Traces Left Behind: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ Graffiti at Boggo Road Gaol

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For the most part, our understanding of the experience of imprisonment is mediated by official accounts, or by researchers’ interests that target predetermined aspects of the incarceration experience. Prison graffiti are a valuable source of archival data that enables insight into the experience of incarceration from the perspective of prisoners. The current project is an inductive thematic analysis of graffiti produced by individuals previously incarcerated at Boggo Road Gaol, in Brisbane, Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graffiti are discussed in relation to the conditions of imprisonment, and broader social and political issues in Queensland during the 1980s. Resistance observed in the graffiti suggests that, despite their physical barrier to the outside world, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners remained active agents during their incarceration.

Graffiti have been examined in a range of settings and from various perspectives. Earlier studies often focused on the manifest content of the graffiti under study, or how they relate to specific events, rather than considering the broader meaning underlying the images. More recently greater consideration of the social context in which the images were created has been incorporated into graffiti research. This article is based on preliminary findings of a broader study on prison graffiti at Boggo Road Gaol, Brisbane, Australia. The research considers graffiti as an unmediated source of data that can provide insight into the lived experience of incarceration. Visual ethnographic methodology has been employed, and a number of other resources are utilised in order to consider the context surrounding the creation of the graffiti.

Boggo Road Gaol served as a men’s prison for most of the twentieth century. Towards the end of the century, before its closure in 1992, it was the site of a number of major disturbances led by prisoners protesting against the harsh conditions of the gaol. Prison census data in Australian gaols has long documented the over-representation of Indigenous prisoners in Australian gaols, and Boggo Road was no exception. This paper focuses on graffiti produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait

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1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this document may contain names or graffiti of people who have since passed away.


Islander peoples at Boggo Road Gaol. To provide readers with a broad historical context, we begin with a brief overview of governmental policies that have shaped the experience of Indigenous peoples following European arrival in Australia, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ contact with the criminal justice system. This is followed by an overview of the broader study from which this paper is drawn, and a description of Boggo Road Gaol. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graffiti that remains at the site is then discussed. We argue that the graffiti provide insight into the concerns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples incarcerated at the site, and that these concerns extended to issues beyond the prison walls. At the same time, it is acknowledged that some of the graffiti observed at the site requires further analysis.

A Brief History Since European Arrival

Early accounts of the history of European contact predominantly focused on the ‘peaceful settlement’ of Australia, while later accounts from the 1960s onwards revealed violent encounters during the process of colonisation, and brought attention to the injustices experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.4 Prior to European contact, it is estimated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples occupied the land for over 50,000 years, and when the First Fleet arrived in 1788, the Indigenous population is estimated to have been between 750,000 and 1,000,000.5 Despite this, their prior occupation of land and existing systems of laws were not recognised, and Australia was declared ‘terra nullius’ – meaning no man’s land.6 Consequently, the continent became governed by British law, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were dispossessed of their land. What followed was a succession of governmental policies and practices that instilled varying degrees of control over the lives of Indigenous peoples.

From the early nineteenth century, governmental responses were underpinned by social Darwinist beliefs that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were primitive, and would eventually die out due to their perceived inferiority.7 This led to an era of ‘protection’ and segregation which resulted in many Indigenous peoples being placed in religious missions and governmental reserves under the supervision of white authorities.8 Legislation was enacted throughout Australian states that permitted government control over aspects of Indigenous peoples’ lives, such as who they could associate with (including contact with their children), their ability to move freely, who they could marry, and the type of work they could engage in.9 Provisions in the legislation exempted Indigenous Australians

6 McRae et al., Indigenous Legal Issues, p. 11.
8 McRae et al., Indigenous Legal Issues, pp. 29-36.
from the regulations imposed by protective legislation; however, these came with conditions that impacted on familial and cultural ties.\textsuperscript{10} In essence, to obtain exemption the individual was required to forego their Aboriginality, and their right to maintain contact with kin.\textsuperscript{11}

By the mid-twentieth century it was acknowledged that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would not merely die out, and there was a shift towards assimilation policies. At best assimilation can be described as integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into mainstream society, while at worst it can be explained as a policy aimed at racial absorption and extinction.\textsuperscript{12} By assimilating into mainstream white society, it was assumed that Indigenous peoples would ‘live as members of a single Australian community, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, as other Australians’.\textsuperscript{13} However, assimilation required Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to reject their culture and adopt white ways of living. Intensive surveillance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continued throughout the assimilation era, and there was a continued threat of children being removed if living conditions were not deemed appropriate by white standards.\textsuperscript{14} Many children, particularly those of mixed Indigenous and non-Indigenous decent, were removed from their families and adopted by non-Indigenous families or state institutions.\textsuperscript{15}

Assimilation policies were replaced with policies of self-determination in the 1970s. Self-determination aimed to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and give them a voice, at both a regional and national level, in decision making that impacted on social, economic, and cultural aspects of their lives.\textsuperscript{16} While seemingly a positive and progressive step in comparison to previous policies, the potential for self-determination, while still ultimately functioning under a white system of governance, proved problematic.\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, it has been claimed that Indigenous peoples were left to fix the damage that non-Indigenous people had created during previous periods, and were not provided with training and resources to enable self-determination.\textsuperscript{18}

From the 1990s the policy of reconciliation was initiated. Reconciliation was concerned with improved relations between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous Australians and initially focused on the need to recognise past injustices endured by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the rights that should be afforded to redress these wrongs. This included acknowledgement of the ‘Stolen Generations’,

\textsuperscript{10} For example, \textit{Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897} (Qld) s33.
\textsuperscript{12} McRae et al., \textit{Indigenous Legal Issues}, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{14} McRae et al., \textit{Indigenous Legal Issues}, pp. 39-39.
\textsuperscript{16} McRae et al., \textit{Indigenous Legal Issues}, pp. 40-41.
\textsuperscript{17} McRae et al., p. 42.
the right to self-determination, and land rights. However, from the mid-1990s the focus shifted to practical reconciliation. Practical reconciliation aimed to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage, and close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in areas such as health, education, and employment. In 2008, Australian Commonwealth, State, and Territory Governments committed to plans to:

- close the gap in life expectancy within a generation; halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade; ensure all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years; halve the gap for Indigenous students in year 12 attainment of equivalent attainment rates by 2020; and halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.

According to the Closing the Gap Prime Minister’s Report 2016, targets in relation to health and education are (for the most part) on track, although the gap in employment is still substantial. In sum, since European occupation there have been a range of governmental policies and practices. Earlier policies exerted great control and surveillance over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and resulted in Indigenous peoples being dispossessed of their land and removed from kin. Despite more recent policies aiming to redress past actions, the effects of colonisation and colonialism continue to have an impact today. One area of particular relevance to the current paper is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ contact with the criminal justice system.

### Contact with the Criminal Justice System

Throughout the process of colonisation police were tasked with administering oppressive legal regulations, and were at the forefront of dispossessing Indigenous peoples from their land, and the removal of Indigenous children from their families. Harsh punishments were afforded to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who resisted British control. In the early years these were punishments aimed at the body, such as floggings and neck chains, as it was assumed that less immediate and less severe methods of control would be ineffective because of a

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22 Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap Prime Minister’s Report 2016*, Australia, Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2016, pp. 23-59.
belief that Indigenous peoples were inferior and uncultivated.24 Alternatively, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were sent to places of confinement reserved for Indigenous transgressors that were far away from their kin and land.25 As government policies shifted away from protection and segregation, citizenship rights were gradually afforded to Indigenous peoples, and the focus of governmental control shifted. Rather than the role of police being an administrative task that governed aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ lives, the focus became one of governing criminal transgressions.26 Since the policing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people shifted, their over-representation in the criminal justice system has been well documented.27

In the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries a variety of factors have contributed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander over-representation in the criminal justice system including a lack of recognition of Aboriginal law, over-policing of Aboriginal communities, over-policing of public order offences, and greater use of arrest and police custody in comparison to non-Indigenous people.28 These factors, in addition to other social factors stemming from the process of colonisation, such as low employment, poor education, and higher rates of substance abuse, have led to initiatives aimed at reducing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contact with the criminal justice system, and providing a more culturally appropriate response to Indigenous offending.29 Despite some successes, such as Aboriginal community patrols and Indigenous sentencing courts, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to be overrepresented in custody.30 According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2015 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over eighteen years old represented two per cent of the Australian population, but accounted for twenty-seven per cent of the total prisoner population.31

Research in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in custody has largely focused on the over-representation of Indigenous people in custody, and more recently, the mental health needs of Indigenous prisoners.32 While these are important aspects worthy of scholarly attention, limited research examines the experience of imprisonment from the perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

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27 McRae et al., Indigenous Legal Issues, pp. 474-481.
Islander peoples themselves. In relation to prison research in general, data is often derived from official records or large scale questionnaires. Various scholars have advocated for the use of more innovative methodologies to allow the independent expression of prisoners to be heard. We argue that graffiti are valuable artefacts, and that visual ethnographic methodology enables insight into the lived experiences of prisoners.

**The Current Study**

In this article we report on preliminary findings from a visual ethnographic study of prisoner graffiti at Boggo Road Gaol in Brisbane, Australia. Visual ethnography is a broad term that encapsulates a variety of uses of different types of visual material (photographs, drawings, films, etc.) during the data collection stage of the research process, as well as the representation of research. Ethnographic study entails deep immersion in the field under study, which enables rich description of the phenomena investigated. Immersion in the field was limited in the current study due to Boggo Road Gaol being a decommissioned prison. However, throughout the current study the research team visited the site on numerous occasions; both for the purpose of documenting the graffiti, and for other tasks engaged in during the research process. Other tasks included clean-ups at the prison, and graffiti tours for the public. These additional activities provided informal contact with former staff, former prisoners, and their family members. This in turn provided valuable information about the prison during its operational years, and promoted reflexivity during the research process.

While it is recognised that visual materials can provide insight into cultures and societies, it is also acknowledged that images do not exist in isolation. Therefore, there was a need to incorporate various data sources to aid in the interpretation of the images under study. In addition to a full catalogue of graffiti that remains at No. 2 Division of Boggo Road Gaol, the broader study from which this paper is drawn has incorporated a variety of additional data: media resources, official reports, institutional records, and autobiographies written by individuals associated with Boggo Road Gaol during its operational years.

Media resources provided insight into issues of public interest and debate. The current study drew on *The Courier-Mail* newspaper articles, radio recordings from 4ZZZ, and archival news footage from the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (ABC) during the 1980s (the period leading up to the closure of the jail). These

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34 For example, see M. Bosworth et al., ‘Doing Prison Research: Views from Inside’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2005, pp. 249-251.
36 Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods*, pp. 190-201.
resources provided information on Boggo Road Gaol, particularly in relation to major disturbances that occurred at the site and conditions inside the prison. The official reports of three major investigations relevant to the criminal justice system in Queensland and Australia described the political context surrounding the creation of the graffiti. They included the interim and full report of the Commission of Review into Corrective Services in Queensland (1988), the report of the Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and Associated Police Misconduct (1989), and finally, both the national report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991), and the Regional Report of Inquiry in Queensland (1990). Collectively, these reports provided information in relation to the administration, practices, and conditions surrounding criminal justice during the 1980s. This information was augmented by institutional records from Boggo Road Gaol held at the Queensland State Archives regarding the administration and practices of the prison. Key archival sources included the Prison Rules and Orders Book (1957-1961), the Superintendent’s Punishment Book (1959-1971), and the Chief Prison Officers Journal (1982-1983).

We also drew on autobiographies of individuals associated with Boggo Road Gaol during its operational years. The autobiographies were written by former staff at the prison: Stephen Gage’s Boggo Road Prison: Riots to Ruins (2009), Tom King’s Boggo Road and Beyond (2007), and Nor Iron Bars a Cage (1982) written by John Roy Stephenson; and The Real Boggo Road (2013) was authored by Larry Campbell, who had been imprisoned in Boggo Road Gaol in the 1960s. While each of these additional data sources was important to the study, the graffiti that remains at Boggo Road Gaol was central, and the content and themes derived from initial analyses of the images were developed in juxtaposition to the relevant information and detail these additional resources could provide. Viewing the graffiti through this broader lens facilitated a more nuanced consideration of the historical, social, and political context surrounding the creation of the graffiti at Boggo Road Gaol, and in turn lends itself to a deeper interpretive analysis of the collective themes represented in the images.

Within the last ten years there has been an emergence of research examining graffiti in former Australian prisons, however there remains a lack of systematic examination of graffiti created by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

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during incarceration. Furthermore, while previous studies have considered the social context of the prison during the analysis of the graffiti, consideration of the broader historical, social, and political context enables deeper evaluation, and demonstrates an interplay between the outside world and the prison environment. The current study uses a case study approach, and the research team were fortunate to be permitted access to all of the graffiti that remains at Boggo Road Gaol. A full catalogue of the graffiti, and the focus on an individual site of incarceration, enables an analysis of the themes commonly expressed by individuals formerly incarcerated at Boggo Road Gaol. This paper describes common sentiments that were observed in the graffiti, and examines the underlying collective meaning of the images. Furthermore, it adds to the literature available on Boggo Road Gaol.

**Boggo Road Gaol**

During its operational years, there were three main prisons in the Boggo Road Gaol Complex: No. 1 Division, No. 2 Division, and a Women’s Prison. No. 1 Division opened in 1883 and initially housed short-term prisoners and those awaiting execution. A total of forty-two executions took place in No.1 Division; the last being in 1913. During the late 1960s and 1970s, the prison was gradually demolished and reconstructed, and it remained in operation until 1992. The cells in the ‘new’ No.1 Division contained running water and toilet facilities, unlike the cells in the original building. No. 2 Division was the next prison built on the site. Construction began in 1901, and the prison opened in 1903 as a women’s prison. However in 1921 it was transformed into a men’s prison, and ultimately became a male maximum security prison in the 1970s. It remained so until it was decommissioned in 1989. From the 1920s onwards, female prisoners were housed in various structures, the last being a women’s prison that was in operation from 1982 until 1999. The Boggo Road Gaol Complex (particularly No. 1 and No. 2 Divisions) was the site of a number of major disturbances in the 1970s and 1980s, including strikes, riots, attempted escapes, and...
protests. In February 1988, the Commission of Review into Corrective Services in Queensland (known as the Kennedy Report) was established to assess, ‘In the public interest what changes, if any, should be made in the organisation, administration and operation of the Queensland prison system’. The review ultimately led to the closure of the Boggo Road Gaol Complex, claiming that the site was plagued with problems, had substantial security issues and operating costs, experienced low staff morale, provided inadequate facilities, and its inner city location was no longer considered appropriate.

Since they were decommissioned, No. 1 Division and the women’s prison have been demolished, and No. 2 Division is the only former structure remaining at the Boggo Road Gaol Complex. The prison consists of three main cell blocks (see Figure 1 for an image of the external structure of the cell blocks); each containing 42 cells. The cells did not contain running water or lavatory facilities, and as a result prisoners were required to use metal buckets as a toilet. In addition to the main cell blocks, there was also a detention block containing six cells (see Figure 2). The detention block was constructed in 1988, and unlike the main cells, contained running water and lavatory facilities. No. 2 Division also contained seven exercise yards that were all similar in structure and design and included shower and toilet facilities. One of the yards also contained a weightlifting area. All of the graffiti in the main cells, detention cells, and exercise yards were documented for analysis in the broader study. This resulted in a sample of 1,696 items of graffito.

The graffiti discussed below includes some of the items that were produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during their incarceration in Boggo Road Gaol. Indigenous status of the graffiti was determined by the following:

a) Explicit identification of Indigenous status in the graffiti (for example, Murri and Koori);

b) Content of the graffiti that referred to issues in relation to colonisation and the subsequent treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;

c) Indigenous status of the former prisoner was identified in other data employed in the study; The design of images within reference to literature on Aboriginal art;

d) Graffiti of a similar design, style, or writing instrument in the same cell of any of the above.

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55 This excludes the graffiti collected in the yards, and those produced by tourists after the site closed. The yard graffiti predominantly consisted of prisoners’ names and was used to cross-reference names identified in the cells, rather than being included in the thematic analysis. Tourist graffiti were identified based on the inclusion of dates after the closure of the prison, and the style and content of the graffiti (for example graffiti produced by females).

56 For example, F. Cubillo and W. Caruana (eds.), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art: Collection Highlights’, Canberra, National Gallery of Australia, 2010.
A total of 277 graffiti were identified as being produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples formerly incarcerated at Boggo Road Gaol.

The Graffiti: Prior Occupation of the Land

A number of items of graffiti refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being the rightful occupants of Australia. The First Fleet arrived in Sydney, Australia in 1788, and January 26, 1988 (the year prior to the closure of No. 2 Division) marked 200 years since European occupation of Australia. Bicentennial celebrations were organised throughout Australia with the advertising motto being ‘Celebration of a
nation’.\(^{59}\) Figures 3 and 4 provide examples of graffiti that (rightfully) claim prior occupation of the land. Additional examples include sentiments such as ‘FUCK THEIR QUEEN INVASION, YOUR UNREPENTED SIN’, and ‘Are you a real Australian OR a Claytons’.\(^{60}\)

As part of the bicentennial celebrations, Brisbane hosted the World Exposition (see Figure 5 for an example of a graffiti referring to Expo). Expo ‘88, as it was commonly referred to in the graffiti, ran from April 30, 1988 until October 30, 1988. Over sixteen million visits were made to the exposition by local, interstate, and overseas visitors.\(^{61}\) In the months leading up to the event, there were claims that prisoners planned to smuggle guns into the prison and take hostages in an attempt to ‘embarrass the State Government during World Expo 88 over the issue of land rights’.\(^{62}\) Even though these claims were refuted by organisations such as the Aboriginal Affairs Department, there were plans to reopen the underground punishment cells which had been previously closed in 1982.\(^{63}\) No major disturbances at Boggo Road Gaol during Expo ‘88 were documented in prison or other government records, or the print media at the time. It is unclear whether this was due to security measures put in place by prison officials to prevent disturbances, the fact that the original claims were unfounded, or as a consequence of the Commission of Review into Corrective Services in Queensland that commenced prior to the opening of Expo ‘88.

The Graffiti: Land Rights and the Mabo Case

During the bicentennial year, a number of protests and marches were organised throughout Australia to demonstrate the survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since European occupation, and the need to recognise the rights of Indigenous peoples. Perhaps most notably, a march was held in Sydney on Australia Day. Over 40 000 people (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) were involved, making it the largest in Australia since the protests that occurred in the 1970s in opposition to the Vietnam War.\(^{64}\)

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\(^{60}\) Clayton’s Kola Tonic was a non-alcoholic drink produced in Australia in the 1980s. It was advertised in Australia as ‘the drink to have when you are not having a drink’. See *Claytons Commercial Australia 1980s*, [online video], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ylH43Tcaj60 (accessed January 20 2017).


\(^{63}\) ‘Jail Guns Claim Rubbish’, p. 2.

Figure 3. Aboriginal Australia.\(^{65}\)

Figure 4. From the beginning.\(^{66}\)

Figure 5. Expo.\(^{67}\)

\(^{65}\) Private collection.

\(^{66}\) Private collection.

\(^{67}\) Private collection.
Land rights was an issue of particular concern for those involved in marches and other acts of public dissent; it was also a common topic in the graffiti at Boggo Road Gaol. Many items of graffito contain the words ‘land rights’, and often were accompanied by an image of the Aboriginal flag (see Figures 6 and 7). Additional graffiti in relation to land rights specifically refer to Eddie Koiki Mabo.

Eddie Koiki Mabo and four other Torres Strait Islander men commenced legal proceedings against the Queensland Government in 1982 to secure recognition of land rights over the Murray Islands.68 The case was adjourned in 1986 when Mabo began additional proceedings against the Queensland government following the enactment of the *Queensland Coast Islands Declaratory Act 1985* (Qld).69 The subsequent case was decided upon in 1988; it was determined that the Queensland legislation was inconsistent with the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth), and the initial proceedings continued.70 The original case (commonly referred to as *Mabo No. 2*) was decided upon in 1992. The High Court rejected the declaration of terra nullius upon European occupation, and led to the passage of the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth).71 Graffiti referring to ‘Eddie’ and ‘Eddie A.T.8’ were frequently observed in Boggo Road Gaol (see Figure 8).

**The Graffiti: The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody**

One other landmark intervention, which also occurred in the 1980s and is of particular relevance here, is the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC). In 1987, the RCIADIC was established as a consequence of growing concern about the number of deaths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in custody. Its terms of reference were focused on investigating the deaths of ninety-nine Indigenous peoples that occurred between 1980 and 1989 whilst they were held in police, juvenile, or corrective custody in Australia.72 Two of the deaths examined occurred at Boggo Road Gaol. These included a forty-two year old Aboriginal man who died as a result of suicide in No. 2 Division in 1980, and a forty year old Aboriginal man who died as a result of a heart attack in No. 1 Division in 1987.73

In addition to examining the deaths in custody, the RCIADIC investigated ‘any subsequent action taken in respect to each of those deaths including the conduct of the coronial, police and other inquires and any other actions that were not done but ought to have been done’, and ‘the underlying social, cultural and legal issues behind the deaths in custody’.

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68 Mabo v Queensland [No. 2], 175, CLR, 1.
69 Mabo v Queensland [No. 1], 166, CLR, 186.
70 Mabo v Queensland [No. 1].
Figure 6. Aboriginal land.\textsuperscript{74}

Figure 7. This land.\textsuperscript{75,76}

\textsuperscript{74} Private collection.
\textsuperscript{75} Private collection.
\textsuperscript{76} It is unclear whether this graffito was defaced by another prisoner or tourist following the closure of the prison. Within the full catalogue of the graffiti some images had been defaced, however this appeared to be the exception rather than the norm (for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous graffiti).
The RCIADIC concluded that, although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not over-represented in deaths in custody, they were disproportionately held in custody compared to non-Indigenous people. While only one graffito at Boggo Road Gaol specifically refers to the RCIADIC (see Figure 9), the high proportion of graffiti created by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the prison is arguably indicative of their over-representation at the site. Furthermore, there were many items of graffiti that referred to the poor conditions of Boggo Road Gaol, for example ‘How can you let us live in a shithole like this look at this place look around’, ‘6 years in hell’, and ‘my dog lives better than this. Screw would you live in a house like this think about it’. Both the RCIADIC and the Kennedy Report expressed concerns that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were more often detained in less satisfactory conditions than non-Indigenous Australians. The Courier-Mail also reported on the poorer conditions that Indigenous prisoners were exposed to, such as being moved from No. 1 Division to No. 2 Division which lacked sanitary facilities in the cells, and claims that the underground punishment cells were being reopened for the punishment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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77 Private collection.
78 Johnston, p. 4.
79 While there is a high proportion of graffiti produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it is important to acknowledge that the graffiti that remains may not be representative of the images that were present upon the closure of the prison. Public tours have been conducted since the prison’s closure so it is possible that some graffiti was removed prior to the site being opened to the public.
80 It is important to note that it was not always possible to determine whether graffiti in relation to the conditions of the prison was produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, or non-Indigenous people incarcerated at the site.
The discussion above has focused on graffiti that relates to broader social and political issues in Queensland and Australia during the 1980s. The widespread presence of graffiti depicting Indigenous occupation of the land prior to 1788, and subsequent struggles for rights – particularly land rights – demonstrates that, despite their physical barriers to the outside world, these issues continued to be of particular significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners. While Sykes claims that the ‘maximum security prison represents a social system in which an attempt is made to create and maintain total or almost total social control’ [emphasis in original], he also notes that prison is a ‘society within a society’. The images reflect resistance to the process of colonisation and resulting practices that impeded on the rights and freedoms of Indigenous peoples. This merits particular attention when taking into consideration claims that the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in prison continues the process of colonisation. The official criminal justice system that governs the behaviours of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a foreign system that was imposed upon European occupation of the land; it consists of laws and sanctions that differ from those proscribed in Aboriginal laws. Traditionally, criminal justice research has neglected the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and they have been portrayed as passive recipients of oppressive regimes. The graffiti discussed above indicates that Indigenous peoples were active agents in expressing their resistance during incarceration. Other graffiti observed at Boggo Road Gaol, when positioned in

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82 Private collection.
relation to resources that provide contextualisation, allow insight into events that occurred within the prison. The example of ‘Spider’ demonstrates this.

The Graffiti: ‘Spider’

A number of items of graffiti contain images of spiders, and the word ‘Spider’. According to The Courier-Mail, in February 1988 a riot occurred at Boggo Road Gaol after an Aboriginal man incarcerated in No. 2 Division had an altercation with prison officers.86 Other prisoners came to the aid of the Aboriginal man, and during the event a prisoner known by the name of Spider was shot in the leg.87 This event led to additional disturbances, including a hunger strike and a rooftop protest. A prisoner known by the name of ‘Itchy’ (this name was also observed in the graffiti) began a hunger strike in protest against conditions in the prison and treatment from staff.88 The hunger strike lasted three weeks, and at its peak almost 300 prisoners from both No. 1 and No. 2 Divisions were involved.89 At the same time five prisoners initiated a rooftop protest on F wing in No. 2 Division.90 The prisoners painted the slogan ‘justice now – public inquiry’ on the roof of F wing, and other slogans on sheets: ‘Stop all torture now’; ‘Don’t let the hunger-strikers die – act now’; and ‘Close Division 2 now’.91 The rooftop protest lasted just under one week, and shortly after, the Kennedy Review began its investigations. Images of the rooftop protest were observed in the graffiti (see Figure 10 for an example).

The common occurrence of graffiti referring to Spider and the events that followed appears representative of prisoners’ solidarity and collective resistance to the conditions and treatment in Boggo Road Gaol during major disturbances at the site. As noted by Michel Foucault, power and control is never certain nor complete; it is dependent upon a complex social network, and resistance is natural.92 Within the prison environment, targets of resistance are limited, and as a result, prison staff are often the recipients.93 Previous graffiti research has identified derogatory graffiti towards prison staff and/or the institution.94 Similar graffiti was observed at Boggo Road Gaol, for example: ‘BOGGA RD WILL BURN [staff member] WITH IT’ and ‘SACK [staff member] THE DOG’. Lombardo notes that, in addition to prisoner

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86 ‘Prisoner Shot in Leg as Jail Riots’, Courier Mail, 2 February 1988, p. 2.
87 ‘Boggo Road Gaol Riots’, The Feed, SBS, 13 November, 2014, [TV program].
88 ‘Boggo Road Gaol Riots’.
deprivation, pressure and publicity from outside of the prison leads to collective forms of prisoner violence. Disturbances at the prison were not uncommon in the 1970s and 1980s, and some graffiti indicate that prisoners were aware of the media attention gained. For example, Gentlemen Joe wrote ‘I’m Listen to 4ZZZ About Prisoner bashing it happen here Last week’ [sic.].

The Graffiti: Diversity of the Graffiti

It is important to note that while the topics presented above were commonly observed in the graffiti at Boggo Road Gaol, they are only a sub-sample of the full record of graffiti collected at the site. There is great diversity in the graffiti created by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and a substantial proportion of the graffiti observed were images containing intricate detail. It is estimated that Indigenous art dates back at least 40,000 years, and given there was no written Aboriginal language, symbols and images were of particular significance. Indigenous art is the practice of storytelling and allowing knowledge and traditions to be passed onto others, and plays an important role in the expression of identity and culture. Many signifiers of Indigenous culture were observed in the graffiti, including images of the Aboriginal flag which featured prominently. Other items of graffiti observed are associated with Dreamtime, such as sketches of Uluru and rainbow serpents. While it is difficult to capture the meaning and significance of Dreamtime in the English language, it has been explained as:

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95 Private collection.
97 The author of numerous graffiti identified himself as Gentlemen Joe (or Gentleman Joe) in the markings he left behind.
the Aboriginal understanding of the world, of its creation, and its great stories. The Dreamtime is the beginning of knowledge, from which came the laws of existence. For survival these laws must be observed.101

Importantly, Dreamtime is not restricted to the past; it ‘continues as the “Dreaming” in the spiritual lives of aboriginal [sic] people today’.102 Figures 11 and 12 provide further examples of symbolism present in the graffiti created by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Given that the meaning of Indigenous symbols varies between Aboriginal cultures, further consideration of some of the graffiti collected is required in order to develop a deeper understanding of the images.103 From a broad perspective, however, the graffiti appears to depict prisoners’ expression of identity and culture. Goffman asserts ‘His [the captive’s] self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified’ by the admission processes and regulatory practices of the total institution.104 Expressions of identity were commonly observed in the non-Indigenous graffiti recorded at Boggo Road Gaol, and have been observed in prison graffiti studies both in Australia and internationally.105 This suggests that such expressions reflect prisoners’ agency and resistance to the mortification of self. Identify and connection to culture perhaps carries greater significance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples when considering the process of colonisation and subsequent policies and practices. Furthermore, the RCIADIC claims that

while the enforced separation from one’s friends, family and domestic environment is undoubtedly traumatic for all prisoners, the greater significance of kin and community relations in Aboriginal cultures exacerbates the trauma of separation for Aboriginal people.106

Conclusion

Since the beginning of European occupation of Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples have been subjected to varying levels of governmental

102 Aboriginal Australia Art and Culture Centre, Alice Springs. Also see, Morphy, Aboriginal Art, pp. 67-88.
control, and as additional citizenship rights were afforded to Indigenous peoples over time, concerns have been expressed regarding their over-representation in the criminal justice system. Boggo Road Gaol has played a significant role in Queensland’s corrective services history, and was in operation when a number of official inquiries into the criminal justice system in Queensland and Australia were conducted. Visual ethnography methodology was employed to examine the graffiti that remains at No. 2 Division of Boggo Road Gaol, and provide insight into the lived experiences of incarceration.

This article discussed prison graffiti produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during their incarceration in Boggo Road Gaol, and how the images relate to broader issues in Queensland and Australia in the 1980s, as well as events that occurred within the prison. Graffiti in relation to bicentennial celebrations and Expo ‘88, land rights and the Mabo case, and the RCIADIC demonstrates prisoners’ awareness and concern for issues occurring beyond the walls of Boggo Road Gaol. Other graffiti, as the Spider example indicates, provide insight into events that occurred within the prison. Further still, a proportion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graffiti requires additional consideration. Further analysis of this graffiti will be valuable, as preliminary consideration of the images suggests they are

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107 Private collection.
108 Private collection.
signifiers of Indigenous culture. Collectively, the graffiti indicate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ resistance to the oppressive nature of incarceration, and the constraints on expression of identity and culture. It also highlights that, despite their confinement, events occurring outside the prison walls continue to impact on prisoners. Overall, prison graffiti can provide insight into a perspective of incarceration that is often unheard, namely the independent expression of prisoners themselves.