



*NEW: Emerging Scholars in Australian Indigenous Studies*

## *'I have a dream' mural site visit*

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Growing up in the Inner West, I always found it strange that the *'I have a dream'* mural on King St featured Martin Luther King Jr's face above an Aboriginal flag. After considering the site's deep history more thoughtfully, I now realise the significance of black internationalism, particularly developments in the United States, in Aboriginal peoples' fight for rights.



*Caption: The 'I have a dream' mural on King St is a focal point in the heart of Newtown. In this photo, a family of Japanese tourists are taking photos of each other in front of it; a testament to the significance of the site across broader society.*

Early Aboriginal affiliation with the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was completely new to me, as I have always assumed any sort of activism or organising by Aboriginal people was more aligned with other indigenous peoples' struggles around the world. I was interested by Maynard's (2005) explanation of how after the Sydney branch of the UNIA was reorganised into the Australian Aboriginal Progress Association (AAPA), the group's leaders nevertheless "saw parallels between the ideology of [Marcus] Garvey's movement and their own experiences. They cleverly unpacked Garvey's ideals and remodelled it to their own experience in Australia. They built their platform around Garvey's call for pride in culture, solid economic base, and strong association to land of birth."



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These ideas initially spread from contact between Aboriginal wharf labourers and black seamen from overseas, during which “an appreciation of an international black struggle developed among Aboriginal people” (Maynard 2005). This contact is how Aboriginal leaders became aware of the works of Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois and others. Because Aboriginal workers worked alongside seamen from North America, the Caribbean, West Africa, the Pacific Islands and the Indian subcontinent, it makes sense that they could develop a sense of international solidarity with these marginalised, black communities.

In analysing the AAPA, Maynard (2005) draws attention to the association’s emblem and motto. Over the years these included the phrase “One God! One aim! One destiny!” and “Australia for Australians”. The former was the same as that of the UNIA, and the latter an excerpt from Garvey’s poem *Africa for the Africans*. This incorporation of Garvey’s rhetoric serves as a metonym for a deeper and more holistic sense of solidarity Aboriginal people had with black communities in the Americas and beyond.

Interestingly, the former Eveleigh Railway Yards and IXL Jam Factory, both of which are walking distance from the mural, were similarly large employers of working class Aboriginal people in Sydney (Barani 2013a; Barani 2013b). Much closer to the mural is the former site of Ern McQuillan’s Gym, which was “the best known training gym for Koori boxers” (A history of Aboriginal Sydney 2015) before it burned down in 1967. This is relevant as world-renowned African-American boxing champion Jack Johnson’s victories in Sydney prompted a boom in cross-Pacific black solidarity (Maynard 2005).

Thus Newtown and its surrounds are a natural location for a public artwork expressing Aboriginal-African American solidarity. Through both work and sport, the Aboriginal community of inner Sydney was exposed to a world of solidarity and optimism from likeminded people in similar situations. Although not explicitly international in nature, Martin Luther King Jr’s leadership in the civil rights movement could have been perceived from an Aboriginal/Australian perspective as a continuation of the efforts of Garvey, DuBois and others who preceded him.

Maynard (2005) notes that the Australian history of the UNIA and the AAPA has been sadly erased from the public consciousness. Personally, I was wholly unaware of it, despite having a strong interest in Aboriginal, African and black histories. That later generations of Aboriginal people were “severed from this inspirational knowledge of their history” is even more tragic. Perhaps this mural was intended to keep the same spirit alive, and if so, it’s succeeded.

## References

A history of Aboriginal Sydney 2015, *McQuillan's Gym, Browns Lane, Newtown*, Western Sydney University, viewed 14 April 2017, <http://www.historyofaboriginalsydney.edu.au/central/location/mcquillans-gym-browns-lane-newtown-centre-street>.

Barani 2013a, *Eveleigh Railway Yards*, City of Sydney, viewed 14 April 2017, <http://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/henry-jones-ixl-jam-factory/>.

Barani 2013b, *Henry Jones IXL jam factory*, City of Sydney, viewed 14 April 2017, <http://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/henry-jones-ixl-jam-factory/>.

Maynard, J. 2005, 'In the interests of our people: the influence of Garveyism on the rise of Australian Aboriginal political activism', *Aboriginal History*, vol.29, pp.1-22.



*Caption: After my research, I found the proximity of the Africa mural to the 'I have a dream mural' very interesting, despite the Africa mural having no direct connection to the African, African American and Afro-Caribbean seamen who introduced Garveyism to the Australian continent.*



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