An Indigenous perspective on sustainability citizenship

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AN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE ON SUSTAINABILITY CITIZENSHIP

David Jones and Beau B. Beza

Variations on aspirations to be good ‘environmental citizens’ depend on one’s values and cultural perspectives. Such environmental concerns are common in Western discourses and literature but, when turning to Indigenous perspectives, the discourse is theoretically and philosophically more complex. This chapter considers the position of ‘sustainability citizenship’ through the lens of contemporary Australian Aboriginal communities, specifically the Wtimndjeri of Melbourne (Victoria) and the Yawuru of Broome (Western Australia). The focus is on relationship with land, and how Aboriginal communities inherently operationalise sustainability citizenship through their belief in ‘Country’.

Importantly, this chapter highlights the disconnect of conventional Western land-use planning theory and ‘ownership’ with that of a people who do not ‘own’ land but rather are stewards of their country, or homelands. The concept of Country is first explained to permit a wider discussion about Aboriginal views toward land and how their attachment to it can be used as a key element in active contemporary forms of sustainability citizenship. This is a critical point to make given that Australian people of Aboriginal heritage only received the vote – formal citizenship – in 1968 and, according to most recent (mid-2011) estimates by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2013), only constitute 3 percent of the Australian population.

‘Country’

In Aboriginal law and cultural understanding, everything in the Australian landscape is considered to be alive and everything is embodied in relationships, whereby the past, present and future are one. Here, both the spiritual and physical worlds meet through the interaction of Country. Thus, Country exists
as a relationship in which an individual is based within and comes from an interconnected system. An Aboriginal person is born to a specific Country and is from that Country, where his or her identity is inextricably and eternally linked. As such Rose (1996: 7) writes that:

In Aboriginal English, the word ‘Country’ is both a common noun and a proper noun. People talk about Country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to Country, sing to Country, visit Country, worry about Country, grieve for Country and long for Country. People say that Country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, and feels sorry or happy. Country is a living entity with a yesterday, a today and tomorrow, with consciousness, action, and a will toward life. Because of this richness of meaning, Country is home and peace: nourishment for body, mind and spirit; and heart’s ease.

In Aboriginal culture, Indigenous knowledge systems are both integral to, and an extension of, Country. Mailhot (1993: 11) describes Indigenous knowledge systems as ‘the sum of the data and ideas acquired by a human group on its environment as a result of the group’s use and occupation of a region over very many generations’. Traditional knowledge includes knowledge about traditional technologies, tools and techniques of subsistence, such as hunting and agriculture; seasons and climate patterns; land management; ethnobotany; ecological knowledge; celestial navigation; archaeoastronomy; and medicines. This knowledge, based upon a generational accumulation of empirical observations and interactions with the environment, is integral for subsistence and survival in host landscapes.

Traditional ecological knowledge in Aboriginal cultures is derived from the rules of community-based citizenship and custodial-based laws of ecological management that prescribe a landscape management regime inherited from over 60,000 years of practice. Their knowledge and application of it sustained human and wildlife populations that co-existed in Country and was mediated by Country for millennia. In support of this application of knowledge, Gammage (2011) argues that Australian Aboriginals were attuned and sensitive land managers who knew their landscapes’ maximum and minimum thresholds and acted in precautionary ways, before damage to Country might occur.

'Country' and Western concepts of 'sustainability'

Non-Aboriginal Australian communities have divergent and tenuous views on sustainability and its definition, including multiple threads and interpretations that intertwine with the environment. Many non-Aboriginal environmental activists aspire to be good global citizens with environmental sustainability a core feature of global citizenship in the twenty-first century. Notions of citizenship are different for Aboriginal people who have a known relationship
in understanding and responsibility to Country separate from their troubled history as citizens. Country is an expression of being and responsibility, and does not lend itself to physical or discriminate embodiments commonly sought in Anglo-Western traditions.

This 'contrast of cultures' featured in a recent example of Indigenous cultural appropriation in the realisation of a landmark building in the city of Melbourne (Victoria). This state has the lowest proportion of Aboriginal residents in any Australian state or territory, 0.9 percent (ABS 2013). In early 2015, the Melbourne-based architectural firm Ashton Raggatt McDougall (ARM) unveiled plans for a 31-storey Swanston Street apartment building in central Melbourne to be positioned at the 'head' of the symbolic axial line from the city's Shrine of Remembrance along Swanston Street to what is the site of the former Carlton & United Breweries. Etched into the façade of the proposed building was to be a photographic portrait of former Wurundjeri Elder, Uncle William Barak (c.1824-1903) (Dow 2015a: 1, 12-13).

The inspiration for this design came from the fact that Melbourne resides on Country of the Wurundjeri, Boon Wurrung and Wadawurrung (or Wathaurung) peoples. The Wurundjeri are the Traditional Owners and the Recognised Aboriginal Party under the Victoria State Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006 (Victoria 2006), although debates continue amongst the Wurundjeri and the Boon Wurrung as to where their historical Country boundary lines occur and merge. This vagary, in fact, mainly occurs in conflict with the firm boundaries of 'private property'; before the white invasion Aboriginal communities had negotiated shared use-rights of lands for various purposes in complex relationships with their environments in sharp contrast to the singular and sole characteristics of private property regulated by a 'state'.

Barak, who was an artist and social justice leader for the Wurundjeri in the late 1800s, is regarded by many Australians as a highly symbolic and emotive voice for the Wurundjeri community. However, appropriating Australian Aboriginal information, representations and imagery in contemporary contexts is a vexed question without due consultation and approval. Thus, the architectural firm ARM approached the Wurundjeri Elders for permission to portray a likeness of Barak on the design of the planned building and discussed how they might realise their idea. The Elders consulted were especially keen that they achieve 'a better likeness' of Barak (Dow 2015b: 13) but the consultation in itself did not necessarily confer agreement. They simply listened and gave advice on curating aspects and values for their Country.

ARM curated an elite public design discourse about the building and the image of Barak through mainstream mass, and architectural, media celebrating the design as a 'monument'. An oral and social media discourse with much less visibility raised many social sustainability concerns. MacKenzie (2015: 1) summarised such critical views by observing that the ARM design and associated discourse reflected 'the impoverished state of public discussion about architecture and the degree to which anachronistic
Victorian [nineteenth-century] attitudes prevail as to what constitutes a public monument' and lamented that such architecture sought ‘to dislocate itself from its social and environmental sustainability obligations’ raised by critics.

Debates ran over a wide range of issues, including questions around whether such Indigenous visual representation in building designs perpetuated outmoded stereotypes of Aboriginal Australia for non-Indigenous audiences (Kennedy 2015; MacKenzie 2015); the validity and ethics of the commercial appropriation of an Elder’s image on a building (Hansen 2015a, b); whether this type of design approach entertained an appropriate discourse for uniting a city’s modern heritage with its deeper Aboriginal history (Hansen 2015a); whether imagery and Aboriginal nomenclature can be used after an individual’s death (Aikman 2013); the unresolved tensions of colonisation (Flanagan 2015; Hansen 2015b; Kennedy 2015); how far this proposal constituted an exploitation of Aboriginal culture and its communities, even if the designers had engaged with and formerly consulted relevant Elders; whether a contemporary Western photographic image was apt in conveying the potency of traditional Aboriginal image and name protocols; who within the Wurrundjeri community and clan groups was entitled to ‘approve’ such an image appropriation (Hansen 2015a), for instance whether a Wailwan/Gamilaraay man or a Palawa woman can openly talk about cultural matters that are external to their Country (Carthy 2014; Gammage 2011; Kennedy 2015); if genuine ‘approval’ had been forthcoming or whether, instead, Elders had simply acknowledged the information received from ARM (Grabasch 2015); conflicts over boundaries, such as whether an image of a Wurrundjeri Elder is geographically appropriate on Boon Wurrung Country (Briggs 2015); whether architects should instead engage in ‘Indigenous ways of knowing/doing as primary design principles’ (Kennedy 2015); and whether principles of reconciliation and recognition of Indigenous peoples and their communities could be reconciled within contemporary (non-Aboriginal) Australian architectural and design representations and statements.

Despite these tensions involving social and cultural senses of citizenship, the deliberation about whether the building and its representation of Barak would proceed rested with the discretion of the ‘responsible authority’ under the Planning & Environment Act 1987 of the City of Melbourne Council (Victoria 2015a). This Act provides for a decision by a ‘responsible authority’ based upon a textually prescribed aesthetic evaluation (not social or cultural sustainability arguments) as determined by provisions in the City of Melbourne Planning Scheme. In the event, despite public disquiet, ‘responsible authority’ approval was given and the building – with the controversial image – was constructed.

**The challenges of marrying citizenship and sustainability**

In Australia, operationalising the emerging concept of ‘sustainability citizenship’ seems to be predicated upon engaging with technocratic land-use planning systems. Public involvement is seen as permitting various degrees of legitimate
engagement and participation to aid consensus building but bureaucrats struggle to accommodate the kinds of engagement and participation that challenge accepted and normative protocols and processes. To complicate the Barak case in point, Aboriginal 'citizenry' as such involves a wide spectrum of community participants who are often difficult to map, identify, categorise and assemble – let alone offer the kind of consensual agreement firm approval might constitute. A traditional Aboriginal sense of time and appropriate processes for decision-making contrast with the immediate, 'sign-here', timeframe of a commercial proposal, with planning approval and ready finance.

Delving more widely into communicative and collaborative planning theory, Jacobs (1961), Davidoff (1965) and Sandercock (2000) discuss the complexity of adapting planning practice to respond to diversities within contemporary communities of citizens. The success of implementing planning policy is largely dependent on acceptability in terms of the dominant communities living where any urban transformation is targeted. This challenge actually requires local authorities to develop novel democratic and adaptive processes – beyond the scope of current legislated procedures – practices that can model development interventions to inform community members of planning policy options and outcomes.

In Australia, contemporary planning tools follow in the tradition of Western land-use town planning instruments guiding and determining community development. Despite a strong policy of 'reconciliation' by successive recent Australian governments, planners have drawn little from Aboriginal generational knowledge. When dealing with 'Aboriginal cultural heritage', land-use planners default to archaeological-survey-biased inventories with place-anchors for Indigenous knowledge. This approach lacks holistic and mixed tangible and intangible information about 'Dreaming' trails, myths, environmental management relationships because these are neither identified nor identifiable to Western planners.

Similarly, evidence for claims to native (land) title – following the Native Title Act 1993 – assumes tangible information, from a Western perspective, to validate knowledge of 'ownership' and 'occupancy' irrespective of native or foreign origins. This critical deficiency is highlighted by numerous analysts, such as Bell and Jones (2011), Cosgrove and Kliger (1997), Jackson (1997), Jones et al. (2013a); Lane and Williams (2008), Low Choy and Jones (2013a, b), Low Choy et al. (2013a, b), Porter (2006, 2010), Porter and Barry (2013), Sandercock (1998) and Smith (2012). Australian planners have working perceptions of land ownership predicated on Eurocentric post-colonial definitions of planning and land settlement that run counter to many Indigenous perspectives of planning (Johnson 2010, 2015; Johnson and Jones 2014; Jones et al. 2013b). This underlying mismatch in cultural land interpretation presents a quandary that scholars, the Australian planning profession and the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA 2002, 2010) have only just started to address in concerted ways.
Currently, when Australian planners do consider Aboriginal knowledge systems associated with land, they focus on inventories of artefact places (Byrne et al. 2010; Hall 1989); contemporary post-colonial place profiles (Pieris et al. 2014); and, to a lesser extent, landscape management plans based on ancient and historical practices (Bunya Mountains Elders Council and Burnett Mary Regional Group 2010; Collard and Palmer 2008; YRNTBC 2011). These enduring myopic lenses create a flawed perspective of Aboriginal knowledge (Gammage 2011) and prompt calls for more inclusive, creative and insightful approaches to land management (Jones 1993; Martin 2013).

**Conducting community engagement**

Community consultation is seen as one of the central mechanisms to raise levels of citizen participation and to increase citizen capacity and social capital. Consultation is just one element in a range of interactions that local government councils have with constituents. A collective voice and values are harnessed through ‘community engagement’ around specific plans, policies and projects. While some councils define consultation loosely as ‘a two-way exchange of information prior to a decision being made’ (Brackertz et al. 2005: 4), the process is value-laden, crosses definitional boundaries and is frequently used to denote participatory practices more generally, which can lead to confusion inside the consultation process and hinder one of its desired outcomes, genuine ‘engagement’.

Reisacher (2013) has investigated how local government councils in metropolitan Victoria choose to consult citizenry when preparing to amend planning schemes. Her aim was to assess whether these councils engaged ‘effectively’ with communities during such processes, which revolve around land and its use. The strategies to engage the community used by these councils included convening a workshop, questionnaires, presentations at meetings to local stakeholders, inviting individuals or groups to address the council, and creating advisory committees. Reisacher was not able to identify a single council demonstrating exemplary community engagement. Although more extensive than required under Victoria’s planning law, during the informal comment and formal exhibition stages all, instead, simply used communication methods sufficient to engage with their community.

Reisacher (2013: 10) concluded that effective engagement relied ‘on how engagement is interpreted’ and highlighted the ‘somewhat nebulous definition’ offered by the Department of Sustainability and Environment (Reisacher 2013: 4; Victoria 2015b), whereby:

‘engagement’ is used as a generic, inclusive term to describe the broad range of interactions between people. It can include a variety of approaches, such as one-way communication or information delivery, consultation, involvement and collaboration in decision-making, and empowered action in informal groups or formal partnerships.
The low level of expected engagement in ‘one-way communication or information delivery’ reflects entrenched but tradable private property rights and obligations. In contrast Aboriginal cultures display much deeper and inalienable connections with the land, as Country.

For the last 60,000 years until white settlement, Indigenous people in the continent we now call Australia created a sustained relationship with land, water and sky, displaying a comprehensive knowledge of the resources and needs of all its landscapes (Gammage 2011). Even current land management practices involve complex techniques, predicated upon an extensive oral ‘library’ of knowledge (now being validated by scientific ecological research), reflected and expressed in their language, art and other facets of contemporary Australian life. To illustrate this point, Rose (1996: 18) states that: ‘[t]here is no place [in Australia] without a history; there is no place that has not been imaginatively grasped through song, dance and design, no place where traditional owners cannot see the imprint of sacred creation’.

Country is integral to life and culture. Country not only shapes perceptions of land but, by extension, is essential to one’s wellbeing. Such a view is ‘foreign’ to non-Aboriginal Australian governance systems and culture and has rarely been successfully translated into land-use planning regimes. Yet, arguably, such Aboriginal concepts and practices of land management are consistent with principles in the emerging concept and practice of sustainability citizenship, read as stewardship, active guardianship and care of the environment as well as an entitlement to healthy living conditions.

Illustrating how ‘wellbeing’ and land are intertwined, Dodson (in YRNTBC 2011: 13) explains the source, and concomitant values, of existence as evolving in one Western Australian Aboriginal cosmology, the Yawuru belief in ‘Bugarrigarra’ as: ‘the time before time, when the creative forces shaped and gave meaning and form to the landscape, putting the languages to the people within those landscapes and creating the protocol and laws for living within this environment’. Most significantly, he continues:

*Bugarrigarra* is not an historic event that created our world at the beginning of time. It is not detached from contemporary life. It continues to exist and is the spiritual force that shapes our ongoing cultural values and practice, our relationships with each other and the obligations and responsibilities that we have to each other that form our Community. It requires respect at the interface of change and development.

According to Dodson (in YRNTBC 2011: 13), there are three integral components of the Yawuru’s active belief in *Bugarrigarra*: ‘Community’ as the way ‘Yawuru people relate to each other’; ‘Country’ being ‘how we use and occupy the seas and lands on Yawuru Country’; and *Liyan*, being the Yawuru ‘people’s view of their wellbeing’.

The application of Indigenous approaches has progressed in rural and remote areas of Australia, where more than double the land size of the entire state of
Victoria exists in a fragmented way as Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs), i.e. 3 percent and 7.18 percent of the Australian continent respectively (Geoscience Australia 2015). IPAs are owned and managed by Traditional Indigenous people explicitly for conservation and cultural values, and only cost the Australian government around A$50 per square kilometre to support in 2014. These areas not only cover ‘some of the most biodiverse and ecologically intact part of Australia’ and are estimated to absorb around 82 million tonnes of CO₂, but also employ hundreds of Indigenous rangers, who live in communities that report health and schooling benefits (FoE Melbourne 2015: 2). Recently, the Yawuru have initiated an IPA for their Country (around Broome).

Might a partial transition to a Country philosophy and approach enable ‘sustainability citizenship’ and more effective community engagement in non-Aboriginal planning and practice in our cities? The Yawuru have a concept of Walyjala-jala kurri jayida jarringgirri buru, ‘voice’, which refers to a plan and to a philosophy to manage Country. The Yawuru Cultural Management Plan (YCMP) (YRNTBC 2011) is a tangible example of achieving such voice. Importantly, it is an engaged rather than authoritarian voice. Developing the YCMP involved extensive discussions and community engagement, consultation and fieldwork. The document drew directly upon words expressed in conversations and discussions within the community, including expressions of Country, custodial relationships as well as conventional Western land-use maps in order to provide ‘a comprehensive articulation of both the aspirations and responsibilities of the community of Yawuru Native Title Holders’ (Edgar and Yu in YBCP 2015: 12).

Most significantly for non-Aboriginal Australians, it is central to Yawuru law ‘to make sure Country, Community and wellbeing … are protected, nurtured and used to help non-Yawuru learn to live with Country and not ruin it’ (Dodson in YRNTBC 2011: 13). The YCMP is a living document, open to appropriate amendment over time, providing cultural understandings about the people and their values in managing country. The YCMP is inclusive and holistic, expressing the ‘hope that through this plan, others will walk, work and enjoy Yawuru Country with respect for Yawuru people, Country and our future’ (YRNTBC 2011: 4).

An enlightened citizenry

While contemporary land-use planning and management discourse and practice tends to be centred on economic sustainability arguments to articulate the ‘greater good’, Aboriginal views toward the management and planning of the land are equally concerned about environmental and cultural sustainability and wellbeing. The Aboriginal perspective revolves around a holistic and living concept of Country with tangible, intangible and sustained custodial obligations to land management and planning. They believe that an individual is based within, and comes from, Country, a concept of nature that offers the ‘sustainability citizen’ a different set of individual and community-based values.
To operationalise Aboriginal knowledge of the environment, non-Aboriginal Australians and their institutions need to incorporate listening and negotiating skills as genuine engagement on sustainability. The sustainability citizen may begin to think ‘outside of the box’, to effect change through behavioural and attitudinal shifts, linking visions of city futures with everyday life and culture in a given area. Finding a collective ‘voice’ and effective forms of engagement to develop appropriate values for sustainable urban futures is a challenge.

If the Barak case highlighted at the start of this chapter indicates the massive gaps and failing of engagement in Australia’s current planning system, the cultural management plan of the Yawurri offers a model of connections with, potentially, deep and abiding engagement embedded in traditional Aboriginal ways of being and doing. Instead of the cursory one-way information serving that counts as community engagement in many Australian government planning processes at present, national and local governments would do well to incorporate the deeply material-cum-cultural perspectives of Indigenous peoples in holistic plans for our cities.

These circumstances and future challenges are not restricted to large cities in Australia but are readily transferable to most countries where similarly bureaucratic and technocratic governance act as a barrier to the development of appropriate and effective engagement for sustainability citizenship.

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