practice of Community Development, for effectively democratizing voice and even ulterior decision-making processes (Bessette, 2004) Another flaw detected in most literature, although pointed out by Botes and van Rensburg (2010), is the pressing expectation and assumptions for positive pre-assembled outcomes of community participation.

The Problem

I estimate it is relevant commenting further on the matter of restraints to the *Courting Blakness* enterprise, prior to better understanding certain discussions generated by the respondents. On the inauguration symposium of the art display (which again, took place in the morning of September the 5th, 2014), Curator Fiona Foley began welcoming interstate and foreign artists and attendees, and stressing the fact that it took he organization team –as it was mentioned above- over three years to comply with all the right internal administrative approvals for the execution of the historical event. Indeed, Foley called the project “groundbreaking”, as the Indigenous art plays with the physical space. Her original intention, as she expressed it, was to facilitate a new respectful dialogue from one people to the other, pass old racial divides and across disciplines. Yet the project managed to raised polemics, as four of Archie Moore’s fictional Aboriginal flags through UQ’S Policies –according to Professor Foley- were commissioned to be banned from the installation, in spite of the previous agreement with the respective authority of having the flags join the non-Indigenous roof of the Forgan Smith Building (the iconic precinct of the St Lucia campus and façade for its Great Court), even after having been approved for the Courting Blakness display. The reason for their removal, as
publicly declared by to the Curator and in the presence of the artist in mention, had nothing to do with Aboriginal sensitivities or perceived risk from the Aboriginal community (as she had previously been informed by an officially phone call notification from UQ):

The reason stated in the official letter for the removal of four flags from Archie Moore’s work was that (and I quote): ‘the university's flag protocol is part of the formal identity of the institution, including its flag, its arm and its motto. The University is also conscious of complying with the National flag protocols. The flag poles on the top of the Forgan Smith building serve a formal purpose, and are reserved for officially recognized flags.’ A European system of protocols had won the day over an Aboriginal man who had a conceptual idea… Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? (Foley, 2014)

Indeed, the commotion generated in this study case is the cornerstone from which much of my argumentation streams: through the normalization of desired colonial spaces, Australian society, in a white mode of occupation, keeps, if not bluntly attacking, still overriding or conditioning Aboriginal cultural expressions in the post-reconciliation era (Greenop, 2014).

Just the same, the lack of attention to Student voice –particularly in Australia, according to Smyth (2012)– adds a complex question to the problem driving this study: educational reforms have been serving the regulatory mechanisms of neoliberalism, and consequently, such seemingly dangerous approach translates into “a dominant policy agenda that is totally uncaring and distrustful, and the effects on young people are not hard to see [...] in the emphasis on individualization, self-responsibilisation, school choice and the move to self-managing educational centers”, (Smyth, 2012, p. 153). Compounding this void in valuing the discussions that the Courting Blakness pursues to generate from students in the first place, with the limitation for the current study that deals with the possible little or non-participation of the volunteers, I must establish a methodological course of action that effectively ponders their engagement with the content and context of the art exhibition in question, and which at the same time, responds to the theoretical framework established for this paper,
METHODOLOGY

Through the proper ethical clearance, obtained prior to the data collection to ensure voluntary and anonymous participation -as well as the non-disclosure of individual identities-, the questions that are sought to be addressed with this research are: What motivates the participation of student volunteers, in projects that seek to communicate using Indigenous Art on campus? And, how does the Courting Blakness project bring about new or different perceptions about Australian Aboriginal Culture and Identity? The nature and content of the data collection -as it will be explained in more detail- was qualitative: target participants (fellow students) were encouraged to talk about their experience, motivation, opinions and meanings built and gained from their involvement in Courting Blakness.

**Method Design Strategy**

The methodological choice for research, in terms of both instrumentalization and procedure (provision of voice through participatory communication, in the form of e-mails and interviews) was set to best serve the theoretical perspective that underpins this study. Indeed -and as such is the case in the field of qualitative research-, the methods I selected are based on a social constructivism perspective, since they are aimed at
observing participants create shared meaning and individual learning through field work and interactions with other members of the group—essentially with me as peer interviewer (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Likewise and as it will be appraised later on in my discussion, the methodological strategy employed complies with the Freirian notion of critical consciousness (Rossatto, 2005), since it entails the combination of researcher perspective and data collected, “validating student knowledge and experiences, while students "dialectically" produce new knowledge” (p. 27). Main (open-ended questions) were addressed to emphasize the empirical and descriptive elements mentioned above (Silverman, 2006). With this elements in mind, the correspondent data collection has been exercised in the form of two strategies;

**Contextual Inquiry**

The key of this participatory technique is to observe and pose questions to the volunteers to understand why believe and have committed in the cause of this art exhibition, but all within the context of the project environment (Bednar, Eglin & Welch, 2007). The value of the investigator being an insider is the research relationship and mutual trust with her peer volunteers (Gelfand & Godefroy, 2010). This potentially enables the person or team carrying research not only to enquire others about a particular topic or event. It also grants the research agent the opportunity to individually grasp a better understanding of their answers (Bednar, Eglin & Welch, 2007). In this case, it enabled me to appraise the importance they place as students to promote contemporary Aboriginal art on campus and the effects they believe the exhibition has within University, since as investigator I also interacted and shared responsibilities in this art installation with the rest of the students involved.

**Participatory Interviewing**

Complementary to the first one, this method goes beyond conducting traditional interviews, by inviting the participant to honor the reality of his/her community as knowledge, in the hopes of benefiting both the participants and the research (Salmon, 2007). In this case, instead of inducing the volunteers into answering a set of questions posed by an outsider—with the more likely risk of them getting inhibited or refusing to share their input--; it was me who interviewed my teammates during the volunteering for Courting Blakness and collected the data under their consent, exclusively to serve the purpose of the study. In a broader scope, this
exercise ought to voice their actual perspectives, and prevent the misrepresentation of students' stories on their personal experience of participation (Gelfand & Godefroy, 2010), which could be determinant in assessing student engagement Aboriginal-related art events.

The most advantageous feature of the methodology proposed resides in its potential to prevent the outcomes of both communication instruments in place (Participatory and Contextual inquiry) to be merely institutional, which would entail dealing with the volunteers simply as 'subjects of research'. On the contrary, the theoretical principles mentioned support the fact of a member(s) of a group (in this case, the team of students committed to the Indigenous art exhibition) knowing his/her and their experience, and interacting with his/her peers from within (Gelfand & Godefroy, 2010).

**Data Collection Instruments**

The choice and development of the data collection instruments has been determined considering the time and resources at hand for the operationalization of my research –meaning the strategy for finding key information, gathering and analyzing it. Following such criteria, I employed both paper and electronic mail questionnaires (subject-completed instruments) for the purpose of registering the discussions from the student volunteers. This data collection tools were completed by them even while I was around, during lunch breaks and by the time we would finalize the shifts, in order not to interrupt our functions regarding the installation and informing the public that would show interest and inquire us about the artworks. Nevertheless, the fact of still participating in the context of volunteering for the Courting Blakness (meaning we had our t-shirts with the logo of one of Archie Moore’s flags on, as we wrapped up for the day or took a lunch break there in the Great Court) was a vehicle for the volunteers to raise discussions with me and among themselves surrounding the interviewing questions for my research, and part of which will be quoted in the next section.

The six core questions set to enquire fellow volunteers -which will serve as the basic structure for presenting the research results- included:

1) How did you first learn about the Courting Blakness exhibition?
2) Why did you decide to get involved?
3) Which piece of art did you like the most, and why?
4) Was your understanding about Indigenous Australians shaped with the project?
5) How can the history, culture, identity of Aboriginal Australians be more widespread in University life?
6) How can communicating Aboriginal Australian matters through art on campus be more effective?

RESULTS

Out of twenty-two student volunteers, fourteen gave their consent to participate in the study and completed the questionnaire. A notable factor was the good willingness demonstrated, almost every time the student volunteers were either asked to answer to the questions in a written manner (twelve of them participated), or whenever I would enquire them about their ideas in respect to the project. In contrast, it was more difficult to get those who I was not able to contact in person, to reply to me via e-mail with the answers to the questions (only two). In any case, the common denominator detected at a first glance was the fact that their expectations surpassed the actual outcome of the art display. Such disappointment evidently does not correspond the effort of the curators to organize the Courting Blakness installation -I learned during my conversations of those I met and shared the stall at the great court with that it took 3 years to make this dream a reality; I will deepen more on this subject later on.

Turning to the data collection, the following encloses the findings that resulted from applying both the contextual enquiry and participatory interviewing methods among fellow volunteers, correspondingly displayed by the core questions posed:
**How did you first learn about the Courting Blakness: Recalibrating Knowledge in the Sandstone University project?**

Students found out about the project through and from academic sources, mostly related to the Museum Studies program: Aboriginal Heritage lecturers and spokespeople involved in it, internships as part of Art History courses. Another informed, ‘through my Indigenous Mental Health class’. Courting Blakness was also introduced to them ‘by academics in the School of Political Sciences’, during diversity week at UQ, through social media and the project’s website. A female student commented having ‘Curated in the Visual Arts’ during her first semester, and her placement was to contribute to the Courting Blakness website.

**Why did you decide to get involved?**

‘I got involved in order to assist the development of perspectives of Indigenous people’ 

Fellow volunteers were encouraged to participate due to their own interest in Indigenous Australian culture and issues, or in contemporary art. A couple were interested in taking part of an event management opportunity. Elements such as ‘love for contributing to increase the representation of Indigenous people’, ‘personal benefit to learn more’, and ‘fantastic opportunity to get involved’ were among the answers. A student even commented ‘I wanted to be part of such an amazing project’, and a Research Higher Degree student added ‘I felt it was important to contribute something if I was going to be benefiting from the project’.

More closely related to their major, others mentioned ‘compulsory placement’, that ‘it is good to have some exhibition experience during some of my free time.’ One volunteer declared to be a practicing artist, and saw related benefit in signing on.

**Which piece of art did you like the most, and why?**

“Through my Eyes” by Michael Cook (see Appendix 1) consisted on the portraits of the prime ministers of Australia displayed on a wall, whose features have been reconfigured by the artist in order to make them look Indigenous. This work was liked because it is said to be 'controversial', and raises the question of ‘how different would Australia be, if all of the prime ministers were Indigenous’. ‘I liked Michael Cook’s work since it’s very thought provoking, with the blending of Indigenous faces on all Australia’s white Prime Ministers’, a male student told.

“Debt” by Ryan Presley (Appendix 3) is a tridimensional word covered in cash notes that display Aboriginal characters instead of the non-Indigenous traditional ones. It was praised by the interviewed volunteers as ‘extremely elegant and clever in its execution’, and ‘a wonderful,
understatedly powerful work’. This sculpture has multiple interpretations: there were participants that liked “Xchange” (as this art sculpture was alternatively referred to), simply because of being ‘more eye-catching’. The volunteers also observed that Presley used money notes to attract people’s attention, and interestingly, a volunteer uttered that the fact that the faces on the notes are those of Indigenous Australians ‘can make the public rethink the country, as one that owes Aboriginal people’. A student pointed out that “Debt” takes a common item of visual culture that is taken for granted, to subvert it and provoke thought. Indeed, in the answers I found that “Xchange” got the youth thinking in a deep level about Indigenous people in a utopian role of authority, representing ‘a debt that colonized Australia owes to them’.

A couple of participants preferred Archie Moore’s “Fourteen Nations” (Appendix 2) Aboriginal flags; one, ‘because they are more obvious, as they stand out because of their colorfulness and movement with the wind in the open space’, and the other also judged not only the artworks, but the symposium to be ‘absolutely interesting and revealing’ important when answering to this question. Only one student mentioned “Blaktism” (see Appendix 4) -which was not exhibited in the Great Court, but only online at the project’s official website.

- Was your understanding about Indigenous Australians shaped with the project?

The volunteers alleged their understanding had been enriched by engaging with the art works and their attempt, as viewers, to understand what messages the Aboriginal artists are communicating through their products and messages. Others –like me- did so by volunteering and attending the previous symposiums that inaugurated the exhibition. A local student admitted: ‘I knew a fair bit before, but by listening to the artists at the symposium, I gained some new perspectives on identity through the work of Archie Moore, and the idea of an Australian debt to the first people’. A more specific answer was provided by an Art History student volunteer: ‘I did learn about The Seven Sisters’ (In 2000, Kleinert and Neile refered to this as a narrative about seven Creator Beings constantly present in the ancestral landscape, to whom natural phenomena and significant involvement in ceremonial life is attributed).

On the contrary, other volunteers said her understanding was not really increase after the project: ‘I guess Indigenous people are somehow struggling with their identities? And even though they are originally from Australia they are facing the loss of cultures?’

- How can the history, culture, identity of Aboriginal Australians be more widespread in University life?
The volunteers expressed personal but definite ideas in this respect, such as making it compulsory to take at least one course of choice in Aboriginal Australian studies. They stressed the importance of engaging students in awareness programs were they are briefed about indigenous culture, its contributions and achievements, as well as that of ‘sharing more Indigenous artwork and informative panels in public spaces at campus’. International Students suggested feature exhibitions in the University museums, or funfair days, yet ‘all those activities should be well advertised.’

A domestic student stated that ‘it should really begin from birth, through school into University; growing up with Indigenous culture would make it an integral part of Australian life.’ Curiously, volunteers would suggest more engagement, in fact, from both parties: ‘[We need] primarily greater consultation of Indigenous people’, and ‘More white involvement in Aboriginal-led projects and programs could help’. There were those participants that expressed in the form of concern, that ‘there is a serious problem if it took three years to curate this’ and protest, as ‘some of the art was not even allowed to be displayed.’

- **How can communicating Aboriginal Australian matters through art on campus be more effective?**
  - ‘Contact rather than online’

The students emphasized on the need for more interaction between the spectator and the artworks, more information visually available, and recurrently, more advertising of initiatives like *Courting Blakness*, inviting more students and general public to 'contemplate and learn'. Strikingly, dialogue was prescribed by some of the volunteers for its power to engage people and bridge communities. In respect to the power of the artworks to communicate, more than half the students enquired hoped for ‘greater/permanent presence of Aboriginal art in the UQ Mayne Centre/ at the UQ Art Museum’ more art pieces in the University buildings because, since art has multiple interpretations, everyone can build their own understanding’ which 'can spark casual conversation and dialogue between people'. Finally, it was stated that ‘art becomes much more effective when courses directly engage with the art and integrate it into their assessment'.
DISCUSSION

About the political and institutional contestation of Courting Blakness

Initiatives like Courting Blakness: Recalibrating Knowledge in the Sandstone University are evidence of the use of a new and visual proliferation of art that is meant to be thought provoking, truth celebrating, and a generator of reflections about who we are as Australians really are (Foley, 2014). Indeed, the constraints that surrounded this Indigenous art installation reflect the institution of Whiteness in University policies and procedures, which too often or until too recently has denied Aboriginal cultural expressions. For instance, as additional evidence of this, it was officially informed to us that the maximum authorities suspended the availability of volunteers present on site, who had been prescribed among other respective tasks, to answer to possible Great Court visitors’ enquiries for the last couple of days of the project; this means the installation was backed up by volunteers only until the 26th of September.

Although there are other factors that can delay advocacy events like this art exhibition - e.g. difficulty in raising sufficient funds - the sphere of reflection upon the example of Courting Blakness and how volunteers experienced it is essentially political. Firstly and in a broader instance, Mensch (2013) attributes a definite tone of political dissent to the general postwar
modern and contemporary art, as well as the power to make direct reference to the social distress; through the forms, techniques, and strategies that make it conceptual, this engaged art would communicate about political matters of common interest, from the perspective either of the artist or the audience. Hence the significance of paying attention to the dialogues a propos of projects of this nature in campus: according to the notion of Voice as value reclaimed earlier in the study (Couldry, 2010), it emerges from us both through material form (the art tangible expressions) and social resources (historical and circumstantial constructs related to Aboriginal struggles versus colonialism, which are embedded in the message transmitted by art). Likewise, both material and social elements are the core channels through which individual and collective narratives are registered, and then reflected upon. Therefore, for [contemporary] art’s political dissent and expression of social issues to acquire a value, the discussions inspired by that art frame a social process that encompasses not only the ‘speaking’ (the installation, curation, diffusion of the initiative) but from the start, also the ‘listening’ (Couldry, 2010).

Indeed, the constant academic and administrative impediments reported before, surrounding the organization and course of Courting Blakness and being pointed out by fellow volunteers, evoke to a certain or major extent the theme of uneven distribution of power and control in Australian society (and even the attempt itself to get other(s) to look at something does involve a play of power, as it will be analyzed later on in this section). That naturally raises the question of whether some present day scenarios of inequality are of traditional, post-colonial provenance, some present day, or whether those scenarios of noticeable inequality are emergent in the sense of them being relatively recent products of social and ideological change (Altman, 1989:45) –in this case, the scenarios would be the seemingly (non) acceptance of contemporary Indigenous art in a typically European space and cultural system, are emergent scenarios in the sense of their being relatively recent products of social and ideological change (Altman, 1989:45), or whether they are of traditional, post-colonial provenance. A possible answer lays in a current social discourse that rarely entails any direct non-Indigenous authoritarianism, as well as decision-making processes with practically no heavy-handed methods that would display unequivocally the concentration of power in a few (white) hands, and yet. Rather, such manifestations (in this case, the impediments I referred to at the beginning of this paragraph) are evidently of a more subtle, less easily observed kind.
The institutional obstacles that were encountered in the establishment of the case study exhibition reflect an authentic and generalized political fact, as Altman’s (1989) analysis resonates even with newer studies cited and referenced in the present one. Such fact is, that the constant reconsideration and reformulation of structures designated to handle Aboriginal matters are stirred, in part, by assessments or perceptions on behalf of other sectors of the population (the wider Australian society), that views decisions related to Aboriginal topics are partly constituted as special issues. "This creates a continuing demand for information about the ‘Aboriginal’ condition, conceived as such. Information and interpretation is needed in order to clarify how, and to what extent that condition is the product of and affected within, the terms of broader political action" (p.8); in other words, bureaucracy increases upon an initiative because of the preconceived expectation (in any case) of potential ineffective policy on regional and national Aboriginal affairs (Altman, 1989). These perceptions become, therefore, a crucial threat to maintaining cultural integrity and the meaningful relationships that can preserve it.

Regarding the matter of student involvement, I could observe there was an important component of the students seeking pertinent further experience and compulsory placement, but I also observed through my findings a great level of personal expectation in my fellow student volunteers, almost the same initial hope for change that inspired the study at hand. For instance, the inspiration of the artists -particularly expressed in Michael Cook's political piece, as the students observed- clearly made them think about what Australian history could have looked like under a National Government headed or influenced by Indigenous leaders. From their recommendations, it is not hard to infer there is a real urge for generalized education on how us as individuals can help and make a positive, inclusive influence concerning and considering Aboriginal matters. However, the lack of new insights gained from the exhibition (most likely among International student volunteers, as the topic of Aboriginality might be newer to them) could obey, as it was assured by the participant volunteers, to the lack of more widely spread information on the significance of the project and the presence of the artworks in the Great Court 'to more than just empty gestures'.

**Volunteers’ engagement with the Artworks**

As it was announced above, it is necessary to dwell, at this point, in the relationship between looking and getting to look images, and power: coinciding with what Edmonds, Muller...
and Turnbull (2006) and Sturken and Cartwright (2009) say about conscious and unconscious intersections of communication, influence played a part as the students were inquired upon their practice of looking at the pieces exhibited. Through the research procedure I proposed, the volunteers voiced the array of emotions and responses, and they (we) became enabled to engage in a relationship of power: the power "to conjure up the presence of an absent person, and experience longing for someone we have lost or someone we desire but whom we have never seen or met […] the power to mystify, to remember" (pp.9, 18). Just the same, the dynamics of power come to operate as antagonistic agents choose not to look, or look away, by the willful or socially induced exercise of bureaucracy, as it has been detected in the research results.

A lesson learned from the appreciations –whichever they were- the students uttered about the art pieces, is that images play with representation, unmasking initial assumptions and inviting the audience to experience meanings beyond the obvious or the apparent real or true meaning, reminding the public that a photograph could be conceived as the scientific outcome of registering reality more accurately (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). In this sense Cook’s “Through my Eyes” -as more simplistically understood by the volunteers- underpins such “ability to invoke a distanced appreciation for what the image holds” (p. 17) by representing precisely, the utopia of a governmental saga of Indigenous Prime Ministers overruling the country that once belonged to the first nations, theirs.

Regarding the reception of the artworks manifested by the volunteers during the interviews, I was able to appreciate in the practice a capital lesson learned by Jorgensen (2008), as he stated that the interest of ornament and cross-cultural aesthetics in the visual rather than socio-economic and postcolonial conditions of artistic production, is what conceives a more equitable exchange between cultures. The reception of art pieces and its surrounding meaning and representation has a more positive acceptance when the art in itself is more promoted than the promise of racial and social justice being served by exposing audiences to it. And yet, the appeal of the volunteers for a more profound engagement to be facilitated between artworks and audiences (as well as their interest to respond to the calling and the queries study in the first place) talks about the extent in which art represents and is surrounded by the human condition and aspiration. If their preferences for a particular piece or the other in the Courting Blakness installation are an accurate representation of the aesthetic of the pieces that were part of this
project, so are their sentiments for cultural equality, inclusion and celebration, through education and dialogue; as such was the expression of their moral feelings, which were aroused by the art (Morphy & Perkins, 2005).

In regards to the potential of art as catalyst of political change, and after having achieved a process of participatory discussions, I continue to stress the importance of student voice triggered by (and in embrace and enhancement of) Aboriginal expressions, but now as a form of networked resistance, as Bradley et al. (2007) portrays it: local, since it germinates in the daily-life environment of University campus, and global, since the interviewing cohort has been formed by both Australian and International people. Even if as a soft form of political dissidence, without visible strategic components, these exercises of effectively democratizing voice inherit “the unlikely appeal to a 'do-it-yourself geopolitics': a chance for personal involvement in the transformation of the world. These kind of actions are about as far as one could imagine from a museum; yet [...] they bring together the multiplicity of individual expression and the unity of a collective will”. (p. 350). I also recognize in this exercise of voice -or in the potential it can achieve, almost as a social movement- a logical, and to an extent expected response to the ambivalent discourse of reconciliation with the Aboriginal community: between its attempt of compensation in policy level to the stolen generations, and the real impediments and protocols that are set for the practice of such national recognition in the form of promoting its cultural legacy (as it was evidenced in the Courting Blakness case)
CONCLUSION

My study accounts for a first-instance evaluation of the youth’s account of Australian Aboriginality, brought about through contemporary art on campus premises. Through its execution, I have intended to shed light on the fact that Aboriginal identity -in this case, captured by and communicated through art- still lacks of its own space and system in the public sphere. Furthermore and as deliberated by Fisher (2012), when efforts to promote the inclusiveness and empowerment of Indigenous representations -such as the Courting Blakness installation- are constrained to, and rather forced to 'fit' or 'adjust' the dominant categorizations of whiteness (and in that way, fit an imposed collective reconciliation (Fisher, 2012)). The student volunteers for my case study weighted and explained the significance of the art products they were exposed to. Nonetheless, I can certainly affirm -after having cooperated with the team in mention and reflected on their insights- that the activity of the artists (or their artistic proceeds), is by far much less politically charged than the process of its diffusion, fact that has been discussed in depth, after it became evident in the nature of the students' responses. The notion of volunteers getting involved in the project and relating to the exhibited products poses at the same time the notion of [academic] authority –and to a broader extent, society- counteractively negotiating the
social relationships galvanized by art. This evaluated realization supports my initial thesis, as in this installation for example, Indigenous art has once again not encountered the space to thrive and yet, "in a world that keeps trying to redirect Indigenous attention on the realities of health, deprivation and economics, Courting Blakness aims at drawing our focus to art -visual, written, performed- because this is one realm where we can imagine alternatives and possibilities". (Te Punga Somerville, 2014).

On the other hand, regardless of the content and complexity of the answers provided by the students, and therefore the potentially incipient outcomes of this research project, it is fundamental to acknowledge the rights of all students to be engaged by, and have a voice in their academic life. The voicing of their own opinions is to be pondered despite their different individual starting points, and different “worldviews” -shaped by their different backgrounds, cultures and experiences (Bolstad, 2011). And yet, as the rhetoric of Paulo Freire (1972) -who advocated that "Education is either for domestication or for freedom." (p. 9) - ought to remind an entire society, that this process of peacemaking through art entails a course of decision and direction. The Australian educational apparatus, by principle and in this perspective, cannot remain indifferent or neutral.

It is difficult to think of dialogue between antagonist parties. Such is the obvious conclusion to reach to, given the prolonged amount of time that went by before the curators were finally able to get the approval for making the art installation a reality. Consequently, if the search for dialogue and peacemaking is to persist, there is an unmistakable need of more extensive, reflective discussions, fostered and widespread through larger groups of students, beginning potentially in the University of Queensland because of the contrasting scenario that the elegant, European-looking Great Court signifies to the institutional landscape. In respect to the data collection, the questions posed to interview the participants ought to be more thoroughly considered and refined in the course of subsequent research, with the purpose of encouraging dialogue that deals more further in depth with the effects of Indigenous art in non-Indigenous audiences. From then on, the vision of academia, educators and the wider society ought to be guiding on a fourth power identified by Sturken and Cartwright (2009) art’s real power of action: to promote the actual wholeness of Australia’s identity, and bring about fostering rooted social change.
As means of recommendation, I believe it is crucial to finalize by reflecting on the diffusion of Australian Aboriginal art, as a potential but key bifurcation matter to ponder for undertaking future study. In order for aboriginal art to become this vehicle for social and political change, the progression of its popularity needs to develop from its local promotion, then to national and eventually multinational scale to have significant impact. The danger of using any kind or genre of art culture and similar endeavors as a political and social vehicle to maintain cultural prominence, is that the movement will transit into pop culture and eventually become commercialized (Kleinert & Neale, 2000). The overused tattoos of the South Pacific Islander and Maori are a perfect example of such a double-edged sword. The danger in this tendency resides in that the more popular and prominent the culture becomes the more likely the reduction in significance and eventual replacement becomes. Consequently the object, art in this instance, will need to maintain significance prominence without becoming a vehicle for modern pop culture.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


APPENDIXES

Appendix 1

"Through my Eyes" by Michael Cook
Appendix 2
"Fourteen Nations" by Archie Moore

Appendix 3
"Debt" by Ryan Presley
Appendix 4

“The Blaktism” by Megan Cope

Appendix 5

Author of the study during volunteering slot (Archie Moore’s flag on Volunteers’ t-shirts)
Con formato: Punto de tabulación: 14,1 cm, Izquierda
Con formato: Fuente: Sin Cursiva