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Knowing from Where?

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Abstract

Exploring western philosophies which have shifted down through time but have also held firm on key features that dominate, separate and shatter at the core I realised this was not us as I tried to “develop the right orientation to ourselves and our place first” (Meyer 2003: 60) as an Arabana udyurla. Thus, despite there being some opportunity here and there within these philosophic positions I turned to the Ularaka—the Arabana worldview—to consider methodology and method drawing from our ancient knowledge. The sun shone brightly. I was able to ‘See… hear…feel and smell (take it in)—think. My approach shifted from a marking out of an Indigenous space within or being an addendum to western philosophies to understanding and therefore doing from an embodiment and embodying within the ontologies and cultural knowledge of the Ularaka. From here while in dialogue with and being ‘grown’ or mentored by key Elders, I could powerfully experience, engage and interpret ‘data’ from an Indigenous knowledge position.
Knowing from Where?

**Introduction**

Aboriginal existence continues in a desperate struggle as empire manifests locally through a colonialism that demands homogeneity in most all undertaken in Indigenous lives. As I argued in my Doctoral study this demand for conformity and the right of others to speak for us also applies to scholarly activity in most learning and research sites. This paper therefore traverses western knowledge and scientific disciplines revealing both the weaknesses and pointing to the possible usefulness of some knowledge and skills while arguing the importance of drawing on, and working from, an Arabana philosophical and ontological position. Thus, this paper points to the need to “experience, engage and interpret” (Arbon 2006) new knowledge from a powerful Indigenous knowledge position drawn from deep within one’s own cultural “specificity” (Meyer 2005: 19). This is an honouring of philosophy—the Ularaka in my case—in all of one’s existence including learning and research. This is a “new old way” (Arbon 2006) where the sun can shine brightly. I would also like to inform a number of words from my people’s language are used. Notably, copyright and moral rights over such aspects always remain with the Arabana people.

**Journeys over many years**

There is a need to undertake complex journeys to “experience, engage and interpret” (Arbon 2006: 3) ancient relationships disrupted as the brutality of invasion and the continuing subjugation of Indigenous worldviews shake our life worlds. Most important in these journeys is the work or doing required to bring together knowledge. Linda
Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 39) argues this is a “centering [of] our concerns and cosmology” and a “coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes”. This is powerful, challenging and, is sometimes, difficult work which must be undertaken by us for us.

In my Thesis undertaken with the support of a number of Arabana Elders—my Elders—it was highlighted that the word *Ularaka* can be understood as meaning history or ‘not in our time’. Notably while these Elders made such statements the *Ularaka* is also noted as being of the present and is the future (Strangways, S. 2005, pers. comm.). The *Ularaka* in this way is cyclical but is also linear as Arabana people move through the generations. Furthermore, the *Ularaka*, for Arabana holds all—our culture, our practices, our beliefs, our values, our stories, our language—as I have argued in several papers (Arbon 2005: 1; Katona, Arbon and Anning 2005: 4–6). More broadly, all knowledge including ontologies which capture meaning central to *ungka* are also a part of the *Ularaka* (Arbon 2006). Thus, the *Ularaka* is concerned with history but it is also knowledge that is of relevance today and will also be drawn on tomorrow. The *Ularaka* is fundamentally related to the past and tomorrow.

Ontologies, mentioned above, are therefore concerned with existence. Meyer (2003: 77) states ontologies are concerned with the “nature of being, reality, or ultimate substance”. Ontologies can be identified in any philosophical or knowledge system. Some ontological features can be extremely positive or negative. Ontologies persist through time and inform being, knowing and doing as Arabana—as Aboriginal—in the life world. Martin (2005: 2) argues that it is “through ontology that we develop an awareness and sense of self, of belonging and for coming to know our responsibilities and ways to
Knowing from Where?

relate to self and others”. Ontologies are tied to epistemology. As Meyer (2003: 210) points out epistemology asks “what do we need to know and how do we know?” This is critical information. In the Ularaka many ontologies confirm who we are as Arabana Nharla.

The above situation exists despite the brutality of recent history in Australia. Thus, taking up a position from within Arabana ontologies and philosophy nullifies the brutalities of the past and subverts the continuing “assimilative intent” (Arbon 2006: 7) in Australian society. Furthermore this doing practice (or being, knowing and doing) in Indigenous work ensures a mentoring or ‘growing’ of knowledge (and individual) in ways that draw on, articulate and affirm Aboriginal philosophy.

Notably, engaging in such ancient knowledge for today’s purposes is emerging across the world as a powerful strategy. Drawing on Indigenous knowledge for new understandings is important as argued by Meyer (2003), Smith (1998) and Stewart-Harawira (2005), among others. However, it is the Elders and others locally who are most important to affirming and ensuring one’s work is undertaken in an arratya way. This does not mean that one does not explore broadly but in doing this Elders and one’s peers are given the authority to ‘grow’ knowledge through affirmation, passing on of information and gentle interpretation as is their responsibility. Understandings derived from within an Indigenous position—in my case readings of Indigenous authorship from across Australia and the world ‘experienced, engaged and interpreted’ from within the Arabana Ularaka with Elders and others—ensured trans-generational learning and an affirmation of knowledge. This is concerned with being, knowing and doing in a ‘new old way’.

My journey has taken me beyond recent history to the ancient knowing of Indigenous people. To the philosophical and cultural knowledge of the ancestors, the wadlhu and the wibma—to what has
been within families for millennia to be carried forward for the past
two hundred plus years and, to where the relevance of such knowledge
is made starkly visible for one to draw on today.

**Western philosophies not necessarily us**

Western philosophies when considered closely also exhibit a long period
of development which has experienced changes through time. Here too
ontological features persist. However, these ontological features are not
premised on relatedness nor is all of life ordered by kinship as in an
Indigenous philosophical position; rather they are based on separation
and dominance.

Considering these western philosophies very briefly it is notable
that there has been a move from pre-Socratic antiquity where there
existed a connection between all aspects of the world. Stewart-
Harawira (2005: 45) a Maori researcher, argues this was an “inter-
connectedness, reverence for existence and a symbiotic reciprocity
between male and female”. This pre-Socratic position required a
practice that recorded what philosophers saw and that which “could
not be seen” argued Heidegger (1969: 19). Stewart-Harawira (2005:
50) argues this has similarity with Indigenous “holistic ontologies
and cosmologies” which have existed “since time immemorial”.
This early western pre-Socratic philosophical position permitted a
powerful acknowledgement of presence—the unseen—in the world.
This is also critical in the *Arabana Ularaka* where both the seen and
unseen are engaged in order to understand. I argued in my Thesis
engaged means “dialogic activity with all entities in our world”
(Arbon 2006: 95).
Knowing from Where?

Looking back on the developments in western philosophies it is important to note the work of Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle saw ideas as coming from the outside world through one’s senses and argued for categories of knowledge within his logical approach while Plato, on the other hand, argued that knowledge needed to be justified (Bunge 1997). Others such as Thomas Aquinas and Francis of Assisi located all “creatures, by virtue of their lack of intellect [and] as subject to human beings” argues Stewart-Harawira (2005: 44). This philosophical position, notes Stewart-Harawira (2005: 44), placed humans at “the top of the chain” and was the beginning of highly structured knowledge within western philosophy. In this way hierarchy and dominance began to gain a strong foothold within the philosophies and disciplines of the west. More recent authors, such as Descartes (1968), moved to separate and, in fact, to facilitate the domination of nature (Meyer 2003: 8). Stewart-Harawira (2005: 45) refers to this as “atomised knowledge”. Clearly, as Descartes (1968: 78) stated, it was his intent to make humanity the “masters and possessors of nature”.

Many of these key ontological features persist at the core of western philosophies. As I argued within my Thesis, it is important to note that most scientific and disciplinary knowledge derived from such dominating western philosophies “carry deep within their epistemic” and ontological “foundations features concerning the separation of nature and humanity, the hierarchical view of the world constructed on the basis of differentials in intellectual capacity, a derived continuum of the fitness to survive and a fragmentary reductionism” (Arbon 2006: 163). Moreover, I also argued this added to “features characteristic of the legitimised western scientific knowledge position...are the practices of a destructive reductionism
History, Politics & Knowledge

and dominance over others which transforms to a cult of discovery and individualistic self-growth through status envy and economic greed” which function as “normal” and define how “to properly understand the world, that is, as ideologies supporting the hegemony of positivism in our lives” (Arbon 2006: 163). These ontological features are extremely destructive to an Indigenous knowledge position but share a space with other skills and knowledge of the western scientific world which may have use in Indigenous lives.

The issue therefore is how to use such knowledge and skills while not being captured within the deep core of separation, domination and control lurking in western knowledge systems. There is a need for extreme caution here as we engage such western philosophical and related knowledge and skills on a daily basis. In these circumstances there is a need to understand and, if appropriate, transform such knowledge back to Indigenous knowledge positions. This must be undertaken in ways that affirm rather than destroy Indigenous being, knowing and doing. But how to work for such Indigenous advantage is the question.

It is critical then to take only what we need from western philosophical and knowledge positions and transform these selected elements back into Indigenous understandings for Indigenous advantage. Such an approach will ensure greater success for survival as Indigenous people embodied within Indigenous philosophy. This has not always been possible under brutal assimilative policies and practices that have subjugated and challenged Indigenous peoples across Australia. There is a need now to know western positions but just as important, is the need to draw from and affirm Indigenous philosophical and ontological knowledge. To experience, engage and interpret the world from an Indigenous knowledge position.
**Knowing from Where?**

### The Ularaka—being, knowing and doing

There are opportunities within the present state of “flux” created by challenges on the western canon. There is also a need for caution as the possible impact of much contemporary western thinking is unknown. Stewart-Harawira (2005: 32, 33) highlights these points as follows:

(In) bringing us to acknowledgement of the plurality of histories and of the self, contemporary poststructuralist and deconstructivist discourses — in successfully dismantling modernism’s ‘grand’ theories and the divide between ‘self’ and other — have deconstructed notions of truth and the meaning of existence to the degree that there has ceased to be any fundamental notion of the meaning of being.

This is a direct statement on the present perceived crisis in western philosophical positions. Other Indigenous scholars from around the world also point to the importance of Indigenous engagement with ancient knowledge and understanding of western scientific positions. Battiste (2005: 1), for example, argues there is a need for a:

serious and far-reaching examination of the assumptions inherent in western knowledge, science and modern educational theory. How these assumptions create the moral and intellectual foundations of modern society and culture have to be studied and written about by Aboriginal people to allow space for Aboriginal consciousness, language and identity to flourish without ethnocentric or racist interpretation.

Both of the above authors make major points which highlight the work needed and the possible opportunities for Indigenous scholars. In
Australia too there is an emerging but very small Indigenous scholarship beginning to destabilise the status quo and accepted positions on Indigenous affairs. Rigney (2001: 7), for example, is “attempting to undermine the monological authority of the Western narrative of representation with regard to Indigenous nationhood” and through such scholarly work “reject the universalist tendency of Western research traditions” that “homogenize Indigenous identities and cultures”. Martin Nakata (2004: 4) also argues a similar position but from a different lens, in the following:

We have to make meaning for them of the things they have difficulty understanding or can no longer speak on, we have to address their logic, their assumptions and we have to write in our experience in a way that challenges academic knowledge and standards. That is the task.

While endorsing the importance of the above statements I have argued in my Thesis that there is a “desperate need to ‘make meaning’ for us. We need to make meaning for ourselves in today’s world without leaving behind critical aspects such as relatedness, control and understanding as we more powerfully speak from our own positions” (Arbon 2006: 46). Clearly as I argued in my doctoral study there is a “need to return to our beginnings”—our origins—“to understand and bring these important ontological aspects of Indigenous knowledge to the present and future” (Arbon 2006: 46).

I now turn to look closely at the ontologies of the Arabana as I have articulated them within my Thesis. I draw on the Yalka. The Yalka is a wild onion which is important for both food and metaphorical meaning in the Arabana world. I draw on the Yalka as a powerful metaphor. The Yalka represents what it is to be, know and do as an
Knowing from Where?

Arabana entity—a person or the Ularaka, for example. The Yalka is represented in one form in Diagram 1 below.

Be
essence, identity
consciousness
embodiment, reciprocity, relatedness

Know
exists, located, presence
experience, organised, controlled

Do
dialogue, mentorship, responsibility
engagement, interpretation, understanding

The metaphor at its very innermost core represents essence as an animating force of the ancestors, identity gained through the wadlu and consciousness emergent from wibma 'laid down' long ago. Surrounding these internal ontologies are external ontological features consisting of embodiment, reciprocity and relatedness. This is what it is to be. This is what brings life and meaning to the entity. The next circle reveals on the inner side existent knowledge, locatedness and presence within all entity while on the outer side of this circle are the areas of experience, organisation and control. This not only translates to what it is to know but is inextricably concerned with how and what we know. This is the beginning point of an Arabana epistemology. Then as one moves to consider the external husk of the Yalka, encountered on the inner side are dialogue, mentoring and responsibility held strong by each entity
and on the outer side are engagement, interpretation and understanding necessary and critical to what it is to do as Arabana.

The above critical and central areas can be seen as the circles within a slight vortex that bring an inner subjective and an external objective feature to the entity. The Yalka then is representative of Arabana entities. This relates to existence within a life world which is also an entity. In other words the Ularaka is also an entity. This is concerned with existence as Arabana people and not individuals captured in the ‘assimilative intent’ of Australian society, fractured and subjugated and lost. This is concerned with honouring the Ularaka and understanding that these central ontologies are critical to what it is to be, know and do as Arabana. Such Arabana ontologies are fundamentally important to understanding and being centred in one’s own cultural specificity.

**Understanding from the past**

Drawing on and using the Ularaka and the ontologies within to “bear witness” (Meyer 2005: 19) on all we experience, engage and interpret is therefore possible when one is embodied within and embodies such knowledge. This is a powerful position to be in as working from within a known worldview—from within a powerfully centred being, knowing and doing—within the Ularaka allows one to understand and do in an arratya way. Moreover, it is here that one engages the beginning point of methodology and method as the ontologies revealed point to, and demand, a different approach. This is an approach formulated at the very core of Arabana philosophy, in my case. This is a drawing on an ancient past organised and controlled for knowing and affirmation of being and doing through relatedness, locatedness and engagement rather than the
Knowing from Where?

domination, separation and control that demands conformity in the western world.

The central focusing point within a relational ontology therefore requires both a response to a basically different beginning point and a drawing on ontologies in Arabana life and, in the case of other Indigenous people, in their lives. Such an existence leads to being, knowing and doing as Arabana and, as other Indigenous groups across Australia. Research and education must therefore be experienced, engaged and interpreted in a new way as Indigenous futures are progressed through improved understandings driven from a position deep within an Indigenous—Arabana in my case—ontological knowledge position. This is a ‘new old’ way.

To experience, engage and interpret from an Arabana position as one simultaneously engages all of one’s senses, is another. Perhaps the most important words in my Thesis came from an Elder, Mr Strangways (2006 pers. comm.) who stated the following “See... hear... feel and smell (take it in)” (Arbon 2006: 2, 288). Stop for a minute! What is the meaning of what we see? What is the meaning of what we hear? What is the meaning of what we feel? Smell (take it in). What do these words tell us? The answer to these questions require a shift to the centre of one’s self and, then a working outward from this position as a powerful reclaiming of one’s Aboriginal position. This is what it is to be, know and do as Arabana. This is unggagyu.

Conclusion

As mentioned the sun shone brightly once understanding was derived from a position that is not a marking out of an Indigenous space within
or being an addendum to western philosophies but is an understanding from within an embodiment and embodying of ontologies and philosophical knowledge of the *Ularaka*. In my doctoral study I drew on the *Yalka* and in this paper too I convey meaning through slightly different representation of the same metaphor. Notably only a small sliver of the complexity of the Ularaka or an Indigenous knowledge position is portrayed. This paper in speaking of the importance of Indigenous knowledge has touched on the world wide struggle of Indigenous people to awaken to the importance of knowledge—their own and that within western philosophies. This awakening to a ‘new old way’ is concerned with existence—ungka. For me as an *Arabana Udyurla* this is concerned with being, knowing and doing as Indigenous people.

**Arabana Wangka**

**Arabana Nharla**  Arabana people or man

**arraya**  the proper or correct or straight way

**udyurla**  woman

**Ularaka**  cosmos, cosmology, worldview, knowledge, history, philosophy, ‘all that is Arabana’, Dreaming

**ungka**  existence, life

**ungkagu**  for existence, for life

**wadluhu**  land, country

**wibma**  story, most are of the Ularaka

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