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On Decolonising our Thinking and Cultural Exchange

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The farmers didn't want the protest camp. *Oh it's in the forest won't harm my property*, farmers said. *And what about Gomeri property which is ALL of it?* says us Murri – Interview with Gomeri women, 3 December 2015.

1. Introduction¹

We need to acknowledge that the world we inhabit and try to explain is largely a stolen place. This is certainly true for settler colonial states like Australia, USA, Canada, and New Zealand, but processes of cultural, spatial and material dispossession have also enabled the emergence of hegemonic states in other parts of the world. Colonialism is global, there is no place on this earth that is not, in one way or another, colonial. And it has also shaped our understanding of the world. To address the need to challenge that colonial bias we want to open this book with a reflection on the decolonisation of knowledge. This reflection is based on Australian examples but has universal jurisdiction and speaks to many of the chapters of this book.

All researchers in Australia, and in many other parts of the world, are formally bound by institutional research regulations (NHMRC, 2007), including ethical research in 'the Indigenous space' (AIATSIS, 2012; Nicholls, 2009; Fredericks, 2008). But despite what is usually referred to as 'consultation' with Aboriginal scholars and communities, formal ethics requirements developed by bureaucracies and in universities and elsewhere can not escape the constitutive character of institutional outputs.

This chapter supplements those formal requirements by bringing together four general principles on decolonising knowledge with methodological reflections based on research undertaken on Gamilaraay Gomeri country. While we interviewed people from many walks of life (see chapter 8), the richest learning came from conversations with countrymen and

women who share a 50,000 year old connection to country. This is consistent with the central organising principles of Aboriginal societies, founded in kin and country.

Researchers in Australia are morally obliged to find out and follow local Aboriginal protocol, whether on Darug or Kuringai, Wiradjuri, Dunghutti or Nganwaywana lands.² The principles set out here are a general guide to discharging that obligation. As the opening quote tells, wherever we go in Australia, we are on Aboriginal land. Etiquette, as an ethical practice, is a universal social norm: to not respect local protocol is poor form in any culture.

2. Decolonising our Thinking, in Academia and Real Life

The principles enunciated here emerged from a range of lived experiences. The first is my identity as a white person accountable to Aboriginal family (through in-law relationships). This identity derives from the ways in which Aboriginal kinship practices recognise extended family.

All societies have cultural norms and rules which regulate partnerships and reproduction – new life and family life. White social organisation is hierarchical, regulating exclusion as much as inclusion. Aboriginal norms are organised around inclusion, mutuality and reciprocity. Thus, without a specific transgression to warrant exclusion, Aboriginal societies tend to accommodate visitors into the social space. This is in contrast to western class structures which perpetuate unwarranted superiority and social exclusion.

The genuinely egalitarian character of Aboriginal societies may influence the Australian character more than we know (or admit). Australia is not in fact egalitarian although our national story insists we are – or want to be (Sheppard & Biddle, 2015). The existing societies were here for upwards of 50,000 years before the English brought their rigidly hierarchical social rules and countermanning need to emancipate convicts for the colonial project. In any case, ancestry does not determine wealth in contemporary Australian society as it did in feudal England. The key point is that while ancestry as a determinant is common to most social systems, social belonging derived from kinship relations along principles of inclusion is distinct from social status derived from inherited wealth and exclusivity.

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The second source from which these principles were distilled is a first year law curriculum development initiative, which aimed to include impacts of the Australian legal system on First Peoples (Head, Mann & Matthews, 2015). That project required extensive consultation before committing to publication what future lawyers would learn about criminalisation of Aboriginal people and of Aboriginality, by the colonial settler state (in our case, New South Wales and the Commonwealth of Australia). Thus the publication relied on the work of Aboriginal scholars and the expertise and input of Aboriginal family and friends.

As a curriculum project which contributed to these decolonising principles, it is important to also acknowledge the part played by students. This reflects our role as a conduit (Arvanitakis & Matthews, 2014), where conversations on country came together with queries and discussions in the class room. Student engagement provided insight into potential knowledge gaps, into student interest in First Peoples of the land where we live, and into what more we can do in higher education. With few exceptions, student interest came across as authentic and deeply respectful.

In this context it should be noted that Western Sydney – where I work and live – is the most diverse region in Australia, and ethno-cultural identities and languages from all over the world are represented among the Western Sydney University student body. Many of the students come from households where their parents or grandparents fled war, religious persecution, and dispossession. As such, the development of the decolonising principles includes a background of student-teacher dialogues informed by experience or backgrounds from many different perspectives and even specific conflicts where Australia was allied with the aggressor, such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

One task, therefore, is to bring an understanding that we are on stolen Aboriginal land into the contemporary multicultural classroom. Although it is relatively new to fully recognise peoples who were routinely and savagely dehumanised by colonisers, it is certainly not new to the western canon to learn by dialogue hold to a pedagogy of virtue. Here, we are merely de-centering inaccurate colonial accounts, honouring those First Peoples on whose lands we gather, and learning from a culture of inclusion to ensure First Peoples voices are heard and

not erased. Colonial practices of erasure, in the academy and public debate, are continuous and continuing, so in this chapter we seek to counter that deeply entrenched norm.

This approach demands consistency across the academic and non-academic landscape. It is not possible to do research on country with integrity, to have conversations and record interviews with countrymen and women, and not 'be yourself'. Can any of us really say where is the demarcation between fieldwork, analysis, and writing, between teaching the resulting content to undergraduate students and posting our work on social media for discussion with colleagues and with people outside our field?

This is not a release to lower ethical standards but quite the opposite. There is no place in decolonised scholarship for the colonial free-for-all, the methodology whereby any white man with a horse and patronage could publish his journal on the exotic ways of peoples and clans on country that the author and his people had invaded. As with institutions globally, at least in principle (Martinez Cobo, 1983), ethical research on country rejects the evolutionary paradigm. This odious hotch-potch of pseudo sciences – eugenics, social Darwinism, craniometrics, phrenology – was created to cast First Peoples as 'naturally' deficient. This in turn gave false licence to breach universal norms of respect for local protocol, and freedom to the coloniser to interpret his 'empirical' observations for destructive consumption.

Research on country must proceed with 'commitment to Indigenous peoples first and foremost, not to the intellectual or academic issues alone' (Nakata, 2006, p. 266).

The third source for these principles was a crystallising of the first two, via research on country. The richness of cultural exchange facilitated by a 'quantum of trust' during fieldwork in the Pilliga is described in Chapter 8 of this volume. On return, I distilled the three sources – conversations with extended family, curriculum development research, and classroom exchange – into a conference paper on the decolonising principles presented here. This generated feedback from colleagues in 'the Aboriginal research space' (researching First Peoples but not Aboriginal) and allowed me to incorporate comment from Aboriginal delegates (Angeles, 2016; Napaltjarri Davis, 2016).

Finally, the caveats.

I am not an Aboriginal person and do not claim expertise in the law, knowledge, or culture of any First Peoples clan or country. This work represents what Porter (2011), in the context of Lockean theory explored elsewhere in this volume, calls 'unlearning'. It is a judgement call on what may be usefully shared, in an un-demarcated academic-real world context. It is not a comprehensive guide or analysis. There is already substantial literature around each principle. This is a distilled account of my efforts to decolonise, as an Australian and as a researcher (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). The analogies are intended to be illustrative, for 'explaining the ordinary' (Barnes, 2000). Reasoning by analogy, and comparative points through western legal history and theory, is largely how I communicate and link ideas – both here and when teaching.³ The work remains, however, conceptually constrained by the exclusivity of the western tradition, and the limitations of the English language, as the language of the coloniser and a colonised imagination. Any errors remain my own.

3. Four Principles of Decolonising Knowledge Systems

3.1 Place-based

Perhaps the most likely site of understanding the pre-eminence of place is the Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country. This is a formal and ancient protocol which has been adopted for public events, by Australian government institutions, and is respected in schools. A recognised custodian on country – a Larrakia person on Larrakia lands, a Darug person on Darug lands – welcomes the delegates or participants or audience to a public or formal event. Respects are offered to ancestors, some local knowledge may be shared, it may include singing, dancing, music, ceremony. Many Welcomes are spoken in local language and English. An acknowledgement is when a visitor publicly offers respects to the First People on whose lands an event is held.

A welcome is not mere permission (in Anglo-Australian property law, a *bare licence*), like paying at the gate to enter a sports arena. A Welcome to Country is a public confirmation of good will and exchange – on all sides. The permission can be withdrawn.

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All cultures have norms and practices around leaving one space, however it is delineated – public or private, personal or legal – and entering another (Matthews, 2016). We arrive at a friend's home carrying a bottle of wine or a dish to contribute to the shared meal we are about to have, and ring the doorbell. Conversely, if we enter another's land without permission, an action in trespass may lie. The English conception of trespass reflects the English culture of social organisation around exclusion (in property law, the *right to exclude*). A Welcome ceremony also reflects local culture, in dance and song and humour, 'granting permission' in a way that shares knowledge on and about country.

In practical terms, it is incumbent on visitors to find out who are the First Peoples of the lands we visit. This is obviously no great burden in the digital age. Visitors should also be alert to 'white narratives' which too often imply that First Peoples lack knowledge of their own social relations and country. For researchers, if sourcing basic [decolonised] geographical facts proves too great a burden, the research aims and method need to be reviewed.

3.2 The Past Co-exists with the Present

It is typical enough for the western canon to draw on Aristotle to understand the elevation of reason over emotion, or understand how Hume set up the pivot to positivism, or look to Locke for the common ancestry of revolutionary democracy and private property rights. At the same time, western thought insists on depicting First Peoples' traditions, with origins fifty times older than Aristotelian philosophy, as primitive or savage. Civilisation on the great Southern land has survived over 50 millennia and two centuries of colonial violence. It is sophisticated, complex and subtle (Pascoe, 2014).

The English refused to see the Peoples and languages and law as diverse and integrated; a cosmology and a reality; physical and metaphysical. Their eyes and ears did not transmit what they were looking at, and being told by the locals. As Black (2011, p. 348) writes

But then I ask how can people who come from such young cultures as those of Europe comprehend the sophistication of a continuous culture that goes back more than sixty thousand years? To be truly 'of the great southern continent' a newcomer needs to engage with the ancient history of the continent through the

intellectual traditions of one or more of the two hundred clans in language, song, dance, and localized common law. Otherwise, newcomers are forever grafting themselves onto a landscape about which they have no real historical understanding, let alone a sustained relationship with, other than as a pit from which to extract resources to sustain the consumer lifestyle of the coast-bound capital cities. In other words, they are devoid of stories from the land. The land is silent, mute to their efforts, belligerent in its continued extremes of flood and drought.

The dominant 'enlightenment' legacy is the evolutionary paradigm: the ludicrous assumption that only propertied white men are fully human. As internationally acknowledged by the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People* (UN, 2007), race is not a real thing. It was made up by white men who invented a hierarchy of humanity and placed themselves at the top. Poly-genetics – more than one 'species' of humanity – was accelerated by 'empirical' observations of Australia (Anderson & Perrin, 2008). Many Peoples are still fighting for the return of ancestors' remains and artefacts, stolen at gunpoint for the purpose of these pseudo-scientific pursuits.

The story of Rodney Murrum Kelly illustrates just one such quest. Kelly is pursuing the return of the Gwaegal Shield, stolen by Cook during his 1770 stop at Kamay (Botany Bay). The British Museum refuses to return the shield, arguing that seven million visitors a year can appreciate and learn from the Shield being in its collection. When Mr Kelly travelled to London and made some empirical observations of his own, he found that few visitors glanced at, and none stopped to appreciate, the Shield.

That shield and those spears represents how Australia was conquered, not discovered and the genocide of our people that took place from that moment onwards. In history, we are just the savages. People in Australia are taught that Cook just walked on to the shore that day, found an abandoned camp where he peacefully exchanged some spears and shields with some beads. But these artefacts can teach a new generation how it wasn't peacefully settled, that from day one we were shot at. Back home, it could do so many things for me and my people, but in that case in the British Museum, it's as if it means nothing (Ellis-Petersen 2016).

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Murum Kelly also describes the experience of visiting the shield at the British Museum, where it is displayed alongside other Polynesian (sic) artefacts: *I felt insulted and angry. They don't respect it. People walk past it everyday and don't look at it, don't know the significance of it. You can't see the back of it, which is important...* (ibid)

As with similar accounts across the globe, the story of Murum Kelly and the British Museum encapsulates the significance of decolonising our perspective to recognise that the past co-exists with the present. Every Australian institution today – public and private, government and politics and industry and corporations and media and universities – is a rigidly hierarchical structure, dominated at the top by the assumed superiority of a single demographic. This form of social organisation is destructive in any context, and is especially jarring when superimposed on non-patriarchal societies (which essentially means all societies more than 2,000 years old – see French, 1985). It is also inherently dishonest.

The lies of liberalism are built into the colonial template. Liberal democracy claims to offer 'peace order and good governance'; to provide equality before the law (Rule of Law) and to not violate fundamental rights and freedoms. Liberalism says that social reward – material wealth, political representation – is based on merit. Meanwhile, Aboriginal people are told to 'get over it' (Moodie, 2016) and the Anzac myth is smothered with ever more nationalist jingoism. 'Mateship' is elevated to sacred status, a narrative which excludes all women and has only belatedly, and again with much black struggle, included Aboriginal veterans.

The Frontier wars are erased like the women and Aboriginal veterans from imperial wars. Go back further and the ocean-going voyages to populate first this land eclipse anything the world had ever known – yet the British lay claim to have landed the First Fleet. The *first* fleet? Australia is an island.

At the heart of white hegemony, at the way we honour our war dead while refusing to recognise an older, deeper resistance, is *terra nullius* thinking (Watson, 2015). It is the equation of progress with linear time and the association of black and tribal peoples with backwardness and being in a pre-social contract 'state of nature'. It is the time machine of the

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Anglo-European enlightenment, whereby newly-arrived aliens declare an ancient homeland 'the new world'.

White science might confirm that Burrup Peninsula engravings are ten times older than the pyramids, that Gunditjmara aquaculture dates back 8000 years, that the Brewarrina fish traps are the oldest known standing human construction on earth. Such antiquity is impressive, but white methodology is relentlessly linear. Luke Pearson (2016) examines what 'oldest continuing cultures on earth' means:

Viewed through the wrong lens it can also be seen to suggest that because we had a 'continuous culture' for over 60,000 years that there were no changes, no adaptations, no innovations, and was not influenced by individuals of great talent and skill. Aboriginal cultures in Australia maintained certain consistencies, but we also know that it survived through significant periods of change and needed to be able to grow and to adapt to survive and thrive in these changing environments.

Marvelling at the antiquity of Aboriginal artefacts is counter-productive when the framing perpetuates stone-age stereotypes. This does not mean we can not marvel. It means that 60,000 years of living culture is a long time to accumulate knowledge of the land and the human condition. This must frame research projects and the pursuit of what western scholarship tends to fetishise as 'new knowledge'. From the perspective of people colonised and dispossessed, criminalised and enslaved, the enlightenment was a dark Ages. Devising a false hierarchy of humanity and calling it science to cruelly destroy entire societies which had co-existed for millennia is not enlightened. We must know this deeply before visiting country in the name of science.

3.3 Aboriginal Law is not Frozen in Time

This concept reflects much of what has been written above, but the phrase itself carries particular weight. It is a quote from the most pivotal case in Anglo-Australian law, *Mabo v State of Queensland* (1992). When our highest court makes such an unequivocal determination, it is not merely a legal fact but becomes part of the common law of the land.

Mabo is lawful authority for recognition that native title holders' rights and interests in land pre-date and have survived the assertion of sovereignty by the British crown. It is recognition by the white law of the existence and survival of Aboriginal law. It does not, however, resolve the problems of illegitimacy which it invokes. With the rejection of the legal fiction of *terra nullius* as bad law, the use of force by the English to seize the land is delegitimised. For 204 years, the use of force was framed as 'peaceful settlement' of a 'land belonging to no-one'. *Mabo* not only confirmed the pre-existence of Aboriginal law, but recognised that Aboriginal people, society and law has, by ingenuity and necessity, adapted and changed to colonial conditions.

Researchers can and should take on board the intellectual implications of decolonising our thinking as we frame proposals and seek ethics approvals and plan our fieldwork. At the same time, the case for doing so is strengthened by the fact that *terra nullius* has been overturned at law, by our highest court; and that pre-existing and continuing Aboriginal rights and interests in land are codified into the law of the Commonwealth by the Australian parliament (*Native Title Act 1993* (Cth)). Other than by constitutional amendment endorsed by a majority of voters in a majority of states by referendum, this is the strongest legal authority available in the Australian system.

3.4 Anglo-centrism and Euro-centrism Produce Inaccuracies

Any scholar should be concerned about inaccuracy. To borrow from the example above, where a white researcher will marvel at the antiquity of a linear time stamp, an Aboriginal writer will emphasise caring for country over the same period. Caring for country over generations brings knowledge of country, connection to country, and love of country. It may ultimately bring authority to speak for country, such as authority to welcome strangers onto country.

The deeply-embedded institutionalisation of Anglo- and Euro-centrism are held in place by continuously recolonising narratives, such as the 'Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums' issued by European and American institutions in defence of their continued ownership of stolen artefacts:

Today we are especially sensitive to the subject of a work's original context, but we should not lose sight of the fact that museums too provide a valid and valuable context for objects that were long ago displaced from their original source. The universal admiration for ancient civilizations would not be so deeply established today were it not for the influence exercised by the artifacts of these cultures, widely available to an international public (DIVUM, 2002).

This is quite simply untrue. It implies that living First Peoples cultures are of the past. The place-based principle demonstrates ontologically that it is not possible to provide accurate context to an Aboriginal object in London. If the English want to showcase the fact of their past plundering, a replica can do that. A stolen artefact is of inherent value to the descendants of its maker. Nor are these institutions universal: the vast majority of Aboriginal people can not afford overseas holidays, due to the historical fact that the English dispossessed them of their resources. The statement perpetuates colonial fictions for colonial purposes.

The inclination to frame Aboriginal tradition as *frozen in time* or as *primitive* denotes a lack of critical thinking, but care is needed not to twist this too. White thinkers must question our own unfounded assumptions, and not mistake this for questioning traditional knowledge people have been generous enough to share. With respect to colonial crimes and cultural loss, asking *why* is not necessarily useful. Why did the colonial state forcibly remove Aboriginal children from their families? Why do you think?

4. The Centrality of Reciprocity

By understanding and acting in accordance with these four inter-related principles, researchers can start to shift away from the dominant euro-centric paradigms in which we are schooled. This is not to suggest that every white scholar can allocate infinite resources to question findings in our field through a lens of settler-colonialism or critical race theory. It is about authentic respect for Indigenous knowledge systems; and about *knowledge-sharing*. *Sharing* invokes mutuality and reciprocity, which, while common to the human condition, are corrupted or subsumed in cultures which reward domination and control as core values and signals of 'success' (French, 1985). Its antitheses are the rigid hierarchies and exclusionism of patriarchal imperialism, where racism is a rationalising technology (Lentin, 2016) for massacre, slavery, and ongoing colonial imperialism.

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Obligations of mutuality operate in both temporal directions. Scholars must ensure that we accurately pass on what Aboriginal people have shared with us. Aboriginal pedagogies are oral, and its practices are characterised by 'kin-based systems for tracking knowledge accuracy' (Reid & Nunn, 2015). Collegial networks and student audiences form an analogical relational system; and we must also distribute findings to those who contributed to the research. This is not merely to 'give back': it is a continuous practice of checking and re-checking, of maintaining relationships and adjusting to changing circumstances. It is something we do instinctively with colleagues, may overlook when it comes to research participants, on whose knowledge our findings rely. The quantum of trust and accountability, honesty and authentic respect, is built into the mutuality and reciprocity which founded the knowledge sharing in the first place. The danger is that as researchers we have not unlearned centuries of scholarship and academic tradition that treated First Peoples as more 'subject' than human.

When consulting with Aboriginal colleagues about writing this chapter, one legal scholar advised me to think of it as building cultural capital that may otherwise not get built. Another saw my role as that of translator, putting the heft and credibility that the white law purports to bring to good use – to deconstruct dominant narratives. Nakata (2006) cautions that any such research must be for Aboriginal people and not just about Aboriginal people.

I am not sure that I can assemble knowledge and ideas 'for' Aboriginal people, given the wisdom of the age-old cultures held by custodians I am still learning to appreciate. But there is certainly a sense of appreciation from family when seeing the results of our conversations in print, carefully interpreted, and contextualized. Most of all, I can attest to the sense of relief, joy and love that comes with shifting from uninvited guest to welcomed visitor. By bringing together these principles, within the constraints of the English language and western conceptions of scholarship, I hope to achieve two things: to pay my personal respects to First Peoples and Aboriginal values and acknowledge living on stolen land; and to persuade others of the ontological value in decolonising our thinking.

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¹ The majority of this chapter was initially submitted with the Pilliga research findings reported in Chapter 8, *Commodification of Country*. As the material was important but largely contextual, we (editors and author) decided to publish it as a separate mini-chapter. This material was first presented at the Aboriginal research symposium *Honouring Our Songlines: Collection, Collaboration Co-creation Symposium*, 24-25 October 2016. Western Sydney University: Parramatta. Feedback was gratefully received, particularly feedback from Aboriginal delegates, while I take full responsibility for the content and form and of course any errors.

² These lands are named for where I now live and work (Darug), was born and grew up (Kuringai), and *visit en route* to the Pilliga and to my children's country (Wiradjuri, Dunghutti and Nganwaywana respectively).

³ The language and pedagogy was developed while teaching units such as First Peoples and the Australian Legal System, Jurisprudence, and Legal Ethics.