Indigenous standpoints, Indigenous stories, Indigenous futures: narrative from an
Indigenous standpoint in the twenty-first century and beyond

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THESIS DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of a Young Adult (YA) novel titled *The Disappearance of Ember Crow* (Ember Crow) and an associated exegesis which explores storytelling and Indigenous standpoint theory.

Ember Crow is the second book in a trilogy (*the Tribe* trilogy) which is set hundreds of years into the future. *Ember Crow* is a work of ‘Indigenous Futurisms’, a term coined by Anishinaabe academic Grace Dillon to describe a form of storytelling whereby Indigenous peoples use speculative fiction to challenge colonial stereotypes and imagine Indigenous futures. The narrative is largely told from the perspective of an Indigenous heroine, sixteen year old Ashala Wolf, who battles an oppressive government on a future earth. She lives in a forest (the Firstwood) with other runaways whom she names her Tribe. Ashala and her Tribe are fleeing a set of laws that divide people into three categories: Citizens (people without abilities), Illegals (people with abilities) and Exempts (people whose abilities are determined by the government to be benign). As is discussed in the exegesis, *Ember Crow* is based on my standpoint as an Aboriginal (Palyku) woman. In this respect, multiple aspects of the narrative are drawn from Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing. These include: a focus on interconnectedness; a fluid ‘learning to read the signs’ interaction with a reality comprised of many animate beings; and the use of Indigenous scientific literacies. Other aspects of the narrative are drawn from colonial oppression – notably, the Citizenship Accord, which are based on the *Natives (Citizenship Rights) Act 1944 (WA)*.

The exegesis explores Indigenous standpoint theory with a particular focus on the Australian Indigenous Women’s Standpoint articulated by Aileen Moreton-Robinson. As defined by Moreton-Robinson, an Australian Indigenous women’s standpoint is one which is centred in sovereign (interconnected) Indigenous women’s ways of being, knowing and doing, and which generates its problematics through our knowledges and experiences, including those of the intersecting oppressions that situate us in different power relations. I identify two characteristics of Indigenous worldviews as underlying my way of knowing, being, and doing as an Indigenous woman storyteller: that the world is holistic and animate. These characteristics then provide a lens through which to discuss the influence of standpoint on storytelling in chapters three and four.

Chapter three of the exegesis examines the nature of holism in Indigenous contexts and the influence of holism on *Ember Crow* in relation to respecting boundaries and
sustaining collectives, and with regard to the use of genre. Chapter four focuses on animate Indigenous realities and human/non-human relationships in *Ember Crow*, including in relation to the embodiment of Indigeneity in narrative. This chapter also examines how a view of the world as an animate reality intersected with the dehumanisation of Indigenous peoples inherent in the colonial project to shape my answer to the question of what it is to be human that is central to the novel.

*Ember Crow*, as a work of Indigenous Futurisms, is a story which imagines Indigenous futures. This does not mean simply the futures of Indigenous peoples, but futures grounded in Indigenous visions of the ways in which humans should live so that all life continues – or in other words, of how to hold up animate, interconnected realities so that all life in the world has a future.
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The novel that is the subject of this thesis, *The Disappearance of Ember Crow*, has been published by Walker Books and Candlewick Press. Thank you to Walker Books and Candlewick for allowing me to put my words into the world.
### AUTHORSHIP DECLARATION: SOLE AUTHOR PUBLICATIONS

This thesis contains the following sole-authored work that has been published

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Exegesis
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Chapter One

Introduction

Narrative has long played a significant role in the rich Indigenous cultures of the earth, including the culture of my people, the Palyku. But in the aftermath of colonialism, storytelling from an Indigenous standpoint can be a complex task. Indigenous storytellers face the challenge of articulating narratives grounded in Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing whilst negotiating structures and spaces that have long denied the validity of Indigenous life-ways. This exegesis examines the complexities of storytelling from an Indigenous standpoint, and the influence of an Australian Indigenous women’s standpoint on the creative portion of this thesis, *The Disappearance of Ember Crow* (hereafter *Ember Crow*).

Summary of Exegesis

The exegesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter one consists of a summary of the content of the exegesis, and offers some introductory comments on terminology as well as a précis of *Ember Crow*.

In Chapter two, I examine Indigenous standpoint theory, focusing on Geonpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s articulation of an Australian Indigenous women’s standpoint. An Australian Indigenous women’s standpoint is one which is centred in sovereign Indigenous women’s ways of being, knowing and doing.¹ It generates its problematics through our knowledges and experiences, including those of the intersecting oppressions that situate us in different power relations under shared social, political, historical and material conditions.² I identify two characteristics of Indigenous worldviews as underlying my way of being, knowing and doing as a sovereign Indigenous woman storyteller: that the world is holistic and that the world is animate. These characteristics then provide a lens through which to discuss the influence of standpoint on storytelling in chapters three and four.

Chapter three examines the nature of holism in Indigenous contexts and the influence of holism on *Ember Crow* in relation to respecting boundaries and sustaining the wholeness of others, as well as the use of genre. Chapter Four focuses on animate Indigenous realities and human/non-human relationships in *Ember Crow*, including in relation to the embodiment of Indigeneity in narrative. This chapter also examines how a view of the world as an animate


Australian Feminist Studies 331, 340

² *ibid*
reality intersected with the dehumanisation of Indigenous peoples inherent in the colonial project to shape my answer to the question of what it is to be human that is central to the narrative.

**Terminology and Indigenous Peoples**

At the outset it is important to clarify the meaning of ‘Indigenous’ and related terms used throughout this exegesis.

The Indigenous peoples of the globe are highly diverse and as such, there is no universal definition of Indigeneity. However, a modern understanding of the term ‘Indigenous’ at an international level is based in the following characteristics:

- Self-identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member;
- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies;
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources;
- Distinct social, economic or political systems;
- Distinct language, culture and beliefs;
- Form [stet] non-dominant groups of society;
- Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities.³

It is estimated that there are more than 370 million Indigenous peoples worldwide, constituting as many as 5 000 different cultures and thereby constituting most of the world's cultural diversity although Indigenous peoples are a numerical minority.⁴ Australia has two Indigenous peoples, the Aboriginal peoples whose homelands lie on mainland Australia, Tasmania and some offshore islands; and the Torres Strait Islander people whose homelands lie in the Torres Strait Islands off the Queensland coast. Indigenous peoples both within Australia and elsewhere share broad commonalities including in relation to earth-based worldviews; experiences of the cycles of violence that constituted the colonial apocalypse; the present day disadvantage and multi-generational trauma that is colonialism’s legacy; and the ongoing struggle for decolonisation. But Indigenous peoples are also distinct from each other, a diversity that is shaped by the connection to our homelands (which Australian Aboriginal people name our ‘Countries’).

Throughout this exegesis, the terms ‘Indigenous’ and ‘First Peoples’ will be used interchangeably to reference the Indigenous peoples of Australia and the globe. When referring only to Australian Indigenous peoples, the terms ‘Australian First Peoples’ or ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ will be employed or the reference will be made clear from the

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context. Finally, when ‘Aboriginal’ is used in this exegesis it refers only to the Aboriginal people of Australia.

The difficulty inherent in the use of general descriptors such as ‘Indigenous’ (or ‘Aboriginal’) is that these terms can suggest a homogenous Indigenous culture that does not exist, and deny the continuing existence of multiple Indigenous nations within the borders of nation-states such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. In order to acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous peoples, any Indigenous person quoted or referred to in this thesis will be identified by the specific Indigenous nation or nation(s) from which they come the first time that their work is referenced, provided their specific affiliation was able to be ascertained. If the specific affiliation could not be ascertained then the appropriate general term (eg Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous) will be used.

The creative portion of the thesis

The creative portion of the thesis is a Young Adult novel of 83 416 words. The genre-category ‘Young Adult’ refers to books which are aimed at twelve – eighteen year olds and which generally focus on the perspectives and experiences of teenagers.\(^5\) *Ember Crow* can further be characterised as a work of speculative fiction, with ‘speculative fiction’ used here in a broad sense to encompass science fiction, fantasy, and other genres or sub-genres such as dystopia, paranormal, and alternative history. However, as is discussed in chapter three, there are difficulties in applying Western genre categories to Indigenous works. *Ember Crow* is therefore best described as a work of Indigenous Futurisms, a term coined by Anishinaabe academic Grace Dillon to describe a form of storytelling whereby Indigenous peoples use speculative fiction to challenge colonial stereotypes and imagine Indigenous futures.\(^6\)

*Ember Crow* is the second book in a trilogy, with the first and third books titled *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* and *The Foretelling of Georgie Spider*, respectively. The entirety of the trilogy was published in Australia by Walker Books during the course of my Ph D.\(^7\) The first two books have also been published in the US by Candlewick Press,\(^8\) with the US edition of *The Foretelling of Georgie Spider* to be published in 2017. The précis of *Ember Crow* (below) discusses some events from the first book in the trilogy; these events are also explained within the

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text of *Ember Crow*, as each book in the series was written so that it could be read without needing to read the previous books.

*The Tribe* series takes place on a future earth following an environmental catastrophe (known as the Reckoning), which destroyed the world. Hundreds of years later, society has rebuilt itself. Sixteen year old Ashala Wolf, along with a group of runaway teens and children (who Ashala names her Tribe) live in a forest named the Firstwood. Each member of the Tribe has a bond with a Firstwood animal, and takes the name of that animal for their own. *Ember Crow* is told primarily from Ashala’s perspective, with a portion of the text narrated by Ember, a member of Ashala’s Tribe.

Ashala’s ability is Sleepwalking. When she uses her ability she experiences everything as part of a vivid dream, where reality is translated into a dreamscape and whatever changes she makes to that dreamscape actually happen in the world. The other two founding members of the Tribe are Georgie Spider and Ember Crow. Georgie can see the future, while Ember has an eidetic memory and can manipulate the memories of others.

Ashala and her Tribe have run to the Firstwood to avoid the Citizenship Accords, a set of laws that divide people into three categories: Citizens (people without special abilities), Illegals (people with special abilities), and Exempts (people who have abilities that are considered by the government to be benign). Abilities are believed to be a threat to ‘the Balance’, the harmony of the world which must be preserved in order to prevent a repeat of the catastrophes that destroyed the old world. Illegals are confined to detention centres and have collars placed around their necks to block their abilities.

When *Ember Crow* begins, Ember has failed to return from a trip to Gull City. She went there to investigate sightings of an Illegal rebel known as ‘the Serpent’, who has been appearing at rallies held against the Citizenship Accords by the reform movement. The supposed appearances of the Serpent are troubling since he is an invention of Ember’s, an imaginary Illegal created to “give the government someone else to chase besides the Tribe.” Ember sends a message back to Ashala via a memory encoded into a stone, which is carried to the Firstwood by a dog (Nicky). The message tells Ashala that Ember might know who the man pretending to be the Serpent is and that’s she’s going after him, but gives no information as to her whereabouts.

Ashala consults her grandfather, an ancient spirit (a snake) who inhabits a lake in the Firstwood. Ashala encountered her grandfather in the first book; he explained to her that he had created her people (Aboriginal people) in the old world. There are no longer divisions based on race in the new world:

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In the old world, the one that had been destroyed by the Reckoning, [grandfather] had created my people, my “race”. It was hard to understand how humans used to care about things like different shaped eyes, or different coloured skin. Now all that mattered was the line between Citizen, Exempt and Illegal.\textsuperscript{10}

Grandfather tells Ashala to ‘beware the angels’. Ash doesn’t initially understand what this means since ‘angels’ are “old-world beings that might not exist any more, if they ever had existed.”\textsuperscript{11} Religion is considered one of the evils of the old world. The abandonment of religion – like much of the philosophy that shapes the society that emerged from the Reckoning – is drawn from the works of Alexander Hoffman, a scientist who predicted the Reckoning and hid caches of his writings and inventions to assist survivors of the catastrophe to rebuild.

Still searching for clues as to where Ember might have gone, Ashala investigates Ember’s ‘laboratory’ – a room in a cave system where Ember conducts experiments – and finds a hidden room that contains a Hoffman cache. Within the cache Ashala finds plans for an artificial lifeform named AINGL (Artificial Intelligence – New Gaia Lifeform) and realises these are the ‘angels’ her grandfather was warning her against. Ember has now been missing for a few months, and a man (Jules) arrives at the Firstwood carrying another stone from Ember, encoded with memories that span the missing period. Ash experiences those memories as if she were Ember, and so this portion of the novel is told from Ember’s perspective. In it, we learn that Ember is herself an aingl, that Hoffman created her hundreds of years ago, and that she and the other aingls consider themselves to be Hoffman’s children. Ember believes the Tribe to be in danger from her eldest brother Terence, who hates people with abilities and views the Tribe as a threat.

The narrative shifts back to Ashala’s perspective as Jules, Ashala and Connor travel to Spinifex City where they rescue Ember from Terence, with the assistance of Leo, another of Ember’s brothers. Ash learns that Ember created the Citizenship Accords, but that she did so after her youngest brother, Dominic, was murdered by someone with an ability. She also learns that Dominic was reborn in Nicky, the dog that initially brought Ember’s message to Ashala. In the first book, Ashala was held captive for a time inside Detention Centre 3 by Chief Administrator Neville Rose. He attached Ashala to a machine designed to read memories. Within her subconscious, Ashala saw the machine as a dog hunting her, but she eventually came to view the dog as a fellow prisoner, and took the machine with her back to the Firstwood when she escaped the Centre. Ember recognised the machine as having being created from the circuits that were all that was left of Dominic after he’d been destroyed:


“You’re the one that built him a body.” I pointed out.
“A body is nothing without a consciousness, and he didn’t have one. He was gone, Ash. I think you brought him back …. they hooked your brain up to the box in the centre, the same brain that lets you transform reality when you Sleepwalk. You saw the machine as a dog, and that’s what he became. When I opened up that box, my brother was there. Only not quite as I’d known him.”

Following the rescue of Ember, Ash learns that Terence is planning an attack. It has been revealed earlier in the narrative that Chief Administrator Neville Rose is going to be subject to a proceeding known as an Adjustment (whereby things will be ‘adjusted’ to achieve Balance). During the course of the first book, Rose broke several sets of Accords, and it was Ashala and the Tribe who revealed his crimes so that he was arrested. The Adjustment is taking place in the now-abandoned Detention Centre 3, on the fringes of the grasslands that lie outside the Firstwood. Ashala and Connor travel to the Centre. Neville Rose escapes, but the Tribe is able to foil the attack, part of which was aimed at assassinating the leader of Gull City and making it seem as though Illegals were responsible. Ember Crow ends with a celebration in the Firstwood:

[Connor and I] ran out to spin among the rest of the dancers and became part of the night, the two of us moving in rhythm with each other and the Tribe and the turning stars above. For a second, the silver glow of the tuarts seemed to twist and elongate into shining lines that flowed between us all, and extended outwards to the animals and the trees and the earth. I see the connections, Grandpa. I do.

The wind grew stronger, swirling sparks of fire and the scent of eucalyptus through the clearing. I gave myself up to the music and the laughter and the dancing; to these people, and this moment.

We are the Tribe, and we are here.

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Chapter Two

Indigenous standpoint theory and research methodology

Indigenous standpoint theory has emerged as a means for Indigenous peoples to articulate critical viewpoints founded in the embodied experience of Indigeneity whilst negotiating the complex intersections of oppression emerging from colonialism. While iterations of Indigenous standpoint theory have drawn from the works of feminist scholars, it is important to recognise that the ancient knowledge-ways of Indigenous peoples have always required locating oneself amongst the networks of relationships that comprise Indigenous realities. In this sense, Indigenous standpoint theory can be viewed as part of a larger continuing project by Indigenous scholars to actualise Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing in the academy. Standpoint is thus closely related to the substantial body of Indigenous scholarship concerning ‘Indigenous research’, which for present purposes can be defined as research that is “made up of vital, transformative practices that emerge from and for Indigenous peoples.”¹⁴

This chapter begins with an overview of Indigenous standpoint theory, discussing the founding work of Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata. I then consider Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s watershed articulation of an Australian Indigenous women’s standpoint theory; explain the connection between standpoint and Indigenous research as embodied in this exegesis; and discuss how I configure an Australian Indigenous women’s standpoint to the specificities of my cultural and social location. The influence of standpoint on storytelling, including in relation to Ember Crow, is addressed in chapters three and four.

An Overview of Indigenous Standpoint Theory

In his influential work, Torres Strait Islander scholar Martin Nakata defines Indigenous standpoint theory as “a method of inquiry, a process for making more intelligible ‘the corpus of objectified knowledge about us’ as it emerges and organises understanding of our lived realities.”¹⁵ Indigenous standpoint theory explores “actualities of the everyday…from within that [lived] experience” rather than deploying “predetermined concepts and categories for explaining experience.”¹⁶ It therefore provides a means of “theorising from a particular and interested

¹⁵ Martin Nakata, Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines (Aboriginal Studies Press 2007) 215
¹⁶ ibid 215
position.”

Standpoint connects with Nakata’s concept of the cultural interface whereby the space where cultures meet is conceived of not as an intersection but an interface that is “constituted by points of intersecting trajectories.” The cultural interface is a “multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organisation.”

An Indigenous standpoint can only ever be articulated by an Indigenous person, emerging as it does from the lived experience of Indigeneity. However, respectful engagement with Indigenous standpoints by non-Indigenous scholars – along with a willingness to interrogate their own standpoint/knowledge-discipline – can focus attention on important questions relating to research privilege, and ultimately lead to more ethical and sustainable engagement with Indigenous peoples. Non-Indigenous researcher Marie Heffernan, reflecting on research and standpoint, writes that:

by positioning research as a political act the non-Indigenous researcher can come to the research relationship with a practice guided by an understanding of the need to find new, culturally appropriate research “spaces” … in taking this view, the focus changes from empathetic understanding to the flexible engagement in an interface that attempts to both challenge dominant discourses and allow Indigenous researchers to act within Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies.

Questions regarding from whose standpoint the value of a research project is assessed – and whom the research/researcher is answerable to – can of course be equally important for Indigenous researchers negotiating dual responsibilities to the community and to the academy. In this respect, Indigenous standpoint theory provides a means not only for Indigenous peoples to articulate our positions to non-Indigenous peoples, but also amongst ourselves. Thus, Tracey Bunda (Ngugi/Wakka Wakka), writing with non-Indigenous colleagues Lew Zipin and Marie Brennan, has described Indigenous standpoint theory as a process that moves in external and internal directions. Indigenous peoples engage externally to “speak critically from the ‘margins’ to the ‘centres’ of institutional power” and also internally to “speak across the margins reflexively to each other.” These internal conversations then “cast multi-focal gazes of critical analysis on

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17 ibid 215
18 ibid 198
19 ibid 199
22 ibid 951
how (neo)colonial power mechanisms limit Indigenous agency to articulate diverse accounts which include ambiguities, tensions and complexities as the very ground for understanding Indigenous pasts and re-imagining Indigenous futures.“

Standpoint also facilitates decolonisation dialogues, which necessarily involve challenging the knowledges and research processes which emerged from Eurocentrism. ‘Eurocentrism’ is the “cognitive and educational legacy of colonization … an intellectual and educational movement that postulates the superiority of Europeans over non-Europeans.” Eurocentrism privileges the knowledge- and life-ways that emerged from Western Europe and were exported across the globe by the colonialism. Eurocentrism has resulted in research traditions that position Indigenous peoples as ‘native informants’ who do not have knowledge-systems of our own, or at least, not ones capable of producing knowledge that is as valuable as that of the West. Eurocentrism thereby “creates a strategy of difference that leads to racism, which allows Europeans and colonists to assert their privileges while exploiting Indigenous people and their knowledge.”

As colonial constructs are challenged and dismantled, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars across a range of knowledge-disciplines are seeking to overcome the lingering effects of Eurocentrism on research practices. Indeed, as I have recently suggested, a proliferation of ethical protocols suggests the concern for most scholars is not whether to ethically engage with Indigenous peoples, but how to go about doing so. Part of the work of decolonisation – and in many ways of standpoint theory – is to create spaces for equitable engagement between knowledge-systems and peoples that opens the way to new understandings.

**Criticisms of standpoint theory**

In formulating an Indigenous standpoint theory Nakata drew on the work of feminist standpoint theorists, and acknowledged the following critiques of past (non-Indigenous) iterations of standpoint:

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23 *ibid 951*


25 For an examination of the way in which a belief in Western superiority was embedded in the original claim to the soil across different colonised nations (including Australia), see Robert J Miller, Jacinta Ruru, Larissa Behrendt and Tracey Lindberg, *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (Oxford University Press 2010), for a broader examination of the colonial project from an Australian Indigenous perspective see Irene Watson, Aboriginal Peoples, *Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law* (Routledge 2014)

26 Marie Battiste, ‘Enabling the Autumn Seed: toward a decolonized approach to Aboriginal knowledge, language, and education’ (1998) 22:1 *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 16, 22

[a] tendency to ‘epistemic relativism’; the endless fragmentation across categories of difference; an unfortunate emphasis on ‘who can know’ rather than ‘what can be known’; the preoccupation with politics of identity and location that reify boundaries between groups who also have common concerns; and the containment of politics and action to recognition and location rather than redistribution and transformation.28

Nakata pointed to the need for Indigenous academics to engage with these issues “so that accounts can be produced that articulate forms of Indigenous agency created in local sites through the social organisation of knowledge and its technologies, and which give content to how people engage and participate in and through them.”29 This has to some degree been addressed by Indigenous scholars since through the operationalisation of standpoint in relation to specific research projects. In this context, Simone Tur (Anangu), Faye Blanch (Yidnji/MBarbaram) and Christopher Wilson (Ngarrindjeri) have written of the use of standpoint to realise their power within tertiary institutions so that their research “contributes to the deconstruction of regimes of power even as it contributes new knowledge and methodologies to disciplinary discourses.”30 Other scholars have highlighted the usefulness of standpoint as a device to “engage in processes of problematicising, challenging, adapting, reframing and negotiating” such that it becomes “not an end-point but rather an ongoing, evolving tool of academic practice.”31 Standpoint therefore provides a means of “systematically questioning and problematicising taken-for-granted knowledge-power relationships” so as to “create new research spaces.”32 This aligns with Moreton-Robinson’s observation in relation to feminist standpoint theory that “[b]oth critics and defenders agree that despite its epistemological indeterminacy, standpoint theory is a useful analytical tool to begin inquiry and key concepts have been operationalised in reconfiguring feminist research.”33

It should also be noted that the past criticisms of standpoint theory can be challenged on a number of grounds. First, concerns relating to epistemological relativism and fragmentation arise from epistemological traditions heavily influenced by Newtonian-Cartesian divisions between observer and observed, and mind and body. Coupled with the privileging of Western knowledge-ways that was inherent in the colonial project, this led to a body of research – often described as ‘objective’ or ‘scientific’ – which was divorced from context and presumed to be capable of

28 above n15, 215
29 ibid, 215
31 above n20, 29
32 ibid
33 above n1, 333
producing universal truths.\textsuperscript{34} But the belief that a single way of knowing forms a universal frame of reference through which the experiences of all peoples should be interpreted and evaluated is a value-laden assertion, and part of what Scheurich and Young describe as epistemological racism.\textsuperscript{35} Epistemological racism refers to research epistemologies which “arise out of the social history and culture of the dominant race, [and]... reflect and reinforce that social history and that racial group (while excluding the epistemologies of other races/cultures).”\textsuperscript{36} Further, the existence of a measurable reality about which a singular grand narrative can be produced (as promised by the Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm) is now contested by developments in Western thought, including within scientific dialogues. The physicist F David Peat characterises the twentieth century as a movement of ‘from certainty to uncertainty’ with relativity, quantum physics and chaos theory raising fundamental challenges to ideas about knowledge.\textsuperscript{37} He writes:

If the revolutions of the twentieth century have taught us anything, at least they should have indicated the inherent limits of reductionist and mechanistic ways of thinking ... We can no longer adopt the privileged position of assuming that we lie outside a system as impartial observers who can objectify the world and discover its underlying mechanisms. Rather we are all part and parcel of the complex patterns in which we live and our thoughts, beliefs and perceptions have a profound effect on the world around us.\textsuperscript{38}

In a social science context, Moreton-Robinson has made the point that “how we are socially and culturally constituted through discourse as subjects play a determinative role in our individual ‘choices’ of research topic and methodology. This constitution makes it impossible for any individual to achieve a state of pure epistemological relativism.”\textsuperscript{39} In this regard, concerns over relativism are not only over-stated but can be viewed as part of the yearning for ontological certainty that has been diagnosed by Indigenous scholars Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran as “chronic and/or acute Cartesian anxiety disorder” and for which they recommend postcolonial therapeutic intervention.\textsuperscript{40}

Anxieties over relativism and fragmentation emerging from Eurocentric knowledge traditions are also difficult to fathom when viewed from standpoints grounded in Indigenous knowledge traditions. In Indigenous systems, an individual’s lived experience of their location within intersecting animate realities is integral to the process of ‘knowing’. A multiplicity of

\textsuperscript{34} For a comprehensive critique of Western research and Indigenous peoples see Linda Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples (Zed Books, 2nd ed, 2012)
\textsuperscript{35} James Scheurich, Michelle Young, ‘Coloring Epistemologies: Are our research epistemologies racially based?’ 26:4 (1997) Educational Researcher 4
\textsuperscript{36} ibid 8
\textsuperscript{37} F David Peat, ‘From certainty to uncertainty: thought, theory and action in a postmodern world’, (2007) 39 Futures 920
\textsuperscript{38} ibid, 927 - 928
\textsuperscript{39} above n1, 334 - 335
\textsuperscript{40} Eduardo Duran, Bonnie Duran, Native American Postcolonial Psychology, (SUNY Press 1995) 7
standpoints (life-forms) existing in relation to each other has always been part of Indigenous worlds. In an Australian Aboriginal context, this is inherent in the many Aboriginal Countries (realities) created by the Ancestor beings in the period sometimes called the Dreaming. Aboriginal Elder Mary Graham (Kombu-merri and Wakka Wakka) has explained multiplicity in this way:

- Place=Dreaming
- Multiple Places = Multiple Dreamings = Multiple Laws = Multiple Logics = Multiple Truths. All perspectives (truths) are valid and reasonable.\(^{41}\)

This is not to say that navigating truths produced by different perspectives is an easy task. But since Indigenous worldviews have always accepted the existence of many truths, standpoints grounded in Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing draw upon a rich inherited body of knowledge as to how to navigate the ebbs and flow of multiple animate realities without being consumed by the constant flux.

Criticisms of relativism (when applied to Indigenous standpoints) can also echo the longstanding denigration of Indigenous perspectives in the academy on the basis that cultural insiders “are incapable of an appropriate critical distance from which to understand their experiences, because they are incapable of sufficient ‘detachment’ or that they do not understand the ‘reality’ of their own lives.”\(^{42}\) Such logic rests on dismissing standpoints founded in the lived, interconnected experience of Indigenous animate contexts because this context is not valued by Eurocentric research traditions.

Other critiques of standpoint referenced by Nakata included a focus on ‘who could know’ rather than ‘what could be known’, and preoccupation with politics of identity/location that reify boundaries between groups. In Indigenous systems, however, ‘what could be known’ and ‘who could know it’ have always been aspects of the same question. Knowledge arose from, and was always limited by, one’s location within networks of relationships. Further, Indigenous systems recognised common concerns between different Indigenous peoples on individual and collective levels (and had physical/metaphysical spaces for those concerns to be managed) whilst still maintaining the boundaries that founded Indigenous worlds in localised sets of relationships.

Finally, Nakata notes that standpoint has been criticised for the “confine of politics and action to recognition and location rather than redistribution and transformation”. But in an Indigenous context this presents a false dichotomy, since it is only through recognition of the sovereign position of Indigenous peoples that transformation and equitable distribution of

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\(^{41}\) Mary Graham, ‘Understanding human agency in terms of place: a proposed Aboriginal research methodology’ (2009) 3 PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature 71, 76

\(^{42}\) Russell Bishop, Freeing ourselves from neo-colonial domination in research: a Maori approach to creating knowledge (2010) 11:2 International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education 199, 212
resources can occur. The separation of notions of civil rights from Indigenous (land-based) rights is in part informed by discourses which have long failed to grasp that equality in Indigenous contexts requires respecting Indigenous difference. As Mohawk scholar Patricia Monture-Angus once wrote: “I no longer proscribe to the theory of equality because it does not significantly embrace my difference or that I choose to continue to remain different.”\(^{43}\) Any meaningful concept of equality, when applied to Indigenous peoples, must include addressing the taking of the land. To conceive of equality in any other way is to ignore the most fundamental of imbalances and the one which gives rise to all others, for it is the dispossession of Indigenous peoples – and the need to justify it with the denial of Indigenous humanity – that created the intersections of oppression under which we now exist.\(^ {44}\)

An Australian Indigenous Women’s Standpoint Theory

This thesis (both the exegesis and creative portion) is written from an Australian Indigenous women’s standpoint, as set out in the watershed work of Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Like Nakata, Moreton-Robinson drew on the work of feminist standpoint theorists. However, she concludes that feminist standpoint theory is incommensurate with her formulation of an Indigenous women’s standpoint theory for two principal reasons. First, it promulgates a body/earth division that is incompatible with Indigenous body/earth interconnectedness;\(^ {45}\) and second, feminist standpoint theorists fail to address their “privileged relationship to the nation’s sovereignty.”\(^ {46}\)

Moreton-Robinson acknowledges the significance of Nakata’s work, but challenges his lack of consideration of the significance of gender in shaping standpoint.\(^ {47}\) As Moreton-Robinson points out, while Indigenous men and women share a body of cultural knowledge, the “relationship between Australian women’s knowledges and experiences will be different to that of Indigenous men because of our embodiment, our relations to different country, people and ancestral creator beings and social location.”\(^ {48}\) In this sense, Australian Indigenous knowledges – and homelands – have always been gendered in nature. In the words of Murri Elder Lilla Watson:

[T]here has always been women's business and men's business. Both genders had their own terms of reference; and respected those of the other gender… there is a balance

\(^{43}\) Patricia Monture-Angus, *Thunder in My Soul: A Mohawk woman speaks* (Fernwood Publishing 1995), 69


\(^{45}\) above n1, 335

\(^{46}\) *ibid*

\(^{47}\) *ibid*, 338

\(^{48}\) *ibid*, 339
between men and women, and cooperation in the area of public business. Public business may be a matter which is not the concern of either gender: or it may be a matter so important that dealing with it adequately will require the combined input of both men and women, working cooperatively and through a process of consensus, from their own positions of strength.\textsuperscript{49}

Gendered standpoint does not of course exclude cooperation between men and women, or deny the existence of those shared spaces and knowledges that Lilla Watson defines as ‘public business’. But it does recognise that, as Moreton-Robinson asserts, “the gender of Indigenous bodies as with all racialised bodies does matter.”\textsuperscript{50}

Moreton-Robinson defines an Australian Indigenous women’s standpoint as follows:

An Indigenous women’s standpoint is ascribed through inheritance and achieved through struggle. It is constituted by our sovereignty and constitutive of the interconnectedness of our ontology (our way of being); our epistemology (our way of knowing) and our axiology (our way of doing). … intersecting oppressions will situate us in different power relations and affect our different individual experiences under social, political, historical and material conditions that we share either consciously or unconsciously.\textsuperscript{51}

The sovereignty that constitutes standpoint is defined by Moreton-Robinson as arising from Indigenous inter-connectedness to our homelands.\textsuperscript{52} This interconnectedness also founds our ways of being, knowing and doing (ontology, epistemology, axiology). Thus, Moreton-Robinson characterises an Indigenous women’s way of being as derived from our embodied relations to our living Countries:

Because the ancestral spirits gave birth to humans, we share a common life force…The ontological relationship occurs through the inter-substanciation of ancestral creator beings, humans and country; it is a form of embodiment based on blood line to country. As such Indigenous women’s bodies signify our sovereignty.\textsuperscript{53}

An Indigenous women’s way of being informs our way of knowing, which is constituted by what Moreton-Robinson terms ‘relationality’, whereby “one is connected by descent, country, place and shared experiences where one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self; this is learnt through reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences, co-existence, cooperation and social memory.”\textsuperscript{54} Indigenous women’s ways of being and knowing in turn inform our way of doing, which is “an extension of our communal responsibilities and sovereignties.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{49} Lilla Watson, ‘Recognition of Indigenous terms of reference’ (Keynote address at \textit{A Contribution to Change: Cooperation out of Conflict Conference: Celebrating Difference}, Hobart, 21-24 September 2004) 7-8
\textsuperscript{50} ibid, 339
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{ibid}, 340
\textsuperscript{52} ibid, 335
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{ibid}, 340 - 341
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{ibid}, 341
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{ibid}, 343
Configuring standpoint

As Moreton-Robinson notes, an Australian Indigenous women’s standpoint “can be reconfigured to suit the specificities of the cultural and social location of Australian Indigenous women scholars when developing their methodology.” This section offers some thoughts on how I configure standpoint to my particular context. The discussion below is drawn upon and expanded in chapters three and four in relation to the influence of standpoint on my creative work.

I am a sovereign (interconnected) Palyku woman. The homeland (Country) of my people lies in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. It is inland Country; I am a freshwater person. My Country, and all Aboriginal Countries, were created by the Ancestor beings who embodied reality through movement. They danced, sung, fought and slept; they shifted between different forms; and they continue to exist in Country. I am connected to the Ancestor Beings, and to Palyku Country, through the Palyku bloodline passed down through generations of Palyku women.

Through the stories of the Ancestors and through the inherited teachings of my family, I understand reality to be holistic and animate. I have previously defined holism in an Aboriginal context as meaning that “the whole is more than its parts, and the whole is in all its parts.” The pattern of reality that was formed by the Ancestor Beings is embodied within both the whole of Country and within all its living parts. This includes not only animals, plants and humans, but also wind, rain, stars, sun, moon and everything (everyone) else. And these many shapes of life only meaningfully exist in relationship to each other.

These two aspects of reality are explored in detail in chapters three and four, in relation to my creative work. For now it is sufficient to say that my sovereignty flows from my connection to the Ancestors in Country who created a holistic and animate reality. This in turn shapes my way of being, knowing and doing. My way of being is to seek balance with the constantly moving shapes of life that form and inform animate Aboriginal Countries. My way of knowing is to focus on connections, acknowledging that the whole is always more than the sum of its parts and the whole can never be entirely known. My way of doing ‘holds up’ my way of being/knowing and so the processes through which I act must mirror the pattern of creation sourced in the networks of relationships that make up Country.

I live and work in the homeland of the Whadjuk Nyungar, and I acknowledge their sovereignty over their own Country. The presence of my family in Nyungar Country is a

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56 ibid, 339
consequence of a journey made by my great-grandmother that was not her choice. Both my great-grandmother and my grandmother are members of the Stolen Generations, and so I am the inheritor of one of the greatest traumas inscribed upon the bodies, hearts and souls of Indigenous women by the white patriarchal state. The laws and policies that created the Stolen Generations, like all forms of violence enacted by the colonial project, were sustained by the denial of Indigenous humanity that was also the source of the settler claim to our land. In Australia this found legal expression in *terra nullius*, the notion that Indigenous peoples were too ‘primitive’ to be regarded as meaningfully occupying the continent and Australia was therefore ‘empty’ territory.\(^58\)

As someone trained in the Western knowledge-discipline of law, I possess the understanding required to locate and analyse the multiplicity of Anglo-Australian laws that shape the lives of Indigenous women, including those that now offer us equality. However, while law can regulate behaviour, it is often far less successful at changing attitudes. But attitudes can certainly subvert the law, and especially the principle of equality before the law. And representation – or rather misrepresentation – in narrative is not separate from discrimination; it is part of what enables it. In those crucial moments when others are making choices that will influence our fate, it is the stories they know about us that can alter perception and displace empathy. I therefore know myself to be vulnerable in that the protection purportedly offered by the rule of law may not be extended to me. Further, whatever equality Indigenous women possess under the laws of the settler state, I do not believe it be sufficient to allow us to fully realise our humanity as sovereign Indigenous women. My initial motivation to study the law therefore persists: I was/am seeking justice, which in Indigenous systems generally equates to balance. But the legal system of the Anglo-Australian nation-state, unlike Indigenous legal systems, is not constituted by the ways of living in Country that sustain Country, and has yet to fully genuinely acknowledge the presence and significance of the systems that went before.

I recognise the value of my own experience within the shared knowledges and experiences that shape the lives of all Indigenous women. As Moreton-Robinson notes, these shared conditions include the continual denial of our sovereignties; the politics of dispossession; our respective countries’ histories of colonisation; multiple oppressions; living in a hegemonic white patriarchal society; lacking epistemic authority within the academy; and resisting and replacing disparaging images of ourselves with our own representations.\(^59\) Some of these experiences also intersect with the lives of other women, for example women of colour, although the unique position of Indigenous women must always be acknowledged. We are First Peoples,

\(^{58}\) see references at n25
\(^{59}\) above n1, 341 - 342
First Women, and we are connected to our Countries in a way that is not shared by the other women who now dwell within the boundaries of our lands. Further, in order for the patriarchal settler state to acknowledge our right to be different (and hence the validity of our difference), it must acknowledge the originating war crimes of colonialism in enacting the violence – including the sexualised violence against women\textsuperscript{60} – that was required to dispossess us of our Countries. There is thus a dimension to dialogues surrounding Indigenous women that is not present in relation to other women. Things are, as they always were, about the land and our relationships to land.

I also acknowledge the experiences of Indigenous women who are subject to intersections of oppression which I do not share. While I am Indigenous and female, I am also heterosexual, cis-gendered, middle-class, and I do not have a disability. As a storyteller I acknowledge the limitations of my own standpoint and that my task is not to embody the experiences of others into narrative as if those experiences were my own, but rather to support others to tell their own stories. Some of the complexities of this are explored later in this exegesis.

Finally, I understand the path I walk now was formed by the passage of those who went before, including the generations of Palyku who were born into the trauma of colonialism. And I know that it is only because of their courage and their strength of will that my path exists at all. My voice is part of a continuum of Indigenous voices, and any wisdom I have did not begin – and will not end – with me. Any mistakes are entirely my own.

**Standpoint and research**

There is now a substantial body of work by Indigenous scholars regarding Indigenous research, which was drawn upon by Moreton-Robinson in developing an Australian Indigenous women’s standpoint theory.\textsuperscript{61} Indigenous research paradigms emerging from Canada and Australia, as Moreton-Robinson notes, are constituted by Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing, which “is informed by our embodied connection to our respective countries, all living entities and our ancestors; our sovereignty.”\textsuperscript{62} Hence, standpoint (as articulated by Moreton-Robinson) can itself be an Indigenous research paradigm. Some specific consequences of the application of this paradigm in relation to the formulation of this exegesis are considered below.

First, and most obviously, I speak from a particular standpoint, and I embrace my subjectivity as an epistemological strength rather than a weakness. As Margaret Kovach

\textsuperscript{60} For an examination of sexualised violence and trauma see Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails, Recreating Songlines* (Spinifex Press 2002)
\textsuperscript{61} above n1, 336 – 338
\textsuperscript{62} *ibid*, 337
(Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux) once put it, “Situating self implies clarifying one’s perspective on the world…This is about being congruent with a knowledge system that tells us that we can only interpret the world from the place of our experience.” The knowledge I produce is at once informed and limited by my standpoint, in that I cannot know what it is to experience the web of relationships that comprises the world from a position I do not hold. Not everything can (or should) be known, but I can speak with authority to my own embodied experience as an Indigenous women, including under the conditions shared by other Indigenous women.

Second, I take it as a given that Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing are as valid a means of understanding reality as the ways of the West. The question asked in this exegesis is thus not whether reality is holistic and animate, but how a holistic and animate reality affected my creative work. In this regard, I also note the need to choose words with caution so as to avoid perpetuating a colonial lexicon which presupposed Indigenous inferiority. As Irene Watson (Tanganekald and Meintangk) has written: “The embedded colonialist and racist constructs of Indigenous knowledges are the following: Aboriginal knowledge is irrelevant, irrational, unscientific, uncivilised, native story-telling, and “oral tradition” (which provides a flawed record of history).”

Third, I privilege Indigenous voices. This has been characterised as a fundamental aspect of Indigenous research by a number of Indigenous scholars. It is also an inevitable consequence of centering Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing, as Indigenous peoples are the primary and most authentic sources of our own experiences and realities. In privileging Indigenous voices I adopt the ‘living texts’ methodology which I have previously developed with colleagues Blaze Kwaymullina (Palyku) and Lauren Butterly. Living texts methodology mandates that the primary sources of knowledge about Indigenous peoples are the works of Indigenous peoples speaking to our own realities in circumstances where the Indigenous person(s) retains control over the knowledge and has authorised it to be in the public domain. The easiest way to ensure this is the case is generally to use only published texts in which the copyright is held by the relevant Indigenous individual or nation. The living texts methodology

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63 Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations and Contexts*, (University of Toronto Press 2009) 110
64 Irene Watson, ‘Re-centring First Nations Knowledge and Places in a Terra Nullius space’ (2014) 10:5 AlterNative 508, 518
recognises that Indigenous sources do not only comprise academic works but all works by Indigenous peoples including life histories, poems, songs and any other means through which an Indigenous person has chosen to communicate their perspective. Works of non-Indigenous peoples about Indigenous peoples are then treated as secondary sources that are used sparingly, and never in such a way as to overwhelm the primary Indigenous voices.

**Final thoughts: standpoint, creativity and research**

It is important to recognise that Indigenous research did not begin with scholars in the academy. Indigenous people “have always done research. That is, they have always asked questions that mattered to them and they have always sought to answer them, mobilizing all relevant sources of knowledge.” Much of the way in which these questions were asked and answered was through story. The telling of stories in the context of children’s fiction requires that I engage with (and disrupt) Western forms that are different to the ones I deal with in academia. But in both contexts, I am articulating a standpoint grounded in my interconnectedness as a sovereign Aboriginal women; in both I must grapple with structures, behaviours and attitudes that deny my sovereignty (and hence the validity of my interconnectedness); and in both my ultimate hope is to contribute to a decolonised world.

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67 above n14, 1
Chapter Three

The whole is in all its parts: holism and Indigenous storytelling

The worlds of Indigenous storytellers are founded in the narratives of the Ancestor beings, and these tales tell of a holistic reality in which all things are inter-connected and inter-related. But in the wake of colonialism, Indigenous storytellers face the task of embodying stories within Eurocentric contexts that have long denied our right to exist as whole Indigenous peoples, instead requiring conformity with Eurocentric values and knowledges. In this chapter, I consider the nature of holism in Indigenous realities and how it shapes the telling of stories. I also examine some of the complexities that surround manifesting the holism that it is integral to my way of being, knowing and doing as an Indigenous Australian woman storyteller whilst negotiating the fragmentation introduced into Indigenous worlds by colonialism.

Holism and fragmentation

I have previously conceptualised holism in an Aboriginal context as a pattern that has many threads of many colours. Every thread connects to (and therefore has a relationship with) all of the others. Human beings are among them, but we are neither the most nor the least important thread – we are one amongst many; equal with the rest. The pattern made by the whole is in each thread, and all the threads together make the whole. Stand close to the pattern and you can focus on a single thread; stand a little further back and you can see how that thread connects to others; stand further back still and you can see it all – and it is only once you see it all that you can recognise the pattern of the whole in every individual thread. The whole is more than its parts, and the whole is in all its parts.

This is the pattern of reality created by the Ancestors. It exists within and between all life, and is grounded in Aboriginal Countries. Storytelling is one of the primary processes through which the ‘whole’ of the connections that comprise the world are known and sustained. Narratives – whether told through dance, song, ceremony or any other form – are therefore both expression and evidence of interconnectedness, which is to say, Indigenous sovereignty. As lawyer and author Terri Janke (Meriam and Wuthathi) writes:

Stories are about belonging. They are the title deeds to a culture – clans have particular stories, and a story connects you to that place, or to those people. The right to tell stories and to link into that history, to that land, and that connection is an Indigenous cultural right.69

68 above n57
69 Terri Janke, ‘Who owns story?’ (Paper presented at Sydney Writers Festival, 2010) 1
Locating oneself amongst the web of relationships that comprise the world requires an intuitive, fluid means of interaction that my mother once spoke of as ‘learning to read the signs’. That was how it was described to her by one of our Aboriginal grandfathers. He characterised Captain James Cook – the ‘discoverer’ of Australia in Eurocentric mythology – as a man who couldn’t read the signs, explaining to my mother that “If a man can’t read the signs, then he might get out of his depth and end up in dangerous waters. He might muck things up for other people too.”

Cook’s actions, like those of all the other ‘discoverers’ of Indigenous territories, endangered worlds of knowledge and stories. Present day manifestations of the lie that it is possible to ‘discover’ (and thereby claim ownership of) that which is already known endanger us still. As Mary Graham has written:

To the Aboriginal mindset phenomena are received, and if there is one rule it is to “behold” … the world reveals itself to us and to itself – we don’t “discover” anything. The same mindset perceives the Western method of inquiry as being inextricably attached to discovery and therefore to ownership. That is why, to Indigenous people in many places, there is often a sense of something predatory about the Western process of inquiry.

Process in Indigenous systems is itself a whole that must embody that which it wishes to sustain. In other words, the process of storytelling is not independent (disconnected) from the result of story. And Indigenous peoples have long challenged the predatory processes through which non-Indigenous peoples purport to ‘discover’ our stories:

Over time many Indigenous Australians have worked in good faith with researchers and writers … [some of whom] have gone on to publish the material in their own name, because they wrote the text and so asserted copyright over the material. Sometimes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were called ‘informants’, an expression that doesn’t capture anything like the full weight of the intellectual property that belongs to them. Many times the relevant people were not provided with sufficient information in advance (or at all) to provide prior and informed consent to the use of their knowledge.

The stories of Indigenous worlds told before colonisation were whole stories that upheld the wholeness of the world. But the arrival of Cook – the man who couldn’t read the signs – and the colonisers who followed him brought a different kind of story into the worlds of my ancestors, the tales of the bewildering, brutal violence of dispossession. Now Indigenous storytellers must manifest wholeness across fragmented contexts. While this can be a difficult task, it is also part of the vital work of decolonisation:

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71 above n41, 76
72 Aboriginal Studies Press, *Guidelines for the ethical publishing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander authors and research from those communities*, (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2015) 21
there is a point in the politics of decolonization where leaps of imagination are able to connect the disparate, fragmented pieces of a puzzle, ones that have different shadings, different shapes, and different images within them and say that ‘these pieces belong together’. The imagination allows us to strive for goals that transcend material, empirical realities … decolonization must offer a language of possibility, a way out of colonialism [and] … that language of possibility exists within our own internal, oppositional ways of knowing.\(^{73}\)

Stories told from Indigenous standpoints – in speaking the language of possibility – open the way to futures free of the colonial project; a world that can only be imagined because it does not (yet) exist.

**Boundaries, collectives and storytelling**

What is it to be an Indigenous storyteller? There are probably as many answers to that as there are Indigenous nations and storytellers. However, the holism that has always informed Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing means that storytelling from an Indigenous standpoint acknowledges the position of the self as a part of a larger collective (whole) that in turn informs the self. But the storytelling traditions (including the research traditions) of the colonial project never engaged with Indigenous peoples as whole beings who were part of whole systems of knowledge. Instead, Indigenous peoples were positioned as native informants whose cultures, histories and knowledges were interpreted through a reductionist Eurocentric gaze and appropriated by the colonial project for its own ends.\(^ {74}\) And the use of Indigenous cultures in circumstances that fail to respect the living (and vulnerable) communities that create, and are sustained by, the cultures continues to be a source of concern. Perhaps the most well known recent example of cultural appropriation is bestselling author J K Rowling’s incorporation of North American Indigenous cultures in her *History of magic in North America*. It has drawn sustained criticism from Indigenous commentators for a stereotypical, poorly researched portrayal of Native cultures that has negative real world impacts on Indigenous peoples and communities.\(^ {75}\) In the words of Cherokee scholar Adrienne Keene:

> We fight so hard every single day as Native peoples to be seen as contemporary, real, full, and complete human beings and to push away from the stereotypes that restrict us in stock categories of mystical-connected-to-nature-shamans or violent-savage-warriors. Colonization erases our humanity, tells us that we are less than, that our beliefs and religions are “uncivilized”, that our existence is incongruent with modernity. This is not

\(^{73}\) above n34, 323 - 324  
\(^{74}\) see above n34  
\(^{75}\) A curated collection of web links to commentary by Indigenous peoples on Rowling’s use of Indigenous cultures has been created by children’s literature expert Debbie Reese (Nambe Pueblo), and can be found on her American Indians in Children’s Literature website here:  
accessed 6 October 2016
ancient history, this is not “the past.” The ongoing oppression of Native peoples is reinscribed everyday through texts and images.76

There are extensive ethical protocols in Australia relating to storytelling and Indigenous peoples across all aspects of the Arts.77 These protocols provide valuable guidance for those seeking to ethically engage with Indigenous peoples. But they exist in part due to the deficiencies in legal protection, including a lack of protection for the valuable Indigenous ecological knowledge that is of interest to pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies.78 Thus, one of the complexities that Indigenous writers negotiate is finding pathways to tell stories grounded in our interconnected worlds in a way that does not put those worlds (or connections) at risk. In this regard, Nukunu author Jared Thomas has written of how he dealt with incorporating plant knowledge into his YA novel, Calypso Summer, noting that although the use of the information was approved by the Elders: “it later crossed my mind that if I wrote about particular plants and their properties, it left Nukunu open to appropriation of our spiritual and cultural knowledge.”79 Thomas ultimately decided not to include the names of any plants in the book, and felt this decision improved the novel: “it became apparent that deliberate development of an air of secrecy surrounding the plants within the narrative…would resolve the issue of revealing information that the Nukunu wish to retain and also serve as a literary tool to heighten suspense. The issue that caused anxiety … developed into a strength.”80

In writing Ember Crow, along with the other novels that comprise The Tribe trilogy, I grounded the cultural aspects of the narrative in the principles that give shape to Aboriginal existence, as I understand those principles through my embodied experience as a Palyku woman. Within the narrative itself, Ashala follows a ‘reading the signs’ mode of interaction with an animate, holistic reality. However, I did not include any specific details (for example of particular cultural stories) in the work. The avoidance of specifics is a strategy deployed by Indigenous


77 See above n72, and also: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian writing (Australia Council for the Arts, 2nd ed, 2007); Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian music (Australia Council for the Arts, 2nd ed, 2007); Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian visual arts (Australia Council for the Arts, 2nd ed, 2007); Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian performing arts (Australia Council for the Arts, 2nd ed, 2007); Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian media arts (Australia Council for the Arts, 2nd ed, 2007); Terri Janke, Pathways and protocols: a filmmaker’s guide to working with Indigenous people, culture and concepts (Screen Australia 2009)

78 The need to protect Australian Indigenous knowledge in this regard has been highlighted by the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples. See National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, The call for a National Indigenous Cultural Authority (2013) 9 – 10


80 ibid 40
peoples across a range of contexts – thus, legal academic Irene Watson has written of her reluctance to “provide specific examples of Aboriginal relationships to ruwi [Country] … because of the dangers of mistranslation, appropriation and commodification.” For myself, it is especially important to deal cautiously with cultural knowledge in relation to speculative fiction, as it is a genre that has a history of fetishizing the cultures of Indigenous and non-Western peoples, and I note that other Indigenous speculative fiction writers are also cautious about the inclusion of specifics. In this regard, scholar Lynette James has compared the incorporation of culture in my work with that of Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki) and Nnedi Okorafor (Nigerian-American), and found:

While these … stories include important references to cultural touch-points such as orientations toward the sacred, the writers remain aware of the temptation for mainstream audiences to exoticize spiritual practices they do not share or fully understand…Readers are given enough details to show that characters engage in deliberate and careful practices with clear parameters, rules, and transferable knowledge. The protagonists make it clear that people who need to know more detail (those initiated into those positions) would know more.

This is not to say of course that Indigenous authors can never speak to cultural specifics. This is a matter for each storyteller to consider in relation to the particular story they are telling. But it is worth noting that books written by cultural insiders may contain less cultural information than the ones written by outsider authors who may not be as aware of the issues surrounding the protection of Indigenous knowledges.

This points to a second issue – who can (or should) tell whose stories? One of the things that concerns me as an Aboriginal storyteller is ensuring that I honour my responsibilities to the collectives that shape my existence whilst respecting the boundaries of other collectives, including those influenced by conditions of oppression that I do not share. In other words, how do I speak as a whole person in a way that does not compromise the ability of others to manifest their own wholeness? I speak from a particular position, and that means not all stories are mine to tell. The proposition that location both informs and limit what stories can be told is not a new or controversial proposition within Indigenous systems, where respecting boundaries was always part of sustaining the whole of Country and hence ourselves:

Traditionally, there are various access points to yura muda [Dreaming] and dangora [totemic stories]. Some stories can be shared amongst the group, others can only be told amongst certain members of a group or gender group. Sometimes members outside of the group can have access to a story or part of it, or they do not have the right to access a

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82 Lynette James ‘Children of change not doom: Indigenous Futurist heroines in YA’ (2016) 57:1-2 Extrapolation 165 - 166
particular story at all. Certain restrictions are inherent to Indigenous storytelling and these restrictions work as mechanisms to protect and maintain stories, culture and the land.\textsuperscript{83}

But acknowledging standpoint (and the limits thereof) has never been part of Eurocentric literary traditions. In the words of Bunurong author Bruce Pascoe:

Western literature is considered a free agent to set its stories against any texture, any colour, any metaphor … perhaps a time will come when Australian authors will not snatch misinformed stereotypes off the shelf to act as background to what many see as their more civilised, more important, more cognitively sophisticated white selves.\textsuperscript{84}

‘Western’, in this sense, is perhaps best understood as a collection of traditions that have, firstly, been heavily influenced by colonial constructions of Indigenous peoples as ‘less than’ and secondly, do not contain the stringent restrictions inherent in Indigenous narrative traditions regarding the telling of stories. However, this is changing as Western literature continues to engage with Indigenous and other marginalised peoples. This is exemplified in children’s literature, where questions concerning who should tell whose stories are part of an international dialogue amongst teachers, award judges, librarians, authors, illustrators, reviewers, and readers. In the US there are now dedicated websites that provide book reviews and commentary regarding representation issues, including American Indians in Children’s Literature (AICL),\textsuperscript{85} GayYA,\textsuperscript{86} Rich in Color,\textsuperscript{87} Disability in Kidlit\textsuperscript{88} and Reading While White.\textsuperscript{89} Australia does not yet have the equivalent of these websites, but there is a web-based discussion happening here as well, to which I am a contributor.\textsuperscript{90} While much of this dialogue is not ‘new’ in that Indigenous and other marginalised writers are repeating cycles of conversations that have been had before (particularly concerning systemic exclusion within the literary industry), the use of the web gives these discussions an enduring global presence. I have written to this in an online exchange with Black writer Zetta Elliott:

it matters [powerfully] to have the voices of so many diverse peoples speaking to these issues in cyberspace. We are creating a record, and if we don’t succeed in changing

\textsuperscript{83} above n79, 27
\textsuperscript{84} Bruce Pascoe, \textit{Convincing Ground} (Aboriginal Studies Press 2007) 211
\textsuperscript{85} <www.americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com>
\textsuperscript{86} <www.gayya.org>
\textsuperscript{87} <www.richincolor.com>
\textsuperscript{88} <www.disabilityinkidlit>
\textsuperscript{89} <www.readingwhilewhite.blogspot.com>
\textsuperscript{90} My commentary in this area is done via free access, web based sources such as online essays and blog posts. Links to some of commentary are available on my website < http://www.ambelin-kwaymullina.com.au/#!page_Collected_Thoughts>
anything for ourselves, we will at least place our knowledge and insights into the hands of
the writers who come after us.  

Conversations relating to standpoint have coalesced around the concept of ‘own voices’. ‘Own voices’ began as a twitter hashtag invented by Corinne Duyvis, a writer with autism and one of the founders of Disability in KidLit (a website which comments on portrayal of disability from disabled perspectives). The phrase ‘Own Voices’ is now used as shorthand to describe books written about diverse protagonists by authors who share that identity (in other words, by authors writing from their own standpoint). I identify myself as an Own Voices advocate, and in this context, I have said that I do not believe the lack of diversity in children’s literature to be a ‘diversity problem’. The origin of a body of literature that fails to reflect the actual make-up of the planet springs from, and is maintained by, a set of structures and attitudes that consistently privilege one set of voices over another, and hence, a lack of diversity is a privilege problem. Privilege is a topic much discussed in children’s literature diversity conversations, including the following recent comment by Australian-American YA author Justine Larbalestier: we white writers…need to step back from feeling we have the right to write the stories of people with less power than ourselves. Especially because every year more books by whites are published than by any other race. In YA, not only are the majority of books by white people, so are the majority of books about PoC [people of colour] and Native peoples. When we write these books we are literally keeping books by PoC and Native writers off the shelves. Outside of my books with multiple protags, I now only write white protagonists because I realised that [by writing non-white protagonists] I was part of the problem of lack of diversity in YA, not the solution.  

The need for white writers to step away from (rather than into) the story spaces of Indigenous peoples and peoples of colour is an issue that has been raised many times over. In the words of Wiradjuri poet Aunty Kerry Reed-Gilbert: “Some (people) believe if it's done by a

93 See the ‘About’ section of the Disability in Kidlit website: <www.disabilityinkidlit.com/about/> accessed 6 October 2016
94 For an example of its use in this context, see Lauren Barack, “When We Was Fierce” Pulled as Demand Grows for More Own Voices Stories (August 12 2016) School Library Journal <http://www.slj.com/2016/08/diversity/when-we-was-fierce-pulled-as-demand-grows-for-more-ownvoices-stories/> accessed 6 October 2016
white person that's better than if it's not done at all. But now we are getting Indigenous writers who can do it, but they are not recognised by the white publishing world." While there are far more published Indigenous authors now than there were in the 1990s when those words were spoken, the privileging of the voices of cultural outsiders over cultural insiders remains a live issue across the Australian literary landscape. Afro-Caribbean Australian author Maxine Beneba Clarke commented on this in 2015 in relation to prizes:

How can our major prize for the best book written by a woman in Australia have so far only been won by white, tertiary-educated women with academic backgrounds, whose (albeit very excellent) work is largely concerned – in character and ambit – with white Australia? Why isn’t there not a major book award for queer writing? How is it possible that in the same year the Sydney Morning Herald shortlisted five writers of colour as their Young Novelists of the Year, one state premier’s literary award gave lucrative awards across three or four categories to white writers whose work either heavily relied on multicultural Australia or told the stories of real or imagined people of colour in favour of works written by writers of colour?  

Among the boundaries I believe that non-Indigenous authors should observe in relation to writing Indigenous characters is that they should not do so from first person or deep third perspective. This in turn leads me to consider what boundaries I place on my own work. In this regard, I emphasise that the choices I make regarding the stories I tell (and the ones I don’t) flow from my interpretation of how I should act in order to sustain the many wholes that are the world. Other marginalised authors interpret their obligations in ways that are different but no less valid.

Within the narrative of Ember Crow there is a gay character (Leo), but his story is not told from a first person or deep third. This means he is not a main protagonist but not that he is unimportant; on the contrary, Leo’s tale is central to the latter portion of the book. But his story is not told in his voice because – in order to ensure my work does not become an occupying force in spaces that should be filled by other Own Voices – I don’t write the stories of other marginalised peoples as if that experience is my own. I note that this is not changed by the fact that Ember Crow is a work of speculative fiction set in a future world in which society is no longer steeped in heteronormativity. Within the narrative itself, Leo is not in any danger of being discriminated against because he is gay. However, stories are not created or read in a vacuum, and while I can (and did) imagine a world that does not privilege heterosexuality, that doesn’t alter the fact that neither myself nor any other author actually exists in a world free of oppression. Nor do any of us

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97 Kerry Reed-Gilbert, quoted in Willa McDonald, Tricky Business: Whites on Black Territory (1997) 29:1 Australian Author 11, 13
exist in isolation from the ways in which we benefit from oppression, something that is the concern of any standpoint theorist. As non-Indigenous legal academic Alan Ardill has written: “Standpoint theory requires all ladders of privilege and oppressive relations of power to be critically assessed.” These existing disparate power relations mean that the fact that I write future or fantasy worlds does not license me to ignore my position (privilege) as a beneficiary of heteronormativity in the here-and-now.

Holism, genre and storytelling

Before the arrival of the colonisers, Indigenous peoples told whole stories that sustained the wholeness of the world. But now Indigenous tales must be embodied into the categories called ‘genre’ and negotiate other Western forms that often do not reflect the interconnectedness of Indigenous existence. In the words of Sami scholar Rauna Kuokkanen:

> Indigenous peoples often have quite different views on "arts" and "aesthetics" from mainstream Western views. Although these terms may be new arrivals in vocabularies of Indigenous peoples' languages, they are not necessarily new phenomena. Many Indigenous artists emphasize that understanding of "arts" or "aesthetics" cannot be separated from other activities and daily life.

Indigenous authors must often resist compliance with outsider expectations of who we are and how we should write throughout the entirety of the publishing process. As Terri Janke writes, in relation to editorial input: “The editing process can diminish [Indigenous] writers. There are concerns that non-Indigenous editors often misunderstand the content of their manuscripts, and often alter language and style to cater for a mainstream non-Indigenous audience.” I have previously commented that one of the problems that confronts diverse writers is that we cannot necessarily rely upon the people on whom writers are supposed to be able to rely, since most agents, editors, and reviewers don’t know enough about us to be able to give us meaningful feedback on the ways in which we are representing our worlds. This also means that nor can they appropriately advise authors writing of experiences not their own. The potential breadth of difference between cultural outsider and cultural insider perspectives was dramatically illustrated this year in the US in regard to *When We Was Fierce*, a YA book written about an urban Black community by a Mexican-American writer. Advance copies of the novel received fulsome praise

103 above n91
from white reviewers, including for its representation of Black realities and the invented Black vernacular in which the story was told. But when the same book was examined by Black commentators and critics, they found it offered a monolithic, stereotypical view of Black communities, and was told in a vernacular that was “abhorrent” and inconsistent with their lived experience. The novel was subsequently withdrawn from publication.

This points to an ongoing problem for Indigenous peoples and other marginalised peoples: the way in which stories about us are read is by reference to what outsiders already know (or think they know) about us. This means that our own stories can be viewed as ‘false’ or ‘inauthentic’ to the extent that they challenge outsider expectations of Indigeneity. These expectations are in part formed by outsider stories that historically “have in the main portrayed half-truths and negative images, and have portrayed our many distinct groups of Indigenous Australians as living in a disjointed and static society all speaking the same language and incapable of adjusting to change.”

Engaging with Western literary forms as an Indigenous author therefore means engaging with a body of work about Indigenous peoples that has often distorted our realities, and the speculative fiction genre presents particular challenges for a number of reasons. First, it has a long history of appropriating the cultures of Indigenous peoples, as well as of reproducing colonial story-cycles whereby Indigenous and other non-Western peoples are represented as either the savage (alien) populations that must be conquered, or the child-like primitives in dire need of a white saviour. Second, the very notion of what is speculative and not depends on how ‘the real’ is defined. Many things viewed as being within the realm of the speculative – such as time travel, astral projection, or communication with animals – are aspects of Indigenous realities. To the extent that Indigenous stories present a view of reality at odds with what Eurocentric traditions define as ‘the real’ – and to the extent that our stories challenge settler

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108 Pat Mamajun Torres, ‘Interested in writing about Indigenous Australians?’ (1994) 26:3 Australian Author 24, 30
109 See above n6 1 - 3; also John Reider, Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction (Wesleyan University Press 2008)
myths regarding Indigenous peoples – all of our narratives might be characterised as speculative. To the extent that our narratives embody Indigenous truths, none of them are.

But while speculative fiction has many pitfalls it also presents possibilities, and the ways in which Indigenous authors negotiate (and transform) the genre to realise these possibilities is best captured by the description ‘Indigenous Futurisms’. This is a phrase coined by Anishinaabe academic Grace Dillon to describe a form of storytelling whereby Indigenous peoples use speculative fiction to challenge colonialism and imagine Indigenous futures. Futurisms consist of “Native writers … [writing] about Native conditions in Native-centred worlds liberated by the imagination.”

Ember Crow, and the entirety of the Tribe series, is a work of Indigenous Futurisms, and so it contains many elements that are not (at least from my standpoint), ‘speculative’. One example is communication with animals and other lifeforms (examined in the next chapter). Another is that the Tribe series is post-apocalyptic. No Indigenous person needs to invent the experience of a world-altering cataclysm. In this regard, Joan Winch (Nyungar and Martuajarra) has told of a dream in which she witnessed the arrival of colonisers in Nyungar country:

I was hiding on the riverbank behind some trees watching these little boats going up the river … As I watched, a terrible feeling of doom came into my heart and I said to myself, ‘This is the beginning of the end.’ When I looked down, I saw that my feet were not mine … I think I was in someone else’s body and I was seeing what they saw and feeling that same feeling of doom in my heart, because of what the coming of the first white people would mean to my people.

As Dillon notes, “the Native Apocalypse, if taken seriously, has already taken place.” Aspects of Ember Crow are drawn from the structural violence of colonialism, notably the Citizenship Accords. These Accords are based on a real-life law: the Natives (Citizenship Rights) Act 1944 (WA). The ‘citizenship’ this legislation offered came in the form of Aboriginal people being exempted from discriminatory, racially-based restrictions that only applied to them in the first place because they were Aboriginal. Citizenship was easily lost (including by associating with Aboriginal people who did not have their citizenship) and anyone applying for citizenship was required to pledge to give up practising Aboriginal culture. This was a form of citizenship grounded in hostility to Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing and which offered no true belonging nor equality.

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110 above n6
111 ibid 11
112 Joan Winch, ‘A Feeling of Belonging’, in Morgan et al above n71, 228
113 above n6, 8
114 Natives (Citizenship Rights) Act 1944 (WA) section 5
Structural violence, along with all other colonial violence, wreaked terror and chaos on Indigenous worlds, but as psychologist Judy Atkinson (Bundjalung and Jiman) points out, it “must be named…that the experiences of colonisation were different for Aboriginal women in comparison to Aboriginal men.” Colonisation directed a particular set of stories at Indigenous women and girls. Atkinson (citing Harris) has noted that a whole language evolved in Australia around the sexual violation of Aboriginal women which placed “sexual violence against women in the context of sport and contextualizes Aboriginal women as animals to be used for sporting pleasure…. [white] society viewed sexual violations of Indigenous women as familiar male sporting events. White women maintained their silence in their denial of the reality of this violence.”

Indigenous peoples lived through the end of worlds, but we did not end, and nor did our stories or our cultures. The focus of the Tribe series is not on the cataclysm itself nor on the establishment of the oppressive society that emerged afterwards. That represents what was, and in some ways, what still is. The focus of the Tribe series is on the question of what happens once the oppression begins to break down and on what (from an Indigenous perspective) is the shape of the world to follow. In this sense, it is a story about decolonisation, and as all Indigenous peoples know, the spacetime of decolonisation is one of both great opportunity and great danger. As Ashala observes in Ember Crow: “[Ember] said that the most dangerous time to be a member of an oppressed group was when the oppression began and when it ended. Those were the times when everyone who’d gained from the oppression had the most to lose.”

Ember Crow is set in a world where people no longer define or describe themselves according to race. The concept of ‘race’ – and of cultural diversity – has largely been forgotten by the descendants of the survivors of a cataclysm that massively reduced the human population. While the discriminatory laws in the series are based on racially discriminatory legislation, the removal of race allows the novels to explore some ideologies underlying those laws without triggering the preconceptions that a discussion of the actual laws might provoke. It also allows for an exploration of the connections between all forms of discrimination, whether race-based or otherwise, which links back to the theme of inter-connectedness explored by the series as a whole. It is important to note, of course, that as a work of Indigenous Futurisms, Ember Crow speaks to future possibilities, including the end of discrimination in any form, a result which is ultimately achieved at the conclusion of the Tribe series. This is not to say that the present world

115 above n 60, 62
116 ibid 61 - 62
is free of discrimination, and Indigenous peoples must daily negotiate our existence under the intersecting oppressions born of colonisation. But the exercise of Indigenous imagination is, in and of itself, part of the larger process of decolonization. As writer and academic Lee Maracle (Salish and Cree Sto:lo Nation) has noted, in relation to Indigenous youth: “If your imagination isn’t working – and, of course, in oppressed people that’s the first thing that goes – you can’t imagine anything better. Once you can imagine something different, something better, then you’re on your way.”

Ashala’s Indigeneity is central to her existence, although she is unaware of it at the outset of the series. This aspect of the narrative speaks to the enduring nature of Indigeneity and the spiritual agency of Ashala’s grandfather and the land he creates. In Indigenous systems, land can carry memory. As Ngarinyin Elder David Mowaljarlai once put it, in speaking of place where there were no longer any Indigenous people: “The land remained, you can’t get away from that. It acts for the people and their imprint is still there.”

Ashala does not become aware of her Indigeneity until she arrives at the Firstwood. While she carries an Indigenous bloodline, the knowledge of how to be Indigenous – of ‘reading the signs’ – is taught to her by her grandfather and by all the life that he created. For example, it is the saurs who teach her that land cannot be claimed but that she must ask permission of the trees to live in the Firstwood, and thereafter fulfil her obligation to care for the forest. This reflects the fundamental duality that underlies the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and our homelands: that you must care for Country if you expect Country to care for you. It also reflects the longstanding role of Country as a teacher in Indigenous systems, while the intervention of Ashala’s grandfather at various points throughout the narrative mirrors the role of spiritual ancestors as guides. One of the questions I had to contend with as an Indigenous author in writing the Tribe series was: what would remain of Indigenous peoples if the world ended and culture was forgotten? My answer was that, as long as the Ancestors survived, Indigeneity would as well.

[NB sp and colon changes]

The Indigenous peoples of Australia – and the globe – share commonalities in terms of earth-based worldviews, the trauma of colonisation, and the present-day disadvantage that is colonisation’s legacy. Ashala’s relationship to the Firstwood is drawn from some of the fundamental principles that underlie Indigenous systems (for example, that the earth is animate). However, Indigenous peoples are also highly diverse, and much of this diversity relates to the

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different environments that shaped Indigenous cultures. While the Tribe series offers an exploration of Ashala’s Indigeneity it is not of course the only way to be Indigenous; and her experience is very much shaped by the Firstwood and the specific guidance she receives from her grandfather. Other Indigenous peoples in Ashala’s world in different places would have a different experience but the series as it stands did not allow for an exploration of these stories; they may be addressed in later books.

Dillon describes all forms of Indigenous Futurisms as narratives of “returning to ourselves”, a process which “involves discovering how personally one is affected by colonization, [spelt “colonisation” above, which is more common in Australia; check the exegesis for consistency] discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world.”121 I would add to this that in returning to ourselves we also return ourselves to the world, including our insights into the futures of all the life that shares this planet. In this sense, the concept of Indigenous Futurisms also provides a frame of reference for non-Indigenous peoples to engage with Indigenous speculative fiction in ways that produces deeper and more nuanced understanding of Indigenous literature in this field.

Assessing non-Western stories through the evaluative norms of a Western critical lens can be a fraught task, as Trin Minh-Ha writes:

to be "good" a story must be built in conformity with the ready-made idea some people - Western adults - have of reality, that is to say, a set of prefabricated schemata (prefabricated by whom?) they value out of habit, conservatism, and ignorance (of other ways of telling and listening to stories). If these criteria are to be adopted, then countless non-Western stories will fall straight into the category of "bad" stories.122

Further, literary analysis that pays no attention to the context that shaped the story will fail to actualise deeper understandings of a text. To use an example in relation to my own work, one of the aspects of the Tribe series sometimes pointed to as being ‘different’ is the hopeful nature of the narrative. Compared to the often bleak manifestations of future worlds often presented in YA dystopias, it is different. But when compared with the speculative fiction works of other Indigenous peoples, a more nuanced understanding of commonalities begins to emerge. In this regard, Lynette James’ analysis of the works of Joseph Bruchac, Nnedi Okorafor and myself – an analysis grounded in the concept of Indigenous Futurisms – found multiple manifestations of hope across all three narratives.123 James’ article appeared in a special edition of Extrapolation

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121 above n6, 10
122 Trin T Minh-Ha, Woman Native Other: Postcoloniality and Feminism (Indiana University Press 2009) 142
123 above n83
devoted to Indigenous Futurisms and edited by Grace Dillon.124 The volume as a whole exemplifies the kind of analysis that can occur when Indigenous works are examined with reference to the Indigenous contexts that shaped the works. This allows not just for a deeper understanding of individual texts but also for the mapping of connections across cultures and experiences. It also allows for non-Indigenous peoples to engage with the imaginative processes of the decolonising project – for as Eve Tuck (Aleut) and K Wayne Yang write, decolonisation “is not accountable to settlers, or settler futurity … [but only] to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity.”125

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125 Eve Tuck, K Wayne Yang, ‘Decolonization is not a metaphor’ (2012) 1:1 Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society 1, 35
Chapter Four

All our relations: Storytelling and animate realities

Indigenous peoples have always come to know our worlds through story, including through the stories that make all others possible, the tales of the Ancestor beings. These tales told us of a living world made up of many beings who speak in many voices. But the colonial project has long characterised Indigenous peoples in fixed terms that denied both the validity of Indigenous peoples’ life-ways and the animate nature of reality. In the words of Wiradjuri scholar Wendy Brady: “[Indigenous peoples were] placed within European historical mythology that claims us as the exotic, the erotic, the naive, the unsophisticated, the vulnerable, the static, and which often locates us as pre-civilised.”\(^\text{126}\) This reinforced the settler mythos that the destruction of Indigenous culture was part of the ‘civilizing mission’ of the colonial nation-states or an inevitable consequence of their ‘manifest destiny’. And while the life-altering impact of the colonial project and the multi-generational trauma left in its wake is not to be understated, its ultimate failure must also be acknowledged. Indigenous peoples survived colonialism’s attempts to annihilate us, and one of the reasons for this was because we had a fluid means of interaction with a living reality – and that which is dynamic, adaptable and capable of transformation is extraordinarily difficult to destroy.

This chapter considers some of the multiple implications of a view of the world as comprised of dynamic ‘wholes’ on storytelling and stories. It begins with a brief discussion of animate Indigenous realities, building upon the examination of holism in the previous chapter. I then consider how living worlds influence Indigenous storytelling with specific reference to Ember Crow, focusing on two areas. First, embodying Indigeneity into narrative, including in relation to the power of women. Second, the interaction of Indigenous and Western scientific literacies in the context of shaping a response to the question as to the nature of life (and humanity) that is central to the resolution of the narrative in Ember Crow.

Many voices, many stories, many relations

The pattern of creation is comprised of living wholes. This includes humans, animals and plants, and also sun, moon, wind, rain and everything else in Country. Because everything lives, everything moves, and in a constantly shifting reality, position is always relative – which is to say, determined by relationships. In this respect, the ‘whole’ of Country – carried within – is a navigational system. In the words of Arrente Elder Margaret Kemarre Turner: “Aboriginal people

\(^{126}\) Wendy Brady, ‘Observing the other’ (1999) Eureka Street 28
didn’t carry a map, or a rock, or a bit of stick with a map or something on it. Their map was inside their minds, or inside their ‘brains’ as some people like to call it. And also inside their heart. Inside their heart they will hold it very strongly.”

Indigenous kinship systems map connections (relationships), and the concept of ‘family’ is not confined to human beings but extends to animals and plants and every other shape of life in the world. As has been said by many Indigenous people before: all are our relations. And all of our relations, have stories. The extent to which humans can understand the voices – and the stories – of other lifeforms depends, of course, on relationships. Every human cannot understand the language of every animal, but a human with a totemic connection to a particular animal will have greater insight into the stories of that shape of life. And all stories are valuable and valued. While the tales of humans offer a different perspective on the nature of being to the tales of (for example) crows, human stories are not inherently ‘better’. In any event, that which is human may one day be crow (and vice versa), as relationships stretch across spacetime to connect all life through the greater movements of existence. Thus, in Aboriginal systems, a person with a crow totem might have been a crow in a previous incarnation, or will be one again as positions shift across cycles of being.

An understanding of reality as animate is a fundamental aspect of the knowledge- and life-ways through which Indigenous peoples sustained ourselves and our homelands for thousands of years. But Eurocentric knowledge traditions have long dismissed the worth of our systems with the value-laden descriptor ‘animism’. As Gregory Cajete (Tewa) writes, animism is a term “steeped in Western scientific and cultural bias. Along with words like “primitive”, “ancestor worship”, and “supernatural”, animism continues to perpetuate a modern prejudice, a disdain, and a projection of inferiority toward the worldview of Indigenous peoples.” However, in an era when “a strong critique of Eurocentrism is underway in all fields of social thought”, understanding is growing that there are multiple (valid) ways of viewing the world. Stories told from Indigenous standpoints can thus offer spaces for respectful engagement with knowledge- and life- ways premised in the existence of animate worlds, and so doing, contribute not only to decolonisation dialogues but to the adoption of a different modes of interacting with the earth necessary to reverse the environmental degradation that threatens human beings as a species.

**Animate worlds, stories and Indigeneity**

129 above n26, 23
In a living reality, where humans are not the only storytellers, stories emerge from multiple points of existence and are influenced by larger cycles of interactions. As Mary Graham put it, “the world reveals itself to us and to itself.” And there are many pathways through which the world reveals, and shapes, story. These pathways include communication with spirit beings, such as the following encounter related by Bundjalung writer and artist Bronwyn Bancroft:

I was working on a series of three books that I was illustrating and one was Dirrangun, a story that connected three language groups in that area. I was trying to paint Dirrangun … and I was having great difficulty so I asked her for guidance…I was in the bedroom retrieving a brush when a huge gust of wind slammed the two outside doors. The doors have been fastened back, so this surprised me, but I was not scared. The hairs on my arms just stood up higher than I had ever seen them and I went to my desk and started painting her. I sensed her guiding me, and that is an incredible feeling, to know that an ancient spirit is standing right next to you. Not one thing moved as I completed my image of Dirrangun and when I was happy with it, I asked if she was satisfied that I had captured her. There were no more wind gusts, just silence and I knew that we had connected.

Pathways to story also include dreams, like the one experienced by Joan Winch in which she witnessed the arrival of the colonisers in Nyungar Country. In relation to my own work, the first tale I ever published was communicated to me through a dream, which I then embodied in a picture book. Animals can bring wisdom too, and in this regard, Len Collard (Whadjuk and Ballardong Nyungar) has recounted Nyungar bird stories of the Djidi Djidi (Willy Wagtail), Wardong (Crow), Walitj (Eagle) and Kulbardi (Magpie), writing that “we, as Nyungar, make sense of the Nyungar worldview through the activities of birds and the messages they convey and how Nyungar then interpret these.” Finally, small changes in physical and metaphysical surroundings can alert to larger dangers, which is why it is so important to ‘read the signs’. Dawn Besserab (Bardi and Indjarbandi) tells of her experience while visiting a women’s water site with a non-Indigenous friend:

[M]y sandals disappeared from the riverbank … As we were the only ones there, it was a mystery how they had disappeared. Later, as my friend and I were paddling in the shallow water … I suddenly remembered that I had not introduced myself or my friend to country. I said to her, ‘I know why those sandals disappeared, the country is telling me something!’ And to her surprise I started to call out and speak to country, saying who I was and that we were visiting for the day and meant no harm. After I finished speaking, I

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131 above n41, 76
133 above n112
134 I have discussed this in Ambelin Kwaymullina, ‘The creators of the future: women, law and telling stories in Country’, Pat Dudgeon (ed), Us Women, Our Ways and Our World (Magabala Books, in press)
had this strong feeling to put my hand down under the water and touch the riverbed in front of me, I did this and touched a broken bottle with very sharp and jagged edges sticking up in the sand. If I had taken one more step, I would have seriously cut myself… I knew that … the country had spoken back to me, acknowledging my greeting.\(^{136}\)

The world is always speaking its story; and the example given above demonstrates the importance of process in coming to understand the story being spoken. Part of learning to read the signs is following processes that test the accuracy of any given interpretation. These processes can include the exercise of individual judgment, seeking advice from others, and waiting for further signs. Generally, a cautious approach is adopted, as befits a world in which not every story can or should be known. As Moreton-Robinson writes: “the world I inhabit has been created by ancestral creator beings and it is organic and alive with spirits and signs which inform my way of knowing. Thus respect and caution frame my approach to knowledge production; the more that I know the less that I know because there are other forms of knowledge that exist beyond us as humans.”\(^{137}\)

One of the tasks I faced in writing *the Tribe* series was to consider – from an Indigenous standpoint – what survives a cataclysm of such a scale that much of the earth has sunk beneath the ocean. It seemed to me that at least some of the beings that enliven reality, capable as they always were of extraordinary transformations, would survive. So an Ancestral Serpent emerges from the chaos, gathers up what life he can find, and creates the Firstwood. Further, since Aboriginal systems have never denied the existence of other ancient beings in other places across the globe, I thought that old spirits from elsewhere might survive too. This is partly indicated by the cat spirit Starbeauty in *Ember Crow* (although feral cats have been introduced into Aboriginal Countries, and in some Countries have been incorporated into the Dreaming). Further, in an animate, holistic world, where the pattern of all creation unfolds and enfolds from any single (living) point, there was the possibility that a species which was not presently embodied into physical form might re-emerge in the new world. In *Ember Crow*, this manifests in the saurs, who are based on a species of megafauna (*Megalania prisca*).

In the wake of the disaster that destroyed most of the earth’s population, race and culture are no longer points of distinction between different peoples. This means that when *the Tribe* series begins, Ashala carries the bloodline inheritance of her Indigeneity but has never been taught what it is to be Indigenous. Thus, her knowledge of Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing is revealed to her by the world. In *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*, she finds shelter in the Firstwood not by asserting ownership over the forest but by asking the trees for permission

\(^{136}\) Dawn Besserab, ‘Country is Lonely’, in Morgan et al (eds), above n71, 44, 51 - 52  
\(^{137}\) above n1, 341
to live there; it is the saurs who alert her to the necessity of approaching the forest in this way. Ashala enters into a relationship with the Firstwood that is comprised in equal parts of rights and responsibilities, and her interactions with the forest are therefore informed by the same fundamental reciprocity that underlies all Aboriginal relationships with their homelands: you must care for Country if you expect Country to care for you. She learns more of her heritage through the teachings of Grandfather Serpent and the many lessons she receives from other forms of life; her sources of information include the saurs, the wolves, and the Firstwood itself. It is through her interactions with animate beings that Ashala comes to understand reality as a living place that endlessly reveals itself; or as she puts it: “[t]here are layers and layers to this world.” These interactions also shape Ashala’s understanding of what it is to lead her Tribe as a young Indigenous woman.

Throughout Ember Crow, Ashala struggles with the task of understanding and actualising her power. Her Sleepwalking ability allows her to alter reality, and this aspect of the narrative speaks to the use of dreams as a means of interacting with animate realities. But, as Ashala herself knows, being able to Sleepwalk is not enough to enable her to fulfil her multiple responsibilities. In this respect, a tale steeped in the individualism of a Eurocentric standpoint might have told a story that focused on Ashala’s ‘superhero’ ability. But this is a story told from an Indigenous standpoint, and so, as the narrative of Ember Crow makes clear, Sleepwalking is not Ashala’s power:

I saw it, stretching out like one of Georgie’s webs – the many linkages I’d made on which events had turned.

My jaw dropped. “My power. It’s … to connect. To – to love.”

Everything connects, Grandpa had said. But not everyone sees those connections. I finally understood the danger he and Starbeauty were worried about for the future. People were good to the Earth now, only they weren’t good to each other, and it wasn’t enough to value only one kind of connection. All life matters, or none does.\(^{139}\)

Ashala’s power as an Indigenous woman is defined by being part of a collective, and upholding the networks of relationships that comprise the collective. At multiple points across the narrative, the message is continually reinforced that Ashala is only able to find and manifest the best of herself through her interactions with a living world. For example, when she is wrestling with her guilt over having killed someone, it is the wolves who offer her comfort. When she speaks with Leo in Spinifex City, she acknowledges that she could have been as lost in grief as he


\(^{139}\) p 207 of this thesis; Ambelin Kwaymullina, Ember Crow Australian Edition, above n 7, 431; Ambelin Kwaymullina, Ember Crow US Edition, above n 8, 412
seems to be, if not for Georgie and the Tribe. And it is the dog Nicky who helps her to Sleepwalk so that she can save others and ultimately protect the many connections that sustain her.

Ashala’s world – in which she manages multiple responsibilities to (and through) the lifeforms that sustain her – reflects the many roles that have always been carried by Aboriginal women. As Lilla Watson writes:

Women carry responsibility for their own knowledge, and the enhancement of their own lives as women; for their own ways of thinking and acting; their own contribution to maintaining harmony and managing conflict; for women's mental and physical health, the menstrual cycle, the sacredness of conception and childbirth … We have our own responsibilities for childrearing, growing girls up to become women, and letting go of boys at initiation ceremonies so that they could be made into men.140

The women’s world that Watson writes of requires the physical self to be honoured, and this aspect of Ashala’s story connects with other works of Indigenous Futurisms. As Martin has noted, discussing the work of Bruchac, Ororafor and myself: “Teenage Indigenous futurist heroines pay attention to their bodies … in the same way and for the same reason they attend to their minds and spirits: they must know their limits and needs in order to fulfil community and personal responsibilities.”141

From my standpoint, there is very little about Ember Crow or the rest of the Tribe series that is speculative fiction, in the sense of not being part of what I consider to be the real. The mode of interaction through which Ashala navigates and understands reality is grounded in Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing. Consistently with the approach adopted in this exegesis, Ashala does not ask whether the world is animate, but how – and moreover, in what ways she needs to act so as to uphold the wholeness of the many beings that form and inform her reality.

Animate worlds, scientific literacies and being human

As was noted at the end of chapter two, Indigenous peoples “have always done research. That is, they have always asked questions that mattered to them and they have always sought to answer them, mobilizing all relevant sources of knowledge.”142 One of the research questions to be considered in writing Ember Crow was whether a synthetic lifeform was any less ‘alive’ (or human) than an organic one.

Applying a perspective grounded in Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing, this was not a difficult question to answer. The world is presumed to be animate. I could discern no

140 above n50, 8
141 above n82, 162
142 above n14, 1
basis on which synthetic composition would alter that basic proposition and remove synthetic life
from the energy which flows through and between all life. Nor did I believe that there was any
basis for concluding Ember was not as human as an organic lifeform – she is embodied into
human shape and identifies as human; that is the position she occupies in the network of
connections that is the world. If any confirmation of this view was needed, I found it in the
learning forced upon Indigenous peoples by the colonial project. For hundreds of years,
Indigenous peoples have been consistently and pervasively degraded by what Maori scholar
Linda Smith characterises as the deeply encoded “dehumanizing tendencies within imperial and
colonial practices.”143 The collective experience inherited from my ancestors of having our
humanity denied is not an experience I would wish to inflict upon others. Ultimately, therefore, I
reached the conclusion expressed by Alexander Hoffman in Ember Crow: “Whether we are
organic or synthetic, whether we walk on two legs or four, whether we are creatures of claw or
hoof or wing or feet – it matters not. Composition does not determine character. Or greatness of
soul.”144

I regard the way in which Ember’s story is told and resolved within Ember Crow as
emerging from, and entirely consistent with, my way of being, knowing and doing as an
Indigenous person. But I am also aware that this portion of the narrative challenges the lingering
stereotype that Indigenous societies did not have ‘technology’ or ‘science’ and hence that our
knowledge systems are unable to deal with ‘modern’ developments.

Indigenous scientific literacies – which include such things as detailed ecological
knowledge and sophisticated environmental management systems – are formed and informed by
our understanding that the world is comprised of living wholes. As such, our scientific literacies
offer a holistic way of being, knowing and doing grounded in Country. Thus, while Indigenous
peoples always had extraordinarily detailed knowledge of their environments, not every resource
was to be exploited. In the words of Joan Winch: “Our old people have always told us that there
are some things you leave in the ground, and uranium is one of them. Huge mistakes have been
made in the past, but the lessons still haven’t been learnt.”145 The human capacity to invent does
not exist for invention’s sake but is a function of sustaining connections that are the world – or as
is said in Ember Crow: “advances in technology can never compensate for failures in
empathy.”146

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143 above n35, 323
144 p 152 of this thesis; Ambelin Kwaymullina, Ember Crow Australian Edition, above n 7, 318; Ambelin
Kwaymullina, Ember Crow US Edition, above n 8, 299 - 300
145 above n112, 233
146 p 56 of this thesis; Ambelin Kwaymullina, Ember Crow Australian Edition, above n 7, 120; Ambelin
Kwaymullina, Ember Crow US Edition, above n 8, 111
The workings of Eurocentrism meant Indigenous sciences were not regarded as science at all; scientific advances were the property of the West and something to which Indigenous peoples contributed through being the objects of study. This stereotype continues to affect the ways in which Indigenous peoples are viewed and our cultures valued. In this context, astrophysicist Ray Norris has pointed to the persistent failure to acknowledge Australian Indigenous scientific achievements, and – referencing Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* – has called for a paradigm shift:

We grow up with a paradigm (such as “Aboriginal culture is primitive”) which we accept as true. Anything that doesn’t fit into that paradigm is dismissed as irrelevant or aberrant … We must overcome the intellectual inertia that keeps us in that old paradigm, stopping us from recognising the enormous contribution that Aboriginal culture can make to our understanding of the world, and to our attempts to manage it.¹⁴⁷

Works of Indigenous Futurisms can provide points of engagement between Indigenous and Western scientific literacies,¹⁴⁸ and thereby speak to the possibility of larger connections and convergences between different knowledge traditions. This can in turn fuel the development of what Cajete has described as a much-needed environmental cosmology (ecosophy) for the human species:

A modern “ecosophy” would be about the rediscovery of meaning as it relates to our universe. It would require not only a different way of thinking, but also a different way of knowing and living. Such an ecosophy would rebuild a unitary view of the cosmos in which everything is interdependent and moved by creative energy, one that views the Earth and the universe with reverence and explores our essential relationships and responsibilities therein. It would be, essentially, the philosophy that Indigenous peoples have lived by for generations, writ large.¹⁴⁹

The notion of an inherent harmony between all life (which human beings have a responsibility to sustain) is captured in *the Tribe* series in the idea of the Balance. In the trilogy itself, this idea becomes subverted, with people who have abilities (Illegals) characterised as being outside of the Balance. Illegals can therefore be oppressed without any larger effects on the harmony of what-is, a view which is challenged by the reform movement in Ashala’s world. In many ways, the differing interpretations offered of how to sustain the Balance is representative of a struggle between different ways of knowing: a reductionist worldview that separates result from process, and a holistic one in which all processes by which the Balance is maintained must themselves sustain connections (and hence, nothing and no one is outside of the Balance). This, then, is the conflict between the Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm and Indigenous worldviews; it is

¹⁴⁷ Ray Norris, ‘Aboriginal people – how to misunderstand their science’, *The Conversation*, 21 April 2014
¹⁴⁹ above n6, 7
¹⁴⁹ above n126, 60
also a conflict being replicated elsewhere as different knowledge-traditions (including Western traditions) shift towards more holistic understandings. In this regard, Murphy (writing of the *Tribe* series) has pointed to the role Indigenous Futurisms can play in fostering understanding between the scientific literacies of the West and those of Indigenous peoples, and in so doing, suggest a way of “being in the world … that is accessible to anyone willing to listen and strive for greater cooperation and kinship with the surrounding environment.”\(^{150}\)


*Extrapolation* 177
Conclusion

The many Indigenous nations of the globe have always been storytellers, and our stories tell of an animate reality in which everything lives and everything connects. Indigenous stories are like each other in that they tell (or presume the existence) of living worlds in which the earth is the source of all meaning. And Indigenous stories are different from each other in that they are shaped by the diverse creative Ancestors, cultures, environments (relatives) and individuals that comprise our many realities.

The arrival of colonisers in Indigenous homelands engulfed us in cycles of cataclysmic violence that sought to annihilate our ways of being/knowing/doing. But Indigenous peoples and cultures survived the colonial apocalypse. We are storytellers still. And while we must negotiate structures and spaces that have long denied the validity of our life-ways, our tales are not the only ones that now challenge Eurocentrism. So too do the narratives of other non-Western peoples, as well as those of some Western storytellers. Grace Dillon characterised Indigenous Futurisms as a process of ‘returning to ourselves’; the same is true of all Indigenous stories. And for those non-Indigenous peoples who are seeking to understand Indigenous peoples on our own terms, narratives told from Indigenous standpoints provide pathways to respectfully enter our realities, and to engage with the knowledge we have chosen to share in the ways that we have chosen to share it. The connections formed through story then inform engagement across a multiplicity of contexts and shape the dialogues of decolonisation.

One of the tasks of a writer of Indigenous Futurisms is to imagine Indigenous futures. This does not only refer to the futures of Indigenous peoples, but to futures based in Indigenous visions of how to live within the world so that the world will always continue. There are aspects of the narrative in Ember Crow that speak to oppressive behaviours, structures, and attitudes, drawn from my lived and inherited experience as an Indigenous woman. But the narrative also speaks to the means by which oppression is defeated, and at its centre is an Indigenous heroine whose ultimate power is to identify and sustain the connections that link the whole world together.

For all my relations.
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