

10. From Paris to Papunya: Postcolonial Theory, Australian Indigenous Studies and 'Knowing' 'the Aborigine'

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Introduction

As a scholar from an Aboriginal background who is deeply embedded in the western academe and its claims to universal truth, in this chapter I consider the possibility that Australian Indigenous studies may simply function to re-inscribe the power/knowledge claims of European ideas. This outcome is contrary to the stated claims of the field, which proclaims to offer an anti-colonial platform from which Indigenous peoples can be heard within the academe. Seeking to expose the problematic relationship that exists between Australian Indigenous studies and the European ideas that underpin its critical gaze, my discussion takes place in the context of my own research on the historical and contemporary involvement of Aboriginal people in Australian Football. Applying the notion that Europe exists as an idea that is implicit in the western academe, this chapter develops a critical discussion of key ways in which European understandings of self and other are applied in the research of Aboriginal peoples in Australia. Referencing the work of Gayatri Spivak, I offer a personal and self-reflective insight into the paradoxical nature of research generated in Australian Indigenous studies. This chapter challenges readers to consider if Australian Indigenous studies, instead of disrupting the power of the western academe, has assumed the status of the new anthropology.

I first became motivated to engage with the questions outlined above in the wake of a research trip made to the Aboriginal community of Papunya in September 2011. Located 240 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs, a colleague and I had been asked to Papunya by elders involved in the organisation of the local Australian Football team. The elders wished to use our research skills to help them reinstate a regional football competition that would operate across the western desert in *Luritja* and *Pintupi* country. The elders' desire to restore a league of their own was driven by the deeply held concern that current arrangements, requiring the team to play in Alice Springs, had significant negative consequences for the young footballers and their community.

According to the elders, ‘the law of the town’ was destroying young men. They wanted to reinstate *Luritja* and *Pintupi* law (‘the law of the land’) by instituting an ‘on country’ football league in an effort to redirect the young men of Papunya away from the destructive influence of Alice Springs, the bad law of violence, drug and alcohol abuse and imprisonment that characterise their experience of town. After visiting Papunya, I made my way back to Alice Springs, where I spent a morning at the Magistrates Court. Here I saw first-hand why the elders were so concerned to redirect their young men away from the ‘law of the town’. I watched defendant after defendant—all young, male and Aboriginal—being sent to prison on remand for a variety of petty offences.

These experiences left me wondering how my professional expertise could possibly benefit the elders of Papunya, a community of artists renowned world over, yet still forced to struggle for even their most basic social and political rights to be recognised and upheld. In the months that followed, these initial doubts deepened, as I began to question how theories and ideas originating in Europe, especially those from the United Kingdom, France and Germany, which provide the basis for scholarship in Australian Indigenous studies, could deliver useful and practical outcomes for the elders I had met.

This chapter represents a first attempt to raise such fundamental questions about the nature of contemporary Australian Indigenous studies in a serious and considered manner. Such questioning casts a critical spotlight on Indigenous studies in order to explore whether the relationship between a theoretical basis made in Europe, imbued with the cultural cachet of the western academe, is or can ever be capable of improving the substantive life experiences of Indigenous people in Australia? While not seeking to provide definitive answers to these questions, the reflections outlined in this chapter are designed to shed more light upon the various characteristics that have come to define Australian Indigenous studies and its relationship, assumed to be positive and productive, with the Indigenous peoples of Australia. In many respects, the idea of ego-histoire developed by Nora provides the perfect framework for critically reconsidering the historical trajectory and current truth claims of Australian Indigenous studies. The notion of ego-histoire is highly relevant because Australian Indigenous studies increasingly rely upon a way of recalling the past that seeks to go beyond history, defined conservatively as that contained in archival documents, to one inclusive of story-telling, which contains an intimacy, specificity and authenticity of understanding drawn from the wellspring of personal experience and its memory. For the Indigenous studies academic who identifies as ‘Indigenous’ or ‘Aboriginal’, the growing demand for ego-histoire can be a force for both liberation and entrapment as one finds oneself increasingly positioned as ‘native informant’ within the confines of the western academe. In keeping with the spirit of this volume, the critical discussion that

follows is set out as an ego-histoire, as thoughts and reflections drawn from the memory of personal experience intersect with the history of Indigenous studies in Australia, and those of the European ideas that provide its philosophical and theoretical underpinnings.

What is Australian Indigenous Studies?

In recent decades Indigenous studies has increasingly acquired the status and trappings of an academic discipline. Australian Indigenous studies appear in a variety of forms: as major or minor study components of generalist degree programs, as elective studies in professional degree programs, and as bachelors, masters and PhD degree programs that exist in their own right. As a formal part of the university curricula, new academic career paths as teachers and researchers of Australian Indigenous studies have emerged. The rise of the specialist academic has in turn witnessed the advent of a diverse and growing body of scholarly writings promoted under the aegis of Australian Indigenous studies. Publications such as the *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, the *Australian Aboriginal Studies Journal* and the *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues* have emerged to provide a distribution outlet for this burgeoning scholarship. Professional associations have likewise emerged. Furthermore, an expansive conference circuit which is global in scope and ambition has created transnational relationships between Indigenous studies scholars in Australia and academic peers in Europe, Canada, New Zealand, Hawaii, Asia, and the United States of America.

Despite recent claims that Australian Indigenous studies is an academic discipline in its own right, significant questions remain about whether this is the case. Having worked in teaching and research for a decade and a half I remain uncertain about where the epistemological boundaries of Australian Indigenous studies rest. Australian Indigenous studies are, I think, best conceived not as an academic discipline but as an area of studies. Rather than being an established discipline, Australian Indigenous studies is, in practice, characterised by a lack of its own theories and methods. As a result, Australian Indigenous studies lacks definitive theoretical and methodological boundaries. It is this lack of definition that allows scholars drawn from a wide variety of academic backgrounds to find a home and claim expertise in this field. The absence of definitive boundaries paradoxically functions to define Australian Indigenous studies as an area marked by scholarship that is inherently interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary; produced by academics who are likely to identify themselves as anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, sociologists, economists, political scientists, cultural theorists, gender theorists, environmental scientists, nurses, medical doctors, lawyers, journalists, artists, and social workers.

The interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary nature of contemporary Australian Indigenous studies, I believe, makes this area of studies highly dynamic and innovative in a way that academic disciplines often are not. It is these attributes that explain the historic rise of Indigenous studies within the Australian university system. Although accounts vary, the development of Australian Indigenous studies can be traced to the politics of the late 1960s, a period that saw a referendum end the racial exclusion of Aborigines from the Australian Constitution and the policy of Aboriginal self-determination commence (see McGrath 1995).

In scholarly circles this period witnessed W. E. H. Stanner coin the term 'the great Australian silence' in his landmark 1968 Boyer lecture, 'After the Dreaming' (Stanner 1969). Stanner pointed to the near complete absence of Aborigines in the national histories of Australia that had been written in the period since federation in 1901. Stanner challenged historians and other academics to consider the place Aborigines have occupied in the past and will continue to occupy in Australian society. Although an anthropologist himself, the challenge Stanner posed was in part a critique of the monopoly anthropology had assumed in the 'study of the Aborigine'. It was, after all, the 'scientific truths' uncovered by anthropology that defined Aborigines according to measures of blood quantum, confirmed the intellectual and physical inferiority of the 'full-blood' Aborigine and consigned the Aboriginal 'race' in the collective imagination of white Australia to a prehistorical stone age, timeless past and non-synchronous present (see Birch 2005).

The origins of contemporary Australian Indigenous studies are located in the way that scholars responded to Stanner's challenge. In keeping with the progressive mood of Australian society at this time, the new studies of Aboriginal people that developed deliberately adopted a critical stance designed to question, challenge and disrupt old truths about 'the Aborigine' that had come to shape scholarly, governmental and popular understandings of Indigenous peoples. In contrast to the theories and methods employed by anthropology, which imagined the Aborigine as an object of 'scientific study', much of the new scholarship sought instead to position Indigenous people as active agents of history and contemporary social and political movements.

The scholarly response to the authority of anthropology is characterised in the writings of Charles Dunford Rowley, whose works sought to re-position the Aborigine within the grand narratives of Australian history and those of contemporary Australian politics (Rowley 1970, 1972). Later scholarly works, including most notably those by Henry Reynolds, built upon the project commenced by Rowley (Reynolds 1981, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004). Reynolds put questions about the place that Indigenous people occupied in the past, and the implications this has for the present and

the future, at the very centre of national debates about what it means to be Australian. Although some Indigenous-focused programs have existed in Australian universities since the 1960s, the wide spread popularity of Reynolds' writings played a significant role in the growth and proliferation of Indigenous studies from the 1980s to the present day.

While the home-grown engagements of Rowley and Reynolds initiated a growing interest in what became known as Australian Indigenous studies, the theoretical foundations that have come to be most closely associated with the contemporary field have their basis in a diffuse range of critical ideas imported from Europe. Reflecting on racial ideologies of fascism, in the 1940s western philosophy adopted a critical gaze, as the truth claim of European humanism to universalism became the subject of widespread intellectual doubt. In Germany, Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt questioned the ethical basis of human actions and pointed to the limitations inherent in political systems that based morality in external forms of authority (Benjamin 1969; Arendt 2004). In France, Jean-Paul Sartre raised similar ethical questions. In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, for example, Sartre asks how a committed French nationalist who believes in the reason of the Enlightenment, the Republic and its constitutional pronouncements on the rights of man can at the same time also exist as a self-proclaimed anti-Semite? (Sartre 1995). Sartre in particular encouraged the development of a colonial-based critical philosophy that focused attention on the shortcomings of European humanism as it applied in the context of Europe's overseas colonial empires.

Among those directly influenced by the ideas of Sartre was Frantz Fanon (Fanon 1967, 2007). Fanon, a black colonial intellectual from the French 'overseas department' of Martinique, fused the existentialism of Sartre, the *négritude* of Aimé Césaire, the psychology of Jacques Lacan, and the political economy of Karl Marx in order to develop his critique of colonialism. According to Fanon, the systematic political and economic process embodied in European colonial domination succeeds in de-humanising both the native and the settler. His most renowned works, *Black Skin, White Mask* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, became foundational texts of what has become known as anti-colonial theory. The writings of Fanon and those of his contemporaries, Césaire and Albert Memmi, created a critical mass of scholarship written from the point of view of colonised natives. The natives spoke back to Europe using a critical philosophical voice to do so. Writers such as Fanon were pivotal intellectual leaders who succeeded in forging an ongoing critical dialogue with the mainstream currents of European intellectual culture. In the decades that followed new voices from the colonies built on the foundational work of Fanon (see Said 1978; Nandy 1992, 1995; Chatterjee 1986, 1993; Bhabha 1994). Just as Fanon and his contemporaries

created a philosophical dialogue with Europe, subsequent post-colonial theorists have continued to engage with the work of leading European thinkers (see Derrida 1998; Deleuze 1994; Foucault 1972, 1981).

A Mechanism for Academic Accountability

This brief historical account suggests that contemporary Indigenous studies in Australia can trace its foundations to a disparate range of origins. While the practical imperative for the development of Indigenous studies may be traced to the particular and growing concerns of Australian scholars, its theoretical underpinnings rest at the heart of Europe and the various post-colonial intellectuals who from mid-twentieth century spoke back to the colonial metropole in their 'masters' voice using the language and ideas of the western philosophic tradition. This chequered history furthermore suggests that claims to position Indigenous studies as an academic discipline are misplaced, as the field exists as an academic scavenger, an adept hunter and gatherer of theories and methods devised elsewhere. Fashioned together in a multitude of ways, this scavenged intellectual material enables Australian Indigenous studies to explore every imaginable aspect of colonialism in order to give action and voice to Indigenous people and their perspectives, understandings and worldviews. Importantly, it is these qualities that provide Indigenous studies with the *potential* to critique and scrutinise the claims to power, knowledge, truth and objectivity that academic disciplines continue to make in respect to Australia's Indigenous people. At its best, Indigenous studies can act as a self-reflexive mechanism to actively question, disrupt and render problematic the assertions made by anthropologists, historians, political scientists and many other areas of expertise to know and speak the truth about Aborigines. The role that Indigenous studies can undertake in placing claims to 'truth' and 'expertise' under critical scrutiny justifies the continued growth of the field within Australian higher education. However, recognition by the field that the truth claims of the western academe have limits and are often specific rather than universal raises fundamental problems for those who claim knowledge and expertise from Australian Indigenous studies itself.

A Theoretical Paradox

Recognising that Indigenous studies is not the product of Indigenous traditions of knowledge, but rather those of Europe, raises a fundamental paradox for those who claim expert authority under the imprimatur of the field. How can Indigenous studies, as the product of Europe, come to know and claim expert

understanding of Australia's Indigenous peoples with any more validity and effectiveness than the similar claims of scholars who have become regular targets of critique and interrogation from Indigenous studies?

Such questions and the paradoxes these raise are rarely admitted by those with established careers in the field of Australian Indigenous studies and its counterparts elsewhere. In 2009, I attended a conference of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA). After listening to a series of highly theoretical papers that sought to grapple with the nature of contemporary Indigeneity, I asked the panel members if they had ever considered the possibility that Native American and Indigenous studies might have become the new anthropology, as its debates about Indigenous peoples appeared to be far removed from the everyday realities of the people that we academics purported to represent? My question was memorable because it was met with an almost unanimous blank stare from those in the audience and with an equally unanimous silence from the panel. Clearly such a question touched a raw nerve with my colleagues as they allude to the stark differences that exist between the world of international conference attendees, marked by global air travel, high-end hotels and corporate credit cards, and the world of Indigenous peoples, a world too often marked by immobility, isolation, poverty, hunger, despair and death. Despite these silences, questions about the ability of Australian Indigenous studies to know Indigenous peoples and re-present their perspectives within the Western Academe remain of critical importance.

The Ability of Postcolonial Reason to Know and (Re)-Present the Subaltern Native

In the broader project of post-colonial studies the importance of the questions I asked of my colleagues at the NAISA conference is underlined in the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Spivak 1988, 1999). Spivak has placed questions of representation at the centre of her scholarly engagements with the colonial and post-colonial. In her highly influential essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak explores the political campaign to outlaw the practice of *sati*. While the vast colonial archive of the British Raj enables Spivak to hear the voices of colonial authority, the voices of the women who actually participated in the practice of *sati* remain silent to history. The silence that met Spivak in her study of the colonial politics of *sati* suggested that the subaltern might only be traceable as a lack, absence or apparent 'gap' in the historical record. Written as a critical response to the claims of the Subaltern Studies Group that a people's history of colonial India is readily available for retrieval, Spivak shows that the subaltern 'native' is a creation of colonial administration whose act inaugurates

only figures of hybridity. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' contains multiple messages about the status of the subaltern native and her production by the western academe. Pointing out how 'progressive' European intellectuals, such as Foucault and Deleuze, tend to engage in gross universalisations when speaking on behalf of the third world 'masses', Spivak shows how colonial and 'native' representations are similarly problematic. Focussing on widow sacrifice (*sati*) in colonial India, she concludes that, '[b]etween patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation, the figure of woman disappears ... There is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak' (Kapoor 2004).

The themes of representation first raised in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' are developed further in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a history of the vanishing present*. Here Spivak seeks to retrace and recapture the ethnographic figure of the native informant as a particular notion of subaltern that is commonly applied by western academics. Spivak pursues the figure of the native informant through the European disciplines of philosophy, literature, cultural studies and history. The search for the native informant is a journey without end. The informant that Spivak seeks turns out to be both a necessary and a necessarily foreclosed figure which is required to inaugurate 'the name of Man' in those key texts of Western philosophy (Kant, Hegel, Marx) that were to inaugurate the ethical, political subject of European Enlightenment. Importantly, Spivak claims the native informant to be an imaginary device that exists as a figure of (im)possibility:

The native informant is imagined a-temporally. It is also a prosopopoeia, a strategic 'personification' as well as a 'character' that substitutes for the imaginary or absent figure ... The native informant is also 'a blank' that only 'the North-western European' tradition and its 'Western model disciplines' commencing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could inscribe (Bhatt 2001).

In her discussion on the three great figures of Western philosophy, Spivak concludes that the native informant is the prime condition of being required for the inauguration of European rationalism and humanism.

In seeking to expose the limitations inherent in postcolonial reason, Spivak retraces how the philosopher Immanuel Kant comes to define human culture and reason (which he defined exclusively as a European domain) through the imaginary figure of *der rohe Mensch* (man in raw nature or humanity, without culture, philosophy, god, purpose or reason). Inspired by eighteenth-century tales of discovery, Kant located the figure of 'man in the raw' as the New Hollander (the Australian Aborigine) and the man from Terra del Fuego (the Native South American *Selk'nam* people). Spivak's analysis of Kantian philosophy underscores that the Enlightenment project he helped inaugurate actually functions to obliterate the 'man in the raw'.

The native informant cannot therefore inhabit the frameworks of colonialism/imperialism to function as a manifestation of absolute other but rather functions as a para-subject positioned someplace in-between man in the raw and man cooked by culture – a medium rare man in the process of being cooked – a hybrid creation of colonial/imperial interactions, engagements and entanglements. Echoing Kant's critical approach to knowledge, Spivak's *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* is motivated by the need of the postcolonial (and Indigenous studies) theorist and practitioner to acknowledge the native informant as an illusionary figure, a figment of '(European) Man's' imagination. Sounding the alert, Spivak notes the continuity between Kant's idea of *der rohe Mensch* and her own figure of the native informant. In 'mainstream' western thought, both figures continue to operate as necessary and necessarily-foreclosed figures of absolute otherness that provides perpetual justifications for the projects of colonialism and imperialism. In the present day, it is the figure of the native informant that becomes the object of postcolonial imperialism. In what Spivak dubs 'The New Empire', NGOs, the United Nations and the World Bank imagine the native informant to be located in the universal figure of the woman of the south.

Principally concerned with the production of representation and the tendency of the western academe to conflate the acts of 'speaking for' and 'speaking about', in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak concludes somewhat pessimistically that, even if the subaltern can speak, nobody (in Europe and/or the western academe) is listening. The ability of the so-called subaltern to speak constitutes an important question for all who seek to articulate anti-colonial understandings of history, culture and politics, and in particular those who claim to represent the perspectives of the subaltern native within the field of Indigenous studies in Australia and elsewhere.

Insistence that the subaltern as native informant exists as an illusionary product of the colonial/imperial project also makes *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* of fundamental importance as for the ability of Australian Indigenous studies to represent, speak for and speak about Indigenous people. If there exists a true subaltern (as sign of absolute other), Spivak admits she is unable to locate her in a definitive sense. Instead her ongoing search for alterity yields only members of the native ruling and middle classes, known to posterity because of their relationship with colonial rule, and noted in the archives of the imperial power as footnotes in the history of empire.

Returning to the archive of British imperial India in an attempt to locate the elusive character of the subaltern native, Spivak comes to focus on the liminal figure of the Rani of Sirmur. The Rani appears only briefly in the imperial archive as a woman whose self-immolation the British sought to avert. Spivak as postcolonial critic demonstrates how the figure of the Rani and the circumstances of her life, her character and her relationships become known

to us only through the eyes of the imperial functionary. It is in this sense that the subaltern/native informant exists only as a construct of colonial/imperial concern—the archive taken to constitute the stuff of human history. The Rani's place in the archive shows her to be implicated in the project of the British Raj: a 'native' who is both 'known' to the imperial functionary and whose interaction with the British paradoxically transforms her into the hybrid, her identity no longer that of the uncontaminated subaltern native but existing someplace in between colonised and coloniser. But as Spivak shows, her true identity remains impossibly always out of reach despite the best efforts of the anti-colonial or post-colonial writer to know her.

Frustrated by the narrow lens of British historical records, Spivak visits the Rani's palace in an effort to know her identity. Unlike the archives, where the past is already digested as the raw material for history writing, the past here is a past of memory, which constitutes itself differently in different subjects interconnecting:

As I approached her house after a long series of detective manoeuvres, I was miming the route of an unknowing, a progressive *différence*, an 'experience' of how I could not know her. Nothing unusual here, and therefore never considered worthy of mention, of notice ... I was halted by my own ideological formations as a child of a Kali-worshipping sect, an East Indian phenomenon imbricated with the so-called Bengal Renaissance, as clearly out of the Rani's reach. There were no papers, the ostensible reason for my visit, and of course, no trace of the Rani. Again, a reaching and an un-grasping ... These are the familiar limits of knowing; why do we resist it when deconstruction points to them? (Spivak 1999, pp. 239–242).

The story of the Rani of Sirmur and the attempt of Spivak to retrieve her as subaltern native indicate that the figures left to us by history are in actuality the faux native. Significantly, according to Spivak, the subaltern and its particular manifestation within the contemporary western academe, the native informant, exist at the very margins of colonial history, her occurrence as almost-other, providing this figure with the ghost-like qualities of the uncanny. The native informant can therefore not ever be fully known and understood by the application of postcolonial reason of the type that informs and directs Australian Indigenous studies (see Fourmile 1989).

Papunya and Knowing Indigenous Australia

The story of the Rani so eloquently outlined in Spivak's critique resonates strongly with my own engagement with Indigenous Australia. In much of my

research I too have scanned the colonial archives seeking to know and understand the truth about the subaltern natives who inhabited the recent colonial past. In researching the historical development of football and the instrumental role of Thomas Wentworth Wills in originating 'the Australian game', I sought to find the *Djabwurrung*. Wills had grown up among these people and had probably been aware of and possibly played their game of football called *marn-grook*. Although his cousin, Henry Harrison, reported that Wills had come to know the language, dance and something about the culture of the *Djabwurrung* in a way few whites on the colonial frontier did, my archival search for this Aboriginal people failed to yield any of the intimate knowledge Tom Wills had known. In the pages of human history, the *Djabwurrung* now exist only as a sad footnote seen through the eyes of George Augustus Robinson, the Chief Protector of Aborigines, as the victims of frontier violence and massacre. Later, the colonial functionaries that succeed Robinson as protectors of Aborigines no longer see the *Djabwurrung* as a distinctive group. Rather they note the presence of 'remnant individuals' who survive at mission stations and are identified by the non-specific label 'western Kulin'. In other research, I went searching for the Aboriginal footballer Joe Johnson, the first 'native' to play Australian Football at the elite VFL/AFL level. Johnson also existed as a footnote in human history. When Johnson volunteers to join the Australian army during World War One, the colonial functionaries note his nationality only as 'British subject'. Later, in Egypt, the archive notes that he is reprimanded for challenging a superior. The ill-discipline displayed by Johnson is considered the outcome of a 'drinking problem'.

When I searched for Sydney Jackson, another Aboriginal footballer still living, I found his life referenced in the archives as a footnote in Western Australia's policy of removing 'mixed blood' children from their Aboriginal mothers. The colonial functionaries only see Jackson within the frame of cultural assimilation. When Jackson is reported for striking in the Western Australian Football League (WAFL), the colonial archive records that elimination of his native traits is not yet complete. My experience in researching Indigenous people in Australia confirms much of what Spivak has to say about the limits and inadequacies inherent in postcolonial reason and the field of Australian Indigenous studies that is informed by it. Human history, as outlined in the colonial archive of Australia, makes the prospect of knowing and understanding Aboriginal people in anything approaching the absolute truth an impossible objective (Judd 2007, 2008).

Having become frustrated with the fact that an Aboriginal presence in the history of colonial Australia is generally only apparent through a lack, an absence and a silence in the archival records, I have in recent research forays gone into the field in search of contemporary Indigenous Australia. As outlined above, I have lately commenced a research engagement with elders at the central Australian Aboriginal community of Papunya. I saw the opportunity to come to know and

understand something of the people who live at Papunya and their ongoing relationship with the sport of Australian Football, as a gift, a godsend. I assume that the opportunity to engage with Papunya people arose because colleagues at my university have come to designate me their very own resident native informant. My unstated role as native informant is also, I assume, based on the fact that I am both a recognised scholar in the field of Australian Indigenous studies and, more importantly, one of few academics to claim an Aboriginal heritage. My assumed status as native informant is, then, symptomatic of an Australian higher education sector that continues to lack the critical mass of Indigenous intellectuals who are necessary for the academe to develop a productive, sustainable and ethical engagement with Indigenous Australia. In the absence of a critical mass of Indigenous scholars, the few Indigenous people who work as academics within the Australian university system are assigned the role of native informant, in the sense that they become contemporary representations of 'native otherness' in the way the writings of Spivak describe.

In my professional life, I am viewed as knowing the otherness of the Aborigine because as an Indigenous academic most of my colleagues, I suspect, view me as belonging to the otherness of the Aborigine in an absolute sense. My suspicion that I have come to occupy the position of native informant stems from my everyday experience of being called upon to solve, advise and intervene in any business of the university that requires an engagement with Indigenous Australia or that assumes the prefix 'Aboriginal'. Although I claim a very limited expertise, which is reflective of the qualifications I hold, the teaching experience I have had, and the research interests I am driven to pursue, non-Indigenous colleagues assume that my knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australia is boundless. Because I am burdened with the role of native informant, those I work with have expectations that I can 'fix' everything 'Indigenous', from the ad hoc complaints of individual students, to curricula and research grant development in areas that lie far beyond my own areas of expertise, to providing advice and feedback to strategic planning activities concerning student services and employment issues, to advice about undertaking ethical engagements with Aboriginal communities and providing cultural awareness sessions to my colleagues.

Although the opportunity to engage with Papunya likely arose from peer and institutional constructions of me as resident native informant I embraced this new research opportunity for personal reasons. My family connections on my mother's side are with central Australia. My grandmother was a Pitjantjatjara woman and my grandfather a whitefella of Scottish and Afghan descent. My mother was born at the cattle station Maryvale, about 100 kilometres south of Alice Springs. Since the age of five, I have made numerous trips to central Australia. Camping out, hunting kangaroo and goanna, collecting wild onions

and honey ants, and swimming in water holes remain among my most cherished memories of childhood. These childhood visits also established a lifelong interest in Australian race relations as I attempted to make sense of the fact that I had grown up in an Anglo-Australian suburb in relative affluence while members of my family who were designated Aborigines lived in conditions characterised by poverty, unemployment, and sub-standard housing and education.

Personal experience combined with a professional designation as native informant meant that, for me, the engagement with Papunya would not be without some points of reference. My prior knowledge of and experiences with Aboriginal Australia stood in sharp contrast to that of my colleague who has become my primary research partner in this venture. Newly arrived in Australia from the United Kingdom and with no professional knowledge or personal experience of Indigenous Australia, Papunya existed as an absolute unknown to him. I observed his unease and apprehension as we arrived at the township and were introduced for the first time to the elders who had invited us into their community. His obvious self-doubt succeeded in bringing my own critical questions, about what role and effectiveness 'expert' proponents of Australian Indigenous studies such as myself can have in solving the very real problems that Aboriginal communities face, to the forefront of my thoughts. These remain very serious questions, because the present day reality for communities such as Papunya appears little different to what these same communities faced when I visited as a child in the 1970s.

The questions that my colleague raised in expressing feelings of being 'out of his depth' directly led to drafting this chapter and its critical questioning of Australian Indigenous studies. Re-reading Spivak and her critique of postcolonial reason reconfirms both the strengths and the limitations that characterise Indigenous studies. Its greatest strength remains the possibility that the critical self-reflexive stance of the field may call scholarly engagements with Indigenous people to account, by pointing to the limits of knowledge, truth, objectivity and expertise that are inherent in the claims of the western academe. The other great strength of Australian Indigenous studies is the possibility that its foundational theoretical texts will communicate the complexity of identity that emerges in the colonial or postcolonial context. The native informant, the subaltern native and man in the raw do not exist in reality, but only in the imagination of Europe as a philosophical sleight of hand, used to confirm its own humanity at the expense of all others. In this respect Australian Indigenous studies has an important role to play in educating both the western academe and the broader public that Aboriginal identities are and always have been defined by their complexity, dynamism and multi-cultural characteristics.

In this way, Australian Indigenous studies can therefore communicate that Aborigines commonly designated the role of the subaltern native, the native

informant, or man in the raw, exist not as absolute other, but in hybrid spaces that are traditional and modern at the same time, and which render popular stereotypes and scholarly categories of difference meaningless in their universal simplicity. Such insights and understanding of Indigeneity, native-ness, alterity and difference can trace their genealogy to the philosophical insights of European thinkers, and to writers among the former colonials who have responded to new ideas originating in the metropolises of Europe. In this qualified sense, then, the relationship between Europe and the great metropolitan centres of London, Berlin and Paris, and places such as Papunya, can be a productive one as it reminds researchers such as myself to consider the limitations of our knowledge, and therefore of our own abilities to know Aboriginal people in a way that would deserve the label of 'expert' being applied.

The great weakness of Australian Indigenous studies is that those who work in the field start to uncritically accept the superiority of their own knowledge and expertise, in contrast to the traditional academic disciplines it competes with for credibility and authority in 'knowing Indigenous people'. To ignore the insights of anti- and post-colonial theory is to risk the field of Indigenous studies becoming the new anthropology. In working with a colleague brave enough to admit no prior knowledge or understanding of Indigenous Australia, I have been reminded of the value of the critical work of Spivak and of my own professional limitations. More than this, I have been reminded, on our visits to Papunya, that open-mindedness, a willingness to listen to, and be directed by the agendas of Indigenous people themselves, a commitment to commence a long-term relationship, and, above all, an honesty to admit that we don't know, counts for just as much.

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Ngapartji Ngapartji, *In Turn, In Turn: Ego-histoire, Europe and Indigenous Australia*

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