

Agency of Place / Healing Jugun (Country)

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I acknowledge and pay my deepest respects to the ancestral Country of the Kulin Nations where this writing occurred. I extend this respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

Ngali garima mala jugun (Bundjalung) translates as ‘we look after this Country’.

When we think of Country, we locate it as a living subject as opposed to being a benign object. If we look at Country in this way, we can reconfigure how colonisation has created narratives that are based on disregard and self-regard, locating Country as an object – something to be divided, “tamed”, covered and levelled. The same occurred for people, dislocating us as objects.

These two patterns of disregard and self-regard are the cause of trauma for people, and trauma on Country. Actions of disregard and self-regard are dismissive of relationships in the way that they are not premised on empathy, and thus bring harm to the human and non-human alike, resulting in complex and devastating issues that have real effect on Indigenous peoples and Country today. The dislocation and displacement from Place, from Country, from each other, is the underlying cause of the various issues we face today. The division and categorisation of land is very much the same as the categorisation and false (re)presentations of people. The categorisation of people based on race and the policies that followed classified and treated us as objects.

A shift, a reconfiguration of looking at Place, at Country, and at each other combats this disregard and self-regard. This is the act of Healing: Healing each other and Healing Country. So how do we reimagine Country? What is agency of Place? Agency means that all things inherently have relatedness, and this comes from an internal place. Some people call this physics, some call it spirituality. Regardless what we call it, Country, people and ways of knowing have agency. It is this agency that connects us to each other, to Country and to our collective knowledge.

For example, when we consider the notion of ideology, one has to believe in something that may not be present. This ideology or imaginary relationship to the world is something that is quite different when we think of the agency of Place, the agency of Country. Country is not imaginary, and here lies the significant difference to many ideologies predicated in Western and colonial thinking. Country is real. It is in the real that we can find this shift, this reconfiguration. A substantial example of this shift is the Whanganui River in Aotearoa (New Zealand), and how it now has the same legal status as a human being. This significant legal ruling demonstrates that it is not about what we take from Country, but how we act and what we give back to it. It is relational; it is premised on regard for each other. This is a Healing act, one that shifts the world we have come to live in.

When the Djab Wurrung Directions Tree was removed, many people felt the pain of harming Country. This act of dislocation on Country has real material effect on the world around us; it has real effect on people. It is here that we need to consider how we define what constitutes cultural heritage. We need to ask ourselves: Is cultural heritage something that needs the hand of the human to be defined as cultural heritage? This question intersects with an Indigenous and non-Indigenous ideological view and is something that is essential to reconsider in order to re-ascribe value to our ways of knowing. The future is Indigenous, but it can only be so if Country walks by our side.

NAIDOC Week 2021 holds its theme as Heal Country. This has a very deep relationality between the human and non-human. If we learn to reconfigure and unlearn what the colonial world has instilled in us, then we can learn from Country, learn from this action and agency. We have responsibility, we have obligations, and we have accountability to Country and to each other. Country and our own sustainability lie at the core of this relationship. It is this mode of resistance that holds us together, that holds us with Country. Ngali Garima mala jugun – *we look after this Country*, which also means, this Country looks after us. Healing Country heals us.

Brian Martin is a descendant of Bundjalung, MurraWarri and Kamilaroi peoples and has been a practicing artist for thirty years exhibiting in the media of painting and drawing. His research and practice focus on refiguring Australian art and culture from an Indigenous ideological perspective based on a reciprocal relationship to Country. Brian is the inaugural Associate Dean Indigenous in the Faculty of Art Design and Architecture (MADA) at Monash University, where he leads the Wominjeka Djeembana research lab. He is represented by William Mora Gallery, Richmond.