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Ecology, Ontology, and Pedagogy at Camp Coorong

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Introduction

Ngarrindjeri futures depend on the survival of the land, waters, and other interconnected living things. The Murray-Darling Basin is recognised nationally and internationally as a system under stress. Ngarrindjeri have long understood the profound and intricate connection of land, water, humans, and non-humans (Trevorrow and Hemming). In an effort to secure environmental sustainability the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority (NRA) have engaged in political negotiations with the State, primarily with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), to transform natural resource management arrangements that engage with an ethics of justice, redistribution, and recognition (Hattam, Rigney and Hemming).

In 1987, prior to the formation of the NRA, Camp Coorong: Race Relations and Cultural Education Centre was established by the Ngarrindjeri Lands and Progress Association in partnership with the South Australian Museum and the South Australian Education Department (Hemming) as a place for all citizens to engage with the values of a land ethic of care. The complex includes a cultural museum, accommodation, conference facilities, and workshop facilities for primary, secondary, and tertiary education students; it also serves as a base for research and course development on Indigenous and Ngarrindjeri culture and history (Hattam, Rigney and Hemming). Camp Coorong seeks to share Ngarrindjeri cultural values, knowledges, and histories with students and visitors in order to "improve relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people with a broader strategy aimed at securing a future for themselves in their own 'Country'" (Hemming 37).

The Centre is adjacent to the Coorong National Park and 200 km South-East of Adelaide. The establishment of Camp Coorong on Ngarrindjeri *Ruwe/Ruwar* (land/body/spirit) occurred when Ngarrindjeri Elders negotiated with the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) to establish the race relations and cultural education centre. This negotiation was the beginning of many subsequent negotiations between Ngarrindjeri, local, State, and Federal

governments about reclaiming ownership, management, and control of Ngarrindjeri lands, waters, and knowledge systems for a healthy Country and by implication healthy people (Hemming, Trevorrow and Rigney). As Elder Tom Trevorrow states:

The waters and the seas, the waters of the Kurangh (Coorong), the waters of the rivers and lakes are all spiritual waters...

The land and waters is a living body...

We the Ngarrindjeri people are a part of its existence...

The land and waters must be healthy for the Ngarrindjeri people to be healthy...

We say that if *Yarluwar-Ruwe* dies, the water dies, our Ngartjis die, the Ngarrindjeri will surely die (Ngarrindjeri Nation Yarluwar-Ruwe Plan 13).

Ruwe/Ruwar is an important aspect of the public pedagogy practiced at Camp Coorong and by the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority (NRA). The NRA's nation building activities arise from negotiated contractual agreements called KNYs: *Kungan Ngarrindjeri Yunnan* (Listen to Ngarrindjeri people talking). KNYs establish a vital aspect of the NRA's strategic platform for political negotiations. However, the focus of this paper is concerned with local Indigenous experience of teaching and experience with the education system rather than the broader Ngarrindjeri educational objectives in the area. The specific concerns of this paper are the performance of storytelling and the dialectic relationship between the listener/learner (Tur and Tur). The pedagogy and place of Camp Coorong seeks to engage non-Indigenous people with Indigenous epistemologies through storytelling as a pedagogy of experience and a "pedagogy of discomfort" (Boler and Zembylas). Before detailing the relationship of these with one another, it is necessary to grasp the importance of the interconnectedness of *Ruwe/Ruwar* articulated in the opening statement of *Ngarrindjeri Nations Yarluwar-Ruwe Plan: Caring for Ngarrindjeri Sea, Country and Culture*:

Our Lands, Our Waters, Our People, All Living Things are connected. We implore people to respect our *Ruwe* (Country) as it was created in the *Kaldowinyeri* (the Creation). We long for sparkling, clean waters, healthy land and people and all living things. We long for the *Yarluwar-Ruwe* (Sea Country) of our ancestors. Our vision is all people Caring, Sharing, Knowing and Respecting the lands, the waters, and all living things.

Caring for Country

The Lakes and the Coorong are dying as irrigation, over grazing, and pollution have left their toll on the Murray-Darling Basin. Camp Coorong delivers a key message (Hemming, 38) concerning the on-going obligation of Ngarrindjeri's

Ruwe/Ruwar to heal damaged sites both emotionally and environmentally. Couched as a civic responsibility, caring for Country augments environmental action. However, there are epistemological distinctions between Natural Resources Management and Ngarrindjeri *Ruwe/Ruwar*. Ngarrindjeri conceive of the River Murray as one system that cannot be demarcated along state lines. Ngarrindjeri Elder Uncle Matt Rigney, who recently passed away, argued that the River Murray and the Darling is embodied and that when the river is sick it impacts directly on Ngarrindjeri personhood and wellbeing (Hemming, Trevorrow and Rigney). Therefore, Ngarrindjeri have a responsibility to care for Ngarrindjeri Country and Ngarrindjeri governance systems are informed by cultural and ethical obligations to *Ruwe/Ruwar* of the lower Murray River, Lakes and Coorong. Transmitting knowledge of Country is imperative as Aunty Ellen Trevorrow states:

We have to keep our culture alive. We want access to our special places, our lands and our waters. We need to be able to protect our places, our ngatji [totems], our Old People and restore damaged sites. We want respect for our land and our water and we want to pass down knowledge (cited in Bell, *Women and Indigenous Religions* 3).

Ruwe/Ruwar is an ethic of care where men and women hold distinctive cultural and environmental knowledge and are responsible for passing knowledge to future generations. Knowledge is not codified into a "canon" but is "living knowledge" connected to how to live and how to understand the connection between material, spiritual, human, and non-human realms. Elders at Camp Coorong facilitate understandings of this ontology by sharing stories that evoke questions in children and adults alike. For settler Australians, the first phase of this understanding begins with an engagement with the discomfort of the colonial history of Indigenous dispossession. It also requires learning new modes of "re/inhabitation" through a pedagogy informed by "place-consciousness" that centralises Indigenous connection to Country (Gruenewald *Both Worlds*).

Many settler communities embody a dualist western epistemology that is necessarily disrupted when there is acknowledgment from whence one came (Carter 2009). The activities and stories at Camp Coorong provide a positive transformative pedagogy that transforms a possessive white logic (Moreton-Robinson) to one of shared cultural heritage. Ngarrindjeri epistemologies of connection to Country are expressed through a pedagogy of storytelling at Camp Coorong. This often occurs during weaving, making feather flowers, or walking on Ngarrindjeri Country with visitors and students. Enactments such as weaving are not simply occupational or functional. Weaving has deep cultural and metaphorical significance as Aunty Ellen Trevorrow states:

There is a whole ritual in weaving. From where we actually start, the centre part of a piece, you're creating loops to weave into, then you move into the circle. You keep going round and round creating the loops and once the children do

those stages they're talking, actually having a conversation, just like our Old People. It's sharing time. And that's where our stories were told (cited in Bell, *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin* 44).

At Camp Coorong learning involves listening to stories while engaging with activities such as weaving or walking on Country. The ecological changes and the history of dispossession are woven into narrative on Country and students see the impact of the desecration of the Coorong, Lower Murray and Lakes and lands. In this way the relatively recent history of colonial race relations and contemporary struggles with government bureaucracies and legislation also comprise the warp and weave of Ngarrindjeri knowledge and connection to Country.

Pedagogy of Experience

A pedagogy of experience involves telling the story of Indigenous peoples' sense of "placelessness" within the nation (Watson) as a story of survival and resistance. It is through such pedagogies that Ngarrindjeri Elders at Camp Coorong reconstruct their lives and create agency in the face of settler colonialism. The experiences of growing up in Australia during the assimilation era, fighting against the State on policies that endorsed child theft, being forced to live at fringe camps, experiencing violent racisms, and, for some, living as part of a diaspora in one's own Country is embedded in the stories of survival, resilience and agency.

"Camp Coorong began as an experiment in alternative teaching methods developed largely by George Trevorrow, a local Ngarrindjeri man" (Hemming 38). Classroom malaise was experienced by Ngarrindjeri Elders from Camp Coorong, such as Uncle Tom and Aunty Ellen Trevorrow and the late Uncle George Trevorrow, Aunty Alice Abdulla, and others when interacting or employed in schools as Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs). It was the invisibility of these Elders' knowledges inside schools that generated the impetus to establish Camp Coorong as a counter-institution.

The spatial dimension of situationality, and its attention to social transformation, connects critical pedagogy to a pedagogy of place at Camp Coorong. Both discourses are concerned with the contextual, geographical conditions that shape people, and the actions people take to shape these conditions (Gruenewald, *Both Worlds*). Place-based education at Camp Coorong advocates a new localism in order to stimulate community revitalisation and resistance to globalisation and commodity capitalism. It provides the space and opportunity to develop the capacity for inventiveness and adaptation to changing environments and resistance to ecological destruction.

Of concern to the growing field of place-based education are how to promote care for people and places (Gruenewald and Smith, xix). For Gruenewald and Smith this requires decolonisation and developing sensitivity to forms of thought that injure and exploit people and places, and re/inhabitation by identifying, conserving, and creating knowledge that nurtures and protects people and places. Engaging in a land ethic of care on Country informs the educational paradigm at Camp Coorong that does not begin in front of bulldozers or under police batons at anti-globalisation rallies, but in the contact zones (Somerville 342) where “a material and metaphysical in-between space for the intersection of multiple and contested stories” (Somerville 342) emerge. Ngarrindjeri knowledge, environmental knowledge, scientific knowledge, colonial histories, and media representations all circulate in the contact zone and are held in productive tension (Carter).

Decolonising Pedagogy and Pedagogies of Discomfort

The critical and transformative aspects of decolonising pedagogies emerge from storytelling and involve the gift of narrative and the enactment of reciprocity that occurs between the listener and the storyteller. Reciprocity is based on the principles of interconnectedness, balance, and the idea that actions create corresponding action through the gift of story (Stewart-Harawira). Camp Coorong is a place for inter-cultural dialogue through storytelling. Being located on Ngarrindjeri Country the non-Indigenous listener is more able to “hear” and at the same time move along a continuum of a) disbelief and anger about the dispossession of Indigenous peoples; b) emotional confusion about their own sense of belonging in Australia; c) shock at the ways in which liberal western society’s structural privilege is built on Indigenous inequality on the grounds of race and habitus (Bordieu and Passeron); then, d) towards empathy that is framed as race cognisance (Aveling). Stories are not represented through a sanguine vision of the past, but are told of colonisation, dispossession, as well as of hope for the healing of Ngarrinjderi Country. The listener is gifted with stories at Camp Coorong. However, there is an ethical obligation to the gifting that learners may not understand until later and which concern the rights and obligations fundamental to notions of deep connection to Country. It is often in the recount of one’s experience at Camp Coorong, such as in reflective journals or in conversation, that recognition of the importance of history, social justice, and sovereignty are brought to light.

In the first phase of learning, non-Indigenous students and teachers may move from uncomfortable silence, to a space where they can *hear* the stories and thereby become engaged listeners. They may go through a process of grappling with a range of issues and emotions. There is frustration, anger, and blame that knowledge has been omitted from their education, and they routinely ask: “How did we not know this history?” In the second stage learners tend to remain

outside of the story until they are hooked by an aspect that draws them into it. They have the choice of engagement and this requires empathy. At this stage learners are grappling with the antithetical feelings of guilt and innocence; these feelings emerge when those advantaged and challenged by their complicity with settler colonialism, racism, and the structural privilege of whiteness start to understand the benefits they gain from Indigenous dispossession and ask “was it my fault?” Thirdly, learners enter a space which may disavow and dismiss the newly encountered knowledge and move back into resistance, silence, and reluctance to hear. However, it is at this point that a choice emerges. The choice to engage in the emotional labour required to acknowledge the gift of the story and thereby unsettle white Australian identity (Bignall; Boler and Zembylas).

In this process “inscribed habits of attention,” as described by Boler and Zembylas (127), are challenged. These habits have been enabled by the emotional binaries of “us” and “them”. The colonial legacy of Indigenous dispossession is an emotive subject that disrupts national pride that is built on this binary. At Camp Coorong, discomfort is created during the reiteration of stories and engagement in various activities. Uncertainty and discomfort are necessary parts of restructuring the emotional habitus and reconstructing identity.

The primary ethical aim of a pedagogy of discomfort is the creation of contestability. The learner comes to understand the rights and obligations of caring for Country and has to decide how to carry the story. Ngarrindjeri ethics of care inspire the learner to undertake the emotional labour necessary to relocate their understanding of identity. As a zone of cultural contestation, Camp Coorong also enables pedagogies that allow for critical reflection on common educational practices undertaken by educators and students.

Conclusion

The aim of the camp was to overturn racism and provide employment for Ngarrindjeri on Country (Hemming, 38). Students and teachers from around the state come to Camp Coorong and learn to weave, make feather flowers, and listen to stories about Ngarrindjeri Country whilst walking on Country (Hemming 38). Camp Coorong fosters understanding of Ngarrindjeri *Ruwe/Ruwar* and at the same time overturns essentialist notions developed by deficit theories that routinely remain embedded in the school curriculum. Camp Coorong’s anti-racist epistemology mobilises an Indigenous pedagogy of storytelling and experience as a decolonising methodology. Learning Ngarrindjeri history, cultural heritage, and land ethic of care deepens students’ understanding of connecting to Country through reflection on situations, histories, and shared spaces of human and non-human actors.

Pedagogies of discomfort also inform practice at Camp Coorong and the intersections of theory and practice in this context disrupts identity formations that have been grounded in a white colonial construction of nationhood. Education is a means of social and cultural reproduction, as well as a key site of resistance and vehicle for social change. Although the analysis of domination is a feature of critical pedagogy, what is urgently required is a language of hope and transformation understood from a Ngarrindjeri standpoint; something that is achieved at Camp Coorong.

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