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Runner: Over the past sixty years Indigenous scholars the world over have challenged facets of Western knowledge and knowledge acquisition. We have attempted to understand research from our own perspectives. This next presentation does this and more as it moves beyond Western philosophical positions to the Ularaka—the philosophical knowledge and practices—of the Arabana people. This morning I have the pleasure of introducing a person who has traveled a great distance to present on her dissertation which exemplifies a:

- passionate naming of "assimilative intent";
- use of Indigenous philosophy, ontologies, metaphor, and language within research;
- complex and detailed discussion of "expert"-led resistance to change; and
- vigilant demonstration of the multi-faceted and parallel nature of existence.

Dr. Arbon graduated from Deakin University with a Doctor of Philosophy, in 2007. Ms. Arbon's dissertation is titled "Thirnda Ngurkarnda Itrynda: Ontologies in Indigenous Tertiary Education." Focused on change in curriculum and employment in an Indigenous tertiary institution it is a complex study. Veronica, I am anxious to hear more. Welcome.
Veronica: Thank you. I acknowledge the wadlhu Nharla—the people belonging to this country—I am privileged and honored to be on your land. As an Udyurla Arabana, I also acknowledge my Mathapurda and Udyurla urriya parda—my Elders. Kudlha anthuna naninda.

As indicated by Runner, my dissertation is centrally focussed on understanding resistance to Indigenous-led change within a tertiary institution in Australia. This institution offers award studies across both the higher education and the vocational education and training sectors. The institution has responded to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples learning aspirations from across Australia for over thirty years. Many of the students come from northern Australia where educational opportunities are limited and Indigenous knowledge, including cultures and languages, are very visible and resilient.

My dissertation is grown from within my people's worldview. I engaged, interpreted, and understood the Ularaka at deeper and, much more complex levels with the support and wisdom of Elders. Key features emerged. These features signified, for me, core meanings to being, knowing and doing as an Arabana Udyurla. I saw these key features as ontology, in a paradoxical and changing world. My Elders were a bit perplexed by this word when I brought it and the related words of epistemology and axiology home for discussion. The word ontology emerged in Western philosophical thought back in the fourth century, but it is useful in describing how the vastness of the Ularaka (Arabana philosophy), the wadlhu (land to which we relate), and the wibma (ancestral stories) can be drawn on for more complex understandings within my dissertation. Therefore, the concept of ontologies allowed for both a journeying back—right back—to Arabana history and a drawing from this knowledge system.

This greater knowing of the Ularaka was achieved by traversing “experiencing, engaging, and interpreting”—this knowledge system and Western philosophies. In turn I was able to articulate my understanding of what it is to be, know, and do as an Arabana Udyurla.

My dissertation holds many journeys—recordings of what has occurred for millennia in the Arabana wadlhu and surrounding areas—telling of the past and the present. And in the dissertation other scholars and, in particular, Indigenous writers are invited into the telling of the overall dissertation. For the Arabana the words “story” and “journey” have both metaphorical and temporal meanings and are critically important to knowledge transfer through the generations. Thus, the use of these words within this thesis took me to both the temporal and, at times, the sacred world.

The first stages of the journey to complete my dissertation were often deeply personal. This journey required numerous visits to the country and discussions with Elders. There were also visits to libraries and archives, often with Elders. A number of Elders also provided writings or comments on their experiences of the colonial process fifty or sixty years ago. This was a delving
into the Ularaka and the history of colonial impact on Arabana and other Indigenous peoples lives in Australia. There was a need to capture all this information in some storied form and I turned to a metaphor.

This was the Yalka, a small onion that grows in our country, which has a fine brown skin and porous layers. The Yalka was drawn on as the central metaphor to articulate key features of the Ularaka. The use of the Yalka as metaphor facilitated a coherent representation of the complexity of Arabana philosophy. The Ularaka and the Yuwa (common law) therefore came to form a loosely integrated framework to my doctoral study. The metaphor of Yalka captured beautifully the complexity of not only the Arabana Ularaka but, also later in my studies, the vagaries of colonialism that continue to impact.

Importantly, the metaphor of Yalka facilitated the representation of the rationality of ‘essence, identity, and consciousness’ tied in relatedness at the very core of each entity. Moreover, the fundamental imperative of the relatedness of the Ularaka itself could be raised. The metaphor also allowed representation of a vertical and horizontal, as well as a close and a not-so-close relatedness within the temporal and sacred Arabana world.

I must state that taking up this metaphorically represented ontological position from within the philosophy of the Arabana was not a ‘creation of a minority space within western thought but a marking out of the validity and strength of Indigenous knowledge and ontologies as read from within the Ularaka’ of my people. This position allowed a complex multi-faceted understanding and ‘right doing’ as is my obligation. Finally, the metaphor allowed understandings from within the Ularaka that went beyond the capacities of many Western philosophical positions and the ideological hegemony of Australian society.

Clearly this approach to my dissertation was not achieved easily. I made several attempts to develop an initial proposal. In the end as my colloquium was planned I submitted a proposal. I had thrown the draft out and in several weeks re-written the whole document. At the time I was anxious to be moved from enrolment in an EdD (doctorate by coursework and portfolio) to a research dissertation. Was I caught up in the definitions of others? Or was I struggling to break free of the concerns raised by one of the gentlemen who dropped in earlier today?

The colloquia eventuated with nine academics making up the panel. I faced the colloquia with great trepidation but, also, with relief as I learned two members were Aboriginal. I continued to worry, however, as the approach I had attempted to articulate was somewhat exploratory and un-formed. But after a couple of hours of intense questioning and insightful responses from both sides of the table, I felt comfortable. Then a critical question was posed. This came from an Aboriginal member of the panel who had honed in on the fact that I was moving to what could be considered a “double degree.” This panel member could see I planned to work from an Arabana knowledge position and, then, intended to apply this position to the analysis of “data.”
I responded that this was basically what I was doing. He smiled. I knew my struggle had just begun.

At this colloquium meeting I asked for an Arabana Elder to be engaged as a supervisor and that an Elder be permitted to graduate with an honorary PhD at the time I received my award. Sadly, this Elder was never officially engaged on a salary. However, Thanthi (my great grandfather) continued as an educator, carefully mentoring my journey. Other family members also played this role to a lesser degree. Thanthi was an examiner commenting on the philosophical/cultural aspects of my dissertation for which he received a payment. I was pleased with this eventual outcome but none of my relatives agreed to graduate with me earlier this year.

Going back to the early phases of my doctoral studies I read and attempted to engage and to understand the philosophy of the Arabana in greater detail while working through Western science and philosophy. I often came up against a monolithic wall within Western philosophy. What was a dissertation? How could I articulate the dissertation in English? This was a language I struggled with continually in my life. Eighty-thousand words, how was I to do that? More taxing was the fact that many articles and books were written from within the Western philosophical position and were often skewed, or skewed the reality that I understood. How could I work from relatedness in this fractured Western world of domination and subjugation? A major question was also how to articulate the Arabana philosophy in ways that I could draw from it without revealing the secret and sacred aspects of this knowledge position. I went into avoidance. I could not “see” a way forward.

Eventually a supervisor suggested I place myself at the core of my study. I was, for the first time, embodied. This embodiment was a new freedom. Clearly, I was now located in the complex issues of life, of work, and of my studies. I was engaged from within the Ularaka. I went to the Elders for advice. I decided, with the support of Elders, to write from the “inside out.” I drew the Ularaka close around me and began to write from within this secure place. Now the hard work seriously started.

In Australia, as in many other parts of the world, education, including tertiary education, became a transformational tool of colonial practice. This tool replaced the central Indigenous learning mechanisms of ceremony, family, and life. This form of colonialism denies or subjugates Indigenous aspirations for ongoing sustainability in philosophical, social, physical, and economic areas of their lives. I encountered these aspects of this transformational education tool often in my doctoral work. As a result of the “assimilative intent” in society, writing the dissertation was often complex. The “path to knowing from within an Arabana cosmology and the continuity of knowledge . . . was . . . subject to dominating power” and change in Australian history. Therefore, I found a need to clearly articulate the wimpa, or track, that I was to follow.

I stumbled on the writings of Manulani Aluli Meyer, who just spoke with us, and I must say it was worth my traveling all this distance just to meet her.
again! I highly recommend any and all of the books and articles she has written! She taught me that the best way to honor spiritual beliefs is to first be led by them. This wisdom added to the strength and wisdom offered from a number of Elders to bring new insights and great clarity to my study. I learned to “See . . . hear . . . feel and smell (take it in) our Ularaka and Yawu (common law)” in much more complex Arabana ways. The wimpa I needed to follow, became clearer. A new consciousness emerged as I entered Indigenous knowledge and, in particular, the Ularaka, powerfully.

I understood all animate entities embody and, are embodied. I understood each entity, in fact, all entities, exist as located and have a presence. I understood this holistic worldview at one level has a complexity and instability of the most fundamental kind while at another is organized and controlled through the kinship system. I understood this system of relatedness mapped over all of life. I understood that dialogue, responsibility and mentoring were central to experience, engagement, and interpretation in this Arabana knowledge system. I understood that other Indigenous groups around the world also held within their philosophies some similar aspects such as relatedness, locatedness.

The above clarity that the ontological features captured within metaphor brought me to “bear witness” on the data, another idea I extracted from Manulani’s work. I wrote vigilantly. However, I often worked in isolation of my supervisors at this stage of my dissertation, as the knowledge being experienced, engaged, and interpreted by me was foreign. I was fortunate, though, as one of my supervisors was Aboriginal. This isolation then led to stops and starts and, at times, long discussions with both my supervisors and family. Silences were also present as I resisted suggestions. These supervisors, with our support, recently published a paper about supervising Aboriginal doctoral candidates who had successfully completed, in which they state that trusting Indigenous judgment was critical.

As I moved forward in completing my dissertation, a chapter on the failures of tertiary education in Australia and how “assimilative intent” in these systems brutalized and subjugated Arabana and other Indigenous knowledge positions was included. An additional chapter explored the growth of tertiary education in the Northern Territory, which offered an alternative model while highlighting the fact that this model was being undermined and erased through limited policy formulation and funding cuts. These chapters highlighted the broader context of, and inability to understand Indigenous tertiary education and the visions of Indigenous people within this system over many years.

This information then led to two Yanhirnda arratya. This is a process of speaking consciously (in this case writing) about an issue or issues for all to hear in order to correct a situation through dialogue. In the past this method would have been used early in the morning and no one could respond until after midday or until all members of the community had returned to the camp. This approach therefore included an invitation to comment on the
position outlined by the speaker. The Yanhirnda arratya process is an important knowledge affirmation and generation method that has the capacity to bring to discussion difficult matters. In my dissertation, the content, forms, and essence of resistance to curriculum and employment changes were documented.

I then take up the invitation for response to the “data” captured within the Yanhirnda arratya. This process revealed the complexity of the situation within the institute. One of the critical factors revealed was the undermining and temporary loss of Indigenous-led vision. I argued within my dissertation that Indigenous vision concerning our sustainability must not waver as it can be manipulated easily by “experts” in such a situation. These “experts,” the politicians and practitioners constructed as hegemonic agents who “speak” solutions for Indigenous people in Australia, are not necessarily concerned with such a vision. It was clearly shown that the focus of the “experts,” those leading the resistance to change at the institute, was aiming to maintain an accepted status quo. Is this what we want? Indigenous vision is critical to change for Indigenous futures. However, numerous complexities can emerge in change situations. In the Institute the “benevolent” dominations of history surfaced to powerfully subvert Indigenous vision.

Notably, recent Australian history informs Indigenous people they can be named as the “stirrer” when situations of conflict occur. This is a derogative term that comes with practices to pacify or remove the behavior or voice of an Indigenous individual threatening the accepted status quo. At the institute, certain staff who worked for the required changes to achieve the endorsed vision, were named in this way. In the end these named Aboriginal staff members were removed. In this instance the agendas of others—the “experts”—asserted the accepted status quo. Planned changes were therefore blocked and Indigenous vision temporarily thwarted.

A “new old” way is necessary in such circumstances. This is argued in my dissertation. I argued, drawing on the ontological features of the Indigenous past and reading these from within the Arabana philosophy (in my case) can bring powerful learning and hard-hitting critiques. I argued such a position can ‘grow’ the critical mass of Indigenous thinkers who have knowledge of both worlds. These individuals are critical to making the necessary and complex changes important for Indigenous sustainability. Moreover, I argued, to do in full knowing of what it is to be as an Arabana person—an Indigenous person—would be critical to this “new old” way.

My dissertation contributes, as it is a statement on Arabana existence. My dissertation also contributes as it outlines the importance of content, processes, and practices, defined from within the Ularaka, to sustainability. Importantly, this notion of sustainability is linked to the criticality of Indigenous-led vision within my doctoral study.

My dissertation also highlights the fact that “benevolence” operates as an “assimilative intent” demanding conformity within Australian society.
A further contribution of my dissertation, I believe, is its ability to open dialogues on Indigenous-led change in complex tertiary education contexts. Furthermore, my dissertation placed for discussion resistance to change. Importantly, it is here that the dissertation becomes critically important as it documents the forms of resistance and activities that emerge as shifts to the status quo occurred at the local level.

My dissertation also contributes through drawing on metaphor, dialogue, reflexivity, and cyclical approaches in research. These are approaches that allow for a stronger dialogue in a complex and paradoxical world. My thesis is also important as it operates from a fundamental premise of relatedness, locatedness, and mentorship and the balance constantly sought within Arabana philosophy.

Ultimately, my work *Thirnda Ngurkarnda Itrynda: Ontologies in Indigenous Tertiary Education* is important as it reveals many aspects of an Arabana way—an Indigenous way—and articulates issues for improved understanding. And in this Indigenous way the role of Elders and important peers are defined as critical to Indigenous knowledge generation and transfer.

Completion of my dissertation was a difficult but highly rewarding journey. There were many pitfalls and false starts as I struggled to find the right track and leave behind a story that will transfer through the generations. The study was personally rewarding as it forced me to consider my responsibilities as an Arabana Udyurla. Finally, undertaking the dissertation required me to expand my consciousness in the presence of Elders and 'new old' understanding.