An invitation to a gathering *of* Arrernte Country

Sacred *para* – river red gum, Parsons Street / Todd Mall intersection, *Mparntwe* – Alice Springs
Photograph courtesy *Alice Springs News* (2018)

You are invited to join Stick Mob, a collective of intra-cultural storytellers from central Australia – *Akarre* Elder and language teacher Margaret Kemarre Turner OAM, affectionately known as MK, along with an Indigenous ranger, a local historian, numerous dogs, friends, family, a NT DoE school leader, rolled up Stick Mob exhibition posters, *inurla* – spiders and *urlpaatja* – ring-necked parrots gathering under a sacred *para* – river red gum growing along Todd Mall, the main pedestrian street of *Mparntwe* – Alice Springs. This gathering is a future account of a past event entitled 'ideas incubator' that occurred as part of the *Shifting Ground*[1] forum held in *Mparntwe* in 2007 (Finnane, 2014a, 2014b).

Knowledge Trees

MK requested we meet here. She wants those gathered to hear the 'strong story' of this *para* – river red gum, rooted in in the commercial district, and how this tree is culturally and rhizomatically connected to other knowledge trees growing along *Lhere Artepe* – Todd River – the (seasonally) dry riverbed which runs parallel to the mall. She indicates that this *para* is

[1] *Shifting Ground* was a month-long Watch This Space (WTS) program held in March 2007. *Shifting Ground* arose from a creatively grounded process entitled *Art~Land~Culture* which began in 2005. This expansive arts program owed much to the vision and organising energy of the then WTS coordinator, Kieren Sanderson.

an ancestor[2] to Stick Mob and our exhibition at Watch This Space gallery, which we are in the process of walking towards.

MK says that the 'Knowledge Tree' feels past-present-future energy running beneath the town. She tells us that before colonisation the banks of *Lhere Artepe* were a particularly good place for harvesting *yalke* – wild onion. In hushed tones, turning her attention to Stick Mob, she says that one of the ways 'Knowledge Trees' manifest their past-present-future vitalities is through art and creativity (Finnane, 2014). The background hum of traffic fades, and I hear *pupurla* – skinks – and *iwupa* – itchy grubs – in the folds and smells of *para tjalka* – bark of the river red gum. A visceral halting – embodied as a slowing down of time, space and what is coming to matter as MK and these mighty sacred ancestral trees *re*ground, *re*perform foundational intra-connected and intra-generational knowledges in their becoming/s.

MK nods to another 'Knowledge Tree', growing in the shade of the Alice Springs Supreme Court. She tilts her head towards an Arrernte Ranger who takes up the story. With a wryly ironic raised eyebrow the Arrernte Ranger says, in the last twenty years, Western science made the 'discovery' that majestic trees communicate through a microscopic network of fungi, called mycelium, that runs underneath the concrete. They explain that river red gums are 'foundation' or 'hub' trees as their roots reach deep sources of water and minerals which they pass onto younger trees – essential for their survival in arid regions (Simard, 2012). The ranger takes a breath before saying that Western science and Indigenous knowledges are beginning to find common ground; however, Western science and bureaucracies still struggle to value entities as inanimate, ancestral and agential, which means that sacred *para* trees remain objects to human subjectivity. On that note, MK reminds us how hard it was for Arrernte Elders to protect these sacred 'living' ancestor trees from urban development through the Northern Territory Sacred Sites Act (Northern Territory Government, 1989).

[2] The 'ance'– Latin prefix in ancestor, means 'before' – 'to go before'. An ancestor, in this instance, is an entity that has 'gone before'. This etymology 'gone before' is apt for the engagement of 'ancestor' agency (not as a metaphor) and temporality (the inseparability of past-present-future) as honoured throughout this article.

Whilst walking we *re*member

Walking along Todd Mall we pass Adelaide House, the first hospital and first stone building to be built by Rev John Flynn in central Australia (built in 1920) and the John Flynn Memorial Church (opened in 1956 and currently a Uniting Church) (Petrick, 2015). The local historian halts us to explain the history of why the portrait of Rev John Flynn, a Royal Flying Doctors Service aircraft, a RFDS De Havilland Dragon and a Traegar[3] pedal wireless radio used by the RFDS to improve communication in remote areas – primarily for pastoral families and central Australia land development interests – is etched on the Australian twenty dollar note (Enns & Myers, 2021). The historian invites those gathered to *re*question taken-for-granted colonial inheritance and benefits received through 'the mantel of safety' offered by the RFDS to white settlers in the early 1900s (Shearman & Limmer, 1978).

Walking, we *re*member these multi-layered entangled stories that make up the sedimentary topography of Todd Mall. We talk about how our present experience of boarded-up shops and roller door shutters due to Indigenous youth unrest in the CBD (Haskins & Barwick, 2022; Laverty, 2022) is threaded through the missions, pastoral stations, mining interests, policing, telecommunication projects, exhibitions, art markets and Arrernte family groups gathering *yalka* while camping along *Lhere Mparntwe* watching for fire signals to ensure safe passage through *Ntaripe* – Heavitree Gap.

Extensive CCTV surveillance track this intra-generational, intra-cultural, in/animate preamble as potential friends or foes to regional security. For the purpose of this article, which is to get a sense of the in/animate entities gathering and performing along Todd Mall, the focus is on two prominent security cameras. The first camera is the Northern Territory Department of Education, keeping a close watch, to see if the content and pedagogical approach undertaken by this un/sanctioned group validates the latest systemic 'quality assured' instructional model (as deemed beneficial to academic improvement by a raft of empirical research findings). The second camera is academia, universal surveillance from

[3] Alfred Treague was the inventor of the pedal wireless radio. Traeger worked with Rev John Flynn to establish the Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia. His pedal radio enabled remote families, primarily pastoral families and mining company personnel, to access medical treatment. It later became the mode of educational delivery to pastoralist families across 'outback' Australia – see Alice Springs' historian, Jose Petrick's book *The History of Alice Springs Through Landmarks and Street Names* (2015).

elsewhere, which in this instance is connected with place through my academic presence in this gathering. This is a multifaceted, tensioned, balancing act in movement – how to stay on the track *of* ancestors within the confines of structures that do not (yet) recognise the agency of in/animate entities, nor acknowledge the co-creation of in-situ knowledge gatherings/performances/productions *of* specific places and those gathering. Here we are, a preamble of in/animate entities in relationality (inseparable) to one another, accountable to stories told and telling – walking a fine line so as not to alert security.

The arrival of guards would indicate nervousness, the intolerance of differences that this gathering represents by those positioned as surveying from elsewhere. Walking, understood as theorising in movement and CCTV surveillance are never innocent to the violent forces held in position by dichotomies such as inside/outside, in/animate, universal/local, centre/periphery, reason/affect, un/disciplined, un/restrained, un/civilised, un/supervised. Nor is it innocent to the repetitive violence of colonising patterns released on bodies when binaries are un/settled.

The above narrative establishes education in central Australia as a multi-storied phenomenon co-authored by a host of entangled in/animate entities and histories *of* Arrernte Country. The narrative gathering of in/animate entities include different knowledge systems and knowledge holders, thinking, walking, art, narratives, and CCTV monitoring mechanisms, to name a few. The above narrative affirms the relationality of in/animate entities so as to *re*conceptualise and *re*materialise educational research purposes, practices and matters through embodied, entangled and storied methodologies and methods arising from specific places and context.

A diffractive analysis of this situation is provided through multiple intra-connected stories as told by different entities. This approach offer glimpses into how different matters materialise in relationship to one another and how power is threaded through gathering, storying, walking, art making, past/present/future messaging, and CCTV. Materialising matter/s in this manner *re*troubles and *re*thinks Newtonian notions of causality, power, agency, and ethics as gatherings of Arrernte Country *re*perform and *re*pattern the very nature of knowledge, doing and being.

Guided by different knowledges

How to be guided by different knowledges emanating from in/animate entities, troubles, times and spaces? How to be *of* Arrernte Country – aware of our inheritances, and vested interests, as well as mis/interpretations, projections, habitual thinking and appropriations? As a woman of Irish/English heritage I am entangled in repetitive colonial patterns. In multiple, threaded ways my work as a teacher-artist-researcher of this place, Arrernte Country, is an *un*ravelling – a *re*threading of my colonial inheritances embodied in systems that uphold and benefit from deficit discourses *about* Indigenous people. I am grateful to work and create alongside those who *always* and *already* talk/write/sketch/perform issues of epistemic violence that resist the erasure of Arrernte ontologies, and the effect of colonial deficit discourses and practices (see creative work by Miller, 2021; Newberry, 2021, 2023; Stuart, 2017; Turner & McDonald, 2010). In this way I am heartened by those gathering as we *re*think and *re*question what it means to live and become differently in central Australia (Finnane, 2016; Kemp, 2022; Moss, 2023; San Roque, 2017; Tacey, 2009).

delia, migratory duck and MK chatting

Detail of delia, *ipelyakwe* – migratory teal duck and MK chatting about *Amiwarre* – the Milky Way.

Artwork: *Antulye Country: bodies in the making* (Cowan, 2020).

Positioning: in/animate entities, thoughts, writing, time, education and relationships materialising *of* Arrernte. This is a gathering space *within* the undulating *Antulye* ridges, where in/animate entities gather and sit in counsel. The in/animate entities, of which there are many, do not just inhabit but rather co-create space, time and matter/s *of* Arrernte Country in

its un/sedimenting iterative intra-activity. For example, the two twisting *apmurne* – mulga trees – tune into all possible (past-present-future) pathways, all possible relationships, all possible becomings. These mulga trees are not mute, docile and generalisable trees that represent something outside of relationality; rather they are analytical tuning instruments *of Antulye* Country. The entangled threads that carry and create these ethical, epistemological and ontological knowledges are rhizomatic.

Dimensions: 160 cm x 100 cm.

Medium: Four large post-it notes, masking tape, whiteout, graphite, ink pen, black and red biro. This drawing was created quickly and energetically in an office space using a range of office materials at hand.

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