

# The weaving power of Indigenous storytelling — personal reflections on the impact of COVID-19 and the response of Indigenous communities

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## Introduction

The academy has always been a complex place for Indigenous scholars. In first entering as students and graduates in the mid-1960s, the growing number of those choosing an academic pathway and career is slowly, yet fundamentally, altering the way research is undertaken and teaching and learning is done. From seeking to find spaces within the Western disciplines with a goal of “Indigenising” the curriculum and through modules on “Indigenous studies,” there is a growing move towards the inclusion of traditional knowledges, not just as a way to fit in with Western sciences, but as a knowledge system in their own right.

Research projects in the Indigenous space have moved from being “about Indigenous people” to working towards the concept of “Indigenous led-research.” Ethics processes and protocols have reflected these shifts. The privileging and valuing of the knowledge of Indigenous Elders and consideration of how Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) will be treated are now central to framing research questions and methodologies.

These shifts are a reminder of how, now that the cohort of Indigenous academics has increased in the academy, fundamental shifts have taken place, even though they have been incremental over time. I start

with this reflection as a recognition of the way in which Indigenous people have been agents of change within the academy — and that they have entered it without leaving their concept of self-determination at the door.

I was in the town of Oak Valley, out on the lands of the Maralinga Tjarutja, working on a film project,<sup>1</sup> when news of a virus outbreak in Wuhan, China, started making international headlines. Oak Valley has the most remote health service in South Australia. The health service is community-controlled and its Aboriginal nurse is a central member of the local community. Oak Valley has its own Indigenous-run Council and is part of the Maralinga Tjaruta Lands Trust. The traditional owners had been moved off their lands when the atomic testing took place and, after a Royal Commission and continual community pressure on successive Federal governments to clean up contaminated land, it has been returned to full community control.<sup>2</sup>

As the understanding of the impact of COVID-19 grew, the health service swung into action with community meetings to discuss what was known about it and to pro-

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1 *Maralinga Tjarutja*, Blackfella Films, 2020.

2 For a fulsome account of the fight by the Maralinga Tjaruta people to regain their lands, see Hiskey (2021).

vide information about hygiene and social distancing. As the threat loomed larger, talk began of closing the community off and the work started in ensuring that there was enough food and medical supplies.

It was noticeable at the time that, as the Federal and state governments struggled with the difficult task of balancing health imperatives with economic implications and the need to develop strategies for ensuring public health including closing borders and implementing other restrictions, these remote, self-governing communities could act swiftly to make the determinations about what was in their best interest. I often heard people express the view that they felt safe in the remoteness of their outstations and homelands. Communities like Oak Valley could be nimble. State and territory governments quickly supported their decisions but it was evidence of one of the many benefits of an empowered local governance structure.

Also highlighted in the quick response from Indigenous communities was the importance of the community-controlled sector. Community controlled health organisations from the start of the COVID-19 crisis did the heavy lifting in terms of community education and other precautions, including highlighting the need for flu and pneumococcal vaccinations to limit the risk of complications if people did get infected.<sup>3</sup> Those targeted campaigns were culturally appropriate and targeted the most vulnerable in the Indigenous community who are often missed in large government roll-outs. They did this heavy lifting with limited resources.

However, as was the case with much of the way COVID-19 impacted the community, gaps in service delivery and other inequalities were quickly highlighted. The cost of fresh food has long been an issue in remote communities<sup>4</sup> with negative implications on Indigenous health. It's cheaper to buy soft drink and chips in remote community stores compared to the high cost of fresh fruit and vegetables that have been largely attributable to high transportation costs. Even in communities such as Oak Valley where there is some capacity to supplement diets with healthy bush tucker, the cost of nutritious food remains an issue.

The other reminder of inequity was evident in the official listing of most “at risk” groups: people over 70, people over 60 with an underlying health issue and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over 50. This highlights the gap that still needs to be closed in terms of life expectancy and health outcomes such as higher rates of heart disease and diabetes in Indigenous communities.

One of the first, hardest hit areas when COVID-19 became a global pandemic was the performing arts and then the arts sector more generally. Performances were cancelled; venues and exhibitions closed.

Along with the rest of the sector, Indigenous performing arts companies were hard hit by this. Many of the smaller companies were focused on performances for tourists interested in local, traditional culture. As flights stopped and borders closed, Indigenous arts companies faced the further challenge of the loss of their key commercial markets. Community art centres often rely on tourists travelling through, so, with

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.naccho.org.au/covid-19-resources>

<sup>4</sup> See Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs (2020).

extended lockdowns and strict restrictions on movement in and out of remote communities, these small entrepreneurial industries suffered.

But it is misguided to assess the impact of COVID-19 on creative practice in Indigenous communities by simply looking at the impact on the arts and creative industries. Creative practice is part of a larger ecosystem in tight-knit communities and has profound impacts on cultural life.

Art practice such as painting, weaving and possum-cloak making is often still a very communal activity within the Indigenous communities. Restrictions on movement and gatherings have had an impact on these types of activities, limiting engagement in these important processes. Other important cultural practices, such as ceremonies, were impacted by closed borders and isolation restrictions.

When we think of the connection between culture and well-being for our mob, especially mental health, the lack of the community engagement brought on by COVID had a significant impact.<sup>5</sup> Not only does it remind us that engagement with culture and cultural practice is a key factor in the wellbeing of Indigenous people, it should serve as a reminder that, universally, a connection with creativity and creative practice is enriching.

Despite the challenges that COVID and its restrictions have posed, there was optimism and opportunity — partly because the virus did not sweep through communities as was first rightly feared.

For many Indigenous people, the trials posed by COVID were just another set of challenges amongst many others, another

bump in the road. Resilience in Indigenous communities has developed over the centuries of colonisation — responding to dispossession from land, policies of removing children, strict controls over daily life, the introduction of diseases, the destruction of cultural sites. Lives have often been disrupted; Indigenous people have long been on the margins. We are used to being at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. While this global crisis is like no other in our lifetime, it was just one more disaster to threaten Indigenous communities. As one Elder said to me, “We’ve survived small pox, we can survive this.” In that dark humour lives a resilience that speaks to a continuing resistance to colonisation and all its myriad impacts.

While the impact on communal practice and ceremony was deeply felt, personal engagement with cultural practice remained strong. Many people re-engaged more intimately in connection to culture. I began my brother’s possum coat as a way to keep strong in the culture in a more personal way, though the usual way to make the coat is communal. By preparing the skins and starting the burning of the patterns, it was ready to sew as a family, a space to share stories about my brother, to share with his children, when we were able to come back together as a broader family network.

Artists themselves have been entrepreneurial. Indigenous people have a good take-up of technology.<sup>6</sup> It is access, not adaptability, that is an issue. Artists’ collectives are selling on-line; art markets and festivals are going virtual.<sup>7</sup> One instructive example was Dance Rites, an annual

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5 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1997).

6 Rice et al. (2016).

7 See <https://aiatsis.gov.au/iam>

program put together by Rhoda Roberts at the Sydney Opera House.<sup>8</sup> Before COVID, it would have been unthinkable to suggest that such an important cultural event, one that brings together performers from all over the country, could be done virtually, missing the important element of people meeting and connecting. But the event was undertaken by recording people locally around the country. Elders who would not have been able to travel to Sydney because of age and/or illness could participate. And the format meant that important dances were recorded for the community. While not the same, there were clear benefits in a virtual event. And while it is also not the same for an audience to see dance performed virtually as it is to see it live, there is a potential for a much larger number to access it. And it is important to performers that they get to perform.

The pandemic has highlighted many weaknesses in our economic, democratic and social systems that were just cracks before that were easily papered over. Vulnerability in the employment market and fragility in the housing market are two areas where those with less security are feeling the pinch, while those with economic certainty are more easily weathering the storm. The difference between the “haves” and “have nots” is coming into starker relief.

Perhaps that is one reason that explains why there has been a bigger response to the Black Lives Matter movement by the broader Australian community during the pandemic than at any time leading up to it. I’ve been marching against Deaths in Cus-

tody since I was a child and a turnout of fifty or more would be greeted as a sign that the tide was turning.

To have seen the tens of thousands who turned out across the country to give support to the Black Lives Matter movement showed a fundamental shift. After each death in custody in Australia, another family, another Indigenous community has been mobilised. All of those deaths were unjust. But something shifted when it was impossible not to draw comparisons to the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020, and David Dungay Jr in Long Bay Correctional Centre, Sydney on 29 December 2015, when both men’s last words were, “I can’t breathe”.<sup>9</sup>

I’m not signalling this as necessarily leading to the changes we’ve long advocated for, but there is a different discussion now in the mainstream that acknowledges that there is such a thing as systemic racism that was reflected in the language used at the Black Lives Matter rallies. Signs read: “End White Supremacy” and “White Privilege is the Problem.” These are slogans I never saw in my youth. Discussions about systemic racism and complicity in colonial systems that have long existed but have now moved from the academy into the streets.

COVID-19 almost eclipsed the preceding summer of apocalyptic bushfires. Through the lethal and intense burning of bush and homes that shattered communities and decimated ecosystems, there was furtive questioning about the extent to which we can manage the climate crisis. This has led to an increased inter-

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/festivals/dance-rites.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/01/family-of-david-dungay-who-died-in-custody-express-solidarity-with-family-of-george-floyd>

est in Indigenous knowledges, particularly around fire-burning technology<sup>10</sup> and sustainability practices. The profound cultural impact of Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu*<sup>11</sup> has also seen more Australians think deeply about the way they live on this country and what the people who survived on it for over sixty-five thousand years may have to teach us about it.

During the period of the COVID lockdown I updated my book, *Indigenous Australia for Dummies*.<sup>12</sup> It had been ten years since its publication and there was a lot of catching up to do. While socio-economic statistics needed updating, they had not shifted too much — education and some health outcomes were improving; rates of over-representation in the criminal justice system and out-of-home cares systems were increasing. The two areas that required the most work were the areas of Indigenous knowledges and in performing arts and literature. There is a renaissance of Indigenous filmmaking, performance and writing; proof that the storytelling traditions are alive and well.

There is an increasing understanding that Indigenous stories need to be led by Indigenous people. And there is an increasing awareness that the strongest storytelling comes from Indigenous perspective. More and more there is broader acceptance of Indigenous stories as Australian stories — as *the* Australian stories.

Because of the relative containment of COVID in Australia, we were amongst the first in the world to be ready to perform and create again. Major film productions moved

here; people returned to the stage ahead of the rest of the world. This had additional advantages for local performers. The 2021 Sydney Festival was the first in the world to return to in-person events. Headed by Artistic Director, Wesley Enoch, the Festival combined risk management and strategic and deliberate investment in our local content with a program of all-Australian talent. While fluid border restrictions caused their own logistical nightmare, the Festival was a success — the first opportunity for many performers to take to the stage in front of a live audience. In perhaps a sign of things to come, live events were often available with virtual options for the audience. You can watch in the venue; or at home. Again, this opened up the Festival to those who could not travel to Sydney.

This adaptability gives me optimism about what regeneration post-COVID-19 looks like, with a focus on the importance of the role of creativity and performing arts as a way of building communities and bringing us back together. As we rebuild, story is a way to heal and strengthen. I think of it like weaving, and as our stories intersect and we find our connections and how we are tied to each other, the fabric becomes stronger — there is a cohesiveness that builds.

With the vaccines now rolling out, there is quiet optimism that Indigenous communities across Australia have avoided the fates of other First Nations around the globe, particularly the Navajo Nation in the United States.<sup>13</sup> It is a credit to our community-controlled organisations and their ability to respond to cultural needs and to the nimble regional and local self-governance systems.

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10 Steffensen (2020).

11 Pascoe (2014).

12 Behrendt (2021).

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13 Cheetham (2020).

They are providing further proof that the principle of self-determination is not just a lofty ideal and a central human right — it is an effective and efficient framework for policy and service provision.

Communities like Oak Valley, who so quickly and ably turned their attention to the safety and well-being of the people who lived there, need to be recognised for their role in achieving the results. The Closing the Gap agenda has been rebooted, including justice and child protection strategies. Its progress and the implementation of strategy is now overseen by a Partnership Agreement that sees Indigenous peak bodies take a seat at the table beside government. Hopefully this will avoid the practice in the past of governments who funded non-Indigenous NGOs to do the rebuilding or the work being funded through stimulus at the expense of the Indigenous community-controlled organisations who have done the heavy lifting through the crisis.

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