

Abstract

Doctorate students with recent experience of the conventions distinguishing the knowledge system of a Western academy can best articulate the mix of challenges for the role of the Indigenous scholar in 'the decolonial era'. This article narrates such challenges and 'creatively'¹ applies an Australian Indigenous ethos to address them. It is subjective, not seeking to typify Greek-Euro traditions in academic convention, grammar or manners of articulating decolonisation, which requires an objective argumentation. Instead it requests a deep read, providing an analectic rather than dialectical account of that experience.

Key Words

decolonial era, Place, enquiry, academic conventions, practice-led research, 'creativity'.

A 'PhD Journey' in the 'Decolonial Era'

T'hokahoken Doxtater (2004) writes:

"The coeval movement to recover Indigenous knowledge resides within the time and space of worldwide decolonization. In this way I pose that we have passed through the colonial and postcolonial eras. Decolonizing knowledge, the beginning stage of the decolonial era, commences the process for reengaging Indigenous knowledge with a practiced culture rather than merely a performative culture. From here on we emancipate Indigenous knowledge of governance, sovereignty, agriculture, architecture, mathematics, astronomy, communications, medicine, and healing. Thus, the intellectual diligence of Indigenous scholars marks the beginning of what we could now call "the decolonial era" (p. 629)."

Introduction

A favoured term, the 'PhD Journey', naming a concept of discovery through an exploratory trip, also describes the process and practice of enlistment with Western academic institutions for the purpose of undertaking 'higher degree education'. In this context the 'journey' becomes the conveyor of academic 'research', and is focused upon the production of 'new knowledge'. I have recently reached the end of my voluntary enlistment, received an honourable discharge in the form of a doctor of philosophy degree by practice-led research (a PhD), and take this opportunity to share my articulation of that experience framed by the theme, the role of the scholar in the decolonial era.

¹ This term discussed in detail at pages 6 and 7.

Introducing myself

Processes and practices of enquiry fundamental to sustaining and maintaining life across land/country and managing Indigenous society and sovereignty, I hold, begin at home in 'Place'². I speak as an Australian Indigenous woman with the authority vested in me through the sovereignty and stewardship of genetically related ancestors, and from a lifetime of creative praxis in participatory, collaborative, community performance, media-arts, and practice-led enquiry. I articulate my knowledge and experience in an accountable first person from my own understanding derived from my customs as an Australian Indigenous woman.

My customs affect self-identification and also ensure I am never alone or without a Place in the world (as indicated in my Placement mapping given below); an inherent aspect of the participatory and collaborative functions across my creative praxis. I am affected by the extremely diverse experiences of, and with peoples from those countries and Places, acknowledgement of which assists others to decipher my knowing, intent and values; such transparency an attribute of ethical relations.

Traditionally, relationships to land and between people within the context of the complexity of Place – relevant time, events and history - are determining factors in the unfolding of identity, consciousness and knowledge. At Mer, neighbour to my country of origin, Erub (aka "Murray" and "Darnley Islands" in the "Torres Strait") Dr Noni Sharp (1993) interprets conditions determining identity as:

"When a Meriam le introduces himself or herself, self-identification locates that person in ged, home-place, and in a line with a clan or nosik with its particular totem or lubabat. Everything else about him or her is to be judged by the other person. Together they go to the heart of what it is to be a Meriam. Yet always that expression of identity contains within it a contrast with another nosik at another ged. In Kitaoji's words, the concept of 'Meriam' is 'multi-layered', seven overlapping meanings of Meriam coming to exist over time (1982, 68) (p. 65)."

This is an evolving complex and sophisticated custom of socialisation, developing self-knowledge for a mature and stable society. Self and Place are inseparable and both conscious and subconscious parts of a constantly evolving identity and maturing personality; combining the way one perceives self, is perceived by and perceives others, and behaves in any given situation. The following personal history and Placement mapping demonstrates the complexity of identity and relations active within the ways of my own customs:

Samsep, Isem - Erub-Darnley Is – Meriam Mir (saltwater): ancestral country of my Mother, Eva Salam - ancestry includes Tudu, Sri-Lanka, Denmark, Indonesia; born **Waiben** on **Kaurareg** country.

² Use of upper case 'Place' denotes the concept developed by Australian Indigenous, local Elder, Kombu-merri Wakka Wakka philosopher Mary Graham, in her unpublished paper, "Introduction to Kummara Conceptual Framework, a Discourse on a Proposed Aboriginal Research Methodology" (2006 and 2012), referenced throughout this paper; lower case 'place' denotes the European/Western meaning.

Coolamon-Wiradjuri: birthplace of my father Jack Peacock – ancestry includes England, Ireland.

Mareeba–Kuka Yalanji-Djabugandji (freshwater): birthplace 1951; early childhood.

Cooya Beach–Kuka Yalanji (saltwater): early childhood with relatives.

Redcliffe-Ningy-Ningy (saltwater): moved to urban region; childhood (seven siblings); primary and secondary school 1955-64.

Brisbane–Turrbal-Jagera: corporate business employment, 1965-68.

Sydney-Eora: community theatre performance practice, 1969-73.

Britain (U.K.): theatre - performance, directing and producing, 1974-80.

Cairns-Irukandji, Mossman–Kuka Yalanji (saltwater): the return, 1981-82.

Sydney-Eora: film and TV production training at ABC TV, 1983-85.

Thursday Is.-Waiben, Murray Is.-Mer (saltwater): community radio (conscious of transformation of experience to knowledge), 1985.

Brisbane-Turrbal-Jagera: community film and video production development, 1985-2003 (media-arts praxis became definitive).

Gympie-Gubbi Gubbi (freshwater): (my children's paternal country), home, growth of children, media-arts business praxis, 1991-2004; 2011-current.

Redcliffe-Ningy-Ningy (saltwater): birth of children 1990 and 1992.

Brisbane–Turrbal-Jagera: tertiary study, 2004 – 14.

The concept of self in Place provides a framework for 'enquiry' with the potential of a 360 degree inclusive world view which animates and inspires my intellect and participatory and collaborative processes and practices. In contrast Western style 'research' conveyed through a predetermined journey of discovery navigated by the use of Greek-Euro epistemological and methodological conventions, in my experience, induces a narrowing linear focus on a desire to produce individualised, original and significant knowledge. The difference between these two approaches and expectations is pointed out by Mary Graham (2006):

"To the Aboriginal mindset phenomena are received and if there is an observation it is to "behold" or "*regardez*". The Law is both creator, informer and guide – the world reveals itself to us and to itself - we don't "discover" anything. The same mindset perceives the Western method of Inquiry to lead to and, to be inextricably attached to discovery and therefore to ownership. That is why, to Indigenous people in many places, there is often a sense of something predatory about this process (Inquiry) (p. 9)."

Origins

Congolese novelist and film critic Thomas Mpoyi-Buatu (1985) stated

"... the problem posed is that of our origins. Now our origins have been dried up at their source, by which I mean that they have been denied all possibility of history. This deception", he continues, "hid nothing less than the straight forward presumption of a lack of humanity (p. 56)."

In this context Martineau's and Ritskes' (2014) idea that decolonisation is manifest in creative acts of 're-presencing', offers a way of addressing that problem. I therefore

begin in recovery, by asking what are the origins of the concepts 'research' and 'knowledge' that drive Western scholarly pursuit, and if these terms suit the processes and practices in Indigenous customs of relating, sharing and developing 'wisdom that is not reduced to knowledge' (to use the words of François Jullien (2007, p.185).

'Research' derives from the old French word 'rechercher' meaning to seek out, search closely (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=research> accessed 1/10/14). The term 'knowledge' has origins, in the Indo-European word "gno" to know and the concept derives from an ancient mix of Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, Japanese, old and modern English, its interpretations including - to know, perceive, consider, meditate, regard, idea, sense, observe, watch (www.edenics.net/english-word-origins.aspx?word=KNOWLEDGE accessed 1/10/14).

These definitions indicate both 'research' and 'knowledge' are common, endless human activities, processes and practices fundamental to the experience of sustaining and maintaining all life, and are therefore neither the prerogative, nor proprietary activities, of Western academic and scientific domains. This point of view, simplistic as it may seem, marked the beginning of my 'PhD journey' through the decolonial era; and initiated an act of Indigenous sovereignty in confidently and strategically managing encounters with an institution of the colonial state.

Also at play in this recovery is the 'idea' – i.e. the way in which we hold the meaning we seek to express, and invite ingenuity in its application. N. Scott Momaday (in *Narrative Chance*, 1993) says of his novel *The Way to Rainy Mountain*:

“... it is pre-eminently the history of an idea, man's idea of himself and it has old and essential being in language. The verbal tradition by which it has been preserved has suffered a deterioration in time. What remains is fragmentary: mythology, legend, lore, and hearsay – and of course, the idea itself, as crucial and complete as it ever was. That is the miracle (p. 163)”.

So, it is understandable, words like 'research' and 'knowledge' are not without our own ideas that determine meaning and use. Before diving into the research question and epistemology and methodology to define Indigenous knowledge, and design a successful outcome, I consequently needed to ask, what is the idea behind 'research' and 'knowledge'.

What was made clear by this question, is that scholarly pursuit requires the application of terms that recognise Indigenous origins within the scope of their definition. Defining our own terms ensures the continued development of our intellectual ideas, cultures, customs, necessary to overcome the mediocrity induced by coloniality at every level of conversation and theoretical endeavour; and ensures the terms remain inclusive of variables that reveal who we are and where we are at any given time. It also determines that scholarly pursuit is to subsume and promote prodigious wisdom that values intuitive, insightful and sensory input and performance, as immanent aspects of intelligence, reasoning and representation.

Concepts of power and language perpetuating coloniality by sustaining a contentious action-response relationship with colonial societies, in an endless task of researching social science literature to assert a stance and defend a theory for the purpose of knowledge production, were more visible from this point-of-view. I relate this perception to what Maldonado-Torres (2007) describes as a 'normalised non-ethics of war (p.247)' that maintains social political and economic dominance over

every aspect of Indigenous lives and society. Contrasting rather than a focus on positioning or opposing perspectives, is one way I used for recovering, recognising and applying Indigenous terms for enquiry and knowledge.

In addressing this problem I also realised theory and creativity/art, as the materialisation of our intellect and beliefs, are integrally related. Martineau and Ritskes (2014) propose "... each act of creative refusal makes a new present possible (p. p.x)". In scrutinising and refusing to accept the prerogative and proprietorial intent identified in the Euro-Western terms 'knowledge' and 'research', I began to preference the recovery of Indigenous concepts, processes and practices, that is, reciprocal and dialogical forms of enquiry, that keep open 'the way to a new present'. That way stimulates a natural dialogic condition where research experience processes to knowledge and the practice of knowledge brings wisdom.

Enquiry and knowledge is therefore not about theory alone; although that is not to dispute that

"theory can serve as a decolonizing practice, and in doing so compels us to recognise that Indigenous people are legitimate theorists, and that important theoretical work often takes place outside the academy within activist groups and communities" and "the importance of theory in the struggle against the settler state (2014 NIRIKIN Critical Reading Group poster 10/10/14)".

The same scrutiny of the term 'creative' revealed origins in a Christian religious ideal: "The creature who has been created cannot create himself. God, having made nature, but having also made man in his own likeness, gives him the capacity 'with the force of a divine breath' to imagine and make things beyond Nature" (Williams R. (1983) quoting from Christian Saint Augustine, and Phillip Sydney (1554-95).

My Australian Indigenous community media-arts practice is a fundamentally different experience to the above Western-Christian origins of creativity. My processes and practice are embedded in land, law, Place, culture, spirituality, politics, social and community management/governance and development and are thus not activities which occur in isolation. Praxis in this way, is also an act and representation of an Indigenous concept of sovereignty. These elements are all related parts of creative practice simultaneously and no separation or rigid definition is necessary. This is captured in the Australian Aboriginal Turrbal language where "gahrr" meaning breath or spirit, is the closest word to 'creativity' (Bell, 2005³); and is also confluent with the concept that Aboriginal creativity, as Ambelin and Blaze Kwaymullina (2010) assert "is an act of being in the world where since the whole is in all its parts, there is no distance in creation (p. 197)".

This creative praxis also takes into account the importance of the 'act', Mikhail Bakhtin, 1993, "Toward a Philosophy of the Act", explained by Gardiner (2000) as:

"... the "eventness" of the everyday social world" and "the phenomenological nature of the "act" as the essential "value-centre" for human existence. This in turn, involves an understanding of the alterity between self and other, insofar as we can only construct a unified

³ Bell (2005). Aboriginal Linguist, advised on the word "Gahrr" from the Turrbal language, for QUT Creative Industries, Indigenous Creative Industries Unit KKB704 (2005).

image of self and engage in morally and aesthetically productive tasks through our reciprocal relation to each other (p.1-2).”

In contrast, creativity within the European tradition of arts patronage is the invention and production of art and aggrandisement of artists (or theorists and intellectuals) as discrete entities. In order to contrast and characterise a perceived ontological and cultural difference, I will use throughout this paper a term I invented during the writing of my PhD Treatise, ‘creact/creaction/creative/creativity’. ‘Creative’ speaks to Indigenous origins of creativity - that communal/community, participatory, collaborative and shared process of custom and experience in representational, reflective and reflexive expression.

Under-standing in Place

Mary Graham (2006) offers the philosophical equation below derived from her insights into the ways in which Australian Indigenous people manage society and land over millennium. It remains pertinent to the way in which life is sustained and maintained and, I suggest, provides an important and useful intellection for processes and practices of enquiry and knowing where re-covering and re-presenting Indigenous wisdom is in focus.

Multiple Places = Multiple Dreamings = Multiple Laws = Multiple Logics
= Multiple Truths = All Perspectives (truths) are Valid and Reasonable
(p. 9).

In her paper “Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal World Views”, Mary Graham (1999) also offers an Indigenous perception of the core differences of the two concepts I have designated as ‘Place’ and ‘place’, in saying: “We believe that a person finds their individuality within the group. To behave as if you are a discrete entity or a conscious isolate is to limit yourself to being an observer in an observed world (p. 106).” Connectivity, relationality and reciprocity is practiced in ‘Place’ where as ‘place’, in contrast, is arrived at through observation and objectivity within the objective of progress. It is the Indigenous culture of connectivity and relationality within and which shapes Place over millennium, that provides the foundations by which to understand more deeply the dilemmas of living with coloniality; and the multitude of processes and practices continually created, by which those dilemmas are addressed. Moumen Smihi (1987), a film-maker from Morocco, said:

“Personally I am convinced that the ideology of capitalism, to be sure both private and of the state, is primarily interested in cultural linearity and monolithicity (novelistic or cinematic) to the extent that it sees menace in diversity, in multiplicity, in haziness ... The third world, itself a world of explosion and the exploded, has to be interested in this problem (p. 82).”

My initial impression of the ‘PhD Journey’ was of arriving at a banquet for the elite with a buffet serving the terms and language of Greek-Euro academic conventions, disguised as eminent education and knowledge proficiency wrapped in a

preferred ideological stance. Diversity, multiplicity and haziness throughout my praxis was a creative norm, rendering these conventions, purporting to be essential to research and knowledge acquisition, alien to my mind. This induced acute confusion and diminished confidence in my intellectual capability. Not being my own, “the operative language” was preventing me from “bearing the burden of my experience” (thanks to James Baldwin for the tip (in Vizenor, 1999, p.xi) and alienating the articulation of my practice-led enquiry from my processes and practice.

Nevertheless I set about deciphering, translating, interpreting, whilst simultaneously (with exquisite customary humour in conversation amidst Indigenous community people outside the institution) stripping away the Western ideological veneer of ex/conclusive reality/truth/knowledge. This led to a ‘hop-scotch’ across research approaches and references mapping no-through-roads in a maze of contraries. Construed from a bountiful Western intellectual inheritance, that maze – social science framed theoretical literature – was growing like crazy with ideas and assertions on art, politics, economics, culture, spirituality, law, ethics, manners, and so on. Navigating that gaze was a useful exercise to comprehend how utilising a social science framework and applying different research methodologies delivers distinct plural knowledge, ways of knowing and ideas which can be narrated in monologic, individualised theories. Applied to Indigenous (or any) society, such theories claimed to render interpretations of reality and truth duly contested for the purposes of verification; or thesis against thesis infinitus.

In clarifying this context within which research operates in a Western academic domain and the logic behind pivotal concepts that apodictic discoveries produce ‘new’ knowledge in that system, I could move on confident the best place to start was from my own ‘under-standing’, literally, the ground beneath my feet. It was at this point I realised the importance of an Indigenous concept of Place as inclusive and participatory methodology and epistemology and how it underpinned my media-arts praxis in a tacit and sublime manner.

The use of Place as methodology disrupts both the endless quest for power (or conversely, empowerment) in the production of meta-narratives as an instrument of coloniality in the possessive act of ‘knowing’ new territory, while in relentless pursuit of the unknown; and the tacit urge for conquest within the delivery of meta-knowledges that fix and appropriate the known. Most important is that the Indigenous concept of Place as a methodology, redeems a custom of accessible and legitimate dialogic engagement, in variable, evolving, fluid and transmissible knowing across generations and genders.

I know, from a lifetime’s experience of community performance and media-arts creativity, the reality of my creative processes functions within the socio-political-cultural-spiritual-intellectual particularity of an Australian Indigenous ontology and ethos in Place. As such it is subject to the timeless conduit of multiple relativity - the philosophical equation as posited above by Mary Graham. All perspectives are merged and each perspective is defined by the other in my Indigenous community media-arts processes and practice, creative work and practice-led research, and all are open to interpretation and furtherance.

Rupturing the Known

Historically and currently, it has been said, knowledge gathered by scholars in Australian colonial contexts intersects with the interests of imperialism and coloniality

in maintaining global power and authority. Indigenous people were resources for local knowledge used during invasion and settlement, and now in multiple ways to maintain the power of state domination. This reality, posed consistently by Indigenous and other scholars in the decolonial era, places under serious and intense scrutiny what is 'known' about Indigenous land, people and society as derived within Western academic environments, and simultaneously 'opens the way to a new present'.

In this regard, in the paper "On the Coloniality of Being", Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) speaks of how the Lithuanian Jewish thinker Emmanuel Lévinas, in contesting Euro-Christian and Euro-secular traditions found it necessary to expand his method and approach "by discovering new themes and other thinkers who would make similar kinds of heretical interventions (p.241)". New themes - a process of identifying, recovering and reinstating Indigenous methods and approaches to enquiry and knowledge - came naturally within the focus provided by the 'PhD Journey'. Other thinkers in the conversation arising in the decolonial era, contrasted the perceptions and conceptions of coloniser society, exposing the way coloniality dominated consciousness, and the extent to which communication between Indigenous people preserves a distinct manner of thinking, intellectual traditions and praxis.

Such reflection brought the realisation that whilst praxis develops, the way knowing and skill is attained (process) fundamentally remains the same: local, Place-based sources and customs are the most important primary resources for formation of creative concepts, knowledge and direction, and thus practice reciprocates the development, needs and aspirations peculiar to both people and Place. This form of process and practice is collaborative, co-operative, participatory and co-productive.

Spheres of interaction between Indigenous people over millennia have consistently sustained development of processes and practices from our customs and countries that excite the potential of holistic, sustainable, socially and politically relevant, multiple forms of creativity; evidenced by the increasing presence of Aboriginal creativity locally, nationally and globally. As such 'Place' generated, germinated, fostered and nourished the core values and principles of creativity evoked in the creative work "Colourise Festival 2013: eARTh", the focus of the practice-led research for my PhD. This work is detailed at the website www.colourise.com.au in the events tab.

In my community media-arts practice, experience, synchronism-coincidence-simultaneity across dimensions of time and Place is what binds relations actions and customs between people, land, fauna, flora and all the elements. This connective phenomenon in the essence of Place determines values and principles in philosophical and ethical concepts motivating purpose, direction and action. Continuous ancient in situ connectivity between people, Place, countries, is held within spheres of interaction, collaboration and conversation that drive creativity. The people entering those spheres have brought with them tacit spirit and knowing of their ancestors and countries, making relations dynamic, congenial, reciprocal, respectful and representational. This notion says Momaday (in *Narrative Chance*, 1993) generates "a moral idea of ourselves which in order to be realised completely, has to be expressed (p. 164)".

These principals render Indigenous terms of reference for 'research' and 'knowledge' arising from the creative work, and its extension, the Treatise articulating the 'PhD Journey'. The choice of writing a 'Treatise' over an exegesis or thesis, was to narrate rather than analyse the practice-led research; and both

symbolises the absence of the political instrument 'Treaty' in Australia and contributes indirectly to its relative dialectic. In contrast to the conventions espoused for best process and practice in the Western academies that monopolise higher degree education, these principles offer an Indigenous intellectual, spiritual, ethical ethos in which to expand praxis.

On the Question of Theory

Indigenous academics at QUT recently posed the following statement for consideration by higher degree students attending a critical reading group: "Many in Indigenous Studies prefer to focus on immediate political issues, whilst others are suspicious of theory as reflecting 'an inherently Western, imperialist epistemology'. The essays in "Theorizing Native Studies" acknowledge these concerns, but insist on the utility of theory in identifying 'the larger institutional and political structures that enable racism, inequities, and the displacement of Indigenous peoples' (2014 NIRIKIN Critical Reading Group poster 10/10/14)".

Relative to this topic, Kombu-merri Waka Waka Philosopher Mary Graham (2006) poses a fundamental question: "If Indigenous people were to have an analytical theory then what would that theory consist of? How would it be applied to examine a proposition or problem (p. 4)?" In response, I originally had the notion it was in challenging policed positions of theoretical cognition, rigid epistemology and methodology and the application of cogent argument. During the course of my study however, I came to realise instead, that where enquiry was grounded in practice, examination of any proposition involved making a choice to enact dialogic, creative, participatory custom/practice, within what I term 'the fluid inductive reasoning of processes in Place'. This enabled old and new assemblies of meaning to unfold and become clear.

I also questioned: what and how ontological thinking and ideas shape Australian Indigenous media and other creative practices to communicate the dynamics of representation at any given time; and if a specific genre and practice of Australian Indigenous community media-arts makes more visible a philosophy of connectivity? Like-wise the answer lay in enacting dialogic, creative, and participatory custom/practice within the fluid inductive reasoning of processes in Place. This is the rationale of the epistemology framing my community media-arts praxis which was put to the test in my collaborative, participatory creative work for the PhD, the event Colourise Festival 2013: eARTh, and articulated in a Treatise.

So Why Do a PhD?

I completed a Master of Arts (Research) in 2009 (topic, *A Novella of Ideas: how interactive new media-arts can effectively communicate an Indigenous philosophical concept*) after which I applied to the same institution to undertake further practice-led research in a higher degree Doctor of Philosophy course (topic, eARTh: the dynamics of ontological representation). I had begun to develop the principles outlined above from experience and outcomes over the course of the Masters study, during which I also realised the value of further development of community praxis through research. I did not see higher degree education as a way to enhance a career or indeed to profess I was in any way more intellectually competent than any amongst my peers, friends, relatives and acquaintances.

Universities in Western countries worldwide are amongst the best resourced state and national institutions because of the perceived power of knowledge, research and representation. In a colonised country which attaches great value and allocates significant financial investment to European traditions of education, access to those resources by Indigenous people whose political, social and economic viability is at the mercy of such dominance, is nothing less than a human right. Entering such institutions and applying strategies to utilise those resources for 'reengaging Indigenous knowledge with a practiced culture rather than merely a performative culture' is not to be scorned. This is particularly so for Indigenous practitioners seeking re-recovery and re-presencing of important creative customs and social and political perspectives that are agents for change.

The question "why do a PhD" was posed twice to me during the PhD Journey, when it became clear I had deviated from the standard conventions of a Western institution in both purpose and presentation of research and knowledge. My response was as outlined above and, in short, that finding an open door to any resource palace in a colonised country was an invitation to enter, rather than scale the walls, and that once inside one should surreptitiously and purposefully conduct our business on our own terms. This would not be the formula for a smooth ride up the academic career ladder but, if from the resources available you could deal yourself a good hand, chances are you could play to completion with great intellectual, political and spiritual satisfaction, unscathed by the University's conventions, rules and regulations police, and make a substantial contribution to conversation and praxis happening in the decolonial era. It was worth the gamble as, also, I was not an isolate in this uni-verse-city. My community, praxis, family and the land itself ensured my feet stayed firmly planted on the ground (guaranteeing clarity in under-standing) along that 'PhD journey'. (Perhaps one day I should check out a bank.)

Having said that, it can't be stressed enough how important it is for Indigenous higher degree research students to have a supervisory team conscious of the significant value of cultural and political interchange in a colonised country, and who can communicate intelligently across ontological, epistemological and ideological divides. I was extremely fortunate in that time was on my side (synchronicity cannot be under-estimated) throughout my post-graduate engagement with the university; and I had dealt a good hand from the supervisory personnel available and we fostered and nurtured respectful/able and challenging relations. However, it was my own community and sense of Place – history, society, politics, spirituality, values - that provided the direction and guidance with regard to enquiry and reflecting upon and improving creative praxis; as had been the case for over thirty years.

Also relevant, is that I was not looking for a career take-off runway when I found myself at the open door to a university. I was a mature, established community media-arts practitioner with 21 years in creative Indigenous community processes and practice in the Place where the university was located, and had two teenage children in tow. I was originally employed by the university to bring Indigenous perspectives into the Creative Industries Faculty curriculum and being part of that experiment and experience proved to be excellent preparation for insightful understanding of how the university operated, its limits and areas of latent malleability where "a new present" could incubate.

I opted for full-time study, resigning from the Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum experiment, when it was obvious the curriculum program staff hadn't the

foresight to recognise that a significantly progressive and valuable investment in an International Indigenous Studies Faculty was long overdue, in the country of one of the most venerable societies and cultures alive. However, to their credit, the Indigenous academics on staff maintain the highest standards of scholarly pursuit and student support services, despite the mediocrity that defers inaugurating an International Indigenous Studies Faculty stifling the opportunity for growth, as well as effective intervention in the uncurbed acts of racism oppressing Indigenous people.

The move into academia also directly assisted the continuity and further development of our community media-arts organisation which, having avoided the pitfalls of relying upon government funded arts programming, had operated mainly by persistence rather than consistence, since beginning in 1985 as a community development initiative. The original brief for the development of the organisation, given by community elders and activists, was to produce independent, socially relevant Murri (local term meaning Aboriginal) image media. 'Murriimage' production led to the incorporation of a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee in 1994, Uniikup Productions Ltd., with creative media-arts programming that responds to identified community needs. It is a low profile organisation with collaborative and participatory methods of creativity in co-production with community.

The organisation name "Uniikup", came about around a kitchen table where a suggestion of Unique Productions was proposed, and from typical humorous banter, "u nique up on me, I'll nique up on u", Uniikup was derived; carrying connotations of sneaking up both politically and as in the tradition of hunting for food. The name is also symbolic of the loss of traditional languages, as a result of the violence and usurpation of our lands and all that entails. The constitution of the legal entity was devised by community activists who ensured that it would serve our purposes over the years.

The creative skills developed, maintained and which have continued to evolve since 1985, include video camera operation and sound recording, writing, extensive documentation of community life – social and political development and management – screen exhibitions, creative events and social gatherings, arts and craft, promotion of local, national and international Indigenous films film-making and media-arts, construction of websites that inform and encourage conversation about sovereignty and relative issues, performance of work that re-presences Indigenous land and people across city streets, and creative collaboration across ethnic and national borders. Websites carrying detailed information are www.colourise.com.au, www.indigenousoverigntyaustralia.com.au, and Uniikup board member Jenny Fraser's <http://www.superhighwayacrossthesky.net/>.

In 2015 there will be a celebration of Uniikup's 30th year and the succession of the original to a new generation of Indigenous creatives who uphold the same values and principles and who were born to the decolonial era. The work generated by this PhD (and many more like it), is the legacy left by both the original creatives of Uniikup/Murriimage and the community elders and activists who inaugurated the community development program in 1985.

All together this seemed like a fertile area for focused enquiry and further development; a good reason to do a PhD.

The Role of the Scholar in the Decolonial Era

A common exchange between Indigenous people entering the academy, I found, revolved around expectations of students by the institution to meet its standards for research, analytical frameworks, and articulation in higher education, in order to attain a doctorate degree. The use of Greek-Euro language – ontology, epistemology, methodology - used to convey these expectations was inhibiting common sense understanding of being, knowing and doing, and Indigenous scholars were addressing and responding to the situation by providing interpretations and alternatives according with cultural and political perspectives.

As a mature and experienced creative practitioner I responded to this dilemma with self-interrogation: where, how do adverse perspectives meet in order to understand and share the imaginable world in which creative concepts and work belong; one which exists beyond the imposed reality of a mundanely materialistic social system? What is practice-led research, its values and principles, in the context of the creative work, as I experience it? Perception and conceptualisation of Indigenous knowing and being is steeped in the genetic and psychological inheritance of a venerable heterogeneous society and culture known to have developed more than 200 local languages, knowledge and laws specific to Place and country, evolving in a vast land over millennia. Was it prudent to expect this can be substituted with relatively new Western concepts of knowledge imported by colonialism i.e. theory, practice and its conventions?

And, in this context, how useful or restraining are concepts, described by François Jullien (2007) in his interview on “Thinking between China and Greece: Breaking New Ground” as:

“... the principles of non-contradiction and the law of the excluded middle, everything that constitutes the essence of definition itself ... but most of all predication (of an argument on facts).” And, the idea that “speech to be valid must determine, and, there is no possible intermediary between contraries, since one single predicate, whatever it is, of one subject alone must necessarily be either affirmed or denied , (p. 185, 186, 187).”

Such analytical frameworks, I deduced, were what Protevi (in Margaroni, 2005) says is “part of a legacy of forceful imposition of complete organisation in a body politic”, which in effect denied the essential reality of “chance, change and motion”, the essence of my creative processes and practice. Chance, change and motion, fundamental to the “self-ordering potential of an all separating, connecting, halting, diverting, scattering, transforming dynamic (p. 85)”, developed within the propensity of both cultural orientation and arts practice, is intertwined with Kwaymullina’s (2010) idea that “the purpose of knowledge [within Aboriginal systems] folds back into the underlying principle of balance ... both constructed and transmitted around the idea of balancing relationships between all things in the universe (p. 196).” Consequently reproduction/imitation or repudiation of such imposed logic and analytical frameworks, as referenced by Jullien, I determined, served no purpose in my practice-led research project.

Going against the tide of Western knowledge production frameworks was both a threat to the perceived natural Western academic order of things and consequently to the credibility of my ideas of enquiry and knowledge. Mary Graham (2006), puts it this way:

“Western modern scientific methods reject claims of non-Western knowledges in the belief that reality is what it is, irrespective of what humans think or know about it, and that it is ordered with a universal and invariant structure across time and place.” Her philosophical theory and methodology of Place “.. challenges Western biases of universalism in Western methods of enquiry to, in the action of Inquiry itself, promote multiple knowledge systems (p.3).”

However, once the proverbial line was crossed there was no turning back and the ‘PhD Journey’ took me in October 2013, into the deep waters of doubt in search of a life jacket, or an island populated by other heretics. I was very fortunate, the life jacket came in the form of a trip to a conference in the British Isles at the Royal Holloway, University of London titled “In the Balance: Indigeneity, Performance, Globalization” (www.indigeneity.net/conference/), where I hoped other Indigenous people would gather to share creative processes and practices arising from the decolonial era. The conference was part of a five year research initiative, “Indigeneity in the Contemporary World: Performance, Politics, Belonging”.

The intention to participate in the conference was to increase my understanding of which/how/where performance (across areas and work albeit selected by the conference organisers – ‘theatre, film and dance, but also mixed-media and site-based work, Olympic pageantry, festival events, political protests and cultural displays within tourism ventures’) is positioned in relation to the socio-political realities of Indigenous people in their countries; and how we are managing and inventing processes and practices firstly relative to our own ontological, cultural, spiritual, political and economic developments specific to Place.

Circumventing various power games at play during an international academic conference, I thought, may lead to like-minded people - those descendants who share experiences of catastrophe and whose creative practice makes our worlds meaningful again; and that it could be possible through exchange, over time, to create, expand and strengthen our own rhizome like connectivity of multiple, non-hierarchical global relations. I took the cue from Dupré (in Vizenor G., 1999), who suggests “not merely our thinking about the real changes: reality itself changes as we think about it differently. History carries an ontic significance that excludes any reversal of the present (p. viii).”

The conference location encompassing the heart of imperialist history and traditions, needless to say, modelled all the assumptions of Western knowledge superiority and its conventions, revealing the continuous dominance of Indigenous research and knowledge by academic institutions. It contradicted its purported notion in its promotional material that “Indigeneity now matters in global debates about natural resources, heritage, governance, representation and social justice”, and subsequently demonstrated a shallow concern for “the contentious issues that continue to stall the unfinished business of decolonization”. Indeed its real focus was “on regions settled during the great era of European imperialism, notably Australia, the Pacific Islands, the Americas and South Africa” with an objective to serve the university’s well-resourced research project “Indigeneity in the Contemporary World: Performance, Politics, Belonging” by championing “the transnational circulation of indigeneity as a highly marketable commodity, particularly in Europe”. Also, adding insult to injury, at a conference on ‘indigeneity’, there were only thirty-four Indigenous delegates (just two of which were keynote speakers) out of 100 presenting papers; and an absence of formal Indigenous protocols to assist

introductions and connections for the purposes of effective networking and information exchange that would contribute to cultural, economic and political growth for Indigenous communities and countries.

The paper I presented dealt directly with these contradictions and did not contribute my knowledge of Indigenous creative processes and practices to the conference collection. Other young Australian Indigenous delegates, in reinstating the reality of the Indigenous presence, also disrupted the coloniality functioning at the conference, raising the questions: who are we performing for and to what ends? Who do we become in obligingly performing to unrelenting dominance? At the majority of academic conferences, in what way and how is the operative paradigm assessing the calibre of research presentations and conference proceedings relevant to Indigenous people? The experience however, did strengthen my enquiry of the socio-political realities of Indigenous people in their countries and how we are managing and inventing creative processes and practices firstly relative to our own ontological, cultural, political and economic developments specific to Place.

‘The Way to a New Present’

This brings me full circle, not to a conclusion but a productive summary of the ‘PhD Journey’. The essential value of enquiry, I found, has been its agency; connectivity and relativity abounding in the new, contemporary Places that are created and entered when discourse accommodates the gathering of reasoning in many perspectives.

At the “In the Balance: Indigeneity, Performance, Globalization” conference in London my misgivings about the real value of a doctorate degree were affirmed by other Indigenous PhD students and scholars who were grappling with the dilemmas caused by Western domination of the education process, and scholarly elitism. In his Keynote presentation, Michael Greyeyes, a Cree Artist and Educator, referred to himself as a “practicing theatre maker, seeking to hi-jack the establishment’s spaces, audiences and funding.” By also “challenging the canonicity, white privilege, and the colonial gaze, Greyeyes re-asserts and affirms Indigenous protocols as the foundation for a twenty-first century practice (2014, Abstracts, p.1)”.

Likewise other Indigenous presenters through the articulation of their subjects of enquiry were sharing their engagement in ‘Indigenous knowledge with a practiced culture rather than merely a performative culture’; e.g. “Feelin ‘Reserved’: Global Indigenous Hip-Hop and the Colonial Settler State”, Michelle H. Raheja (Seneca), “The Revolution Will not be Televised (but it Will Show Up on You Tube): Idle No More and the Round Dance Revolution” Jennifer Adese (Otipemisiwak, Cree-Métis), “Caribe Performances: Indigeneity and Anti-Colonial Resistance in Vieques, Puerto Rico”, Marie Cruz Soto, (Viequense), “Indigenous Ceremony and the Creative Transformation of Conflict”, Polly Walker (Cherokee), “Walking with our Sisters: Social Media Advocacy for Indigenous Women in North America”, Gloria Bell (Métis). It must be acknowledged also, that the “In the Balance: Indigeneity, Performance, Globalization” conference did present academic work which provided information that was useful and relevant to the legitimisation of cultural, political and spiritual validity which Indigenous scholars enact.

These approaches to the problems of coloniality were arising from processes and practices of knowing accessible in the Places of local communities, creating theories for the purpose of initiating change. This change was not just in relation to

the continuing dire circumstances that coloniality maintains for control over Indigenous populations on their own lands/countries, but holds the generosity of creativity arising from the Place where colonialism and Indigenous sovereignty coincide, converse, collide and potentially converge for the betterment of society. This Place is dynamic, not just as protest, contention or demonstration of political analytical prowess and courage, but for nourishing the seeds of ingenuity, envisaging and realising the power of our own continuous revolutionary processes. It also follows, as Kerby (cited in Vizenor, 1999) states,

“our identity is that of a particular historical being, and this identity can persist only through the continued integration of ongoing experience”, making Indigenous sovereignty as alive today as at any time in our past, “because we bring our history along with us, as a more or less clearly configured horizon, new experiences will tend to flow into this story of our lives, augmenting it and adapting themselves to it (“Narrative and the Self” (p. 64))”.

At the time of final lodgement of my Treatise, which had been recommended for the award of a PhD degree, I did not think I had reached an end, and cannot say I was ever on ‘a predetermined journey of discovery navigated with the use of Greek-Euro epistemological and methodological conventions, producing a narrowing linear focus on successful production of individual, original and significant knowledge’. Indigenous knowledge, I believe, lives through us, genetically tying us to land country Place and people from generation to generation in dialogical relationality, and is not recoverable through a conventional ‘PhD journey’.

What I offer from this experience of engaging in higher education in the decolonial era is the same intelligence received in general conversation/exchange with other Indigenous people; the value of such offerings relying upon reciprocity in the absence of a competitive ego. In this way we are supporting our traditional educational processes which enable our continued ‘survance’ and ‘remembrance’ (to use words of wisdom of Gerald Vizenor) across generations and genders, and contributing to the structures, logic/thought and methods we define and conceive to support our efforts.

The creative project Colourise Festival 2013: eARTh was the accumulative result of a lifetime praxis and the PhD provided the opportunity for further development of core concepts. The work undertaken since 1985 in the Brisbane Indigenous community carried the commitment to what Martineau and Ritskes (2014) view as breaking “the vow of silence and invisibility demanded of Indigenous Peoples by settler society (p. III)”. In this community of people from many Aboriginal countries and experiences of the ultra-violence and corruption which is imperialism/colonialism/coloniality, that is a tacitly shared commitment, and the initiation of creative media-arts added another form of Indigenous intervention and strategy to an already established custom of persistence, resistance and r/evolution practiced in the decolonial era.

Ritskes and Martineau (2014) articulate the underpinning purpose of the recovery of Indigenous creative practice in the decolonial era, in saying “To destabilise the pervasive mythology of colonialism (and its aesthetics) is to re-constitute and re-narrate spaces beyond and elsewhere (p. III).” Gerald Vizenor, they continue, “has argued that Indigenous aesthetics of *survance* assert Indigenous presences against the continued erasures wrought by settler colonialism

through 'fugitive poses' (p. III)". I had been able to engage with Gerald Vizenor due to the enquiry conducted for the PhD. His work had a remarkable impact upon my understanding of the depth to which coloniality obscured and corrupted the distinctive ingenuity of Indigenous creativity, thought, imagination, expression and communication; and consequently gave reassurance to confidently maintain the 'aesthetics of survivance' across creative praxis, which included both the PhD creative project and its articulation in a Treatise.

Ritske and Martinea (2014) also claim there is "... energetic potency in remaining illegible to power, incommensurable with colonialism, and opaque to appropriation, commodification and cultural theft (p.V)", through the collectively communicated work emanating from the 'aesthetics of survivance' in the decolonial era. Connecting with powerful and relative voices through enquiry represented for me much more value than a doctorate award. Staying true to the deep vein of culture, spirituality and philosophy, the heritage that sustains our creative customs, has maintained ethical and purposeful lives from the first sunrise and will continue until the Kookaburras' last laugh at last light.

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