

What do you need a whitefella's  
education for? A yarn about  
Aboriginal philosophy

by

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of Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores two central questions: one, why does the field of Aboriginal philosophy remain largely unestablished?; and two, what shape might Aboriginal philosophy take? The first two chapters of the paper will address the first question. Value structures that are biased towards western philosophies will be identified as a key reason for the relative absence of Aboriginal philosophies compared to European and American philosophies taught and researched in Australia at present. A Nietzschean analysis of these value structures will demonstrate that the lack of value attributed to Aboriginal philosophy in Australia at present is unwarranted; it will also provide a platform from which a reevaluation of competing narratives can take place. The exploration of a number of Aboriginal Dreaming stories will emphasise that such stories contain complex understandings of the world that are of equal value to any other philosophy the world has produced; neither ‘folk’ philosophy nor ‘myth’ nor any additional descriptions that suggest an inferior, simplistic worldview. The last chapter will address the second question by providing an exploratory step towards Aboriginal philosophy. The aim of this thesis is to provide a basis for further research into what Aboriginal philosophy or philosophies may look like, and the development of a dialogue between Aboriginal philosophy and mainstream philosophy as valued, respected, equal fields of intellectual knowledge.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Mouheener country I wrote this thesis on, and to pay my respects to elders, past, present and becoming.

I give my sincere apologies if I have misinterpreted any of the stories presented in this thesis, or utilised them in any way that is not the way their custodians intended them to be utilised. I also give my thanks to those who gave permission for these stories to be made publicly available.

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These are just a few people out of all of the people in all of the different communities I am a part of. All of you who make up those communities are part of this story too, and I thank you.

My country, thank you. All of the countries this yarn has travelled to, thank you too.

Mum, Dad and Brady, thank you.

Roshan, thank you.

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## Introduction

I chose to include ‘What do you need a whitefella’s education for?’<sup>1</sup> in the title of this thesis because, in the right sort of context, it is the kind of question that can shift a paradigm. I was certainly in the right place to hear it when I did: Rhodes House. It is a sentiment I am familiar with, but I had never taken it seriously before, grown up like I was with such a strong emphasis on achievement in education. Yet there I was, on a trip to the United Kingdom as a potential applicant for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate scholarship to study at Oxford or Cambridge, all of a sudden asking myself ‘What *does* a blackfella need a whitefella’s education for?’

How did I get to there? I had been reflecting on a number of Nietzsche’s texts during my Honours year, specifically *The Birth of Tragedy* and *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, attempting to understand how it was that Science trumped art as the most legitimate way of making sense of the world when both are essentially modes of storytelling<sup>2</sup>. In the frame of mind I was in, then, it wasn’t such a stretch from the question ‘Where does this assumption come from, that Science is superior to art?’ to ‘Where does this assumption come from, that whitefella education is superior to blackfella education?’ From there, I began to wonder why I hadn’t studied any Aboriginal<sup>3</sup> philosophy during my degree (not to mention why it hadn’t occurred to me until then). When I discovered that it was practically nonexistent as a discipline I knew I had found my thesis topic.

Early on, I struggled with how to write this. Should I write within or outside the paradigm, as I see it? At first, I thought I would go with within the paradigm, considering the institution within which I am producing this paper. Then I thought ‘to hell with it - I’ll write the way I write most comfortably’: creatively, in story form. In the end, though, I recognised the potential - indeed, the necessity - to fuse the two

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<sup>1</sup>Corrinne Franklin, personal communication, November 2011 (relaying an opinion expressed to her).

<sup>2</sup>When I say storytelling, I am referring to the creative act of making sense of the world; I also consider ‘story’ or ‘stories’ to be products-in-process of this creative act, not ‘fictions’.

<sup>3</sup>I understand and acknowledge that the Torres Strait Islander peoples also have a profound and rigorous intellectual tradition that can be developed into a philosophy or philosophies; however, as I will be using texts, reflections and examples provided by Aboriginal people in this paper, I will only be addressing Aboriginal philosophy or philosophies and therefore referring to it as such.

together, and so I decided on both. That way, the form reflects the content; in any case, this approach reflects me best. I have been immersed in the whitefella education system for most of my life and have had very little blackfella education. So, you could say I am more practised at whitefella storytelling than I am at blackfella storytelling. On the other hand, whitefella storytelling is something I have had to learn; blackfella storytelling is something I just do. When I met with Ingo, my supervisor, after an entire summer, I had to break the news to him that my thesis had changed direction considerably. How did I begin? By telling him my personal story, circling backwards and forwards between significant events in an effort to express how I had ended up where I was. That is the way I make sense of things to myself.

So, this paper is going to take the shape of a yarn. Due to the personal nature of a yarn, it is, in a sense, going to be a story about my journey as I wrote this thesis; an autoethnography. It is also going to have a number of other traits. I have drawn inspiration from Tyson Yunkaporta's work, so I will follow the protocols of a yarn as articulated by Tyson, and loosely imitate its structure. As I write this, it occurs to me that it is difficult to discern just where things begin, and how to put everything in some sort of order. This document actually belongs in the middle of the story, but also in the beginning. To me, this emphasises the complex web that is my journey - how everything is somehow related to everything else, and all of it is linked up somewhere. This thesis is largely going to reflect the circular nature of my experience, rather than following a traditional linear model, but I will attempt to make it comprehensible to readers from both cultural traditions. In fact, the genre of a written yarn is already an instance of cultural and intellectual fusion - a yarn is traditionally an oral form of communication. In accordance with Tyson's directive, I will begin this yarn by paying my respects and introducing myself.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of all of the countries of this land, first called Trou.wer.ner, then Van Diemen's Land, and now Tasmania. I also wish to pay my respects to the elders, past and present, who are the custodians of this land. My name is Lauren Gower. I am a Punnilerpanner woman and I am from Northwest Tasmania, a place of tall green hills dotted with bush and coastal scrub, a place of flat, blue skies and cliffs and dunes by the sea. I am also the owner of a British passport -my mum is from England - and, my Nan tells me recently, I have Danish ancestry too. So my

identity, like most peoples', is a shifting, breathing, complex space. It gives me difficulties: people question and demand justification of my identity all of the time - how can I be black, when I am also (and mostly?) white? -; on the other hand, it also gives me privileges: I relate to all sorts of people, and they to me.

How does this relate to my thesis? Well, in a sense, I am a metaphor for this very project, an expression of both cultures simultaneously; an embodiment of the process I am exploring. As Doris Shillingsworth, Karen Martin and Tyson Yunkaporta outline in the context of the Aboriginal pedagogy framework 8ways, 'Non-Aboriginal verbal metaphors are hidden and abstract. Aboriginal visual metaphors are concrete and explicit.'<sup>4</sup> Furthermore,

Cultural metaphors are the tools we have been given to know and therefore sustain creation. The structured manipulation of words, images, actions and objects that carry additional layers of meaning is the way we co-create systems and events within the spiritual fabric of existence which is Dreaming...Our metaphors work in a turnaround action at the overlap of Dreaming and material worlds, where the double-meanings of sounds, images, movements and objects earth-side create a reflected reaction sky-side.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of this thesis, I am the concrete metaphor for this exploration of meaning, as well as the storing place for its conclusions and all of the interactions and encounters along the way. The meaning will be located in me; simultaneously, I will engage in the process of making that meaning, and writing it down. You could say that I am inscribing the philosophy into myself.

Now, before we go on, some more structural points. The thesis will be presented in three chapters. The first will provide a Nietzschean critique of Science in order to establish that no one way of making sense of the world is superior to any other; the second will explore practical examples which demonstrate that Aborigines possess a

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<sup>4</sup>8ways 2011, "Visual culture way," Wikispaces, <<http://8ways.wikispaces.com/Visual+culture+way>>.

<sup>5</sup>8ways 2011, "Relationally Responsive Pedagogy," Wikispaces, <<http://8ways.wikispaces.com/Relationally+Responsive+Pedagogy>>.

profound and rigorous intellectual tradition, and establish an ethical basis for the pursuit of Aboriginal philosophy; and the third will attempt to create an example of Aboriginal philosophy in the overlap between blackfella and whitefella knowledges<sup>6</sup>. These chapters also represent different stages in my journey towards understanding; again not in a linear fashion, from simple to complex or less to more, but in a circular fashion. Now, onto another beginning of this story.

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<sup>6</sup>I say 'knowledges' rather than 'knowledge' to emphasise that there are many different ways of knowing the world, rather than *a* way of knowing the world.

## Chapter One

### Skycamp: Floating, Criticising, Searching; Dislocated analysis

Nietzsche fascinates me. When I started my thesis, I wanted to write about his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*; more specifically, I wanted to explore the tragic Dionysian intuition that he talked so much about. Looking back, it makes a certain kind of sense to me, how I came to write about Aboriginal philosophy when I began thinking about Nietzsche. I was interested in art, and different ways of knowing and expressing things about the world; I was interested in a world view that was not so stifled by fact and logic; an artist's worldview, and this was one that Nietzsche championed. I began to analyse his criticisms of Science [read, positivism or Enlightenment science] in order to shape an argument that posits art as an equally valuable way of understanding or telling stories about the world. Then I left for Oxford, and my thought processes shifted. Nietzsche, however, remained relevant; perhaps in part because he worked to undermine the dominant paradigms of his time, and so his arguments remain applicable to the undermining of the paradigms of today. He had an uncanny vision for the moral assumptions that underpinned much of societal and academic discourse and simultaneously experimented with the boundaries of expression that he criticised. Nietzsche was no objective, detached philosopher; for him, philosophy was a matter of life and death. Granted, he probably did not consider the possibility that his arguments could be applied in such a way for such a purpose, yet his concerns were his concerns, as mine are mine, and all anybody can really do is focus upon what concerns them.

Curiously, as I have progressed through the writing of this paper, I have come to recognise there are many similarities between the way Nietzsche philosophises and some Aborigines philosophise. Nietzsche is a very place-based philosopher. This is evident by the way that place seeps into his reflections and shapes his very thoughts - almost as if he can hear the words written in country. It was at Lake Silvaplana, for example, that Nietzsche first conceived of Zarathustra. Also, Nietzsche walks. And he walks and he walks and he walks. That is how he comes to understanding things, walking and reflecting. I will come back to this point later; first, here is an analysis of some of Nietzsche's arguments that I think are relevant to this project.

## **On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense: Embedding Truth in language**

In his early, posthumously published essay *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, Nietzsche presents a genealogy of language and Truth<sup>7</sup>. In this paper, Nietzsche challenges the dominant scientific paradigm by developing an argument based in philology that undermines Science's monopoly of Truth. Nietzsche identifies two functions of the intellect, both of which he considers necessary for the survival of the individual: dissimulation as an antidote for one's intuition of the tragic nature of life, and communication, which is a requirement of social existence. Language arises out of the need to communicate, so in order to fulfil this requirement humans invent uniformly valid and binding designations, words, which correspond to things. The concepts of 'truth' and 'lie' appear for the first time: the use of valid designations, or words, according to convention is 'truthful' and the use of words to make something that is unreal appear real is 'untruthful'. Truth, then, is a phenomenon that exists *within* language and can be established only within language. Just as there is a difference between a word and a thing, there is a difference between language and the world. According to Nietzsche, a word is a metaphor of a metaphor, an expression begun in a nerve stimulus, translated into an image, translated into sound. The word is far removed from the world - although, interestingly, 'word' and 'world' are only separated by a letter. Possible exceptions to this are onomatopoeiae: words such as 'boing' or 'splash', which sound like what they represent.<sup>8</sup> Onomatopoeiae, though, are still not the same as that which they represent; they may be more closely related to what they stand for, but they are still signs. The word 'galahs', however, is completely unrelated to the mob of noisy, squawking figures I can see whirling, flapping and arguing about me. The concept of galah can only exist by disregarding all particular galahs; if humans were serious about describing a galah, then a new word would need to be invented for each galah in each instant of its lifespan. Nietzsche observes in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* that

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<sup>7</sup> I have chosen to use capital letters for Science and Truth to indicate that I am referring to a particular kind of science and truth: Enlightenment positivism and conceptual truth.

<sup>8</sup> Leonn Satterthwait, personal communication, April 2012.

We obtain the concept, as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual; whereas nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise with no species, but only with an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us.<sup>9</sup>

Sansom notes that ‘Aboriginal people in their ways of thinking generally reject unqualified conceptualisation of the world by way of establishing types to which observed manifestations are then said to conform.’<sup>10</sup> There are exceptions to this tendency; for example, kinship systems operate by classifying people into ‘types’ and these systems are central to the social organisation of Aboriginal peoples.<sup>11</sup> In spite of this, I have also come across many instances of individualising in the texts I have read. Discussing the concept of number in Aboriginal epistemology, Elkin writes that Aborigines speak in particulars, not generalities; hence, there is no need for numbers or counting and Aborigines often have difficulty with it. For example,

the native stockman’s inability in the frontier conditions to tell his white “boss” even approximately how many cattle he had seen around a known waterhole. He would possibly say “big mob”, but if pressed might say 20, or if the “boss” did not seem satisfied, he might then hazard a guess of 200. These numbers had no meaning for him. But if the stockman had been asked to describe each beast by a characteristic feature, he could have done so.<sup>12</sup>

Another example of the Aboriginal tendency to individualise is the way Gladys Idjirrimoonya Milroy and her daughter Jill Milroy speak of trees: ‘Trees themselves are in large extended families and communities with lots of support, love and care: grandparents, parents, aunties, uncles and children.’<sup>13</sup> It makes perfect sense not to

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<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche’s notebooks of the early 1870’s*, translated and edited by Daniel Breazale (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979), 84.

<sup>10</sup> Basil Sansom, “Irruptions of the Dreamings in Post-Colonial Australia,” *Oceania* 72, no. 1 (2001), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Leonn Satterthwait, personal communication, April 2012.

<sup>12</sup> A P Elkin, “Elements of Aboriginal Philosophy,” *Oceania* XL, no. 2 (1969), 95.

<sup>13</sup> Gladys Idjirrimoonya Milroy and Jill Milroy, “Different Ways of Knowing: Trees Are Our Families Too,” in *Heartsick for Country: Stories of Love, Spirit and Creation*, edited by Sally Morgan, Tjalaminu Mia and Blaze Kwaymullina (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2008), 34.

speak of 'the tree' or twenty trees when you can point to a particular tree and recognise it as an individual within a community, an aunty or a mother.

Lakes, therefore, do not exist as imperfect copies of the lake; the concept of the lake exists as an imperfect copy of lakes. The concept of the lake cannot explain the complexity of a lake, nor can it accurately reflect the constant process of becoming that is embodied in a lake that is situated in a world of flux. It is because language is removed from the world of flux that it can provide no proof of the existence of Truth outside of itself. When I distinguish between the concept 'lake' and the thing 'lake', I am still trapped within language; there is, in fact, no lake as such, which any particular lake would approximate.

It follows that 'all the material within and with which the man of truth, the scientist, and the philosopher later work and build, if not derived from never-never land, is at least not derived from the essence of things.'<sup>14</sup>This is significant because the basis for the value attributed to fields such as science and philosophy is their claim to Truth. If scientific and philosophical Truths are arrived at within a framework of language that is purely speculative - an inventive, human creation - then why should they be attributed any more value than competing world-making narratives? If 'Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions'<sup>15</sup>, then why should 'truthful' scientific narratives be valued over narratives based in illusion<sup>16</sup>?

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<sup>14</sup>Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies," 83.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 84.

<sup>16</sup> When I say illusion I am referring to Nietzschean illusion: the Apollonian veil that is drawn over the tragic intuition that to live is to suffer, in order to make life beautiful and bearable.

## The Gay Science: Does Truth have more value than illusion?

What Nietzsche's argument reveals is that the Scientific "will to truth", as Nietzsche dubs it, is based upon the moral assumption that Truth has more value than illusion. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche explores the moral assumption that underpins the valuing of Truth over illusion and provides a platform from which a reevaluation of competing narratives can take place. Nietzsche writes that

science also rests on a faith; there simply is no science "without presuppositions." The question whether *truth* is needed must not only be affirmed in advance, but affirmed to such a degree that the principle, the faith, the conviction finds expression: "*Nothing* is needed *more* than truth, and in relation to it everything else has only second-rate value."<sup>17</sup>

Science, then, rests upon the prior conviction that Truth has absolute value. As Nietzsche puts it, 'it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests...that God is the truth, that truth is divine.'<sup>18</sup> If Truth is divine, then those who make Truth claims also make value claims. By attempting to undermine the metaphysical faith that Truth is divine, Nietzsche also undermines the value system that corresponds to it.

In *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, Nietzsche claims that 'truth' - using words according to convention - is valued over 'lying' - not using words according to convention - because of the potential harm that lying can cause to other individuals in society, not because of the act of deception itself. Deception, in fact, is critical to social life<sup>19</sup>; little white lies 'oil the wheels'. It is also critical to life itself. According to Nietzsche, humans cannot face the tragic Dionysian intuition that all things will be engulfed by an indifferent process of destruction and creation. Illusion, therefore, is necessary for life. This claim undermines the assumption that nothing is needed more than Truth; illusion may in fact have more value than Truth in terms of allowing for

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<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science; with a prelude in rhymes and an appendix of songs*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 281.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>19</sup> Leonn Satterthwait, personal communication, April 2012.

humans to affirm life despite that tragic Dionysian intuition. Truth, in fact, functions as that very illusion. At some point, however, the pursuit of Truth will turn upon itself and establish its basis in error, which will cause it to self-annihilate. Not only does the Enlightened pursuit of Truth at any price sacrifice Truth itself to its cause, but also human interests and survival.

Science, to sum up, is fundamentally a belief system. It is based on the belief that Truth is of ultimate value to life. It deals in the same illusions as myth<sup>20</sup>; it is, essentially, a myth. Moreover, according to Nietzsche, it is a dysfunctional myth because of its lack of self-awareness. For Nietzsche, the object of belief is precisely what myth is not; that is the poorest expression of a myth. Nietzsche emphasises this in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* when he remarks ‘How little does this [scientific investigation] resemble a product of the imagination, for if it were such, there should be some place where the illusion and reality can be divined.’<sup>21</sup> Science, at present, considers illusion *as* reality. However, as Science becomes more self-aware and confrontation with tragic Dionysian intuition becomes a danger, Science’s basis in illusion may be revealed as its greatest strength. Its imaginative ability to transform itself into an art form, a conscious act of giving meaning to the world and creating meaning within the world, may be its salvation.

Perhaps one of the greatest concentrations of potential for this transformation can be found at the interface between Science and traditional Indigenous knowledges. However, as Bala and Gheverghese Joseph point out, the present dialogue between Science and traditional knowledge focuses largely on practical techniques, empirical correlations and practices while traditional theoretical and methodological knowledge is disregarded as mythological; this disallows the opportunity for an egalitarian dialogue between Science and traditional knowledges, and instead results in the exploitation of traditional techniques to advance modern scientific theories and methodologies.<sup>22</sup> This is precisely why the above revaluation of Science as myth is a

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<sup>20</sup> When I say myth, I am referring to a framework that provides a basis for understanding the world, not something that is ‘false’.

<sup>21</sup>Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies,” 87.

<sup>22</sup>Bala, Arun and Joseph, George Gheverghese, “Indigenous knowledge and western science: the possibility of dialogue,” *Race & Class* 49, no. 1 (2007), 54.

necessary step in the transformation of the dialogue between Science and traditional knowledges. It not only provides the platform for a revaluation of competing narratives, but also for a rearrangement of power structures.

## Truth, knowledge and power

By establishing that Truth exists only within language and revealing the moral basis for the pursuit of Truth, Nietzsche destabilises two of the major premises upon which the western knowledge system is based. His analysis also raises a number of questions. If Truth only exists within language and its value is derived from a moral assumption, why is it widely accepted as the basis for knowledge? Why did scientific and philosophical ‘truths’, which are really illusions, take on the authority of Truth? This is where Nietzsche becomes relevant to the lack of Aboriginal philosophy taught in Australia today. By revealing that the western knowledge system is simply a series of narratives that enjoy more authority and more frequent readings, Nietzsche suggests that alternative ways of making sense of the world have equal validity. He also reveals that power is at play here because the discussion about what is and is not knowledge takes place in a discursive framework that largely represents just one perspective. In this sense, power creates knowledge. Knowledge, of course, also bestows power. Aborigines are no strangers to this concept:

in our cultures, knowledge is literally power - so the most knowledgeable people in any given context have the most status and respect. No single person knows everything - knowledge is divided and kept by different people, ensuring sustainability and survival of the knowledge as well as ensuring no single person can gain too much power over others.<sup>23</sup>

The last point in this quotation is a key point in relation to the discussion of power in this context. The way that individuals engage in the exchange of knowledges and power is what shapes power relations. Power relations, in turn, determine which stories get told and which do not, as well as when the stories get told, how they get told, who tells them and, importantly, who hears them. At present, power relations are such that philosophers in Australia are not telling Aboriginal stories and so they are not recognised as philosophy. I was only able to find a small number of Aboriginal philosophy courses when I searched for them: *Indigenous Philosophy: Contesting Knowledge in Social Science PHIL 1002*, offered by the University of South

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<sup>23</sup>8ways 2011, “Aboriginal Community Protocols,” Wikispaces, <<http://8ways.wikispaces.com/Aboriginal+Community+Protocols>>.

Australia<sup>24</sup>; *Aboriginal Philosophy* HPA344, offered by the University of Tasmania<sup>25</sup> and *Aboriginal Land, Law and Philosophy* AIND20005, offered by the University of Melbourne.<sup>26</sup> At present, then, philosophers in Australia are mostly only telling the stories of the Greeks. And so the Greek stories are philosophy. Story-telling, however, is a powerful political act and, like all philosophies, it is in the telling of Aboriginal stories that Aboriginal philosophy plays out.

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<sup>24</sup>University of South Australia, *Indigenous Philosophy: Contesting Knowledge in Social Science (PHIL 1002)*, Programs at UniSA,

<http://programs.unisa.edu.au/public/pcms/course.aspx?pageid=006921>>.

<sup>25</sup>University of Tasmania, *HPA244 Aboriginal Philosophy*, UTAS Unit Detail, <[http://courses.utas.edu.au/portal/page?\\_pageid=53,33239&\\_dad=portal&\\_schema=PORTAL&P\\_UNIT\\_CODE=HPA244&P\\_YEAR=2012&P\\_CONTEXT=NEW](http://courses.utas.edu.au/portal/page?_pageid=53,33239&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL&P_UNIT_CODE=HPA244&P_YEAR=2012&P_CONTEXT=NEW)>.

<sup>26</sup>University of Melbourne, *AIND20005 Aboriginal Land, Law and Philosophy*, Handbook UniMelb, <<https://handbook.unimelb.edu.au/view/2012/AIND20005?output=PDF>>.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Earth: Locating, Recognising, Understanding; Practical examples**

Last chapter was called Skycamp because that is where I was, floating weightlessly in the abstract. The philosophy in the first chapter is not located; it is all taking place in my head, unrelated to anything tangible or physical. It is out of place. This chapter is called Earth because in this chapter I am slowly coming back to a place, this place, Australia, to begin telling the stories from here. This is where I have a look at some Aboriginal stories, and give us some space in the paper, a chance to be heard, and a chance to take part in the yarn. I will start off with a story that demonstrates the inventive and ingenious ways that Aboriginal people employ humour and language to disrupt paradigms and reassert their own ways of making sense of the world. Then I am going to talk about the processes that go on when stories are told, and about the stories themselves, and demonstrate just how they are philosophy. I am also going to contrast a European philosopher's text and an Aboriginal philosopher's text in order to draw some parallels and to further emphasise the characteristics of Aboriginal philosophy. Essentially, I am going to embed my analysis into some practical examples. So, onto those examples.

## Contesting whitefella paradigms

Basil Sansom's *Irruptions of the Dreamings in Post-Colonial Australia* provides an in-depth analysis of a number of stories that subvert dominant whitefella discourses. The one that stands out to me is 'That Biggest Buffalo Toilet', which goes as follows. Ol Luke, the protagonist, comes bursting into the camp upon returning home from an expedition to catch up with people he knew from his buffalo-shooting days, wearing nothing but boxer shorts and proclaiming 'I bin see; I bin see that biggest Buffalo toilet! That biggest Buffalo toilet!'<sup>27</sup> It transpires that, on the way back to the Darwin camp from the edge of Sickness Country, ol Luke and his companions stumbled upon a huge, fresh buffalo deposit in the middle of the road, which they instantly recognised as a sign of the Buffalo Dreaming<sup>28</sup>.

There are a number of things one needs to know to put this story and its meaning into context. Firstly, ol Luke has been informed by doctors that he has diabetes. The illness has caused his limbs to swell up and his body to bloat. It has also caused him to make more frequent trips to the toilet, which has resulted in great humiliation because he is no longer able to perform these trips with the discretion that is a cultural requirement. One's toilet is considered a 'very private business.'

Secondly, the Buffalo Dreaming story itself:

Buffalo was brought to his end when he encountered a Hornet with a prodigious sting. For no good reason, the cranky Hornet stung Buffalo. Buffalo collapsed onto the ground. Part after part, Buffalo's body swelled up until he was hugely bloated. Buffalo did not recover and he finished up right there where he had suffered. Then he went into the ground, leaving behind at the pace of his last passion that huge rock formation of unmistakable contour and form - the 'biggest Buffalo toilet' of them all.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Sansom, "Irruptions of the Dreamings," 5.

<sup>28</sup>Dreaming or Dreamings can also be used to refer to particular characters or stories that inhabit the 'spiritual fabric of existence' of Dreaming.

<sup>29</sup>Sansom, "Irruptions of the Dreamings," 8.

Finally, the buffalo shooting. In the late 1970s the Australian government decided to slaughter the entire Top End buffalo population because there was disease among them which could have infected Territory cattle with brucellosis or tuberculosis and affected exports. Ol Luke took part in the holocaust, shooting, skinning and gutting buffalo during that time. In other words, ol Luke had ‘tangled’ with the Buffalo Dreaming and given it reason to cause him grief.

The significance of the story, then, is as follows. Years later, the Buffalo Dreaming had finally caught up with ol Luke. It was no coincidence that his body had swelled up like the bloated body of Buffalo. However, upon witnessing ol Luke’s suffering and embarrassment, Buffalo took pity on him and acted to give him both psychological and metaphysical relief. By indicating that ol Luke’s plight was the same as his own, Buffalo released ol Luke from humiliation and gave him licence to be public about his bowel movements, just as a Dreaming would. Most importantly, ‘Buffalo turned ol Luke’s complaint back into blackfella business...He came fully to a comprehension of his own affliction. Maybe whitefella medication could give some relief but what ailed him was no whitefella DIABETES. His was a problem that comes of the Dreamings of the Sickness Country.’<sup>30</sup>

This is just one example of a blackfella reframing of whitefella realities, and the consequent reappropriation of power. In ol Luke’s case, this was the power to make sense of the world in a way that made sense; to unmake and make up stories in order to come to an understanding of the world. To, in effect, engage in philosophy. The interpretation of ol Luke’s story, and the process of extracting meaning from it, in fact, brings us to another issue: the misconception that Aboriginal thoughts mystical rather than logical.

In 1969, Elkin raised the issue of logical thought in his paper *Elements of Australian Aboriginal Philosophy*. Elkin contests the accepted anthropological view of that time, which considered Aborigines prelogical and placed mystical participation rather than logical process at the basis of Aboriginal thought:

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<sup>30</sup>Sansom, “Irruptions of the Dreamings,” 9.

I very quickly realized in my field-work that the Aborigines explained and argued points by what was to me quite logical methods. I could and did disagree with their major premise, but not with the inferences drawn from it...Thus, granted a basic theory or doctrine of pre-existence of the souls or life-cells, or existence-potentials of all creatures and phenomena, beliefs and actions regarding human conception, the increase of natural species and phenomena, and the return of the soul after burial ritual to spirit-homes are quite logical inferences.<sup>31</sup>

Sansom's paper provides further evidence of the use of logical process in determining the meaning of a sign. Sansom outlines the process by which this takes place:

The first phase is prime witnessing - reporting what was experienced and seen. The second is the business of interpretation and interpretation is done by the members of an independent audience who deal with received particulars in order to set them in a larger matrix of understandings. Interpreters invoke and confirm among themselves relevant principles of logic or belief. To their work they also bring further facts concerning persons, events or things...The interpreters work until they have a completed story which they then bring to the party of prime witnesses for those witnesses to assent in.<sup>32</sup>

In the case of ol Luke's story, the conclusions drawn from the sighting of the great buffalo deposit are perfectly logical and the story makes complete sense within that particular belief system. If one accepts the story of the Buffalo Dreaming (which already contains the happenstance of Dreaming retribution, whether provoked or unprovoked), then the sign is obviously pointing to an affliction caused by the Buffalo Dreaming. This is backed up by ol Luke's history, which gives the Buffalo Dreaming very good reason for causing him chronic illness. In short, ol Luke's actions provoked the Buffalo Dreaming to cast affliction upon him which caused ol Luke great embarrassment and suffering which provoked Buffalo to feel pity and leave a sign that alleviated ol Luke's humiliation while also establishing the reasons for it. The

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<sup>31</sup>Elkin, "Elements of Aboriginal Philosophy," 87.

<sup>32</sup>Sansom, "Irruptions of the Dreamings," 6.

form of the sign is also logical and instantly recognisable: why would Buffalo leave any other sign of his presence? With no understanding of Luke's condition and no knowledge of the Buffalo Dreaming, one could draw no parallels. Without the historical context and an understanding of the behaviour of Dreamings, again, one could not link the logical chain of causes and effects together. The thing is, it is a logic that is not contained within 'objective' observation, which recognises only cause and effect isolated from all else, but a complex understanding of a matrix of cultural, historical and geographical references that combine to present a holistic account of an event, negotiated and discussed and given meaning by the various knowledges of the various people responsible for those stories, and woven into a story that interprets and sustains a world view simultaneously. The very same matrixes and processes, in fact, that the scientist and the western philosopher are engaged in<sup>33</sup>, yet sometimes fail to recognise.

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<sup>33</sup>Leonn Satterthwait, personal communication, April 2012.

## Can philosophy be anything but Greek?

Now I am going to perform an experiment, by contrasting two texts: Max Charlesworth's article 'Australian Aboriginal Philosophy' in *A Companion to Philosophy in Australia and New Zealand* and *Yorro Yorro: Everything Standing up Alive: Spirit of the Kimberley* by David Mowaljarlai and Jutta Malnic. Charlesworth states in his article that:

1. Australian Aboriginal cultures do not contain anything remotely similar to what Western European societies call 'philosophy'.<sup>34</sup>
2. It is possible to extract what might be called a 'folk philosophy' from the sophisticated systems of practical knowledge and quasi-religious bodies of mythological material, and a number of anthropologists have attempted to do so.<sup>35</sup>
3. This rudimentary Aboriginal 'folk philosophy' has nothing to offer contemporary philosophers attempting to solve problems relating to metaphysics, ethics or the nature of human consciousness.<sup>36</sup>
4. One reason to study Aboriginal 'philosophy' when it is clearly incommensurable with what Western European societies call 'philosophy' is that it emphasises that philosophy as we know it is a culturally located phenomenon and most past civilisations have survived quite happily without it.<sup>37</sup>

Mowaljarlai begins his preface to *Yorro Yorro* by saying 'I'm very happy about this story. I've been carrying it from my old people for a long-long time, always thinking

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<sup>34</sup> Max Charlesworth, "Australian Aboriginal Philosophy," in *A Companion to Philosophy in Australia and New Zealand*, edited by Graham Oppy, N N Trakakis, Lynda Burns, Steven Gardner and Fiona Leigh (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2010), 65.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

how I can do it.<sup>38</sup> What is it, this thing that people in Western European societies call ‘philosophy’? Could it be a story they have been carrying from their old people - the ancient Greeks - for millennia, always thinking of how they can carry that story and how they can tell it? Mowaljarlai goes on to remember a question of Malnic’s that reminds me of how I have felt at times during my study of philosophy:

How can anybody understand all those stories, what they mean? All the time they are saying di-di-di-di-di. It’s like sand between stones in a dry river - no water, no flow, no direction. You can’t see it’s a river.<sup>39</sup>

I began to understand Foucault far better when I realised he had read Nietzsche. I am sure I will understand Nietzsche better when I read more of Schopenhauer. If I visited the places they lived and wrote, read about the times they wrote in, I would be able to see a much bigger picture. It is like putting together pieces of a puzzle: to begin with there is just a babble of words: existentialism, phenomenology, post-modernism, neo-Kantian; then you begin to see that they are all related to each other and they fit together in a cultural and geographical matrix. In other words, you see the river and not just the stones and the sand.

Mowaljarlai continues:

I had never seen it in fullness myself.

It has opened out more and more to me and given me understanding; what was behind all those stories the old people used to tell. I can see it clearly now, because we have been working on this.

What I am really saying: we walked together over many places and areas, travelled long distances around. Every day we were learning. We got closer and we were understanding it more - the country. It came out to us. Di-di-di-di-di-di - that’s travelling across large spaces, talking, listening, all that. That’s learning to understand.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> David Mowaljarlai and Jutta Malnic, *Yorro Yorro: Everything Standing up Alive: Spirit of the Kimberley* (Broome: Magabala, 1993), xiii.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

(At another point in the text, di-di-di-di-di-di-di, di-di-di-di-di-di-di is referred to as ‘...and he walked and we walked and they walked...’<sup>41</sup>).

There are a two points that stand out to me in this passage. Firstly, there is something behind the stories. Mowaljarlai is not the only one in the book to suggest this. In his foreword, Lommel refers to the collection of Northern Kimberley Aboriginal stories in *Yorro Yorro* as a ‘magnificent and stable “weltbild”, a universality of view which, as we now know, may have existed for 60,000 years.’<sup>42</sup> Secondly, the process by which Mowaljarlai comes to understand the full meaning of the stories is analogous to the process by which I am coming to learn to understand. When I read philosophy texts, I am also travelling across large spaces, talking and listening to people, watching things open out to me. Philosophy is that very process, I think. ‘Learning to understand’; that is the best definition of philosophy I have heard yet.

When I say philosophy, by the way, I am not talking about another narrative *about* Aborigines. Not another history for a people with no history, or anthropology, or cultural studies. I am talking about the philosophy that is already there and has been for thousands of years. I am talking about recognising it as such and attributing it the same value that is attributed to Western European ways of telling stories about the world.

Muecke observes that ‘making up and unmaking stories is what philosophers do in order to rethink the conventions called ‘understanding’.’<sup>43</sup> This understanding of philosophy not only echoes Mowaljarlai’s sentiment; it also allows for philosophy to be inclusive of all sorts of traditions. The argument that philosophy is not a free-floating phenomenon disconnected from time and space, and that it finds its geographical location in Europe and its historical point of origin in Greece, seems to me to be based upon the assumption that philosophy is, by definition, Greek, and cannot exist in any other form. I would argue that it is *a* philosophy, not *the* philosophy; that there were philosophies in all sorts of other places in the world, before and after the Greeks came up with it. I understand that western philosophy is

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<sup>41</sup>Mowaljarlai and Malnic, *Yorro Yorro*, 77.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., x.

<sup>43</sup>Muecke, *Ancient and Modern*, 173.

inherited from the Greeks and therefore culturally laden; I am not saying that Aboriginal philosophy is the same as philosophy that came from Greece, just that it is the same kind of activity and that the term philosophy needs to be understood more broadly. I do not dispute that topology influences philosophy; that the drastically different landscapes of the world can give rise to drastically different understandings of the world. The world, however, contains all of those landscapes - just as philosophy can contain any number of different traditions.

In any case, there are similarities as well as differences between different traditions. Pragmatism, for example, focuses on an important element of Aboriginal philosophy: the role of story-telling. Rorty speaks of 'unforced agreement' rather than 'objectivity', which I understand as a forum in which members negotiate the particulars of worldview, debate what makes the most sense for the community and develop a cohesive practice out of discussion. I would describe the process by which a community of people interpret a Dreaming encounter in almost exactly the same way. Going back to the story of ol Luke, community engagement in determining the meaning of the encounter is paramount. In fact, the very telling of the story was an invitation to comment, or as Sansom puts it, 'transfer the onus'. As Sansom<sup>44</sup> outlines, the receiving of the story had a responsibilities attached to it: to recognise or fail to recognise it as a Dreaming encounter, and if it was recognised as such, to determine the reason for it.

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<sup>44</sup>Sansom, "Interruptions of the Dreamings," 6.

## Fusion of horizons

In *Yorro Yorro*, Mowaljarlai writes of a dream he had:

I dreamed I went right across to Palestine country. They had those old huts and synagogues there made of mudbricks these people used to build with, flat-roofed. That's where I saw Jesus in the holy land, walking between those houses. He turned and looked at me, then kept walking and did not look back again.

He never talked to me. What was he saying to my spirit? That's what I'm asking you - what am I supposed to do, what is going to happen, what is coming?

This light is really live in my body, look, it's swinging me all the time. These dreams have changed my life. It's strange, but the way I see it now is that I must help not only my Aboriginal people, but all people, blacks and whites.

And to come out of that darkness, we've got to try and cope with that true thing, work evenly together to represent the Christ, Jesus, not just Aboriginal-side or just church-side; because this dream told me, "This is the way you must go about it."

And I know now that God comes from sunrise, where power comes from. He comes from the same direction that the Wandjina came from. Power comes from an angle, not from straight above - that is my statement.<sup>45</sup>

Muecke points out that this is not a story of Christian conversion, but an 'accommodation of whitefella magic' into blackfella storytelling.<sup>46</sup> He also asks what I think is a very relevant question: 'How many readers want to bracket out this Christian material as inauthentic Aboriginality, evidence of a sullied and degraded hybrid culture?'<sup>47</sup> It is a question that relates to this very paper: Why the inclusion of a Nietzschean perspective in a thesis about Aboriginal philosophy? Why draw on a continental philosopher's argument to establish the value of such an enterprise? Does

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<sup>45</sup>Mowaljarlai and Malnic, *Yorro Yorro*, 37-38.

<sup>46</sup>Muecke, *Ancient and Modern*, 175.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

it undermine the integrity of both traditions, or is recognising new applications for old philosophies and knowledges necessary?

Nakata's theory of Cultural Interface is relevant here. Yunkaporta defines it as 'the dynamic overlap between systems previously defined as dichotomous and incompatible.'<sup>48</sup> The diagram below outlines how the Cultural Interface is relevant to knowledge.<sup>49</sup>

As Yunkaporta points out, '*at the surface levels of knowledge, there are only differences across cultures. You have to go higher or deeper, then you will find the vast common ground, the interface between different cultures.*'<sup>50</sup>

What I have attempted to do here is emphasise some of the similarities between western philosophy and Aboriginal philosophy in order to create a site for dialogue. My intention is not to prove that Aboriginal philosophy is equal to western philosophy; I do not consider either a benchmark for the other. Neither do I want to set Aboriginal philosophy and western philosophy up as opposites with clear boundaries, mutually exclusive and self-contained. Instead, I want to emphasise possibilities for dialogue and fusion between the two; to concentrate on the site where the two overlap, and on the potential for creation and collaboration within that space. This is precisely what the last chapter will address. First, however, I would like to discuss two concerns.

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<sup>48</sup>Tyson Yunkaporta, *Aboriginal Pedagogies at the cultural interface*, PhD thesis (James Cook University, Queensland, 2009) xv-xvi.

<sup>49</sup> Image removed for copyright purposes.

<sup>50</sup>Yunkaporta, *Aboriginal Pedagogies*, 5.

## Hesitations

Initially, there were a number of reasons I was hesitant about taking the next step towards exploring what Aboriginal philosophy might look like. The first of these was my lack of cultural knowledge. I think that I embody my culture, and that the rituals that take place in my family, our very being-together, and the stories that make up the fabric of our lives are what our culture consists of. However, my reality is not the same as the reality of some - the few - Aboriginal people who have managed to maintain relatively undisturbed cultural links to their country. Stories, practices, and knowledges have been lost because of forced migration, separation and fear. My great-grandmother, for example, did not tell my pop who did not tell my dad who did not tell me the stories. Curiously, the majority of my family live on our traditional land still, and within a half hour drive of our traditional tribal land. But they live on the land largely in silence. This thought brings to mind the exhibit in the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), *Untitled (White Library)* by Wilfredo Prieto.<sup>51</sup>

It is a space that resonates with me on a deep level: it is a similar experience - walking around in a blank landscape that normally holds thousands of words - to going back to country. A place of knowledge empty of knowledge to me because I cannot recognise it. But also a place of potential for knowledge. The unwritten words in the books are still somehow there, just as the stories are written into the landscape. Ambelin Kwaymullina comments in the introduction to *Heartsick for Country*, that ‘because the land holds memory, then for as long as it remains, nothing is ever truly lost. Songs, stories and knowledge that have passed from human memory can still be brought back to us.’<sup>52</sup> There are levels of understanding and sometimes the deepest level is the most accessible.<sup>53</sup> Some things are intuitive; sometimes the body recognises and understands the knowledge a particular place holds. I think this is true. It has happened to me many times, in many places. Country says something to me, and although I cannot articulate it, my body knows it. I may not be able to unearth customs and practices this way, but I can recognise the sacred. My country speaks to

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<sup>51</sup> Image removed for copyright purposes.

<sup>52</sup> Ambelin Kwaymullina, “Introduction: A Land of Many Countries,” in *Heartsick for Country: Stories of Love, Spirit and Creation*, edited by Sally Morgan, Tjalaminu Mia and Blaze Kwaymullina (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2008), 16.

<sup>53</sup> Leonn Satterthwait, personal communication, April 2012.

me in so many other ways, too: I grew up there, and spent about half of my life there, after all. The places up there hold a lot of my memories - memories that I sometimes forget until I go back there, and country reminds me. I miss it still, and it misses me.

In addition to my lack of cultural knowledge, I was also conscious of the fact that I am not an elder in my community. What that meant to me was that I did not have the same authority to speak about knowledge that an elder has, and I did not possess the same knowledge that they do. In Aboriginal cultures, the right to knowledge is not an inalienable right; there is no concept of freedom of information. The right to knowledge is something that must be earned, and with it comes responsibility. Certain things are never told to some people; men's business, for example, is men's business and women's business is women's business. That's it. Or so I thought. Finally, there is the topic of sacred knowledge. I was acutely aware that some knowledge is simply not available for public consumption and I was fearful of somehow overstepping boundaries because an enquiry into Aboriginal philosophy would likely be an enquiry into sacred knowledges.

Now, however, I have come to understand more, and better. I am still wary of causing offence, but less so. Writing my thesis in the form of a personal reflection; situating myself and documenting my movements and my journey from there<sup>54</sup> has allowed me to experiment with more confidence than I would have been able to had I attempted to write as if I were an authority on the matter. Also, I am humbled and heartened by the Northern Kimberley communities' response to putting together *Yorro Yorro: Everything Standing Up Alive: The Spirit of the Kimberley*, which contains much which would be considered sacred knowledge. Daisy Utemorrah of the Mowanjum tribe says '*Yorro Yorro* is for young people to read and learn about. Also it brings memories back to the old people, so we can pass it on to the young. Reminding is good.'<sup>55</sup> David Mowaljarlai reflects that 'my spirit guides have helped me with this work. At times they come and I can feel them standing next to me: my father, my grandfather or my mother or uncle. They are telling me the story, how it goes. They just pour it all out to me, telling me who they are.'<sup>56</sup> This has been my experience thus

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<sup>54</sup> Suggested to me by Leonn Satterthwait, personal communication, April 2012.

<sup>55</sup> Mowaljarlai and Malnic, *Yorro Yorro*, ix.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

far of speaking to people about Aboriginal ways of doing and knowing, and about Aboriginal knowledges; it has not been the minefield I imagined it would be. Every person I have spoken to so far has been overwhelmingly generous with sharing knowledge. They have encouraged me, shared with me, taught me, advised me, and taken me under their wings. I have grown so much in confidence due to this show of support, and I have realised that things are not as inflexible as I imagined. Older women, for example, can sometimes become quite knowledgeable in men's business.<sup>57</sup> It has been, rather, a process based in spontaneity - which makes perfect sense, because people make knowledges, after all. I have begun to understand that it is my very participation that is important, not what I already know or do not know. I have come to see that what is important is the responsibilities I am willing to take on, not the responsibilities I already have or do not have. I am sure that I will still make mistakes but the fear of doing so no longer paralyses me; as long as I act with respect, integrity and sensitivity, I am confident that my mentors will correct me, not condemn me.

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<sup>57</sup>Leonn Satterthwait, personal communication, April 2012.

## Why Aboriginal philosophy?

So, I have attempted to establish that Aboriginal philosophy has the same intrinsic value as Western European philosophy and Science. The practical question remains, though: why not simply accept that in Australia we live in a world dominated by Western European - specifically British - culture, views and stories and adapt to that world instead of challenging it? Do I need a whitefella education simply because that is what everyone else needs to get by? It is all very good to establish in abstract terms that Aboriginal worldviews are as valid as any other worldview - but why change everything to incorporate them? Why is it so important? At present, it will not get you a job, social status, money, security, or a career. What could it possibly offer to a whitefella, or to anyone? Perhaps this is the question that needs asking: not what can a whitefella education offer blackfellas, but what can a blackfella education offer whitefellas? So, what do you need a blackfella's education for?

Let us start off with the sculpture *Tracing Time* by Claire Morgan.<sup>58</sup> Is it a fall from nature that this artwork heralds? Or a fall from artifice, a descent back down towards the earth? The descent is not a gentle one; this is made apparent by the taxidermied wren hurtling downwards with a total lack of control. To me, it reflects the state we are in now globally and locally, plummeting towards catastrophe as some people remain unable or unwilling to understand that we are not separate from nature. This view of the world stands in contrast to the world as other, as an entity outside of us, full of objects, that can be measured, divided, controlled and manipulated. If the world is not inside of us, and we are not inside of it, if we are separate from it, and better than its other inhabitants like animals and trees in this hierarchy we have established, then we get to decide what is valuable and what is not. If we can know Nature, then we are no longer of Nature. Truth is not of the earth. It is not of this country. Truth, Reason and Progress, in fact, are killing this country. Frankly, whitefella education has not been kind to this country. Whitefellas largely seem to have forgotten what Aboriginal people still remember: the land is alive; the land is life. Taking land is taking life; destroying land is destroying life. Blackfella education

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<sup>58</sup> Image removed for copyright purposes.

teaches that when country suffers, people suffer. When country is healthy, people are healthy.

What I am talking about is the concept of ‘relational process’ as outlined by Doris Shillingsworth, Karen Martin and Tyson Yunkaporta in the context of the Aboriginal pedagogy framework 8ways:

“Relational process” is at the heart of “being” - in Aboriginal worldviews an entity cannot exist unless it is in relation to something else, and so our ontology (way of being) is a process of relating to the world. This is shaped by our epistemology - our process of knowing and thinking, which is in turn shaped by our operating process or methodology.<sup>59</sup>

The ethics contained within ‘relational process’ are also explored:

Whatever metaphor you use to describe these layers of relatedness - doing, knowing, being; hands, brain, heart; methodology, epistemology, ontology - there is something missing. The missing part is valuing/spirit/axiology. This is the most basic expression of Law, and the foundation of Aboriginal pedagogy. You have to work backwards in this process, from Law to relations to knowledge to practice. Spirit to heart to brain to hands. Axiology to ontology to epistemology to methodology. So that first step is always respect.<sup>60</sup>

Respect must form the basis of blackfella education; this is something that whitefella education often lacks. Responsibility is another important element of blackfella education. The paragraph below addresses the obligations contained within blackfella education and the reasons for it:

Our ways of knowing this web of relatedness actually co-create it - existence only continues to exist because we know it. This is our reason for existing, our purpose as a custodial species...We maintain reality

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<sup>59</sup>8ways, “Relationally Responsive Pedagogy”.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

through culture - through story, ceremony, song and social systems (relationships). But we do more than simply maintaining creation - we also have an obligation to increase complexity and relatedness. We have been given a unique spiritual makeup to help us fulfil this role. <sup>61</sup>

Respect and responsibility, then, are two things that blackfella education has to offer whitefellas; these same two things can also provide for are connection to country - a place - and a future in that place. In order to fulfil the ethical imperative to maintain creation, we must engage in it; that way we fulfil our obligation to contribute to increased complexity and relatedness in the world. Failure to do so will mean a descent into chaos.

The antithesis of creation is simplicity. Entropy comes from the isolation, simplification and unification of systems that are by their nature interconnected, complex and diverse...Complex, adaptive, diverse systems become basic, static monocultures which cannot be sustained. This is an unravelling of creation, the inevitable result of which will be the end of all life. <sup>62</sup>

Blackfella education - and Aboriginal philosophy - must enter into dialogue with whitefella education: a dialogue between two equal parties in which the most rational beliefs are judged by their practical applications, rather than their correspondence to a supposed external reality that contains Truth. It is entirely possible, as Rorty observes, that 'what is rational for us now to believe may not be *true*.'<sup>63</sup> In fact, it is far more likely that is the case. If Dewey is correct, and 'any philosophical system is going to be an attempt to express the ideals of *some* community's way of life,'<sup>64</sup> then let us create a philosophical system that represents the entire community's way of life. Why continue to engage with a philosophical system that does not represent us, all of us, in our place at this time? It is the time to create a new vocabulary. It is the place to think different thoughts.

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<sup>61</sup>8ways, "Relationally Responsive Pedagogy".

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*, 23.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.,43.

## Chapter Three

### Overlap: Reflecting, Turning around, Creating; At the interface

The past, present and future are not separate concepts in all world views. Wal Wal Ngallametta, a Kugu Songman, Oldman, once told me about this - the way past, present and future are only one time and place, that creation is forever unfolding yesterday, today and tomorrow. In this way our hero ancestors still walk the land, and always will. He saw an overlap between things that others see as separate domains. He talked about “Kangk nanam, nyiing inam”, a concept that has always been around on this continent, the idea of a common ground or interface between old way and new way that keeps cultures alive and in motion.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Yunkaporta, *Aboriginal Pedagogies*, 2.

## Movement

Tyson told me that there are two camps, skycamp and earth. Once they were one, spiritmaterial, all one, but then they separated: skycamp became skycamp and earth became earth. This was the turnaround. In some places, though, the two still overlap: these places are the sacred places. We can also initiate turnarounds by performing Ceremony and allowing for skycamp and earth to meet - to overlap - in a particular place.<sup>66</sup> A discussion of this theme can also be found on the 8ways webpage:

Creation is sparked by the separation and overlap of opposite forces, a turnaround of spirit and material, skycamp and earth. This delicate but turbulent process is constantly in motion, and responds to our ways of relating to it. Our ways of knowing this web of relatedness actually co-create it - existence only continues to exist because we know it.<sup>67</sup>

Overlaps and turnarounds mean slightly different things to me. I conceive of turnarounds as paradigm shifts, those *aha* moments, when we are able to inhabit a *sphere of possibility*, a sacred, impermanent space we infuse with sacred meaning. I conceive of overlaps as sacred, permanent places, permanent *sites of possibility* already infused with sacred meaning. What they have in common is that they cause a ‘suspension’; a site where creation and meaning-making are paramount, a place of paradox, a place where all things are possible. As Rose points out, ‘The essence of paradox is that the boundaries are only meaningful in context. In ceremony, paradoxical play becomes an art form, and boundaries are demolished, constructed, and above all asserted to be arbitrary.’<sup>68</sup>

When I imagine this in visual form I see the mouth of a river, or an estuary. They are a pair, spheres and sites; accordingly, they exist in tension but also in balance. Sites create spheres; spheres create sites. Transposed onto the image, if the *sphere of possibility* is contained within a *site of possibility* - the mouth of the river - there is

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<sup>66</sup>Tyson Yunkaporta, personal communication, May 2012.

<sup>67</sup>8ways, “Relationally Responsive Pedagogy”.

<sup>68</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo makes us human: Life and land in an Aboriginal Australian culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 216.

entry and exit as water flows both into and out of the estuary. It also flows in different directions, like energy in a sphere or site; there is interaction, dialogue and exchange.

Body and place seem to me to be another instance of forces that interact in a constant process. Body and place are separate but not separate: body parts of Dreamings can often be found scattered through the landscape, and the landscape can also be found on the body. Ritual scarring, for example, is the transfer or transcribing of knowledge from the land onto the body; knowledge that is located in the land becomes located on the body as one gains knowledge. The interaction of these first two tenets of Aboriginal philosophy indicates a third tenet: everything is one. The means by which this interaction takes place - process or movement - is a fourth tenet. In this paper, I am going to explore the first two tenets explicitly, drawing on Jeff Malpas' work; the second two will, for now, remain implicit in this thesis. I think the picture below by David Mowaljarlai of the body of this place<sup>69</sup> provides the perfect reflective framework for this next section.

The squares are the areas where the communities are represented...The lines are the way the history stories travelled along these trade routes. They are all interconnected. It's the pattern of the Sharing system...The whole of Australia is Bandaiyan. The front we call *wadi*, the belly-section, because the continent is lying down flat on its back. It is just sticking out from the surface of the ocean...Inside the body is Wunggud, the Snake. She grows all of nature on the outside of her body. The sides are *unggnudjullu*, rib-section. This rib-section goes right across the country, above the navel. Uluru is the navel, the center, *wangigit*. The part below the navel is *wambut*, the pubic section. There is a woman's section, *njambut*; and a man's section, *ambut*. The shoulder parts are *manu*...They are *ungadjella*, all the islands. They are connected. So is Tasmania, the footside, *wemballaru*. Right up top is the head-part, *ulangun*: Cape York, Arnhemland, Kimberley, Bathurst and Melville islands, that area. Below the gulf of Carpentaria are the lungs, *wumangnalla*.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Image removed for copyright purposes.

<sup>70</sup> Mowaljarlai and Malnic, *Yorro Yorro*, 190-191.

## Located knowledge, located philosophy.

Deborah Bird Rose observes that ‘to be located is to have a ground from which to know, to act, to invite and deny, to share and ask, to speak and to be heard. Old Jimmy Manngayarri, a Bilinara emu man, expressed this groundedness through an analogy with trees. Both people and trees, he said, have their roots in the ground.’<sup>71</sup> Aboriginal people often refer to trees. I wonder if this is because trees and plants are the ultimate expression of located beings; humans and animals - even rocks - can move around, but trees have one place, and they do not leave that place even when they die. Malpas argues that ‘particular places enter into our self-conception and self-identity inasmuch as it is only in, and through our grasp of, the places in which we are situated that we can encounter objects, other persons or, indeed, ourselves.’<sup>72</sup> Place, therefore, is prior to knowledge. Moreover, ‘the fundamental grounding of subjectivity and of mental life in place is mirrored in the subject’s own self-conceptualisation in terms of place and location.’<sup>73</sup> I understand this to mean that knowledge of ourselves comes from and in place. This brings a question to mind: ‘If we come to know ourselves in a particular place, can we come to know other things?’ In other words, can a place hold knowledge? According to Rose,

Country is alive with information for those who have learned to understand. Throughout the world information is spatially dispersed and locally controlled. Events, rather than calendrical time, provide information: the world talks about itself all the time. Crocodiles (*Crocodylus johnstoni*), for instance, only lay their eggs at one time of year. Yarralin people know that it is time to hunt for crocodile eggs when the black march flies start biting...In following their own Laws they communicate themselves; those who know the interconnections find information in their actions.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Rose, *Dingo makes us human*, 106.

<sup>72</sup>J. E. Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 177.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>74</sup>Rose, *Dingo makes us human*, 225.

For Aboriginal people, places hold knowledge of past events and people who know how to listen can hear the place speak to them. As soon as that person enters a place - usually a sacred place, an overlap of skycamp and earth - their body knows that place; it feels the knowledge, senses it, understands it. Aboriginal people speak a lot about feelings, spirits, juju, sacredness. Of course, it is difficult to put such sensations into words because they exist in a realm that words do not have access to, something like immediate, direct knowledge; intuition, perhaps. Nonetheless, it is knowledge.

If place is essential to an understanding of the world, then it might be possible to conceive of place as a depository of knowledge. In fact, Malpas almost goes as far as to suggest this:

‘to know’ is not merely to be acquainted with something nor does it primarily involve a grasp of a body of true and justified propositions. Instead, it is a matter of one’s locatedness within a particular region; of an ability to find one’s way within such a region; and perhaps, above all else...a matter of dwelling or of being ‘at home’. In this sense, one’s ‘knowledge’ is the region in and through which one’s life is established and defined...<sup>75</sup>

Malpas draws on a description of ‘The Knowledge’, a test that London cab-drivers must pass to get a licence to drive a cab, to illustrate this point. According to Malpas, this example indicates that ‘perhaps one ought to think of knowledge as itself always a form of such locatedness or ‘placing’ - as always a knowledge in and of place.’<sup>76</sup> ‘The Knowledge’ tests one’s familiarity with central London, as well as one’s ability to navigate the region’s urban geography. It is not a simple list of streets that need to be identified, but an understanding of how the streets are interconnected, and an understanding of how to move around in that particular place; it is a person’s ‘feel’ for a place that is assessed. Here, knowledge and intuition become intertwined; this knowledge of place and navigation of place is a bodily knowledge. For Malpas, ‘the

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 190.

<sup>76</sup>Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 190.

very possibility of understanding or of knowledge resides in locatedness and in a certain embeddedness in place.<sup>77</sup> What is it that embeds us in place? Our bodies.

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<sup>77</sup>Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 190.

## **Embodied knowledge, embodied philosophy**

If Aboriginal philosophy is a philosophy of place, then it must also address that which inhabits place: the body. In a discussion about agency, Malpas suggests that ‘to have knowledge or understanding of the world in general then, is fundamentally a matter of being able to act and to move, in a certain complex and organised fashion, within that world.’<sup>78</sup> Malpas goes on to describe ‘The Knowledge’, as mentioned earlier. According to Malpas, this illustrates that ‘To have a grasp of one’s own location, or of the larger space in which one finds oneself, is essentially tied to the capacity to navigate and to move within that space and from one location to another.’<sup>79</sup> In order to do this, one must have an understanding of how different locations are connected to each other, which translates into a grasp of the pathways between those locations. I detect a parallel between the way a cab-driver moves through the city of London and an Aboriginal person moves through country. The cab-driver’s ‘pathways’ are the Aboriginal person’s ‘songs’, for it is songs (or stories) that allow one to move through unfamiliar landscape. Aboriginal stories act as maps; indeed, they can only be properly understood as one walks over the land that they describe. It is not a coincidence that the di-di-di-di-di-di of the people of the Kimberley features in the stories; they understand that walking - bodily movement - is an important part of the process, and that the body must move in order to gain knowledge.

Embodied knowledge contrasts with the western conception of knowledge, which traditionally understands it as something that takes place in the mind: a disembodied knowledge. In this tradition, it is not the body that travels from place to place to gain knowledge, but knowledge that travels from mind to mind. The concept that knowledge can only be arrived at through movement relates back to the concept of place as a reservoir of knowledge. In order to absorb the knowledge contained in place, the body must visit the places that contain it. By visiting a place, and knowing it - re-cognising it - the body re-creates that place, as the place re-creates that body. Each infuses the other with meaning.

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<sup>78</sup> Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 134-135.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

## Conclusion

I would like to reflect for a moment on a dream that Stephen Muecke had on Cadigal land. It was the last thing he spoke of in his book, so it seems appropriate to mention it here. It goes as follows:

My dream took place in a classroom in a building a couple of floors above the land. We were trying to discuss Aboriginal philosophy and there were a couple of Aboriginal students in the class who offered a presentation. Suddenly there was a great pile of pebbles on the floor and, with her bare feet, one of the young women was tracing a path in them. This contoured path, something like a circular track, was formed by her feet working down and smoothing the little pebbles, smoothing them sideways and forwards. She was almost dancing. And then she made another track, parallel and overlapping with the first.

She was finished and suddenly I was seized with a desire to take a photograph. But it was already too late; she was smoothing over the tracks, erasing them and making her patch of stones into a smooth space.

Now, the other young woman did her thing and she was talking in a traditional language as she carried in more stones. They were like slabs of concrete. Maybe one slab and some smaller fragments piled on top. These she carried on her arms, cradled on her forearms like one might carefully place a well-ironed shirt (this analogy occurred to me at the time) and very carefully placed them one by one on the smoothed-out bed of pebbles. It was important that the smaller stones not fall off as she did this. She was repeating a text each time but I could only catch a person's name as she did this. Each slab seemed to be dedicated to a person in the class, so that we were all included by name, even myself and even an academic friend from another university who was not present.<sup>80</sup>

This dream says a lot to me; in fact, it mirrors much of what I have been saying, or vice versa. The focus on the floor, even though the building is above land, represents

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<sup>80</sup>Muecke, *Ancient and Modern*, 177-178.

adaptability and a fusion of approaches. The movement of tracing - dancing (Ceremony) - a pattern in the stones represents the central role of movement in knowledge and the embodiment of knowledge and learning (philosophy). The two tracks of knowledge - songlines - are parallel and overlapping, which represents the interfaces we inhabit. The lack of hesitancy to destroy in order to create by smoothing out the stones represents not holding onto tradition just for the sake of it. The slabs of concrete represent non-Aboriginal knowledges; the care she takes with that knowledge, holding it so carefully, underlines the importance of respect. The importance she places on balancing the two knowledges alludes to the role of balance and tension in creation. The naming of each person who is a part of the process points to the fact that each one of us has a role to play in co-creating existence by knowing it, locating it, and embodying it.

So, what *do* you need a whitefella's education for? So you can engage in dialogue with a blackfella education. Living in between two intellectual cultures gives you the opportunity to reflect upon both of those cultures; to see the strengths and weaknesses in both systems, and to recognise compatibilities and opportunities for collaboration in making meaning. In short, to increase knowledge and relatedness; to allow old things come together in a new way.

This has been a profoundly personal journey. It has been a time for reflection and self-reflection: an opportunity to grow in understanding and confidence both intellectually and personally. I have explored a number of questions that have been playing on my mind for some time - questions relating to identity, place and responsibility especially. Writing this paper has truly been a rite of passage.

At present, I have decided not to apply to study a PhD at Oxford. The process of writing this thesis has got me moving in a different direction. I am already in the place I need to be in to explore Aboriginal philosophy, I have realised. In fact, it would be absurd for me to move to the other side of the world to study a located philosophy in an entirely different place - at this stage, at least. As Ingo pointed out, movement is not only towards something but away from it, and at times distance between oneself

and a place may allow for greater insight; my trip to Oxford is an example of this<sup>81</sup>. There may come a time for such movement. But for now, the place I need to be is here.

Usually, this is the place where I would close the yarn. This time, though, I want to keep it open. Why? One of the reasons I chose to write this thesis in the shape of a yarn is because I see it as an invite for others to speak. In any case, one of the aims of this project is to provide a space in which Aboriginal narratives can be told and listened to, rather than just non-Aboriginal narratives. To make a philosophy that reflects this place, now: a philosophy that is alive, here. For me, this is just the beginning of the yarn, the beginning of a discussion. So I am extending that invite out to everyone who encounters this yarn: respond, relate, create. Yarn with me.

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<sup>81</sup> Ingo Farin, personal communication, June 2012.

## **Postscript: A philosophy of this body in this place**

When I was in the process of writing this thesis, Leonn and Ingo made some suggestions that floated about in my consciousness - and my body - for a bit and finally took the shape of a map. This map consisted of a number of places I wanted to visit in Tasmania in the last weeks of writing my thesis. I wanted to go to those places to spend time there and see what knowledge those places might give me. To experiment with the ideas I have explored about the intersection of body, place and knowledge. To write about my experiences, and to write about the knowledge that the custodians of those places gave me (the appropriate knowledge, with the appropriate permission, of course). Like so many ideas, though, it did not quite happen as planned. I had too many demands on my time, schedules did not match up, and plans were postponed. I am not concerned about it; knowledge is something that comes in stages, and cannot be rushed. It presents itself at the appropriate time and place. The project, though - an exploration of a philosophy of this body in this place - is still pending.

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