



From Ngukurr to Newcastle. Exploring the activism, impacts and legacy of Dexter Daniels

In early 2020, we made a surprising discovery in the UON's Copley archive, which is held in the special collections of the library. We found a series of newspaper clippings about a man who was well known to Kate Senior from her work in the Ngukurr Community, but what was material doing in a collection that is focussed on Newcastle?

This man was Dexter Daniels, a Trades Union organiser from the remote Indigenous community of Ngukurr. Daniels was instrumental in organising and supporting the Wave Hill Walk off (1966) which eventually led to the NT Indigenous Land Rights Act, NT. Daniels is a largely forgotten figure, perhaps due to his associations with the Australian Communist Party. The story that emerged from the Copley was about Daniels' work outside of the Northern Territory, his strong association and support from the Unions and his speaking tours and participation in rallies for land rights across Australia. A key focus of this activity was the Newcastle Trades Unions, who raised money to support him and encouraged their members to recognise and engage with the struggle for equal pay and land rights. In collaboration with Dr Daphne Daniels (who is Daniel's niece) and Ms Karen Rogers (Ngukurr elder and artist), this project proposes to consolidate information about Dexter Daniels and explore the reasons why his story has been largely forgotten both in his own community and nationally.

The Living Archive project

This project is embedded in a larger project, 'The Living Archive of Indigenous Knowledge' which is a collaboration between the University of Newcastle, The University of Melbourne, Museums Victoria and the Ngukurr community. The project works with communities to support access and engagement to their material held in museums and archives. It does so, in two ways; by developing a digital repository for community access and by engaging with Indigenous artists to re-tell stories about the items in collaboration with the community and share their knowledges of the creation of such pieces through workshops.

The Cooks Hill project

We worked with students and staff at the Cook's Hill Campus to create a major artwork based on Dexter Daniels' activism and his time in the Southern States, especially his time in Newcastle. Indigenous artist Keri Clark and her son Mitch Mahoney, both of whom are experts in the art of making possum skin cloaks led the workshops. They used the cloak as a medium to talk about Dexter and his work and to share their knowledge about all stages of construction of the cloak, from sewing through to creation of the dye and design. The cloak will be taken to the Ngukurr community and the artists in the community will complete the design. Possum skin coats are not something that are traditionally made in Ngukurr, but the artists are keen to learn these new skills and see the cloak as a metaphor for Dexter's own innovations and cross-cultural engagement.

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