

Prefigurative Activism, State Engagement, and Agency in the Townsville Aboriginal Movement

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Abstract:

Aboriginal people are often presented in the media and popular discourses as marginalised, powerless, and oppressed. These stereotypes are based on a long history, statistics, and they are undoubtedly a reality for many people. However, the assumption that all Aboriginal people are downtrodden denies the considerable agency that is possessed. This paper will examine the way that activists exercise agency in the form of prefigurative activism – that is, instead of reactive protest, the establishment of meaningful alternatives to a system. Using archival and ethnographic research, this paper will discuss the prefigurative activism of Aboriginal people in Townsville, primarily in the form of the Black Community Schools (1970s) and Black Community Meetings (present day). Through these contexts, I explore the ways in which activists engage with (or not) the Australian state, the ways they claim agency for themselves and their community, and the alternatives they hope to embody.

Keywords: Aboriginal, activism, free spaces, agency, prefigurative

Introduction:

Despite a history of colonisation and oppression, Aboriginal people have always maintained resistance. The collective action is bred in “free spaces”: small spaces which are distant from external control and domination which “generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political motivation” (Polletta 1999:1). Polletta (1999) distinguishes between three types of free space, each with their own characteristics and outcomes; the most overtly political of these are “prefigurative”. In these spaces, also called “non-hegemonic” or “autonomous zones”, Aboriginal people have room to challenge the Australian state, redefine stereotypical ideas about themselves, and negotiate amongst themselves. Prefigurative spaces allow Aboriginal people to engage with the state on their own terms, and, sometimes, to avoid engaging with the state altogether.

Examples of free spaces within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia are plentiful. The Gurindji Walk Off, the Palm Island Strike, the Tent Embassy, and various other high profile protest events all have involved free spaces. In this paper, I will focus on two examples from Townsville which illustrate different aspects of prefigurative spaces. The first is an historical example, the Black Community School, based on document analysis from the Queensland State Archives. The School was established in 1973 as a permanent free space which prefigured alternatives to the education system. As such, it was required to engage with the state to a certain degree. In contrast, Black Community Meetings are short-lived spaces which are intended to avoid engagement with the state and with the mainstream altogether. As an ethnographer of Aboriginal activism in Townsville, I have attended a number of these meetings since 2007. In this paper, I argue that prefigurative spaces such as these are integral to the success of a movement like this one, which represents minority interests, because they allow for internal movement development at the same time as consolidating the external strategies.

Free Spaces, Prefiguring Alternatives, and Agency:

The notion of free spaces has been important in studies of collective action since Evans (1979) popularised the term. However, Polletta (1999) points out that the meanings of this term were fluid and vague. In an attempt to make discussions more precise, Polletta (1999) offered three categories of free spaces: transmovement, indigenous, and prefigurative. All three are cultural formations where movement identities can be generated and mobilised. All three also offer a chance to “plot alternatives, and to test the limits of official power” (Polletta 1999:14). That is, they allow for the expression of agency, even by people who are seemingly powerless within the mainstream system (Scott 1990). Transmovement free spaces are those which Aldon Morris (1984) refers to as “halfway houses”, that is, they link activists across diverse locations, causes, and generations. Indigenous free spaces are those which are embedded in a community, and are often formally non-political though they become breeding grounds for movement formation. Common examples of indigenous free spaces are Southern black churches in the United States in the lead-up to the Civil Rights movement, which existed outside of the movement but became very closely integrated with it (Polletta 1999).

Prefigurative movements are:

Explicitly political and oppositional (although their definition of “politics” may encompass issues usually dismissed as cultural, personal, or private), they are formed in order to prefigure the society the movement is seeking to build by modelling relationships that differ from those characterized by mainstream society. Polletta 1999:11

What is important about prefigurative movements is that they provide the space for movement participants to work together on internal issues – deciding on strategies and tactics, working out conflicts, and creating alternatives – without jeopardising their façade of unity and

commitmentⁱ. These spaces are successful when they are limited to movement participants and supporters, so membership is often restricted (Polletta 1999:12).

However, prefigurative spaces are not only about building movement identities. A key focus of these spaces is the creation of alternatives. Prefigurative spaces are a recognition that the movement's goals are in opposition to the mainstream, and a dismissal of any suggestion that they cannot work. Prefigurative spaces allow movements to set about creating their desired social relations immediately, rather than waiting for society to change on a larger scale (Day 2005; Polletta 1999). Rather than trying to struggle against the state, prefigurative spaces provide the option of standing to the side and putting energy into positive action, engaging with the state only for funding or other resources. According to the dual definition of agency offered by Ortner (2006), prefigurative free spaces allow movement participants to exercise agency as *project*, in addition to agency as *resistance*, and thus to work proactively towards their goals.

Examples of prefigurative free spaces are abundant, though much of the research focuses on anarchist movements because prefigurative action and free spaces are so central to their aims. The Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, are one of the most visible and regularly cited examples who “did not seek to obtain state power in Mexico” (Wallerstein 2004:632; also Deslandes and King 2006). Other examples are squatter community centres, or *centrisociali* in Milan (Ruggiero 2000), the DIY Punk Scene (Culton and Holtzman 2010), culture jamming (Sandlin 2007), and non-hierarchical decision making practices such as anarchist spokescouncils (Maeckelbergh 2011). All are means of building up movement identities, consolidating strategies for protest, and challenging norms simply by existing.

Within Aboriginal Australia, the best example of a prefigurative space is the Wave Hill Walk Off in 1966. What began as a strike for better working conditions quickly became

an ideological push for autonomy. The Gurindji people wanted their land returned so that they could maintain cultural and economic independence. While they were waiting for the legal issues to be worked out, they simply went ahead and started their community, setting up homes and a school where the children studied both western and traditional subjects (Hardy 1968; Attwood 2000). Other, smaller spaces are also important prefigurations for Aboriginal groups: medical, legal, housing, and education organisations which operate locally and nationally to offer culturally appropriate, accessible alternatives to the mainstream system. For example, the Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Service (TAIHS) provides the opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to address their own needs in their own ways. In the case of TAIHS, this means offering culturally sensitive health care which focuses on wellness and respects traditional roles. TAIHS describes its establishment in 1973, along the principles of self-determination:

Townsville Aboriginal and Islanders Health Services Limited (TAIHS) is one of an increasing number across Australia of self-governing, independent, community-controlled Indigenous organizations providing primary health care services to Indigenous people. TAIHS has grown up out of the desire of local Indigenous people to take control of their own health and of how primary health care services are delivered to and within Indigenous communities in north Queensland. (TGPN 2007)

The Black Community School:

One noteworthy black space which was created in Townsville was the Black Community School established in 1973. This initiative was driven by Eddie KoikiMabo, Harry Penrith, and a small group of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activists. The Black Community School was started because the educational system was failing Indigenous students, and these activists felt that they could do better if given the chance. In a letter to a bureaucrat in an Aboriginal education department, Harry Penrith acknowledged that 'we're

not experts' and they may make mistakes, and that this was a 'rather revolutionary idea', but that something had to be done (Penrith 1973a). In hindsight, it seems like attempting to improve educational outcomes is not all that revolutionary, but at the time it was a very radical concept. This was only six years after the 1967 Referendum; land rights were yet to be granted; and self-determination was still on the horizon. Thus, the thought that Indigenous people could do a better job of educating their children than the state was probably very hard for many people to comprehend.

Despite the odds which were stacked against them, Penrith and Mabo submitted a proposal to the Education department for the establishment of a Black Community School in August 1973. Their aims were to provide black children with an appropriate education, involving parents and the community to provide encouragement and hope. The teachers would have an understanding of "Aborigines' difficulties and differences in outlook and aspiration" and would guide students towards the ultimate goal of tertiary education (Penrith 1973b). The first group of students began learning in this space in September 1973, although the local press reported that it was not legally recognised by the Education Department (*Townsville Daily Bulletin* 1973). These activists decided not to engage with the Education Department; they saw an urgent need to remedy the situation and opted to fix it themselves. They attempted to engage the state by submitting a proposal, but when met with no response, they did not wait for permission. This willingness to defy the state in favour of direct action is one of the hallmarks of a prefigurative free space, and is a good demonstration of the way these spaces allow marginalised people to express agency.

The Department of Education encouraged the school organisers to submit the necessary paperwork for the school to be formally recognised, but that paperwork was not forthcoming (Acting Director-General 1974). It seems as if the organisers were not actively opposed to the state, but rather indifferent to it. They got on with the business of running the

school and had no time for paperwork, although they sought official support in the form of financial backing. The Black Community School was eventually formally recognised by the Department of Education and was funded by Queensland State grants (Gunn 1981). By 1982 the school had not received any further funding from the government and was forced to close, not due to poor educational standards but a lack of funding (*Townsville Daily Bulletin* 1982).

This example indicates that autonomous social movements can be successful, but they become vulnerable to collapse or co-optation when they become too reliant on the state. Hart et al. (2008) explain a similar phenomenon in regards to Indigenous self-determination struggles. Rather than actually allowing Indigenous communities to operate completely autonomously, government policy was that economic and in-kind support 'depended on individuals accepting mainstream norms first for (nuclear) family structure, settlement and life-style and then for housing occupation' (Hart et al. 2008: 53). The Black Community School is a very good example of the black spaces which many activists seek to create. In these spaces, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people actively express both agency as resistance to the mainstream, by protesting against that system, and agency as project, where they intentionally engage and enact their own cultural values (Ortner 2006:145).

Black Community Meetings:

The Black Community School was an important prefigurative space which created a meaningful alternative to the status quo. In the present-day, spaces like this one exist, but many "black spaces" similar to the School have been incorporated into governmental programming. In Townsville, the role of prefigurative space has been taken over largely by Black Community Meetings. These are generally one-off events, organised around a particular issue. In Townsville, the vast majority are held at St Theresa's Church, run by the

Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council, who lend the space to public events such as these. In 2008 a number of Black Community Meetings were held in Townsville to canvass opinions about the Queensland Government's Stolen Wages Reparations Scheme. At these meetings, someone presented the information which was available at the time, but the majority of the meeting was taken up with conversation from the floor. Community members expressed their opinion about what the government should do, and eventually the meetings shifted to strategising about protest tactics. One meeting decided on a delegation who would speak to a Queensland "Community Cabinet" event being held in Townsville. Another became a working bee, where banners were made for the Labour Day march.

These meetings were important for reaching internal consensus on issues, but consensus was not always easy to reach. Internal discord presented itself often. Sometimes meetings were called to deal with particular tensions. In the 2008 Stolen Wages campaign, conflict developed between several activists. A three-hour community meeting allowed the community to negotiate their internal tension without outsiders peering in. In fact, the four non-Indigenous people at the meeting were asked to leave for the most heated portion of the discussion. The Black Community Meetings are a prefigurative space within the Aboriginal movement where activist identities were mobilised, internal conflicts were dealt with, and strategies were decided.

Summary and Conclusions:

Prefigurative spaces are an important aspect of social movements which allow for the expression of agency by marginalised, disempowered and oppressed groups. They allow for the creation of meaningful alternatives to the dominant system, which by their very existence challenge that system. They also allow movement participants to develop identities and to

work together to develop strategies and engage in conflict in ways that do not damage their public image. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Townsville, a number of “black spaces” work to prefigure alternatives. The Black Community School acted, throughout the 1970s, as an alternative service provider which challenged the mainstream education system. Black community meetings are short-lived prefigurative spaces which are formed to fulfil specific functions – to organise against a cause, to negotiate community dysfunction, or to communicate within the movement.

Importantly, both spaces, and others like them, allow for the expression of agency by Aboriginal people, which is a direct challenge to stereotypes and assumptions that Aboriginal people are downtrodden and powerless. Locally, the effects of these prefigurative spaces are multiplex. On one level, they create opportunities to build a strong community. They are spaces which are safe from outsiders where issues can be discussed and debated. A strong community is more likely to appear worthy, unified, numerous and committed, which Tilly (2004) argues is vital to movement success. They provide an opportunity for the community to exist on its own terms. At the same time, prefigurative spaces are a starting point for change. These spaces can act as seeds which grow into larger structures within broader society. The mere existence of prefigurative spaces is a challenge to the mainstream because they suggest a meaningful alternative.

ⁱ This is important because movements are judged externally based on their WUNC, or Worthiness, Unity, Numbers and Commitment (Tilly 2004). Any infighting that happens publicly risks damaging external perceptions of unity, which allows power holders to write off any claims that are made.

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