

## **The Wentworth Lectures - 2004**

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

### **Indigenous Australian Studies and Higher Education<sup>1</sup>**

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In 1959, Mr Bill Wentworth presented his original proposal for a national Institute of Aboriginal Studies (Wentworth, 1959). He was motivated, in part, by a concern that the then three anthropology departments in Australian universities were not doing enough to document Aboriginal societies rapidly undergoing transformation (Petersen, 1990).

Forty-five years later, Indigenous Studies, the current inclusive, though somewhat contentious term that encapsulates Aboriginal Studies and/or Torres Strait Islander Studies, and which more recently includes, as well, comparisons from the international Indigenous context, is a discrete and much expanded field of academic study and inquiry in universities across this nation.

It would seem timely to examine where we are currently at with 'Indigenous Studies' in Australian universities with a view to considering future directions.

In this lecture my aim is not to present an audit of Indigenous Studies, or discuss its structural organisation within universities, or give an historical assessment or critique, but to begin some early discussions on the way we, the Indigenous academic community, approach Indigenous Studies as scholarly and intellectual activity.

The aim is to stimulate some thinking within the Indigenous academic community about the way we think about and study Indigenous issues in universities.

To speak broadly about scholarly and intellectual practice in the field of Indigenous Studies from the Indigenous perspective is to speak about it quite differently from non-Indigenous academics who speak from within the disciplinary intersections where their knowledge production and practice takes up issues about us, our historical experience, and our contemporary position.

For us, the field of Indigenous Studies is part of a broader landscape that includes not just Indigenous Studies, but higher education for Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> This lecture is an abridged version of a larger paper on Indigenous Australian Studies currently being prepared for publication.

students (see Bennett, 1998), and the rebuilding of Indigenous communities and futures. For us, these are not entirely separable.

This complicates discussion of Indigenous Studies for Indigenous academics whose scholarly concerns are diverse and scattered across the disciplines, whose work in universities crosses many concerns beyond scholarly ones, and whose work must always remain articulated to community concerns and sensibilities.

And yet, the theoretical and methodological issues of knowledge production and representation that emerge in Indigenous Studies are fundamental to understanding the broader landscape in which we educate Indigenous students and the way we think about the Indigenous relationship to the Australian community (Nakata, 1993a; 1993b).

Furthermore, understanding the theoretical and methodological issues are critical to producing new and more effective approaches to negotiating the intersections of different knowledge systems as they converge, circumscribe and condition the possibilities for both understanding the past and its legacies, and improving Indigenous futures.

Underpinning Indigenous academic involvement in Indigenous Studies is a definitive commitment to Indigenous people first and foremost, not to the intellectual or academic issues alone.

And working to generate new ideas and lines of inquiry and experimenting with practice forged in the intersections of Western knowledges and our knowledge traditions is to theorise people's lives and to set out to reshape opportunities for their futures in the same way that others have, no matter how we bring our perspectives and interpretations to bear on it.

Indigenous academics, therefore, operate in a tension between the expectations of academic and Indigenous communities that both informs and constrains the development of an Indigenous intellectual community.

So, when we stray into perceived intellectualisms or activity that does not at first sighting appear to have a direct relation to community interests, we can be called into question by our communities as to the relevance of our work and whether we are leaving community interests behind and becoming too immersed in ways and thinking of the 'White world'.

These are confronting questions that seek to regulate not just our thinking and intellectual activity, but also our identity, according to the perceived application of our work to community interests—confrontations that question our allegiance to the Indigenous community. Are we members of the Indigenous community or the academic community?

The choice is sometimes that stark. That is, an Indigenous intellectual is as much an object of suspicion as a non-Indigenous one.

The irony of course is that entry to the academic community is not activated merely by our presence and work in the institution. Academia has its own gatekeepers, which we must also negotiate.

Thick skin and secure identities are essential job requirements.

But unless Indigenous academics begin to focus more sharply on the intellectual issues associated with our co-option into the academic disciplines

as a 'knowable' subject of study we will arguably not meet our commitment to Indigenous people and futures.

It is imperative in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that we develop an Indigenous intellectual community, and it is imperative that the Indigenous community understands the function and purpose of such an Indigenous intellectual community.

My focus in this lecture is on disciplinary and scholarly issues within Indigenous Studies and how these might be approached in ways that keep the necessary cohesion and solidarity so important to the Indigenous struggle but which allow enough space for Indigenous scholars to pursue different avenues of inquiry in the interests of generating new and more productive knowledge and practice for Indigenous communities.

This freedom to explore is critical, and without it Indigenous knowledge production in the academy will be both stifled and impoverished, or fractured by political division between different schools of thought and their associated politics.

I want to discuss the broader framework of Indigenous Studies in two ways: firstly, in terms of how we approach the intersections of different knowledge systems in Indigenous Studies; and

secondly, in terms of the overarching narrative, through which we frame and connect our struggle to shape the content and teaching of Indigenous Studies and the education of Indigenous students.

But first, a brief sketch of the trajectory we have been on so far.

When the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies was established, Aboriginal Studies was defined in clear and unambiguous terms and everyone knew where it belonged. The 1964 *Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Act*, defined Aboriginal Studies as:

*...anthropological research and study in relation to the aboriginal [sic] people of Australia (including research and study in respect of culture and languages). (cited in Bennett, 1998, p. 2)*

At the time there were three anthropology departments in Australian universities and the work of the Institute helped develop the disciplines of archaeology and linguistics in universities (Petersen, 1990).

This triad of subjects that once dominated Aboriginal Studies now forms a much smaller portion in a greatly expanded field. These subjects have themselves undergone change in their direction and practices.

The early study of Indigenous societies had little interest in Indigenous peoples beyond how we, as living evidence of the human past, could contribute to knowledge of the evolution of human societies (Berndt, 1982; Hiatt, 1984; Jones, 1978; Mulvaney, 1986; Attwood, 1996).

The value of study was to capture knowledge of us and our 'primitive social organisation' before we were 'lost' or 'transformed' so the knowledge would not be lost to science (Peterson, 1990).

This early knowledge production was therefore all about us and yet had nothing to do with us either—it was quite external to our society and concerns (Nakata, 1998).

The purpose of study about Indigenous Australians changed in the decade leading up to the 1967 referendum and production accelerated into the 1970s, 80s and 90s.

In a context of public policy reform, academic research began constructing new ways of understanding Indigenous people in order to develop effective reform measures (Sherwood, 1982).

Once again this knowledge production in the early period of reform was largely external to us, formed by the application of theories and methodologies of the relevant disciplines, including educational theory and psychology and the all-pervasive use of statistics.

In this period explanations of educational failure, of cultural deprivation and cultural difference, and of poverty and disadvantage, emerged in a renewed consideration of who we were and what we needed in reform measures. That is, we were no longer dying, but pathetically transformed and in need of reform.

At a steady pace, from the beginning of the 1970s Aboriginal Studies came to include topics in a revised history and literature, that uncovered a silence about frontier violence (eg. Loos, 1982), theft of land (eg. Reynolds, 1989) and children (eg. Wilson, 1997), racism (eg. Cowlshaw & Morris, 1997; McConnochie, Hollinsworth & Pettman, 1988), and the effects and practices of colonisation (eg. Beckett, 1987) and native administration (eg. Kidd, 1997).

We became subjects of the social sciences through sociological theory about minorities, analyses of race relations, the politics of identity, and so forth.

We became subjects in the emerging cross-disciplinary areas of Cultural Studies, Australian Studies, and Post-colonial Studies.

We have become the subject of the discipline of Law, Education, the Health Sciences, the Environmental Sciences, and the Fine Arts and others (Bennett, 1998).

The definition put forward by the Commonwealth Aboriginal Studies Working Group report to the Australian Education Council in 1982 reflected the changing agenda in relation to understanding Indigenous Australia:

*Aboriginal Studies is the study of the history, cultures, languages and life styles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, both prior to and following European colonization in a context which places emphasis on understanding of issues central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contemporary society and on their relevance to the total Australian community. Its contents are the descriptions, insights and explanations of human experience derived both from Aboriginal and from non-Aboriginal sources. (Hill, 1986, p.1)*

This definition signalled an expanded purpose, that of understanding contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait society, which reflected not just the goals of reform but our inclusion into the national story.

The definition also includes an important addition to the corpus: descriptions, insights and explanations of human experience from Aboriginal sources.

This is an important change. Indigenous Studies, though still the study about us, was to now include insights from within Indigenous society. This definition of Indigenous Studies informs most Indigenous Studies courses today.

This change was in part due to the other major influence on Indigenous Studies during this period, which has been the political activism and the presence of Indigenous people in Indigenous affairs, including higher education.

Early activism has evolved into an entrenched and recognised presence of Indigenous interests within universities, though not an entirely secure one in many places.

Early political activism pursued not just equitable access to higher education but also pursued education for self-determination, especially for Indigenous people who worked in communities and emerging Indigenous organisations and who needed to develop very specific sets of skills to assist community development and provide leadership (Bin-Sallik, 1990).

With various beginnings, and continued development, Indigenous people have been involved in two spheres of activity: developing academic and cultural support centres; and developing specially designed programs, which now cross seven gradations of qualifications from preparatory levels to the postgraduate level.

Although initially dependent on and supported by non-Indigenous academics these programs are now where possible Indigenous-run, managed and taught.

Special programs exist to meet an ongoing demand for skills in urban, regional and remote Indigenous communities and organisations that standard academic programs do not fulfil adequately or appropriately. They include some Indigenous Studies content from the disciplines but often develop content for their own particular needs and purposes.

Increasingly Indigenous students have also entered unchanged programs across the Faculties, and may or may not take Indigenous Studies subjects.

Indeed, in many places it is non-Indigenous students who constitute the major student cohort in these subjects.

As I stated earlier, Indigenous academics have grown as a community over this period as graduates have come through the system.

Once largely confined to support activities, increasing numbers of qualified Indigenous academics teach Indigenous Studies, some within the disciplines, most from the Indigenous centres or in special programs.

Indigenous Studies is increasingly under the nominal authority or management of Indigenous academics even if it continues to be taught by non-Indigenous academics.

A growing cohort of Indigenous scholars has emerged that is contributing to Indigenous Studies in important ways.

We are speaking back and challenging the disciplines, critiquing, interrogating, asking different questions and producing alternative and disruptive accounts that are useful for others' understanding, useful for a fuller understanding (eg. Anderson, 2003; Behrendt, 2003; Birch, 2003; Cronin, 2003; Davis, 2003; Dodson, 1994; Heiss, 2003; Langton, 1992, 1998, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2003; Morrissey, 2003; Quiggan & Janke, 2003).

This brief sketch provides only enough detail to show how the field has expanded, how for us it is part of the bigger Indigenous higher education project and how we ourselves are increasingly becoming involved at the academic and scholarly level.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Indigenous Studies is now cross-disciplinary in its specialisation.

It draws concepts, analysis, theories and methodologies from the disciplines, other cross-disciplines, and also from Maori Studies, Native American Studies and other international Indigenous studies contexts.

It also inserts back into disciplines knowledge about Indigenous people and their realities drawn from a range of disciplines, for example, anthropological knowledge on culture goes into education, health, and law, and so on.

It is therefore a cross-discipline that circulates an ever-expanding corpus of knowledge. It collects and redistributes knowledge about Indigenous people.

I suggest it is time that Indigenous academics redefine Indigenous Studies once again to reflect our concerns.

We have had content-based definitions emerging from others' concerns but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we need to consider definitions that also pursue a renewed purpose for Indigenous Studies at the tertiary level that is more reflective of Indigenous intents and goals.

This is particularly important as we grapple with the effects of our construction within and by the Western disciplines and work to renegotiate the meanings of these understandings at the intersections of our own understandings of our traditions, historical experiences, contemporary positions and possible futures.

Defining Indigenous Studies in these terms implies that questions of concepts, theories, methodologies, underlying principles and boundaries are relevant and open up Indigenous Studies for consideration as a discipline rather than simply a collection of subjects garnered from across the disciplines.

This brings me back to the first point mentioned earlier about Knowledge Intersections.

In the academy, Indigenous Studies is clearly the study of and about Indigenous people.

What does it mean then for an Indigenous academic to participate in the continuing production of knowledge about Indigenous people, from within the academy, when our goals and commitment are to serve our own people, to rebuild communities and futures?

What does it mean for our participation in the continuing production of knowledge in Indigenous Studies, if what we do, if our Indigenous perspectives, knowledge and analysis are inscribed in and through the Western ontological world and circulate back to shape practice in Indigenous contexts in similar ways to Western production?

These questions are prominent in Indigenous academics minds, not just in Australia but in other places as well.

They lie at the heart of the Indigenous dilemma in Western education.

Western education demands an ongoing denial or exclusion of our own knowledges, epistemologies, and traditions and a further co-option into a system:

- that is quite different from our own;
- that is deeply implicated in our historical treatment and continuing position;
- that can never fully understand or give representation to our own histories, knowledges, experience and expression of our reality; and which,
- through its discursive complexities, always circumscribes our own representations and understandings in its re-presentations.

Different approaches to this problem have emerged that reflect this central contradiction but one common aspect underpins the various Indigenous approaches.

When Indigenous Studies in higher education is discussed from within Indigenous concerns, that is concerns internal to Indigenous society, it invariably is not separated from what it means for the education of Indigenous people or from what it means for re-establishing continuities with former traditions and knowledge.

There has been much more discussion of the broader issues associated with Indigenous Studies as a discipline in the North American, Hawaiian and Aotearoa contexts and although Indigenous Australian academics are in conversation with international Indigenous scholars this has not tended to result in similar conversations within our context.

The issues, rather, are taken up by individuals in their scholarly work or by networks in particular places but do not produce much conversation in the literature about the forward movement of Indigenous scholarly production or practice in Indigenous Studies.

Indigenous Studies in international contexts share similar intellectual and scholarly issues to us, though they have been discussed for longer and more robustly in this context.

As early as 1970, there was a view amongst American Indian scholars that Native American Studies was about defending Indigenous nationhood, that is, “defense of the land and indigenous rights” (Cook-Lynn, 1997, p. 9).

The discipline was envisioned as “the endogenous study of First Nation cultures and history” (1997, p. 10). That is, it was to be studied from within

these cultures, and would refute 'exogenous' knowledge of Indigenous people constructed by the methodologies of Western knowledge systems.

Inherent in this view was a great desire by Native American scholars to assert themselves not merely as "the inheritors of trauma but [as] heirs to vast legacies of knowledge about [their] continent and the universe that had been ignored" since colonisation (Cook-Lynn, 1997, p. 9).

This view of Indigenous Studies as a discipline that can be developed from within Indigenous epistemologies to continue tribal knowledge traditions is a strong ongoing strand in the international literature (eg. Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002; Ermine, 1995; Forbes, 1998; Grande, 2000; Smith, 2000; Walker, 2000; Wheaton, 1998; Wildcat & Pierotti, 2000), and very few scholars in these international contexts discuss Indigenous Studies in their own contexts without reference to the underlying philosophy of tribal knowledge systems and its differences from Western knowledge.

From a perspective that foregrounds the role that Western education plays in supporting colonial goals, a major position expressed in this literature concerns developing Indigenous Studies as a discipline which assists an ongoing decolonising education process (Walker, 2000).

The purpose of Indigenous Studies, in this approach, is, not just to decolonise through revival of Indigenous Knowledges but also to defend them by reinstating Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies through the development of new frameworks to redress the submergence of Indigenous peoples' knowledge as it has occurred through colonial regimes (Battiste et al, 2002; Cook-Lynn, 1997; Meyer, 1998; Smith, 1999; Smith, 2000; Thaman, 2003; Wildcat & Pierotti, 2000).

This position recognises that Western paradigms cannot adequately portray Indigenous realities and asserts that developing more adequate representations requires privileging Indigenous realities via Indigenous ways of knowing which, in turn, involves rediscovering, developing and applying 'Indigenous' paradigms (Swisher, 1998).

In this literature is a deepening exposition of the characteristics and concepts of Indigenous systems of knowledge and discussion of how to employ these as informing principles for the discipline of Indigenous Studies.

Some scholarship in this area attends to Indigenous concepts and formations of knowledge that have been 'unknowable' from the Western epistemological standpoint, knowledge that was and is deemed 'unscientific', 'irrational' and 'primitive' from the Western standpoint—those aspects, particularly, that are 'beyond belief' as Cheryl Smith (2000, p. 47) puts it.

An extreme aspect to this position, however, is continuity with Indigenous knowledge traditions through rejection of much of what Western society has to offer and so disciplinary development on these principles faces the inevitable question of "how does it fit in" (Cook-Lynn, 1997, p. 25) to the academy.

Less extreme positions discuss this continuity in terms of transformation of the representations within the disciplines and via the education process (Battiste et al, 2002).

Others (eg. Champagne, 1996) view the academy as an unsuitable place for transmitting tribal knowledge.

This view argues that Native Americans should receive a cultural education from Elders in a tribal context, and should attend university to learn the history of their relationship to the nation-state and what informs their current position from that point of view.

The purpose of 'mainstream' education is therefore to understand that mainstream, develop skills for operating in it, and to maintain tribal standpoints through knowledge gained via tribal relations in tribal contexts.

These positions are not mutually exclusive, except in their extremes, and what is being acknowledged in a range of the literature, is that to defend Indigenous peoples, Indigenous students require understanding of the concepts and methodologies of both systems of knowledge.

That is, one can't do battle with Western systems of thought without understanding it, likewise, its inconsistencies cannot be turned around and an Indigenous perspective substituted without rigorous understanding of Indigenous concepts (Battiste et al, 2000; Champagne, 1996; Deloria, 1998; Smith, 2000).

Despite this theorising, in practice, in these contexts, Indigenous Studies has emerged in universities as a cross-disciplinary specialisation in much the same way as it has evolved in Australia—a field expanded across the disciplines as Indigenous issues have been taken up by those disciplines.

This is not withstanding a major structural difference in the strong community-controlled tribal college system in North America, or the dual system of education in Aotorea, which perform similar roles to our special programs in Indigenous enclaves within Australian universities.

In the Australian context, the issues surrounding the theoretical underpinnings that might guide the progression of Indigenous Studies as a discipline are not discussed.

Although arguments are put forth for Indigenous-controlled Schools of Indigenous Studies (eg. NIHEN, 2002) or for an Indigenous-controlled university (eg. Bourke & Bourke, 2002; West, 1999) of some form or structure, the central dilemma regarding the corpus of knowledge that inscribes how we are understood as Indigenous people remains unresolved.

In Australia our primary approach to resolve this contradiction of being included in, of working in, and studying in the very institution that has constructed ways of thinking about us, that have not historically served our interests, that indeed have played a role in the injustices perpetrated against us, is that of 'Indigenisation'.

Indigenisation, in simple terms, has been about making a space within universities that is recognisably Indigenous—a space formed by inserting and asserting content, practices and processes that culturally affirm Indigenous people, students, community and perspectives.

It has been achieved through a range of measures from employment of Indigenous people in a range of roles, to recognition of cultural ways that

require different policies surrounding things like special leave, cultural celebrations, support services etc., to academic content issues.

It has worked well at the personal and structural levels because it defines the boundaries and unambiguously delineates Indigenous interests as distinct from non-Indigenous interests.

At the academic level, Indigenisation has achieved a measure of success. Indigenous people were, not so long ago, invisible in the knowledges of the academy, except in anthropology.

Early efforts to 'Indigenise' curriculum were arguably necessary and important because content and knowledge about Indigenous people had to be brought in and extended across the disciplines if Indigenous issues and realities were to be understood and responded to.

Likewise, inclusion of 'insights from Indigenous sources' depended on bringing in accounts from Indigenous people, and these accounts, both oral and written, have enriched the understanding of others about who and what we were and are, and have contributed to a growing Indigenous corpus.

However, as the decades roll by there is a deepening of concern by Indigenous academics about the difficulties of the cross-cultural aspects of the education task. That is, both the task of educating Indigenous students without further erosion of culture or assimilation by the Western way of thinking and the task of educating non-Indigenous students to more fully understand the Indigenous perspective or world view.

As a result of this concern, inclusion via the concept of 'indigenisation' is being extended and talked about at deeper levels.

Now, some of us are not content to talk of superficially descriptive course content, which has been constructed in the Western disciplines, but want deeper acknowledgement of Indigenous knowledges, epistemologies and pedagogies.

Some of us are looking for recognition and representation of our own systems of knowledge and thought within the academy.

Increasingly there is an assumption that inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy into tertiary curricula will provide an alternative to the Western corpus, or will allow the development of an ongoing Indigenous intellectual tradition, or will contribute to Indigenous problem-solving.

There are problems with this view that are not being discussed in the literature.

We are right, in my view, to argue that the complexities of knowledge and epistemological intersection are critical in understanding the difficulties we are having in developing deeper understanding of the cross-cultural space at the intersections of Indigenous knowledges, cultural practices and histories and non-Indigenous ones.

In this space we are indeed in crisis. But we are taking up these considerations before we have thought enough about the cross-cultural space in which we all operate.

'Indigenisation' is a strategy that seeks to define a space that is recognisably Indigenous.

At the level of knowledge, it works on a premise that if we just keep adding more and more 'authentically' Indigenous content in, we will build up a knowledge context that is more representatively 'Indigenous' and from this place will somehow generate 'Indigenous' solutions to our problems that are couched in Indigenous meanings.

But this is flawed thinking. In the academy, any Indigenous space is always circumscribed by non-Indigenous systems of thought.

To 'study' Indigenous knowledges in a Western institution is a very different enterprise from 'learning' the deeply embedded cultural and social meanings of these knowledges in their own context.

'Study' of it distorts and reduces its meanings to fit with Western knowledges and disciplines (Eyzaguirre, 2000).

The practice of carving up Indigenous knowledge whose meanings are embedded in local and oral contexts into a myriad of subsets across the academic disciplines is already well-critiqued (see Nakata, 2002). There may be a legitimate purpose for continuing to do this, but we need to be clear on the purpose and the limits of what can be achieved.

Indigenous knowledge can be studied to discern its differences from Western epistemologies of knowledge to illustrate just how complex the cross-cultural space is.

But, if simple comparisons are applied generally to understanding and/or practice, this risks the reduction and simplification of complex meanings and highly nuanced meanings through a different language and a process of superficial application of the meanings of the differences.

It also reifies the 'us-them' opposition and carries it through as a necessary condition of learning which it is not.

There is a danger that in the rush to engineer a quick resolution of the intersection of these different knowledge systems that we will bring in, for example, some impoverished and corrupted and misapplied version of something called 'Aboriginal pedagogy' to some impoverished, corrupted or misunderstood version of Indigenous knowledge, both of which are already circumscribed by Western understandings of them and by the Western knowledge that is also being conveyed.

It is evident in the literature that some problematic work is going on in this area.

Traditional knowledges do need to be documented and preserved and may have a place in the academy as a subject of study but this is a separate endeavour from mixing them into formal education systems and teaching practices in order to make these systems somehow more representatively 'Indigenous'.

A whole range of issues arises that should ring alarm bells: whose knowledge, which parts of knowledge systems, whose language, who is in charge of them, what can be written about them, who owns the intellectual property, for what

purposes can they be taught, who decides, what survives in the translation (Agrawal, 1995a, 1995b; Forrest, 2002; Nakata, 2002).

As Indigenous academics we need to ask ourselves whether we are more intent on authorising ourselves within institutions or in seeking fuller understanding of our position.

In the strong and long arguments we have made to gain some measure of authority on Indigenous matters in Australian universities, Indigenous academics have taken on roles, on behalf of the broader Indigenous community, as custodians, authorities, and points of references for Indigenous perspectives in the curricula.

However, I would argue that we must not let the political argument delude us in relation to the knowledge reality.

Let me be clear about this.

In universities, the great mediator between Indigenous and non-Indigenous understanding is not us, is not Indigenous people or academics, but the ontological world of Western knowledge systems.

It is the disciplines, their knowledges and practices that mediate meaning, which interpret the Indigenous world to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

When we talk of cultural traditions we talk of them as constructed through anthropology, when we study Indigenous life stories, we study them as an addition to the Western literary or history tradition, when we speak of Native Title, it is via another system of land ownership, when we talk of traditional language revitalisation we talk of language as described by linguistics and disembodied from its community of speakers.

All knowledge that is produced about us, and all knowledge that we produce ourselves is added to the Western corpus, gets reorganised and studied via the disciplines of Western knowledge.

It is important to accept this reality.

However, it is important as well to think about the space that the academy provides for bringing in Indigenous knowledges, histories, experiences and perspectives and to make something of it for our own purposes.

It would seem to me that in educating ourselves and our children, we may want to deploy a traditional form of education that is often forgotten in our anxiety about assimilation through education.

That is, we might teach ourselves and our children about our 'locatedness' or 'situatedness' in relation to what is around us, in this case, not environmental elements, but knowledge systems. This is already familiar to us in the ways we know ourselves in relation to country and people.

This to me is a useful way to consider our relationship to the corpus of knowledge circumscribed by Western systems of thought. What does this corpus of knowledge mean for us and what do I have to know about it to understand where I am situated in relation to it, how it positions me and how I might position myself to engage with it in my interests or on my own terms (Nakata, 1993a).

In simple terms it is about knowing where you are, knowing where you stand: about a big knowledge map, the distinct features, the quicksand that might swallow you, the difficult areas that slow you down, the features that obscure what is beyond, the blurred boundaries, the paths to negotiate.

With an awareness of our 'locatedness' we then might develop knowledge positions embedded from our 'standpoint', that is not traditionally Indigenous or Indigenous per se, but embedded from the particular historical and knowledge location from which we read and understand the disciplinary constructions of us—a way, if you like, of authorising the position from which we speak back to the disciplines but not so arrogant that we suggest a singular Indigenous intellectual position is the Indigenous intellectual position. Any Indigenous standpoint must respond to the diversity of older traditions, the diversity of historical experience that have shaped contemporary positions and the diversity of possibilities open to us.

This suggests that to be understood by others, our construction as subjects of the Western disciplines needs to be revealed to others as well.

It also suggests that there are myriad conversations to be had at these intersections, between ourselves, with our communities, and with non-Indigenous academics, which will necessarily be quite varied but which over time may identify a clearer, recognisably and referenced Indigenous position.

So if we consider the intersections of knowledge, not just as a simple Indigenous /non-Indigenous intersection but as an interface that is complex and layered by many, many historical and discursive intersections, then the difficulties of representing ourselves within or outside of this corpus become apparent.

Explorations at this interface where two different sets of knowledge and historical understanding meet, reveal, not simple oppositions of black and white, us and them, but a tangled web of where we are caught up, some clear boundaries perhaps, and some very blurred boundaries.

This is much more representative of our position than the constant reduction of complexity to simple oppositions that posit us in ways that confine us to either/or options.

Explorations of this kind that reveal and accept the complexity of knowledge intersections are also more likely to allow a better theorisation of this cultural interface as a place of contradiction and tension, a site of constant negotiation, which is the everyday lifeworld of many Indigenous people.

We may learn to accept ambiguity and contradiction as part of being Indigenous, instead of self-regulating ourselves as the subjugated Other.

It also allows for a different view of Western knowledge. There is much of value in the Western disciplines that benefits us and which we need to master, but where this knowledge circumscribes the ways that Indigenous people, Indigenous interests, Indigenous issues can be understood is where we should be exploring, investigating, interrogating, unsettling, responding to, re-interpreting, constructing alternative opinions, theories, and reshaping the knowledge of those disciplines in relation to their Indigenous circumscription.

From this view, Indigenous Studies in the academy is not the study of Indigenous societies, histories, cultures, or contemporary issues alone but necessarily, given historical circumstances, the study of how we have been studied, circumscribed, represented and how this knowledge of us is limited in its ability to understand us.

What Indigenous Studies needs to attend to is just how difficult it is to understand and know Indigenous people and their issues due to the mediation of our histories, knowledges, experiences and social realities by the Western corpus and their disciplines.

What is needed is a reconsideration of a different conceptualisation of the cross-cultural space, not as a clash of opposites and differences but as a layered and very complex entanglement of concepts, theories and sets of meanings of a knowledge system.

If this were to be our starting point then the deeply cross-cultural encounters between different knowledge intersections that emerge every day in communities, in health, in education, in governance and so on, could be approached, not ambivalently as heralding further cultural loss, but more robustly as the source of new sets of negotiated meanings that may or may not look distinctly Indigenous but which connect with older traditions in ways which do not disrupt and alienate people from those traditions but continues them by enriching practices in ways to produce much better outcomes.

In formal education contexts, then, the consideration of Indigenous knowledge, standpoints or perspectives, at whatever level we want to consider them, should be primarily about bringing them into conversation with knowledge in the traditional disciplines in order to negotiate a new set of meanings and reinterpretation of meanings.

Neither sets of understanding are set in stone. They are constantly shifting and intersecting, drawing in concepts and meanings from all over the place. The quest is always for fuller understanding and this is both in a micro-sense and in the interest of producing bigger pictures and better narratives of explanation.

An example of this emerges in the deeply cross-cultural encounter that is Indigenous health worker education (see Clapham, Digregorio, Dawson, & Hughes, 1997).

Think for a moment about the complexity involved in finding ways to educate the Indigenous professionals who need to interpret concepts of health and medical practice in remote communities across two deeply different systems of knowledge each with their own concepts, traditions and practices—Western medicine and traditional healing and medicine.

In this context, negotiated notions of ‘community pedagogy’, described by Clapham et al (1997) in the health worker education literature are far more useful than simple applications of ‘Aboriginal pedagogy’ or the imposition of Western paradigms because they represent a negotiation of meanings and purposes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts thus clarifying goals, needs, strategies and roles in the education process.

Clapham’s notions are far from unproblematic but they represent what has to occur—the negotiation of meanings attached to the social practices

surrounding different systems of knowledge and the weaving back of them into something quite different from both Western and Indigenous traditional contexts of education and health practice but which allow both elements to work together rather than at cross-purposes.

These need to be informed by much clearer understanding of the theories and concepts being brought to any analysis.

What this requires is much more sophisticated analysis and development of higher order skills amongst our students and much more Indigenous scholarship that engages with and takes on the disciplines for a range of purposes, as well as much better understanding and more complicated analyses of the diversity and complexity of Indigenous knowledge contexts than currently being produced in the Australian context.

This type of engagement with the disciplines is difficult, challenging work and risky work because it implies the generation of new knowledge that may discontinue or transform some aspects of Indigenous knowledge and understanding.

This anxiety might be allayed to some degree if Indigenous academia could adopt a more positive position in its approach to Indigenous Studies as a field of inquiry.

We arguably still see ourselves as reflected in a portrait of ourselves painted by the early anthropologists—as a dying race—and preoccupy ourselves with knowledge production that affirms first and foremost notions of cultural maintenance.

We have adopted a narrative of cultural loss (Bauman, 2002) to underpin our political arguments for cultural affirmation and a definable cultural space, a position of defence against further loss.

Well, we are still here, we have survived, and we might ask ourselves and our community, if now, after thirty years of activity in higher education, a more positive narrative of survival might not take us further than the narrative of cultural loss.

It is not enough to protect and defend our past, we must protect our future interests by understanding much more fully what sort of knowledge landscape we are currently traversing viz., a knowledge landscape that is growing more complex by the day as information exponentially increases.

We particularly need a positive thesis that will hold us all together in the struggle for better futures and which will encourage risk and exploration rather than comfort and the status quo.

Now for some concluding remarks

Forty-five years ago, Mr Wentworth recognised the changing circumstances of Indigenous Australians and did something very positive to assist in the documentation of knowledge about us—knowledge that we now can access and use.

It is time we generated a new purpose for Indigenous Studies, one that generates knowledge for us. Whilst Indigenous Studies in the academy will

always be study about us, we must shape it to ensure it is also study and inquiry for us.

We as Indigenous academics need to have a long think about our position at the intersection between Indigenous and Western systems of knowledge, and about the intersection itself as it is constituted in the academy, and as it emerges in conditions on the ground in communities.

There is much hard work ahead to conceptualise the intersections differently, to re-theorise them in all their complexity, and to find better methodological approaches for negotiating them.

A narrative of survival may be more conducive to this sort of exploration.

This is an important part of the future work of Indigenous Studies in the higher education sector.

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