

# Dharug Custodial Leadership: Uncovering Country in the City

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## **Abstract**

*When Dharug Ngurra (Country), as an interrelated web of presences, places and practices, involves interweaving diversities that currently form cosmopolitan Sydney, Australia, the question of Dharug custodial leadership becomes pertinent. What does custodial Indigenous leadership in the city look like and does it have a place in today's educational institutions? This paper will engage those questions sourced from recent research centred on the traditional custodians of the majority of Sydney: the Dharug. Through yarning times, seven Dharug 'sistas' share their sense of belonging, caring and connection to the presences, places and practices of Country. Their custodial cultural leadership, undertaken in diverse educational contexts today, demonstrates leadership that enhances futures which belong, care and connect to Ngurra based in Dharug knowledges and practices embedded for millennia. While Dharug Ngurra may present as Sydney, it is argued that localised caring-for-Country practices strengthen localised belonging and enhance human and other-than-human wellbeing through custodial leadership. Recognising Goanna's (Australia English word for our monitor lizard) place in this weaving brings out the more-than-human in us all.*

**Keywords:** Dharug, Indigenous, Australian Aboriginal, lifeworkings, Goanna, leadership

## **Introduction**

When Country is a cosmopolitan city of around 5 million humans from around the world the question arises: How can traditional custodians continue to provide custodial cultural leadership? While much research engages Australian Aboriginal communities located in regional or remote contexts, this paper focuses on Dharug Ngurra, traditional Country of the Dharug-speaking peoples, known today as the city of Sydney, Australia. It is argued that traditional custodial leadership is being undertaken, as evidenced through doctoral research with seven Dharug women in place-related 'yarning' (sharing times/tellings) sessions, a cultural practice continued for tens of thousands of years. 'Goanna Walking' is recognised as both a way of weaving cultural obligations with the demands of urban modernity, and offers a more-than-human, third way, for intercultural engagement and leadership. It is suggested here that bringing our understandings of belonging to place, the obligations of caring for place, and understanding the relationality of place opens us to an appreciation of the values and practices that are the foundations of a sense of Indigeneity.

Expanding from this localised context, it is also argued that in this era of Anthropogenic climate change, continuing cultural knowledges, relationships and ways of knowing and doing that reflect

and engage cultural obligation to care for Ngurra (Country), is critical to continuing the sustainability that has been practiced across our continent for more than 65,000 years. This continuity is recognised as the longest continuing civilization on the planet. It is proposed that traditional custodial leadership, rather than the homogenous concept of “Indigenous” leadership has a unique and significant contribution to offer in educational contexts. It recognises traditional custodians are the holders of cultural authority because they have a unique and critical role as knowledge holders of storying that connects to and cares for presences, places, and people relevant to that Country. They have the cultural obligations of caring for Dharug Ngurra.

### **Indigenous Educational Leadership in the City**

In an Australian Aboriginal context, Indigenous leadership often involves Indigenous relationships within Indigenous-dominant contexts, including presences (agents), places and practices. In remote regions of Australia traditional custodians of their Country are often the largest component of the Indigenous population and Indigenous leadership enacted through relational systems of Eldership holding cultural authority is recognisably a cohesive culture of difference to that of any non-Indigenous population that may live there. However, with Country-as-city, enacting custodial leadership becomes fraught with complexities, multiplicities and negotiations involving not only non-Indigenous hierarchies of power, but also various Indigenous communities living, working and enacting leadership roles outside of traditional custodial authority and within powerful governmental and other bureaucracies.

This is the case for Dharug Ngurra. Thus fulfilling custodial obligations around caring for Country and the diversities that are co-becoming there, in spite of its human centricity is extremely difficult (Bawaka Country et al. 2015). Colonisation and associated pressures from human over-population, traffic congestion, pollution of waterways, ecosystems and consumption of space for suburban sprawl have done much to undermine custodian agency. Ngurra’s stress is symptomatic of global distress, as human overpopulation and rampant globalised extraction/extinction multinational industries undermine ecosystems, and results in human-induced climatic-changing conditions. Mother Earth now suffers through the era of the Anthropocene (Bignall, Hemming, and Rigney 2016). It becomes imperative therefore, that educational leadership involves changing ways of knowing and doing for sustainability. Finding ways to re-establish a custodial voice within urban Indigenous leadership, beyond binaried narratives of ‘them and us’, involves perspectives that foster inclusivity and caring with/for/of those diversities and brings authentic cultural authority to “Indigenous” educational leadership in the city. As the doctoral research thesis, *Country Tracking Voices: Dharug women’s perspectives on presences, places and practices* shows, bringing custodial ways of knowing, being and doing into the academy opens pathways for custodial voice and authority (Rey, 2019).

## Goanna Walking

For the research, an Indigenous approach of engaging two broad contexts evolved. That engagement I called ‘Goanna Walking’, as agency creating a ‘third space’ between the binaried positions of, in this case, Dharug and other-than-Dharug (Bhabha 1990). Goanna walking was finding a third way, between the diversities that engage the context of the academy (in this instance Macquarie University, on Wallumattagal Ngurra (located in the suburb of Sydney named North Ryde) and the diversities that engage the Indigenous context(s) of seven Dharug Aboriginal women. Goanna walking involved steps on the left (Dharug women’s context/s), and steps on the right (Macquarie University, Department of Educational Studies and associated supervisors’ context/s). It involved walking and learning between these Dharug women’s ways of knowing and doing (Goanna’s steps on the left) and the doctoral candidature ways of knowing and doing (Goanna’s steps on the right). It involved engaging in Dharug custodial ways of transmission of knowledges, e.g. storytelling via possum skin mapping, ceremony, ancestral engagement, transgenerational storying, puppetry, art, song and poetry in association with sites of significance on Dharug Country (Goanna’s left-way stepping). In contrast, it also involved engaging the written form of transmission as required by the western academy of the university (Goanna’s right-way stepping). This journey produced Goanna’s trailing tail-tale in the sands of time, as the doctoral thesis, producing new knowledges and a form of leadership, as a map of woven ‘Indigenous to the Universe’ ways and means (Arabena 2015), to be read and followed by others across timespacematter-ings (Barad 2010). As such, recognising Goanna brought other-than-humans into the place of research methodology. Sharing this approach acts as Indigenous educational leadership within the academy.

## The Dharug Ngurra Web

‘Goanna Walking’, as the research method, brought to the surface the web of values, practices and some of the places of significance that these seven ‘sistas’ privilege for custodial continuity. This Dharug Ngurra web (Rey 2019) is made up of the affinity of *belonging*, the emotion of *caring*, and the engagement of *connecting*. These three aspects of the web were woven *through* cultural practices; woven *with* presences (human and other-than-human); and woven *into* and *from* places. This Dharug Ngurra web shows that a sense of belonging to Ngurra is strengthened by the custodial obligation of caring for Ngurra as the practice of reciprocity in return for the benefits Ngurra provides Dharug people. Reciprocity, belonging and caring become entwined within the Dharug Ngurra web (Rey 2019). An increased sense of belonging to Ngurra and obligation to Ngurra strengthens the sense of caring. Caring, reciprocally, enhances a sense of belonging and obligation. Belonging to Ngurra/Country (more broadly than the specific Dharug entity) does not include the concept of ‘ownership’ of land. Recognising Ngurra as Mother Earth, opens access to recognising humans in relationship, not only to the planet, but to the Universe.

## **Ngurra-as-Mother Earth and Universe-Reference**

From the broader concept of humans in relationship with Ngurra-as-Mother Earth, we are able to conceive of our relational context as with not only the planet, but with the Universe. To Arabena (2015, xxv), the Universe is:

A unity, an interacting and genetically related community of beings ... bound together in an inseparable relationship in space and time. The unity of the planet Earth is especially clear; each being of the planet is profoundly implicated in the existence and functioning of every other being of the planet. The three basic tendencies identify the reality, the values and the directions in which the Universe is proceeding.

Accordingly, Ngurra as Universe-referent-agency becomes conceptually feasible and available for relationship with humans when practiced through custodial obligations and values which foster sustainability of these diversities through biotic communities (Arabena 2015, xx). It is important to note, as Arabena (2015) makes clear, that Universe-referent consciousness is not the equivalent or a synonym of 'universalism': the homogenization of all diversities that fosters predatory monoculturalism. Rather, to be Universe-referent in our agency is to be in harmony with the Universe's own agentic self-reference through diverse contexts and communities.

While caring for Country can take place without an Indigenous, millennia-old belonging, spiritual belonging to place and its diverse more-than-humans strengthens a sense of connection which in turn enhances wellbeing across diverse human-more-than-human contexts. We care about our places of belonging, just as we care about our human relationships, and those with whom we feel we belong. When we feel we belong to/with other-than humans, our sense of connection, and caring is increased and we co-become as more-than-human (Bawaka et al. 2016). However, it is only at the local level, that caring for Ngurra and all our relational obligations, can be successfully undertaken. Not by individuals working alone, but by connecting to others using collective approaches. Caring and belonging therefore builds collectives and communities. It follows, that strong communities are better able to support families, and strong families are better able to raise individuals that feel they are strong in belonging, caring and connecting to the presences, places and practices. These are the relational values and practices that have sustained diversity across millennia. Sharing these knowledges becomes Indigenous educational leadership to the broader populations living in urban spaces.

In Australia, when colonisation, as the enactment of predatory monoculturalism, began ripping holes through the fabric of this cultural web in 1788, on Dharug Ngurra, there were at least 250 Aboriginal Countries, with between 300 and 700 languages interwoven across the continent of Australia (AIATSIS 2019, Simpson 2019). Predatory monoculturalism practiced by colonizing settlers enforced prohibition of Aboriginal languages, forbade the practise of cultural ceremony, dispossessed peoples of food sources, land and biodiversity management systems. Dharug

communities initially, followed later in others' Countries, were unable to continue caring for Ngurra. Knowledges embedded in places, practices and presences were forced 'underground' into domestic spaces, with remnants kept alive behind closed doors. It is only in relatively recent times that custodians have felt safe enough to begin reweaving the web of connection and caring across communities and across the continent of Australia. This revival relies on understanding one's place of belonging, the values of reciprocity and caring for Ngurra, in all its diversities. Indigenous leadership as expressed and enacted by custodians in our cities, therefore, opens possibilities for educational leadership to foster a sense of caring for sustainable futures by the broader population. Such leadership was shown through the thesis, *Country Tracking Voices: Dharug women's perspectives on presences, places and practices* (Rey 2019). As researcher-participant and Dharug community member, further sharing of the evidence of Dharug community's continuity in the practice of caring for Ngurra, and their cultural continuity in the face of continuing colonisation, becomes an act of educational leadership that conforms to Dharug communal desire to have their custodial continuity recognised and their values and knowledges appreciated for the benefit of Ngurra. As such it also contests continuing colonisation and predatory monoculturalism.

### **Custodianship as Indigenous Leadership in the City**

The question of Dharug custodial cultural leadership becomes pertinent when we seek ways to enhance caring for Country. Through yarning (shared storytelling) sessions with seven Dharug custodians, situated in their selected places of significance, a better understanding of what caring-as-custodianship entails was elucidated (Bessarab and Ng'Andu 2010). The seven women (including researcher-as-participant) chose not to use their English language names, but instead their other-than-human 'significant identifiers'. The word 'totem' was avoided as this term arose through colonial expeditions in other First Peoples' places, such as the US and Canada, and as such represents a homogenising instrument of the English language. The women's identifications included the Australian birds: Kookaburra, Wagtail, Crow, and Bellbird (the latter as researcher-participant), two possums: Bushytail and Ringtail and Sandstone, down at the beach. As such other-than-humans were brought into the Academy from the beginning, so that supervisory discussions were always undertaken using these terms. From this point, for the researcher, it was easy to recognise another other-than-human in the research process – Goanna (as researcher-companion).

There were only two caveats required of the women. Firstly, as the knowledges gained from the project would go back to Dharug community, their primary audience would be community and so whatever they chose to yarn about was to bring benefit to community. Secondly, that their storytelling should be related to place and that the yarning would take place in the associated storytelling site. Thus places (including a cemetery, rock engraving sites, bush, and suburbia), associated presences (Ancestors and living other-than-humans), and practices (yarning) involving transgenerational storytelling (including various other customary and modern forms of storytelling, such as possum skin work, puppetry, art, song and poetry), were the basis for establishing the Dharug Ngurra web of

connections. Through the yarnings, values of belonging, caring and connecting became clear and the web was fully woven. One place of yarning was in the St. Bartholomew's cemetery, at Prospect (Western Sydney) with Ringtail possum, speaking of her Ancestor, Boorooberongal woman, Bolongaia (Maria Lock), and the importance of transgenerational caring as storying. The following extracts come from the doctoral thesis, *Country Tracking Voices: Dharug women's perspectives on presences, places and practices* (Rey, 2019):

It feels nice, its calm, it's peaceful, and we talk about Maria [Lock] wherever we go. But being here, it's almost like she's included in the conversation. We always talk about her being put into the [Parramatta Native] Institute site and her achievements, and ability to get land grants, but coming here feels like she's been included in the conversation, and of course the family wouldn't have existed either without Robert, who is buried here with her, and so it's like being able to bring family in rather than talking about them. And we've come here a few times, on a few occasions and it's always felt a kind of calmness here, and so I think she's OK here. It's Warmuli Country, not Boorooberongal ... possum Country. We've never felt any kind of angst here and I think it does make a difference, and I'm always proud to talk about her and proud to let people know. But to include her in the conversation seems a little bit more real, and not just a tokenistic person that people talk about to make a point, because she was still our grandmother and still a human ... (pp. 190-191)

Ringtail possum also showed how the practice of reading Country is an act of caring that recognises the relational connections with other-than-human presences:

...And the Old Grandfathers [Crows] are getting noisy now, because we are talking women's business, feeling a bit left out. (p. 193)

Additionally, caring for humans that have passed on, is part of the obligations of belonging to Ngurra. Ringtail possum explains:

It's our obligation to look after anyone that's living or travelling or visiting our Country, not just our own. So, you know, that includes the dead. You've got to look after souls ... (pp. 200-201)

But it is in the transgenerational sharing of Dharug knowledges, amongst other Aboriginal ways of knowing and being and doing, that continues culture across millennia. Such examples as these show Indigenous leadership and enables caring for Country sustainably:

And you do know when the wind blows up, when you're talking like that, it's the Grandmothers sending you kisses. Thank you, Grandmas (p. 203).

It becomes clear these women's lives are enacting what has been at the heart of Indigenous culture, practice and sustainability, despite colonisation, despite millions of other humans coming into Dharug Ngurra, and despite the pressures of modern urban work and life, through the continuity of recognising, developing and maintaining human-more-than-human relationships. These relationships enable co-becoming as caring. As all the women are educators in one form or another, they are engaging in cultural practices through work and home. As Kookaburra shows us, her career through puppetry, and the puppet troupe, *Yarramundi Kids* (Burke), enabled an entwining of identities, times, places and storying into a life's work. She recounts the importance of a dream she requested to solve a problem:

...now I think back and only now I make this connection, that has become my life's work, that [dream] was the beginning of my life's work 30 years ago. So ... I use that information and I put it into a story and it is a story that Nakita [the puppet] tells, and I use [Crow's] song, the 'Wirrawee Bubulwal' song, and ... her grandmother sits her down one day, and her grandmother says to her, because ... Nakita is grieving because her mother is no longer here, loss of her mother and all of this, and her grandmother sits her down and she says to her, 'Now, Nakita I want you to go down by the river, I want you to sit down there, don't take anyone with you, go on your own, and I want you to sing that song, and I want you to see what happens.'

... and Nakita, in the telling of the story, she says: 'But where Nan, where, where at the river?' And then she goes, 'Oh, I know, I know where, that big flat rock, that special place you showed me, the big flat rock.' ... And so, what Nakita does ... she just sits, ... And she goes: 'Wirrawee'.

And then she goes: 'And I wait, and I listen and I'm listening' ... And when she [Nakita] tells this story, you could almost hear a pin drop. Now, I've told this story in Parliament House, Canberra, and you could've heard a pin drop with all these polities [politicians]. But anyway, everywhere people wait, and then you hear: 'Bubulwal'. And she goes: 'Ah, Ah. So, I sing it again. I go "Wirrawee", [pause] "Bubulwal"'.

And she [Nakita] goes: 'My Nan knew that was going to happen, eh? My Nan knew that was going to happen because...' and then she says, 'You know who what was singing back to me? That was my mum.' Right?

Here we have the dialogue passing from Kookaburra, to Nakita, across time as a recount of other performances, to audiences and across places, the place of performance, the place of Kookaburra's home (the telling for the research) and the place of the thesis, and now this place, this journal article. It is a story of how children need to listen to their Elders, in order to learn. A mighty example of Indigenous educational leadership, outside of classrooms, through oral transmission

which has been undertaken across cultural lines for thousands and thousands of years (Stutheit 1981).

Thus the women do not live in the binaried place where work is separated from ‘life’ (the left over hours after work), but rather live as ‘lifeworkings’ (Mitchell 2016, 2017), where work involves living and educating culturally, caring for Country through educating others, connecting to places and other-than-humans through storying, whether that be by the collection of materials required for continuing cultural practices such as grasses for weaving baskets, string, bags, belts, gathering eucalyptus leaves and branches for spiritual ceremonies of ‘smoking’ for cleansing, and ‘gunyah’ building (bush shelters); sourcing stones for cutting, and kangaroo and possum work for blankets and wraps, or as Kookaburra does, through puppetry teaching values, caring and connecting to the children (and adults) in her audiences. As Bushytail explains her lived practice:

... I am constantly thinking about who I am culturally as a person from the time I wake up to the time till even in my dreams when I go to sleep about my spiritual connection and how I can improve on that in a good way, and not only for myself but for my community and also my children ...

In terms of the interweaving of her life, work, family and community, Bushytail tells us:

... Family is in the core, that would be in the circle in the middle, then another circle going out in another circle, with lines going out, which is how we belong to the community, and in a workspace, but there’s effects of that as well. Community and school, Community is always on my mind, so that runs through, but the education is important as a teacher always on my mind too...

It’s all interwoven, actually. So, I work two days at school and the rest is really Community and family ... So Community can mean lots of different things, and I have my relationships with Aunties and Uncles, in my Community, who I consider family as well...and then there’s other people identifying as Dharug Aunties...and so connecting, and a lot of us have experienced what it’s like not to belong and so they have a yearning to belong, ... and the generations are coming out now, because in the past they felt shamed or feared, but they are making a step to come out and identify.

Through connections to places, presences and continuing practices, values are enacted through lives lived attentively (Mitchell. 2016, 2017). As such their connections, values and practices become a source of strength, resilience and renewal as they co-become on Ngurra with the agency in all its diversities that are the Universe. To care for Country today requires a sense of reciprocity and respect for diversities. To educate others for sustainability requires changes in educational practices – away from values of competition, towards values embracing the collective and its diversities.



## **Bringing Indigenous Leadership into the Academy**

The academy has been one of the most colonizing instruments throughout western history and continues to enact monocultural supremacy, by privileging western knowledges over diversity. Plumwood (1993) succinctly shows how western patriarchal hierarchies and separations, originating at least from Plato's time, driven by Christian narratives of human entitlement to colonize the 'primitive heathen' Others, and righteously exploiting Earth's resources for the wealth and maintenance of white supremacy, has been at the heart of the western hegemonic impetus. As western education was one of the enforcing instruments used for empowering this monocultural domination over diversities, it has fuelled discrimination, racial and biological genocides, and underpinned mechanization, industrialization and now globalization and extraction/extinction industries.

Today, the economic narrative of mass consumerism is one of the latest implementations for maintaining the privilege of the few over the poverty of the majority resulting in mass dependency. At the same time, systems of administration and funding competition within the academy are stripping, from the inside out, intellectual diversities so there is a domination of intellectual engagement by systems promoting science, technology, engineering and mathematics, also known as STEM subjects. These are narrated as the ways needed to drive us into futures that will maintain the privilege of "us" over "them", that is the few over the multitudes (Murphy 2017). As Murphy (2017) describes it, the control of thinking through this domination is resulting in "zombie" universities.

On Dharug Ngurra, since the establishment of the first Native Institution, initially at Parramatta (1814), then Blacktown (1825), this monocultural enforcement and domination has been ruthlessly implemented and resulted in what came to be known as 'The Stolen Generations', with the removal of children considered fit for 'civilization', with an emphasis on those most looking white. Thus, Australian his-story since colonisation is the story of monocultural, patriarchal domination at the expense of the her-stories produced through matriarchal cultural diversity that underpins the peoples, presences, places and practices that have been engaged across the continent for, what some Aboriginal people say, has been forever.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, the question arises, when Country is a city, when the monoculture of modernity is killing off the diversities of 'lifeworkings', how can Indigenous custodial leadership turn around the institutional 'Titanic' before it sinks its own ship and takes billions of diversities with it? It is suggested here that bringing our understandings of belonging to place and the obligations of caring for place, and others within it, opens us all to the values and practices that are the foundation of a sense of Indigeneity. As Arabena (2015) points out, we are all Indigenous to the Universe, and so a Universe-referent consciousness fosters our belonging, our caring and our connecting to presences (ancestral, living other-than-humans), places and practices across time, space and

matter. Doing so enables our co-becoming (Bawaka et al., 2016) and together with Ngurra timespacematter-ing and ‘hauntological entanglements’ are enhanced (Barad, 2010). Recognising the nature of custodial leadership currently being undertaken by Dharug community members when Country is a city, is critical to recognising its continuity. Dharug custodians who are engaged actively in the obligations of custodial responsibilities and continuing cultural reciprocity are bringing Indigenous leadership to the broader population residing in Sydney. It is therefore imperative for the academy to not only recognise its place within Ngurra today, but to own the moral responsibility and concomitant obligation to care for Country as an act of compensatory reciprocity, for its practices across past, present and forthcoming knowledge production. Recognising its presence in grounded locality in Dharug Ngurra requires its foundational knowledge production to provide sustainability for the diversities in Ngurra. When threats to diversities are undermining the very monocultures that have till now been fostered, educational institutions need to show indigenous leadership by thinking as Universe-referent beings. Connecting with custodians who belong in Dharug Ngurra, who are providing Indigenous custodial leadership that continue cultural practices, supports cultural obligations, and brings respect and reciprocity, enables the broader population to belong, care and connect to/with/for Ngurra in an indigenous Universe-referent manner. As has been shown, localised caring-for-Country practices strengthen localised belonging and enhance human and other-than-human wellbeing through custodial leadership. Recognising Goanna’s place in this weaving brings out the more-than-human in us all.

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