It's Time:
An Aboriginal Social Theory for, by, and with Aboriginal People

Submitted by

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Acknowledgments

This thesis was originally titled *Journeying Towards an Aboriginal Social Theory* but then journeying as a word had become overused and lost its true meaning for me. When I decided that I would commit to finishing this piece of work, after thinking it would never see the light of day again, what motivated me was being listened to, having a seat at the table, and I aspire to gain the title of Associate Professor. *It's Time: An Aboriginal Social Theory for, by, and with Aboriginal People* resonated well inside of me. This thesis has been an emotional rollercoaster with numerous highs, tears of frustration, and tears of deep sadness for the lives lived by those brave enough to tell their stories. This research is the first of its kind nationally and internationally.

I would like to thank my intellectual Elders who took the time to sit with me and discuss the potential of an Aboriginal social theory. Their knowledge and wisdom have pioneered space within the academy for a thesis of this type to be researched and written. I would like to acknowledge the autobiographies and life stories I read from people who have been through some of the most horrendous life experiences. Their bravery and determination to have their stories heard and documented took enormous strength and I hope this thesis will give back something to their children, grandchild, and their future generations.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are warned that this thesis may contain images, transcripts or names of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples now deceased. It may also contain historically and culturally sensitive words, terms and descriptions.

Statement of the Contribution of Others

Nature of Assistance	Contribution	Names and Titles
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Abstract

Social theories are the analytical frameworks sociologists use to examine our social world, to try and make sense of it, and explain why things happen as they did/do. There is a plethora of social theories available to sociologists and sociology students. What is missing is a social theory that examines and explains the commonalities of mainland and Tasmanian Aboriginal society. We do not have a social theory that provides an adequate framework to examine Aboriginal social phenomena. This research set out to investigate if there are commonalities in social knowledge between Aboriginal people who inhabit the mainland and Tasmanian Australia to explore the notion of an Aboriginal social theory. There are no outside sources used to ensure the purity of the research and its findings, to guarantee this is truly an Aboriginal social theory for, by, and with Aboriginal people. Theories and writings from our sisters and brothers of the Torres Strait Islands are beyond the scope of this thesis. This is a mark of respect as the Torres Strait Islander society has thinkers and scholars who can choose to examine and write their social theories.

Karen Martin's (2001) ways of knowing, being, and doing provide the framework for this research. Thus, the research itself is an extension of her work. This thesis does not intend to essentialise Aboriginal people but rather to start a conversation around Aboriginal social theory. To examine the notion of an Aboriginal social theory, a qualitative analysis was necessary. An Aboriginal methodology was adopted as an Aboriginal social theory cannot be written using any other method. The foundational theoretical underpinning of this analysis was developed using Lester-Irabinna Rigney's (1999) Indigenist research principles. This was then combined with Greg Lehman's (Lehman, 2003) notion of yarning, *dadirri* (Ungenmerr, 2015), storytelling, Aboriginal narrative therapy principles, and a strengths-based approach to developing an "old new way" of conducting research.

The data was provided by yarning with my intellectual Elders, reading autobiographies, life stories, and academic literature, and analysing my story. My story was crucial to the research findings. As Moreton-Robinson (2000) attests, the self and society are intertwined, and you cannot have one without the other.

As social theories are used to interpret and explain social phenomena, this thesis explores and develops an Aboriginal framework to explain and interpret Aboriginal social phenomena. The research found that there is a strong, robust, and thriving Aboriginal social theory. It shows that ways of knowing, being, and doing are interconnected and cannot exist independently. They directly connect to Veronica Arbon's (2006) concepts of connectedness and relatedness,and this all binds us to our collective spirit.

The research found that our knowledge is cyclical; it has no starting point or end, and it is dynamic and fluid. We pass this around through yarning, where we have storytellers and listeners, and the yarn grows with each retelling of the knowledge. Thus, our knowledge is never complete and comes full circle, arriving back to us as different but recognisable. We demonstrate our ways of being through our many ways of knowing our Country, and while we still express them in their old ways, we have learnt to adapt them to suit the society we find ourselves in. Country, for us, is a living and breathing

entity who produces all life. Country is our maternal spirit and binds us to our collective spirit. Knowing Country and where our ancestors once walked provides us with a sense of belonging.

The elements of our ways of being are kinship, sharing, time, Elders, and humour. These significant elements exist inside of us and are how we practically express our collective spirit. They unite us through the commonalities of our knowledge across the continent and Tasmania. Our ways of doing are not new practices; they have been adapted to suit the world we find ourselves living in. Again, they are the new, old way. Ways of doing have been and are part of our daily lives, and we share the same understanding of their importance to bind us to our collective spirit.

Finally, we have our ways of knowing, which the research identified are comprised of three interconnected and related components: epistemology, ontology, and storytelling. Our knowledge is a living entity that defines us as we define it. Knowledge is never owned, nor is it complete, and if it is not needed, it is simply discarded. Our ontology is shaped by our experience and perception, and as such, it is flexible. Finally, our ways of knowing cannot be transmitted without the use of storytelling. Our knowledge is indeed a story of our past, present, and future. Through storytelling, we strengthen our collective spirit and reinforce our connectedness and relatedness.

This research seeks to open the discussion and provide a safe and brave space for Aboriginal social theory to enter the academy as a significant and valid discourse.

Statement of the Use of Generative AI

Generative AI technology was not used in the preparation of any part of this thesis.

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Chapter One
A New Phase in Sociology

Introducing Myself

It is customary to introduce oneself in Aboriginal spaces by providing information about one's family, one's Country, and one's personal history. I am Jaimee Hamilton, the second oldest of four children in the family of Stephen and Julie Hamilton (nee Duncan/Bradley). My mother is Aboriginal, and my father descends from the British Iles. My mother's birth mother's origins are not clear, but she is Aboriginal; my mother's birth father is a *Ngunnawal* man, and his ancestral lands are Canberra. I grew up in Maitland, New South Wales, and growing up, I thought I was the eldest of three children (with a younger sister and brother). I found out at around ten or eleven years old that I had an older sister whom my parents had to give up for adoption. I am an Aboriginal woman who has experienced and is still feeling the effects of past policies and prejudice that saw my mother adopted in 1958 and my older sister put up for adoption in 1976. I will not go into detail about either my mother's or sister's adoption, for those are not my stories to tell. As a consequence of these past governmental policies and prejudices, until the age of thirteen, I had not experienced the privilege of being raised surrounded by Aboriginal kin, nor had I been exposed to a wide range of my ancestral stories. However, upon meeting them, my Aunties completed our genealogy, confirmed our Aboriginality, and subsequently told me stories of our family's history.

I have a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in sociology and psychology, from the University of Wollongong, and I have completed my honours degree in sociology at that university. I also pursued postgraduate studies in psychology at Macquarie University, and I am now attaining my doctorate from James Cook University. My university education has been in two complementary disciplines that often refuse to see how inter-related they are, for they do not see as I do, that one cannot study society (sociology) without understanding people (psychology), and one cannot understand people without understanding society.

Throughout my career I have found myself working with people and community. I have always wanted to help provide opportunities for community. I was employed at the Illawarra Aboriginal Medical Centre, where I designed research projects and wrote programs for Aboriginal men and their children. I was part of a wonderful Substance Misuse team, and I have been heavily involved in Aboriginal youth programs. The Wollongong Aboriginal Aquaculture Corporation also employed me to develop a detailed map of Aboriginal fishing practices along the New South Wales South Coast. I was a lecturer at Charles Darwin University in the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems, where I wrote and taught the university's common unit, "Cultural Capabilities." I also taught Australian history from an Aboriginal perspective and taught honours students research methodologies and issues

in Indigenous research. I was also the honours coordinator. I was a lecturer at the University of South Australia, where I wrote and taught subjects such as "Indigenous Philosophy: Contesting Knowledges in the Social Sciences," and "Aboriginal Futures." In all the subjects and degrees I have designed, I have always used ways of knowing, being, and doing. I have been able to adapt this to a successful pedagogy.

My career then transitioned into work in a mainstream faculty at the University of Adelaide, where I was a curriculum project officer. I was involved in the project "Modernising the Curriculum." In this role, I conducted curriculum design work, such as designing the program learning outcomes, designing the suite of programs, and ensuring they were succinct and met the project objectives. I also project-managed the four-year rollout of the curriculum. I redesigned the Bachelor of Engineering and Master of Engineering to reflect ways of knowing, being, and doing. In both degrees, I implemented a thread through the subjects that built the students' cultural self-awareness and sense of cultural intelligence and taught them how to create and maintain safe spaces.

I was then an educational designer at James Cook University. I worked with science and engineering faculties and provided support and high-level expertise to academic staff in the design and development of subjects and courses. I researched and implemented the "Learning Glass" at James Cook University (JCU). The "Learning Glass" enables you to stand behind it and annotate directly on one side whilst being filmed from the opposite side. I also redesigned a preparatory subject in chemistry using ways of knowing, being, and doing, and I introduced yarning as a pedagogy in a master's level biology subject. This subject was highly successful, with students commenting that it was the best way of learning they had experienced.

I am currently a lecturer in a pathways program, and I teach "Learning in a Digital Environment.' Once again, I have applied an Aboriginal lens to this and redesigned it using ways of knowing, being, and doing. I have a consultancy where I am running workshops with a kindergarten provider, teaching them "Cultural Intelligence: Creating Culturally Inclusive Classrooms." This was also designed using ways of knowing, being, and doing. This consultancy is about to be turned into a JCU pathways subject for students to become culturally inclusive 21st-century professionals.

I acknowledge and thank the ancestral spirits of the numerous Countries in which I have lived and the spirits of those people from whom I have drawn crucial knowledge for this thesis. I acknowledge both my Elders and the Elders of the Countries I have lived on and visited, and their current custodians. I have been able to draw upon the strengths of the many Elders who are living today and those who have gone before them.

By providing this information, I have declared my genealogy, ancestry, and position as a student, researcher, and member of our society. I know that my own story is not foreign to the many, many people who have also lived through similar experiences to me. I declare myself firstly as an Aboriginal woman, then as an Aboriginal societal member, an Aboriginal student, an Aboriginal researcher, and finally as an Aboriginal academic. I have provided these details in order to remain

transparent to all Aboriginal people in my studies, in my work, and in my life. In doing so, I have allowed Aboriginal people to locate me and to understand something of the nature of the social and political relations that may exist within my being.

The Perils of Sociology

The idea for this research came from the conclusions in my sociology honours thesis (Hamilton, 2005). That research investigated whether traditional fishing practices were still being passed down from generation to generation on the South Coast of New South Wales, and if the transmission of this knowledge directly correlated with the strengths or weaknesses of peoples' sense of their Aboriginality. What I found was that, contrary to my expectations, very few, if any, of the Elders I spoke with were actively transmitting this lore to their children and grandchildren. But, on the South Coast, the people are strong in their Aboriginality, and I knew this also to be the case in many other Countries around the continent.

As a result of this work, I realised that possessing and transmitting particular types of knowledge does not equate to whether or not people have a strong sense of their Aboriginality. Parents were teaching their children to stand proud and to declare their Aboriginality. They no longer had to hide it due to government policies and practices dictating that the only option available for their children's success in life was their rapid and complete assimilation into non-Aboriginal society. Parents were teaching children through stories and also by demonstrating how to be proud of and fight for their Country in ways that were not available to their grandparents. Because of these conclusions, I started to think, research, and ask what it was that was keeping us so strong. I learned that knowledge was indeed being transmitted by the Elders to the young, but that its nature and purpose had changed and was changing. I slowly began to appreciate that tradition is seamless and carries us from the past into the present and on into the future.

As a direct result of these conversations and reflection, I began to think about the commonalities that bind us to each other. We come from more than 500 distinct language groups (Pascoe, 2010), and many of us have family in more than one Country. However, when we are around Aboriginal people, the feeling is very different to when we are in the same situation as a minority among people from other societies, say in a gathering, a meeting, or a classroom. I became increasingly curious about what we share, what these commonalities are, how we come to know and understand them, how we share them with each other, and how they change.

In this research, I set out to investigate if an Australian Aboriginal social theory exists and, if so, what it looks like. To achieve this, I focused on literature and stories from mainland and Tasmanian Aboriginal people. I did not seek to investigate whether there are global First Nations social theories, nor if the Torres Straits have strong social theory. It must be made clear that this thesis is in line with Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing and does not seek objectivity. Throughout the whole

thesis, I use first-person pronouns, including "we' and "us' when discussing Aboriginal people as a collective. My story and experience are an essential part of the research.

The choice to only use Aboriginal thinkers from mainland Australia and Tasmania is complex and may seem controversial. All of the thinkers cited in this research are far more aware of Western theory than Western theory is aware of them. So, Western theory is present in their writings and analysis. The way Australia was colonised means there is no way to alleviate this. I also acknowledge that the phrase "social theory" is a Western construct – so too is the very act of completing a doctoral thesis. Despite this, I wanted to write something that our university students could use in their studies.

As an undergraduate, I was not exposed to anything that came close to satisfactorily explaining how Aboriginal society is structured and how it prospers and changes. The social theories I was exposed to were predominately written by white European and American men. These theories did come close to representing the world I inhabited. The role of social theory is to pursue questions of why we order and structure ourselves in the manner we do. If a society of human beings exists, then it stands to reason that social theories exist. It had become very academically clear to me that Aboriginal society is alive and well, and where there is a strong Aboriginal society, there must be good Aboriginal social theory.

As mentioned above, as a student, I was frustrated that sociology did not accommodate my worldview. Thus, this research is also driven by this frustration. Sociology tends to investigate the "down and out,' the underclass, the disadvantaged, differences between people, gender relations and, of course, the phenomena called "the family.' What appeared strange to me was that Aboriginal people – who are so frequently referred to in literature, the media, and common speech as perfect examples of disadvantage in Australia – are nonetheless largely invisible in the sociological literature. It appears Aboriginal society has no apparent insights to offer sociology and thus has been left to the "other" disciplines, such as anthropology and linguistics, to investigate, deconstruct, and reconstruct. Sociology does not provide Aboriginal students with strong Aboriginal social theories to use.

While this may be seen as unjust, it has also been quite beneficial to both Aboriginal people and sociology. We have not had to contend with a plethora of sociologists "traipsing" through our Countries undertaking what they consider to be research. While we are now in a position to continue our own research and to develop social theories that we own, we do not have to compete with those European theorists who consider themselves "experts" on all things Aboriginal. Some sociologists proudly assert that they have not investigated Aboriginal society as it was not their "place" to do this. However, I remain sceptical of this assertion, as sometimes silence speaks louder than words.

To explain my scepticism, I provide the following examples. As a student of both sociology and psychology, I have sought out and studied literature concerning Aboriginal society and thought. What I have found is a surfeit of literature written by European experts. There are certainly noble Europeans who have devoted their lives to assisting Aboriginal people. However, the majority of experts are

constantly contradicting themselves when it comes to the "study" of anything Aboriginal.[1] On the one hand, they are experts on dysfunction, subjugation, dispossession and the loss of identity, and on the other hand, they are authorities on spirituality, mythology, language, kinship, and ties to the land. There is a widespread notion that Aboriginal culture must remain static, stuck in the "prehistoric" era and that anything other than this is inauthentic. The *Native Title Act* is a prime example of this. In order to obtain *Native Title* we must demonstrate that we have unbroken and continuous ties to the land. There are even European "experts" who consider themselves to be "more" Aboriginal than our scholars because they have lived in a "community," have learnt a language and have been given a skin name. Then there are those "experts" who write numerous publications on the dire state of Aboriginal education, health, housing, income, and social mobility. Yet, by the very standards they have helped to establish, we still remain the most disadvantaged people in Australia.

In the academy and specifically in sociology, the only tools available to study society come from a Western perspective. While there are some exceptions, sociology has generally been conceited in that it asserts that all societies and their structures can and must be initially examined using European theorists such as Foucault, Durkheim, Weber and Marx (I experienced this first-hand throughout writing this thesis). Certainly, Durkheim used Aboriginal people in his studies not to understand Aboriginal society but rather to investigate the origins of European religion. Aboriginal society has been left to other disciplines such as history, anthropology, pre-history and education to deconstruct and then reconstruct us into a neat and palatable package that is simultaneously self-serving for European educational institutions and marketable to the broader society – and to foreign fee-paying students and tourists. Historically, even the critiques of "white" sociology by white sociologists generally have been conducted by Europeans for European consumption.

I was extremely dubious about undertaking this research as I was not confident that the academy was ready for a thesis of this nature. More importantly, I was not sure how Aboriginal people would respond to such an investigation, so I yarned with many people about it. Some told me that this task could never be accomplished, expressing what I had feared: that Aboriginal people do not possess commonalities, do not constitute "a people" who could have "a voice" (let alone be reflected in any way adequately within a social theory) because we are so very diverse, so different from one another. However, others were supportive of and excited by what I was suggesting. Linda Ford (yarn, September 2007) thought that the time was right for research of this nature and that Aboriginal people could benefit from it. During my yarn with Greg Lehman (September 2007), he told me not to be afraid to speak of Aboriginal culture and society, for we need to stand tall and say: "This is who we are, and this is how we see the world." He was certain that we should be adventurous and robust enough to take social theory into our own hands and not be dictated to any longer. He was excited by my passion for Aboriginal social theory and said that he would love to see me "nail it."

[1] To keep the purity of this thesis and in line with my previously stated boundaries of only having Australian mainland and Tasmania Aboriginal people in my research, I have not provided references to these scholars' work.

So, to be absolutely clear – this research does not seek to establish that all Aboriginal people are "the same" and even less that one voice (mine!) can speak for all of us. I have never sought to speak on anybody's behalf; I am far too aware that it is not my right to do so, and I am very conscious of the diversity of our people. But, I was still confident from the scholarly work I have encountered and the understandings I have gained from living in our society that I would discover commonalities sufficient to establish a foundation firm enough to support inclusive Aboriginal social theory. This research will hopefully encourage other researchers to think about these commonalities, reflect on the things that we share and hold dear, develop them further, locate deeper and less obvious ones, and bring into discussion the collective spirit which they constitute, and which is unique to our society.

All theorising contains synthesising and generalisation. Not all Aboriginal societies function in the exact same manner, but they do have widespread practices, common perspectives, and shared experiences. I do not know if the conclusions arrived at in my research may be applicable to other societies outside this continent, and frankly, I do not care. Aboriginal knowledge does not seek to be universal.

Enough has been written about us as "the other," about our "faults," "failings, and "disadvantages as a social group." This thesis wants to understand what it means to be "us" and how we go about ordering ourselves in a social world. No doubt some will see this as a romanticised view of our people because it refuses to see them, let alone position or measure them, in relation to the non-Aboriginal world, but the aim of this thesis is not to produce a body of work that highlights the dysfunction of our people. Rather, it is to look beyond the comparison of "black" with "white" that inevitably shows us to be inferior. It recognises that we have a unique and complex society that is, often enough, warm, loving, spiritual and strong, and which has produced, and will continue to produce its own social theory. So, my endeavour is to remain true to the collective spirit and give back to my intellectual Elders and my people what they have given me. I hope I have advanced the existing body of knowledge on social theory and have created a discussion within sociology in which our social theory will flourish.

Meanwhile, there are already many Aboriginal scholars working assiduously to reclaim the study of our own people. When I first conducted my initial review of the literature on Aboriginal social theory written by Aboriginal people, I discovered the work of Karen Martin (2001). Since I was reflecting on the commonalities that might exist among us, I found that her work on ways of knowing, being, and doing provided a perfect framework for this research. As a result, I have sought to use these concepts to further the body of knowledge on Aboriginal society and thus to continue to formulate our own social theory.

Aboriginal People and the Academy

The *Federal Race Discrimination Act*, passed in 1975, sought to outlaw racial prejudice and discrimination. Although it was a "defining moment for Indigenous inclusion in higher education"

(Rigney, 2001, p. 6), universities are still built on institutionalised racism, that is, on racism that is not necessarily explicit in university procedures and policies. Rather, European epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies infuse universities' culture, thinking, administration, and curricula, ignoring and marginalising different ways of knowing and learning. People who enter higher education do so strictly on the terms and conditions determined by European thought.

As a testament to this, in 1966, more than 100 years after it was founded, a young *Arrente* man, Charles Perkins, enrolled at the University of Sydney and subsequently became our first graduate, obtaining a Bachelor of Arts. This was our first experience as a tertiary student rather than as an object of study. For the first time, we were actively learning and gaining an education in European knowledge systems like philosophy, science, and pedagogy. As a result of this first success, many more of us have followed this path. We have mastered the European knowledge systems and are now slowly infiltrating our own ontologies, epistemologies, knowledges, and methodologies into the academy. Social theorists like Lester-Irabinna Rigney (Rigney, 1999), Morton-Robinson (2013), and Blair (2015) are carrying out significant research to develop and understand our epistemologies and methodologies in ways that are acceptable to the academy. Gaining access to the institutions of higher education is only part of the story, and the participants in this research project constantly returned to the theme of the racism that still exists in higher education institutions and emphasised that we cannot write social theory without exploring the power and dominance embedded in European theories and research methodologies. However, while I recognise and accept the importance of exposing racist oppression to the light of our own experiences and of writing anti-racism into our theories and methodologies, nearly sixty years on from the graduation of Charles Perkins is time enough for some of us to continue to build on his achievement, celebrating our knowledges and advancing our own social theory.

Entering the Next Phase

I began this research in 2006, though I walked away from it in 2012. In 2024, I returned to the research to finalise and submit. During this long period of doctoral research, there has been much social change. John Howard implemented the Northern Territory intervention in 2007, which has had mixed results and has left people divided. A change of government saw Prime Minister Kevin Rudd deliver a long-awaited apology to the Stolen Generations at the first sitting of Parliament in 2008. We had a referendum where Australia was asked whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should have a voice in parliament. Australia rejected us. Universities Australia established a Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC)/Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC) committee that comprises either DVCs or PVCs Indigenous from each university, or if there is not a DVC or PVC Indigenous, the most senior Indigenous person on the committee. The committee is chaired by Professor Bronwyn Fredericks. This is quite an achievement for us in academia. A record number of students have graduated with trade qualifications, TAFE qualifications, and undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, and there have been many other advances that we have celebrated.

The next phase is to achieve the inclusion of Aboriginal social theory in the academy. Of course, I am aware of the specific contexts through which Ford's (2005) "interface site" is seeking to make university spaces culturally inclusive of Aboriginal knowledge and how Martin's (2001) ways of knowing, being and doing have been used in many different academic contexts (I have developed my pedagogy based on this). Nevertheless, people around the continent continue to transmit knowledge through their lived physical environment and orally. Technologies encourage creativity and cultural change and enable existing knowledges to be stored, accessed, and transmitted more easily through time and space. The Central Australia Aboriginal Media Association broadcasts TV and radio, has a music label, and produces film and TV shows. First Nations Media Australia are the national body for remote Indigenous media and communication. Imparja broadcasts radio and TV programs across 4.5 million square kilometres, and National Indigenous Television (NITV) broadcasts twenty-four hours a day to inform, entertain and educate while preserving our languages and telling our stories. These are but some examples of the plethora of means technology now provides to transmit knowledges. The knowledge transmitted, too, has changed. As societies become intermingled and more global, the knowledge that is needed to survive in them, and for them to survive, also changes.

With all this in place, there seems little reason to be bashful. As Arbon (2006) so rightly declares, "not only do we need to bring our knowledge to the fore but we also need to powerfully speak our own futures" (p. 7). In her work, Martin (2001) shows how ways of knowing, being, and doing are central to social structures and hence that social theory must be built on the understanding that to know is to be, and to be is to do, and to do is to know. Similarly, Denis Foley (2003) considers that "Indigenous philosophy has three interacting worlds: the Physical World, the Human World, and the Sacred World" (p. 46). While these two theorists have named their concepts differently, they are analogous. Both theorists insist that social theory should be cyclical, grounded in the land, and firmly (but not solely) linked to metaphysics. It should honour knowledge for its usefulness and appreciate that every living thing is integral to the world. This means that to be Aboriginal, Aboriginal social theory needs to be built on the firm ontological and epistemological foundations shared by all of us, no matter where our ancestral grounds lie. As Bessarab (2008) reminds us, "Aboriginal women and men throughout Australia have similar philosophies" (p. 47); it is precisely these that I want to address here.

In short, I intend to investigate Aboriginal epistemology and ontology, which work so well, to demonstrate how they are interconnected with each other and how they are related to our ways of knowing, being, and doing. At the point of writing, many scholars (including (Blair, 2015; Foley, 2000a, 2000b; Martin, 2001; Moreton-Robinson, 2009, 2013; Noon & De Napoli, 2022; Walter, 2006; West, 2000) have written about our epistemology and ontology, but these concerns have not been at the forefront of each author's story. Now is the time to further uncover and reveal the commonalities in knowledge creation and in our understandings of reality and to explore how they are expressed and transmitted in our society. As Milroy and Milroy (2008) so clearly spelt out several years ago:

> Aboriginal people are culturally and linguistically diverse, but share a holistic, animate, interconnected system of knowledge that knows the stories for country, the spirit in the land and the relationships between all living things. This is entrusted to us from the Dreaming, the boundless, eternal enduring spirit of time. (p. 40)

Even before Milroy and Milroy (2008) had made this declaration, Arbon (2006) had stipulated in the conclusion to her thesis that the time was right to forge ahead with social theory:

> I point out that the Indigenous ontologies (and the epistemologies and methods within) articulated here are fundamental but are but a beginning to this work, that now needs to begin to further clarify ontologies, epistemologies and methods in the present and the future. To powerfully exist within, understand, draw from and use *thirnda, ngukarnda* and our ***ungkagu*** is our challenge for ourselves. (p. 286)

I have taken up Arbon's (2006) challenge "to further clarify ontologies, epistemologies and methods in the present and the future" (p. 286); with this in mind, I will explore the phenomenon known as the collective spirit that informs our connectedness and relatedness to each other and our Countries. While there are thousands of people who live off the land, who have been given knowledge of the land, and who can speak for it, there are many more who have been removed from their Country and whose Country has been removed from them. Especially for these, the general ontological and epistemological principles remain inclusive and embracing through our reflexive and dialogical methodologies and our collective spirit.

If our societies have such wide and varied experiences and yet we still remain connected through inclusivity, then the formation of theory itself must be inclusive. As Rigney (2001; yarn, October 2007) says, writing Aboriginal social theory is "process driven." Thus, I am not setting out in this work to produce a rigid social theory that is exclusive to the research itself. Rather, my aim is to synthesise the existing significant body of Aboriginal social theory and encourage other Aboriginal scholars to join this process and build on these research findings. To keep Aboriginal social theory alive and flexible enough to accommodate and reflect our changing social realities, it is crucial that others commence and enter into conversations like this one. In this way, we will develop concrete theories that will help current and future Aboriginal thinkers conduct, analyse, and critique research, and its methodologies. This thesis seeks to provide another building block and stimulate further dialogues within and outside the academy, in which Aboriginal thinkers can comfortably develop, sustain, and collectively own our knowledge and social theories.

Clarifications

Social theories are the ideas used to interpret and explain social phenomena. They are also used to explain how societies change and the social institutions that humans construct in order to live

together. With this understanding, this research sets out to interpret and explain social phenomena by paying particular attention to knowledge generation and transmission, social relations within Country, and the social relationships between people and Country in relation to Aboriginal people who belong to Tasmania and the mainland continent. The burning question for me is this: if Aboriginal social theory exists, what does it look like?

The social phenomena and theories unique to the other Indigenous groups are not analysed here, and I have not yarned with people from the Torres Strait. This is because my suggestion that the two hundred Countries on the continent might share fundamental elements of their ontologies and epistemologies seemed quite cheeky enough, even without including the Torres Strait. This is not an act of disrespect; quite the contrary, it is out of respect that I do not include them. I have little understanding of how their social structures function and I do not presume to know more. Their own thinkers are proficiently far better placed than I to explore and develop their own social theories.

The word "spirit" is mentioned quite frequently in this thesis, and many people in this study have stated in various ways and several contexts that there are no clear boundaries between the human, spiritual, and physical worlds. However, to say that the boundaries are indistinct and that the worlds merge or overlap or even interpenetrate is not to say that they are the same. There are elements of the Mother (see definition below) that are indeed more spiritual than others, and some that are clearly more human. I would be delighted if Aboriginal scholars in the schools of religious studies and theology pursue the spiritual aspects of our ways of knowing, being, and doing. However, this thesis is largely concerned with the human world.

Definitions

Throughout this work, I use several terms quite frequently that probably will not be new to an Aboriginal reader. Nevertheless, I provide the following definitions to prevent any misunderstandings and alleviate any misgivings that might arise.

Aboriginal

The word "Aboriginal" is contentious, for it has been imposed by non-Indigenous people and used as a blanket term covering all the Indigenous people in mainland Australia and Tasmania. Non-Aboriginal Australia in the past (and in some cases presently) did not recognise nor distinguish between the Countries that pre-existed the invasion and still exist today. The term "Aboriginal" had and still has negative connotations; it has been used to classify, categorise, and label us. When the term is used, race is implicit in and central to it. It has been a word void of humanity. It has denied the richness of our society, and it has not recognised the variety of experiences, successes, and sufferings that have been felt by the people who have been forced into this category.

However, "Aboriginal" (Langton, 2023; Martin, 2001, 2008) is a term that I have grown up with as it was consistently used to label and categorise my family (even when I was unaware I was

Aboriginal). "Aboriginal" is also the word most commonly used in New South Wales (where I grew up) to describe the Indigenous people of this continent. In this study, I mean it to refer to the humans who first inhabited the mainland continent and Tasmania and their descendants. Martin (2001) also uses the term Aboriginal in her theoretical exploration of our ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Elders

The term "Elders" (Anderson & Anderson, 2018; Blair, 2015; Ford, 2005; Langton, 2023) is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five. It refers to a distinct group of people who are fundamental to the functioning of our society. They are the caretakers of knowledge and we seek advice, instruction, and direction from them on all aspects of our lives. They are the ones who have had much life experience and can guide us through this life. They decide what knowledge is to be transmitted and what knowledge is no longer useful. We have a deep, unwavering respect for them, and we honour them, past, and present.

Intellectual Elders

By "intellectual Elder," I mean the thinkers with whom I have yarned and whose work and stories I have studied. Many are employed in universities, and most have been working for far longer than I have. Many of them have been through the process of successfully completing a doctoral thesis, and all of them understand the nature of research. They provided me with much guidance in this research, and they also helped me with sound advice about working in the university. Many with whom I yarned said that they were actually "the young ones" within their Country and still had much to learn before they would be considered an Elder. I feel they deserve to be honoured in a way that reflects the wealth of knowledge they have shared with me and the academy and because they took the time to guide me as a young Aboriginal student and to yarn to me about important sociological issues. Hence, I refer to them as my intellectual Elders.

Stories

The term "stories" (Blair, 2015; Ford, 2005; Foster, 2018; Heckenburg, 2011) refers to the active process of knowledge transmission and acquisition. All knowledge is passed on through stories, whether they are about creation, history, morality, family, work, spirituality, or Country. Stories come in many different oral, written, and visual forms, but they all involve at least one teller and one listener.

Yarning

As discussed further in Chapter Three, yarning (Blair, 2015; Dickson, 2017) is a form of communication in which the participants talk and listen to each other. For this to be successful, a relationship needs to be already established within which listeners become yarners and yarners become listeners. In yarning, more significance is placed upon the process and the feelings engendered than the actual words exchanged. In this informal process, everybody can discuss anything they like, in any

order they wish. It can take a long time. It may be very spiritual, involving deep philosophical exchanges, and is often extremely humorous.

Dadirri

Dadirri (Blair, 2015) is generally used in relation to yarning. It means deep contemplation, the process by which people acquire information and take the time necessary for it to become knowledge, and to be absorbed and understood. *Dadirri* is the action we take to make sense of the information we are given. It has no time constraints, and people may engage in it for lengthy periods. It is discussed further in Chapter Three.

Country

Country (Heckenburg, 2011; Martin, 2008, 2017; Noon & De Napoli, 2022) is a term used to describe a specific area of the continent and all the entities – human, physical, and spiritual – that it contains. It concerns people's relationship to and custodianship of the land and articulates a deep spiritual connection with it. It is about relationships with and between humans, the flora, the land, the birds and animals, the sky, the water, ancestral beings, and spirits. Country is not a piece of soil with economic value but a living entity often referred to and described in gendered terms. In this thesis, Country is understood as a living entity that must be respected, nurtured, and honoured. About two hundred Countries exist within the continent.

Mob

The term "mob" (Bryan, 2018; Noon & De Napoli, 2022) refers to one's connectedness and relatedness to several families. Generally, a Country contains several mobs. The term is also used when people who do not necessarily share the same Country connect themselves to each other, usually in an ongoing fashion. I acknowledge this is a continuous term, so I have tried to use it sparingly.

Ancestral Spirit

The term ancestral spirit (Community first development, 2022; Cruse, 2022; Graham, 1999; Heckenburg, 2011; Kerwin, 2011) refers to those who have gone before and those who have created the physical, spiritual, and human world. Ancestral spirits are also central to Aboriginal society as they provide the knowledge which guides us on our life path.

Mother Earth, Earth Mother, Mother

The terms Mother Earth, Earth Mother, and Mother (Cruse, 2022) refer to the metaphysical body, which is also known as Mother Nature. Mother Earth is who we take our direction from. She informs us about seasonal changes, the behaviour of our flora and fauna, and fundamentally, how we survive in a complex environment. We honour her by calling her the "Mother," and we have a deep-

seated respect for her. We nurture her through ceremonies, song, dance, art, and the telling of stories. She nurtures us by continually providing for us.

Thesis Outline

Each chapter in this thesis synthesises the existing body of knowledge within its purview while exploring its commonalities. The chapters then look at how these common themes come together to shape social theory. They draw on published scholarly work and combine this with insights gathered from yarns and from the study of autobiographies and life stories, as well as my own lived experience. The conclusions are a part of the cyclical nature of Aboriginal social theory and form the notion of our collective spirit. It is this collective spirit that I argue underpins and informs our social theory.

I have demonstrated that an exploration of Aboriginal social theory can indeed be completed using only Aboriginal Australian mainland and Tasmania thinkers. I argue that knowledge, epistemology, and ontology are entwined and cannot exist outside of each other. As we are not individualised people living independently of each other, our social theory cannot be created on this basis. We share a history that extends for millennia, and we share experiences that are told and retold through stories that constitute and express this common past, so it is only conceivable that our social theory is and will remain based on collective endeavours as individually we are part of a greater whole. Martin's (2001) ways of knowing, being, and doing provide the framework for this research. Using this framework, I have established that there are indeed commonalities in social knowledge across the continent that form the basis of existent Aboriginal social theory. My research has reinforced Martin's (2001) argument that our ways of knowing, being, and doing cannot exist independently and are related, as are the elements that constitute them. Together, they provide us with our connectedness and relatedness which are vital components of our collective spirit.

Chapter Two outlines the methodology developed and used in this study. After reviewing and discussing the current methodologies developed and employed by Aboriginal scholars, I draw on them to shape a "new old" methodology based on yarning and *dadirri* (see above). I took the principles of strengths-based research and coupled them with Aboriginal narrative therapy and storytelling to inform my ontology. My yarns were with intellectual Elders (see above) from around the continent who have written about social theory. They are all experienced researchers who are well aware of the cultural protocols involved in discussing and sharing knowledge. All the yarns were centred around their published work, which is available for critical analysis and further development. I spent time with them discussing family connections and cultural locations so that we could familiarise ourselves with each other and establish empathic cultural, social, and political relations.

Chapter Three: Me… What a Ride situates myself within the research. My story must be woven through this thesis as part of reciprocity. You cannot have a social theory without humans, and I am a human in this story; I must give to receive. In my teaching, I want students to see that the "self" does not have to be left at the door, with you turning into a student of Western thought when you enter

academia. We learn and interact better with the world when we see ourselves as actively engaged. Our reciprocity is what permits us to make sense of the world. It binds our connectedness and relatedness. It builds trust and thus helps us to feel safe.

Chapter Four: Ways of Being concerns our connectedness to this world and vice versa. Our existence and understanding evolve through our interactions with the world and its people: "In Indigenous cultural domains, relationality means that one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self" (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 16). Martin (2001) explains that relationality is not limited to human beings. Within Aboriginal ways of being, we are informed by *all* the entities that make up the Mother (see Chapter Four), including the land, the flora, the birds and animals, the sky, the water, ancestral beings, and spirits. Mother Earth is not an entity separate from us but is "inside" us, even ingrained in our ontology and epistemology. She provides the knowledge for us to seek out, so that we might understand this world of which we are a small part. This understanding of the Mother guides our methodologies, determines our morals and ethics, regulates our social interactions, and underpins our spiritual beliefs. Simply, our ways of being are how we develop relationships with the entities.

Chapter Five: Ways of Doing explores how people come to know the world in which they live by acting in it. Ways of doing are the practical expressions of our ways of knowing and being. They are how we physically participate and express ourselves in this world. They are the things that we do day to day. These customary actions shape our sense of reality, and they provide the influences that first guide children through the complexity of life. The chapter examines five key elements of our ways of doing: kinship, sharing, time, Elders, and humour. These practices are not new to our people for they were and are part and parcel of the daily routines that nourish our collective spirit, just as they are also informed by it.

Knowledge is constructed through experience, and experience helps shape and change knowledge. Chapter Six: Ways of Knowing explores how our picture of reality is formed out of the sum of our experiences which are shaped by our collective practices. Knowledge is holistic and evolving, integrally part of living in the world. It can be comprehended in several ways by those taught to see it, and it can be felt almost pre-cognitively. Our knowledge is never complete, for society is never stationary but constantly in motion. We do not produce and transmit knowledge simply to know; knowledge must serve a purpose for us. Once knowledge has exhausted its purposes, it is no longer transmitted and reproduced. This chapter examines our ways of knowing by looking at Aboriginal epistemology (knowledge), ontology (reality), and storytelling (transmission). When these three concepts are understood in their relationship to each other, they shape our social theory and locate it firmly within our collective spirit.

I have chosen to structure this thesis not in the order of Martin's (2001) ways of knowing, being, and doing. I wanted to honour our ways of being first, as our relationships with Country and the Mother are foundational. Next, I discuss our ways of doing, as our actions are direct physical representations

of our relationships. Finally, I end with ways of knowing to explain the cognitive process of our relationships and physical actions.

This thesis is fundamentally about investigating whether Aboriginal social theory exists and, if so, what it looks like. The thesis explores these questions through literature and yarning, as well as personal experience. I must again reiterate that I have not written this thesis from a position of authority; I acknowledge that Aboriginal society is extremely diverse, and no theory can speak for all people. But, what I have attempted to do is to start a dialogue with other Aboriginal people to place Aboriginal society and our theories into the domain of sociology. I seek to examine the day-to-day living of Aboriginal people to celebrate the richness of ourselves as a group who have inhabited this land for millennia. I seek to place our knowledges and theories in a position of power rather than being "othered." This thesis is a celebration of our abundant epistemologies, ontologies, and knowledges, finding commonalities that bind us as a collective. I have explored our relatedness not only to us but to our Countries and our collective spirit.

Chapter Two
Methodology: Yarning, Dadirri, and the Intellectual Elders

As outlined, this thesis aims to investigate the commonalities of Aboriginal Australian mainland and Tasmanian social knowledges and behaviours to see if we have a social theory. I acknowledge that every Aboriginal person is different, and I do not seek to essentialise us. I know we all exist in this world with different cultures, knowledges, experiences, and behaviours – we are not a homogenous people. I am seeking to write a story that celebrates and honours our commonalities, what binds us together as a group of people. This story does not start here with what I have completed; it has been told for 65 million years, and this is not the end of the story. This is a small snippet in the story. This story is for our students who do not see themselves in current social theories. This thesis challenges the traditional genre of thesis writing. I seek to write an Aboriginal thesis that stays true to our ways of knowing, being, and doing. I seek to write in a manner that is as accessible and relatable as possible for our students.

Social Research and the Academy

It seems axiomatic that writing Aboriginal social theory requires an Aboriginal methodology. I set about uncovering the methodologies that are already in use within Aboriginal society and the academy so that I could locate myself in relation to them and shape the methodology for this project. I also wanted to find out how and how far scholars have developed European methodologies, or indeed if they have abandoned them altogether in favour of something more uniquely Aboriginal.

Lester-Irabinna Rigney (2001) identifies the academy as an institution that has sought to oppress, classify, and categorise our people. Paradoxically, it is also an institution that has brought to consciousness some of the concepts, tools, and theories used to explain our oppression. Academia may simultaneously subvert and enlighten scholars, and as Gary Foley (yarn, September 2007) has pointed out, it is extremely important for us to understand the way Europeans construct knowledge and then use this comprehension to our best advantage. He argues that we cannot achieve power and take control of our own affairs without understanding the processes behind European academic structures. A lot of scholarly effort and time has already been dedicated to critiquing European ways of thinking and researching (Anderson, 2003; Brady, 2001; Dodson, 2003; Foley, 2003; Huggins, 2003; Langton, 1981; Martin, 2001; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Morissey, 2003; Rigney, 1999; Walter, 2006; West, 2000). It is not my intention to replicate this excellent work but to build upon and advance it.

This work of our current Aboriginal scholars (mentioned above) enabled us to take back some ownership of Aboriginal and Indigenous Studies, which are part of the university curricula. However, we have had to do this while our methodologies, epistemologies, and ontologies are generally under-valued and often are not regarded as genuine alternatives to European paradigms. My own research is

no exception. On the one hand, I was told by a senior academic that the Faculty of Arts at the University of Wollongong wanted my research to continue, while, on the other hand, I was advised that I could not succeed unless I used European methodologies and theories. This tension arose numerous times over the period it has taken to finish and submit this thesis and has been one of the main barriers.

A plethora of scholarly literature is written for nonaboriginal researchers investigating our society (Foley, 2003; Martin, 2001; Rigney, 1999, 2001, 2006). Rigney (2007), the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) (2020) and the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Centre (2023), to name but a few, have all developed guidelines for non-Aboriginal researchers who want to study our people and our social structures. Thus, it is not the scope of this thesis to provide this. Rather, I use the Aboriginal methodologies that are available at the time of writing to reframe and develop a methodological approach that suits the unique nature of this research studying our society.

As an emerging sociologist, I am mindful of the expectations the discipline has of me regarding the manner in which I should go about developing my methodology. I am keenly aware of the correct procedures' sociology demands while also remaining conscious that I have been trained by an institution that is thoroughly permeated by European thought and procedures. Conversely and more importantly, I am very well aware of the expectations my intellectual Elders have of me and of my methodology. So, I set about developing a methodology that was informed by my ontology and by my intellectual Elders, yet loosely met all the requirements of my discipline and of the academy. Fortunately, Lester-Irabinna Rigney (Rigney, 1999, 2001, 2006), Greg Lehman (2003), Karen Martin (2001), Denis Foley (2003), Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2009), Maggie Walter (2010), and Linda Ford (2005) have provided useful theoretical foundations and methodological rigour which both reflect our collective spirit and suit the academy. These scholars have gone through this process before me and have successfully developed methodologies that the academy approves, but which are based on our ways of knowing. I am grateful that they have paved the way for me to further disrupt the "normalcy" of sociological methodology while contributing meaningfully to our collective spirit.

In this chapter, I discuss current methodological positions, how they were developed by my intellectual Elders, and how they led me to my epistemological and ontological approach to the research. I outline how I have taken the fundamental principles of a strengths-based approach and Aboriginal narrative therapy principles, amalgamating these with yarning, *dadirri,* and storytelling to design my distinctive methodological approach. I elucidate my research process, how I determined what data I determined would be the most respectful and appropriate and how to analyse the data.

Current Methodologies

We have been conducting research for millennia, for this is how we have come to understand our environment, our relationships, and our core being. It is how our society has adapted to the changing world. The first PhD I read from one of our scholars, Veronica Arbon (2006), told me:

> research is not a new thing to *Arabana* people. Research was used in the past. The *Arabana* nation learned through engagement, experience and interpretation to live well, in a paradoxical life world. (p. 200)

Similarly, Ford (2005) states in her own thesis:

> The learning "sites" through which *Tyikim* people gain knowledge are, firstly, the knowledge generating and transmitting contexts within the *Tyikim* clan itself. This is the *Tyikim* community domain of knowing, being and doing and, as such, provides the origin for *Tyikim* knowledge and, through this knowledge, as *Tyikim* we know people's identity, languages and country. (p. 5)

In this way, through engagement, experience and interpretation, "We too, seek out greater knowing of what it is to be. What it is to exist. And, what exists both visibly and invisibly" (Arbon, 2008, p. 83).

Nearly three decades ago, Rigney (1999) began developing an Indigenist methodology to eliminate racism from the research process and to create research methodologies and epistemologies that promote self-determination. He has developed three fundamental and interrelated principles. The first is *resistance*, the acknowledgement of our people's physical, psychological, and social genocide, its inclusion in our history, along with the recognition of successful struggles to survive. Rigney's (1999) second principle is *political integrity*, which insists that research should advance the political, economic, and social liberation of our people. Researchers governed by political integrity are guaranteeing that they will remain accountable to our society and will inform our consequent struggles. Integrity means that research always remains transparent to our people and that the techniques and outcomes of social research are predicated on our advancement. The final principle is *privileging Indigenous voices* by the according of authority to our voices and by acknowledging the primacy of the lived social experiences of our people. Our voices should always be foremost in any research regarding ourselves and our society. We should be free to determine what is written about us and how it is written. It is our people who should determine our research agendas and their desired outcomes, and we are the researchers who need to be responsible for conceiving and executing research in our own interests. Rigney (2006), of course, realises that we are not a homogenous society whose members co-exist in a state of blissful harmony, but he argues that we "do tend to be more aware and respectful of each other's cultural tradition," and thus "it is certainly politically more appropriate that Indigenous Australians be given the option to speak through Indigenous researchers" (p. 44).

One such researcher is Linda Ford (2005), whose methodology was informed by her family's "knowledge creation processes" (p. 71). She has likened her methodology to a hunting and gathering story, where she was the learner being led by her Elders in the quest for knowledge. In her childhood, she relied on the older children and the Elders to guide her in her search for food and water. The older children and the Elders would ensure her safety and that she would hunt and gather in an area that was rich in resources. In a similar way, this is how Ford (2005) undertook her research. She was once again

the younger person who was guided by her Elders to obtain her research objective in a culturally safe and respectful manner. Ford (2005) relies heavily on the notion that all knowledge is metaphorical. We explain our stories through metaphors to ensure that others understand our ontological and epistemological stance. Metaphors connect us to the physical world and give us the words to articulate and convey our ontology and epistemology. She applied her metaphor of the "hunting and gathering" of knowledge to Martin's (2001) ways of knowing, being, and doing. She showed how knowledge is attained through people gathering to yarn about matters of importance and obtain solutions useful to them.

Errol West's (2000) thesis has developed the *Japanangka* teaching and researching paradigm as a holistic research practice that is made up of eight dimensions. They are summarised in Table 1 (West, 2000). West (2000) acknowledges that these eight dimensions are cyclical in nature; they are continuously moving and reshaping. They are, simply, us.

Table 1

Summary of West's Eight Dimensions of Japanangka Teaching and Researching Paradigm

Cultural dimension	How we respond behaviourally as a holistic cultural being in a time-specific manner, which encompasses the past, present, and future. The total of our culture, knowledge, and experience.
Spiritual dimension	Our ontological positioning, which is spiritually framed.
Secular (quality of life) dimension	A combination of our private and public selves, and how we present ourselves and tend to our relationships with all the entities.
Intellectual dimension	This is where we employ all eight dimensions in a cyclical manner. It is a tacit being. This dimension allows us to heal individually and collectively.
Political dimension	Here, we draw upon our axiology, ethics, and integrity. This dimension is not innate; it has come about through colonisation.
Practical dimension	Quiet simply put, this is the practicality of knowledge and the satisfaction of purpose. If there is no purpose, there is no practical need.
Personal dimension	How we as individuals contribute to the collective; the spiritual and physical world.
Public dimension	Our cultural expressions, such as NAIDOC Week, Sorry Day, sacred sites. They are tangible footprints.

Dennis Foley (2003) also developed a methodology that is both palatable to academia and resonates strongly with his own ontology. His methodology amalgamates Rigney's (Rigney, 1999) Indigenist and West's (2000) *Japanangka* paradigms. Foley (Foley, 2003) argues that our methodologies concern three interconnected worlds: the physical, human, and sacred. The physical world is the land because it grounds us; we do not own it but depend on it for survival. The human world includes our knowledges and our social structures, and the sacred world is where our ontology lies. When the three worlds are combined, they make up our being. Our methodologies need to engage with and reflect all three.

Moreton-Robinson (2009) developed an Indigenous women's methodology centred on Indigenous women's knowledge, informed by feminist methodology. Her methodology is very personal and very reflexive, informed by her people's ontology and epistemology and by feminism. She argues that women intertwine their experiences with their ontological frameworks. Thus, methodology must be informed and shaped by their shared lived experience. Moreton-Robinson (2009) says that, as Indigenous women, we have an objectivity that is unique. As we are constantly oppressed by patriarchal European methodologies, we are in a prime position to analyse colonial rule. She states that Indigenous women's standpoint "is framed around its methodological standpoint and involves a six-step iterative process of listening and talking, observing, thinking, clear-sightedness, reading and writing" (Moreton-Robinson, 2009, p. 7).

Listening and talking involves being aware of everyday conversations and hearing the stories that have been written and spoken by women. This, Moreton-Robinson (2009) argues, informs everyday lived experience, which is a reciprocal experience as it is about learning through one's own experience as well as tapping into collective experiences. Observing is intertwined with listening and talking, as the researcher must observe the conversations that are taking place and listen to the stories that are being told in order to share and be informed by the experience. The next process is thinking, which is similar to *dadirri* (discussed further below). Moreton-Robinson (2009) says that time must be taken to think about the reasons for the stories and conversations, and what their implications might be. During this thinking time, she turns to her ancestors for guidance and then engages in a period of clear-sightedness in which she can begin to explore the ideas that have unfolded. The final two processes are reading and writing. In the reading phase, Moreton-Robinson (2009) reviews the relevant literature to gather as much knowledge as possible about the research problem. She explains that during this phase, the methodology is shaped into a framework. Finally, in the writing process, she analyses and explains the issues, conveys an argument, and advances solutions.

Like the ontological and epistemological positions held by Moreton-Robinson, Walter's (Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009) methodology, *naryi kati,* is also based on the conception that the land, humans, and spirits cannot be separated and that human life does not supersede any other living entity. Unlike the methodologies mentioned above, Walter is concerned with quantitative methodologies, which are constantly placing negative labels on "the other.' Through quantitative

methodologies, Aboriginal people are usually represented in negative statistics. Walter (Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009) argues that her methodology is also a personal one in that each researcher must adapt it to suit their own social position. She states that knowledge that is uncovered in her research cannot be owned and is relational, depending on the person. A crucial element of *nayri kati* is the development of the research question. When a question is designed by an Aboriginal person, the quantitative methods that arise from it are from an Aboriginal epistemological and ontological standpoint. It is crucial that the statistics developed are viewed through an Aboriginal lens using an Aboriginal framework, which is far from difficult because this is how we have built our very existence.

Martin (2008), in her dissertation, found there are seven research strategies that honour and foster respect. Table 2 names the strategies and explains how I have conducted myself in relation to this research and the strategies.

Table 2

Martin's (2008) Strategies and How I Implemented Them

Respect your land	All yarns took place at my intellectual Elders' chosen places. I entered the space only after being invited. I honoured the space. I honoured the entities through the spoken word and by practising deep gratitude. I acknowledged and learnt about the lands of those whom I read.
Respect your law	I only used information that was published in the public domain. I chose to only speak with Aboriginal academics as they were all too familiar with the research process. I understood and respected that I could not engage in true reciprocity with any non-academic community.
Respect your Elders	I was completely guided by my intellectual Elders in how to design and progress the research process.
Respect your culture	I ensured the entities were honoured at every stage of the research phase.
Respect your community	I was transparent in my aims and objectives. I held trust, respect, and reciprocity at the forefront of the process and in my lived experience.
Respect your families	I listened, respected, and honoured stories. In the yarns, if my intellectual Elders shared something that was sacred, it was not analysed or used.
Respect your futures	I will share my research findings, start a conversation about establishing an Aboriginal social theory for our future students to use in their university studies, and cement Aboriginal theories into sociology.

Drawing from Martin's (2008) strategies, I am choosing to obey and live for my own self-regulation and to pay homage to my Elders, family, and cultural ties. These strategies may have been written for non-Aboriginal people conducting research into our communities. However, I have found them extremely fitting for me when entering others lived experiences, knowledge, epistemologies and ontologies (whether through yarns, reading stories, or engaging with academic literature). These strategies are synonymous with the very foundation on which Aboriginal social theory exists, which I am attempting to synthesise. By following these strategies, I was able to reach deep into my own ontology and epistemology to ensure trust, reciprocity, and respect. Connectedness and relatedness were always at the centre of relationships, both physical and metaphysical.

Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing in Action

Yarning and Dadirri

In embracing Rigney's (1999) three principles and Martin's (2008) research strategies, I realised that the most appropriate way of putting them into practice was by using the concept of yarning as discussed by Greg Lehman (2003). Knowledge comes in many different forms. However our knowledge is defined, its roots lie deep in oral tradition, and this form of transmission has shaped its content. For this reason, I realised that it was crucial not only to read the relevant literature but also to yarn with its authors. But, the yarning process is completely different from European methodologies, for "'having a yarn" is more governed by the protocols of respect, trust and companionship" (Lehman, 2003, p. 175). Lehman (2003) implies that yarning does not necessarily involve the expression or exercise of power that generally occurs in Western social science research. Unlike a researcher who employs classical research methods, I was not in a position of power during any stage of this research process. I was a student trying to understand and apply the knowledge that my intellectual Elders chose to share with me to my own life story, and those I had read, to find commonalities.

Language is a major way in which people locate themselves and others, and of course, it is central to yarning. Through language, we are able to establish respect, trust, and companionship, without which yarning cannot occur. Lehman (2003) says that we are able to do this successfully as we have our own "English," in which the words have different meanings that enable us to communicate on many different levels. One such term, integral to yarning and knowledge, is "truth." One knows "the truth" of any piece of knowledge through experience. Sharing an experience and negotiating the meaning of that experience collectively determines "truth." To know the truth is to experience a narrator's knowledge, to feel the emotions of the story, to envision the story, and to become one with the story. As Lehman (2003) argues:

> Rather than listening with the expectation of photo-accurate observations of a subject, hearers of a "yarn" listen for meaning, nuance and metaphor. And

> only by knowing the person speaking – or at least her family – are you likely to get more than a minimum of what is really being said. (p. 175)

Linking logic with knowledge is an impracticality that will result in the "true" meaning of the story being lost. Lehman (Lehman, 2003) considers that the truth is much deeper than the spoken or written word. Truth is allegorical, containing intertwined contradictions, abstractions, and practical elements. Yarning is a very special form of communication which can occur only where all participants have established trust, connectedness and respect with one another, then yarning is free to flow, and participants listen intently for truth rather than accuracy.

Yarning cannot take place without *dadirri*, for both the speaker and the listener need to engage in deep contemplation of what is being transmitted, and the truth is sought by absorbing and locating the knowledge within our collective spirit. *dadirri* itself is:

> A special quality, a unique gift of the Aboriginal people, is inner deep listening and quiet still awareness. Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. It is something like what you call contemplation. The contemplative way of dadirri spreads over our whole life it renews us and brings us peace, it makes us feel whole again. In our Aboriginal way we learnt to listen from our earliest times, we could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. We are not threatened by silence, we are completely at home in it. Our Aboriginal way has taught us to be still and wait, we do not try to hurry things up, we let them flow their natural course – like the seasons. (Ungenmerr, 2015)

Yarning and *dadirri* bind people together through the expression of life experiences and as a result, knowledge is sometimes passed on through absorption rather than pedagogy (Lehman, 2003). Indeed, I think that "absorption" is of itself one of our pedagogies.

Dadirri and the principles of yarning meant that I, and the people yarned within this research, could listen to what each of us was saying and also hear what was being said and what was left unsaid. We had a common understanding that time was needed for reflection, and the process was never hurried (see Chapter Four). If I asked a question, I knew the answer might not be instantaneous and would not come in a long-winded monologue. *Dadirri,* which guaranteed shared respect, passion, and connectedness, allowed the transmission of knowledge to run its course in its own time.

In the European way of thinking, since knowledge is socially constructed, there must be an exchange between a minimum of two human beings for its production and transmission. This exchange is conducted using language and other means of communication to stimulate each person's senses so they can cognitively comprehend the meaning of this knowledge. However, yarning and *dadirri* dissolve the binary of narrator and listener as each person is at once a listener and a narrator. Knowledge production and transmission is cyclical. It is never-ending and constantly evolving, with each communicator interpreting the knowledge differently according to their ontological position. This is what my research and my methodology represent. I have listened to the stories my intellectual Elders

have chosen to impart to me. I have written about them to the best of my ability, with the understanding that this knowledge itself will be comprehended and used in different ways, changed into something new, and shaped by further yarning and *dadirri* over the coming years. As Lehman (2003) argues, knowledge evolves. The narrator shares experiences, which are then retold, and each new listener can become a narrator, assigning new meaning and retelling the knowledge, which grows through this process. Both Lehman (2003) and Ford (2005) contends that this is not something new; it is how first knowledge was created and conveyed through storytelling and in the habits and customs of daily life down the generations. To truly understand the knowledge that surrounds us, we need to be immersed in the culture and live it. The Elders fine-tune the active listening and observation, which are crucial elements in knowledge transmission. Knowledge is more than the transmission of information (Ford, 2005). It is felt, absorbed, lived, and honoured. This is how my methodology was formulated and how it, too, will be transformed.

To familiarise oneself with fellow yarners is to open up a deeper level of understanding of the knowledge being shared. This is exactly how the yarning process took place in this research. I yarned with fifteen intellectual Elders. We spent time engaged in the customary introduction so we might familiarise ourselves with each other (This essential protocol, a modernised form of the pre-European ritual of social engagement, is discussed further in Chapter Four). We spent time discussing who we were and where we were from, trying to make family connections and establish cultural locations (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). We then moved on to discuss the paper I had sent them and what their thoughts were about this. I simply asked them why it was different to walk into a room full of blackfellas than to walk into a room full of whitefellas. This took some *dadirri* on their behalf, and then we yarned about possible answers and questions and we shared experiences of the two. Finally, I asked them if they thought we had continental commonalities and if I could use this as a basis for our social theory. As I went from yarn to yarn, I started to see patterns emerging in what my intellectual Elders were saying. This formed the topics of each chapter, coupled with the autobiographies and my life experience.

Yarning understands that the spoken word is not the only method of transmission and that real communication is more than verbal. During the yarning process, we usually sat in an office or outside. Our hand gestures and head, face, and eye movements were integral to the knowledge being transmitted. These were often of such minute expression that to interpret their meaning, our own mode of comprehension was necessary. However, this was not so in all cases. I yarned with one Elder via Skype, where I could see and hear him, but he could only hear me, as a webcam was not available. This yarn was very different from the others as my body was invisible, and a sense of familiarity was not established due to this lack of physical presence. Nonetheless, yarning still provided the foundation that made this a success, and I did not have to alter my core methodology.

All the yarns were with intellectuals whom I consider Elders, experienced researchers who are well aware of the cultural protocols involved in discussing and transmitting knowledge. The discussions were all centred on their published work, which was available for critical analysis and further

development. This was extremely important to my methodology as it demonstrated to my Elders that I was not yarning to gather sacred knowledge and that my research met Rigney's (1999) test of political integrity.

The yarning process was not predetermined, with me asking a series of set questions and simply transcribing and collating the answers. Yarning is a give and take process, and we covered many, many subjects. It was about coming together and expressing life stories while formulating new storylines and creating a dialogue safe enough to investigate the creation of contemporary social thought. Life experiences were shared, and more sociological questions were raised. This led to a deep discussion of social structures. While a conventional approach to qualitative research is to protect the confidentiality of the research participants, my intellectual Elders agreed for their names to be included. This was an extremely important part of the process. Firstly, I was there to discuss their published works and secondly, it demonstrated the connectedness and relatedness we have to the collective spirit. We are indeed all giving back to Aboriginal students. Yarning with Aboriginal intellectuals was also an emotive experience, which influenced the degree of knowledge transmission and its subsequent analysis. During this invaluable time, we made deep spiritual connections that assisted the transmission of knowledge. However, I became aware that some knowledge was not being transmitted to me but was, in fact, being held back. In a moment of *dadirri,* I realised that this was not of concern as I was being given the knowledge the Elders believed was necessary for me to learn. Indeed, this is as it should be and is discussed further in Chapter Five. If I am true to myself and my methodology is cyclical and inclusive as I hope it to be, then my Elders must have a real say over what I am given access to and what I can and cannot say.

One consequence of this is that all the people involved in this research own the knowledge that is contained in it even though I am responsible for its expression (Fejo-King, 2005). Even though the research reflects our thought processes and knowledge, I cannot so easily escape the responsibility placed upon me by European authorship. That is, I accept that this thesis and its conclusions were written by me, but responsibility for the truth of the knowledge I have gained through this process and have expressed here rests with those who provided it to me. I am a custodian of the interpretation of knowledge they have shared with me. I am not its owner.

Strengths-based Approach

A strengths-based approach, according to the Stronger Smarter Institute (2020), "is our way; that is an Indigenous standpoint" (p, 7). It is from this standpoint that I take my point of departure. Looking at the structures and social fabric of Aboriginal knowledges, epistemologies, and ontologies from a positive paradigm does not mean the trauma, hurt, injustice, and real-life lived experiences are ignored and not honoured; it is quite the contrary. These experiences are lived, real, internalised and externalised and are a real part of the social fabric of Aboriginal society and thus play a part in Aboriginal social theory. A strengths-based approach listens to, identifies, honours, and examines these,

not just from the individuals' experiences but also our environments. This is synonymous with Rigney's (1999) first principle of *resistance*.

Our environment is physical (land), cultural, social, spiritual, emotional, and psychological; it is holistic. A strengths-based approach allows the researcher to examine, explore and analyse the spoken and the written word and the researcher's lived experience from a place of kinship and celebration. Trust, reciprocity, and respect for each other and the research process are built. This position permits the commonalities of our connectedness and relatedness to each other and the land to become axiomatic. Strengths-based approaches honour us as individuals and, in the case of this research, as a collective. As Rigney's (Rigney, 1999) third principle *privileging Indigenous voices in Indigenist research* articulates, we are the experts of our society as we have inherited this, live this, nurture this, and change this. We are unique in our individualism but gain our identity as a collective. We are also unique, and by building upon our strengths (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2020), connectedness, and relatedness, we are, in fact, strengthening our Aboriginal social theory position.

An approach that is strengths-based is collaborative and built on relationships in nature, and so is our society. As we have conducted our social behaviours and maintained our social structures throughout time immemorial, our research practices must be representative of how we order ourselves in the world. Being colonised subjects is certainly part of our social story and has empowered our resilience, empathy, and knowledge; however, it does not define us. Strengths-based approaches flip the deficit thinking of colonised subjects fighting for a space in academia to a place of resilience that is continually fluid (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2020). It permits us to embody a positive standpoint that can openly discuss, write, and honour our social theories in a safe and brave space.

Aboriginal Narrative Therapy Principles

Aboriginal narrative therapy, according to Wingard and Lester (2001), is "telling our stories in ways that make us stronger." By this virtue, narrative therapy is Aboriginal in nature, as its fundamental principles are grounded in our ways of knowing. Stories transmit knowledges, acknowledge strength, build the collective spirit and also have room for trauma to be discussed and healed. They honour and privilege that there is more than one story but also acknowledge that numerous shared stories exist. These shared stories transcend time and place and bind us as Aboriginal people (Drahm-Butler, 2015). The foundational principles of Aboriginal narrative therapy for Drahm-Butler (2015) are:

- *Hearing the "strong stories'*
- *Defining wellbeing in our own ways*
- *Yarning with purpose*
- *Contextualising problems and holding shame at a distance*
- *Decolonising identity stories*

- *A de-centred position even when we are of the collective experience*
- *Yarning as a spiritual practice.* (p. 26)

The first principle of *hearing the "strong stories"* required me to truly "hear the stories," whether they were oral or written (Drahm-Butler, 2015). I changed the physical response of hearing into cognitive and emotional listening to the stories. I actively listened to the individual stories, located them within my own stories, embodied them, and understood that they are connected to our collective stories. I listened and observed the commonalities of these stories and started to locate them within our ways of knowing, being, and doing. To truly achieve this, I had to engage in *dadirri*.

Defining wellbeing in our own ways (Drahm-Butler, 2015) was essential to my methodology as, fundamentally, Aboriginal social theory is telling our stories our way. Instead of defining wellbeing in our own ways, I took this principle and engaged in *dadirri* for some time. After a period of deep contemplation, I realised this was exactly what I was doing within the academy. I wanted to take back the Aboriginal narrative (from numerous disciplines) and start the process of writing a strengths-based, narrative-informed Aboriginal social theory.

The principle of *yarning with purpos*e permitted me to listen, embody, acknowledge and decipher meanings (Drahm-Butler, 2015). We collectively communicated and created explanations of our social structures and behaviours while passing on our histories and knowledges. With the literature of some of the academics and the autobiographies, I certainly was not able to yarn with the authors due to funding and time restraints. I was, however, able to sit with the principles of yarning and *dadirri* and group our social commonalities into our ways of knowing, being, and doing. *Yarning with a purpose* is also directly related to our ancient traditions of storytelling.

The fourth principle of *contextualising problems and holding shame at a distance* (Drahm-Butler, 2015) also required serious contemplation on how this principle could be applied to my research with a strengths-based approach. It came to light that this principle was where I could engage with the notion of decolonising sociology and where Rigney's (1999) first principle of *resistance as the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist research* would be applicable. I contextualised the issue of an Aboriginal social theory not being explicitly present within sociology by thoroughly examining the current literature and mapping this to the aims and aspirations I had for this research. I then coupled this with a strength-based approach, which empowered our social theory to shine through and not be clouded in the depth and despair of colonisation.

Decolonising identity stories means exploring our identity through stories, understandings, and behaviours within our society (Drahm-Butler, 2015). Through an Aboriginal lens, I was able to privilege and normalise our social structures and start to reclaim ownership of how our collective identity is discussed within the academy. An Aboriginal social theory started to take shape where I did not have to privilege and engage in the contestation and dichotomisation of Aboriginal EVERYTHING.

As I am a researcher, I needed to have *a de-centred position even when we are of the same collective experience,* Drahm-Butler's (2015) sixth principle. I had to be mindful when listening, yarning, reading, and contemplating that I am part of the collective experience. However, I am also the author of this thesis; thus, it was essential that I remain vigilant of this. This principle also acknowledges that the researcher and all the different means of stories that have been listened to, absorbed, and embodied are co-creators. Aboriginal voices must remain the experts on how our social theory is developed and written.

Finally, *yarning as a spiritual practice* is grounded in spirituality (Drahm-Butler, 2015). The very act of engaging in this research topic and using this cyclical form of methodology is spiritual. Embedded in the yarns, autobiographies, academic literature, and my own lived experience are cultural ties to the past, present, and future. Relationships, connectedness, and relatedness to all the entities are constantly present, felt, and connected to the collective consciousness.

Aboriginal methodologies of yarning, *dadirri,* and storytelling are synonymous with a strengths-based and Aboriginal narrative therapy principles approach. While these concepts have been developed independently and for different audiences, they are essentially trying to achieve the same goal. They just privilege different elements. All five of these methods are cyclical and cannot exist without the other in this research. Figure 1 articulates my thinking here. I have deliberately made it complex and messy as this is how I have conceptualised these approaches as intertwined, connected, and dependent on one another. What I conclude is that Aboriginal methodology seeks to privilege Aboriginal voices and Aboriginal needs. Our people are to set the research agenda, and the agenda must ensure that the human world is not privileged above any other living entity. Based on these considerations, I felt well-prepared to formulate the methodology for this research.

Figure 1

My Methodology

The Research Process

Preface

It is vitally important that I start this section of the thesis with a reiteration of my aims for starting this crusade.

I wanted what I did not have.

I wanted understandability, readability, and representation for our up-and-coming students so they would not be constrained by European paradigms of language and thought. I wanted Aboriginal students to be able to use their known, lived and embodied social theories to analyse social phenomena and not be forced to use social theories that purposefully ignore our existence. I wanted Aboriginal students to recognise that their world views and ways of knowing, being, and doing were firmly appreciated, integrated, and accepted within the academy. I wanted our future students to be actively engaged in learning and teaching activities designed with an Aboriginal lens. I wanted Aboriginal "anything" not to be a hotly contested space that was a constant dichotomy of European knowledge systems. I wanted my work to be part of the decolonising process of "Aboriginal social theory" within the academy. I reiterate this here as it deeply informs the research process I have undertaken.

Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing are antithetical to conventional rules of research, where I must present a logical argument and prove my methods to be reliable, valid, objective, and "true" within the university paradigm I have occupied. My past and current academic sphere demands my research to be cemented in logic. As Graham (1999) explains, "Western logic rests on the division between the self and the not-self, the external and the internal" (p. 189). Here lies the overindulgence of the important nature of one understanding of reliability, validity, objectivity, and truths. There is no room to explore these "terms/concepts" as Western human constructs that are devoid of the spiritual, the sacred, the creative, and the collective. There is no room for other knowledges, truths, and logic to be acknowledged, explored, and disseminated. European methodologies often alienate and lock out numerous other knowledge systems, epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies. They stifle creativity, growth, collaborations, and relationships.

To contemplate, create, and write a methodology suitable for this research, I needed to discern whether our social fabrics are a product of our own definition of metaphysics. As Graham (1999) describes:

> Aboriginal logic maintains that there is no division between the observing mind and anything else: there is no "external world" to inhabit. There are distinctions between the physical and the spiritual, but these aspects of existence continually interpenetrate each other. All perspectives are thus valid and reasonable: there is no one way or meaning of life. There is never a barrier between the mind and the Creative; the whole repertoire of what is possible

> continually presents or is expressed as an infinite range of Dreamings. What is possible is the transformative dynamics of growth. (p. 189)

I make note here that I am not posing Aboriginal social theory as the antithesis to conventional Western research paradigms. I am simply demonstrating that there is another way of understanding and existing within our academic structures. I am reiterating what Graham (1999) states above – there are multiple meanings of life and, thus, multiple ways of explaining social theories.

The Process

Where my PhD was going to make a difference was in academia, so I decided to talk to Aboriginal academics and read academic literature and autobiographies while also using my own lived experience. With this in mind, I decided to yarn only with people involved in scholarly work. While people outside of academia have valuable knowledge and insight to offer, I chose to focus on academics due to the complexities of reciprocity, consultation fatigue, and history of academic research with community. Those who are not scholars are often tired of academics coming into their lives and taking their valuable knowledge, for which they are given little in return. As Rigney (Rigney, 1999) points out:

> Indigenous Australians, like First Nations Peoples around the globe, are arguably the most studied people of the world. The research enterprise as a vehicle for investigation has poked, prodded, measured, tested and compared data toward understanding Indigenous cultures and human nature. Explorers, medical practitioners, intellectuals, travellers and voyeurs who observed from a distance, have all played a role in the scientific scrutiny of Indigenous Peoples. (109)

Reciprocity is at the heart of this project. However, as my research is heavily concerned with theoretical sociological concepts, I could not offer anyone from any particular Country definite and immediate benefits that would improve their education, health, housing, or income. My research is within sociology and its related disciplines. I certainly wish this work to be useful, but I do not want to continue the colonial practice of extracting knowledge from those who have been so continuously and assiduously plundered. As Christine Fejo-King (2005) writes:

> In questioning Western knowledge, methodologies and research practices, I felt very small and insignificant, but I persisted... As a result of their ideologies and practices, Australian Indigenous peoples have reaped the whirlwind of displacement, disinheritance, pain and injustice. As an Australian Indigenous researcher, I do not want to be seen as coming from the same mould. (p. 3)

Accordingly, I considered it more appropriate to yarn with those working in higher education, as they are generally quite familiar with the research process and its outcomes. My aim is not to continue the scientific scrutiny (Rigney, 1999) of my people but to develop our existing social theory and to enrich

the field of sociology by providing Aboriginal theories, understandings, ontologies, and epistemologies with which to understand the social world. Deep philosophical contemplation and exploration, for Aboriginal people, are not done in isolation. It is a communal reflective practice. As such, yarns with my intellectual Elders meant we could gather and reflect together on the mechanics of our shared epistemologies, ontologies, axiology, and knowledge transmission (Graham, 1999).

When beginning this research, I was already familiar with much of the literature through writing my honours thesis. I knew the ideas of many of the main thinkers instrumental in this PhD. However, there was still literature that I had not found or read. As well as searching for the work of the authors with whom I was familiar and consulting their bibliographies, I undertook a thorough search in databases, libraries, the internet, and archives, looking for terms such as "Aboriginal knowledge," "Aboriginal epistemology," "Aboriginal ontology," "Aboriginal methodology," "Aboriginal theory" and then substituted the word "Indigenous" for "Aboriginal." In this way, I obtained an extensive bibliography. From this, I located the work already done in social theory.

I was able to identify the scholars who are interested in knowledge and social theory. I approached forty of these potential intellectual Elders, fifteen of whom agreed to participate. The fifteen come from a broad range of disciplines and a variety of backgrounds. They have diverse experiences within and outside their respective Countries. These I considered to be my intellectual Elders even though most of them were regarded by the Elders in their own Countries to be "young ones." They all had their own Elders whom they considered the "wise ones,' and many thought they still had much to learn from them about their own cultures. However, as I soon found out, they understood very well the mechanisms of knowledge and its transmission. They were very conscientious about cultural protocols, their specific place within their own people, and their relationships outside them and with me.

Rigney (2001) writes about the "journey of academic contradiction" in ways that speak to my own experience writing this thesis. When I applied to the University of Wollongong for approval to travel to parts of Australia to yarn with my intellectual Elders on social knowledge, the university ethics committee eventually approved my application on very strict conditions. The committee was extremely concerned that I would not be working with but instead would be "gossiping about" my intellectual Elders. However, the committee did not scrutinise fellow PhD students who were to interview academics and government officials in Southeast Asia to the same degree. The committee was also very worried that I appeared to have no contacts in the areas in Australia where I wished to travel. Yet, this concern was not extended to fellow students travelling overseas to places that did not share their culture or language. As noted in the introduction, it is in the minutiae of lives, in the day-to-day simple decisions about the allocation of time, money, and resources, that institutionalised racism is most deeply buried.

The University of Wollongong's Faculty of Arts, in which I was enrolled, has strong research engagement in Asia and the South Pacific. It provides funding to those researching this region, which it defines as the countries of East, South, and Southeast Asia, the islands of the Pacific, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation economies. What was troubling was that the faculty did not think that

Aboriginal people were covered by this description, even though Aboriginal Australia has been (even physically) a part of Southeast Asia and the Pacific a long time before the invasion. Thus, I did not receive funding sufficient to visit those I needed to talk to in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. This made my research even more difficult as I needed to yarn to people who were in every state and territory, particularly those regarded as "peripheral" where the bulk of our people live, to ensure that my data was not restricted to the southern and eastern states of Australia, the centres of European power.

Once the university ethics committee had given me permission to talk to my own people and the (inadequate) funding was finally approved, I contacted by email the people I had located, providing my name, explaining my cultural location, and giving a brief overview of this research. I informed them of my family connections and clan group (following Moreton-Robinson, 2000: xv). However, one scholar did pull me into line by reminding me of our cultural protocol regarding social and personal identity. In my initial email, I provided my name and details of my clan group, but I had not established familiarity through family and extended family ties (see the discussion of introductions in Chapter Three). I was reminded that I had not given any real insight into who I was both culturally and as a person. I had failed to share information that would establish an understanding of how I had come to this research.

I was grateful to be "pulled up" on this because it forcibly reminded me of how European notions of knowledge tend to dominate our own ways of knowing. Caught up in the university's procedures and aptly-named "deadlines," I did not comply with my own very basic cultural process of self-identification. I emailed my intellectual Elder back with a brief personal history and what I knew of my family; from there, we developed a healthy and productive relationship.

After I had established who was willing to yarn with me, I confirmed dates, times, and places that suited my intellectual Elders. I also sent them a brief paper in which I summarised my current thinking of what knowledge, epistemology, and ontology were and how these were transmitted. It said in part:

> Aboriginal social theory draws upon our commonalities while acknowledging our differences. Our knowledge, ontology and epistemology do not require universality (Foley, 2003). We know and understand our knowledge through the entirety of our experience and communication, and each person will acquire different knowledges at different times in their lives. Due to this, our society is very dynamic and knowledge has survived and grown as a result. What I am doing in this project is extracting the essences of all these knowledges, to find what unites us as being and feeling Aboriginal.

This paper was not long, as I appreciated that my intellectual Elders were all extremely busy. Even so, not all the people I met with were able to read it before our yarn. Many read it while I was sitting with them. In retrospect, I realised that it was, in fact, more beneficial to the yarning process that they had

not read the paper beforehand. When they read it on the spot, the ideas were fresh in their minds, and conversation flowed quite freely.

With the participants informed by their knowledge of their Countries, their own life experiences, and their academic training, the yarning sessions took shape. According to the methodology of yarning, the intellectual Elders, with their knowledge status, led the yarning sessions and guided the yarning in a way that revealed what they thought important. I was constantly the learner and only needed to instigate the session with a few prompts from which the yarning flowed. The interviews with my intellectual Elders took place in 2006. As mentioned above, I had to yarn with one person via Skype. I thought that this would provide a solution to not being funded to go to Western Australia. However, the university placed another restriction on me: it would only allow me a certain amount of time to break through their firewall in order to use Skype. They contended that using Skype would be detrimental to the security of their server. They also did not provide a video link; thus, as mentioned, my intellectual Elder could not see me.

In the process of yarning, it became apparent that many of the questions I was asking my intellectual Elders were about issues that had not been broached with them before. Most needed time to think about what people share that allows them to interrelate. My research methodology started to appear to me to be somewhat European as our people do not traditionally seek explanations for such taken-for-granted knowledge. Many Elders were initially confused when I asked, "How do you know this or that to be true?" But then, as the process unfolded, I realised that this is what yarning is. It was about creating a dialogue in which no one felt inadequate or foolish and where topics could be discussed in any order, for yarning itself has no middle and no end. The knowledges, stories, and contemplations of these yarns have been weaved throughout this thesis and intertwined with academic literature, autobiographies, and my own life story. This formulates an analysis of the knowledges and epistemological and ontological underpinning of Aboriginal social theory.

Autobiographies and Life Stories

As mentioned above, I was restricted in who among my intellectual Elders I could visit. I was told that if I wished to go to Western Australia and the Northern Territory, I would have to fund myself. I was able to pay for a trip to the Northern Territory, but I could not find the means to travel to Western Australia. This was seriously impeding the breadth of my research. When discussing this institutionalised racism with one of my intellectual Elders during the yarning process, she suggested that a good way to include Western Australian people would be to use autobiographies and life stories as they can also give a sharp insight into the mechanisms of social structures and reveal the commonalities of social knowledge. In pursuing this idea, I started reading autobiographies recommended to me by the intellectual Elders and my supervisors. I found that it connected well with *dadirri* as autobiographies and life stories give access to the subjectivities of the authors and allow them to express their contemplation on the workings of society.

By listening to my intellectual Elders, I was able to overcome a major hurdle. Taking their advice kept my methodology cyclical and ensured that the notions of yarning and *dadirri* remained at the forefront. Because my methodology remained inclusive of those who were sharing their knowledge with me, I was constantly a learner, even in the design and execution of the research. By using academic literature, yarns, autobiographies, life stories, and my own story, I was able to engage in deep contemplation about what I had learned. From this, I was able to formulate what one of my intellectual Elders called "new old ideas."

As I was reading the autobiographies and life stories, I found that those of the Stolen Generations in particular, gave me a deep insight into how social structures were organised. The yarning process for them had been broken by their removal from their families and Country. As knowledge transmission through storytelling (see Chapter Four) is oral and experiential, the circle of knowledge had been ruptured by the genocidal actions of the colonising state. The reconnection of their storylines was evident in their writings, and for many of them, their autobiographies were about mending the ruptures that had broken the yarning circle and dislocated them; thus, I sought to read as many of these life stories as I could find. In total, I read eleven autobiographies and forty life stories and drew my most heavily from *Heartsick for Country: Stories of Love, Spirit and Creation* (Morgan et al., 2008) and *Speaking From the Heart: Stories of Life, Family and Country* (Morgan et al., 2007).

The members of the Stolen Generations were initially writing about themselves, about how they had travelled along in life without knowing where they came from. But, what was especially beneficial to my research was that they were also writing about how they located themselves in society once they had found their families and their Countries. Meehan (2000), seven years after reuniting with her mother, was sitting in her mother's backyard after her funeral, looking around at all the family. She realised she did indeed belong:

> I had an overwhelming sense of belonging. I had been searching for something all my life but I didn't know what I was searching for until this moment and now it was so easy to identify. I needed to know that I was part of a family and I needed to know that I was part of a race. (p. 212)

Members of the Stolen Generations wrote about *dadirri* (without necessarily using this term) and how *dadirri* at first was foreign to them, but once they had practised it, they grew to understand how to wait and to be silent in order to see and to understand the mechanisms of society.

As mentioned earlier, because this research investigates everyday taken-for-granted knowledge – knowledge they did not need to question – my intellectual Elders found it difficult to discuss topics such as what it means to be Aboriginal and how they know this. Autobiographers from the Stolen Generations answered such questions with ease, because they had asked themselves these very questions many times over. They gave a very clear picture of how society operates. Many wrote that they doubted that they would ever feel like complete members of their family, as they were constantly conscious of the many years of yarning they had lost. They have been on journeys of the mind, body,

and spirit in order to find their Country, and their place in the world, and have had to learn as adults the complexity of the social structures from which they had been so cruelly taken.

Academic Literature

I have previously discussed the process I used to search for literature to locate the intellectual Elders I needed to yarn with. My literature review started with the traditional scholarly function of setting the scene for the research and identifying the gaps in the existing body of knowledge. I was initially under the impression that the academic literature was only a source for review to understand what had previously been published and if an Aboriginal social theory had been written or if one could be developed. It became apparent through a yarn with my new supervisors that the academic literature is itself a source of data. This literature was not only used as a location mechanism of key intellectual Elders and current thinking, but it also played a significant role as key data to draw upon. It holds essential understandings of Aboriginal society, knowledge, epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies. This literature comes from a plethora of academic disciplines, from sociology to law to psychology. It quickly became my third source of data and functions as both my primary and secondary sources, not only informing the research questions but also answering the questions.

Since picking this research back up after a hiatus, I conducted another literature search and found my research was still unique and had not yet been completed by our scholars. Our scholars' (Blair, 2015; Kerwin, 2011) have indeed written about our epistemologies and knowledges, but no one has attempted to start a dialogue of Aboriginal social theory written solely by Aboriginal thinkers for Aboriginal people.

My Story

My story is the past me, the present me, and the hopeful me. A truly cyclical thesis ground in Aboriginal methodologies cannot be written without my stories and my journey through academia, from studying to working, being weaved throughout the research. This is a living theory built through lived experience. I cannot write about a society I am a part of without inserting myself. As Moreton-Robinson (Moreton-Robinson, 2000) says, "In Indigenous cultural domains relationality means that one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self" (p.16). As Aboriginal people, we cannot find and explore our identity without being part of our collective consciousness (Graham, 1999). To tell any story in isolation is to deny the very essence of Aboriginal lore and, thus, social fabric.

As this thesis is my interpretation of all the data sources, it is customary to not only introduce oneself but also to build connectedness and relatedness to establish trust, reciprocity, and respect. By weaving my story and voice throughout the thesis, I am honouring and respecting the reader and the other three sources of data. I am transparently demonstrating how I have reached my conclusions and displaying the importance of all Aboriginal stories.

In analysing the data, I took guidance from Yunkaporta and Moodie (Yunkaporta & Moodie, 2021), who developed an Indigenous data analysis method. They have developed and adapted four principles, with the first being *connection*. This is where I had to locate myself within the data through my story and experience and define the relationships that were established. The second principle is *diversity* (Yunkaporta & Moodie, 2021). I have identified all the different stories that have been shared from all the different elements. I needed to look for the commonalities of the stories. Here, yarning was of the utmost importance as I had to yarn with my intellectual Elders to seek their knowledge of these commonalities. The third principle of *interaction* is where the process becomes cyclical, and "cultural metaphors" come into play (Yunkaporta & Moodie, 2021). Much of the discussions in my research used metaphors to explain our social structures and all sources of data constantly connected these structures to both the spiritual and physical worlds. The last principle used to analyse the data was *adaptation* (Yunkaporta & Moodie, 2021). Through this principle, the research was able to demonstrate that an Aboriginal social theory is absolutely in existence. This principle reinforced that the research is a living entity because our epistemology and ontology are alive and forever changing and have no time boundaries. Using these principles clearly articulated that data analysis is constantly happening during the whole process of the research; it is not limited to the "middle." Through my process, I found I was constantly analysing and shifting, as I have demonstrated throughout this chapter.

Conclusion

Lester-Irabinna Rigney (Rigney, 1999, 2006) provided the basis on which I developed my approach to this research. *Resistance*, as (Rigney, 2006) describes it, inspired me to break free from the sociological restraints on my research and embrace the methodologies that our society knew to exist. The notion of resistance provided a framework within which my intellectual Elders owned what they said and could be certain that their knowledge was not going to be misrepresented in this work. *Political integrity* (Rigney, 2006) guaranteed that my research was transparent at all times to my intellectual Elders and could not be used to their detriment. I also applied Rigney's (2006, p. 42) third principle of *giving privilege to Indigenous voices*. As is apparent, these voices are essential to my research. Without yarning with my intellectual Elders and without the autobiographies and life stories I have studied, this research could not have taken place. Rigney's (2006) third principle was also critical in my decision to use only those thinkers whom I found to be crucial in formulating social theory. Social theory must be researched, written, and informed by our people.

While Rigney (2006) influenced the ethics and politics of the research, the principles did not furnish the actual means to obtain the knowledge I needed to write this thesis. I took initial guidance in relation to my approach to attaining knowledge from Greg Lehman (2003). His description of yarning and concern with "the truth" helped to establish how I was going to approach and engage with my intellectual Elders. Moreton-Robinson (2006) advises those attempting to conduct research with our

people to make themselves, their family connections, and clan group known, and this is exactly how I approached my intellectual Elders.

From Karen Martin (2001), I learned that I should yarn with my intellectual Elders face-to-face. Martin (2001) demonstrates the importance of physical presence when knowledge is being generated and transmitted. The notion of physical presence was imperative to understanding the connectedness of ways of knowing, being, and doing. I could physically see through my yarning how our ontology, epistemology, and knowledge cannot be separated and discussed individually. They exist only in an interwoven fashion. I have also learnt that the English language provides barriers to articulating what exactly is meant by the notions of ontology and epistemology. It is far easier to use metaphors to convey the knowledge that leads to a deep understanding of our ontologies and epistemologies (Ford, 2005). Martin (2001) explains that knowledge must be received with the understanding that each piece of knowledge transmitted has a historical and social context and is never absolute.

Dadirri (Fejo-King, 2005; Ungenmerr, 2015) educated me not to be impatient in my knowledge-gathering and not to expect answers to be presented in a nice neat package, where all that is needed is to transcribe the yarns and place the knowledge into pre-designated categories. I learned to let the knowledge pass from my intellectual Elders, and from the autobiographies and the life stories, to myself and then to engage in contemplation to decipher the meaning of these knowledges before formulating my conclusions. The enlightenment of *dadirri* convinced me that waiting was crucial in my quest for knowledge, not just to wait for my intellectual Elders to speak, but to wait for the knowledge that was imparted to me to take shape and meaning.

Of course, *dadirri* could not have taken place without yarning and the concept of truth. To know the truth is to appreciate each individual's lived experience and thus acknowledge that we all have our own perceptions of the world. What was "true" to my intellectual Elders was often alien to those of the Stolen Generations before they made contact with their families and Countries. However, once their yarning lines were reconnected, the generation and transmission of knowledge became something they eagerly participated in. Yarning, as a method of knowledge generation and transmission, is now considered essential in their daily lives. Yarning allows information to flow freely where a listener does not have to listen "hard" in order to determine a logical absolute. It permits the listener to become absorbed in the story, become one with the story and interpret the story according to their own experiences. Both my intellectual Elders and the authors of the autobiographies and life stories clearly and firmly understand how knowledge is generated and transmitted. This led me to conclude that our core ontologies and epistemologies are very deep-seated. Knowledge has a history, a future, and a presence, all of which are deeply implicated in our ontologies and epistemologies, and this was revealed in the yarning process itself.

A strengths-based approach comes from a place of strength and belief in the relationships and social fabric of Aboriginal society (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2020). It is not a dichotomy between

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. A strengths-based approach has permitted me to honour, celebrate, and document the commonalities of Aboriginal knowledge transmission.

Yarning, *dadiri*, storytelling, Aboriginal narrative therapy principles, and a strengths-based approach represent Aboriginal social theory. They have all been developed independently; however, they are cyclical, and one cannot exist without all the elements of the others. These approaches only differ in the elements they prioritise (see table 3). The principles, when contemplated and embodied by myself, are one and the same as each other and the other elements I have used to construct this thesis. The goal of an Aboriginal social research methodology is to create a safe, brave space for Aboriginal people to discuss our collective consciousness, our connectedness, and relatedness, tell our stories, and celebrate our commonalties and social structures. When I decided to couple this with a strengths-based approach, it became apparent that this form of methodology was indeed the "new, old way.'

Table 3

Summary of Methodological Approach

Aboriginal Method/Methodology	**Focused Element**
Yarning	Creating a dialogue in which trust, connectedness, and respect have been established and where topics can be discussed in any order, for there is no middle and no end.
Dadirri	Inner deep listening and contemplation. The process of embodying knowledge.
Storytelling	Thematic and didactic. It has narrators and listeners.
Strengths-based approach	We are the experts in our society, and as a collective, we gain our identity.
Aboriginal narrative principles	Telling our stories to make us stronger, heal, and bring strength.

As can be seen, my methodology is cyclical, with the circle never ending. Yarning is not only a process whereby knowledge is created and passed around, but it also is a way in which it grows. The contemplative way of *dadirri* eventually gives way to a further embellishment of the yarn, and so on, to the next listener/learner/yarner. Knowledge, then, is always incomplete; it grows by accretion, eventually arriving back where it began, recognisable but different. This thesis has grown in a similar way. It is a continuous process. The knowledge in it had no starting point and no end. I have taken counsel from many different sources and have combined it in a manner that best fits with my own ontology and epistemology and that which was most comfortable and convenient for my intellectual Elders. The most successful part of my methodology, and what made this the hardest chapter to write, is that it is unstructured and open to change.

Chapter Three
Me: What a Ride

Locating the Research Within Myself

This chapter is written so the reader can have some background into how the research came about and why it has taken me some eighteen years from inception to completion. It is also an important source of data that informs my analysis in the latter chapters. It has been a wild, gruesome, and sometimes depressing ride. What needs to be said is that, at every moment during the past eighteen years, this research has sat on my back, weighing me down, scaring the bejeebers out of me, and causing enormous amounts of anxiety. If anyone asked, "When are you going to submit your PhD?', I would either swiftly change the subject or say, "I have zero interest in it now" and then walk away and cry in private. I am sure I am not alone in this endeavour, but I do feel it is necessary to have my story here. My thesis is genuinely a story, and I am part of this story, so I must lay bare my authentic narrative. I hope I am able to convey in words how passionate I am about this research and what it could mean to our future students.

I have conducted and written this research for the students who may be feeling like I did as a pathways, undergraduate, and postgraduate student who could not understand nor see themselves in the theories presented to them, and the academics who enter the academy and wonder why is this a constant battle to be seen and heard? This is extremely important as, at my commencement of this endeavour in 2006, numerous Aboriginal pioneers were fighting extremely hard to make space in academia for Aboriginal knowledges. Since then, numerous other Aboriginal scholars have had their PhDs conferred and gone on to continue to fight for this space and build inspiring careers. Nevertheless, we Aboriginal academics are still largely an afterthought, believed by most to belong in Aboriginal studies or streams of "Aboriginal" within disciplines. It is my desire for us to be a forethought and a mainstream.

As stated above, this thesis was started in 2006, and while (as explored in Chapter Two) it was not an easy task to be accepted to conduct the research, I started it with passion, fire, and love. I have gone through periods of "yes, I will submit it" to "nope, not gunna happen.' I am going to tell a snippet of my story. This has been written with a lot of hindsight, and while I have tried to go back and be present in these moments, I am not the same person that I was. I have had new and different experiences, I have been exposed to more knowledges, I have expanded my views and attitudes, and I am older.

Where My Academic Journey Began

University was not something that was in my sights growing up. I was of the understanding that when I finished school, my role in life was to get a full-time job immediately. I was told at fourteen and nine months that I had to get a part-time job and I did just that. I got a job at KFC, and for me, the natural progression after school was to accept the opportunity to be trained as a manager there. I did this, and this allowed me to move from my hometown to Sydney. I had made it. I was living and working

in the "big city." I then went for a full-time position in Wollongong and got it. I worked there for a few years as a manager because this is what people like me did. We got full-time jobs and stayed in them for life. One day, I stopped what I was doing and looked around and realised I was surrounded by fourteen-year-olds, and this was not the life I wanted. I did not want to end up with a fourteen-year-old mentality at forty. I was on good money for someone with no qualifications; however, I wanted something completely different. I did not want to work in a job just because I had to earn a living and pay my way.

I had always loved the movie *Silence of the Lambs* and loved the character, Agent Starling. As a teenager, I wanted to be a detective but was not willing to move to Goulburn for a year to study for this (which was mandatory to become a police officer in New South Wales) for it was too cold there, and I did not want to start at the bottom of the food chain and have to walk the beat for the first couple of years. I wanted to be a detective straight away (I was young). I decided to look into going to university to try and become Agent Starling without going to Goulburn. I was still living in Wollongong at the time, so I investigated enrolling as a mature-age student at the ripe old age of twenty-one years. No one in my family had been to university, so I had no one to talk to about it. I found an access to university course, and I researched if Abstudy would suffice as my income. I worked out very quickly that there was no way I could survive on Abstudy alone. I had to keep working. I had rent and bills to pay.

I found out the University of Wollongong did not offer criminology, and the closest I could do was a Bachelor of Arts majoring in psychology and sociology. I had no idea what sociology was but thought, "hey, let's roll with the punches." I did the thirteen-week intensive pathways course, which required me to study English, maths, physics, and chemistry. I hated the last three. I failed maths, but I did quite well in physics and chemistry, to my amazement. I was accepted into the Bachelor of Arts program and commenced my studies.

In my first sociology subject I failed as the final exam was worth 60%, and it was multiple choice, where each question had five or six options. This is not great for someone with ADHD and for someone who really had no idea what sociology was or how to study at university or do a multiple-choice test. It was also a requirement of my sociology subjects that each student had to present on one of the classical sociologists (all mainly European white men; I think we looked at one woman). Of course, I was assigned to present about Weber, and because I had no idea who he was, I pronounced his name incorrectly. The lecturer laughed at me, told me I was uncultured, and publicly corrected my pronunciation. I was absolutely mortified and nearly quit university there and then. I had no idea what was going on, and I could not relate their writings to my world. So, while sociology was a big scary place where I needed a dictionary just to know what words they were using, psychology was also a bitter disappointment where I found out I had to do statistics every year, sometimes twice a year. I had to learn the whole history of psychology. The fundamental theories, again, were written by European white men, and again, I could not relate much of it to my world.

The method of teaching in both disciplines was to stand and deliver a lecture where I was expected to listen and write down what they were saying at the same time. I was cognitively overloaded all the time and riddled with anxiety as I had total imposter syndrome. The tutorials each week were also designed in the same way as the sociology tutorials. Each student would give a presentation on the week's topic, and then questions would be asked. We were not taught how to do this or even how to make a PowerPoint. I used to vomit before the tutorials I was due to present. So, I would vomit at least twice a semester, every semester, for the first two years.

At the University of Wollongong, I found out early that sociology and psychology did not walk side-by-side. This truly baffled me. As I came to understand sociology, I could not understand how they were not best friends. You cannot have society without the individual, and you cannot have the individual without society. I was told that this was a very naive and uneducated opinion. I had to seek refuge somewhere, and it was most certainly NOT with my lecturers or tutors. I became part of a good group of people who were also all mature-age students. They were all far more intelligent than me and understood the university game and this whole notion of studying and rote learning. They helped me to try and understand our subjects and they understood that this university business was very strange to me. I had one extremely good friend who is still present in my life, and they are the sole reason I graduated and went on to complete my honours.

My sociology lecturers worked out fairly early on that I did not fit their definition of a university student and treated me appallingly, which I found astounding considering they all studied the disadvantaged. They were mostly white privileged men who taught mostly theories from other white men. Their privilege and behaviour also highlighted the hypocrisy they subscribed to, as they were all actively involved in research and theorising using Antonio Gramsci. They judged how I spoke and that it took me longer to understand what they were trying to teach me (a lot of this time I did not and just winged it). I remember asking one lecturer where Aboriginal views of the world were, and I was told if I wanted to learn "that stuff," I needed to do Aboriginal studies; they were teaching sociology. I then asked about referencing, and why everything needed to be referenced, and what if I had thought of something but had not read it somewhere. They told me that was ridiculous, that I was an undergrad, and of course, I had read it somewhere. I no longer asked questions.

In psychology, Aboriginal people or worldviews were also not mentioned or even acknowledged. You were not encouraged to ask questions, and if you were not passionate about experimental psychology, you really did not belong there either. The lecturers were just that: they stood and delivered lectures and did not take the tutorials – this was left up to PhD students. You were not allowed to email the lecturer or speak to them after lectures; you were only permitted to speak with your tutor.

The whole way through my studies, I had to work to earn money, and this was frowned upon; the attitude was that I was a student and nothing else. I always had the feeling that as an Aboriginal student, I should have been studying Aboriginal studies and not sociology and psychology. It was not

until my third year that I started to feel a little bit okay, not safe but okay, and my friend started to encourage me to study honours with her. I never thought I would get a degree, let alone an honours degree. I was working at the Aboriginal Medical Centre at the time and had applied for a job with NSW Health to be the harm minimisation officer for the state. I got the job but turned it down to pursue honours.

As I was working as a research consultant for a local Aboriginal corporation looking at traditional fishing practices on the South Coast of New South Wales, I decided to look at knowledge transmission. I was assigned an "old pale and male" anthropologist as my supervisor. He was the head of the Aboriginal centre, and it was deemed that no one else in the Faculty of Arts would have the expertise or knowledge to supervise an Aboriginal student who wanted to research Aboriginal society. Within the first month of my honours, I had worked out that this man was not the person for me. He wanted to dictate to me what I was going to research and what I was going to write about, and it was very anthropological (not my style). I told my coursework coordinator, and he told me to "get rid of him" in a very matter-of-fact way. I was astounded. How could I, as a little black chick, get rid of this professor? My coursework coordinator said he would love to supervise me, that I could do what I wanted, and that he would support me. He said we were aiming for first class honours because our next step was a PhD. I was gobsmacked; when did this little black chick become worthy of a PhD, and why did this lecturer even care about me? We then started talking about how people now know they are Aboriginal without traditional practices being passed down. From there, we started the conversation about where Aboriginal social theory is.

Once I started researching the literature, I quickly realised there was a substantial amount written about Aboriginal society and knowledge but not very much was written by us or even owned by us. To gather my data on traditional fishing practices on the South Coast, I decided to interview Elders in the community. The ethics process was horrendous as I refused to have our Elders sign consent forms due to the history behind Aboriginal people signing their rights away, their children away, and their knowledge away. I fought with the ethics committee, saying that it was an honour system and if the Elders wanted to participate, they would and if they did not, they would not. After a lot of back and forth with the ethics committee and support from my new supervisor, they finally approved my application. I completed my interviews, and then one Aunty came to me angry and distraught as she thought I was working with a certain anthropologist in the Aboriginal centre at the university, and she no longer gave permission for any of her or her husband's knowledge to be used. It was lucky I worked with her son and could go back to their house and explain I was not, but she insisted her knowledge be deleted. I then took her and her son to my house so they could delete the file off my computer and off my thumb drive themselves. I also let them look through my computer to make sure I did not have a backup file.

This was a terrifying experience, as the last thing I wanted to do was cause distress and anger. However, this experience was extremely valuable. I learnt through first-hand experience the trauma

academics have caused in our communities, the lack of respect our communities have been shown and that our voice or permission was not present in sociology or anthropology. Anthropology constantly stole from us and made illustrious careers from us, and we owned nothing of our knowledge and lived experiences. Sociology was highlighted to me as ever more absent, and if we were looked at by ourselves, we had to always come from a negative space to fight for our right to be in the academy. We came from raced identities, whiteness studies, feminism, history, education, law, health but NOT medicine and, of course, cultural awareness/safety.

The next drama in my honours endeavour was to find an internal and external marker. We chose the lecturer who would be the hardest on me and who had been horrendous to me the whole way through my degree and did not believe I could do an honours project. I demanded that the external marker was to be Aboriginal. We chose an Aboriginal academic I used throughout my thesis. I was awarded first class, and I was elated. I was also on the dean's merit list and the dean's first class honours list and then turned my sights to a PhD. I won an Arts Postgraduate Scholarship. What the hell had just happened in the space of a year? Amazing what can happen to a little black chick when someone empowers her and believes in her.

During the year I completed my honours, I also did a postgraduate diploma in Aboriginal narrative therapy. Narrative therapy, I found, was Aboriginal in nature as its fundamental principles are grounded in our ways of knowing through telling stories that transmit knowledges, acknowledge strength, and build the collective spirit. It also has room for trauma to be discussed and healed. It honours and privileges that there is more than one story. Not only are we a nation of different people with different stories, but we, as individuals, also have multiple stories. Through this study, I decided I wanted this PhD to emulate narrative therapy. My goal is to create a safe space for Aboriginal people to discuss our collective consciousness, our connectedness, and relatedness, tell our stories, and celebrate our commonalities and social structures.

In conjunction with my supervisor, I decided that I needed to start the conversation of an Aboriginal social theory. I refused to speak with community again due to my experience with my honour's thesis. I realised when talking with community that I was no better than the plethora of anthropologists who had gone before me. I took their knowledge and gave nothing back. My honours thesis was for me to gain a qualification and did absolutely nothing for the South Coast community. As has been previously stated I went about designing my PhD to be by, for and with Aboriginal people. Once again, the application process was not easy as the University of Wollongong did not think this was a PhD topic, even though I was going to be money for the university as an Aboriginal student.

Once I finally made it into the PhD program, the next hurdle was the confirmation: an assessment of my research proposal and whether it was progressing into a doctoral thesis. This had to be completed after my first six months of enrolment. I presented what I had completed and where I was going. Once again, this was not good enough, and it was seen as not worthy of a PhD by the sociologists in the room. Prior to the confirmation, my supervisor said we should "stack" the room with people who

supported me, so my secondary supervisor at the time, who was Aboriginal, gathered the troops. For once at the university, a room was predominately populated with "blackfullas." Once I had presented and left the room, a heated debate erupted; I am not privy to all the details, but what I do know is that it was not pretty, and the sociologists were forced to back down and grant my confirmation. This did not really leave me feeling confident, and it reinforced the fact that I was indeed an intruder. My supervisor said, "Fuck em Jaimee, they are so blinded by their white privilege they cannot allow any other possible knowledge systems into the academy." This helped a little, but the trauma and insecurity that my ideas were not worthy have always remained with me.

I continued to write my ethics application and that was where the next hurdle came. The University of Wollongong ethics committee did not grant me approval, as it was seen as me "swanning" around the country gossiping with other Aboriginal academics. If this did not explain why there was a need for Aboriginal social theory, I do not know what would. I suspected that they did not have the capacity to understand that Aboriginal people are not just a group of people to be studied (as has been discussed in Chapter Two). It really was not an inclusive space back then.

I had to work during my PhD, so I picked up tutoring. I was only given teaching in Aboriginal studies subjects to start with as I had a better rapport with these lecturers than I did with the sociology lectures. They only hired the non-Aboriginal PhD students. In the second semester, I tutored Aboriginal studies and the sociology of nursing. I also worked as a research assistant for numerous people. While tutoring, I realised I loved teaching, and I also realised I loved designing the tutorials.

My supervisor warned me when I started my PhD that I would get snapped up as a lecturer and then overloaded with teaching, and I said, "Don't be silly; this won't happen." How on earth could I even be considered to be a lecturer? It did happen in my second year, and I moved to Darwin to be an academic. I needed money to survive, and this was an opportunity I could not refuse. I was also so proud that I could be considered to do this. I packed up and moved to Darwin. I remember being in Darwin and asking a colleague to read my methodology as I found it extremely hard to write. She did, and she said it was terrible and not written in a scholarly manner, and it would never get through. I stopped working on it after this, around 2008. This was probably my most devastating blow.

While I let my PhD slip, I learnt an incredible amount about academia and saw just how non-existent we were in terms of everyday policies, processes, and thinking. I also had some great experiences and some fabulous mentors who, to this day, I am eternally grateful for. After a few years, my supervisor told me to come to Wollongong over the summer to get the PhD done and submitted, as he had retired. I went down, and I got the bulk of it written and promised to do the rest. I had to leave as there were massive dramas at home. I did not do the rest, and then I was given a new supervisor who I never liked and who did not believe in me or my research. They demanded I add in all the Western hegemonic theorists I had fought not to have. So, I just disengaged and ran away in around 2014. I also left Aboriginal academia and went mainstream in 2017.

Through work, I reconnected with one of my participants and they said I should transfer to their university and complete the research and submit it under them. I enrolled there. They read what I had written and said it was good but not great. It needed me to contest the white theorists. I agreed because I did not want to disrespect them. However, I did not really agree and could not bring myself to do the work my supervisor wanted of me. This was the last interaction we ever had, and alas, I did not submit there either. I resigned myself that the 42,000-odd words I had written for this research would never see the light of day. I felt like I had done as an undergraduate: an outsider, not worthy.

Through my work as an academic, I have experienced so much trauma from the academy. I have been patted on the head (not metaphorically) and told, "It is okay; we know you do not understand." I have written great subjects, and when they were succeeding, I had them taken off me and given to a more suitable white woman. My knowledge and experiences are constantly dismissed by white men and women because I do not fit what they deem as an acceptable academic. I was bullied extensively by academics, and I had to walk away as the university supported those bullies in higher positions, despite the evidence. When I look back on my experience in Darwin and South Australia, I realise that I was truly a sociologist, pointing out how Western theories and practices were based on Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing.

My previous role working as an educational designer in a division that did not understand what Aboriginal knowledge is and how it can contribute significantly to the institution, along with being the only Aboriginal employee, nearly broke my faith in higher education. I was constantly disregarded and ignored because I did not fit into the academic basket they deemed appropriate. My ideas were either shut down and scoffed at or given to a non-Aboriginal team member who was deemed far better placed within the Western academic paradigm. I was considered appropriate to work on tiny sections of big projects that needed an Aboriginal voice. In one particular project, I refused to be the token person, and they were forced to ask non-Aboriginal staff members to do it. I instructed them that I was sick and tired of taking on "Aboriginal" projects that I put my heart and soul into, for it to just be shelved. They were shocked and appalled. I had to explain that these projects were not just work to me; they were deeply emotional, spiritual, cultural, and psychological, and I could not keep getting excited that something good would happen for Aboriginal students only to be told near completion of the project it was being shelved as the political landscape of the university had changed and this was no longer needed (even though it clearly was).

Another example of why an Aboriginal social theory is needed can be seen when I was contacted by my then-manager to discuss the new teaching standards at my institution. I was elated as I thought that after three years of working there, they were finally valuing what I had to offer. Once again, I should have reverted to what I know, as when the discussion took place, I quickly found out they only wanted me to have a "chat" with the non-Indigenous person writing the new standards about Indigenous knowledge. When I spoke with the non-Indigenous person on the project, they were shocked and appalled and said this was in no shape or form how they conveyed the conversation. We ended up

talking about how disgusting it was that I was "tokenised" all the time by the division and only acknowledged when my cultural heritage suited. We have since worked together on a few projects and presented at a conference. They were a critical friend for this research.

It was interesting to note that outside of my division, I had many people at all levels who valued my knowledge and experience and worked hard to get me into a space where I have been acknowledged and celebrated. I have around me, both professionally and personally, people who empower, inspire, and mentor me for me and not for my heritage, and this is something so deeply alien to me. They also see the value in this research and how it is deeply needed within the academy. I was asked to be in a working group advising on trailing a version of Hyflex learning. It is here that I met my current supervisors. I was on a Zoom call with one of my current supervisors, and she said both of my current supervisors had had a discussion the afternoon before, and she had volunteered to ask to read the thesis I had as of July 2023. I froze. I cannot remember if I cried or what happened. I just remember the absolute terror I felt. I had just met and was working with these two associate professors. I thought if they read this, they would know without a doubt that I just bluffed my way through this university life. I took some days and thought, "If you do not jump, you do not know if you will hurt yourself." After all, I could just quit the working group and never speak to them again. So, I sent it to them. They both emailed me back, saying they "really enjoyed reading it." They both offered to supervise me and have been just as supportive as my initial supervisor. I enrolled at James Cook University (ironically, where Karen Martin also was awarded her PhD). I have spent from October 2023 until the middle of 2024 updating the thesis and jumping the necessary hurdles to get to submission.

After completing so much work on this research, living in the world as an Aboriginal academic, transitioning through life, reading different sociological theories and pedagogies, and changing where my passion lies, one thing has become screamingly obvious: many of these theories are just Western notions of Aboriginal social theory. I have applied ways of knowing, being, and doing to so much of my work. I reframed them as a pedagogical framework and used them to help redesign the Bachelor of Engineering at the University of Adelaide. I have designed subjects using this framework, and I have designed a weekly learning sequence for the learning management system using them. I have successfully used them as a framework for "Preparatory Chemistry," and I have rewritten a pathways subject using my research called "Learning in a Digital Environment" where my students learn computational thinking, then how to couple this with human attributes, and finally how to apply this in their academic and professional life. I have a consultancy where I am applying my research to develop a framework for cultural intelligence and inclusive spaces to run workshops for external partners. I am also turning this framework into a subject to be offered in the pathways program, and I am working on having this framework as a major within the Bachelor of Early Childhood. I have encouraged non-Aboriginal people to use yarning as a pedagogical framework. I applied ways of knowing, being, and doing to "engineering habits of mind" as it was so glaringly obvious how they came out of ways of knowing, being, and doing.

In both my identified and my mainstream roles, I have remained true to myself and ways of knowing, being, and doing. They have been the backbone of everything I have created. I have also shifted passions, and I am now deeply passionate about universal design for learning, which is an inclusive and accessible learning experience for all learners. I would like to explore how this could be researched and applied using an Aboriginal lens, the development of pedagogical practice which is rooted in ways of knowing, being, and doing and coupled with universal design for learning. The point I am trying to make here is that Aboriginal social theory is present and all-encompassing. When I break down numerous theories, all I can see are ways of knowing, being, and doing. I have presented this numerous times. Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing can be seen and applied to so many facets of the academy.

Chapter Four

Ways of Being: The Maternal Spirit, Connection, and Reading Country

> The voices that come from the deserts and forests are not simply the spirits of the trees, but those of Aboriginal ancestors. These beings still talk and sing to Aboriginal people from their location in the environment. The voice is a primal thing that is silent and scarcely obvious, except to Aboriginal people for whom the voice is known as "country." The voice is humble and enduring of the original spirits of Australia. Aboriginal people inherited the country from the ancestors who pioneered the landscape. The voice is as old as the continent of Australia and was created before Aboriginal people took their human form. The spirits used the natural environment to seek out food and create paths to waterholes and soaks (which became their drinking places) and to meeting places by known tracks. (Kerwin, 2011, p. 252)

Country was the most yarned about topic when I spoke to my intellectual Elders, and it was a constant among the autobiographies, the life stories I studied, and the academic literature. For people, myself included, it is the place where we gain our strength, knowledge, stories, and spirituality. Simply put, it is "us.'

In Western thinking, a Country is thought to be a territory that a governing body and its people have sovereignty over, that is a piece of land that has set boundaries within which people live. Usually, its people share a language and hold common values, and a social structure is in place within which laws exist to ensure that the inhabitants can exist in relative harmony. In times of war, people may be called upon to defend their country, and they also represent it in global meetings, conferences, and competitions. Pieces of the country can be individually owned, bought, and sold. A country can be a source of economic wealth, as its mineral and material resources can be extracted to enable its productivity to be measured and its goods to be exchanged on global and domestic markets.

The Aboriginal understanding of Country is far more complex than this simple definition. As Kwaymullina (2008) explains:

> This continent, named Australia by Captain Matthew Flinders early in the nineteenth century, is a land of many countries – and for every country, there is a people. (p. 7)

Neale (2022) expands our knowledge and understanding of Country:

> In Aboriginal thinking, Country is not just land, it is a worldview. It is more than land as expressed in Western view of land as landscape. It is much about the visible as it is about the invisible, the animate as the inanimate, whether it be a grain of sand, a rock, a bee, or a human. (p. 1)

Milroy and Milroy (2008) caution that "We should not mistake "nation" for Country. Nations come and go, but Country is forever. The land speaks true; there are no lies in country" (p. 42). Cumulatively, the three quotes from Kwaymullina (2008), Nearle (Neale), and Milroy and Milroy (2008) demonstrate that the deity of Country is the absolute core of our collective spirit. It derives our connectedness and relatedness and provides us with a platform to start to understand and explore what Aboriginal social theory should be built from.

Moreton-Robinson (2003) points out that before the invasion, our people belonged to over 500 language groups and 200 Countries contained within the continent. Those Countries still exist today; however, their sovereignty has been forcibly removed in most cases, but never conceded in any case. We all belong to a specific Country, sometimes to several Countries depending on our genealogy, and before the invasion, most of our ancestors lived on their Country, shared a common language that was representative of the people and the Country, and held common values inherent in their collective spirit taught by the Elders through stories. There was a social structure that everyone knew and lived by, protected by laws. People sometimes defended their Country in times of conflict or represented it in celebrations and trading with neighbouring Countries.

Country means far more than a piece of land that can be used for economic gain, bought and sold, sowed and harvested, dug up and exported. No piece of a Country can be owned by any one person; it is maintained by a group of people who are its custodians. Cruse (2022) elucidates why we cannot own Country:

> Our rights and connections to land are different to white people's notions of land ownership in Australia. We can't claim to own land; because we are part of the land, children of our respective Countries. Because of this, we have a familial relationship with the land's natural features, vegetation, and animals.

Quite simply put Country is nurtured and respected and is considered the Mother (Moreton-Robinson, 2003).

What is missing from the European conceptions of country are the crucial concepts of connectedness and relatedness (Arbon, yarn, September 2007). Karen Martin (2001) argues that how we relate to Country, to ourselves, and to others is intricately linked to our ways of being. She says that our ways of being are a reflection of how we behave within Country. With this in mind, I have taken her (Martin, 2001) argument and built upon it in the light of what I found when yarning with intellectual Elders, studying autobiographies and life stories, and analysing academic literature, and my own lived experiences. I have found that our ways of being are determined by our connectedness and relatedness to the entity known as Countries (land, skies, waterways).

As will be discussed in Chapter Six, Country is a living entity that people depend on for survival, and the Country depends on the people to nurture it both physically and spiritually:

> Country is the source of all creation, all beauty, all wisdom. It sustains us, nourishes us, guides us. It gives us life, and teaches us how to live so that life

> – in all its shapes – will always go on. Country is our joy, our love, our hope.
> (Kwaymullina, 2008, p. 10)

We had and have a deep connection to Country that was formed millennia ago, when there were sovereign custodians of the land, and people had very specific tasks they had to perform for the well-being of the land, the people, and the spirits. De Napoli (Noon & De Napoli, 2022) reminds us to not only look down and around for Country but indeed to look up: "[T]he sky is an ocean of knowledge that reflects our experience on the ground. What is found in the sky is reflected here on Earth" (p. 22).

Country is about the heart and the soul, where one can see the stories of the ancestors and feel the emotions that go along with these stories. It is the embodiment of what people are taught, how to survive physically, socially, and spiritually. Country is where knowledge can be seen if one has the knowledge to see it, and as Kerwin (Kerwin, 2011) so eloquently reminds us, "The ancestral spirits are wise and through their work and through infinite time they sculptured the landscape and taught how the country should be read" (p. 252).

The four key themes that emerge from these knowledge sources, which form the basis of this chapter, are:

1. Country as the maternal spirit
2. Connection to Country
3. Reading Country
4. The social significance of Country

This chapter demonstrates how these recurring motifs are interwoven into our collective spirit, and I illustrate how Country connects us to the past, present, and future and, thus, is elemental to our ways of being, doing, knowing, and seeing. I also suggest that we have a new way of reading Country that has enabled us to rise and succeed even in European society.

Country as the Maternal Spirit

Country is the word most commonly used to identify where on the continent people are from (as discussed in Chapter Five: Ways of Doing). It also describes people's connectedness to the land. Moreton-Robinson (2003) contends that this connectedness is an ontological relationship (further discussed in Chapter Six: Ways of Knowing), with Country as Mother, or Mother Earth. Naming Country in this manner shows very deep respect and love. Country is the provider of life and nourishment, which we depend on to ensure our continued survival. As Dennis Foley (2003) argues when explaining the physical world:

> The physical world is the base that is the land, the creation. The land is the Mother, and we are of the land. We do not own the land, the land owns us. The land is our food, our culture, our spirit and our identity. (p. 46)

Our survival is not just physical where we depend on Country or Mother Earth to provide food, water, and shelter. As Foley (2003) notes, we also depend on Mother Earth to nourish us spiritually and to

hold the stories and knowledge of those who went before us. Martin (yarn, September 2007) says that the Mother is the core of her being. She understood that the Mother would provide for her as long as the relationship between her and her Country was one of reciprocity, where there was deep respect and a commitment that she and her Country would not be separated. The Mother is the provider of the lore (Martin, yarn, September 2007) and "the land is full of stories, and we are born from our Mother the land, into these stories" (Milroy & Milroy, 2008, p. 24).

Cruse (2022) reminds us that the relationship with the Mother is not one-directional, where we reap all of the benefits. It is cyclical. We not only take our guidance and lore from the Mother, but we must give back to the Mother. The Mother needs us to be able to practice our cultural rituals within our Country to nourish and replenish her. She needs us to restore harmony and peace within the land, skies, and waterways. The taking of the Stolen Generations causes the Mother deep, deep sadness as she lost (and still does[2]) many of her children for a period of time. This loss for our Mother, caused a difficult situation for her to maintain lore, order, and stability amongst her children, her custodians. By returning to the Mother, we are not only strengthening ourselves as a people, we are also healing the Mother and allowing her to restore her cultural obligations to us.

The Mother is our teacher, and we are her children, eager to learn the way of our people, our lore, traditions, stories, and practices. Our Mother has taught us; we learn through *dadirri*, yarning, and storytelling (explained in chapters Three and Six), and we do this in an experiential way. Blair (2015) demonstrates this through her research where she went out on Country to be with the Mother in order to:

> go beyond the yarns to visits to Country. They embody the experiential learning necessary for such a journey. In each community and Country visited, my Colleagues took me out to Country to yarn, to see places, to sit in Country and reflect, to actually do things. (p. 69)

Martin (yarn, September 2007) explained while we were sitting on Turrbal Country on the bank of the Brisbane River that she takes guidance from the Mother by observing the weather patterns and the tidal changes. This, she said, helps her to make the correct decisions in her life. By taking the time to connect with Country and observe how the Mother navigates around obstacles put in her path since the invasion, such as farming and mining, Martin says she is able to take inspiration from the Mother in how to circumnavigate difficulties that she encounters.

According to Neidjie (1985), Country (whether he is speaking about his direct Country or the continent in which he lives) is the Mother as we are born onto the land, and we gain our spirit and stories from it. Country nourishes and provides for us while we are alive, and when we die, we are returned to

[22] SNAICC in their "Family Matters Report 2023' found we have 23, 328 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care. Our children are 10.5 times more likely to be in out-of-home care. Our children in out-of-home care constitute 42.8% of the total percentage of all children in out-of-home, yet our children only make up 5.98% of all children in Australia.

Country to be buried and absorbed back into the spirit world. We come from the land, and we return to it in a cyclical process. This is how we gain our spirituality because we come from the spirits when the time is right to be born, and we are returned to the spirit world when our time is done. This helps to strengthen our collective spirit and our being, as there is no doubt about life after death.

We know where we are going after death, as those who went before us are a part of us. We are living testament of our ancestors. Vilma Webb (2003) demonstrates this through the telling of her father's passing:

> We believe that when people are going to be recreated they come back as something of the earth. The earth is our Mother and we always come back to her, look after her, not abuse her in any way, because we'll always go back to her. And she'll look after him now that he has travelled onto the next life and will come back as a person, a bird or an animal, a kangaroo or even a tree, anything that's got to do with the earth which is the Mother. When you're born, you're part of your Mother; you don't fight against that. (pp. 67–68)

The senior Elder women of Coober Pedy (2003) think similarly, saying that we are on this earth physically for a very short period of time, during which it is our responsibility to care for Country and to tell the stories and to relate the lore which are contained within it. They also say that it is our responsibility to fight for the well-being of our Country. Similarly, Irene Watson (2008) says that we must draw strength from the Mother in order to fight for her:

> If not for the strength we gain from the land, it would be difficult to continue to care for it… If not for the strength gained from the land as sovereign peoples, we might surrender and walk away. But country calls us to act. (p. 88)

Once our physical time on Country is finished, we are once again returned to the spirit world to become one with the Mother again and provide strength to the next generation. Moreton-Robinson (2003) explains our connection to Country as the Mother is metaphysical and deeply rooted within the realm of spirituality:

> As the descendants and the reincarnation of these ancestral beings, Indigenous people derive their sense of belonging to country through and from them. (p. 32)

As a result of this connection, Country is not considered inanimate; it has a pulse, it breathes, and it nurtures. This is another reason it is called Mother Earth. It feels joy, and it feels pain, and it is the vehicle for spirituality. Bessarab's (2008) Uncle, an Elder, illustrates how Mother Earth is connected to us through stories that the ancestral spirits have left behind for us. Land is the source of spirituality and informs our being:

> Aboriginal women and men throughout Australia have similar philosophies. Land is not considered inanimate; it is seen to have feelings. Within the land

> there are messages and stories that have their foundation in the Dreaming, and through spirit beings these messages were left in the landscape to be relayed to us through stories that instil a strong belief in spirituality. (Bessarb, 2008, p. 48)

Langton (2023) reminds us of how this is acquired:

> Elders say that if you sit quietly in the places our ancestors" left traces of their lives, on middens where they ate seafood in the sand dunes, or in rock caves where they left their paintings, you can hear them and feel their presence. This sense of being connected to deep history is at the core of our being. (p. 22)

The spirits provide stories that may be about the pain that the Mother has felt and may be seen through the dried-up rivers and creeks, stories about the joys that may be seen in the flourishing landscapes and the continuing rejuvenation of the flora and fauna. However, one would never be able to know this unless the knowledge of how to read Country has been imparted (as discussed below).

As Country is deeply respected as the Mother, I must reiterate Milroy and Milroy's (2008) caution for people: "We should not mistake "nation" for country. Nations come and go, but country is forever. The land speaks true; there are no lies in country" (p. 42). When using the word Country, we are expressing that we understand that the land mass, skies, and waterways we inhabit are alive and provide for us: "The world is alive. This is essential unchanging nature of the universe. This is the reality of life for Indigenous people" (Morgan, 2008, p. 270).

In my yarn with Lehman (September 2007), he stated that this unchanging notion that the world is alive is what informs his spirit. He looks out the window and knowing that all things on the land and in the skies and waterways are alive and are connected to the same Mother, with every one of them having a role to play, gives him a sense of connectedness and relatedness. He knows that he is part of a higher being. By sharing the Country with flora, fauna, landscapes, waterways, skyscapes, climate, and the spirits, Lehman (yarn, September 2007) knows that Country, as the maternal spirit, is informing him that he is a part of the web of life and that he can continue this web by telling the stories that are contained within Country. Adding his own knowledge and lived experience to express and build upon these stories binds him to the collective spirit and it to him.

Similarly, West (2000) argues that people's relationship to Country is of a reciprocal nature. It is the same as the relationship between any parent and child, where the child relies upon the parent for physical, emotional, and spiritual development. He also recognises that this relationship includes society itself:

> … our parent relationship with Mother Earth enables us to negotiate, use and maintain the land and to build and/or rebuild the social structures needed for us to function effectively. (West, 2000, p. 139)

Here, West (2000) is also encompassing the lore of the land and people. As with a parent/child relationship, there must be laws put in place so that society and the Mother can function in relative

harmony. Everett (2003) considers that the parental relationship that dictates the lore is about being a responsible "citizen" of Mother Earth:

> Being responsible citizens of Earth Mother means we have to be responsible to the other citizens of Earth Mother. This means the possums, kangaroos, the bird, the fish; we look after their environment, and they look after us. If you don't show due respect to the water, the water gets sick; your Sister Water is then no good to you or anything else. You formed a responsibility to your Sister Water, that fellow citizen that you should be showing respect to, not to see yourself as superior to her. (pp. 58–59)

Everett (2003) and West (2000) both reiterate that people are not "higher" beings than Country. We are a mere element in the circle of life, a child in a large family that has responsibilities, obligations, reciprocity, and respect.

Graham (1999) explains that as Aboriginal people, our first relationship in our lifecycle is to the land. This is where we learn how to be a member of our social fabric. How we nurture and treat our first relationship is a direct reflection of how our society functions. She states,

> The land, and how we treat it determines our human-ness. Because land is sacred and must be looked after, the relation between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations. Therefore all meaning comes from the land. (Graham, 1999, pp. 181–182)

Graham (1999) has provided the fundamental element of where our social theory must be built. She has told us that our relationship and behaviours with Country are a direct representation of how we order ourselves. She explains that just as the land, skies, waterways, and all that live on and in it are not alone, all living entities do not and cannot exist without forming some type of relationship. The Mother provided us with a kinship system that encompasses not only humans but all the entities (this will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five). Graham (1999) explains how the Mother gave us our kinships and responsibilities to her and to ourselves:

> The Creator Beings helped these proto-humans to become fully human, teaching them the Laws of custodianship of land, the Laws of kinship, of marriage, of correct ceremonies – they gave them every kind of knowledge they needed to look after the land and to have a stable society. (p. 182)

As mentioned above, each of the 200 hundred different Countries in the continent has a people who are its caretakers. The boundaries of these Countries were set in place by the Mother and contained within these boundaries is some of the lore of the land (Everett, 2003). According to Everett (2003):

> lore[3] is the Rules of the land, the life on that land. That might not only be animal life, that may be the trees, plants, water and so forth. So these things

[3] When I refer to Lore this is the meaning I am attributing to it.

> have particular behaviours and those behaviours are meaningful because they have been set by the ecology of this planet, and people who connect with that fit into the Lore of the Land those behaviours. (pp. 59–60; see also Martin 2001, p. 4).

People do not fight over what Country the Mother chose for them to be born onto. The Mother created the boundaries in the land through mountains, rivers, creeks, rocks, and many other distinguishable landmarks. Each group of people know their boundaries, and the lore was put in place by the Mother to prevent people from neglecting their responsibilities and obligations to each other and to the land. Each group of people was chosen by the Mother for their Country because they were products of certain Dreaming tracks, and their ancestors were contained within the land. These people are responsible for caring for those Dreaming tracks and ancestors.

Because of this connectedness and relatedness to the Mother, the lore states that people cannot cross over their Country's boundaries and enter another Country without permission. People had to go to the boundary and wait for permission to enter (Everett, 2003). They had to state what their intended business was whilst in the other Country. If their business was deemed appropriate, permission would be granted; however, this permission was not ongoing. If they did not follow the decision, they were susceptible to punishment in accordance with the Mother's lore. Thus, today visitors to some of our Countries must obtain a permit from the relevant Land Council and must state the nature of their business whilst on that land (Northern Land Council, 2024). They must wait for permission to be granted, and if the people of that Country do not think the business is appropriate, they will not be granted permission. If they enter the Country without permission, they are susceptible to incur large financial penalties (Northern Land Council, 2024). This practice also applies to sacred grounds, which are located all over the continent. One cannot enter a sacred site without permission, and this is rarely granted. If the sites are known to the general public, fences will be erected around them to stop unauthorised people from entering and disrespecting the Mother.

As the Mother has set the lore in place millennia ago, people have had to adapt it so they can still respect the Mother. They had to confront and deal with the invasion and its repercussions. Land was stolen from us, and people were removed from their Countries and placed in foreign Countries to live and work (Crabbe, 2007; Moreton-Robinson, 2003). Today, those of us who do not live in our own Country or who move from Country to Country have developed ways of showing our deep respect for the Mother so that we can remain true to the collective spirit. These adaptations include identifying oneself to the people of that Country, seeking out the local cultural centre, introducing oneself to the Elders of that Country and explaining one's intentions to them, and respecting the lore contained within the new Country, such as avoiding places that are not to be visited. Many of us seek permission from the ancestors of the Country we are about to enter. We silently ask permission to enter the Country. We tell the ancestors who we are and who our family are, and we explain our intentions for being on that particular Country.

I, for one, have experienced feelings of uneasiness being on a certain Country, and I have felt in my core that this is not a place for me, and I have left. As soon as I stepped out of that Country, the feelings instantly disappeared. One particular time, I went to some hot springs. I felt uneasy being there, and as soon as my feet hit the water, I knew this was not a place for me. I later found out it was a men's place. The ancestors were telling me to leave. This is the deep connectedness and relatedness we have to Mother, which cannot be quantified in academic/scientific terms but can be explained through an Aboriginal lens – an Aboriginal social theory, if you will.

Our Countries are also inhabited by non-Aboriginal people. These people live and work on our Countries; often, they clear and build upon them without the permission of the custodians. Because of their lack of connectedness and relatedness to Country, we have adapted the Mother's lore and try to make them pay respect to the Country they are on. This is done by means of the Welcome to Country (also discussed in Chapter Five). This ceremony, which is performed at official gatherings, the opening of events, in schools, at universities, in government offices, and in parliaments, is an acknowledgement that Aboriginal people are the true custodians of the land and a recognition of the people currently on it. Jude Barlow (2024), a Ngunnawal Elder from the ancestor lands of the Canberra region (my own Country), explains the importance of the Welcome to Country:

> Being welcomed to Country means that you are talking to your spiritual ancestors and you're saying just let this person come through. We trust that they're not going to do any harm on this Country and so do not harm them. So for me the significance of being welcomed to Country is about ensuring your spiritual safety because my ancestors and I understand many other ancestors of First Nations people are still present on Country as they are still with us. They're in the animals, they're in the trees.

Even though this may not be what the Mother's lore had intended, it is an adaption that enables the custodians to be recognised and demonstrates that for us to be, we must acknowledge the Country and, indeed, acknowledge the Mother.

To sum up this section on how fundamental the Mother is to us as a people and how deeply rooted in our being the Mother is, I quote a poem from Nola Gregory (Community first development, 2022):

> Mother Earth
> I belong to this land
> It runs through my veins
> It's the earth in my bones
> It's the dry dusty plains
> It's the whispering wind
> As she blows through the sand
> It's the sparkling salt water

That trickles through my hands
It's the feeling I get
When I return to my place
It's deep down inside me
It's my Mother Earth space.
I belong to this Country
I've walked in her dust
I have weathered her storms
I have learned from her past
It is respect for my Mother
It meanders through my mind
It clings to my spirit
To my soul it does bind
It's that feeling I get
When I walk in this place
It's deep down inside me
It's my Mother Earth space.

Connection

Gregory's (Community first development, 2022) discussion of "that feeling I get/When I walk in this place/It's deep inside me" connects with the next theme of our ways of being, which is how we express and feel our connection to Country. Long before the invasion, our people understood that their survival was dependent on not destroying the environment that sustains them; this is the connection we have (Foley, 1988). Kev Carmody (yarn, February 2007) agrees, expressing his deep connection with Country when he spoke of the reciprocal nature of his relationship with it. His statement is quite simple, yet it is packed with meaning: "You look after Country and Country will look after you." He has a connection and relatedness and understands the reciprocity of his being. He linked his connection to Country, with his family's understanding of the vital significance of sharing (as discussed in Chapter Five). His family and his people knew that if they respected the land by not consuming more food and water than they needed. By knowing when to take and when not to, the Country would reward them continuously. They were also aware that they needed to care for Country by reducing waste and not contaminating it so that life could continue to flourish. He said if food and water were taken, it was shared evenly among his neighbours, whether or not they were Aboriginal. This ensured both people and Country would survive, for his family was able to keep the collective spirit of Country and sharing alive. Carmody's story exemplifies how connections to Country and people cannot be separated.

Kwaymullina (2008) explains further that "The world the ancestors made is one in which all life is joined in a web of relationships, a web that exists both within and outside us" (p. 10). Noon (Noon & De Napoli, 2022) reiterates this vital component of our ways of being through her detailed understanding of connectedness:

> The threads that piece each and every single thing in our universe, from people and animals to every grain of soil, every drop of water in our river systems and every star in the sky, are infinite in number. Our initial thread has revealed a network, much like a spider's web, that quickly becomes a complex woven blanket extending into all of time and space. (p. 45)

Arbon (yarn, September 2007) argues that this connectedness to Country gives us our very identity, saying our "connectedness to Country our relatedness, that is our gem." She says that as an *Arbana* woman, her essence is shaped by Country. It gives her strength and relatedness and provides her with knowledge that she is part of the collective spirit. Thus, Country exists both inside and outside her (Kwaymullina, 2008). Every one of us has a connection to Country as we are the oldest living culture. The connection that we have can be traced through genealogy. The invasion only happened less than three hundred years ago, and before invasion, we all had ancestors who were living and taking care of Country. As Arbon (yarn, September 2007) states,

> [W]e know as Aboriginal people that there is some Country we connect with very strongly and there are other Countries where the connection is not so strong. There is Country that we must care for and there is Country that we must work for.

Martin (yarn, September 2007) agrees, saying that she was always accountable for her actions no matter what Country she was visiting. She understood that she must work for those Countries even where the Country did not know her. She explained that as an Aboriginal woman, she had responsibilities in all Countries, and she took her responsibilities for her connection to Country very seriously. She was all too aware of the consequences of not fulfilling them. Martin (2008) maintains that "For Aboriginal *People,* being in someone's else's Country is akin to visiting them in their homes and requires the same level of respect" (p. 127).

Martin (yarn, September 2007) explained that no matter where on the globe she was, she always took a moment to let the ancestors who went before her know that she was just visiting their Country and meant it no ill fortune. She told me a story of how, when she was driving through a foreign Country in North Queensland, she did not talk to the spirits to let them know she was there. As a result, she said, the car became bogged, and it was not until she had spoken to the spirits of that particular Country and had introduced herself properly that the car became free, and she could continue her travels. She reconnected with the Mother and let them know where she was and what her intentions were. Connecting with the Mother grounds us and reminds us that we are part of a deep web of interconnected and interdependent relationships. Martin (yarn, September 2007), in her story, demonstrates how deep

the relationship runs. When we get so caught up in day-to-day living and forget to honour and acknowledge the Mother, we may run into misfortune. Our connection gives us meaning and a sense of self.

Lehman (yarn, September 2007) also considers that his connection to Country is what makes him who he is:

> [T]he land for me as an Aboriginal person, is what makes me Aboriginal. It is the knowledge that I know where I come from and I'm really lucky too, because I still live on the land that thousands of generations of my family have lived on, that's what being Aboriginal boils down too. Strip away all the cultural constructs and the flags and the this and the that, it's really about family and land.

People often call the process of tracing their family history or trying to reunite with their family – who were lost or disconnected as a result of forced removal – "going home" (Edwards, 1990). Stepping back onto Country allows them to see the place where they know their ancestors are still present, where the family members they did not know lived and breathed, and in some cases still do. Edwards (1990) expresses how it feels to be going back home and reconnecting with Country and family:

> I want to say that I feel I'm regaining my Aboriginality. To me at the moment it means that I know where I'm from, I know who my people are, I'm starting to know who all my relations are, I'm starting to know them as my aunts and uncles and my cousins and my grandfather. I'm learning very slowly the history of the area that I'm from, and it is a sense of belonging, and unless you've felt that you don't belong, its really hard to explain how important it is and how precious it is knowing where I'm from. (p. 16)

Joan Winch (2008) agrees, and she explains:

> Knowing what my connections are to my mother's and father's peoples gives me a strong sense of place and a feeling of deep belonging. Connections like these are very important to Aboriginal people because they tell us who we are and influence the way we see the world. (p. 222)

Edwards (1990) and Winch (2008) provide excellent examples of how connectedness and relatedness to Country enables us to feel that we belong to the collective spirit. They reveal the reciprocal nature of Country and family and how this informs our being. They demonstrate that, with connectedness and relatedness to the collective spirit, we have a very strong sense of empowerment. Edwards (1990) illustrates how, after many years of emptiness, her being is slowly being filled by discovering that she does indeed belong to a Country and a people. Kwaymullina (2008) explains that:

> We are formed with the hills and the valleys, the water and the sky, the trees and the plants, the crows and the kangaroos, created by the ancestors who

> gave meaning and life to our world. And for each of us, our country is not just where we live, but who we are. (p. 7)

For Graham (1999), there is a direct link between our connectedness to Country and our cultural identity. Our connectedness was first weaved into the very core of Mother Earth through our ancestors travelling over the Country, creating the landscape we now know. She explains that when our ancestors were travelling, we were sleeping under the surface of the land and in "embryonic forms, in a state like a kind of proto-humanity" (p. 106). She contends that as they travelled, they left traces of themselves for us to connect with and thus identify ourselves as, in my case Ngunnawal.

A close friend of mine experienced just how powerful this connection is when we were in the Sydney region studying Aboriginal psychology. We students were told to go outside and look at the natural environment and then comment on how it made us feel. The exercise was designed to show us how powerful a connectedness to Country could be. We were to walk around until we found a spot with which we felt a connection. My friend, who did not realise that her ancestral land spread this far, noticed a public sign disclosing this information. From the moment she had read this sign, something very strong came over her. She took her shoes off and stood there in a *dadirri*-like state. Upon arriving back in class, each person was asked to talk about their experiences outside, but no one was as touched as my friend had been. She was almost moved to tears when she told the class how she felt once she realised that she was standing on her ancestral land. She explained that something inside her told her to take off her shoes and allow her body to feel the Country directly. She explained that she felt "at home," and an instant surge of happiness washed over. Her happiness was that she was being educated in the very place where her ancestors, too, had shared their stories. She felt very happy that this was where her stories were born and from which they developed. However, she also said that with the happiness came grief that her ancestors had been removed from this land and that the knowledge and stories of this Country had been removed with them. She felt a deep sadness that she did not know that this was part of her Country and, thus, a part of herself. However, she had a newfound connectedness to her Country and a connectedness with the collective spirit that she now shares with her own children.

Going back to Country, even for those who still live on Country, is an emotional experience. I do not live on my ancestral Country, but I do feel strong emotions when I visit it. I also feel what my friend above felt, but I also have these feelings when I am at the beach. The connectedness I feel to the coastline is extremely strong. I often wonder if there is some family history I am not aware of, as both my older sister and brother have these same strong feelings.

Although many of us do not live on our Country, we still have a physical, emotional, and spiritual response to our Country. It is where our ancestors lie, where battles have been won and lost, and where our ancestors laid down the lore for our physical, social, spiritual, and psychological well-

being. It is a connection that is extremely hard to place into words. It is a warm sense that rushes over you and lets you know that no matter what the world says about not belonging, you do. Remembering what it was like to go on holiday to see family, Cromb (2018) explains this feeling beautifully:

> Staring out the window as the flat plains turned to rolling hills, I knew it wouldn't be long before we were pulling up in the driveway of our holiday sanctuary. The plains turned to scrub, and the dirt turned red and sandy; the hills were inviting, and the air crisp and cleansing so your body relaxes and you can breathe better. I didn't know it then, but I know it now: that's what it feels like when you're on country after an absence. (pp. 62–63)

As Kwaymullina (2008) states quite simply, "Country is our heart" (p. 10).

The women Elders of Coober Pedy (2003) tell stories of their deep connection and knowledge of their Country and talk of the huge environmental problem of where to dump the nuclear waste formed from the uranium dug up by companies mining in their Country. They and their own past and present Elders have known that the uranium buried deep beneath the surface of their Country is poisonous and should never be touched. They explain that the waste will seep into their water supply, which is the "sinkhole in the desert." They tell stories of the aftereffects of the nuclear testing carried out near where they were living. The ecology of the surrounding Country changed, and large numbers of animals were born with defects. Now, some of their people have become blind and have started passing away. The women speak of how they told mining officials of the dangers of digging up their Country, and how there would be serious environmental and social ramifications once it was dug up. The women knew all this because of their deep and intricate connection to Country, and they knew that their Country was not a deserted place perfectly suitable for a nuclear waste disposal site. Their Country is not only their heart and soul, but through their connection to it, they are its custodians.

Watson (2008) also tells of her concern that environmental destruction will not only severely impact connectedness to Country but also both the Mother's and our own health:

> We belong to different nations, languages and peoples who were once in sovereign occupation of traditional lands, seas and waterways which were, at the time of Cook's coming, in pristine ecological condition. Now the land, we call *ruwi,* like the bodies of Aboriginal people, is fighting for survival against poor health and environmental devastation. In fulfilling our Aboriginal obligations as traditional owners and carers for country, many of us have been dispossessed or have no power to decide the future of our lands, collectively struggle to occupy, reconnect with and determine their future health and well-being. (p. 82)

There is much concern around the continent for the health and well-being of Country. There has been much environmental damage done to Country, and people are also suffering. Kwaymullina (2008) calls upon us to take time to listen to what the custodians of Country are saying to us:

> In an era of global environmental challenges, we all need to listen to the voices that offer a way of seeing and relating to country that will allow the earth not only to survive, but also thrive. (p. 7)

Much like Kwaymullina (2008), Cruse (2022) illustrates that it is through our deep connection to Country that we can heal the Mother:

> It is a great honour for an Aboriginal person to be regarded as the best suited custodian to manage the laws put in place to ensure Country is being looked after and provided for. Traditionally, under Aboriginal knowledge systems, our people, the natural environment, natural resources, plants and animals were all cared for.

Cruse (2022) expounds quite clearly on how the Mother intended us to care for and nurture her. He further discusses how he understands that the Mother cannot be restored back to pre-colonisation as there has been too long a past now. What he asks for is a deep respect to be shown for our connectedness and relatedness, knowledges, and emotions for Country, and to permit our ways of being in conjunction with modern technology to be used to heal the Mother.

When I yarned with Lehman (yarn, September 2007) and with Walter (yarn, September 2007), they each spoke of their good fortune in being able to maintain their connection to Country by still living on it. They both agreed that their connection was rejuvenated on a daily basis, and they did not have to struggle daily with being homesick. Mia (2008) says of her connectedness to Country, "When you live in your country, there is a quiet serenity and connectedness, a feeling that is sometimes hard to express because it's so deep" (p. 184).

While Arbon (yarn, September 2007) did not live on her country, she connected to it through stories and through her family. Martin (yarn, September 2007) spoke of how she is constantly connected to her Country by entering into other's Countries, feeling their ancestral spirits, and being reminded of her own Country. Other people are content to know that they have a Country where their ancestors are, and this is connection enough for them. Some do not know where their Country is, but the knowledge that they have a Country gives them a sense of connectedness and relatedness. Birch (2018) articulates this with the emotional rawness that is our history:

> We have no "tribe" or "totems" in our family. We know why this is so and we know it without shame. We also know who we are and where we are going. (p. 36)

Graham (1999) reminds us that no matter what, we all have a collective connectedness to Country:

> In other words, every Aboriginal person has a part of the essence of one of the original creative spirits who formed the Australian landscape. Therefore, each person has a charter of custodianship empowering them and making them responsible for renewing that part of the flora and its fauna. (p. 106)

By whatever means a person maintains their connectedness to Country, there is one constant, and that is that we all feel safe and secure in knowing that our stories and our ancestors, part of the collective spirit, connect us to our Country.

Reading Country

We have, for time immemorial, used our ability to read Countries to order ourselves into social structures, feed ourselves, know what is coming in the future and keep time (discussed further in Chapter Five). Noon and De Napoli (2022, p. 71) explain Aboriginal people "have become experts in documenting and analysing subtle variations in their environment" (p. 71). Our reading of Country is what allows us to determine Lore and to make sense of what it means to be human (Graham, 1999). We are able to understand our past, present, and future; we seek solace in reading Country to know our purpose.

As I discuss further in Chapter Five, Country is waiting for us to reconnect with it in order for us to read and hear our stories (Lehman, 2008). Lehman (2008) argues that some of us have lost our way within European society and have forgotten or have never learned how to read and hear our Country. He claims that the voices of our Countries are still talking to us, telling us their stories and waiting for us to hear the lore of the land. The Country is waiting for us to re-establish our connectedness and relatedness, for, as Kwaymullina (2008) argues, "Our blood is carried by the rivers and the streams, our breath is on the wind, and our pulse is in the land " (p. 7). Because some of us have lost our way from Country, it does not mean that we cannot find it again. To read Country, one needs to have knowledge. Reading Country is a skill that is waiting for those of us who have been disconnected from it by the invasion and dispossession to pick up and use once more. It is vital that those who still have the ability to read Country, maintain, nurture, and transmit this skill.

For those who know how to read the Country, it is about physical and spiritual survival. The Kupa Piti Kungka Tjilpi Tjuta (The Coober Pedy Women Senior Elders, (2003) tell stories of how they were born on and are continuing to fight for their Country. They speak of how the Elders taught them to read the Country. They tell of their birth into the warm desert sand and how, to this day, mothers are still giving birth in this manner. They know because they have been taught by the Elders where the birthing place is, what to look for in the Country, and how to find the signs that will tell them where, under the sand, fresh cool water runs.

Reading Country is more than just reading the physical landscape. Within Country, there are land formations, flora and fauna, and humans, all of which must be considered in order to read Country. We are a society made up of social creatures, and thus, we also learn to read the behaviour that is displayed on Country. From our ancestors, we have learnt that we must take time to observe what the seasonal changes mean in relation to the changes in flora and fauna. Such observations may turn into valuable knowledge that is crucial to survival. The people on the South Coast of New South Wales, for example, understood that when the inland wattle flowered, sea mammals were approaching; when

certain flowers bloom, honey would soon be available. They know the plants that are used to cure illnesses. This historical reading of Country is still relevant in some people's lives. Marika and Yunpingu (2003)[OBJ] describe how they teach children to read the seasons and weather patterns to know which plants can be collected for consumption and which must be left alone until the time is right. They can read the Country by observing and turning this observation into knowledge, and they transmit this knowledge through stories to the children.

In their book *First Knowledges: Astronomy,* Noon and De Napoli (2022) give numerous examples of how reading the night sky gives our people valuable social and survival knowledge. They explain how the story "of the Celestial Emu exquisitely illustrates the holistic nature of Country and Indigenous Knowledge systems" (Noon & De Napoli, 2022, p. 17). They explain how the Milky Way, to many of our Nations, is known as the Dark Emu and depending on where it is sitting in the night sky will depend on what the land emu is doing in its yearly cycle, and this informs our people of their daily activities. This informs our people of when it is okay to take the eggs, when it is time to allow the emu to go about their daily business, when it is time to move on to different camps, and so on. The importance of their story demonstrates the interrelatedness of Country, seasonal change, and human activities. Where I live now, I have learnt to read the Country. I know that if the wind is coming from the north, it is not safe to even put your feet in the ocean, and the "stingers" are blowing in. I know that when the Black Cockatoo comes, it is time to rejoice as winter is over and summer is here. I have learnt that when a certain tree starts to flower, big rain is coming. I have learnt to read the Country and skies around me and correlate this with what is currently happening or what is going to happen.

These observational skills and knowledge that are used to read Country are useful for us when navigating European society. Bunda (yarn, September 2007) yarned to me about how to read the university to work more productively in it to attain good outcomes for our people. She spoke of learning by observing how "to play the game" concerning the operational structure of the university and about passing this knowledge on to people who are new to the sector. Bunda (yarn, September 2007) saw one of her jobs as mentoring students and new colleagues in how to read the university, passing on a very useful skill for surviving in an alien structure. Lehman (yarn, September 2007), too, spoke of our ability to read colonial theories so that we can develop our own to explain social and political phenomena. He said that from our teachings and history, and through our outstanding achievements in policy and legal work, we have been able to place ourselves in influential positions from which we can protect and maintain our collective spirit.

I have often been told by my family, friends, and colleagues that I am very observant and can read people's behaviours and act accordingly. I sit back and watch, I observe, I feel what is happening around me, and I act accordingly. I know who is safe to be myself around, and I know when I have to pop on a different persona. Like Bunda (yarn, September 2007), through my reading of the university Country, I have learnt that the university setting is not one that is conducive to my natural ways of

being. This thesis and the time it has taken to submit it is evidence of this. I had to sit in d*adirri* and watch and read the landscape to know when the time was right to complete the research.

By learning to read the Country, we are able to successfully understand this new foreign way of life, and thus, we have contributed enormously not only to our own society but to non-Aboriginal society as well (Foley, 1988). Foley (1988) argues it was people's ability to observe and read the social and political world that enabled our activists to set up legal aid services, medical centres, child care centres, and women's refuges. Our people have become so proficient in reading the Country they inhabit that they have been able to make successful applications to the United Nations, as in the case of Stephen Hagan (Hagan, 2005), who took the fight to have the word "nigger" removed from the name of an athletic stadium in Toowoomba to the United Nations. We have successfully fought for the enactment of land rights and the racial discrimination legislation, and we have established peak national bodies on Aboriginal affairs, none of which would have happened without our knowledge of reading Country.

As explored in Chapter Six, knowledge is alive and is not static, and so is our reading of Country. Noon and De Napoli (2022) attest:

> [I]f we were to study all the sky and star stories held and maintained by Indigenous peoples, we would see that the storylines evolve over time, depending on the physical observations being recorded at each time and place. (p. 50)

They explain that as the sky and stars change, so does our land environment. We as a people have changed our social behaviour over the millennia, some because of colonisation and others due to our different understandings of reading Country. Our reading of Country determines our knowledges and stories and how we order ourselves.

The Social Significance of Country

Throughout this chapter, I have given many different examples of how our ways of being are developed and enacted. I have broken them down into categories not because I believe they need to be ordered and that there is a hierarchy but for the sake of this thesis. For me, they are all cyclical and interrelated, with no one being able to exist without the other. This leads me to this last section, social significance. Of course, everything I have written about in this chapter is of social significance to us. As Graham (2014) articulates:

> The intrinsic part of this understanding is expressed as the sacralising of the relationship between the Land and human beings which in turn led to the fundamental principle of custodianship or a permanent, standing obligation to look after Land, society and social relations – the law. (p. 17)

Let us start with some of the great triumphs we have had when it comes to the social significance of land to us. The land rights struggles of the twentieth century have been of enormous social, political, cultural, and economic significance to Aboriginal people. These successful campaigns made *terra*

nullius void and validated to the rest of the world that we were a people in fact as well as in name; that we are the true custodians of the land, the first people of this continent; and that we are from many Countries. The connection between Aboriginal people and their Country has never been severed. Some of us may have moved off our Country, but we have never lost the deep spiritual connection that we have with it. The High Court of Australia's findings reinforced to both our people and the non-Aboriginal world that our social structure is strongly linked to Country and that we and it are here to stay. We indeed have our ways of being.

The Wave Hill walk-off in the Northern Territory started as a dispute over wages and working conditions. The Common Ground Team (2022) explains that in the 1960s, working conditions for Aboriginal people were appalling. Some were actually working on their own lands, although not working for the Mother but for European pastoralists for sub-standard wages and were living in very poor conditions. Their food supply was limited to what the pastoralists would allow them to eat. Hunting and gathering were curtailed by fences and cattle farming, which drove off native fauna and destroyed the flora. They were also limited by the long hours they were forced to work. They were treated with such contempt that physical and emotional violence was a daily occurrence.

In 1966, Vincent Lingiari, a Gurindji leader, decided that these working and living conditions were not acceptable. He asked the station owner to improve his people's wages and conditions. The increase he asked for was still substantially less than what non-Aboriginal people were being paid. The station owner rejected Lingiari's request, and as a result, Lingiari and about 200 stockmen and domestic workers stopped work and walked off the station (Anderson & Green, 2006; Commonground, 2022). The workers camped on a site that held sacred significance about 13 km from the station and refused to return to work until their working conditions improved. The Wave Hill walk-off and the Gurindji people stirred feelings of outrage in other people who felt they were being treated unjustly. Rallies were organised around the continent by the Gurindji and their supporters, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal (Pascoe, 2010). As time passed, the campaign became much more than a wage struggle; it became about land rights, independence, and equality.

Lingiari and his countrymen and women lobbied for a portion of their traditional land to be returned so the Gurindji could live however they chose. After a nine-year battle, the Gurindji were handed back their land at a momentous ceremony where Prime Minister Gough Whitlam went to Gurindji Country and, in a symbolic act, poured its soil into the hands of Vincent Lingiari, saying:

> I solemnly hand to you these deeds as proof, in Australian law, that these lands belong to the Gurindji people and I put into your hands part of the earth itself as a sign that this land will be the possession of you and your children forever. (Charles, 2023)

Charles (2023) argues that the Wave Hill walk-off was the first unambiguous land rights claim. Lingiari and his people demanded the return of the land which had been forcibly taken from them. To all people who had also experienced this, the campaign was both socially unifying and liberating. It showed that

they could win the fight to have themselves and their families restored to their Countries, and that they could once again live amongst their ancestors, stories, and the Mother.

One result of this successful campaign was the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (1976)* enacted in the Northern Territory (Watson, 2008). Following the Northern Territory's lead, the other states, with the exception of Western Australia and Tasmania, implemented some form of this act (Pascoe, 2010). The significance of this fight for Country was that for the first time since the invasion, governments recognised that people had rights to the Countries that had been stolen from them. The appalling conditions in which people were living and working were also exposed, and those living in these conditions no longer felt isolated and abandoned but were enabled to unite and fight even harder for land and justice. This was a celebration of our collective spirit, and it was also a testament to how strong this spirit could be.

The other momentous case which demonstrated the social significance of Country to Aboriginal people was what has come to be called the *Mabo* decision. Although this was about Country in the Torres Strait Islands, it has had a large impact on people living on the mainland. Murray Islanders decided they would be the ones to challenge the legal principle of *terra nullius* in the High Court and that Eddie Koiki Mabo would be the one to lead that action. They lodged an application in the High Court seeking recognition of their rights over their Country. They wanted to be the legal custodians over their Country and sea, and they wanted to destroy the colonial idea of *terra nullius*. They won the case in 1992. The High Court's *Mabo v Queensland* judgement determined that:

> [U]nder the introduced English common law of 1788 and thereafter, Australia was not legally – or in fact – a vacant territory, but was occupied and possessed by Indigenous communities with traditions and customs of their own. (Bayet-Charlton, 2003, p. 172)

This judgement by the High Court that "removed the colonial fiction of an empty land" (Foley & Anderson, 2006, p. 95) was a huge achievement for our being as our people had been campaigning relentlessly to have Australian Common Law acknowledge our people's continual presence since long before the invasion.

After the High Court's ruling, many people in the Torres Strait Islands and beyond lodged land rights claims seeking legal recognition of their custodianship of their Country (Foley & Anderson, 2006). While the Mabo decision is fraught with difficulty (Behrendt, 2003; Foley & Anderson, 2006; Moreton-Robinson, 2003), it is beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate and discuss its shortcomings. What is relevant to this argument and crucial to this thesis is that the Mabo case highlighted exactly how important Country is to our social structure, as the case gave acknowledgement and hope to our people. Foley (yarn, September 2007) told me of the struggle for land rights in the 1960s, where people united and fought for a common goal. He said it brought people in the cities

together. They thought that having our Country back would heal people's hearts, which would improve our health, education, and housing, alleviate poverty, and strengthen our collective spirit.

Like Gary Foley, Larissa Behrendt (yarn, October 2007) is adamant that Country is about far more than geography. The land is a historical document that illustrates the stories that have been told by the Elders. The land can be read as a history book. As a story is told, it helps both the listener and the teller to experience emotions and form mental images relevant to the story, enabling them to be transported into the history that is present in the land. The listener is then reminded of the story every time they view the specific aspects of the landscape, thus bringing history into the present and ensuring it will be remembered in the future. Behrendt (yarn, October 2007) explained how her Elders took her to Country and pointed out certain trees and natural features as they told her stories of her past. They could pinpoint the exact tree where a member of her family was ripped from her parents by the authorities. The tree, in this instance, is the living illustration that connects Behrendt to the land through her family.

Similarly, Stephen Hagan (2005) tells of how the Country where he grew up is still significant to him. He speaks of how, even though he left his natal community and moved into the township, he still goes back to the Country of his birth to nourish his soul. He talks of how, as a child, he played in the sand dunes and used them to get cool in the heat of the day, and of how important it was to bring his wife and his children to where he was born and spent the first few years of his life. He says the physical set-up of the Country has changed, but the feelings that overwhelm him when he visits his Country remain. He insists that it is important for his children to know where they are from so they, too, can share the same connectedness that he and his wife feel to land and, thus, to the collective spirit.

We display the social significance of Country at every meeting where we either have a Welcome to Country or an acknowledgement. We demonstrate the significance. We meet others for the first time. We introduce ourselves in our customary way (as I have done at the start of this thesis and as is discussed in Chapter Five). As Dickson (2017) confirms:

> When Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people meet each other, we ask questions like "Who is your mob (family/community)?' or "Where are you from?' These questions are the foundation of cultural identity and locate you for others by connecting you to family, community, country. (p. 3154)

In his story *Dear Australia,* Bemrose (2018) explains what he deeply loves about Country, amongst other things. His ending quote resonated most with me when it comes to thinking about the social significance of Country:

> I truly love every square inch of Australia. I look forward to when we realise that this country is our giver of life and will survive long after we have passed. Maybe, then, we will each choose life similar to that of our ancestors: one of leaving soft footprints and a light touch on this landscape, and with a kindness for each other. (Bemrose, 2018, p. 30)

This, for me, coupled with the quote from Graham (1999), which I have used above and will state again because of its importance, is the fundamental social significance of our ways of being:

> The land, and how we treat it, is what determines our human-ness. Because land is sacred and must be looked after, the relation between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations. (Graham, 1999, p. 106)

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have written about the many ways of "knowing" Country and how the old ways are still practised, but I have also shown how we adapt these to suit the society in which we now find ourselves. In saying this, I agree with Arbon (yarn, September 2007) that we now have "new old ways," ways of being and doing that are informed by our contemporary understanding and appreciation of Country. I have shown that Country is all encompassing, it is the sky, the Land and the Waterways, and are indeed, in our social structures. Understanding that Country is a living entity reinforces in us the strong sense that Country is undeniably the Mother. It is the maternal spirit that guides us through life and is fundamental to our ways of being. I have shown that our close, dependable relationship with Country is filial. The Mother provides the lore by which we live, and we adapt this and bring it into the present. By doing this, we are expressing our respect for the Mother.

Our connection to Country has never wavered, even though many of us have been removed from our custodial grounds or have had our land taken from us. Knowing we have Country, where our ancestors have lived and continue to live, gives us a sense of belonging. We know that we are part of a greater being and have a very long and rich history and an unending future. We are connected to our collective spirit. Our connection instils in us a sense of sharing, for we share the Mother's fruits and, in return, honour the reciprocal nature of the relationship by treading carefully on the Mother, tending to her needs, and acknowledging she is the lore.

Ways of reading Country change as the Country itself changes. We adapt them to meet the requirements that we have for living in society today. Many people still read Country to understand the weather patterns and seasonal changes and obtain sustenance. Many use these skills of observation and reading to succeed in non-Aboriginal organisations, universities, and governments, as well as to change society and prosper in it. Finally, there is no doubt that Country is of huge significance to Aboriginal social theory. Country embodies the stories that hold our history, bring it into the present, and carry it into the future.

Chapter Five
Ways of Doing: Kinship, Sharing, Time, Elders, and Humour

> The influence of the ancestors is felt in the Indigenous knowledge systems that tell us about how the world works and how humans should live together and in the world. The ancestors created kinship systems, laws for the ownership of land, sacred sites, and systems of relationships between people and the natural world. (Langton, 2023, p. 56)

Karen Martin (2001) has written about ways of doing, which are the practical expressions of what she calls our "Ways of Knowing and of Being." This chapter explains how ways of doing shape people's sense of reality and how people come to know the world in which they live by acting in it. Our ways of doing are how we develop and build relationships with all the entities around us. This chapter elaborates on Martin's explanation of ways of doing by examining five elements I have found to be fundamental to our ways of doing: kinship, sharing, time, Elders, and humour. However, each is not an entity on its own, for they cannot exist independently of each other. They all also contribute significantly to our ways of being and knowing. We are a cyclical society where our connectedness, relatedness, and our collective spirit are what binds us together. In the following chapter, I discuss each element of our ways of doing as a practical activity, as things that we do day to day. Clearly, sharing is an activity, something that we do with other people – one cannot share alone. Humour involves laughing, talking, joking, making fun, and creating pleasure. Time, too, is something that we use, spend, save, and give. Elders are considered such, not merely because of the passage of time, but because of the work they engage in and the tasks they perform in and for the community. Finally, we cannot have a society if we do not have a form of kinship in which we thrive as social beings. Kinship gives us identity, support, and nourishment. As a result, we cannot have our ways of doing alone.

Kinship

> Relationships are the "cornerstone" of our Knowings – relationships with each other, with our Countrys and with our spiritual ancestors. Our teachings, our Knowings are informed by these relationships, and our Countrys. (Blair, 2015, pp. 140-141)

The relationships we form from the minute we are conceived are the foundations for the society we create. The kinship element of our ways of doing provides the influences that first guide us as children through the complexity of life, for we learn by doing long before we can understand. As a result of my interviews and analysis of autobiographies, life stories, academic literature, and my own

experience, I have discovered that kinship relations are the underpinnings of what children bring into adulthood and thus turn into social knowledge. Children's sense of self, morals, behaviours and, most importantly, their sense of who exactly their family is are shaped by ways of doing. Familial ties are not restricted to what is sometimes termed "blood relations." Walter (2017), in her collaborative report *Indigenous Children Growing Up Strong,* states how family for us is much broader than the Western ideal of the nuclear unit:

> Doing family involves the everyday and the extraordinary interactions between family members and family friends inside and outside the house. It also involves regular and ongoing social structural interactions of the family, as a foundation unit for society, with major social institutions. (p. 124)

Children learn by doing. This informs who they are to form familial ties within the community. Their family comprises those who have been integral to their upbringing. Kinship is elastic and active; it shapes and is shaped by what we *do* with one another. Here, it is interesting to note that Walter (2017) argues that, as Aboriginal people, we are not just part of a kinship system, but rather we *do* kinship. We are constantly actively within our kinship space through our connectedness and relatedness. We are taught to *do* kinship, which is to have "*Respect, Responsibility and Reciprocity,* and don't you forget it" (Araluen, 2018, p. 14).

Kinship contains many underlying social meanings and behaviours. In general, it is a complex social, political, and economic system that governs intimate social interactions, in particular, the social bonds of marriage and relations between generations. However, I argue that in the current social world, kinship has evolved more complex meanings and is not concerned only with the practices of marriage and parenthood, but also with the formation and transmission of a collective spirit. This spirit is collective because it is shared first and foremost by natal family members and then by overlapping sets of family and extended members, and those who are also considered within the kinship circle and are frequently referred to as a mob, which generally identifies itself with a particular Country. Little (2018) remembers the moment she found out about the importance of kinship:

> When I was a young girl, my uncle told me and my older cousin about our family. He told us that family is the most important thing in your life; he told us about our history, our family and who we are as a people from the Wiraduri tribe; he told us these stories so passionately. (p. 158)

One's sense of self is not arrived at by some personal search for a primordial inner essence or individual "soul." Establishing or finding oneself is not an individual act but is a collective process that crucially involves those who were, are, or will become family.

Stan Grant (2002), in his book *Tears of a Stranger,* explains the complexity of the Aboriginal self (which many of us, me included, have felt in our lifetimes in different circumstances) and what kinship provides for this complexity:

> For all the ingredients of contradiction, confusion and downright forgery that make up Aboriginal identity, still I yearn for my blackness. It's where I find meaning. In the company of my kin I can truly feel at home. In them I find kindness, laughter and dignity….. Being an Aborigine is often the only thing that truly makes sense of my world. (p. 62)

The basis of what Grant (2002) is saying is the root of this thesis: why do most of us feel this? How do we connect ourselves and seek safety and comfort within our wider kinship system?

Gary Foley (yarn, September 2007) points out that one way we connect ourselves to the collective spirit is through the introduction of ourselves to strangers by establishing who our mob is. This is a well-established tradition that ensures that shared history, time, and space are established early in the encounter. When he was in Redfern in the 1960s, the political climate was turbulent, and people were fighting hard for their rights. Many people from different Countries were converging on Redfern to fight for self-determination, and they used this customary way to establish quickly and succinctly who was fighting for the cause and who was not. In this way, people could establish familial ties, or they at least understood who they were dealing with, sufficient for them to feel comfortable enough to talk frankly about serious issues (Foley yarn, September 2007). They soon developed shared understandings of what it meant to be them in that particularly chaotic political climate: "[W]e have a shared experience no matter what part of the nation we are from" (Bunda, yarn, September 2007).

Moreton-Robinson (2000) and Arbon (yarn, September 2007) likewise note that it is customary to introduce oneself upon meeting someone for the first or sometimes for the third or fourth time. This process runs much deeper than social niceties. By introducing oneself in familial terms, one is not just locating oneself as an individual but as a member of a particular family, friendship network, community, and Country. As Moreton-Robinson (2021) explains:

> The protocol for introducing one's self [*sic*] to other Indigenous people is to provide information about one's cultural location, so that connections can be made on political, cultural and social grounds and relations are established. Following this protocol, I introduce myself to the reader. Unlike the majority of white people in Australia, I belong to the Koenpul people of the country known as Quandamooka. (p. 22)

Our introductions are practical expressions that locate us as Aboriginal. Introductions encompass the self, mob, Country, the history, time, space, and place (Martin, 2017). Each person identifies their standpoint and allows the other to make quick connections with them. As Gary Foley (yarn, September 2007) explains:

> When I was young in Redfern, when I first moved to Redfern, if you wanted to know who somebody was, you said "What's your name? Who's your mob? Where're you from? What's your mother's name? What's your father's

> name?" and we could usually pin-point fairly accurately who people were or at least have a sense of who they were.

What Foley assumes here is that what we are is also about what we do. Ways of doing and being are contemporaneous. Tracey Bunda (yarn, September 2007) also explains that the way we portray ourselves in contemporary society (who we are) correlates directly with our history (what we have done). In the recent past, our identity was socially and politically constructed for us by non-Aboriginal structures and processes. Liddle (2018) concurs this when she tells her story in *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia* (Ed Heiss, 2018), she states:

> Beyond what I was immersed in through fractured family connections, my culture was more social and political than it was traditional. It was also partly "outcast" culture- the culture developed because you are always different and society will remind you of this. (pp. 149–150)

As a result, we have subsequently re-adopted old social ways of identifying each other.

When I was undertaking this research, kinship was the first thing I established with my intellectual Elders. I showed them who I was by talking of my family and its connections and they explained who they were, similarly, seeking common ground and forming trust. This introduction is what Collard (2008) calls a "visa." Just as people need a visa to enter a foreign state, we make ourselves and our familial ties known when we are meeting people who are not known to us (Collard, 2008). In the autobiographies and stories I studied, the authors usually devote the first few pages to their kinship to explain who they are. This also rings true for a lot of academic published works; the author nearly always establishes a relationship with the reader by providing their visa. While writing is a one-sided exchange, these personal introductions still created within me, a reader, trust in and familiarity with the author, establishing points of identification such that I could become part of the author's "we," and, thus, share a collective sense of belonging.

As our society became literate in Western ways, a new form of introduction has become customary to acquaint a writer with an unseen reader. Whether it is in autobiographies, books of poetry, journal articles, other academic texts, or sending an email to someone unknown, it has become traditional for us to write a personal introduction to replace the oral one. We introduce ourselves in this intimate way when we are in person. However, now that we are published, we have adapted this introduction to suit the modern medium while at the same time staying true to our collective spirit. The written introduction is usually quite open and honest and answers the same questions that would be asked face-to-face. This gives the reader who shares the collective spirit with the writer a sense of familiarity and trust similar to that established through talking. It establishes who the writer is through their kinship connections, and as the reader is reading this, they are also thinking about their own connections and trying to discover what commonalities may be between them and the writer.

Bunda (yarn, September 2007) says that when we introduce ourselves in literature, it is to remain transparent to ourselves and to our communities; it affirms our commitment to our collective

spirit. She argues that this transparency shows respect to Elder readers and demonstrates that we have not been lost in the academy, which "teaches us to be individualistic and to be isolated." Most importantly, it demonstrates that we can adapt our social etiquette to the changing world by remaining truthful to our customs. The introduction has become ingrained in us and tells us a great deal about people without numerous conversations. It also provides us much joy as we catch up on news about those we have long ago lost touch with. Establishing familial relationships is a significant way that those not living in their Country stay in touch with it (as we have seen in Chapter Four). The introduction keeps us in the political loop regarding what federal, state and territory governments are planning or enacting, and most importantly, it keeps us strong as a people. As children, we learn this behaviour by observation and by doing, by seeing others introduced and by introducing ourselves. At parties, I have heard children unknown to one another asking each other these questions. Even though they did not fully understand what they were asking and what was being told to them, they still asked the questions and listened to the answers before moving on to playtime, mimicking what their Elders do. Kinship is a social institution that we seek to establish and maintain through the protocols of the written and spoken introduction. However, this does not mean that after the introduction, all involved engage in positive lifelong relationships. What I am proposing, though, is that the introduction often establishes a kinship where, through the collective spirit, familiarity is already nascent.

Our way of introduction is not the only way we have taken old ways and brought them into the new way of life to establish, honour, and respect kinship. Kinship is our relationship within our local and wider communities, the land, the skies, the waterways, and the entities. It is where we see and feel ourselves fitting as a proud Aboriginal person/community. It is not just a Westernised notion of "family." Kinship is a place, a security blanket, a safety net; it is hard to put into a few words for a chapter of a thesis, but it is us, and we are kinship.

Noon (Noon & De Napoli, 2022, p. 31) simply states, "mob knows who mob is." Bryan (2018) can attest to this as she recalls an interaction at the beach with an unknown family member:

> A man with smooth dark skin and a look of my father stared down at me. For a moment it seemed to me that he was suffused with light. As if the spirit that lit his amber-hazel eyes was at once a beacon, magnet and the warmth of a homecoming camp fire. Years later I would describe it to an elder. He would rock back in his chair and stare at me intently before he spoke: "Ah. That's kinship recognition. That's how you know your mob." (p. 47)

Cromb (2018) also remembers that, as a child, her kinship connections to other Aboriginal children made her feel safe, relaxed, and valued:

> We would go away on camps together, and we all got on and laughed and had the best time when it was just us. When we were mixed with the white kids, our difference stood out and we were quieter, but I do remember how it felt

> to look into the eyes of other Koori kids as they passed in the course of our day. I felt in that moment as if I wasn't alone. (p. 65)

Through this ongoing process of colonisation, our connectedness and relatedness to kinship has protected us, kept us strong, and has been instrumental in us finding the voice to fight for our place in the world. Kinship is an extremely strong mechanism and has been vital to our social fabric.

The connectedness and relatedness of shared experiences, knowledges, and behaviours with our people and Country also strengthens and expands our kinship. Bond (2005) noticed in her employer insistent cultural awareness training (something many of us have had to do because we identified as Aboriginal), with a large number of Aboriginal people from the community attending. She states they were attending to connect, learn, and share with mob and to grow and celebrate the community. They were attending to strengthen their identity.

> Perhaps one of the most conspicuous strengths, which community members continually spoke of, was strength in identity – the persistence of Aboriginality within ourselves, our families and our communities (Bond, 2005, p. 40).

In our active resistance to the strenuous attempts of the non-Aboriginal world to destroy our ways of knowing, being, and doing, Lehman (2003) argues that it is not only the words in the message being delivered but also the way the words are delivered and what the words assume, that is important. Most significantly, the reception and the delivery of the words both assume trust – trust that there will be an understanding of what the questions are asking (Who is your mob? Where are you from? What is your last name?), trust that one is who one says, trust that what is said in reply to the questions asked will be understood, trust that the words being spoken bring us into the collective kinship circle. This trust is predicated on the existence of a collective experience that produces one's ways of being, for one is consciously around people who foster and reinforce this being (Bunda yarn, September 2007). The experience of trust and being found in the collective spirit is expressed in a common worldview, the understanding of which is part of the process of growing and living, learned in the sharing of behaviours and their meanings (Bunda yarn, September 2007), and quite simply expressed through our ways of doing. As Gary Foley (yarn, September 2007) explains:

> [I]dentity was a key element; I mean it just seems to me that the way in which we politically functioned as a group in Redfern in the old days, had a lot to do with how we saw ourselves and where we saw ourselves fitting, both into the local mob from which we came, and then into a much bigger community in Redfern.

Thus, the answer to the question "Who is your mob?" holds the key to if and how communication and connection will develop. The answer establishes which Country people are from, which makes it possible for the questioner to acknowledge others they may know in that location, and, thus, to make

links to the answerer. Strangers then are no longer strange; they are kin. This part of the conversation may last just a few minutes but usually takes much longer, and as I will discuss further in this chapter, the notion of time establishing kinship is not about how many minutes it takes but rather the process. Nevertheless, once a familial connection is established, many more stories follow, and much more time will be spent. It is usually a very humorous conversation filled with laughter and catching up on news from other places.

Making introductions in this way and establishing familial connections joins us as a united people. We exchange stories that connect, educate, and liberate us. Bunda (yarn, September 2007) explains that meeting someone who was thought to be a stranger and finding that this person is a relative or is really good friends with someone well-known but maybe not have been seen in many years is one of the most "joyous parts of our collective experience." Such was the experience of Langford Ginibi (2007), who writes of such an encounter when her husband brought a stranger home. From the introductory questions, she found out that he was a relative of hers. The establishment of familial relations joins people together and gives us a sense of unity when distance and dislocation are so often an issue. Finding connections can put people in contact with relatives they did not know existed. Many families are reunited from exchanges like this. Thus, the introduction is important in itself, not just as a prelude to the sharing of other knowledges.

Although society is culturally diverse, what we do have in common since the invasion, as Bunda (yarn, September 2007) has explained, is an identity constructed from exactly who we are not. Liddle (2018) states that her own culture was:

> It was partly an "outcast" culture – the culture developed because you are always different and society will remind you of this. While this has been repugnant, it has strengthened our resolve to ascertain our own common ground, which we share through the kinship relations we have (re)established throughout the continent. (p. 150).

Bunda (yarn, September 2007) points out that we are kept strong through this sense of kinship because we are continually around our people, and we are constantly making new ties and remaking old ones. Noon and De Napoli (2022) also state that,

> On the inside, we are proud and staunch and have great strength. Within our communities we are connected and clever and determined. (p. 25)

Our sense of identity is kept strong and safe by our new, old kinship practices of relationship-building, *doing* kinship, expressing our visa, and our understanding and reliance on trust. These practices reinforce, embrace, and expand our collective spirit. The next section of this chapter takes the kin relationship a step further by analysing the practices of sharing, for it is hard to imagine how kinship could exist at all without the sharing of affection.

Sharing

Sharing is integral to society in many ways: the sharing of material wealth, personal possessions, time, knowledge, and the sharing of ourselves. It may be evident that you cannot have a society without sharing. Thus, you cannot have a social theory. However, as my research has uncovered, this has not been examined and analysed using a contemporary Aboriginal social theory. It would be remiss of me not to explore and write about how sharing is at the heart of our connectedness and relatedness. We cannot build these core elements of social fabrics without it.

Gary Foley (yarn, September 2007) contends that a large part of our socially constructed knowledge involves sharing. Learning to understand how and why sharing is practised is a key analytical tool (Foley, yarn, September 2007). We engage in sharing in a unique way that may appear to the non-Aboriginal world to be complex and, at times, incomprehensible. Sharing may appear to have many contradictory rules beyond the understanding of an outsider. This section shows that the notion of sharing is evident in ways that people have not often thought of, as it is most often taken for granted, and it explores the simplicity of the complexity of sharing.

Congruent with the themes of this thesis, I bring the notion of sharing to light by sharing a story of my own. I was privileged to share a crucial period of time with an Elder who was about to undertake major surgery and who was meeting his child for the first time in thirteen years. He had been an alcoholic and heroin addict for most of his life. Now, in his twilight years, this Elder had been living on and off the streets for many, many years. He had five daughters and one son, none of whom lived with him and with whom he had very little contact. However, he had an active kinship network, who lived on the streets with him and who all followed the protocol of looking after their Elders. The kinship he had developed on the streets stemmed from sharing similar life experiences and acknowledging that the "mainstream way of life" was not congruent to their way of knowing. He had learnt that he had cancer and needed to have an operation, which would result in him no longer being able to speak. He asked his second eldest child to be with him at this time.

I accompanied his child on their trip interstate to meet their father. We found him at the front of the hospital in the middle of about seven people handing out cigarettes to everybody. By the end of the day, he had no cigarettes left, so we bought him another packet as we left. The next morning, we returned to find him in the same situation, and an hour later, he had no cigarettes. Although he had no money, no home, and minimal clothing, he could not watch another person beg outside the hospital for a cigarette. He had no concern for his own nicotine addiction; he gave because he had something to give, and it was that simple.

The next day in the park, he saw an elderly woman sitting on a bench by herself rocking. He walked over to her, sat down, and they talked for about ten minutes. Then he came back and told us that the woman was homeless and had been admitted to the psychiatric ward. He had promised her that we would buy her a cup of coffee and a piece of cake from the café across the road, which we did. Again,

he had done this simply because we had the means to provide her a little comfort. The next day, she gave him a "thank you" card she had obtained from the hospital chapel in which she had written the most beautiful words of appreciation. The Elder brushed this off as though this is how everybody acts, saying that the woman was "crazy" to be so appreciative. He had not realised or did not care that other people would have crossed the road to avoid her.

This story is not an isolated example. As I have lived my life, I have witnessed these events on an almost daily basis. I have grown up with parents who would give others what they could without expecting anything in return, and I am sure thousands of us have lived and do live the same way. What this Elder did sharply reminded me that sharing is part of my consciousness and is integral to our connectedness and relatedness. It also highlighted how important this aspect of our collective consciousness is and thus demanded to be included in this thesis. My intellectual Elder Stephen Hagan (yarn, 2007) told me a similar story of a time in the USA when he offered some money to assist an African American stranger. When I asked him, "Why did you do this?" he replied, "To help a brother out." I questioned him further about why he wanted "to help a brother out," and he responded, "Because I could." Because he felt that sharing was something he had done all his life, Hagan had difficulty putting into words why he did this. Upon reflection, he said he had seen his parents and grandparents share what they could, and he had taken this into his own life and was now demonstrating it to his own children. Here, we can see our collective consciousness playing out in the simplest and most obvious ways, yet without us sitting back and really looking and analysing why we do this, it would go completely unrecognised. This is us passing on deep practical knowledge of what it means to operate in our society.

To appreciate how ingrained this action of sharing is, one only has to look at the title of Aunty Ruby Langford Ginibi's (2007) autobiography *All My Mob*. The title is inclusive and shows the author not as just an individual but as part of a collective. It discloses her love and devotion to her people. The title also illustrates the sharing that one finds within the pages, which reveals a strong woman who shared all she had with her people. She has given her life to sharing, with her kin and with those around her. She writes:

> Happiness was putting my child endowment book in Billy Woo's store to buy food for my hungry brood, then not having the fares for a taxi back home to Gunnedah Hill. (Lanford Ginibi, 2007, pp. 79-80)

Her sense of sharing ran so deep that she ensured that her money stretched far enough to feed not only her own nine children but also the other nine children who had come to live with her as well. This is what gave her happiness, and Aunty Ruby is not alone in the sharing of stories like these. Cromb (2018) concurs, remembering fondly this notion of sharing from her own childhood where:

> Everybody who needed a feed, no matter how close or distant, was welcome at Nan and Pop's for Sunday lunch, where the elders would sit at the dining

> table, the other adults would be throughout the lounge room, and us kids would be all over the backyard eating and playing games. (p. 63–64)

Cromb (2018) is not only remembering the sharing of material possessions but also the sharing of time, space, stories, and selves – quite simply, the sharing of our ways of doing.

Langton (2023) provides a historical overview of where this subconscious aspect of our way of life stems from.

> Exclusion from the Australian economy and exploitation of indentured and slave labour created intergenerational poverty for thousands of Indigenous people. It made sense, then, to keep the old tradition of sharing so that no one starved. These traditions have changed, especially in the areas where colonisation impacted first, yet they are still recognisable as Aboriginal kinship and social structures. Helping family and friends in one's social network was, and remains, normal and is often governed by rules in those societies that operated in a more collective fashion. (p. 78)

Other than possessions and money, people share many things that go unnoticed because we do not have the time to appreciate what is being shared. When I asked Maggie Walter (yarn, September 2007) why she thought sharing was such an integral part of our being, she brought to my attention the sharing of time. I had not given this much thought as my mind was trapped by material wealth. She explained that we commit our time at community meetings to ensure that discussion happens on particular issues. Our Elders dedicate their time to ensure their presence is felt at meetings, functions, and events. We share our time when we do a Welcome to Country for a conference, event, or government sitting (Walter, yarn, September 2007). In the university, we spend time attending endless meetings to ensure that we have a voice at the large table and in the result. As Tracey Bunda (yarn, September 2007) explains, many of us take a long time to finish doctoral theses because we must share ourselves not only with our kin but with very many professional and community organisations who require our presence. I am a testament to this.

Through sharing our time, we also share our experiences and our cognitive space. Sharing our experiences and stories is how we learn and know we are strong Aboriginal people. It is how we form kinship circles and feel safe. As Bond (2005) demonstrated in the previous section of this chapter, her mob who attended her cultural awareness training did so to form kinship, and they did this through the sharing of experiences and cognitive spaces. Dickson (2020) acknowledges, in her own research experience, how the sharing of experiences and cognitive space can have profound impacts on health outcomes:

> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experienced improved health outcomes and increased engagement with maternity services that employed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health staff and health students, partly due to familiar communication styles, community familiarity and

> relationships that extended beyond "the boundaries of a clearly defined professional relationship" (p. 3)

Elders guide people by sharing their life experiences and understandings and thus ensure that they are keeping their knowledge alive (Arbon, yarn, September 2007). When an Elder speaks, they are not only sharing their time, but they are also sharing their knowledge and experiences, and we must share our cognitive space by listening and engaging in *dadirri* to hear, feel, and embody the story. This can be seen in the book *Elders. Wisdom from Australia's Indigenous Leaders* (McConchie, 2003), in which Elders share their time and experiences to ensure that their knowledge is recorded and that they have a voice in such a frantic, time-deprived world.

When our Elders decide to share time, experiences, and knowledges with us, we are obligated to share our cognitive space. What I mean by our cognitive space is that we need to be actively listening, feeling, and embodying what is being shared with us. We have to take this on board, and as Aunty Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr (Ungenmerr, 2015) so powerfully asserts, we must engage in *dadirri*: "The contemplative way of dadirri spreads over our whole life. It renews us and brings us peace. It makes us whole again." My intellectual Elders shared their time, experiences and knowledges with me, and I had to reciprocate by allowing myself to share my cognitive space so I could write this thesis with their voices present. I am now obligated to finish this thesis and see it through to submission. I also owe it to our students, whom I am so passionate about and made a silent promise to all those years ago. Many of us share our knowledge with the academy and other institutions so that scholars, students, and others may achieve their goals. We share time experiences and knowledge with the young so they may come to know and appreciate our ontology and epistemology and understand the forms of social organisation around them.

We give the time of our lives to our families, as Noel Nannup (2007) did. When he was young, he left school and worked for a time. However, his parents divorced, and an older sibling told him he must look after their father. As he explains, "the code in our family was family first and if you were told to do something by an older sibling then you did it" (Nannup, 2007, p. 206). He spent time with his father, which was crucial in saving his life. Stories like these are common, but they are too rarely publicly shared and celebrated. The autobiographies that do exist are full of stories of how people have shared themselves to ensure somebody else survives. Anita Heiss (2012) pays tribute to her mother and the time she spent with her family, writing:

> Her commitment to family
> matched by no other
> for she is the eternal mother
> her role as matriarch
> the key to her identity. (p. 48)

Heiss (2012) demonstrates what Aunty Ruby's (Lanford Ginibi, 2007) book also tells us, that so many of our people devote their entire lifetimes to ensuring that other people are safe, secure, fed, and comforted.

When I yarned with Veronica Arbon (September 2007) about this idea of sharing, she told me, "You can feel it in your guts; it is part of you." This may be why many of my intellectual Elders stumbled when I asked them, "Why is sharing so important?" and why very few identify and address this wonderful phenomenon in their autobiographies and academic writings. Sure enough, the authors of the autobiographies write about sharing material wealth, time, cognitive space, and knowledge, but they do not name it as sharing. It is generally written about in such a fashion that it remains hidden in their daily lives and is often invisible even to themselves. This is why I feel it is important to write sharing into this investigation of social theory. Bunda (yarn, September 2007) points out that one of the joys of our society is our collective spirit and strong sense of kinship. There is no collectivity without sharing. Thus, this notion of sharing is vital to our being. It nourishes our spirit. This needs to be acknowledged and celebrated. The Elder at the hospital described above gave me new insight and a deeper understanding of our collective commitment to sharing. He showed me that no matter how downtrodden, we are always living this simple yet complex notion of sharing and that time is deeply implicated in the giving of ourselves to others.

Time

> We were taught immemorial time. (Araluen, 2018, p. 13)

> I would define time as "a space in which something happened or did not happen, a space in which something continues but a space in which something has stopped." (Yalmambirra, 2000, p. 133)

As can be seen through the previous two sections of this chapter, time is also a fundamental element of our social fabric. Time for us is born through the timeless nature of our Mother, Country, skies, waterways, and kinships. Our ancestral stories transcend time and space and have been woven into our epistemology and ontology. The ancestors ensured we were not bound by time, but rather, we are bound through our connectedness and relatedness. Our Mother is timeless, and our sky Country is timeless and, as such, our social fabric is decided by this. Our concept of time is managed by our connectedness and relatedness to the entities and our knowledge.

No one has control over time. It cannot be stopped or slowed down, but it can be adapted to suit a particular social structure. This is what is discussed in this section: how time is important to the structure of our society, how we use it to suit our social lives, and how it forms a foundational element in our collective spirit in the ways that time is named and in the manner in which its passing is recorded.

What has become apparent in my research is that time has many names across the continent. There is Koori time, Murray time, Tiwi time, Yolngu time, Nyungar time, and so on. Clearly, the common understanding of what time means is closely connected to one's sense of Country (which has been discussed in Chapter Four). The naming of time and the collective sense of time are both taken for granted and are seldom spoken about but are more usually assumed. Around the continent, time is named by the people of a particular country or region after themselves. So, in New South Wales and Victoria, people say, "I'm on Koori[e] time"; in the Tiwi Islands, people say, "Settle down, it's Tiwi time." However, even if one is in another person's Country, everybody shares the collective understanding that when time is named in this fashion, it is to remind us to always take time for ourselves without "forgetting to give time to each other. We are to honour the process, not the restricted "time" restraints that so often determine so much of our lives. Meetings, functions, events, research, and relationships will not be rushed due to this common understanding of time. Things will begin and end at the appropriate moment, not when a mechanical apparatus strikes some dictated predetermined figure. To name time in this way is also to own it, which means that we decide collectively how to manage our time and how to use it to best meet our social needs.

By naming to own, we modify how we historically understood time and take this changed understanding into contemporary society. Historically, time was understood in relation to the natural environment. The stars, the flora and fauna, the seasons, and the climate would determine when and if meetings and events took place (van den Berg, 2005). Noon and De Napoli (2022) state that traditionally:

> Timekeeping is commonly anchored within oral traditions relating to Sky Country. Throughout the Indigenous nations, this has been done by reading Country. By tracking particular stars and constellations, especially at sunrise and sunset, and embedding these observations into story, seasonal, annual and ceremonial time can be accurately kept. (pp. 86–87)

McMillan (yarn, July 2008) explains that this naming of time is an evolution of how and where we historically placed ourselves according to the seasons. By this, she means that while we no longer rely just on the seasons, we do still consider time to be something that cannot be forced, for events will happen when they happen, and time will unfold, a notion crucial to our survival as a society within a non-Aboriginal world.

When we use phrases like "Koori[e] time," we collectively understand and acknowledge that the right people need to be present at the event or meeting before it can commence. Those considered important to the conversations that are about to happen need to be present before anything can take place. At the start of each encounter, people take time to (re)make kinship connections and to (re)establish relationships, as discussed above. Unless time has been taken for this, the event cannot take place. Thus, Koori[e] time is essential to our way of doing. Unless the whole, which may include a range of different factors, people, objects, events, and relationships, is complete, then nothing can

move forward. Collective time is about life and its path, about whether we are ready for events to occur and whether events are ready to include us in their occurrence.

Collective time requires us to share, establish kinship relationships, and have Elders present or, at the very least, consulted. We are not an individualistic society; our time is not appreciated in this manner. Time does not give significant priority to the individual but to the collective. We are more concerned with making sure that things are in harmony and that our Elders are happy for us to proceed. How we listen and share is directly related to our respect for our Elders (yarn, McMillan, 2008). One of the lessons we learn as children in regard to sharing time is that when an Elder speaks, we must stop and listen. Walter (yarn, September 2007) points out that no matter how long an Elder speaks, no one leaves before they have finished. Everybody respects the Elders and the time they take to impart their knowledge. We learn that our time has no limits when an Elder speaks. We sit and we listen, no matter if we are supposed to be somewhere else, even if the Elder speaks for hours. Yalmambirra (2000) states:

> If an Aboriginal person is talking to an Elder then the issue being discussed may well take precedence over most other things. This is Aboriginal protocol and deemed more important in the overall scheme of things. (p. 136)

No one would dare to bring shame on their families and themselves by leaving. We would not dare to show such a level of disrespect to our Elders, and at the end of the formal proceedings, we like to stay to spend extra time together to swap stories and experiences and to unconsciously feel the connectedness and relatedness to our collective spirit.

Time is not linear; it follows its own path and depends on the physical and spiritual environment (McMillan yarn, July 2008). A key element of Aboriginal social theory, then, is that everything is connected and cyclical. This does not mean, however, that history is pre-determined, or the future pre-set, for "Timing is uncertain; it goes its own way. Things can change" (Milroy & Milroy, 2008, p. 22). When Milroy and Milroy (2008) describe time in this fashion, we understand that, yes, time is uncertain; it does not happen in a linear sequence (McMillan, yarn, July 2008). Instead, time is about being ready to move into the next phase as decided by the collective and by the Elders. By taking "a long time to know" (Milroy & Milroy, 2008, p. 22), one understands that time cannot be rushed. Ungenmerr (2015) also describes this understanding of time:

> Our Aboriginal way has taught us to be still and wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course – like the seasons. We don't worry. We know that in time and in the spirit of *Dadirri* (that deep listening and quiet stillness) the way will be made clear.

Blair (2015) also discusses what the concept of time meant to her doctoral research and how time is deeply rooted to the Mother:

> Time as measured in seconds, minutes and hours had no place in any of the learning experiences. Time existed only in respect of the season, the rain, the position of the sun and the winds. (p. 107)

Kerwin (2011) tells how our ancestors weaved the importance of time into our collective spirit:

> These myths contributed to the culture of Aboriginal people and transcend time and space. Ancestral beings provide the existence and dimension of time and add to the physical, spiritual, and social fabric of Aboriginal people. (p. 253)

Our notion of time is also related to our understanding of sharing. We understand that time must be given to our communities to reinforce our collective spirit. Walter (yarn, September 2007) thinks that those of us in the university system have huge responsibilities, not only within the university but also to our communities. We have responsibilities to give back the time that we have taken from our communities to achieve our educational goals and to honour our Elders who have dedicated their collective time to fight for us. One such group consisted of Mum Shirl Smith, Ken Bindle, Chicka Dixon, and Elsa Dixon, who committed enormous amounts of time to ensure the collective would attain its rights within non-Aboriginal society. The use of their time, their sense of kinship, the sharing of their resources, their respect for their Elders and their humour were all instrumental in establishing our legal services, medical services, tent embassies, and numerous other services.

Collective time is also about communicating with our spirits. McDonald (McDonald & Finnane, 1996) writes about her time growing up on the mission and how it was extremely important that she and her family, whether or not they were living on the mission, took time to "go walkabout':

> Walkabout was a time to be with family, loved ones and friends. It was also a time for renewal of our tribal spiritual life. Our people went bush to communicate mentally and spiritually with the ancestors who had left this mortal life. At this time we always felt closer to mother earth and to nature. Everything seemed to come together for the Aboriginal people on walkabout. (p. 15)

Time must be taken not only to affirm and renew the collective spirit but also to attend to the individual's spirit. As Musgrave (2003) explains:

> The water eagle, the white-chested one, the fish eagle, that's what I become. I go into his body and fly with him, I work through the water eagle. My body in this chair, no one touches me, they know I'm with the eagle. Everyone leaves me alone when I am like this. I can look down from the sky, I'm like a doctor man. (p. 101)

People need time to spend with their spirits in order to heal, attain knowledge, and be at peace.

Elders

> It's important for us as Elders to tell our stories and encourage others to write about their experiences and how they have come to terms with the past. As Aboriginal people we may never have the wealth of our fellow Australians, but I believe by recording our stories we leave behind a wealth of knowledge and a rich and important legacy for our future generations. Young people will know their identity and cultural connections to this country; and be proud to work towards making significant contribution to the destiny of their people. (Nelson, 2018, p. 177)

Ensuring that time is taken for spiritual life is a responsibility held by the Elders more than by anyone else. We are surrounded by time, for we are seldom just with people our own age but are frequently in the company of those who have lived before us and those who will live after us. The Elders represent time as they have lived longer than us and thus have more experiences to pass on. Elders are both living and deceased, and every person has them. As Langton (2023) articulates:

> Respect for the spiritual Old People and ancestral beings is strong throughout the culture of First Australians. The idea of the Old People corresponds to the perception of the stars being representations of the past. The Old People are encountered in the landscape, just as we see stars when we gaze at the night sky. We know that the stars are what can be seen now of some cataclysmic event in the universe many thousands of light years ago. That is, the light of the explosion emanates through time and space and is visible to our eyes in the present. (p. 56)

Likewise, Aboriginal people perceive the spiritual presence of Elders in the landscape as something that has come through time and space and is visible to our eyes in the present.

Elders are instrumental in all facets of life and society. They are people who have great knowledge and life experience and are always the first point of call. While they are older, an Elder is not someone who has attained a particular age. Elders are people who are older than us and who have a deep responsibility to us as a people, for they are the custodians of the knowledge of how society functions and how it relates to the physical and spiritual world. As Bessarab (2008) explains:

> [A]s I grow older (though I am not at this stage yet), I am beginning to understand what it means to be an Elder, the responsibilities that will come with that status, and the importance of passing on my knowledge and understanding to my children. (p. 58)

Elders are responsible for linking us to our past and teaching us what our social customs represent and mean, and how to enact them. They make sure that we perform those taken-for-granted behaviours such

as the introduction, sharing, making links to Country and family, and understanding time is a process, not a number to be dictated by. This ensures that our essence as a people does not dwindle. They make certain we remember where we have come from and what our people have been through and maintain our sense of the collective spirit. Blair (2015) reminds us:

> Elders have a pivotal role in the transmission and sharing of Indigenous Knowings, in traditional and contemporary contexts, in community, corporate and Academic environment……. Discussion about Elders invariably invokes reference to the concept of wisdom and the impact this has on Indigenous Knowings. (p. 148)

Elders have a responsibility to be good storytellers so that our attention is kept, the words are heard, and the message is eventually understood. Bessarab (2008) writes that both her mother and father were excellent storytellers who would tell of many things, from the sharing of childhood experiences to the passing on of cultural knowledge. She writes that her mother "held us captive to her magic" because of her gift for storytelling. Bessarab (2008) feels that she is strong enough in her identity to tell her own stories.

We have an enormous reliance on Elders for instruction on our core being and an immense responsibility to them. We understand that they are older than us, that they have more knowledge and experience than us, and that we can learn a great deal from them, even if this is not directly explained to us. Brinkworth (2018) recalls how she was taught to respect her Elders when she was a child:

> Growing up in Yarrabah mission, it was a cultural custom not to look an adult in the eyes when speaking or being spoken to – a silent sign of respect with eyes averted. (p. 42)

Our responsibility is to honour our Elders, and we do this in a number of ways. We honour them, past, present, and emerging, in every Welcome to Country that is conducted.

Elders are always listened to with the utmost respect; they are taken care of and protected. We show our respect for prominent Elders by recognising their achievements by naming scholarships, memorial lectures, foundations and hostels after them. Lowitja O'Donough, Vincent Lingiari, Lloyd McDermott, and Chicka Dixon are among the many who have been honoured in this manner. Aunty Lowitja O'Donough was honoured for her outstanding contribution to health and welfare when her name was given to an institute. Uncle Vincent Lingiari has a memorial lecture named after him for his leadership in attaining equal wages and land rights. Uncle Lloyd McDermott has a rugby union foundation named after him for his strength and pride in the sporting arena, and Uncle Chicka Dixon has a hostel named in his honour to pay tribute to the work he did for social justice. Our very first Distinguished Professor, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, bulldozed many academic barriers both physically – by creating space for Aboriginal academics to hold positions within academics – and theoretically – by establishing the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association. Uncle Lewis O'Brien has been instrumental in developing *Kaurna Warra Pintyanthi,* a group of people dedicated to

recovering the Kaurna language of the Adelaide plains. Anita Heiss has dedicated her life to ensuring Aboriginal literature is written and produced by Aboriginal writers and companies.

Another obvious way is that as a mark of respect, we call them "Aunty" or "Uncle," irrespective of our familial relationship with them. However, not all aunties and uncles are Elders. I am called "Aunty" by friends" children, but this does not mean I am an Elder in their community, only that these children are showing respect for me, a person older than them. In this research, I considered both those I yarned with and those I read to be Elders as they were instructing me, and I was learning from them about what is important in social theory and about what to be careful of while working in academia.

As children and young people, we take for granted that the Elders will guide us (Bessarb, 2008). However, they can never be sure if the knowledge and the experience they have shared have been received, understood, and retained. Bessarab (2008) emphasises the importance of publishing Elders so that their knowledge is more accessible after they have left this life and that it is there waiting for us to receive when we feel the time is right. Many Elders feel strongly about their legacy. As a result, their autobiographies and books of their stories have been published, which I have been able to use in this work.

We understand that as we grow older, we constantly take instructions from our Elders, whether it is through personal contact or through spiritual connections. We are raised to respect and to seek guidance from our Elders, who often do not move at the same pace as younger people. Collectively, we understand that Elders need sufficient time to arrive not only at particular places but also at appropriate answers. Historically, we depend on this deep contemplation and their carefully considered answers for our survival (van den Berg, 2005).

We have a responsibility to look after our Elders, not just in times of poor health. When younger people are around, it is very rare to see an Elder get a cup of tea for themselves or get themselves a seat or something to eat. Younger people have great respect for Elders and willingly offer to take care of their needs. We also adjust our behaviour to be more in line with Elder expectations. We also have a responsibility to care for our intellectual Elders because if it were not for them, we would not be in any position to understand what our social theories would look like or to understand that our collective spirit is what bonds us together as a people.

Even before a research question or an idea for a community project is formulated, we seek guidance and acceptance from the Elders concerned. We are reliant on them to give us "the go-ahead" for our research or project. This is usually termed "community consultation," but it is really a quest for approval from our Elders. We rely on them to ensure that our project is beneficial to the people involved. We want the Elders to say that what we are doing is worthwhile and will actually make a positive difference. We also rely on them to help formulate prescriptions and policies for organisations; we need them to be board members and council members, lore keepers, lawmakers, and enforcers. We rely on

them to advise on the aims and goals of community organisations so that the community not only benefits from but has control over what is happening within and to it.

When yarning with my intellectual Elders, reading the autobiographies and stories, and considering my own lived experience, it is quite evident that we rely almost entirely on Elders to shape and explain society. While this may not come as a surprise, it is important to acknowledge them properly in our conversations and writings about society in the contemporary world. No matter which medium I gathered my data from for this research project, everyone paid respect to the Elders. They were mentioned in every type of discussion, and every person I yarned with spoke about the Elders as the true custodians of our collective spirit. All spoke about the Elders devoutly in a manner that left no room for misinterpretation.

I was not alone in this experience. Arbon (yarn, September 2007) spoke to me of how her own doctoral experience was shaped by her Elders and how those Elders helped her to deepen her understanding of what it means to be Arabana:

> I referred to my Elders constantly as they were there making sure that my journey was the right, the proper way and I tried to write from an Arabana position and my Elders were right there with me, correcting and pointing things out that I needed to chase around, and saying "You need to be careful with that one.'

Martin (yarn, September 2007) had the same experience. Her doctoral research allowed her to attain a higher degree, yet it was also about making time to take instruction from her Elders. She immersed herself in the community in Far North Queensland and ensured that her fieldwork was undertaken in a manner that the Elders approved. They, too, had the final say over what was to be shared and what was not. Similarly, Ford (2005) explains that her mother is her "mentor, supervisor and boss" (p. 11). She describes her mother, the last senior Elder of her people at the time of her thesis writing, as her life coach, as the one she went to for guidance, knowledge, and strength. Blair (2015) and Dickson (2020), in their research, also follow Arbon, Martin and Ford and honour their intellectual Elders who shared stories, experiences, time, and space with them. Blair (2015) referred to her intellectual Elders as colleagues:

> I am reticent to describe participants as either subjects or participants. I have chosen to refer to people as Colleagues as this indicates more of a sharing relationship where learning took place for all involved in the research journey. (p. 73)

Dickson (2020) chose to honour her intellectual Elders as team members:

> Throughout this study "research participants" were named Team Members. This term represents the true engagement between me ('researcher') and Team Members ('research participants') throughout the whole research process. (p. 4)

What my intellectual Elders are illustrating quite clearly here, is our reliance and respect on Elders, something that we are aware of but that has not been written about in much detail.

In the autobiographies and stories I studied, many people had travelled back to their Country to reconnect with their Elders. Aunty Ruby Langford Ginibi (2007) writes:

> These stories of mine include some of the many journeys me and my mob have taken. They include journeys to family and extended family, back to the missions, to culture and heritage and history, to our tribal places of belonging. (p. 3)

Langford Ginibi (2007) takes each of her children back to her Country to meet with the Elders so they may experience the joy she had growing up with the Elders all around her. She stresses that this meeting with the Elders is almost therapeutic as the stories and experiences they share with her and her children are nourishing their being, reinforcing their collective spirit. This experience is shared by Bunda (yarn, September 2007), who argues that nothing reinforces the collective spirit more than being around people who share the same worldview.

Tjalaminu Mia (2008) writes about how she relied on the Elders to help fill a hole in her heart. Her mother always reminds her to remember her "taproots" as they will never forget her. Her mother is telling her that no matter what happens, the Elders, their stories, their experience, and their knowledge will always know her in both a physical and spiritual form. Stan Grant (Grant, 2016) writes about how he takes his son back to Country to feel the presence of the Old People and to understand where his people once lived but were also decimated, rooting his son in the collective story. What is evident here is that the stories, experiences, and knowledges the Elders hold are indeed a part of us. Whether we have grown up with traditional knowledges, stories, and experiences shared with us by Elders, or whether we have found it later on, it is always inside of us. We are born with Aboriginal blood, the collective spirit and our connectedness and relatedness. We cannot deny this. The stories from the Stolen Generations, while deeply traumatising to read and very close to home, provided strong evidence for this.

Doona Meehan (2000), a member of the Stolen Generations, articulates how our collective spirit, connectedness, and relatedness never leave us:

> This belonged to me or I belonged to it. The pain of the day I was taken away came flooding back. I cried the day I was sent away and I was crying now because I was back. As, I wiped the tears, in the distance I could hear the currawongs. They're still here. Some things returned while other things never left. (pp. 165–166)

We are reliant on the Elders to remember us and to connect us to the collective spirit. We also have a responsibility to listen and learn. As mentioned previously, we take this responsibility quite seriously. When an Elder speaks, we listen until they have finished (Walter, yarn, September 2007). We also have

a responsibility to listen to Elders if they come to us in spirit form. Gladys Milroy and Jill Milroy (2008), who are mother and daughter, insist:

> Sometimes these stories come as a dream, or messages from our old people whose spirits are still with us, even though they have died. A dream can be a warning, given because you've gone the wrong way. Or there may be something you must do. It can be a way of reassuring and comforting us by letting us know we are going the right way. (p. 22)

They are telling us that the Elders do not have to be present in the physical world to guide us; that we have a responsibility to slow down, to look for advice from our Elders, and to think about what comes to us in spirit form (Milroy & Milroy, 2008). We rely more heavily on the Elders than they do on us. We need them to keep our collective spirit alive, to continue to tell us stories (oral and written) to ensure that we remember what they have been through, to give us what we have now, to keep us grounded and united as a people, and to remind us that unified we are stronger.

Humour

> I loved hearing these stories, and I'd sit with my grandfather for hours as he told them over and over. He was a master storyteller. They were always funny stories, but the humour came from lives where the only options were to laugh or cry. Aboriginal humour is like that; we're always telling jokes against ourselves. (Grant, 2002, p. 37)

Storytelling plays a key part in the formation and transmission of knowledge. Crucial to storytelling is humour, through which people have built a strong sense of unity and identity. Duncan (2014), in her doctoral thesis *The Role of Aboriginal Humour in Cultural Survival and Resistance,* found that our connectedness and relatedness are interconnected and dependent on each other. She states that "culture and humour are interconnected in Aboriginal culture" (2014, p. 95). Throughout the continent, people feel a strong sense of belonging because they understand each other's sense of humour, which contributes to our collective spirit and is ingrained in daily life. There are few conversations that do not contain humour. Hurley (Hurley, 2019b) states:

> Regardless of the situation, laughter always reigns. Humour plays an important part in our lives. Aboriginal peoples have been laughing at life and its circumstances for millennia.

Humour is inclusive, full of irony, and reinforces our sense of self. Our identity is strengthened by finding the humorous side of past and present disasters. Connie Nungulla McDonald (McDonald & Finnane, 1996) tells how the army wanted to build a military base on her mission. The Elders did not want this, and it caused great distress, but what she most remembered was being distraught that her lolly supply would end. This story demonstrates how we remember life-changing events through humour.

Lillian Holt (2009) researched how we use humour. She found that humour is a strategy and a strength that has outcomes advantageous to our collective spirit:

> That's the way it is. Integrated into everyday existence. Everyday conversation. Everyday survival. It's about the collective. The community. Humour is shared within the group. Which is probably why there aren't too many Aboriginal comedians, because it happens "on the ground," locally, so to speak. It's spontaneous and part of ordinary life, happening in the here and now! (p. 82)

Since Holt (2009) undertook her research, our humour has exploded onto the "mainstream" stage. We have numerous stand-up comedians, such as Sean Choolburra, who is probably our most recognised "Doctor" of Aboriginal humour. He spoke at a James Cook University graduation and used our satire, humour, and sarcasm to celebrate and entice students to study and follow their dreams. We have a plethora of comedy films and TV shows, with *Black Comedy* being one of my favourites that demonstrates our contemporary humour. We have PhD graduates such as Perl Duncan (2014) who have dedicated their doctoral studies to researching our humour. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine all our contemporary examples of our humour. What is important here is how it informs our connectedness and relatedness and, thus, how humour is a piece in the puzzle that is our social theory.

Humour is used strategically to ensure people stay strong. Throughout our history, humour has been a prominent mechanism used to emphasise both the importance of the story and to demonstrate the strength of our survival (Kwaymullina, 2008). Duncan (2014) argues that we use humour not only to transmit the hardship of our past experiences but also to enjoy the mundaneness of everyday life. Through this, humour promotes strength in our children by passing on resilience, not bitterness. Humour was employed to mitigate the effects of the atrocities of the past while at the same time ensuring they were not forgotten. As van den Berg (2005) explains:

> Aborigines are notorious for seeing the funny side of life and being able to laugh in the face of adversity. Perhaps the ability to laugh at each other and themselves was what enabled Aboriginal people to survive the holocaust that was colonisation. (p. 2)

Huggins (1987) concurs in her research:

> [H]umour allows for relief and pleasure, and this helps to explain why it has been notably present among people who seem to outsiders to have little to laugh about. Humour has allowed Black people to laugh, thereby gaining some perspective upon their own anger. Things can be so funny, yet so deadly serious. (p. 5)

Similarly, McMillan (yarn, July 2008) says, "the strategic deployment of humour allowed many individuals to be able to pass on their stories from a grounded place rather than a bitter place." She

describes how the use of humour helped her to remember a story and to remind her of the Elders" strength to endure the tribulations and to see the positive.

Gary Foley (yarn, September 2007) yarned to me about his use of humour. He employs humour as a strategy to teach non-Aboriginal people about our history. He invited me to one of his lectures, which I found quite amusing and entertaining. Yes, he spoke of our horrendous past and even showed footage of the police trying to remove the tent embassy in Canberra, yet he did this in a manner that appealed to my sense of humour. However, as I was sitting there, I was thinking, "Wow, this must be really hard going for people who do not belong to our society; they must be offended." I looked around the lecture theatre and discovered that the students were completely engrossed in his lecture and were laughing along with his humour. Holt (2009) says this is what our humour does; it draws people in and is infectious. We are able to use it to educate people in matters that are quite serious and may be devastating. The students lined up to thank Gary Foley for his lecture and for the way he delivered it. I heard them say that they had been to lectures on this topic given by non-Aboriginal people and felt as if the lecturer was directing blame at them. However, because of Foley's sense of humour, the students left the lecture theatre quite excited and entertained; they had been educated in such a manner that they were likely to retain the information he had imparted.

Hurley (2019a) concurs with Gary's way of delivering some hard truths about the society in which we have found ourselves:

> Yet humour is also a way of giving voice to Aboriginal people, of telling the truth. What interests me, makes me laugh the most, and what I believe should be a focus and obligation, is taking the opportunity to educate through humour. Not being scared to tell it like it is.

In writing and teaching subjects such as "Australian History from an Aboriginal Perspective," "Cultural Intelligence," and "Learning in a Digital Environment," I also deliver some hard truths by using humour. I have reflected a lot on why I do this, and I have a few reasons. The first is that it is my default position. I use humour constantly in my daily life. The second is that teaching in this style makes the room safer for me to deliver these truths. Finally, I have found that my students respond better and take on board the deep messages I want them to learn when I use humour. I am not alone in this.

Holt (2009) also argues that humour is a form of social lubrication. This is illustrated in the example above. Gary Foley (2007), in his lecture, was able to use humour to "lubricate" our history to ensure it was retained by the students but did not overwhelm them. Humour can lubricate an unpalatable truth to bring a new perspective to the surface (Holt, 2009). Humour also brings relief to both the storyteller and the listener, for speaking of the bleak history of our people could bring only negative emotions that we do not necessarily wish to convey or relive in their entirety.

The cover of Leah Purcell's (Pursell, 2002) book *Black Chicks Talking* pictures her laughing. This immediately draws a reader to the back cover, where it says:

> Meet a new generation of Aboriginal women as Leah Purcell speaks to nine black chicks making their mark on contemporary Australia. Although they are from diverse backgrounds, all of these women share a passionate, often humorous, approach to the highs and lows of life, and a strong determination to succeed.

The first line of the introduction is humorous and enticing: "Bloody hell, second book!" (Purcell, 2002). The humour employed throughout the book by both Leah and the women she yarned with is relaxed and raw. She makes fun of the fact that Liza Fraser-Gooda is from a "normal" family:

> Well, I'll be blow'd, you mean to tell me we can have a normal black family that fits into society and lives a fulfilling life? Can't be hey, something must be wrong somewhere, surely. No! (p. xi)

We use humour to tease each other and to pick flaws in ourselves. We mock each other, and then we quickly dismiss it (Holt, 2009). This strategic use of humour makes light of stereotypes and turns them inside out. Duncan (2014) contends that our humour is a strong sense where we can soothe and nourish our collective spirit. Those who are really listening can learn what we are really like beyond what the stereotypes say we are.

The strength we attain collectively from our humour is enormous. When I yarned with Faye McMillan (yarn, September 2008) and asked her what our humour was, she replied "too funny, too deadly," and went on to say that it was a great strength that we possessed. We use humour to ground ourselves, to keep us living in the here and now while not forgetting our past (Holt, 2009). It also stops us from getting overcome by success or failure. The strength we gain from humour allows us to keep ourselves in check and not get too carried away with our own importance. We are not too shy to make fun of ourselves or each other, and this keeps us grounded. We often say, "You've got no shame," followed by gales of laughter. Humour is our strength because it is spiritually liberating and nourishing. In fact, Holt (2009) argues that it is essential for our spiritual survival and that it is ingrained in our ontology. She says that she cannot prove this and does not intend to do so, but she does argue that humour leads to laughter and that laughter nourishes the spirit. Duncan (2014) found in her research into our humour that, "There is nothing that brings out our humanity as much as a sense of humour. Indeed, humour, joy and happiness is when humans are most spiritual" (p. 222). As our humour is collective, so too is our laughter. It is nourishment for our collective spirit.

The effects of our humour are numerous. We can take a serious situation and manipulate it to suit ourselves through humour. I have been in several situations where a discussion has been quite tense, and then one of us will make a humorous remark, and the whole meeting is then in fits of laughter. Holt (2009) talks of how, when she returned to work in one of our organisations, the first thing that struck her as she walked in the door was the amount of laughter she could hear. This is true in my own workplace; our corridor is usually filled with laughter, even though this is not something we consciously set out to do. As Holt (2009) explains, our humour is infectious:

> It was impossible to sit around with a bunch of *blackfellas* with a tape recorder and not join in their laughter, not join in the conversation. It was beyond my skin to do so. And this *blackfella* did not want to be left out of the fun. (p. 86)

Not wanting to miss out on enjoying the fun or providing the humour draws us into a conversation. This also happens in my home. When we have mob over, we all compete to be funny while at the same time appreciating each other's humour. However, the end result is always the same: we all end up with sore muscles from laughing. Van den Berg (2005) thinks that our humour is infectious also to people from outside our society. Through film, theatre, and stand-up comedy, many of us have been able to tell our stories. She argues that our thespians are so skilled in the art of humour that those who attend their performances try to relate our stories to their friends.

This section has shown that humour is vital to our collective spirit and helps to keep us united as a people. It is a strategy and a strength that has real, positive outcomes. Sharing stories empowers the collective spirit and contributes to a sense of unity. Humour accommodates our stories and ensures that they are not only enjoyed but remembered. Humour is used to celebrate our lives, to pass on stories to our children, and to educate those who are not part of our society. Humour is a healing and thriving mechanism and an essential teaching tool. It liberates and nourishes our ontology and reinforces our collective spirit, and it spreads.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined kinship, sharing, time, Elders, and humour. All emerged as important elements in my yarns, reading, and in my life. They are not exclusive and cannot exist on their own. However, together, they are significant components of our collective spirit, our unity, and our commonalities on a continental scale. They are the practical expression of Martin's (2001) ways of being. In becoming part of a kinship system, children learn that we do not exist only as individuals but as part of a larger whole. We locate ourselves by utilising the oral or written introduction, not by simply stating our names but by establishing who we are part of. We make connections between ourselves and others and thus establish trust and familiarity. I have shown that we share more than just material wealth. We share our time, we share knowledge, and we share ourselves. Our life cycle is a continuum of sharing, whether it is our Elders sharing knowledge and time with us, us sharing our time and knowledge with our community, or sharing a joke with our workmates. We ensure that children understand that sharing is part of our core being.

Time is of the essence in our society, and we name it in order to own it. Once it is named, we collectively understand what it means to society. We know that things cannot be rushed and that we must wait until all the elements are present and ready before we can move forward. Time is also intergenerational, and we understand that others have had more time in this world and can impart their wisdom to us and that we have a responsibility to take this into the future. Our Elders are also vital to the social structure as they are the ones who hold and transmit our stories, who join our past to our

future. They are the ones whom we seek guidance and approval from, and they are the people whom we hold in the utmost respect. We respect them by looking after them and giving them titles such as "Aunty" and "Uncle." They are continually around us in physical and spiritual forms.

Finally, we have humour, a great force that is also a strategy used to educate people and those who are not part of our society. It is ingrained in stories and has given us strength to stay united. It liberates and invigorates our sense of reality and reinforces our collective spirit. The five elements of the ways of doing that I have analysed here are not new to our people; they were and are part of our daily activity. They nourish our collective spirit, and they are attributes we are extremely proud of. However, if people come to know the world in which they live by acting in it and developing relationships, what knowledge do they produce, how do we know it to be true, and how is it passed on? In the next chapter, by further developing Karen Martin's ways of knowing, I answer these questions, addressing Aboriginal epistemology (knowledge), ontology (reality), and storytelling (transmission).

Chapter Six
Ways of Knowing: Epistemology, Ontology, and Storytelling

In the previous chapter, I discussed ways of doing, particularly the social practices concerned with the formation and transmission of the collective spirit. I explained how our ways of doing shape people's sense of reality and how people come to know the world in which they live by acting in it. Knowledge is constructed through experience, and experience helps shape and change knowledge reciprocally. As society and ourselves are living entities, so too is our ways of knowing. Knowing changes as society changes; it adapts. As Moreton-Robinson and Walter (2009) point out:

> Knowledge is experiential, holistic and evolving, and Indigenous knowledge systems are an integral part of living in the world. Epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies are interwoven into this knowledge system... [which] continue to develop as living, relational schemas. (p. 3)

Moreton-Robinson and Walter (2009) provide an excellent point of departure for this chapter, which examines our ways of knowing by looking at Aboriginal epistemology (knowledge), ontology (reality), and storytelling (transmission). When these three concepts are understood in relation to each other, they shape our social theory and locate it firmly within our collective spirit.

Epistemology

> Clearly, Indigenous epistemologies, throughout Australia have an absolute sense of Belonging, of relatedness through language, use of metaphor and story. Networks and patterns are fundamental to the expression of thought. These refer to the spiritual essence that imbues the relationship of people to their country with meaning…a religious expression of fundamental spiritual origins and the place of phenomena in the world (Langton, 2000, pp. 260-261).

Epistemology is concerned with knowledges and answers the questions: What are knowledges, how do we know what we know, and how do we acquire knowledges? Unpacking our epistemological commonalities for this thesis has been a very complex and time-consuming task. It required much *Dadirri*, and I have written and deleted this section on numerous occasions. My initial thought was that these questions of epistemic value seemed like "gammin"[4] questions to be asking myself and my intellectual Elders. I thought the answers were so obvious that surely I did not need to dedicate a whole section of this chapter to discuss the relationship between mind and experience. As it turns out, these

[4] "Utilised in multiple ways including when someone is joking, being fake/pretend, not true to themselves or who they are and acting out', Deadly Wears. (2021). *Deadly definitions: Gammon/Gammin*. https://deadlywears.com.au/our-yarn-blog/f/deadly-definitions---gammongammin

are indeed the hardest to answer. As I set about researching these questions through my lived experience, yarns, and readings, I realised that our epistemology is not easy to unpack and then convey in words. These tasks require diving into our tacit knowledge. Knowledges are felt and acted out, and are so deeply personal that it feels rude to try to dive deeper. This version of us is not written out procedurally, and much of the academic literature speaks around the concept of epistemology but does not break it down (Arbon, 2006; Blair, 2015; Foley, 2003, 2006, 2018; Martin, 2001; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Noon & De Napoli, 2022). For these scholars, the purpose of their writings was not to delve deep into our epistemology. I also do not wish to dedicate this whole thesis to epistemology; however, I do need to explore this to a certain degree to investigate an Aboriginal social theory. So, here I am trying to convey the best way I can without intruding or disrespecting our people's innate selves.

Moreton-Robinson (Moreton-Robinson, 2000) reminds us that relationality is the core of our epistemology. As she asserts:

> My coming to know and knowing is constituted through what I have termed relationality. 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, co-operation and social memory. (p. 16)

West (2000) avows, "Aborigines, the traditional "owners" and "first owned" of this continent already know the origin, nature, methods and limits of our knowledge systems" (p. 237). As a result of this, he contends that our epistemology is deeply rooted in the "unbreakable" connectedness and relatedness we have to the Mother and the spiritual world (West, 2000). We are acutely aware that our first knowledges came from the spiritual world and are represented through the Mother. Kerwin (Kerwin, 2011) concurs and asserts that, as a result of this, we receive deep spiritual gratification. Our epistemologies are deeply grounded in the Mother, and this guides how our social structure and behaviours are carried out. Accordingly, our contemporary epistemology is clearly built upon this connectedness and relatedness.

Wendy Brady (yarn, August 2007) and Greg Lehman (yarn, September 2007) are both emphatic that knowledge not be confused with information. Brady (yarn, August 2007) said possessing a lot of information does not mean being knowledgeable. She explains that it is only when we have the cognitive ability to process information and to understand why this particular information is important that it becomes knowledge. I get goosebumps and feel empty, and a sense of danger comes over me when I visit certain Countries. I feel as though I need to be removed from this place immediately. This is information. However, I do not know exactly why this happens. I do not know what has happened on this Country before, and I do not know how this comes to be. This is knowledge that I do not have. In our life cycle, we are inundated with information, but Brady (yarn, August 2007) contends we only turn a very small percentage of this into knowledge. There is simply not enough time for us to explore the significance and relationality of every piece of information. Rote learning requires the learner to

memorise a great deal of information. However, the learner rarely turns this information into knowledge as time is not taken to engage in *dadirri* on the information and to see its significance concerning already acquired knowledge and our place in the world.

Lehman (yarn, September 2007) is particularly concerned with who has the knowledges. In our society, no one person holds all or even most of the knowledge available to us. However, we trust that signified people hold particular knowledges and that we can seek them out to answer the questions relevant to their knowledge and to know it if we are permitted to acquire such knowledges. Sometimes knowing that they have this knowledge, that it is in competent and appropriate hands, is solution enough. Martin (2001) agrees, saying that all people have particular social tasks, and these require different knowledges. There are knowledges that we will never come to know but may have information about, in the sense that we know where the knowledge is, and what it is broadly about, even if we do not know what it contains.

Similarly, West (1998) argues that our epistemology is also about understanding that there are limits to understanding. It is not the social task of all people to transform all forms of information into knowledge for everybody. Foley (Foley, 2003) contends that respecting that we will never know everything and trusting that others know what needs to be known shapes our epistemology. We do not seek answers to questions that are not ours to ask, such as a woman inquiring about men's business and vice versa. I, for one, do not feel comfortable looking at rock art from different Countries. When I first did the Ubirr[5] walk and saw a big group of people staring up into the rocky shelters, my natural curiosity took over. I looked up and I immediately had a physiological response of goosebumps and a sense of fear. Something deep down inside of me told me to not only look away but move away immediately as this was not my story to view; it was not my knowledge to know. We respect that some knowledges are privileged and that there are knowledges that we may not be privy to and so do not have the right to ask or know about.

Heckenburg (2016) provides another dynamic to exploring and yarning about our epistemology, and this is through our ways of "seeing." We cannot answer our epistemological questions without acknowledging that "Within an Aboriginal way of seeing the world, the world is unified, moral values and notions of the environment are all tied in together" (Heckenburg, 2016, p. 4). For us to know and understand how we know, we must "see." The term "see" acknowledges that our knowledge is alive and can be physically seen by those with the ability. Our ways of seeing are inherent to our ways of knowing and exemplify the cyclical nature of our connectedness and relatedness and how we are a part of the collective spirit.

[5] Ubirr is in Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory. It is where the traditional owners used to camp beneath the rock shelves. It has several significant sites which contain rock art. The walk takes you through rock shelves and you end up on top the rock shelves and you look out onto the Nadab floodplains and escarpments.

What is Knowledge?

> Both traditional knowledge and contemporary Indigenous knowledge systems are the result of evolving practices, encapsulating how many people have negotiated ever-changing landscapes and environments through ice ages, food insecurity, drought and colonisation. Without adaptability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples could not claim to be the oldest continuous culture to exist. (Noon & De Napoli, 2022, p. 69)

If our picture of reality is the sum of our experiences, the question of how we experience the world must be answered. Sure, we experience the world through living our day-to-day lives, but there are other elements at play here. The human body has the senses of touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste, and we experience the world through them. However, they cannot be relied upon entirely. As I have discussed previously, information is not knowledge. Western psychology suggests that our senses can be unreliable as what we see may not be real, as in the case of optical illusions and mirages. Taste may not provide a reliable representation, as many people perceive what something should taste like differently. When I first tasted raspberries, my reaction was to say they did not taste like raspberry because my knowledge was based on the taste of a raspberry lolly. The senses alone cannot be relied upon to give us an accurate picture of reality.

Even when we can agree on what our senses tell us, experience itself is open to interpretation, and art is a good example of this. A picture may represent an artist's creation story, but to somebody else in the community, it may be a family portrait. However, to somebody from another community, it may be a map, and yet another may see it as decoration to be placed on the wall and admired. These different meanings all depend on experience and perception. The first observation is by the artist who set out to paint their creation story. The second observer may be somebody who has been taught by their Elders that this style of painting represents people's families. The third may be somebody who is also an artist but whose method of painting is to paint maps of their Country, and the third may be somebody who has bought it for purely aesthetic purposes. These examples demonstrate that reality is shaped both by individual experiences and collective practices in a society.

One can pass on an experience to someone else, and this may shape their perception. To share a reality does not mean that one must share an experience. Experiences can be passed on in many different forms. Once the experience has been shared, it can and does shape the receiver's perception until they have a similar experience. However, once an individual has had an experience, it can reinforce the pre-perception formed through somebody else or the experience can alter the perception completely. So, knowledge is something that exists both internally and externally of the self. It cannot be any other way. We gain external experiences, and we internalise them, and then we share the experience with others.

West (West, 2000) argues that our knowledge is also universal because our "first knowledge" is intrinsically tied both to the spiritual world and to the land. First knowledge is created by our ancestors and is the core of the knowledges we now have. As West (2000) states:

> First Knowledge is the totality of Aboriginal thought, conceptualisation, psyche, morality, behaviour, social order and humanity. It is a combination of all things that make Aborigines members of the world community. (p. 39)

This first knowledge is a living thing, an amalgamation of our collective spirit, all of the entities of Mother Earth and the skyways combined. It gives structure to society, and it gives people a deep-seated respect for the inter-relationships between humans, the land, the waterways, the weather, the sky, all the entities, and the spirits. Neale (2022) also highlights how deeply connected land and sky Country are in the universality of our first knowledges:

> The skies, like the land are libraries of archived knowledge essential for an oral culture, where each star cluster or constellation forms a recognisable image triggering stories that release required knowledge. In other words, these associative images – including emus, turtles, saucepans and various characters such as the Seven Sisters- act as mnemonics where stars can be likened to a book that will, on cue, release the traditions and knowledges associated with them. (pp. 5–6)

As individuals and as social groups, we build upon this first knowledge. However, as Moreton-Robinson and Walter (2009) and West (2000) argue, knowledge can never be owned: it can only be augmented, safe-guarded, used, and shared, much like Country and time. Even the keepers of knowledge cannot own, sell, or buy knowledge. Knowledge is not a commodity. It is pointless to own something that is far too susceptible to change. As Martin (yarn, September 2007) explained to me in no uncertain terms, if knowledge is not useful to society, we discard it. It is alive, adapting, and changing as we do.

This is not to say that knowledge, even first knowledge, is not formalised and codified, not even orally. Our knowledge is twofold: it is seen, and it is felt (Arbon, yarn, September 2007). Seen knowledge can only be apprehended by those taught to see it, such as the knowledge of the land we learn to see through creation stories and how we use the landscape as a metaphor. Felt knowledge, described by Arbon (yarn, September 2007) in the previous chapter as a "feeling in your gut," is immediate and almost pre-cognitive. Felt knowledge includes the knowledge that one is Aboriginal and belongs to a group of people. Anderson (2018) explains this "gut feeling" of belonging to the collective spirit:

> I knew my background was significant because I could feel that it was… Then I remember in Grade 5 we were given dot paintings to colour in, and I felt a sense of pride – but no grounds on which to claim my pride. I knew I

> identified with this thing that I loved, but without the knowledge of how to.
> Or something. (pp. 6–7)

West (2000) says that knowledge is a "personal and living paradigm"; it has a "cultural personality" that is continuously evolving and adapting (p. 39). We continually grow and have new experiences that shape and reshape our epistemology as part of our cultural personality. Knowledge shapes group and individual identity through a lived collaborative experience. It informs us that we are part of the collective spirit and that we have specific tasks to accomplish, such as being a child, sister, daughter, aunt, cousin, mother, community member, worker, and boss. Sometimes, our knowledge obliges us to do jobs simultaneously. These multiple knowledges constitute a "web of relatedness" (Arbon, yarn, September 2007) in which different types of knowledge coexist and make our relatedness functional (Martin, 2001). In this way, we understand and value the obligations to, respect for, and reciprocity with our society and land. Our relatedness is bonded through our collective experiences.

However, contained in this relatedness is always incompleteness (Arbon, 2006); our knowledges are never complete as society is never complete. Society is never stationary but is constantly in motion, as is our knowledge. Society is constantly changing. As the world around us changes, so does our knowledge. Contemporary knowledge is different from our grandparents' knowledge, and their knowledge is different from their grandparents' knowledge. Even in one life cycle, we grow, change, and interpret knowledge differently. We customise this knowledge according to our present needs and interpretations. We have understandings about survival that we learn as children, but concurrently, we are being versed in social knowledge that explains to us how we are to behave in certain circumstances. As seen in the previous chapter's discussion on kinship, even during childhood, we start to reinforce our social knowledge with each other by enacting it with one another. Knowledge is experiential and is a human construct. We are both defined and constrained by it, and we define and constrain it.

Thus, as Arbon (yarn, September 2007) argues, while we are constrained by "the old ways" of knowing – reliant on ceremonies, the kinship complex and being able to read and speak for Country – our experience has taught us how to enlarge these by incorporating other knowledges, such as formal education, continental politics, and understanding capitalism. She says that we now have a whole new way of knowing informed by the old ways, which (as mentioned elsewhere in this thesis) she has coined "the new old way." This is now appearing in new media such as television, theatre, movies, radio, publications, and education (and hopefully a bona fide Aboriginal social theory). Aboriginal knowledge is deep, long, and ancient. It is built by being in tune with all the elements and a deep respect for all things in the world. It does not prioritise humans over anything, including the sacred and spiritual world. We are simply present and custodians.

How Do We Acquire Knowledge?

> Indigenous Knowings are dependent on Story to transmit and grow, that the storytellers and the listeners are connected through Story and that Storys have many dimensions, many perspectives which all contribute to Indigenous Knowings. (Blair, 2015, p. xxiv)

Ford (Ford, 2005) suggests that we acquire knowledge and build on it through metaphors. People speak metaphorically when they use two notions that would not immediately be considered similar to demonstrate that they have a commonality. Metaphors are used to demonstrate that they are indeed alike to make a particular point, or they are used to conceal knowledge that the listener may not be ready for. Metaphors make a mental picture of the words being spoken. As Arbon (2008) explains:

> Metaphors allow understanding. Metaphors allow knowledge to be grouped, meaning to be explored and responsible representation. Metaphors carry both knowledge that exists (such as stories) or knowledge that is a presence (in that hill for example). In other words, visible and invisible forms of knowledge is more easily understood. (p. 88)

Indeed, much social knowledge is acquired through stories about the landscape. The knowledge is not only heard, but can also be seen in land formations and then linked to social knowledge (Behrendt, yarn, October 2007). The land is used as a metaphor to convey how to engage in social behaviour and demonstrates the ramifications if one does engage in undesired behaviour. This can be seen in stories from Arnhem Land to the bottom of Tasmania. The story of the Five Islands in Wollongong is a great example of this. The islands were created because five daughters had undesired behaviour, and their father threw them out to sea (Coomaditichi United Aboriginal Corporation, 2016). This story is told to ensure children have desired behaviour because, otherwise, there were consequences.

Children can more easily gain a deeper understanding of knowledge when it is passed on through metaphor. This also encourages *dadirri* as they must contemplate each part of the metaphor and then consider how its parts fit together to make sense. Even in adulthood, people use metaphors to explain social phenomena (McMillan, yarn, July 2008). McMillan uses metaphor to explain how she understands the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. She spoke of an hourglass with Elders at the top and herself as an adult community member in the narrow centre through which the sand must pass in order to reach the collective (society) at the bottom. The Elders are the ones who decide what should filter down to her; they decide what knowledge she needs to thrive in society and maintain a strong collective spirit. She is in the centre as she needs the guidance of the Elders, but she also has a responsibility to make certain that society maintains its collective spirit. Society is at the bottom, and she filters knowledge into it. However, at any time, the hourglass may be turned upside down, and

society then filters into her, and she reports back to the Elders, who decide what knowledge is and what is not (McMillan, yarn, July 2008).

Elders decide what knowledge should be available to society. Arbon (yarn, September, 2007) says that knowledge is about "doing," and as those responsible for knowledge in a society that revolves around doing, this is how Elders determine what knowledge is. Doing means actively experiencing the world around us. As discussed in Chapter Five, we learn through experience, and then we take time to turn our social activities and the information involved in them into knowledge to be passed on. Nevertheless, we have many different ways of knowing. So far, I have discussed the acquisition of knowledge through experience and metaphors, but there is another vital way we attain deep knowledge, and that is by means of the spirit world.

The spirit world can visit people at any time and provide knowledge on many different issues:

> One of the ways we know and make sense of the world around us is through stories given to us from the Dreaming. Knowing may come in the depths of sleep, between sleeping and waking, or when we are awake but restful and quiet. In these times it is easier for us to listen to those other ways of knowing that are available to us. This is when we can tap into the deep knowledge all around us, not just the surface (Milroy & Milroy, 2008, pp. 22-23).

At times, people may not understand what has just happened; they may need time for their minds to absorb what is being acquired, and then they may need to engage in *Dadirri* in order to grasp the relevance of this knowledge. Webb (2003) explains how, on the night of his father's burial, his father came to give him the important message that he was happy and on his way:

> During the night my wife and I woke to the dog laughing and it was my father's laugh. This lasted about ten minutes. We just let him go. He was having a good time, my Dad, his spirit was coming through our little dog. He laughed so clearly, he was happy and on his way. (p. 68)

According to Webb (2003), when somebody dies, they nearly always return in spirit form to let their families know they are on their journey. They may return to impart knowledge that they did not have a chance to share whilst still alive.

We acquire knowledge using metaphor as it allows us to see how the knowledge is relevant to us. Metaphors are told to us using storytelling. Through this, we experience the knowledge, and it then becomes a part of us. We can only acquire the knowledge if our Elders decide it is time and appropriate. We can also acquire knowledge through the spirit world, where our ancestors and passed Elders may visit us from time to time to pass on the knowledge they determine we need at that time. Our knowledge is alive and instrumental to our ways of knowing, being, and doing.

How Do We Know What We Know?

> When I reflect on what being Aboriginal means for me personally, I know this means: being strong and proud, having a strong connection to my home country and its cultural history, caring for others, my family and community, and having respect for my Elders. #DefineAboriginal. (Bates, 2018, p. 22)

We know what we know because we experience and, therefore, act. We know what we know because we are connected to mob and mob is connected to us. We are connected to the entities, the Mother and the skyways. How we know what we know is an extremely complex question to answer in words but a very simple question to feel and act in the world. It is our tacit knowledge. Hartley (2018) tries to answer how she knows through poetry:

> I remember Aboriginal is a colonial construct.
> I know very well my law and culture.
> I am Ku Ku Yalanji.
> I am Karranjal.
> I am proud.
> Born of ancient song.
> My blood is in the country and the ancestors know me there.
> I remember, beneath this skin
> I am continuance.
> I am resistance.
> And... yes
> I am living memory.
> Some call me "Aborigine." (p. 114)

De Napoli (Noon & De Napoli, 2022) explains that knowledge can be known through our learning. By learning, we know there is more and more knowledge out there:

> Aboriginal oral traditions encode knowledge in endless layers that extend so deeply that once you feel you have learnt enough, you realise that you have only scratched the surface. (Noon & De Napoli, 2022, p. 22)

This highlights that the very act of acquiring knowledge and realising there is much more to know is itself a testimony of "we know, what we know," and we can feel confident in this knowing. The Mother and our Elders are living examples of our past and present knowledges.

While there is no doubt that Elders hold a crucial position in the construction and transmission of knowledge, there is another sense in which knowledge is a birthright, that knowing lies within us all. Unfortunately, this way of knowing has been discarded by many of the world's cultures. It has been removed from their formal knowledge and learning systems (Milroy & Milroy, 2008) and needs to be

restored. We all have the ability to know; we just need the pathway cleared. Coral Edwards (1990) was interviewed on the ABC program *Being Aboriginal: Raised to Think White*. She has felt the devastation of the Stolen Generations through her mother being taken, herself being taken, and her daughter being taken. She argues this point:

> Aboriginal people are getting a lot stronger; they're feeling like their own people. They're uniting more. And they're doing a lot to rejuvenate the culture, just bring it to people's eyes. Once people know about where they come from – their country, their tribes – and they've met their families, then they've got it inside, and they know a little bit about traditional society and how traditional people lived: that's all they need. (Edwards, 1990, p. 16)

We share a commonality of knowledge because we all know that we have a connection to land whether or not it has been taught to us (Arbon, yarn, September 2007). Once we realise that we belong to a people, we immediately understand that there is an attachment through them to the land. We know this because of the people who have gone before, who have developed and shaped our collective spirit, which is the core of how we know what we know. We know we have a shared history, we know we have a shared sense of community, we all know that we have ancestors who have gone before us, descendants who will come after us, and we know that we have stories that tie all these entities together. As Kerwin (2011) attests, our ancestors ensured they left behind our knowing:

> They acculturated the land by painting it, by managing the resources, by walking it, by singing about it, by mapping it, by naming it and by developing stories of place. (p. 250)

Austin demonstrates how those who have gone before us have paved a pathway to bring our mob back, "We've been teaching the younger women and the women that were taken away, teaching the people the lost culture" (The Coober Pedy Women Senior Elders, 2003, p. 17). As Austin illustrates, even if people have not received the historical stories during their childhood, there is always the opportunity to become a conscious part of the collective spirit that contains the core elements that are alive and around if one is able and willing to access them. Heckenburg (2011) reinforces the notion of how those who have been removed from the collective spirit can find their way back:

> A conscious, self determined, rational, contemporary Aboriginal person is still governed by this premise of behaving with wisdom, this wisdom being legalistic in nature, and the repercussions of wrong doing being the creation of uncertainty. Aboriginal people who are separated from this view of the world because they are *stolen, fostered* or in some other ways *alienated* from culture quickly pick up these notions within their personal acculturation process in mixing with other Aboriginal people. (p. 112)

Our sense of sharing continually binds us to impart knowledge to others who have come back to our society and bring them into the collective spirit.

Many of those who have grown up with the connectedness and relatedness and have felt the collective spirit their whole life discussed how there was no real moment someone sat them down and explained they were Aboriginal, and this is how we know what we know. They simply existed in the world. As Foster (2018) articulates:

> I don't ever remember being told I was Aboriginal. I just was. There was no one defining moment; it was just one of the pieces of grass that intertwined with the others to create the dilly bag that held me together. I had no idea what it meant to be Aboriginal because I had no idea what it meant not to be Aboriginal. (p. 86)

Our connectedness includes, according to Martin (2001), "the ways in which knowledges are retained and expressed, expanded and contracted according to social, political, historical and spatial dimensions of individuals and the group" (p. 87). Martin (2001) is saying that knowledge is reinforced through our collective spirit and our teachings. We live our epistemology in our daily lives. What we need to know and what we do not need anymore is shaped, tested, and verified by day-to-day life and persistently reinforced by the collective because we are constantly around our people. We trust in our Elders that what we are taught is what we should know (Bunda, yarn, September 2007; (Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009).

In essence, our epistemology is a living entity. It adapts and changes as society changes. It cannot exist without us, and we cannot exist without it. To know is to live, and to live is to know. Moreton-Robinson and Walter (2009) argue that our reality is dependent on our experience and how we use this experience to shape our worldview. We experience the world through our perspective, and the perspective is shaped through our experience. This makes it evident that we have multiple "truths" as we have multiple experiences, and as a collective, we have multiple perspectives. Society cannot have one "truth" as reality is experienced by people in many different ways through many different media. No two people can experience something exactly the same. However, if we experience multiple truths, does this mean that there are many realities? The next section moves away from knowledge, its construction, and comprehension to consider the nature of our reality and our being.

Ontology

> In Aboriginal thinking, Country is not just land, it is a worldview. It is more than land as expressed in Western view of land as landscape. It is much about the visible as it is about the invisible, the animate as the inanimate, whether it be a grain of sand, a rock, a bee or a human. "Everything and everyone has a place." (Neale, 2022, p. 1)

Martin (2001) argues that our ontology is fundamental to our ways of knowing and that while there are different ontologies around the continent, they contain some fundamental similarities. It is

these similarities that this section seeks to uncover and bring into the conversation. This section explores what it means to be, what it means to exist, and whether we have language sufficient to explain our ontology. Based on what has been uncovered in the previous chapters, I can say that we exist because our world exists and depends on our existence as we do on it. We are because we have kinship relationships that include our own existence and the existence of the world beyond ourselves. We exist because we have a shared history that is part of the past and future of the world around us. We continue to be because we have connections to each other, to the land, sky, sea, waterways, climate, and the spirits, and they have connections to us. We exist because we have a collective spirit that contains our ancestors and links us to our descendants. We exist as our connectedness and relatedness to each other across the continent is too strong to deny existence.

It is true that a human cannot be alone. Humans are fundamentally dependent on each other and on the world. We depend on each other physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We rely on the world for soil that is fertile, water that is drinkable, sunlight to nourish our souls, and a deep-rooted connection. We are dependent on others to grow the food we need to survive and to know where and how to gather the resources our well-being requires. We need the world to provide materials and each other to construct structures that will keep us safe, warm, and connected. We depend on people to make continuous developments in farming and construction so that society does not become stagnant and unfed. We rely on each other to nourish our hearts and to meet our emotional needs through love, reciprocity, and intellectual stimulation. We are obligated to guardians and other adults during our early years to provide us with food, shelter, love, support, and guidance, and we rely on our ancestors to nourish our spirit. We depend on each other to regulate our behaviour. As Heckenberg (2011) contends:

> Within an Aboriginal ontology, behaving correctly has positive implications in mundane life and spiritual reality. Respect is at the heart of relationships to land and people and nature. (p. 110)

Human beings cannot exist in isolation, and we cannot exist unless the world and its entities exist. We require rules and boundaries, for we are holistic and collective, and thus, so is our being.

The world is a living entity that is unable to survive without its components, and the components cannot survive without the world. All entities are dependent on each other for continued survival. Therefore, as Martin (2001) explains, no one element takes precedence over another.

> [W]e believe that the country makes the people as much as the people make the country. We believe that country is not only the people, but is also the elements of skies, waterways, animals, plants, weather and spirits. (p. 86)

Noon and De Napoli (2022) reiterate this explanation of our ontological position:

> When these beliefs are applied to a way of life, we see a culture of "treading lightly," of cohesive communities and sustainable practices based on a web of intimate, relational knowledge. Integral to this culture is a belief system

> that is animalistic in nature, meaning all things in existence possess some level of agency and value. (p. 47)

Historically, we all had jobs to do to guarantee that we, as people, the land, and all its occupants and constituent parts survived. These jobs have changed to an extent, but certainly, many still have substantial responsibilities in caring for the elements. Yunupingu (2003) discusses his responsibilities as a member of the Gumatj Clan of North-East Arnhem Land. He speaks of the responsibility of their hunting rituals, where animals can only be hunted when the physical environment tells them it is time. For example, the stingray can only be hunted when the white flower blooms (November to February of the Western calendar). He also speaks of the responsibility of the burning of Country to cleanse the land. However, I question what happens for those like me, my family, and many of my friends and colleagues who, for reasons such as the invasion and dispossession, have not had responsibilities like these passed on to us. What has and will become of our ontology?

Truly, there is nothing for us to fear, for our social reality is inclusive rather than exclusive. Heckenburg (2011) states, "The ancestors (the old people) can remember people who have not been home for a long time" (p. 115). Our ontology is safely in the hands of others. Not only is it individually ours to keep, for "one experiences the self as part of others and others are part of the self," but "this is learnt through reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences, coexistence, cooperation and social memory" (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 16). I have a responsibility to give back to society as it has given to me. I have a responsibility to nurture new students and guide them through university life, just as I was nurtured. I have a responsibility to give to my family what they so unselfishly gave to me, and I have been given these roles and responsibilities through being a part of the collective spirit. From taking from the spirit, I must give back to it. This is the nature of the social memory.

Social memory is extremely important to our very existence, our being. It is fundamentally built on social experience, which is collective and holistic and is inclusive of past, present, and future generations. Collectively, we place the past in the present and in the future, and this is demonstrated in the way we celebrate and mourn our past. For example, during NAIDOC Week, all Australians are encouraged to celebrate our culture and recognise its contributions. Sorry Day is also an event that brings the past into the present and establishes that our past will always be in the future. On this day, we acknowledge and pay respect to the Stolen Generations. These two events are significant in our calendar and ensure that the social memory we internalise is both collective and inclusive. Social memory was and is transmitted through music, art, dance, and these days through literature and film (Martin, 2001). We reveal our ontological underpinnings not only to reinforce the collective spirit but also to display to a wider audience what comprises the nature of our being. Utilising these mediums reinforces our ontology and, according to Errol West (2000), also demonstrates our flexibility:

> Conceptually, an Aboriginal person's worldview is generally compensatory in that:
>
> ♦ It allows for adjustment in detail though not in context.

> ♦ There is room for regular shifts. New knowledge and new information does not change the truth of a matter.
>
> ♦ One truth yet the context or the domain of that set of knowledge and dimensional thinking does not cause a reconstruction of, for instance, the social patterns that existed prior to the existence of new, or alternative views or "knowledge*'*. (p. 43)

This flexibility may very well be a reason for our ontological survival. As West (2000) explains, we are extremely adaptable in rearranging our worldview to suit our needs. Our collective spirit is becoming stronger, and we can hope for a future where we have overcome the effects of the invasion, strengthened the reconnections with our long-standing history, and redefined how our ancient and still existent ontology relates to the present and the future. As European occupation constitutes less than 1% of the continent's history, we have a very long and well-established history. However, the invasion has been extremely destructive. Colonialism has, at times, succeeded in destroying our connections to the world and its connections to us.

Lehman (2008) argues that we live in and between many different worlds. We have the world that our ancestors created, the land, sky, sea, waterways, climate, flora and fauna, and the spirits, and we have the world that was forced upon us, that of the state, capitalism, individualism, and corporatism. We are successfully creating a new world in which we reconcile what our ancestors have taught us to be true with what is useful to us from the Western world. Nonetheless, Lehman (2008) is worried that the spirit world has forgotten us as so many of us have forgotten it. He wonders if it is possible that the language we now speak is unrecognisable to the spirits and, therefore, we are unable to properly define and describe our ontology. (Lehman, 2008) says that we have been all too proficient in learning the language of science at the expense of the language we need to call on the spirits to nourish our souls. Nevertheless, I do not think we have forgotten our ancestral worldview, for every Elder I yarned with (including Lehman himself in September 2007) spoke of the ancestors and the land. Many said that one cannot speak of our being without speaking of the land, the ancestors, and the spirits. Henckenburg (2016) contends that we are still yearning to be reconnected:

> Learning to work with the metaphysical world and enfolding spiritual beliefs and lore, used to be a normal way of life. This may be challenging in our present day lives, but old beliefs are not forgotten. We are still eager to be enfolded in the ways that we can. (p. 4)

Thus, our reality, our being, can still be said to consist of "the inherent meshing of the spiritual events and the material world. This includes literal geographical connections and related events that occur regularly in our lives" (West, 1998, p. 3).

Many of those I yarned with used words that came from the language of their kin, and all still had a deep respect for the land. Arbon (2006) finds it easier to use her people's language and a metaphor of a small onion to describe her understanding of ontology:

> The metaphor of *Yalka*, a small onion that has layers which can be peeled to metaphorically reveal ontological foundations of what it is to be, know and do is important here. (pp. 20–21)

She explains that *Yalka* demonstrates our ontological foundations. The bush onion is connected to the land and is both horizontal and vertical, with many layers that are closely and not so closely related. It illustrates how our existence is connected, cyclical, and multilayered. Blair's (2015) discusses her ontological understanding through the metaphor of "Lilyology." She states, "at the very least Lilyology is an articulation of my Indigenous Knowing" (p. 222) and that it is an image she created to "privilege Indigenous Knowings" (p. 224). She highlights the connectedness and relatedness of our existence and how our being is all cyclical in nature; our ways of knowing, being, and doing cannot exist without the other.

West (1998) takes these metaphors to the next level by incorporating the spiritual world into his understanding of ontology:

> Our Ontology, as I understand it, is the reverential connections between the spiritual realms of operations of the universe and the material operating platform or the physical earth, of the treasured Mother; acting in accord beyond peaceful co-existence. The beyond is, I believe the unalienable tenure of relevance to life, birth, and death that engulfs the spiritual and material Mother in a cyclic pattern of perpetuity. (p. 2)

Ontology is alive and shifts with people as they experience new things and as new things are introduced into society. We find our way through society and continually shift our understanding of reality. We cannot be without experiences and perceptions, and we cannot be without shared experiences and collective perceptions. Epistemology and ontology cannot exist on their own. Reality is shaped, deconstructed, and then reconstructed. As a society, we are constantly adapting and changing our old ways to morph into our new ones. Our knowledge is forever adapting and changing. This is how we have arrived at our current ontology. The next section analyses how our knowledge, epistemology, and ontology are transmitted so they shape the collective spirit.

Telling Stories

Milroy and Milroy (2008) argue that stories are our birthright:

> For Aboriginal people, the land is full of stories, and we are born from our Mother the land, into these stories. The old people tell us stories that nurture and sustain us through life into old age, so that we can tell children the stories they will need to sustain them. The great life-story cycle has been the way for millennia. It is the birthright of all Aboriginal children to be born into the *right* story. (p. 24)

Stories are waiting for us to reconnect with them. They are always present and are just waiting to be told so they can once again live. Harrison (2003) states:

> By walking hand in hand and listening to the sacred text of the land, the sacred text is every facet of the land, the story of the land, every dreaming of the land. A text is a story, a dreaming! (p. 3)

Harrison (2003) explains how the land itself is full of stories that are waiting to be reconnected with our people. The stories do not disappear; they wait in a *dadirri*-like state, and they will remain there whether we reconnect with them or not. They can only disappear if all the elements that make up the world disappear.

Storytelling is not a new phenomenon, for it is how we have always transmitted our knowledge, epistemology, and ontology. Blair (2015) discusses storytelling, stating that,

> Story has structure, a number of voices and movements. Storys have layers; layers that a few people may Know and more layers that everyone Knows. The storyteller is often the listener at the same time they are the story teller. (p. 145)

Storytelling is an ancient practice that entails spoken and sung words, re-enactment, images, landscapes, skyscapes and, more recently, written words, recorded sounds, and moving pictures. Historically, it has been used to pass on knowledges, morals, values, and ethics, and it was also a form of oral and visual entertainment. Stories are usually told by Elders who use dialogue, music, singing, and dancing. Storytellers employ theatre and drama, facial expressions, body language and intonation, and usually humour to maintain the listeners' attention so that future generations would not forget the story and would be able to retell it. There is always room for embellishment so the teller can add their perspective and experience into a story.

While storytelling is fundamental to knowledge transmission, it cannot take place without retention. As van de Berg (2005) states, "Aboriginal cultures were oral cultures, retaining what they learned was just as important as the learning process" (2005, p. 2). In order to keep the story and the knowledge alive, both the listener and the storyteller must retain what is told. Van den Berg (2005) argues that people have admirable memory, and this is due to engaging in the act of storytelling:

> [M]emory retention was paramount in Aboriginal story-telling. Even in this modern day, when Aboriginal people have the ways and means of gaining an education according to the dominant culture's policies and practices of the written material, memory is still a fundamental basis in Aboriginal cultures. (pp. 2–3)

In order to survive, people historically learnt about the dynamics of the environment through retention and memory. They had to retain crucial information about the movement of the stars and tides, seasonal changes, migratory patterns, the life cycles of flora and fauna, and what all these mean in relation to hunting and gathering practices. They were required to memorise creation stories so that children would

understand how the land was formed and how we come to be, do and know. They retained the stories that spoke of morality and how society functioned as a whole, and as the world around them changed, they learnt and kept a whole set of new stories. As Noon and De Napoli (2022) attest:

> Transmitting knowledge orally requires impeccable memory or memory cues as communities are dependent on the knowledge to survive. To improve a story's memorability, efficiency and longevity, it is constructed and layered to convey information. (pp. 57–58)

Blair (2015) discusses how our memory "is pivotal in Storying, and learning from Indigenous Knowing" (p. 146). Thus, storytelling sustains the social memory, which ensures the survival of the collective spirit.

Artistic images are also useful in helping memory and retention. Fortunately, a large number of images have survived for thousands of years that tell Dreaming stories to educate people on how the land and waterways were formed, teach people about morality, and warn of dangers. They tell people who they can and can not socialise with and advise of the consequences of bad behaviour. Historically, we have used stories in this manner, and the same is true today. As Blair (2015) states, "memory is the repository of our knowing" (p. 145).

Blockbusters, opera, theatre, books, music, and dance are all forms of storytelling that we have adapted to suit our needs. Webpages, emails, text messages, and social media are also all forms of storytelling. There is always a story to tell, whether formal (as in academic work) or informal (as in gossiping and social networking). All the media we enjoy today are useful for storytelling and are the evolution of historical practices. We have continued our ancient traditions and have brought them into the twenty-first century.

Usually, a story has a purpose or a theme that is intended to enlighten the listener. Lehman (2003) suggests that it is not so important to listen to the story for its "truth" but rather for the listener to be taken on an emotional ride with the teller and to feel the story internally. Blair (2015) explains:

> To understand these truths we must first appreciate and then respect the different centres. We must then let go of the recipe we have for hearing Indigenous Storys and craft a new set of skills to listen holistically, watch holistically engaging all of our senses; the senses we need to experience dramatic performance. (p. 147)

The use of emotion and understanding how it is used within storytelling is extremely socially significant as the listener not only hears the story but also sees how the story has impacted the teller. The listener is able to feel the highs and lows of the story for themselves and will come away from the story with a new understanding of our history and of the tellers' place in it. Cromb (2018) explains how storytelling taught her about her culture and the world.

> If pop had a charge, by the time we got home he would be yarning up about the old days. At the time we would giggle and think how funny he is – but

> looking back now, this is how I got to know my history and culture, and also that the world was not going to be easy. (p. 63)

Storytelling has many different functions. Each listener may come away with a different understanding of the aim and objective of the story, and on retelling, may change its purpose. For instance, telling stories is how children learn to communicate orally and physically. Foster (2018) explains:

> My D'Harawal dad is an excellent storyteller. He speaks with warmth, meaning, expression, gravity and humour. I had no idea as a child that my father's storytelling was an ancestral ability born of thousands of years of knowledge sharing. (p. 86)

Storytellers teach children how to become storytellers and show them that the stories they learn to tell, combined with and changed by their own experience, will give them a sense of the world and their place in it, particularly as they link the past with the future.

This is particularly true with stories that give us knowledge of our kin and our people. They connect us through our kinship. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, they are also how we locate ourselves as a collective. We tell the story of our familial ties, and we listen to others' stories about theirs. As Doreen Kartinyeri (Kartinyeri & Anderson, 2008) demonstrates, they help us to form images in our mind that will enable us to remember ties to family and kin:

> We also talked a lot about genealogies. Aunty Rosie would ask me about people on Raukkan and she'd say "Oh, she's my cousin," or something like that. So that would get me thinking about how they were her cousins and she would explain that to me. And all the time we were weaving so I started connecting genealogies up with weaving, in my mind, just like Aunty Rosie did too. (p. 100)

Many stories are told both to us and by us in this manner during our lifetime. Stories are about learning, sharing, reciprocity, and trust. Lehman (2003) contends that learning through stories is never complete. People travel from story to story, adding their experiences and deleting the parts of the story that they feel may not be relevant anymore. The story is never stagnant, and neither are we; we change as we grow older, and so do our stories. Nevertheless, what remains a constant is that the act of storytelling reinforces our collective memory which shapes our knowledge, epistemology, and ontology.

Passing Knowledge On, Different Forms of Storytelling

In this thesis, I have relied on the stories told to me by my intellectual Elders, in the autobiographies and life stories I have studied, and indeed, my own story. In fact, this thesis is itself an act of storytelling, for like other storytellers, I am collating and synthesising information from others' stories to come up with my own. Our stories and thus knowledges are not stagnant and are constantly expanding, retracting and developing. As Blair (2015) contends, "There can be no end point when reflecting and writing about Indigenous Knowing" (p. 1). This section looks at the different forms of

storytelling, how our storytelling is used to transmit knowledge, and what the social significance of storytelling is.

Yarning, discussed in Chapter Three, is similar to storytelling. The difference between the two is that yarning is more conversational, for all parties are actively involved in the yarn, whereas storytelling usually has narrators and listeners. Yarning is a free-flowing dialogue where the yarn can jump from topic to topic and usually does, whereas storytelling is more thematic and didactic. Lehman (2003) strongly associates having a yarn with his understanding of "truth." As he points out, when we are yarning, it is not uncommon to hear people say "aw true" or "true" (p. 175). This is not necessarily because they are verifying the validity of the story but rather because they are expressing that they have heard the yarn and are letting the listener know that they, too, are engaged in the dialogue, reinforcing the collective spirit. Yarning is an inclusive process where the listener is the yarner, and the yarner is the listener. Compared to storytelling, importance is placed more upon the act and the emotional ties than the actual words. It is an informal process where all parties can engage in any topic they like. It can be very spiritual, involving deep philosophical exchanges where reflection and contemplation are needed before verbal communication opens up again. However, while yarning can be deep and contemplative, it can also be extremely humorous, especially about oneself, friends, and family. Either way, it is extremely important as it is food for our souls.

Leah Purcell (2002) puts both storytelling and yarning into practice in her book *Black Chicks Talking*. She uses the written word to convey nine Aboriginal women's life stories. The yarning process was the act of gathering their stories, and storytelling is her written words. She demonstrates how the two go hand in hand when it comes to writing life stories. This thesis has done the same. I engaged in yarning with my intellectual Elders. I also engaged with storytelling by reading autobiographies and life stories. In writing this thesis, I, too, am storytelling.

Storytelling is the social glue that binds our society together. It keeps us strong by keeping us connected to our past, future, and each other. People tell stories of their past and relive the experience, as Kwaymullina (2008) explains:

> To tell a story is to arouse feelings of the past such as joys, sorrows, triumphs and loses. The story teller can call upon these past emotions to convey importance of the story to the listener/s. Questions can arise as to what the future may hold and what will happen to these stories, emotions and lessons once the story-teller has passed on. (p. 7)

The story does not die with the storyteller, for storytelling as a mechanism for knowledge transmission is not restricted to the human world. The ancestral spirits also tell us stories in dreams and in premonitions; it is during this time that we are most susceptible to listening and hearing the story and understanding its knowledge. As Milroy and Milroy (2008) argue, when we are in a dream-like state, we cannot escape the story; we cannot just walk away and busy ourselves with something else. They say that dream stories are sent to guide us through our lives. The ancestral spirits give knowledge of our

jobs and responsibilities in society. The ancestral spirits are a form of message stick that passes on knowledge that we have perhaps gone the wrong way in life, or they give us comfort that we should continue on as we are. Joe Boolgar Collard (Collard, 2008) says he is told stories and given messages and knowledge through the black crow. He says that this form of storytelling has been with him his whole life and that his grandfather knew he would have a special life-long affiliation with the black crow. Susie Anderson (Anderson & Anderson, 2018) tells a similar story. She explained that when she was young, she did not hug a certain Aunty when she came over because she was scared of her:

> She still brings it up every time I see her, and another time she said she'd always known I had something about me. Basically, I take this to mean Aunty Trudy is in tune with the ancestors and blak magic is real. (p. 6)

Stories come to us in many different forms and we embrace these different mediums.

We employ numerous forms of storytelling today. Autobiographies and life stories are excellent examples of storytelling. They are often about the past and the present. The authors are passing on knowledge of time gone by when many of us were not born and did not have the experience of what it was to live through some of the most exciting and horrifying times. Movies and documentaries can do the same thing. They also take the viewer to a new emotional level as they couple words with visual stimulation. Movies such as *Bran Nue Dae* (Perkins, 2009), written and directed by Rachel Perkins of the Arrernte and Kalkadoon Countries, *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Noyce, 2002), written by Doris Pilkington of the Pilbara, and documentaries such as Nyoongar Footy Magic (Bonser, 2018) are examples of stories told through a visual medium. These stories are able to reach an International audience and are a chance for us to tell our stories the way we experienced them and in the way we want them to be told.

The explosion of publishing as a means of storytelling means that more of our stories are being told by more of our people to more of us. As van den Berg (2005) points out:

> Aboriginal literature has revealed more personalised accounts of Indigenous Australian life, instead of readers gaining their perspectives from historians, anthropologists and others from academia. (p. 1)

We have taken back ownership and are now writing stories for ourselves and our children. As Heiss (2003, p. 16) argues, our writers are providing families, mobs and society with experiences and knowledge that can be read by future generations in a style of writing true to our historical traditions, for we are writing "in the oral tradition of storytelling and make use of what is commonly referred to as "Aboriginal English'" (p. 16). I certainly found this in the autobiographies and life stories I studied. The stories read as if they were being spoken, which made them come to life. I could imagine people telling the story instead of me reading it. This style also reminded me of hearing one side of a yarn, as one sometimes does over the telephone.

Poetry is another form of storytelling that uses both the written and the spoken word. Heiss's (2007) poetry collection titled *I'm Not a Racist, But... A Collection of Social Observations* is an excellent example of poetry as storytelling. In it, she makes many observations about how she is feeling

about the treatment and the strength of our people. She does this in a very personal and emotive way. Her poem *Tolerated But Not Valued* demonstrates the power of poetry as a form of storytelling:

> I know you tolerate me
> But you do not value me.
> I know you permit me to speak
> But do not listen to what I have to say.
> I know you put up with my opinions
> But you do not respect them.
> I know you endure the history lessons I give you
> But you still can't admire the strength of those who struggled.
> You may think it is enough not to call me names,
> But it's not.
>
> I don't want to be just tolerated.
> I wanted to be valued for the human being I am.

This poem evokes strong emotions, maybe empathy, anger, sadness, and perhaps joy, that somebody has finally put their own deep personal feelings in words and has had the courage to publish them for all to see.

Once stories are published, they are open to enjoyment, interpretation, and judgement. This is something the storyteller has to weigh before publishing, performing, or recording. The receiver of the story will read the story using their own experience and perceptions, and they may miss the storyteller's main aims and objectives. This is the nature of the new methods of storytelling, and as we saw above, older forms of storytelling are treated much the same. Bunda (yarn, September 2007) made this point very strongly when she advised me to clearly state who my mob is when writing. She said that if she read a journal article by me and I had only stated my academic achievements but not who I was in relation to my kin, she would wonder by whose benchmark I had made these claims and who had decided what I had achieved. She is essentially looking for my visa, as discussed in Chapter Four. This is the reason I opened my thesis using our ways of doing.

Stories are fundamental to our society as they are the vehicle we use to transmit knowledge, educate, and reinforce our collective spirit. Storytelling is how we transmit knowledge orally, in writing, and through art. I have shown the social significance of storytelling and have demonstrated that storytelling comes in many different forms. The novel, autobiography, life stories, poetry, and film are some of the new forms of storytelling that not only sustain our collective spirit but are able to reach a wider audience, increasing understanding of our society.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I employed Martin's (2001) ways of knowing, exploring three main parts: epistemology, ontology, and storytelling. I demonstrated that these are interconnected and are all dependent on each other. As Blair (2015) states, "Knowing is dependent upon ontology and Epistemology" (p. 22). I have shown that we as a society are defined by our ways of knowing, just as we define our ways of knowing. Knowledge is a living entity that is never complete, nor is it ever owned. In discussing epistemology, I argued that there is a stark difference between information and knowledge, and I have shown how information can be turned into knowledge. Our knowing is alive and holistic (Blair, 2015), and we acquire knowledge through different avenues, including the spirit world. In discussing ontology, I revealed that our reality and our core being is dependent on experience and perception. As a result of this, I argued that ontology is flexible and open to change, showing that we have a collective ontology reinforced by shared experiences and perceptions that link ontology with epistemology. Finally, I demonstrated that one cannot have ways of knowing without mechanisms that transmit them to the collective spirit. These mechanisms exist in the act of storytelling, as all knowledge is a story. As society has developed, so too have our storytelling methods. We use storytelling to educate ourselves and others and reinforce the collective spirit to bring strength to our people. Thus, our connectedness and relatedness are built upon trust, reciprocity, and respect. We have, without a doubt, a social theory that we can start to yarn and write about, and we can do this using only our own intellectual Elders, storytellers, and selves.

Chapter Seven

Not the Start and Not the End: Aboriginal Social Theory and the Collective Spirit

Martin's (2001) ways of knowing, being, and doing provide the framework for this thesis. I have extended her work to establish that there are indeed commonalities in social knowledge across the continent. These commonalities form the basis of the existent Aboriginal social theory that is alive and thriving. My research has reinforced Martin's (2001) argument that our ways of knowing, being, and doing cannot exist independently and are related, as are the elements that constitute them. I used Arbon's (2006) concepts of connectedness and relatedness demonstrate that these are what connect us to our ways of knowing, being, and doing. Together, they form vital components of our collective spirit. They bind us together yet provide space for individuality and expression.

Social theory can be appreciated and developed by using only Aboriginal ideas. I have achieved this by yarning with Aboriginal thinkers and studying their work. I read autobiographies and life stories and used my own lived experience. Social theories are used to *interpret and explain* social phenomena. I have *interpreted and explained* Aboriginal social phenomena by paying particular attention to the interrelationships between people, Country, and all the entities (ways of being), collective practices (ways of doing), and knowledge generation and transmission (ways of knowing). While there is a risk of this being perceived as essentialist, this was never my intention. My intention was to start a conversation around Aboriginal social theory so our future students can have what I (and many other Aboriginal thinkers) did not have at university, and that is a social theory where they can see themselves. In essence, I have written an Aboriginal thesis that has pushed the conventions of traditional thesis writing by staying as true as I could to our ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Our Stories, Our Knowledge

The work that Aboriginal thinkers have already done establishes that knowledge is ever-growing and not stagnant and that knowledge, epistemology, and ontology are entwined and cannot exist outside of each other. As we are not people living independently of each other, our social theory cannot be created on this basis. We share a history that extends for millennia, and we share experiences that are told and retold through stories that constitute and express this common past. Our social theory is and will remain based on collective endeavours, as we are part of a greater whole.

Before colonisation, knowledge about hunting and gathering, and also about coming into being, cosmology, and the metaphysical was passed on orally through stories and songs and physically through dances and art (Ford, 2005). Much of this knowledge was metaphorical and served two purposes: to engage and entertain the listeners and to teach them important lessons about how society functions. This metaphorical knowledge taught the listeners about hunting and gathering practices and also explained expectations of behaviour, moral lessons, epistemologies, ontologies, and how to interact with the land, flora and fauna, and others in the society.

The knowledge contained in these lessons was arrived at through *dadirri* (Ungenmerr, 2015) and experience and was shared and transmitted through yarning (Lehman, 2003). People would gather and yarn about daily life and issues that needed *dadirri* (deep contemplation). Lessons were taught with examples from the external environment. Those who were to attain the knowledge were not expected to learn the lesson instantly but rather to engage in *dadirri* and come to their own conclusions. This process could take as long as the person needed and the storytellers were always open to yarning if questions should arise.

The New Old Way

By studying the current body of literature on our methodologies by Aboriginal scholars, I was able to show that because Aboriginal methodologies are developed collectively, they are flexible enough to be adapted to a researcher's ontological standpoint. Consequently, I developed a "new old" methodology that suited my research questions, my intellectual Elders, and me. In doing this, I used Lester-Irabinna Rigney's (Rigney, 1999, 2006) work as the basis on which to develop my ethical approach to this research. In particular, I employed the principle of *resistance*. The knowledge I gathered would not and could not be owned by me. My intellectual Elders were assured that they were acknowledged and honoured as the caretakers of the knowledge that had come from them and that I was returning to their custodianship.

Political integrity meant that I was at all times transparent not only in my research aims and objectives but also as a person by ensuring that I yarned with and sought advice from my intellectual Elders and allowed my methodology to be developed by them in a cyclical way. *Political integrity* also meant that I privileged only Aboriginal voices and used only Aboriginal thinkers' works, including autobiographies, life stories, and my own lived experience, to develop my methodology and theory. I have demonstrated that methodologies can be developed by us and for us based on our own epistemologies and ontologies that do not privilege any particular group within our society. I drew heavily from a strengths-based approach where I came to research our knowledges, epistemologies, and ontologies from a positive paradigm. I was able to focus on the triumphs and accomplishments while acknowledging all the trauma, hurt, and injustices we have faced. This allowed me to insert my own story alongside my yarns and readings to examine our collective lived experiences. A strengths-based approach is built on relationships and flips the deficit thinking of colonised subjects. It allowed this research to embody a positive and celebratory ontology to provide a safe and brave space to explore our social theory.

Aboriginal narrative therapy provided the methodological scaffold for all the stories I have been told, read, and lived to be honoured and privileged. There is not one singular Aboriginal story. This research found that in sharing stories, we build stronger social theory and reinforce our connectedness and relatedness to our collective spirit. Aboriginal narrative therapy also permitted my research to acknowledge, celebrate, and embrace that we are not a homogenous people. We all have

different cultures, knowledges, experiences, and behaviours. However, we do have commonalities that connect and relate us to our collective spirit.

My research has shown that the methods we use to acquire knowledge reflect how we go about our day-to-day lives. I used Greg Lehman's (2003) insight about "having a yarn" and his understanding of the notion of truth to approach and engage with my intellectual Elders. The process of yarning as a method of knowledge generation and transmission allows ideas to be freely exchanged, for a listener does not have to listen "hard" in order to determine a logical absolute. Yarning is an active process in which all listeners and storytellers are engaged in talking and listening. I have shown how, in order to have a yarn, one must *establish* "trust, reciprocity and companionship" (Lehman, 2003, p. 175). To *establish* this, I used the cultural protocol of introducing ourselves, our family connections, and our Country (Moreton-Robinson, (2006), which permitted the yarning to flow freely as each yarner was able to locate the other and recognised there was a commonality of the collective spirit. This two-way process has led me to conclude that our core ontologies and epistemologies are very deep-seated. The yarning process demonstrated that knowledge has a history, a presence, and a future that are deeply implicated in our ontologies and epistemologies.

I found that yarning is connected, related, and deeply rooted in our collective spirit. One cannot have a yarn or know the truth without the use of *dadirri* (Fejo-King, 2005; Ungenmerr, 2015). *Dadirri* was crucial to my methodology. It taught me to be patient in my knowledge-gathering. It provided guidance by helping me to understand that deep contemplation was needed and that periods of contemplation were essential as the yarns were concerned with difficult sociological questions. I learned to welcome periods of silence in both the yarns and to contemplate what all the knowledge I was attaining meant in relation to social theory and how this knowledge was common to us across the continent. I discovered, as Karen Martin (2001) had suggested, that physical presence is crucial to yarning when knowledge is being generated and transmitted. I experienced yarning and *dadirri* in action. The assistance provided by my intellectual Elders demonstrated the interconnectedness and relatedness of ways of knowing, being, and doing. I could also physically see, through yarning and *daadirri,* how our ontology, epistemology, and knowledge cannot exist without each other. They exist in an interwoven fashion, and each piece of knowledge has a past, a present, and a future.

Ways of Being, Doing, and Knowing

Knowledge has no particular starting point and no end. It is cyclical, with the circle never-ending. Yarning is not only a process whereby knowledge is passed around but also a way in which it grows, for each listener of the yarn will interpret the story according to their own ontological positioning and experience of the world. The yarn then grows and is transformed with each retelling of the story. Knowledge then is incomplete; it grows by accretion, eventually arriving back where it began, recognisable but different. I hope that this thesis will indeed grow in a similar way, where others will

take the story I have told here and add their own interpretations and experiences to it and take whatever they need from it so that our social theory will develop while remaining true to our collective spirit.

In investigating our ways of being I found that there are many ways of knowing Country and learned of some of the ways that Country knows us. While I have shown that the old ways of being are still practised, I have also explained that we adapt these to suit the society in which we now find ourselves. By saying this, I agree with Arbon (yarn, September 2007) that we now have "new old ways," ways of knowing that inform our ways of being and doing and are adapted by our contemporary understanding and by our appreciation of changing an eternal Country which is a living and breathing entity that produces all life. We respect and honour Country, for it is the maternal spirit and is fundamental in guiding us through life. The Mother provides the lore by which we live, and I have again demonstrated the flexibility of our ways of being as we adapt this lore and bring it into the present. By doing this, we are expressing our deep respect for the Mother. Our close and dependable relationship with Country is connected with and related to our collective spirit. It provides us with foundational commonalities and thus informs our social theory.

Knowing we have Country, where our ancestors have lived and continue to live, gives us a sense of belonging. We know that we are part of a greater being and have a long, rich history and an unending future. The research has demonstrated that even though many of us have been removed from our custodial grounds and are living on other Countries, our connection to Country has never wavered. Our connection instils in us a sense of sharing. We enjoy the Mother's bounty and, in return, must reciprocate by honouring the relationship.

My research has identified kinship, sharing, time, Elders, and humour as elements that make up our ways doing. I have shown how they are not exclusive and exist alongside each other and within each other. They are significant components of our collective spirit, our unity, and our commonalities on a continental scale, for they are the practical expression of Martin's (2001) ways of being. Our children are socialised within a kinship system and thus learn that we do not exist only as individuals. Rather, we are part of a larger whole, within which we locate ourselves through an oral or written introduction. This introduction states our names and also establishes that we are part of a kinship system that connects us to Country. It establishes trust and familiarity by making connections between ourselves and others who are not directly part of our immediate kin.

The second element of our ways of doing is sharing. We share more than just material wealth. We teach sharing to our children to ensure they understand that we share our time, knowledge, and, most importantly, we share ourselves with the collective. Our life is a continual cycle of sharing, whether it is our Elders sharing knowledge and time with us, people sharing resources and knowledge with their mob, workmates sharing a joke with each other, or all of us taking the time to care for all the entities that constitute our Country.

The third element identified as a way of doing is time. We name time collectively in order to govern it. We understand that time is not something we can rush. We must be patient and wait for all

the elements to align before we can move forward. As a society, we understand that there are people who have had more time in the physical world and thus have attained wisdom, which they may choose to impart to us if we are ready to receive it.

Elders are the fourth element this research identified as making up our ways of doing. Elders are vital to the social structure of our stories and are what join our past to our future. They are the custodians of the knowledge, and they are the ones who decide what stories will be told and transmitted. Elders are the most senior people in our society, and they are the people who provide guidance and approval. We pay the utmost respect to our Elders, and we display this through our actions by looking after them and giving them familial titles such as "Aunty" and "Uncle."

The last element identified in ways of doing was humour. Humour is crucial to storytelling. Across the continent, people feel a sense of belonging because they understand each other's sense of humour. Homour has many different functions, and I have argued it is a strategy we employ to educate both those in our society and those outside it. It is a strength that liberates and invigorates our sense of reality and reinforces our collective spirit. The ways of doing that I have identified in my research are not new practices; they were and are part of our daily activity. They nourish our collective spirit, and they are living traditions of which we are extremely proud.

Finally, in the previous chapter, I built upon Martin's (2001) ways of knowing, identifying three interconnected and related constituents: epistemology, ontology, and storytelling. I demonstrated that we, as a society, are defined by our ways of knowing, just as we define our ways of knowing. Knowledge is a living entity that is never complete, nor is it ever owned. In considering epistemology, I have shown that information and knowledge are not the same. However, information has the potential to turn into knowledge if the person has the correct tools. Knowledge can never be owned, only augmented, safe-guarded, used, and shared. Even the keepers of knowledge cannot own, sell, or buy knowledge. It most definitely is not a commodity that can be bought, sold, and thus owned. It is pointless to own something that is far too susceptible to change, for if knowledge is not useful to us, we delete it. I expanded on the current literature surrounding ontology by establishing that our reality and our core being is dependent on experience and perception. As a result of this, I argued that Aboriginal ontology is flexible and open to change because our collective ontology is reinforced by shared experiences and perceptions that link ontology with epistemology.

My research has shown that our ways of knowing, being, and doing cannot be transmitted without the use of storytelling. I argued that knowledge education of our children cannot take place without the mechanism of storytelling, and I have demonstrated that all knowledge is indeed a story. Through the act of storytelling, we strengthen our collective spirit and reinforce our connectedness and relatedness to the entities that share the world with us.

My research is the first of its kind in sociology to be undertaken on the continent. Written purely using the knowledges, epistemologies, and ontologies created and expressed by Aboriginal thinkers, I have increased the realm in which our social theory can develop by building on our

continental commonalities to make social theory. Aboriginal social theory is founded on the connectedness and relatedness of our ways of knowing, being, and doing, which define our collective spirit and inform the commonalities of our social knowledge. We take counsel from our old ways and have adapted them to suit our current situation. We forever live within our connectedness and relatedness, strengthening our collective spirit.

Theory in Practice

As I stated in Chapter Three, over the years, I have employed my theoretical findings in this research in numerous different ways across many universities. I reframed them as a pedagogical framework and used them to help redesign the Bachelor of Engineering at the University of Adelaide. For the first year and a half, students engage in their ways of knowing by grounding themselves in theoretical knowledge. In the second year and a half, students develop their ways of being through building relationships between themselves and being engineers. In the final year, they develop their ways of doing, where they develop engineering habits of mind and behave as an engineer is expected in the profession.

I designed a framework based on ways of knowing, being, and doing, that is a weekly learning sequence for the learning management system which houses our subjects' learning materials at JCU. The sequence allows students to first develop the theoretical knowledge of the week's topic. They then build relationships with the knowledge by investigating how this theory is present in their world and finally they put this knowledge into practice. I have modularised the ten weeks into three modules where module one is ways of knowing. Here students gain the theoretical knowledge they need to set them up for the subject. Module two is ways of being where my students start to formulate relationships between the theory and the practice. Finally, module three is ways of doing where students start to practice doing their ways of knowing and being. I have empowered non-Aboriginal people to use ways of knowing, being, and doing coupled yarning as a pedagogical framework for a masters subject called "Evolutionary Adaptation in a Changing World". These are just a few examples of how I have used ways of knowing, being and doing in my life.

Where To From Here?

To develop our social theory further, we will need to continue to collaborate and work together as determined by our collective spirit. It is time for sociology to accept that we are not static and refined; we are contemporary, adaptable, and theoretical. Embracing our sense of connectedness and relatedness expressed in our collective spirit encourages a new and exciting stream of sociology that appreciates us as worthy and intelligent beings with something useful to say. It is a starting point for inclusivity, for our students not to be left on the wayside trying to navigate where they can see themselves. Further developing our social theory will empower our students, as they are present and appreciated with their theoretical framework.

Finally, if we are to continue to take the collective ownership of our knowledge seriously and if we wish to continue to regard epistemology and ontology as being as much a part of the Mother as everything else, then we need to deepen our reflections on the sort of world that is needed to enable this to happen. Further yarning and *dadirri* will reveal to us the ethical code and the political processes most in tune with our history, our ways, and our being and will inform us how our ethics and politics are to be structured, developed, implemented, and achieved transcontinentally. I realise how huge this task is, but I am confident that the challenge will be taken up. This thesis did not engage with other First Nation scholars around the globe. Whether there are global commonalities First Nation people hold would certainly be an exciting area of research to investigate. There is a plethora of directions this research can take now. My next step will be to look at putting an Aboriginal lens on the *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines*.

Through this research, I have started writing social theory that our university students will be able to use in their studies. I have provided undergraduates with a social theory that will be closer to explaining how Aboriginal society is structured and how it prospers and changes. In short, I have thought about and written Aboriginal social theory. Where there is strong Aboriginal society, there must be good Aboriginal social theory. This has been made evident through my intellectual Elders' support and willingness to participate in my research. Our ways of knowing, being, and doing, as well as our collective spirit, are evidence of the vitality of Aboriginal social theory.

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