

Nurturing the “beginning” in protecting our traditional practices from the end: family, kinship and Kamilaroi Aboriginal First Nation knowledge in Australia

Dr Marcus Waters

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Abstract: First Nation Aboriginal Australian pedagogy incorporates a circular and non-linear notion of life. It is a philosophy that brings together ways of knowing, being, and doing that is at the very heart of self-governance and custodial obligation for the Kamilaroi First Nation Aboriginal People of Australia. This is contrary to the university setting where “Indigenous” or “Aboriginal” pedagogy remains in danger of becoming lost in translation with various contexts and meanings attached. Rather than custodial First Nation governance a system of pan-Aboriginality has prospered within the comparatively recently established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academy, where it was used as a strategy in the formation of a political community. Unfortunately such positioning also resulted in every Aboriginal Australian being branded, without regard to their individuality, through stereotyped images that exist in the popular imagination. Consequently connection to traditional Aboriginal knowledge production is falling victim to stereotyped romantic visions of Aboriginal identity only being seen authentic if “traditional” or “remote enough”. As a result “traditional practice” is now becoming synonymous with Whiteness. While there still remains authentic Aboriginal pockets of identity connected to a traditional pedagogy of “multi generational learning” these are located outside of the current university setting, situated within many individual Aboriginal families and kinship systems throughout Australia. Kamilaroi is one of these locations. Traditional language acquisition remains pivotal in re-introducing new generations of Kamilaroi children to a number of ritual ceremonies throughout their lives as an ongoing process of life long learning. This is achieved via Kamilaroi knowledge production in such a way to inform decolonising methodologies separate and unique to that of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academy.

Keywords: Kamilaroi, epistemology, pedagogy.

Burra-li ngaandu Ngay? : Introduction - Who am I?

As a young “Kamilaroi” First Nation Aboriginal Australian growing up suffering the indignity of the public housing system, I had a sense of shared communal identity in my feeling of “being oppressed”. Interestingly my oppression became a sense of identity

and motivation when amongst other Aboriginal youth, where feelings of resistance became a pleasurable and empowering experience (Ang 10-11). The idea that as Aboriginal people we find shared identity through oppression is nothing new as examined by Gillian Cowlishaw (2004) when she writes that often one's own "Indigeneity" is formed around a sense of conflict. She goes on to state that racial loyalty demands that individuals choose to be either exclusively Indigenous or exclusively non-Indigenous (Cowlishaw 114). For me personally as an Aboriginal child growing up there didn't appear any opportunity to regulate this relationship as there was no middle path. You were either Black, or you were White (Boladeras 131). Ien Ang, a prominent Chinese-Australian cultural theorist, explains the phenomenon of identity politics as a means of resistance to the dominant culture, where the failure of assimilation policies gives rise to the importance of difference in identities; where difference has become important social capital for the fringedwellers of the west.

Identity politics, in this regard, is a logical offshoot of the decline of assimilationism ... on the basis of a strived-for but never achieved sameness: claiming one's difference (from the mainstream or dominant national culture) and turning it into symbolic capital has become a powerful and attractive strategy among those who have never quite belonged, or have been made to feel that they do not quite belong in the West. (Ang 10-11)

It is this sense of belonging, or more precisely "not belonging" that I want to engage in writing this article. I had always believed that for Aboriginal Australians that our history had been one of forced assimilation, and our objective was not inclusion into, but resistance against domination by the West. As a people we wanted to be seen as a viable alternative to the "West" and collectively we opposed negative characteristics to those whom the West label as "other" (Moreton-Robinson 76). We fight not just for land, but also for our ways of being and seeing the world to be recognised and acknowledged (Houston 41). One would think that Aboriginal academics or an Aboriginal intelligentsia would have a major role in this process? However, in the process of becoming part of an Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academy on having successfully completed a Doctor of Philosophy degree I have found that this may no longer be the case. The first university in Australia, the University of Sydney, was founded in 1850; and it was not until the advent of mass higher education in the 1970s based upon "the catchcry of a 'fair go'" (Augoustinos et al. 353) that Aboriginal Australians gained access to Australian higher education institutions. Mass higher education meant that those previously excluded from and/or under-represented in higher education were given access. This opened the doors for Aboriginal people to gain entry into higher education. Four decades of Aboriginal higher education have now passed and the traditional knowledge base within custodial obligation and ceremonial practice is no closer to being recognised. Instead Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement prioritises strategies such as the "closing the gap" and issues of "equality and access of participation" for our people when compared with other Australians (Productivity Commission Steering Committee 100-108, 368-410). Such goals remain the priorities for government in policy on higher education, was until recently developed and implemented through the agency of the Australian Government

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). To achieve these goals, universities have established a range of Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander units, such as advisory boards, councils and centres, and it is these groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of which I refer to as an “Indigenous academy”. I say “Indigenous” for the sake of clarification and simplicity in wanting to include not only my own Aboriginal people but also my Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters. When referring to peoples of uniquely Australian Aboriginal identity I will use the term Aboriginal.

Recognition of custodial obligation and ceremonial practice as a living breathing Aboriginal epistemology appears to have been replaced within the Indigenous academy with strategies that encourage participation and access into universities that we accept as hegemonic and culturally biased against Aboriginal people (Hart 12-16). As demonstrated by the current Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s opening address at *Our Plan: Real Solutions for All Australians* Policy Launch; where he stated the following,

Participation and access, educational outcomes and jobs remain the priorities for government in policy on higher education ... Preserving Aboriginal cultures, as well as building reconciliation, means doing more to ensure children go to schools, adults go to work and the ordinary rule of the land operates in Aboriginal communities (Abbott).

An “ordinary rule of land” as stated by the Prime Minister suggests shared values as in a “all for one” approach which includes our being assimilated into western modes of knowledge production and values. Such shared values were further demonstrated by Noel Pearson when he appeared to confess to becoming “bourgeois” and having “varying propensities to decadence” as part of his Whitlam Oration (2013).

If I was born estranged from the nation’s citizenship, into a humble family of a marginal people striving in the teeth of poverty and discrimination—it is assuredly no longer the case (...) The truth is I and numbers of my generation are today, *bourgeois*, albeit with varying propensities to decadence (Pearson 1).

So if we are to believe as stated by Pearson, that I [we] as [Aboriginal people] once were ... “a marginal people striving in the teeth of poverty and discrimination—[and] it is assuredly no longer the case”, what then of the values of those [Aboriginal people], who like myself became united in a single fight for recognition and social justice? I am sorry Mr Pearson but I do not want to become bourgeois and/or decadent in my approach, as I see such values as alien in my quest for Aboriginality not only now, but in the past and also my future.

My argument then is that for Aboriginal knowledges to prosper within the Indigenous academy, the question of self-definition, identity and values, should not only start the discussion—it should be the discussion’s objective, and its closing point. My methodology is to utilise contemporary academic and creative voices, in Traditional Aboriginal storytelling as the basis for research. That is to say utilising my own Kamilaroi narrative as expressions of life experience in an active partnership as both the

Aboriginal author and in reaching both domestic Aboriginal and international Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers. Rather than embrace participation and access as my government tells me and enjoy the middleclass trappings as spoken by Noel

Pearson, I prefer to overcome barriers of hegemonic cultural capital through application of my own ethnic, cultural and racial background. To inscribe by scholarly and creative means a separate parallel Aboriginal identity before during and after my contact with the academy. My strategy is in the use of my own Kamilaroi mother tongue at a community ground level where convention and culture organise itself through nature separate to the ideologies of power situated within a system of colonisation (qtd in Maggio 432 - 438). Language then used as a form of translation which organises itself as a critical practice in subversion where the oppressed can, through their own language speak and know for themselves. Giving myself a Kamilaroi voice presupposed through power and desire as a means of defining my Aboriginal self, and in establishing my own Kamilaroi identity separate to and equal to that of the academy (qtd in Maggio 432 - 438).

It works like this...

I am *Kamilaroi* [First Australian Aboriginal Nation], my *Yanguru*, [moiety] as genetic memory, is ancient. My *yarudhagaa*, [totemic system] defines my genealogy, as *kubbaanjhaan* [bloodlines kinship system] connecting me to my *Burruguu-ngayi-li* [Dreaming]. Here within traditional storytelling as cultural practice remains the philosophical connection to the mysteries to all of creation, as defined through *gawuban gunigal* [interconnection between land, water, air and people] (Spearim; Knox; Bell).

The above reference is spoken as a collective incorporating song/dance (Spearim) story (Knox) and art (Bell) during a young Kamilaroi male's second initiation ceremony in defining their place in the world. The men referenced are all acknowledged Traditional Kamilaroi men who were active in my second stage of initiation as Kamilaroi. Uncles Marshall Bell and Reg Knox are both internationally renowned artists in their own right, while Uncle Paul Spearim [Winanga-li Gii] is a senior Custodial Man who has been imparting the cultural knowledge of the Kamilaroi Nation through song, dance and storylines for more than 35 years. These culturally strong, highly-distinguished and respected Aboriginal men have been let down by intellectuals in an Indigenous academy that has been unable to define a tangible working Aboriginal pedagogy within the university system over the last four decades.

Let me explain...

Gagil nhama (The Problem)

I participate in Kamilaroi initiation ceremonies and also write in Aboriginal knowledge production, as well as teaching in screenwriting and sociology. Due to our modern age these Kamilaroi ceremonies have been recorded, both visually and through audio and acknowledged as having taken place. Even so, the intellectual property contained as epistemology through this participation is not recognised by many of my Indigenous colleagues. Instead, I am told to read more, listen more, and understand more the work that has been done by Indigenous scholars in generating a new Indigenous academy. I

am not excited by the development of any “*Newly Established*” Indigenous academy as I still have an investment in the knowledge production of the old one. I have had the opportunity to discuss this approach with a senior Aboriginal [Warrimay Aboriginal First Nation] academic Dr Vicki Grieves who talks about new/old knowledge out of the timeless philosophy of Aboriginal people (Grieves 2009). As my mentor Dr Grieves accepts ceremonial knowledge as most important, though she is clear in her obligation as a senior Aboriginal scholar in nurturing the progression of would-be scholars into the academy. Her notion is that we need to be able to meet the intellectuals of the western academy on their own ground through our own basis for knowledge production and intellectual rigour, in order to progress the aims of Indigenous knowledge production on a global scale. Dr Grieves values transnational collaboration whereby we learn from the experiences of other Indigenous peoples and their intellectual endeavours and this too as a means to enhance our own local knowledges. For example, she is persuaded by the argument of Native American [Teme-Augama Anishinabe First Nation] scholar Dale Turner (2006) for us to become “word warriors” and shift the battle for our rights as Indigenous peoples into the academy (Grieves). Therefore ceremonial knowledge production is not seen as an alternative but as a necessary adjunct to scholarly research and dialogue. Thus I am becoming an Aboriginal scholar by engaging with the academy, in conjunction with immersing myself in Kamilaroi epistemology through language and ceremony.

The problem for me is that in reading and observing developments coming out of a developing Indigenous academy within Australia it remains clear there is a lack of agreement about the basis of an Aboriginal epistemology amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander intellectuals. For example, my identity remains centred in Kamilaroi customary obligations law and ceremony. As Kamilaroi our people have been accepted as Registered Native Title claimants in the High Court of Australia, we have ticked all the boxes legally and academically, so why would I give up such a position to adopt a pan-Indigenous identity that does not hold this same legitimacy to me personally, customarily or intrinsically? Surely in embracing my Kamilaroi epistemology and maintaining our cultural practice I have something valuable to offer Indigenous knowledge production internationally.

Within an Australian context, my position as a Kamilaroi scholar is in danger of being swamped by a homogenising of Aboriginal people, together with Torres Strait Islanders, into one amorphous mass. The demands of the state and the academy are such as to seek an easy explanation for what is a complex situation in Aboriginal Australia. For example, in 2008, the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) stated in a Submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education the need to implement a cultural competency framework as Indigenous Scholarship is yet to be embedded across the Australian university sector as demonstrated below:

... Australia sits on a unique educational asset. Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous culture have a powerful and marketable currency; but it is scholarship that has yet to be fully recognised within the higher education sector (...) Indigenous higher education must be embedded across the whole of the sector and across the whole of individual universities. (IHEAC 1).

The submission identified the need for introducing a competency framework that defined Indigenous culture, as there is currently a lack of guidance and appropriate terms of reference for Indigenous people to work with and within. What I found particularly problematic with the report was that the responsibility to establish such pedagogy was placed with the universities:

2.2. *The responsibility for translating Indigenous aspirations and needs within higher education into practical and sustainable outcomes must be led by universities themselves in partnership with Indigenous educational leaders (IHEAC 2)*

2.6. *Cultural competency must be a whole of institution responsibility that develops good citizenship and helps address issues of institutional and individual racism that continue to be faced by Indigenous staff and students in universities (IHEAC 2)*

Yes, it states the need for partnership with Indigenous stakeholders for this cultural competency to occur, but research from a number of Indigenous Academics appears to agree that currently the pedagogy applied by both the universities and Indigenous scholars is incompatible, to the point of being seen as “mutually impermeable and incommensurable” (Gilroy 65). So why then would anyone recommend that it is the role of the universities to take the lead in such issues? Surely such intellectual property is the responsibility of Aboriginal people ourselves. Yin Paradies gets to the core of the problem, the necessity to “de-couple” Indigeneity from the initially useful strategic pan-Aboriginality that enabled the formation of a political community. Paradies goes on to explain, “such deployment also results in every Aboriginal Australian being interpellated, without regard to their individuality, through stereotyped images that exist in the popular imagination” (Paradies 355). The departure from Traditional Aboriginal Governance dismissed as a romantic non-existent ideal has been further discussed by Mick Dodson, in his 1994 Wentworth Lecture,

an ever-popular subject for artists who portrayed us in paintings or films ... noble, well built, heroic, bearded, loin-clothed, one foot up, vigilant, with boomerang at the ready (Dodson 3)

So even though we have practicing Aboriginal academics within the academy, the struggle against the binary of the dominant white culture remains oppositional, particularly to Traditional Kamilaroi practice and ceremony orchestrated as a romantic stereotype. So much so that the preservation of traditional Aboriginal culture feels like a useless task as the binary is “everywhere” (Kincheloe and Steinberg 80-81), a situation further highlighted by [Ko Ngāti Awa me Ngāti Porou ngā iwi o First Nation] New Zealand Māori Academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith:

It is considered a sign of success [for Indigenous peoples] when the Western world, through one of its institutions, pauses even momentarily to consider an alternative possibility. Indigenous research actively seeks to extend that momentary pause into genuine engagement with Indigenous communities (Smith 104).

In response to the binary between Aboriginal knowledge production and the academy Paradies (2006) conducted an extensive review of literature to establish how Australian Indigeniety has been defined by and within the academy. He referenced an analysis of “over 700 pieces of legislation” undertaken by McCorquodale (1986), which “found 67 different definitions of the term ‘Indigenous’” (Paradies 355). Referencing the work of Aboriginal scholars Taylor and Huggins, Paradies noted the emergence of debate about the true meaning of Indigeniety in contemporary Australians. He discovered that Aboriginal people experience “racism, scorn and disbelief” from other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike, whose “perennial interrogation” of their identity leads to acute anxiety as discussed in (Foley) “Too White to be Black, too Black to be White” as well as “ambivalence”, and doubts about themselves’ as “‘real’ [Aboriginal] people” (Boladeras 147). This intense questioning of authenticity led one person to comment, “sometimes ... it would be just a lot easier to say I’m not Aboriginal” (Boladeras 116). Consequently, we find that existing forms of Aboriginal custodial governance, having survived to this point, now remain in danger of becoming lost in translation, particularly as many people who do identify as Aboriginal expose themselves to “an uneasy pathway through life ... strewn with doubt, disbelief and confrontation?” (Boladeras 153).

At risk is the connection to pedagogy as knowledge production of the oldest living culture in the world. In this way the Aboriginal academy is failing to overcome institutional bias and their connection to Aboriginality is falling victim to “stereotyped romantic visions of identity” (Morrissey 191), as “Traditional” instead becomes a word rejected by contemporary Aboriginal Australians and synonymous to Whiteness as demonstrated by Vernon Ah Kee (2006) below:

We’re Aboriginal and they’re traditional Aboriginal and are a white construct ... Now what happens in the deserts and remote communities is that people create art and they try to live their lives in a way that correlates to this romanticised idea, and it’s a white construction (Ah Kee 3).

This boundary-setting and policing serves to alienate Aboriginal people (past, present and potentially future) who have retained traditional knowledges outside of the relationship of resistance and colonisation (O’Regan 194-195). As the oldest living culture in the world these issues of identity and governance must be resolved, this is not only important for Aboriginal Australians, but for humanity’s understanding of itself and its own development.

Ngaanngundi-nhama buuyawiyaa-li gaalanha minya-gu ngiyani Murri dhayaanduul winanga-y-nha? (So who is responsible and what do we as Aboriginal scholars represent?)

Through this process of self-definition—of self-enforced exclusion (what or who is a “real Aboriginal” person?) the establishment of a working Indigenous academy never quite becomes successful as instead of developing strategies in cultural survival we end up replacing “one form of tyranny with another” (Appiah 163). The problem is that many Aboriginal people who remain capable of establishing a successful Aboriginal academy are instead, as described by Mary P. Follett in Joan Tonn (2003) “addicted to the fight”, rather than supporting the ongoing cultural maintenance and survival of the

oldest living culture in the world (Janke, web-site). We then find ourselves continually “in resistance to the seductions of assimilation and deconstruction of colonialism as an attempt in rebuilding a unique Aboriginal First Nation identity”, as an ongoing survival against the systematic evils of colonisation (Ariss 13). The “fight” then becomes integral to elements in surviving the ongoing colonial imperatives imposed by the Australian nation-state (Russell 76; Werbner and Modood 249). As difficult as it is and as much as we have aligned our identity to a process in surviving colonisation, we must now forget the fight and embrace our own autonomy separate to colonisation in connecting to our past.

(i) it is only a narrowness of vision, or a misconception of culture as a frozen state that leads people to limit expressions of essential Aboriginality to the stereotyped pristine. Far from being dead, passive or conservative, the past is dynamic, active and potentially revolutionary in which we can root our autonomy, our sense of ownership of ourselves and our resistance against assimilation (Dodson 24)

If we are to develop our own Aboriginal pedagogy as both unique and equal to any found in the western academy, it is important to move beyond colonising theory and/or the devastating effects of the colonisation process, and focus instead on the resilience and continuation of cultural ways of being and knowing. By taking away the power of colonisation and its hold over us we unsettle the binary of the present relationship between Black and White in refusing to accept the authority of the academy over us. It is through such emancipation our future promises an equalising recognition of differences, through, at least initially, the recognition of similarities rather than opposition, between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal intellectual activity. I therefore refuse to be colonised and as such my Aboriginal knowledgebase becomes multidisciplinary in its approach. Rather than strategies in surviving colonisation I am interested instead in the operations of culture, science and art to criss-cross the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academies of learning and to value-add to each other. Why? Because I see my initiation into Kamilaroi knowledge production as running equal and parallel with the academy rather than opposed to it. Such an approach allows innovation beyond the current limited status of Aboriginal scholarship associated with the necessarily reductive strategies of surviving colonisation and remaining victimised.

Minya nguuma Murri ganugu ngaannu gamil gaa-gi buurraa dhaay gaalanha binangarrangarra gaalanha gamil gaalinguu guwaa-li? (What of those Aboriginal people who are no longer subject to traditional cultural practice and denied access to their own language?)

This is a hard problem to overcome. I don't have an answer. The complexities of reinvention beyond the binary of colonisation remains especially sensitive for many contemporary Aboriginal people. It is hard to go back in time to return to the beginning if your ties to the past have been replaced with trauma and the experience of colonisation. This experience can be overwhelming. Many, not all, but many of our mob now live in unidentified communities where the need to acquire a sense of identity as a form of active resistance to colonisation is at its strongest. It is in these same communities where the loss of language and ceremony practiced prior to colonisation is also at its greatest, as noted in the work of Yin Paradies (2006) “Beyond Black and White: Essentialism, Hybridity and Indigeneity”. As a result of the construction of our own

identities as savage spectacle by the Western academy, and then the formation of an Indigenous academy within this same Western academy, we have not moved beyond the needy, the derivative and the lesser intellectuals within this academy. As a result the unique position we once held as Aboriginal peoples, inheritors and custodians of the longest surviving culture in the world, has become increasingly difficult to maintain. The majority of Aboriginal people now experience the world from a position that is no longer seen as purely Indigenous or non-Indigenous (Cowlshaw 70-71). As a result the Indigenous academy isn't teaching our culture but instead prioritising strategies that keep us at university. Philip Morrissey, the Academic Coordinator of the Faculty of Arts Australian Indigenous Studies Program at the University of Melbourne states that as a result "Traditional" has become a dirty word, "ironically, a symbol of dispossession" (Morrissey 191). As within the academy we fight for our right to be understood as contemporary Indigenous Australians from an *inherited* marginalised position that connects many of our people to a sense of grief and loss. A position that again is associated to inherited acts of colonialism where community are seen to live poverty-stricken, short and often dangerous lives:

Circumstances of extreme poverty are significantly more prevalent among indigenous peoples than non-indigenous groups, and are rooted in other factors, such as a lack of access to education and social services, destruction of indigenous economies and socio-political structures, forced displacement, armed conflict and the degradation of their customary lands and waters. These forces, which are [*inherited from colonization*], are all determined and compounded by structural racism and discrimination, and make indigenous women and children particularly vulnerable to poor health. (Wesley-Esquimaux 7)

Outside of the academy as uncles, aunties, fathers, mothers and ceremony leaders we talk about our identity as story and knowledge related to traditional ceremony, practice and ongoing cultural maintenance. But within the academy as workers and professionals, the majority of our time is spent discussing the ongoing effects of white culture and genocide, and even more recently access, participation and employment opportunities, as if our culture were only 200 years old. Instead, we should be talking *in these same cultural and community terms* in our professional lives, especially as Aboriginal scholars within the academy. As public servants and academics, politicians and writers, teachers and researchers, we need to draw upon our sense of Aboriginality as something having endured and survived over thousands upon thousands of years. That we have also endured colonisation and the invasion and demonstrated extreme resilience in our survival. Yet currently all this is replaced by the binary between Indigenous and non-Indigenous occupation that becomes timeless, tireless and never ending. It is not surprising, then, that we are beginning to lose connection with who and what we are. So we must, as Aboriginal peoples, debate among ourselves (and *within* ourselves) the true meaning in understanding our unique Australian Blackness—our Aboriginality and/or Indigeneity (Paradies 355 - 363).

Minya-nhama ngay binangarrangarra Gamilaraay ngamilma-li? (So what to me is a Traditional Kamilaroi Pedagogy?)

Traditional Aboriginal pedagogy incorporates epistemology based in a circular and non-linear notion of life and experience (world view, or ontology). It is based in the inter-relatedness of all things and brings together ways of knowing, ways of being, and ways of doing as discussed in Karen Martin, *Aboriginal worldview, knowledge and relatedness theory* (2008). This circular and non-linear notion of life as never ending and all things inter-related is what retains our separation and uniqueness from non-Aboriginal approaches to learning.

When my father was first taught the story of creation he was a young man, I mean 8 years old. That was the beginning of his initiation, see, and then he was taught that same story again at 12. Then again at 18 and again at 30, that same story ... it's a circular thing, in gaining knowledge. Each story take on new meaning, interpretation as you get older, there [are also physical] things you gotta do to, get painted up when you young fella and then [you] paint up nephews when you get older, that change [also] to when, that day you get to tell the yarn, you become teacher student and all that busines s... life was your teaching and learning this was 'black fella' ... proper (Spearim)

Creationist theorist Rob Pope also talks about this unique sense of interrelatedness, as opposed to the way non-Aboriginal or Western people think:

the distinction is an important one. Plato's image of the magnet suggests a one-way transmission of energy from a divine source through physical and human intermediaries to the audience. His is essentially a monologic, top-down model of the inspirational process. That of the Aboriginal elder is more dynamic and dialogic. It involves two- and many-way flows of energy, and, through them, kinds of reciprocal support and inter-animation. Clearly, then, a lot depends upon the precise process of inspiration; who or what is reckoned to be "breathing into" whom or what, through what means, and with what effects. (Pope 92)

Maybury-Lewis alludes to the impossibility of non-Aboriginal people ever comprehending Aboriginal knowledge systems when he states: "It is hardly surprising, then, that a well know Aboriginal artist, Bunduk Marika, said most emphatically, that white people would *never* understand the dreaming" (Maybury-Lewis 1992, p. 197). The key question for me is not whether or not non-Aboriginal people will ever understand our Burruguu-ngayi-li, or Dreaming. I am more concerned whether such Aboriginal epistemology can be nurtured into the future, as Aboriginal scholars join the academy and what was once unique in our cultural practice becomes embedded outside of our own cultural space. I say this as the high contextual content contained within the inter-relatedness of all things associated to our Burruguu-ngayi-li continues to be very difficult to understand within non-Indigenous thinking.

The arguments of different Indigenous peoples based on spiritual relationships to the universe, to the landscape and to stones, rocks, insects

and other things, seen and unseen, have been difficult arguments for western systems of knowledge to deal with or accept. (Smith 74)

What I have learned since joining the Aboriginal academy outside of my own Kamilaroi community is that a system of pan-Aboriginality, whether or not generated as a political form of resistance, does not work for me. What I have discovered is that any Aboriginal component of pedagogy connected to a “learning partnership” is linked to my own foundations of identity firmly established within my own Aboriginal family’s epistemology. That is to say Kamilaroi Aboriginal knowledge production running parallel to, prior to, and then beyond in having survived a process of colonisation. It is the intellectual property contained within this knowledge base, spoken in my own Kamilaroi language and which I adhere to in ceremony still practiced, that I now identify as a “sacred gift”. It is through this collective memory, retained in my family’s ability to speak and write its own traditional Kamilaroi Aboriginal First Nation language, that my “Aboriginality” is shaped and formed rather than through a process of colonisation. My Indigeneity remains first and foremost an intuitive connection to my traditional Burruguu-ngayi-li or “Dreaming”, and is the foundation of the knowledge base associated with my creative and academic practice. An example of the importance in traditional Kamilaroi language acquisition comes from the term “Dreaming” itself.

Part of the problem is the word *dreaming* itself. Modern society does not take dreams seriously and tends to contrast them with reality. So when we refer in English to Aboriginal ideas about the Dreaming, our own translation of their word implies that we are dealing with a figment of their imagination, something not real. (Maybury-Lewis 197)

The importance of a traditional Aboriginal language base is further demonstrated when breaking down the term *Burruguu-ngayi-li* to its true meaning. Before the Dreaming, or Burruguu-ngayi-li, was a time commonly known as the “Dreamtime”, what my family call the Burruguu. The time which first gave birth to the Dreaming, we call *gamilu bidi-wii yilaambiyal*, which put simply means “before the beginning”, and it is in this time before the beginning that we have the introduction of a number of Ancestral Beings, called the Maran Dhinabarra, responsible for all creation.

It’s them old people, them spirits blessing the land ... for sure. Look at them carved trees we had at Tallwood, together with ground carvings, that’s part of ritual, ceremony ... you know, acceptance of them old people. As part of the everyday learning, that is the knowledge ... is the idea of a continuation of the one story ... they come from a time before creation, this is who they are, them old people ... they had/have a different level of consciousness ... a deeper understanding of this knowledge (Bell)

The eldest and greatest of these Maran Dhinabarra within the Kamilaroi Dreaming is known as Buwadjarr, and it is through a conversation between Buwadjarr and another Ancestral Being, Wadhaagudjaaylwan, that the Maran Dhinabarra first give birth to the Dreamtime [Burruguu] as a preamble to the Aboriginal Genesis, “The time of Creation”.

It's a continuation of the one story, it just got bigger and wider ... that's all ... a continuation ... but it comes back to this time before the beginning. It comes back to before creation (Bell)

This idea, that creation (Genesis) is formed from “some-thing”, as in *gamilu bidi-wii yilaambiyal* ... a “time before the beginning”, rather than “God created the world from the void of nothing”, is discussed by Pope as representing an extremely complex and highly developed conceptual understanding of the world around us: “Practically speaking there is no ‘creation from nothing’. There is always something ‘before the beginning’, just as there is always something ‘after the end’” (Pope 37).

For me personally, that precise moment of inspiration: who or what is reckoned to be “breathing into” whom or what, and to what effect has been played out over a number of different times which, upon reflection, become strategic signposts throughout my life. Perhaps at times when the Maran Dhinabarra are with me ... and it is for me this connection to my traditional *Burruguu-ngayi-li* or “Dreaming” that separates my own *Kamilaroi* epistemology from current Indigenous studies. In order to reconnect with our *Burruguu-ngayi-li* we must first acknowledge and then position strategically the traditional strength of the now isolated parallel tradition (the “other side” of the binary) and importantly, ensure it is not relegated to an inferior position. The concern with such debate lies in the potential to further alienate those of us who have retained a more traditional knowledge base as the foundation of their Aboriginal identity. It is a point further highlighted in the work of Grieves, where she discusses Aboriginal Philosophy’s “relegation to the category of quaint myths and legends” as demonstrated below:

The reasons for the debasement of Aboriginal philosophy—its relegation to the category of quaint myths and legends, suitable only for reproduction as children’s stories—lie deep within settler colonial constructions of Aboriginal society as primitive, *stone age* and inherently backward, with nothing to offer the modern, progressive ideals of the colonial project. ... The subsequent base poverty of Aboriginal Australians only adds to the constructions of their worthlessness as a people and the subsequent ignorance of the source of wisdom about ways of managing the natural resource base, and of human populations, held within Aboriginal spirituality. Aboriginal Spirituality remains *unsettling* in its persistence and its being: (Grieves 7)

As stated throughout this paper, the pressure is so great to comply with the hegemonic principals held within the academy that our own Indigenous Academics are now also moving away from any association with a Traditional Aboriginal world-view. This move away is further demonstrated in the works of Yin Paradies and Vernon Ah Kee:

I do not speak an Aboriginal language, I do not have a connection with my ancestral lands or a unique spirituality inherited through my Indigeneity. I have little contact with my extended family, and the majority of my friends are non-Indigenous. (Paradies 358)

That's why I say that the only authentic Aboriginal people in this country are the urban Aboriginal people (Ah Kee 3).

The problem here is that the departure from traditional lifestyle and philosophy becomes an ironic form of authenticity that is born directly from the experience of colonisation. This departure is not a solution to the initial problem associated with our lack of power within a binary position fraught with hierarchical relations. Paradies, Ah Kee and others are simply reorganising their position. They are not dismantling, or disengaging from, colonisation, and as such the binary remains constant. We, as Aboriginal Australians, remain the oldest living culture and collective human consciousness in the modern world, with Australian human occupation occurring anywhere between 60,000 and 110,000 years ago (Flood 86). I am concerned to assert the importance of this against the position taken, for example, by Paradies, Ah Kee and other Aboriginal scholars as demonstrated above.

Warraan garaay (A final word)

As the oldest living intellectual property in the world, the stories of my people are too valuable to ever become lost. Anything else other than saving them becomes a distraction from the truth ... no matter how emotional or sophisticated this distraction may be. My grandfather's first cousin, my uncle Reg Knox, taught me a prayer to use during times when periods of self-doubt and reflection, has the potential to take me away from what I already know, *that what I am and always will be is Kamilaroi ... the way I see the world is Kamilaroi and my very DNA is Kamilaroi...*

Let me then leave you with this Kamilaroi prayer...

"Ngiyani ngiima yilaadhu yalagiiirray ngiyani gimiyandi gaalanha yilaalu-gi gi" (We are here today as we were yesterday and will be forever...) (Knox)

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Marcus Woolombi Waters is a married Kamilaroi man with six children. His PhD “Contemporary Urban Indigenous ‘Dreamings’: interaction, engagement and creative practice” includes documentation of Kamilaroi epistemology through a development of pedagogy from traditional ceremonial practice. A published playwright screenwriter and academic, Dr Waters came to the School of Humanities Griffith University in 2005 after writing a number of internationally award winning short films and also writing for television with the Channel 7 Network and SBS. Winner of the Cultural Inclusiveness Award in the 2009 Griffith Awards for “Excellence in Teaching”, Dr Waters is Convener of two scriptwriting courses and teaches in Sociology.