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Artist-Teacher Practitioner Research with Indigenous Australian Communities on Sites of Conflict and Contestation

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Abstract

Australia's coastline, flora and fauna have been the object of fascination for, and the subject of, representation by European cartographers, botanists and artists since the Seventeenth Century. To Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, the Earth is mother, and survival contingent upon intimate knowledge of, and reverence for, the lands, waters and skies, mapped and recorded through symbol, story, dance and song. While many non-Indigenous artists working in the landscape adopt an approach that is culturally and historically aware, the formalisation of art-practice as research within academic institutions requires artists to address ethical concerns in the conduct of their research. This paper proposes a methodology and strategies to ensure the preservation of First Peoples' cultural authority in knowledge sharing.

Introduction

Renewed interest in Indigenous knowledge, systems, and practices is widespread and global. However as Nakata (2002, 2007) points out,

Indigenous knowledge systems and Western knowledge systems work off different theories of knowledge that frame who can be a knower, what can be known, what constitutes knowledge, sources of evidence for constructing knowledge, what constitutes truth, how truth is to be verified, how evidence becomes truth, how valid inferences are to be drawn, the role of belief in evidence, and related issues.

Poststructuralist, postmodernist thinkers brought to academia in the late 20th century the critique of knowledge as the site of struggle in relations of power. The contribution of feminists and women of Colour in this era was to highlight the ways in which dualist oppositions, ascribed with negative and positive values, worked to preserve the dominant order. Social realists focused attention on how asymmetrical relations of power based on sex, gender, race, and class differentiation intersected to impact on everyday lives. The taking up of these ideas into discourses surrounding the marginalization of the arts in education is evidenced in the shift toward an anti-reductionist approach in the explanation of institutional practice:

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(u)nderstanding how evidence and ideas are put to work within a practice involves disclosing the ways in which meanings, values and intentions are ascribed to them by its institutions. Variations in these ascriptions explain how facts and theories are able to exert their influence over the conduct of practice within a domain (Brown, 2001, p.83).

Many mainstream doctoral studies in Art Education have begun as endeavours that seek to add new knowledge about the contribution of art to learning and development, only to shift focus when the degree of difficulty and complexity of this project becomes evident. The expectation that this new knowledge will be arrived at through 'scientific', or at least an appropriately rigorous and justified 'alternative' method has led to a growth in publications on qualitative and interpretive research methods and grounded theoretical approaches, as well as the use of the visual as 'evidence' (Berger & Morh, 1989; Fischman, 2001; Freeman and Mathison, 2009; Silvermann, 2006). Recent intellectual endeavour in the field of art-practice-led research, such as that by Grauer, Urwin, Sinner et al's (2006) *a/r/tography* as a method that fits the 'knowing', doing, and making' inherent character of artistic practice, has been instrumental in legitimating artistic inquiry as research within the academy.

However it is only through broader engagement with literature beyond the immediate field of inquiry that an understanding is reached that such a doctoral study must also deal with the ways in which discipline-specific ways of knowing and working are defined and valued by the institution. Sullivan's (2005) *Artistic Practice as Research* has made a major contribution here, by articulating how artistic practice as research contributes to the critique of and creation of knowledges, extending beyond the discipline and encompassing the research design itself.

How can site-specific art practice-as-research contribute to the critique of and creation of new knowledge?

All art practice requires research of some kind. Site-specific art in public places – whether civic squares or 'crown' lands – is regulated by local government and state government, and must go through research, community consultation, planning, and design phases to meet local government requirements. In some Australian States and Territories, the approval process includes compliance with policy that requires an assessment of opportunities for integration of new work with local culture so as to build cultural capital. When undertaken in a University and categorised as research involving humans, art practice must be conducted in compliance with ethical protocols developed by universities to protect the interests of the researched, who must be fully informed of the nature of and risks associated with the study. These 'conditions' of practice, then, become part of the method of the practice-study, and contribute to the critique of and creation of new knowledge (for and by the

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researcher and the researched for sharing with others). However it is the regulated requirement that proponents of public and commercial 'developments' such as dams, roads, railways, hospitals, airports, marinas, housing estates, and tourist resorts undertake not only environmental, but also Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage impact studies, and that they work with Traditional Owners of the site to manage that impact that introduces the imperative for appropriate knowledge sharing that is often lacking in the academic context.

Although the two site-specific projects that are the focus of this paper - Venus Ganis's doctoral inquiry into the notion of wilderness and the place of nature in artistic practice and learning at Mt. Nebo, a forested hinterland site, and Glenda Nalder's facilitation of the Indigenous gardens public art project Goorimabah (Place of Stories in Ngandowal-Minyanbal dialect) on the harbour near the border between the highly urbanised 'Twin Towns' of Coolangatta and Tweed Heads - differ on many levels, there are commonalities of significance to this paper's argument. Both sites were 'acquired' by The Crown and 'reserved' for public use without negotiation with First Peoples. The Mt. Nebo site for a State School and Outdoor Learning Centre (Qld) is on the forestlands for which the Jinibara, Turrbal and other First People clans have custodial responsibilities. The old Border Caravan Park (NSW) is on the sands and waters of the Ngandowal people whose coastal country is marked by the Tallebudgera and Tweed Rivers. Both projects - the Mt. Nebo Milky Way and Earth Celebration Poles created by Traditional Owner Artist Vanessa Fisher and her family; and the design for Goorimahbah ('Place of Stories') created by Aboriginal Artists Garth Lena, Mark Nota-Browning, and Rhonda Billet who were selected by the Traditional Owners and Aboriginal community members having historical connections to the site, to visualise the community's design - were funded through State government cultural grants. Both projects had rehabilitation and reparation (natural and cultural) intents, however the circumstances differed markedly. The Mt. Nebo project sits within a relatively isolated educational context that embraces the natural environment, whereas the Tweed project animated a long-held Aboriginal community aspiration to revegetate and rehabilitate a prominent but highly degraded, and disused, tourist camp site, as a 'green' social and cultural space amid the concrete and glass of Gold Coast style development, for locals and visitors to share.

These two projects became indices of land and knowledge contestation: the Celebration Poles commemorating the 150th anniversary of the separation of the state of Queensland from the state of New South Wales, and the Story Place being sited on the isthmus to the northern headland of the Tweed River, known as Chabbo (Ngandowal dialect) that was subsequently named 'Point Danger' and dissected by the border subsequently constructed in 1859. This renaming referenced the place written about by Lieut. James Cook in his Endeavour Journal (1770), during his voyage along the east coast of Australia, which he named New South Wales and claimed for King George III of England.

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Landscape and representation

For artist-teacher-scholars to contribute in meaningful ways to the creation and evolution of an inclusive and sustainable culture, it is necessary to begin with a shared understanding of and respect for historical circumstances. Landscapes from prehistoric, through colonial and post-colonial times become meaningful points of contestation when populations abandon them or are exiled from them —by choice or by force (Smith & Gazin-Schwartz, 2008).

That art 'about' the natural world is not devoid of a politics of representation has ethical implications for Australian artist-researchers. Scholar and Aboriginal Australian, Prof. Marcia Langton reminds us of this when she asks, in her essay *Wilderness and Terra Nullius in Australian Art* (1995), 'What Do We Mean By Wilderness?' Terra nullius (empty land), was the legal doctrine by which Australia had been colonised, and by which Australia's First Peoples, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, had been rendered invisible - despite their graphic depiction in the illustrated journals of the invaders – albeit as merely animal and as "parasites on nature" (Langton, 1995, pp. 8-10) – was dismantled in 1992 by a Australian High Court ruling in favour of Torres Strait Islander, Edward Koiki Mabo, in his land rights case against the State of Queensland.

Early 'first contact' representations of this 'new' land and its people viewed through European eyes ultimately gave way to a genre of colonialist literature and paintings on the theme of a fearful and threatening wilderness just beyond the clearing such as *Lost* - Frederick McCubbin's 1886 the iconic image of a little girl alone in the bush (Ganis, 2009). The coming to prominence of an ecological world view in the face of the growing realization of the devastating impact of a mere 220 years of European occupation by comparison with the sustainable practices of over 40,000 years of habitation by Aboriginal Australians has resulted in a paradigm shift that seeks to de-colonise environmental discourses, making obsolete the Eurocentric conceptualisation of wilderness as "true nature ... pure and uncontaminated by human influence" which "... is to fail to come to terms with the reality that the pre-settlement condition of the land was rarely pure nature but was a mix of nature and culture and included a substantial human presence and ecological agency" (Plumwood, 2002, p. 17). Postmodern approaches to the landscape as subject by non-Indigenous Australian artists are generally more aware of the politics of representation, and of our shared history. Landscape art that arises from a reparative imperative may strive to return a 'lost' Nature as exemplified in eco-art, where the idea of art 'as' or 'in' the landscape is replaced by the idea of art being 'absorbed into nature's cycle, literally becoming part of the natural environment' (Kaitavuori, 2002), or it may seek to 'reconcile' relations between First Peoples and their colonisers, or to incorporate aspects of both.

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Research ethics

Guidelines have been provided that articulate discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research protocols (AIATSIS n.d.; Lui, 1998). Each aims to dispel assumptions of homogeneity by stressing the existence of over 250 distinct Aboriginal language groups, and 5 discrete Island communities, each with their own distinct cultures, forms of social organisation, spiritual beliefs, and experiences of colonisation (Lui, 1998).

The Apology made by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (February 12, 2008) for "laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have afflicted profound grief, suffering and loss" on Australia's First Peoples, preceded the release of action plans for reconciliation in public sector institutions, including all levels of education. This requirement for action has implications for all non-Indigenous artist-teacher-researchers, many of whom may not be aware of the extensive body of literature by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars (Rigney, 1997, 1999; Ford & Fasoli, 2001; Martin, 2003; Altman, 2003, 2004; Dodson & Smith, 2003; Bauman & Williams, 2004; Bourke, 2008; Drockerly, 2009) that outlines why research requests and offers to research Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are frequently (and justifiably) met with distrust, animosity and resistance.

By way of response to this situation, non-Indigenous researchers have begun to conceptualise a paradigmatic shift from "positivist scientific principles of objectivity" to "research frameworks that construct knowledge" based in "relational ethics" (Bourke, 2008, p. 14). At the same time, Indigenous researchers have concentrated their efforts on articulating the terms of engagement: respectful communication (Lui, 1998); the privileging of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies; compliance with community-identified protocols, practices and processes; fully-negotiated research design that encompasses protocols for ownership, access to, and dissemination of, research outputs.

"Indigenist" Reconceptualist Frameworks

This reconceptualisation is not about change for the sake of it. It is not a destination but a journey of smaller journeys to disrupt the discourses of invisibility and paternalism and to reclaim and give agency to Aboriginal worldview, knowledge, heritage and cultures.

In order to avoid perpetuating power over Aboriginal people, this reconceptualisation needs to be informed by the scholarship of Aboriginal, Indigenous and First Nations' Peoples (Martin, 2007, p.17).

"Indigenist" research, a term originated by Rigney (1997), has currency in Indigenous scholarship to signify reconceptualist intent. Initially drawing from critical race theory, predominant in literature from the USA, which "focuses on and learns from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (Yosso, 2005:69), its evolving framework incorporates Aboriginal post-colonialism and de-colonising

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strategies developed through dialogue between Indigenous peoples in a global forum. Martin (2003:3) lists its main features:

- Recognition of our worldviews, our knowledges and our realities as distinctive and vital to our existence and survival and serve as a research framework;
- Honouring Aboriginal social mores as essential processes through which we live, learn and situate ourselves as Aboriginal people in our own lands and when in the lands of other Aboriginal people;
- Emphasising the social, historical and political contexts which shape our experiences, lives, positions and futures;
- Privileging the voices, experiences and lives of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal lands;
- Identifying and redressing issues of importance for us.

Understanding how relationality is fundamental to Aboriginal ways of knowing and ways of being is essential to the achievement of the systematic and structural change that is required to improve health, educational and economic outcomes and quality of life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Relatedness is an Aboriginal reality (Martin, 2007, p. 17).

Relational ways of knowing and being

Surveys in university lectures, tutorials and classrooms routinely reveal that few non-Indigenous students are aware of the names of custodial clans, Aboriginal Nations or indeed of the means to discover this – despite the existence of a map of Aboriginal Australia in most school libraries, and its ready availability on-line, as well as the local government convention of providing brief on-line histories of the land and its people prior to British invasion and subsequent remapping of the land into 'resource' areas. Further, non-Indigenous student awareness of the circumstances of their family's arrival in Australia, unless fairly recent, is in the main sketchy or unable to be called to mind. The ability to state 'this is who I am, this is where I'm from, and these are who my people are' is an important protocol in traditional cultures that sits in contrast to the more familiar contemporary Western convention of basing identity and authority on one's paid-work position, or profession.

The capacity of Australia's First Peoples to know country and practise culture has never been lost, despite extensive disturbance to the land and displacement of peoples over the past two centuries. This is because of the relational nature of Indigenous ways of knowing. By this is meant that kinship is the means of access to visceral ways of knowing and understanding. No one person holds the knowledge of, or can speak for, the land. Knowing occurs when people come together on their

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Ancestral lands (waters and skies and all living and spiritual beings included) to share in ways that are highly sensorial (doing and feeling) and culturally regulated. Despite the best efforts of Western linguists, anthropologists, archaeologists and natural and social scientists to create knowledge by recording and disseminating information in various formats, these records do not and never will constitute knowledge, because knowledge sharing in Indigenous Australian cultures occurs through the interaction of human and other beings in the landscape. Thus the knowledge transfer that actually occurs through intercultural engagement is procedural, i.e., 'know how' rather than 'know what'. What can be learned is how to present to (negotiate permissions from Elders to visit country) and be present with people; how to be present in the moment of the experience; and how to interact respectfully. This knowledge is always generously shared with visitors, but receiving it does require the skills of silent listening and attentive observation of subtle gestures.

Conclusion: Art in the landscape as research and learning

Both projects (Goorimahbah and Milky Way and Earth Celebration Poles) provided opportunities for knowledge generation and sharing through the formation of respectful relationships between people that are ongoing. The artworks have/will become the markers on each site (the 'evidence') of the experience of our learning journeys. The journeys were possible because the research method respected the cultural authority of the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands.

In conclusion, the discovery of the study is the importance of the provision of support for graduate students to treat their methodology studies as opportunities for 're-search' by beginning with relational questions (Martin, 2003, 2007) that are historically informed; to be able to identify cultural biases in the epistemological and ontological stances (their own, and those in the research literature in their disciplines); and to adopt very early stage planning processes and respectful communication to negotiate the terms of their studies with participant knowledge-holders that respect their authority and ways of knowing and being.

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