

The Re-CONstructed Theodolite

(aka Theo, the naughty parrot)



An essay by Franchesca Cubillo

Western technology has provided many answers to questions that were previously unanswered. It has assisted humanity in engaging with the environment and with each other - machinery that assists in producing, consuming, healing, communicating, understanding, infiltrating, entertaining etc. Various scientific instruments have allowed us to scope geographical terrains and in the process of understanding, we have come to control and ultimately manipulate and redefine this environment for our own benefit. This particular scientific instrument - a Theodolite, for example, has been used in the past to survey and map parts of Australia. It has assisted archaeologists in documenting/marking/locating important Indigenous occupation sites. Ancient material culture, human remains and detritus has been brought to the surface in an attempt to understand the complex nature of Indigenous engagement with this prehistoric landscape - this instrument has been critical in facilitating this enterprise.

However, scientific instruments cannot provide all of the answers to all of the questions, nor can it play a critical role in the maintenance of an Indigenous culture that is at least 60,000 years old. It monitors, but does not engage directly. There is a large degree of Australian Indigenous cultural knowledge and lore that has been handed down via an oral tradition for tens of thousands of years, unhindered by scientific machinery. Sophisticated philosophies about humanity, resource and land management, communal reciprocity, complex kinship structures and societal guidelines for maintaining political and social order has been honed over millennia. Therefore the question needs to be asked - are scientific instruments necessary in the pursuit of understanding ancient Aboriginal peoples or could there be alternative methodologies and instrumentation that facilitates this learning experience?

This instrument has been used to locate and mark sites of significance and to a certain extent therefore has aided in the revelation of information associated with Aboriginal people and their complex occupation, engagement and management of this extensive landscape. Therefore it has served society in an honorable way. However, what happens to this instrument when it is passed it's used by date, when it stops functioning in the way that it was originally intended? Does it get a dis-honorable discharge? Well, in this post-modern context anything is possible and in a way, I would like to think that I could theoretically reconstruct this instrument in an effort to rediscover it's alternate purpose.

In its past life it objectively and systematically observed and marked specific locations, aided in the development of survey maps of Country and assisted non-Indigenous peoples understand the historic and ancient practices of Australia's Aboriginal people.

However, imagine if its role changed ...

Instead of mapping, marking and defining a particular location for perpetuity, image if it started to represent the Country that it had mapped, defined, and marked. Imagine also if it had a voice and therefore represented and conveyed the perspective of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples.

What if it became subjective in its focus? What if it assisted Aboriginal people by taking up a contemporary political agenda, randomly shouting political slogans?

Can you image it, a scientific instrument that would be mindful of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Sovereignty in this land, imbued with a fervent passion for Indigenous rights - a Blak voice with a slight degree of dark 'Black Comedy' humor. This instrument would no longer just observe but rather interject loudly and forcibly into any conversation about Indigenous Affairs and race relations in this country. Behaving like a burly old alcoholic unkempt parrot that had spent way too many nights down at the local Redfern pub - half hanging, half standing ... on his perch in the corner shouting political profanities at anyone or anything that passes by.

Some of his more polite commentaries would include:

go back to where you came from

Always was, always will be Aboriginal land

we grew here, you flew here

what do we want - Land Rights

When do we want it - Now

Of course the Re-Constructed Theodolite (aka Theo, the Naughty Parrot) would come out with other obscene statements, but it would be too impolite to include them in this text.

There would also be a serious side to Theo the naughty parrot as he has overheard many academic conversations (over its lifetime) about the complex nature of Indigenous peoples engagement with this continent. Equally his intellectual repertoire and understanding of Aboriginal prehistory and archaeology would be quite comprehensive. And in these moments of seriousness, engaged in complex conversations with himself, he would stand to attention (on his perch) like a military commander - up-right and attentive. With determination and fervent zeal, proclaiming the many virtues of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples and their sophisticated management of the Australian landscape across tens of thousands of years.

Theo would also demand to be taken to every Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander political rally or protest in his local town - particularly on such days as Invasion Day (26 January), National Sorry Day (26 May) and NAIDOC week. However his political stance on Constitutional recognition and Reconciliation is still in the process of being resolved, therefore he is reticent in being involved in these public displays of support and or protest. He is such an intelligent, complex (naughty) Theodolite.

Imagine that - an instrument of science that has documented, witnessed and observed - given a voice/agency to no longer just read the landscape, but rather - represents that landscape and its first people!