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Citation of the final article:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Educational philosophy and theory, on 6 Mar 2017, available at:

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Methodology is Content: Indigenous Approaches to Research and Knowledge

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Abstract

There has been extensive work in the space of Indigenous epistemological approaches to research. Because Australian Indigenous peoples have been researched significantly, there are guidelines around the ethical and cultural conduct of this type of research. Via investigating the Academy’s approach to research in general, we can illuminate the vast differences between empirical approaches to research from the “West” compared to knowledge acquisition and sharing through “relationality” from an Indigenous perspective. This paper investigates this dichotomy and brings into question the premise of power and value attributed to each approach, arguing that this is still not an equal ascription. This paper posits a reconfiguration of approaches to research as a way of extending on research in general, and provides a platform of how Indigenous Knowledges can extend on and reconfigure, in a positive way, approaches to research.

Keywords: relationality, interpellation, Indigenous knowledge, agency, interpolation

Positioning

Before commencing our journey in looking at the relationality of method to content in an Indigenous worldview, I first need to position myself in this pursuit. The positioning of oneself and the agency of positioning is vital on a number of levels which will be discussed at a later stage. I am of Bundjalung, Murrawari and Kamilaroi heritage and my ancestry travels back through millennia on these respective Countries. I also acknowledge the ancestral Country of Wathaurong people and community where this paper was created. I pay my respects to my elders and extend that respect to Bunjil, the great creator ancestor of the Kulin nations.

Agency

The world is intra-activity in its differential mattering. It is through specific intra-actions that a differential sense of being is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency. That is, it is through specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter-in both senses of the word. (Barad, 2003, p. 11)

Just as the “intra-activity” of my positioning is to this paper and to Country, we must recognise that within an Indigenous worldview, all “things” have agency and are interconnected through a system of relationality. Karen Barad moves from geometrical
optics to physical optics to the questions of diffraction rather than reflection. It is through this notion of diffraction that Barad formulates “intra-activity” as opposed to inter-activity. The former being internally determined as to the latter being external between two separate bodies. This is vital to an understanding of agency as it suggests that there exists an inherent ‘relatedness’ between things internally. It is here that we can recognise that all matter, including knowledge, has agency.

This idea is one that creates a different type of privileging which we will unpack in this paper. The methods or epistemologies of knowledge acquisition are significant to the agency of knowledge itself. The argument here is that there exists a long, yet short, history of methods to acquiring knowledge in the research space of the academy. This paper is an attempt to illuminate a way of reconfiguring the separation of method (epistemology) and content (knowledge/ontology) in some strands of western thinking through relational agency as experienced through an Indigenous Australian ideology and cultural framework. In an Indigenous worldview there is no separation between method and content. In fact, the “how” is just as, if not more, important than the “what”. But for us to get to this space, we need to identify what we are critiquing in western knowledges and research.

The Discourse of Separation

In her traverse critique of western systems of knowledge exploring their weaknesses and possible use value for Indigenous Knowing, Veronica Arbon gives heed to the idea that western philosophies are not necessarily us. There is caution:

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 is therefore 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. (Arbon, 2008, p. 140)

Why are the ontological features of western thinking destructive to Indigenous knowledges? When we consider the premise of western systems of knowledge and research paradigms, they extend from scientific inquiry. In light of this, there is a linear movement through the traditional research path as follows:

- Asking a question
- Conducting background research
- Constructing a hypothesis and a null hypothesis
- Test the hypothesis
- Analyse data and compare with hypothesis
- Draw a conclusion
- Report results

Although very simplistic, this demonstrates the linear progression of a research pathway in order to acquire content through various methods. Of course these methods vary from quantitative to qualitative research and beyond. It is this historicist path that separates the
how from the why via deconstructing the research process into parts. To extend on Arbon’s words of caution, we need to identify why there is a separation, and then ask how these systems can be of use to an Indigenous worldview. So why a separation between methodology and content?

Interpellation

Dominant western philosophical discourse premised on representationalist thinking, has grounded its thinking in an ideology and system of thinking that has little relationship to the existence of everyday living. The fundamental problem here is that a binary is created where ideology and lived experience have ephemeral relationality, creating a separation. Historically, this type of western philosophical discourse has involved a quest to represent an ideology of existence that is empirically and scientifically grounded. This course of thinking has established a western framework and is confined by the limitations of western ideology and representation. The critical issue here is the notion of ideology itself. For Louis Althusser: ‘Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ (Althusser, 1971, p. 163).

In his exploration of ideology and the state, Althusser observes the means of production as a reproduction of labor power in its submission to the ruling ideology. In doing so, Althusser presents a “new reality”: “Ideology” (Althusser, 1971, p. 133). It is in this context that he claims there is a ruling ideology that amalgamates the diversity of production. His argument is based on the following premises:

• Ideology has no history: it does not have a history of its own as its history is external to it;
• Ideology is a pure dream.

Furthermore, for Althusser:

However, while admitting that they do not correspond to reality, i.e. that they constitute an illusion, we admit that they do make allusion to reality, and that they need only be ‘interpreted’ to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world (ideology = illusion/allusion). (Althusser 1971: 162)

The vital point here of the equation, ideology = illusion/allusion is that humans transpose and represent reality to themselves in an imaginary form.

Althusser further argues that humans construct themselves through an alienated representation since the conditions of existence around them are alienating. The crucial part of this argument is founded on the idea that the relationship that humanity has to its own reality is like ideology itself. Humanity in Althusserian terms has no history. Within this quandary, Althusser moves on to claim that ‘ideology has a material existence’ which exists
in its practice or practices and therefore, this type of existence is material (Althusser 1971: 165). It is here that ideology itself is made possible by subjectivity as ‘Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects’ (Althusser, 1971, p. 170). This is vital to Althusser’s understanding of ideology in a material existence as having no history as it is manufactured by and manufactures the subjects themselves. We must acknowledge the separation the subject has in relation to ideology in this framework. This separation is the reason why the subject has to constantly interrupt itself with questions about its illusory practices in order to attempt to resolve the split between subject and existence and furthermore be interpellated. This further adds to the separation due to the nature of ideology itself within this framework. This suggests that knowledge does not have agency if there is no interpellation, as it is predicated on the subject.

For Althusser, the existence of ideology is premised by the subject and for the subject. This construct is crucial to an understanding of ideology in western terms. If ideology is an imaginary relation to reality and has no history, which is an aspect of material existence itself, then humanity itself has no relationship to its own reality and history. Not only does ideology represent a false consciousness, the ideology of humanity does itself operate as this type of consciousness. Knowledge cannot have agency as it relies on the subject. All “otherness” outside the subject cannot have agency. On the basis of the Althusserian relationship between ideology, subjects and the real conditions of existence, the notion of an imagined consciousness presents itself. In light of this, the separation continues where all other modes are thinking are devalued, especially an Indigenous ideological framework based on lived experience. This separation and value is premised on power and the dominant culture that maintains it.

**Imagined Consciousness**

This imagined consciousness does have a major effect on Indigenous ways of knowing from the dominant power that enforces it. In critiquing the newspaper articles “Jedda Star Fights Culture of Rape” and “Sticks and Stones” by Paul Toohey and “Noble Rot” by Nicholas Rothwell (The Weekend Australian, 14 April, 2001), Norm Sheehan reveals a hidden agenda by a dominant culture. He postulates that the way incidents in Aboriginal communities are represented are to serve an agenda which sustains the moral righteousness of the white centre. These newspaper articles, foreground traditional Aboriginal culture as a significant causal factor in the perpetration of these crimes. This imagined consciousness is one that attempts to conceal the past and perpetuates a disparity between the real world and an imaginary one. This perpetual dominance is something Sheehan refers to as an “Imagined Moral Centre”.

What must never be stated, however, is that these identities are not only constructed to marginalise and control Aboriginal communities, they are also constructed to conceal aspects of the dominant culture that may expose it as unworthy. (Sheehan, 2001, p. 32)

Sheehan extends further:
Arguably, the main reason for the construction of these identities are that they are needed to conceal real culpability and ignite the imaginary moral centre of the dominant group. (Sheehan, 2001, p. 32)

In this moral superiority, a false consciousness is perpetuated furthering the split between the real and imaginary worlds. It is ideology and representation itself that further the divide as there is a non-existent relationality and agency. In Sheehan’s Imagined Moral Centre, ideologies interpellate individuals with no relationality. We have to attempt to destabilise this false centre in order to reassign value to an alternative Indigenous ideology to reconfigure approaches to research. Challenging this is vital to any attempt at redefining ideology, as in this framework, ideology becomes a construction of imaginary representations.

**Destabilising the Centre**

As Balwant Jani observes: ‘If we have to decolonize historical writings, we have to disengage our minds from the western notions of history’ (Jani, 2001, p.17). I claim that in order to value Indigenous ideology, we have to disengage from established narratives, scrutinise them and overturn them to reassign value. Jani states further:

> A decolonized mind is open to alternatives; it constitutes itself from alternatives and is therefore truly representative. The greatness of a decolonised mind lies in the acceptance of an alien language; its dynamism lies in reshaping it; its variety lies in producing literatures in it; its superiority lies in being able to represent the ethos of a heterogeneous group against the parochialism of the colonist’s language. (Jani 2001:17-18)

Within the context of Australian society, the only legitimate research practice in relation to Aboriginal culture and identity is one where there is no separation between method (epistemology) and content (knowledge/ontology). It is also one that values the premise of lived experience as ontologically significant within research. Lived experience refuses the notion of an imaginary relationship to existence. How knowledge is acquired from Indigenous communities is paramount to the research process. We have to create an ontological space of cultural ideology in order to reaffirm the cohesion between life, culture, Country, practice and memory, which is opposed to an ideology constructed within an Althusserian framework.

The difficulty of moving between two modes of thinking, a western and Indigenous mode, presents different conceptions of the world that are separate. However, it is within this movement between the two that creates a kind of *shimmering* that allows the argument and illumination to come through. Margaret Kovach states: ‘Gaining control of the research process has been pivotal for Indigenous people in decolonization’ (Kovach, 2005, p. 23). This takes us back to positioning and in this positioning it is imperative that it is Indigenous.
Indigenous Knowing

In his creation of a set of principles for Indigenist research, Lester Irabinna Rigney argues for a de-racialisation and de-colonization in order for cultural freedom to be acquired by Indigenous peoples, especially in the research space. He outlines as follows:

Principle and Rationale of Indigenist Research:

I understand Indigenist research to be formed by three fundamental and inter-related principles:

- **Resistance** as the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist research
- **Political integrity** in Indigenous research
- **Privileging Indigenous voices** in Indigenist research (Rigney, 1997, p. 636)

For Rigney, Resistance is research undertaken as a part of the struggle for Indigenous Australians for recognition for self-determination. Political integrity is that the research undertaken is by Indigenous Australians. And Privileging Indigenous voices, is one where the research values and focuses on the lived experience and struggles of Indigenous Australians. What is vital here, is that it is the positioning of the research in terms of Indigeneity on all levels that politicise the research space.

It is in this space that Karen Martin states that western research must recognise Indigenous methodological approaches. Martin, as with Arbon, see the value of Indigenist research aligning itself with certain aspects of western qualitative research frameworks. Martin advances her argument through the term “relatedness”. Through her discussion of a Quandamoopah worldview and ontology, Martin observes that ‘Throughout this account of Quandamoopah worldview, the essential feature of relatedness is constant’ (Martin, 2008, 69). She gives a definition of relatedness as a particular manner of connectedness and a relation between things, going on to say:

In this research study relatedness is defined as the set of conditions, processes and practices that occur amongst and between the Creators and Ancestors: the Spirits: the Filter and the Entities. This relatedness occurs across contexts and is maintained within conditions that are: physical, spiritual, political, geographical, intellectual, emotional, social, historical, sensory, instinctive and intuitive. (Martin, 2008, 69)

It is this interconnectedness, or in Martin’s words, “relatedness” that further demonstrates the premise of a “real” relationship people have to an inseparable cultural ideology that is premised on Country. More importantly, this is further re-iterated in Martin’s discussion about relatedness between people and Country.

We are therefore related to every inch of our Country and to every Entity within it, but there are sites where this relatedness is deeper for some Entities. For People, this depth of relatedness is experienced in terms of gender where there are women’s sites
or men’s sites. There are also areas within our Country where the relatedness is deeper for certain families or clans. (Martin, 2008, 70)

In Martin’s discussion, the three conditions that comprise “relatedness” are vital to an Aboriginal ontology. Martin’s theorization of ontology in relation to Ways of Doing substantiates how an Aboriginal worldview and lived experience is based on the practice of relatedness. This is vital to an understanding of what is already given in an Indigenous worldview. The relatedness that we have to the world around us also can be seen as the inseparable relationality that we have to making cultural things. A pragmatic example we can use to demonstrate the separation is the use of the term “art”. In the multiple Aboriginal languages in Australia, we do not find the word “art”. Art is a western term and could be argued as something stationary of static and has, at many times throughout history, separated itself from the social and real world. The use of the word “Yuka” in Wergaia language means “to paint” which is a demonstration of the action of doing. “Yuka” has agency and has relationality to the maker, the viewer and to knowing.

I propose that opposing the split or separation that western ideological structures create, is the notion of Country, relationality and agency as it is given in an Indigenous framework in which there is no need for interpellation as there is no existing separation between the subject and ideology. In this instance, Country can take on the subjective position, which is the fundamental basis of an Indigenous ideology. Country assumes a subjectiveness. It has agency. This agency of Country is opposed to the way in which objects are represented through a western framework. In an Indigenous worldview, Country informs people of their identity and it is Country’s active role of informing us of our whole belief system that relays its importance to culture. It is the reciprocal relationship that people have to Country and its relationality that demonstrates Country as subject. Positioning oneself with Country is establishing agency of both people and Country, they are inseparable. In this paradigm, knowledge has agency and has relationality with people, Country and entities. How knowledge is obtained then, is of utmost importance as this affects the agency of that knowledge. Knowledge, like Country, has subjectivity and has its own agency. A way to describe the relationality of agency is though the term interpolation. Interpolation suggests putting something between other parts. This term, used in mathematics, measures the intersecting data points along a linear progression. In this definition, interpolation connects multiple points. False consciousness can be refused by interpolation as interpolation is internal, has agency and creates relationality.

The Agency of Knowing

Shawn Wilson presents the argument that Indigenous peoples think and behave in a manner different to that of non-Indigenous peoples. Firstly, by positioning himself as an Opaskwayak Cree from Manitoba Canada, he states:

An Indigenous epistemology would include not only a set of knowledge that is the intellectual property of the people, but also the manner in which that knowledge is
understood. My understanding of the similarity between Indigenous peoples way of thinking can be best stated as being circular and egalitarian. (Wilson, 1999, p. 2)

It is not only how knowledge is understood, but it is important how that knowledge is obtained and shared amongst people. Just as we described the notion of art in an Indigenous worldview as something that has significant agency, knowledge is ever moving, not static. It is “knowing”. Opposing the notion of separation and interpellation, Wilson further states:

What becomes important then in this circular worldview is your relationship with an idea, or how you view it. Thus, in many Indigenous languages, an object ceases to be a concrete thing, like a chair for example, but becomes what its relationship to me is, like a place to sit. (Wilson, 1999, p. 3)

To extend beyond this notion, the idea or even for that “matter”, the chair has agency. The idea or chair does not need the human subject to interpellate it. The idea, or knowledge has agency. This is the agency of knowing. Furthermore, Wilson, in his discussion on a ceremony including a literature review, hypothesizes:

The idea that knowledge is approached through the intellect leads to the belief that research must be objective rather than subjective, that personal emotions and motives must be removed if the research “results” are to be valid”. (Wilson 2008, pp. 55-56)

This brings us back to the premise of research in a western view being “objective” to remain valid. Once again the binary ignores other metaphysical and epistemological approaches to knowledge acquisition. For example, the importance of lived experience in an Indigenous research paradigm. Let us delve a little deeper into the notion of objectivity. Donna Haraway in Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective, argues that feminists have been used and trapped by the binary of the ‘tempting dichotomy on the question of objectivity’ (Haraway, 1998, p.675). Haraway provides a possible solution:

We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life (Haraway, 1988, p. 580).

This describes an opposing view to the conditions of interpellation. It is here that relationality is being built. This becomes an interpolation of relationality, where meanings and bodies can exert their agency. However, it is not just any meaning or body that can shift the centre of power relations. Haraway suggests that this lies with the subjugated:

The subjugated have a decent chance to be on to the god trick and all its dazzling— and, therefore, blinding— illuminations. Subjugated standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world. (Haraway, 1988, p. 584)
She goes on to observe that this positioning is hostile to various forms of relativism and suggests that it is within the epistemology of “partial perspectives” that objectivity lies:

The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs and connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology. (Haraway, 1998, p. 584)

However, a tenuous disparity exists on two distinct levels. Accordingly, Haraway states that no perspective is privileged as all boundaries in knowledge are conceived as power interchanges and not efforts towards the truth. Secondly, there is still that attempt towards objectivity that even with a subjugated or partial perspective, interferes with the agency of knowledge. Let us move away for a moment from the relationship between the knower and knowing (subject and object) in order to eliminate the power moves. How does Indigenous relationality build on knowledge’s agency?

The talking circle is a ritual used among many different Indigenous people. In a talking circle, one person starts by holding a stone, feather, talking stick or other object. The person holding this ‘sacred’ object has the floor as long as he or she holds it, and has the opportunity to speak (or choose not to, as the case may be). When he or she is finished, the object is passed along to the next person in the circle, who then has then floor. This continues until everyone in the circle has the opportunity to hold the object and to speak if they choose to. Remember that you are building spirituality, so don’t be afraid to introduce the sacredness of your talking stick or rock. (Wilson, 1999, p. 4).

If knowledge has its own agency, then it is not tied to the knower. This is a true Indigenist materiality. With Yarning, or the circular movement of knowing, knowledge is given agency through building relationality with one another, with knowing and knowledge building relationality with itself. In the example above given by Wilson, we could say that talking or Yarning circles are a form of interpolation. We could extend by saying that knowing is carried by itself or is transmitted through the talking stick or rock. It becomes knowing, a transmutation of knowing occurs. Then there is no power move. It is agency at its best. In an Indigenous worldview, positioning oneself, positioning Country and positioning knowing clarifies a way of reconfiguring the general knowledge economy without the reliance on the question of “objectivity”.

**The Agency of Positioning**

We can see that positioning is vital to an Indigenist research configuration as outlined by Rigney and discussed by Haraway. This also postulates the relationship between the real and the imaginary as realised in the comparison of Althusserian ideology to Indigenous lived experience. Indigenous ideology is premised on the real conditions of existence and not one that is alienating from them. Barad states ‘… representationalism is the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent’ (Barad 2003: 9). In saying so, Barad suggests that representationalism determines that inherent attributes are anterior to them. It is on the basis of this ontological gap that we
argue where an Indigenous relationality of method as content in research can shift the boundaries of research in general. This is to allow the research process to proceed beyond the framework of representation or an imagined consciousness. Indigenous knowing and research is an exemplary way of demonstrating the premise of “doing” as a form of performative agency and immersive experience. The act of doing is vital not only to extend understandings of an alternative framework but also to enact an Indigenous ideology that is based in the real and upon lived experience. It is this agency of positioning that allow us to shift the power moves back to the agency of knowing itself.

All bodies, not merely “human” bodies, come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity-its performativity. This is true not only as the surface or contours of the body but also of the body in the fullness of its physicality, including the very “atoms” of its being. Bodies are not objects with inherent boundaries and properties; they are material-discursive phenomena. (Barad 2003: 15)

Barad presents a relational ontology where nature, the body and materiality can be in their own becoming whilst at the same time involving our role in the practices of knowing and becoming. It is in the causal relationship that a real materialist ontology is demonstrated. For Barad, the conceptual shift exists and begins in “intra-action” as opposed to “inter-action”. This is elaborated through her understanding of phenomena as phenomena. This is contrary to the idea of the epistemological separable observer and observed, knower and known, subject and object, ‘…. phenomena are the ontological separability of agentially intra-acting “components”.’ (Barad 2003: 9) This connects with an Indigenous notion that Country has an intra-active agency and it is in this action and from within an Indigenous framework, that the concept of object/subject, knower/known is questioned. It is this relationality that creates agency for all entities. For Barad this objectivity is defined as intra-actions leaving marks on the body. For Indigenous peoples, this is the process of immersive lived experience. This is further illuminated by Barad’s statement: ‘On an agential realist account, agency is cut loose from its traditional humanist orbit’ (Barad 2003: 16). In all Indigenous accounts Country, people, entities, kin and knowing is not passive. What an Indigenous approach to research offers is one that does not limit itself to a linear separation. Barad describes this is terms of onto-epistemology:

The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. Onto-epistemology- the study of practices of knowing in being- is probably a better way to think about the kind of understandings that are needed to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter. (Barad, 2003, p. 18)

An Indigenous research paradigm and ways of knowing is phenomena that has come to matter (in both senses of the word {sic.}) and have existed for millennia. Barad provides a way for us to extrapolate a way of communicating Indigenous knowing through a western paradigm. It is here that we find a great use for western modes of thinking without being captured by the separation as cautioned by Arbon. Our position starts from an Indigenous
one. This position has strong cultural agency and reconfigures approaches to research that privileges the agency of all things relational.

Respecting Relational Agency

The above position draws on perspectives of both Indigenous and western thinkers, but is primarily based on an Indigenous ideological understanding of the world predicated on relationality and agency. This comes from my own lived experience. My own positioning as stated on the outset of this paper. We can propose a number of criteria on how to acquire knowledge that is relational, respects agency of that knowledge, is culturally appropriate and ethical. Significant work has recently been done in the space of pre-ethical relationality. I have included a brief description below of the pre ethics guidelines that have been created by staff and Indigenous Higher Degree by Research students at Deakin University. These Guidelines and Principles for Pre-ethical Approaches to Indigenous Australian Research provide a way when research is conducted with Indigenous peoples, communities and entities. They stipulate from the beginning that relationality underpins all aspects of the research process, both methodological and by its content. Below is a summary of the guidelines and principles:

The following guidelines are primarily intended to assist researchers in ensuring that relationships are premised on an Indigenous way of relationality.

Principles

• Consider the positioning of the researcher

• Consider the positioning of the participant

1. Situate/position yourself as a person and a researcher

2. Participants position themselves as co-producer and subject and not only an object of the research.

3. Recognise that the nature of the participant is in relation to Country and other entities

4. Recognise the importance of lived experience and its relation to use value in research

5. The location of the research needs to be paramount in terms of whether the community approves the competency of the research

6. The participant reserves the right to consent orally

7. Principles need to be negotiated and are not necessarily binding because lived experience and actuality of relationality is ever moving. (Martin et al, 2016).
These guidelines create a relational narrative within the research epistemology, where the researcher, participants and entities co-exist and claim their agency. If any researcher follows these guidelines regardless of the qualitative research participants, different narratives will appear. These relational narratives not only enrich the research process, but shift the content of the research by revealing different knowledges. These knowledges assert their agency within this zone.

We have examined a different approach to knowledge acquisition from an Indigenous positioning and viewpoint. We found that these are premised on lived experience, relationality and allowing the agency of all entities to assert themselves. This approach also provides us with a positioning that refuses the foundation of the binary of subject and object. An Indigenous Australian approach to research is premised on building relationality and is not constructed by the subject as realised in a western approach. Relationality has agency. Indigenous Australian methodological approaches operate in their own right, and at the same time they accept existing binaries and ambiguities, as they are not linear in their worldview and epistemology. The methodological approaches to research are the content of the research and vice versa. They have a two-way agency. These are inseparable in an Indigenous worldview and it is in this light that we not only reassign axiology to this framework, but offer a relational way of reconfiguring research within the general knowledge economy.

References


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