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Decolonizing Disability, Indigeneity, and Poetic Methods

Hanging Out in Australia

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The article witnesses encounters in Australia, many centered in Aboriginal Australian contexts, and asks what arts-based research methods can offer to intercultural contact. It offers a meditation on decolonizing methodologies and the use of literary forms by a white Western subject in disability culture. The argument focuses on productive unknowability, on finding machines that respectfully align research methods and cultural production at the site of encounter.

In 2010, I had the honor to be a visiting fellow at the Humanities Research Institute at the Australian National University, exploring international disability culture in a postcolonial context through arts-based methods. It was my fifth visit to Australia, and the second time, after 2008, that my partner, poet, and performance artist Neil Marcus, and I were traveling together across the nation to give workshops, participate in disability culture events, and give poetry readings and performance workshops. In 2008, I had worked as the research consultant for the Melbourne Cultural Development Network. The Network studied for the Victorian Government's Office of Disability the participation of people with disability in the arts. For three months, Neil and I toured the Victorian countryside, and we both acted as facilitators for focus group meetings in both urban and rural locations.

During our travels we encountered many Aboriginal Australian disabled people, and our conversations raised questions about indigeneity and embodiment, questions I have been exploring ever since, and that have offered methodological challenges that I share in this article.

This work offers a meditation on decolonizing methodologies and the use of literary forms by a white Western subject in disability culture. The argument of the article focuses on productive unknowability, on finding machines that respectfully align research methods and cultural production at the site of encounter. This is not an article about Indigenous artists dealing with what Western discourses call disability: that topic will be a part of my ongoing

studies, as will be work on the presence of what Westerners call disability in Indigenous literature from Australia and Aotearoa. In this article, two short creative nonfiction essays and two poems share how decolonizing methods and my experiences encountering “disability” in Australia inform my own creative practice. This article, with its arts-based methodology, is partnered by a literature review tracing Australian literature on disability (currently under review elsewhere). The two essays, with their different methods, inform each other: together, they enact a destabilization of what is known, and can be known, and I hope that they open up poetic play that can lead to a questioning of colonial knowledge patterns.

Meeting with disabled Aboriginal artists in Australia quickly showed me that gathering a corpus of data on Aboriginal perspectives on disability was not something that I as an outsider (and particularly as someone doing research work for an Australian government agency or for an international disability studies framework) could successfully undertake. There were many historical reasons for this, including questions of what “inside” might actually be, and who is enabled to speak for whom—contemporary Aboriginal communities are diverse and heterogeneous, and visiting with people in Canberra, Adelaide, and Sydney was very different from meeting people in Darwin or Alice Springs, or in smaller rural communities.

Then there are the complex knowledge structures. Alopi Latukefu writes about some of these structures in addressing the set-up of cyber-communication in remote Australian communities: “within Aboriginal communities there still exists an uneasy tension between different systems of knowledge and information and who controls them” (46), and “Traditional systems are [...] based on numerous multi-dialogues of relationships, protocols and laws” (51).

We experienced some echoes of these protocols, in particular some linked to gender patterns: it did not take long for Neil and me to find out, for instance, that using our core method, “hanging out,” a method description associated with (often quite male-focused) literary journalism, we were each gathering very different information, with me given access to “women’s business,” often through friendship patterns, and him getting rather different perspectives when men gathered with him. Satire, irony, and humor were also a large part of any cross-cultural hanging-out situation we were part of, and we often felt that we were invited to take some of the information received with a grain of salt.

The concept of “disability” was a particularly vexing one: it has strong use-value when it can be employed as a lever to mobilize funds or services to underserved communities, as the concept of disability as a policy issue has currency within Australian white settler society (see Damien Griffis in his

introduction of the First Peoples Disability Network). The exact nature of the term and concept of disability, and its currency in Aboriginal societies, told by disabled Australian Aboriginal people, is something I am still not quite able to pinpoint. With this, I am joining Ph.D. researcher Julie King (2010), whose work is so far the only in-depth medical anthropological study in the field, in acknowledging that there is great scope in learning about cultural embodiment when one pays attention to the ways health, disability, and impairment are mobilized in Aboriginal self-narratives.

Decolonizing Methodologies

This article locates itself at the level of personal experience and the witnessing of anecdotal episodes, a specific methodological choice grounded in perspectival knowledge, and in the acknowledging of personal stakes and location that characterize most official meetings with Indigenous people in which I have participated.¹

I have been told by the organizer of the then Aboriginal Disability Network, now First Peoples Disability Network, Damien Griffis, that Aboriginal cultures do not have words for conditions like Down Syndrome, and I also realize that a society that values elders creates different systems of stigma around issues such as “the sugar” (diabetes) and resulting amputations. But I do not really know, beyond individual encounters, how younger people with mobility or cognitive impairments (for instance) fare in traditional value systems, and, as I show in my literature review case study, I am wary of some of the claims made in the anthropological literature created by non-Aboriginal people.

Trying too hard to find these answers might well be counter-productive. Why would I want to know? What good would my knowing bring indigenous people? I have written elsewhere that disability is a performance, not just in art-framed settings: disabled people have long been adept at performing “disability” for the medical professional, the social worker, the gatekeepers of the social world, and the dominant system. Surely, any perceived interest in issues of disability as potentially positive and rich lived experience could easily backfire, enabling a potentially non-optimal (from an Aboriginal perspective) set of surveillance reports to gatekeepers, such as funding bodies or development

1. This article stays with specific moments of experience, and does not offer a critique of disability studies' engagement with postcolonial issues. For this, see the overview offered by Barker and Murray.

agencies.² So any questions I ask, in particular if I plan to publish the results, need to be balanced against these realities, just as they have to in the context of US disability activism when I wish to publish my participant-observer notes.³

One thing is evident to me: disability as a health and social welfare issue maps onto the interface between Aboriginal societies and the dominant culture, and needs to be seen through the lens of the ongoing effects of postcolonial violence. But the contours of lived experience and the structures of feeling that surround disability within Aboriginal societies are grounded in very different paradigms. This is not a reference to mystical nature children. The context for these “different paradigms” is an understanding of Aboriginal societies not as stone age remnants but as loosely comparable to the specific Western eighteenth-century political forms called nation states (i.e. as autonomous and sovereign guardians of country, besieged and disrupted by violence). Western disability researchers need to take better heed of the concept of sovereignty and culturally specific knowledge, and allow these understandings to complicate universal human rights frames and ways of conceiving of aid.⁴

Thus, forms of thinking the bodymind, environment, and the social in many Indigenous societies might not follow the contours of the modern project that creates bureaucratic categorizations, the machines of normality, and the biopolitics that attend them. I am not able to write about the particular formations of embodiment and difference that structure Aboriginal societies but the existence and acknowledgement of this query puts my project in motion.

My methodological apparatus relies on tracing the reverberations of indigenous theorizations of embodiment in collaboration and in communal

2. For an extended discussion of this, see my silent reporting from an Australian AusAID conference, in the forthcoming literature case study.

3. These issues came to the front when I wrote about Arnieville, a 2010 Californian disability activism tent village (Kuppers, *Somatic*): while I am privy to a great deal of information about the internal politics of the encampment, I chose to publish a much more general account. The reasons for this are complex, and include personal relationship enmeshments, but also thoughts about a critic's responsibility and the (under)representation of disability-led political labor in public.

4. There are places where this kind of work happens, in collaboration, in long-term duration, and in participatory action research where the “researched” community's interests are firmly kept in mind. Examples include this Aotearoan collaborative research on Maori understanding of what in English is termed blindness, and what is here figured as Ngāti Kāpo (i.e. as a cultural formation). In it, the collaborators write, “In this research, the researchers and Ngāti Kāpo o Aotearoa Inc viewed the Treaty of Waitangi from a Māori world view. In doing so, the research team upheld its centrality with respect to research methodology and analysis, effective partnership building with non-Māori, social equity and justice, and most importantly to Māori aspirations to be Māori and self-determining” (Higgins, Phillips, and Cowan 1).

art practice. My work is not as an observer and a reader emerging from the colonial archive, but as someone who uses poetic and artful communication, and witnesses what happens when these art objects cross cultural borderlines in environments where many different cultural ways of knowing create complex webs.

There are other complexities about locating Aboriginal knowledge, directly linked to cross-cultural tension and (post)colonial violence. What does it mean, doing “research” at the site of indigeneity, and what is it about these “uneasy tensions between different systems of knowledge”? What were the methodological assumptions that I was bringing with me to Australia?

My first guide into this new aspect of my academic practice was Linda Tuhiwai Te Rina Smith (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou), Director of the International Research Institute for Maori and Indigenous Education at the University of Auckland, Aotearoa. Smith’s highly influential book opens with these four sentences, sentences that shape how I try to approach my work in Australia, very far away from my colonizer nation home bases, Germany, the UK, and now the US:

From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term “research” is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, “research,” is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that indigenous people even write poetry about research. (1)

Smith’s book focuses on centering indigenous knowledges, indigenous people, to shape an indigenous de-colonized research practice that is mindful of power relations, sovereignty, and the need to reclaim control over indigenous ways of knowing. My own agenda, as a woman from a colonizer-nation background, with both traveling and institutional privileges, intent on finding out things about indigenous life, needs to be deeply unsettled, queried, its purposes and methods weighted. The research project I submitted to ANU focused on arts-based methods, on finding out things among fellow artists, and on using shared artful behavior as the core method to acquiring knowledges that put things in motion.

My desires stemmed from the fourth sentence of Smith’s book—“indigenous people even write poetry about research.” What if I were to attempt a similar path, using other methods than the solidifying, conglomerating, totalizing

tools of research extraction? What if I were to find tools that would allow me to reflect on the actions inherent in abstracting patterns from lived reality? What can poetry do that social science texts cannot? What can poetic practice offer theorizations about connection, stigma, and embodiment? I am offering a range of stories that illuminate some aspects of the meetings points of disability culture, intercultural visitation, respectful engagement, and indigeneity.

Embodied Poetics, Poetic Material: Two Stories

1. At the Awakenings Festival in Horsham, Australia, 2008

In 2008, Neil Marcus and I published a book of poems, *Cripple Poetics: A Love Story*, and we were invited to perform from it to many people on three different continents, in poetry centers, performance festivals, care institutions, and community halls. At one point, we were at a week-long festival for people with developmental disabilities in rural Australia. We had a slot following a presentation about the creation of a non-disability-led art building in Nebraska, USA, far away from the experience of most people in the room.

Neil and I were a bit worried about how our piece would go over. We live in the US, too, another bunch of imported specialists. But our material comes from a cultural perspective, from a celebration and appreciation of disability's multiple differences, and from disabled interdependent self-organization. Multiple displacements and differences made us look at each other, questioning our performance choices. Would our schtick work here?

Eventually, it was our turn, and we wheeled onto the stage. We began to perform. Neil used vocalizations and hand signs to make people familiar with his spastic speech difference, and I re-voiced for him, and read my own sections. We read slowly, with repetitions, supporting each other, joking if a word did not come out right.

We looked out at the audience, made up of a few nondisabled organizers and helpers, and many people with conditions like autism or Down Syndrome; people who were black, white and Asian. From the stage, we spoke of sensuality, of our courtship, of finding ourselves alive in the world, all more or less encoded in our poems. And as we ended, we saw a forest of fists, raised in solidarity and appreciation, and voices howled or sung words back at us with excitement. For the rest of the day, we got hugs and high fives as we wheeled around the town. People found ways, verbal or not, to show us how much they appreciated hearing layered, artful witnessing words of sexuality and eros

from a stage that is usually about developing work skills, care innovations, or medical advances.

Our poems that day became something else than (only) an aesthetic framing of experience: they became an intervention, a way of speaking difference to machines that speak in ways that have a history of disempowering in different but related ways both disabled as well as colonized people. Speaking slant in-between descriptions of service delivery opened up a space of solidarity. Speaking about and enacting love on this stage became a recognizable marker even to people who did not give us an indication that they followed the content of our words: our embodied performance, leaning into each other and laughing while reading, was enough for some. Our foreign status had not been erased in any way, but members of an international and diverse disability culture found ways to find companionship and solidarity with each other.

2. At an Aboriginal Art Workshop, Alice Springs, 2008

After we performed at a memorial event for Christopher Newell, a disabled activist and scholar, Neil and I were invited to come out to Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, the red heart of Australia.

Our first tour guide had been part of the search party for a baby probably killed by a dingo, dramatized as an iconic Australian nightmare for international audiences in *A Cry in the Dark* (1988). After the first day, he gave us the use of a truck with a wheelchair lift to drive around the red and orange countryside.

At the local wildlife reserve, a wheelchair-using warden came shooting out to the parking lot (as we turned in with our big rig) ready to show us around, and we exuberantly greeted each other, three disabled white folk feeling rather wild and adventurous.

Disability Services Alice Springs, our hosts, threw a barbecue for us at the waterhole that gives Alice Springs its name. As unexpected rain had just filled the mini-lake, I went for a swim, too, with other disabled women, and was faintly red with mud dust for the rest of the night. At this disability culture party, we were given a dot painting created by a disabled Aboriginal artist (whom we did not meet in person, so I do not feel that I have permission to share her name and the painting here). We swapped courting stories with a beautiful couple, two women with developmental disabilities, who celebrated their love for each other with us, all of us taking photos of each other kissing and hugging.

Some of our experiences were a lot more sobering: one of our gigs was visiting with the “special unit” of a local school, and there we found children happy and

glad to dance with us from their wheelchairs or on the floor. About half of them were Aboriginal, and when we mentioned this, the teachers spoke freely to us of fetal alcohol syndrome and parents' drug abuse, not about historical and cultural trauma and its potential embodied and enminded effects.

We led a movement workshop. The teachers told us that "no one does that here," and that these kids do not usually respond to stimuli, that many do not communicate, and that some teachers were just now trying out a new method they had just learned about, something called Total Communication. When asked about this, it turned out that this basically meant listening, taking time, not stopping stimming behavior, mirroring some of the movements the kids were doing till there was some kind of echo or connection going on, just being with one another: all communication methods familiar to many disability culture people, where communication often does not run along the lines of normative social rules. The head teacher told us that our methods looked a lot like Total Communication and asked if we knew about it.

Neil felt less addressed and acknowledged by the teachers to whom we spoke, as his speech difference probably felt too close for comfort to many—but that was our reading, not something we could verify, of course. He and I felt such sadness in that environment: would it really be so hard to work out these things, these ways of establishing communication, without nondisabled specialists or international visiting artists? What would it take for decolonizing methodologies to encompass disabled people writing the guide books for how to deal with difference? When will disabled people become the teachers of people who will go on to make a living being with disabled people?

Our visit also brought us to the Irrerlantye Arts Centre, an Aboriginal Art and Community Centre. Here, we found again what different labor poems perform in cross-cultural contact. At the art center, a number of women were creating paintings that would be sold through the adjacent shop, a significant source of income in many Aboriginal communities. The women spoke with us in short sentences, keeping up their work, and we felt a bit tense and inappropriate. But they encouraged us to read to them while they were working, and so we performed a few poems from Cripple Poetics, and gave a copy to the workshop's library.

This was yet another new context for a poetry reading, and yet another form of poetry audiencing: in a manufacturing setting, reading while workers create postcards and small mats with dot paintings (the serenaded tobacco rollers of Carmen kept leaping into my thoughts). There was little eye contact, and few words. I am still not sure if we actually shared enough common language elements between us for all to understand the words of the poems. Gender,

race, and class differences seemed to fill the room in multiple ways, muffling any exchange in shy glances and short words. I could not read our audiences' affects and reactions, although they told us a few fragmented stories of "people like us" (chair users? spastic people?) in their communities.

As we left and got ready to operate the truck's wheelchair lift to get us to the city center, the group leader called us back. She was standing inside the walled courtyard of the workshop, and we spoke for a few more minutes through a metal grid. "Thank you," she said, "normally white people come here to take something away: Aboriginal culture, explanations for the dot paintings, and the art they buy. You brought us something, instead, and performed for us. Thanks."

This exchange has become an important lens for my understanding of the place of poetics in cross-cultural contexts. In my usual US setting, the act of sharing a poem outside sanctioned poetry events has often a faintly cringe-inducing flavor. Poems in everyday life have become something that puts a burden on the receiver: many poets are reluctant to recite or give their poems to others in private, as the act of giving has become an imposition on others. The gift of a reader's or a listener's attention seems rare and precious. This view of poems as highly personal and potentially embarrassing objects has one legacy in the lineage of lyrical poetics—a culturally specific and contingent construction of poetry's relation to privacy, self, and the public.

Thus, caught in my heritage's grip, I felt as if we were imposing on these women in this quasi-industrial setting. Are these women creating commodity art for tourists, or are they affirming a place for Indigenous land-connection in a white-dominated Australian public? Reading poems there, were we forcing something onto them? But that, it turned out, was not how the poetry was received. I failed to see the women fully as our hosts, as agents, as people with their own understandings of how non-everyday speech and declamatory vocal patterns might fit into their world. The context shifted: now, the poems we brought became a gift, understandable or not, an enrichment, not necessarily by their content, but through their rhythms and through our presence, through the gift of time and attention. The women in the center created a space for them. Maybe, for a few moments, our co-presence in the room became a temporal re-patterning that might entwine our halted, revoiced, and alternating speech patterns with the rhythms of a manufacture that creates near-identical dot paintings, themselves rituals of dreaming country, re-establishing co-presence with the land. Repetition and difference, sound pockets, floating visits, dot, dot, dot.

That strangely uncomfortable encounter in the art factory with its epiphanic ending in the dusty red garden has shifted again my sense of how poems,

ritually patterned speech, can offer space in the everyday, can weave rhythms and open up vibrations of tenuous connection and respect.

In these stories, and particularly when I use a word like epiphany to describe my cultural contact journeys, I need to resist the pressure of either cultural or aesthetic romanticizing, even as I witness myself being moved, and being moved to twist my understandings of my own art processes through intercultural encounters.

Art-based practices do not escape the dirty, extractive connotations of “research” by their nature, far from it: art practices at the site of indigeneity have historically brought forth powerful romanticizing and eroticizing image complexes,⁵ building a visual rhetoric of patriarchal colonialism, or a poetics of expansion, of binary contrasts between human Westerns and non-human others. But I do believe that there are contemporary art-based genres that can formally engage in the project of decolonization:

Decolonization is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. For researchers, one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations, and values that inform research practices. (Smith 20)

It is at this point that I can find traction for my methodological questions about research. Arts-based research is different from art practices. The Western art world (like all art worlds) operates by well-established patterns and control mechanisms, including modes of outsider art and their attendant capitalist gallery enterprises, or *Wanderjahre* novels and exoticizations in the equally successful genres of memoir or travel narratives. Arts-based research, on the other hand, circulates in the framework of the academy in fragile contact with the art world: it is a liminal zone, not devoid of power by any means, but less sure of its grounds than ethnographic practice, quantitative methods, or art production.

Another research method warrants mention in the context of this article:

5. This article is not the place to expand, but one study that came up in the discussion of my methods was Chatwin’s *Songlines* (1986)—a study that many critique, but that warrants close attention as to method and political effect at its historical moment. Chatwin wrote under the sign of disability—he was a high-profile English queer man who contracted HIV/AIDS in 1980. Much more straightforwardly romantic is Morgan’s *Mutant Message Down Under*, originally self-published as memoir, later published by HarperCollins (Perennial imprint) as fiction (1995). Aboriginal Australians have strongly protested the large commercial success of this autobiography and its misrepresentation of Aboriginal culture.

interviews and collecting oral histories. At times, both the anecdotes above and the poems below either report on someone saying something, or quote words spoken. The materials have been shared with stakeholders. My time in Canberra at the Australian National University ended in a research presentation, where I read and discussed the framework of the Landings material below. I also had long conversations with Aboriginal poet and academic Jeanine Leane, and benefited significantly from her guidance and comments on respectfully engaging with what is said and not said in contact between white researchers and artists and Aboriginal researchers and artists.

And it is here that I place the issue of interview techniques and the recording of voices: so much is unsaid, unsayable, shrouded by custom and convention. It would be convenient to imagine that some of the polite and unfailingly friendly utterances that I receive from the Aboriginal women artists I worked with is all there is. But I know that listening to silences, and to the rhythms of conversation—a story told to me by an elder after a certain pause, for instance—can offer me much more nourishment for understanding.

Witnessing in this way, and letting it influence my writing indirectly and through pattern-processes, should not lead to the kind of research Smith warns about, and which is still the dominant mode of what is considered to be “valuable” in research: there is little hard data here in this essay, no extractive nuggets of wisdom, few truth claims or statements about Indigenous being, or about medical, social, or cultural links between disability and indigeneity. And that is a deliberate stance.

At the same time, I hope that this kind of porous writing will not echo too closely the history of romanticization and mystification that is the other side of the coin of anthropological and artistic research, self-indulgence and excessive self-witnessing. I am encountering living people who are getting on with it, and I can record how their co-presence affects me, my ways about thinking about “research,” and my (white, Western, well-meaning) artist being—co-present with me, with country, with history, and with futures. I share this material as an artist-researcher, witnessing people who are adept at code-switching and survivance.⁶

6. *Survivance* is a term emerging from indigenous scholarship that addresses the agency and resilience of people in postcolonial strife, moving beyond victim debates and colonial narratives of death. For an in-depth discussion of the term’s history and application, see Vizenor.

Intercultural Poetics: Writing Landings

Drawing on my encounters with Aboriginal women's poetry and art making,⁷ I use creative/critical methods to find ways of writing about my own experiences: meditations on the foreigner's gaze; disability access and art; connections to country, history and people; performance studies and its relation to anthropology; as well as poetry and its relation to critical writing.

How do cultural aesthetics call upon historical depth in modernity? How can (fractured, provisional) community be created from fragmented, traumatized roots, disregarded sovereignty? What can disability culture(s) learn from postcolonial peoples and survivors of violence, and vice versa? What are contact points? What are differences? What are the ethics of artful cross-cultural communications?

The *Landings* series consists of poems—that is the way these writings appear on the page or are spoken in performance. In terms of what these pieces do, though, I consider them to be critical pieces that engage the traditions of knowledge traffic within the academy.

The poems make connections, offering a form of affective and associative linking that relies on line breaks, on small units of meaning leaning into one another. This writing emerges from a desire to investigate and query the ways that knowledge is gathered, communicated, and archived within the academy. In *Landings*, the authorial “I” or viewpoint becomes spatial rather than grammatical. Sentences switch direction and overlay each other with different perspectives on land, history, and habitation.

With this, these poems are different from the anecdotes above. These short pieces of nonfiction writing also meditate on cultural contact, but do so through grammatical rules and assemblages that still keep my emotional journey as traveler and writer firmly linear. Investigating the formal elements of poetry, witnessing sounds I hear and rhythms I sense, not claiming full understanding or making the sensations secondary to my emotional states: these are the challenges I set myself in this writing.

Some of the material in *Landings: Darwin* emerges from found sound, from

7. Material I looked at, and people I met, include Jennifer Martiniello (who identifies as of Arrernte, Chinese, and Anglo-Celtic descent) and her edited collections *Talking Ink from Ochre* (2002) and *Writing Us Mob* (2000); Wijadjuri woman and Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies research fellow Jeanine Leane and her 2010 collection *Dark Secrets: After Dreaming (AD) 1887–1961*; and Bidjara and Wakaman woman and poet Yvette Holt, author of *Anonymous Premonition* (2008). I also benefited from discussions with Alisa Duff, who presented on “The Politics of Dancing: Issues in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance” as part of the Text and Texture seminar convened by Jeanine Leane.

TV news and Northern Territory documentaries, and some of the lines are comments captured at the Darwin conference. Some of the speakers or people mentioned in these lines are well-known public figures in disability politics in Australia, like Damian Griffis, with whom Neil and I shared an exciting dinner talking about disability justice in 2010; Michele Castagna, the disability services coordinator in Alice Springs, who had hosted us in 2008 and whom we met again in Darwin; as well as Joshua's mother Penny Campton, officer of Arts Access Darwin, and curator of the *Good Strong Powerful* exhibit, an arts exhibit of ten indigenous artists with disability (which ran from October 2011 to January 2012 in the National Gallery of Australia, and will be one focal point of my future research).

The material from *Landings: Silver Screen* has a historical starting point: watching an Aboriginal woman traveling with a mob, part of the Mandjindjara and the Ngadadjara tribes of the Australian Western Desert. An ethnographic film by Ian Dunlop, shot in 1965 and 1967, presented these groups as some of the last nomadic bands. During the making of the films, the woman's legs were burned severely from a campfire, and the film mentioned, without follow-up, that she could no longer travel with her band.

The format of poetry allows me to weave a way through these elements without elevating some voices over others. Who said what, who is speaking, whose voices are included and excluded: those are the issues I am investigating with these formal choices.

As a researcher, I am not becoming a transparent recorder, instead, my gathering and witnessing activity becomes akin to a choreographic presence, a curatorial gaze or ear, opening up the parsing activity of the researcher. I offer these two poems of *Landings* not as aesthetic products, but as meditations on the use of arts-based methods in cultural studies.

Landings: Darwin

On the occasion of meeting Joshua Campton, a Larrakia man, leader, artist and young adult with disability, who opened the 2010 Development and Disability Consortium Conference at Darwin with a Welcome to Country.

Darwin also houses a rare 40-year-old exhibit of a coral ecological system: a tank in which corals, fish, and other local sea-life live in a closed system.

Note: Joshua Campton has given permission for me to use his name in this writing.

Wait
patience
red eyes shine in the torch light
back up into the shadows of the billabong.
Two hundred forty three people perished in the Japanese air raid
they say, they say
Two hundred forty three they counted
of the lighter color
accountable in the fire light
(moon fish eat the rice I throw off the dock)
There is no Down Syndrome amongst Aboriginal people
they say, they say
and someone donates white goods to the bush community.

Sometimes you have to step in the long grass,
grass land,
goanna groans,
(over me swoops the flying fox)
grass land that is not your home, and you are not welcome here
someone drove her up in a van
powerchair hanging deep and heavy
fifteen hours from Alice,
no nook on the aircraft
no view from above
no lines in the red sand
no green flowers of salt

impurities enter through the oil of your skin
red lights in the night
at the back
on the retina
the night throws you back
(I never met the owl, never)

mother father crocodile, saltwater people
the fortress in the night, the aircraft carriers,
red and dark and green:
Hiryu, the Flying Dragon
Akagi, Red Castle Mountain, fire to the lighter colors
shades of ochre and the lush, the lush

milkwood splits
 homeostasis (Plain English balance sheet, two pushing against a membrane,
 one against the other's power, watery support)
 heal the renal clinic
 no balance, no niches, each nook and cranny inhabited
 this is not a plant
 count the leaves in the long grass, asleep in the night,
 misrecognized fauna, this does not count
 as a home.

I welcome you
 I declare this conference open
 this meeting
 in the long grass
 (I watch them step and step in a line, hidden by the vertical stripes)
 you are not welcome here
 I open, you say
 you step forward, you say
 your business is yours
 but I can still feel your touch on my skin

Landings: Silver Screen

On the occasion of meeting ethnographic film director Ian Dunlop, after a screening of People of the Western Desert.

The desert is now the site of copper and gold mines, including the largest Australian gold mine, and many of the traditional owners of the land, reclaiming guardianship of country, are negotiating for Native Title under Australian law.

35 millimeter film unwinds for four minutes at a time
 silent
 silent paths
 silent laughter
 silent digging

the younger wife's legs are burned from the campfire
 she cannot gather her food
 her legs are burned
 silver ash on dark skin
 her legs are burned
 the camera tracks the looping track
 we leave her in the dust

then there's the time of the children's game, etching a curved path
etching a curved path
in the desert
through the desert
little brother skirts carefully
the path
in the desert

run a skirt around the city
close the city
go deep
volumetric ore removal map lines ley lines striated degradation
cyanide will dissolve the earth and free the copper
run a skirt around the city
close the city
(what do I know of the city)
fly in the workers, fly them out: no one lives in the Mad Max world
no one speaks in the silent film
there is laughter in the clang of the spears sticks in the counting in the accounting
acid etches lines into
line it
(what do I know of the desert)
her legs are burned
the goanna gets out of here

Ian Dunlop says: yes, I saw this again, much later, at the mission, children's paths, I saw it. I do not know. I do not know. It was the older brother, 16 year old man. I saw these paths again, at the mission.

When I see the path, I step cross-wise on the line.

Embedded anthropologist

Where will he find a wife?
How do I sing a life?
Where do I find a wife?
Her legs are burned
Where do we sing in the cinema?
What is the sing of the city?
Why is the sing of land?
Who sings in the grit, itching between the hair follicles?
Blood tastes like copper, or copper like blood, and water runs over it all, green,
green, green, greenbacks and oxygen, the bubbling reaction.

Epilogue

This is the place for the summing up, the overview, and the outlook. But in this article of located narrative and poetics, this is the place of questions. What knowledge have you gained, as a reader, and what images and impressions have floated over you? You have read fragments of disabled travelers and have met some Aboriginal people through these lenses. You heard quite a bit about landscapes, too, and might have images of places you have not visited in your mind, and even a desire to go meet people and be welcomed to country.

You might have a wider sense of how developmental narratives and sovereignty perspectives might clash. You might have noticed feints and hide-outs, pauses and blank stares, and an atmosphere of hedging might have settled on you.

If you read poetry differently from prose, you might have taken note of how often you have stopped yourself reading, and tasted words in your mouth.

How can these methodologies witness hanging-out with others? Is this a method that can create knowledge patterns of holes and wholes, of touches and sensation, not in counter-distinction to analysis and overview, but in a vibrational tension with them?

Maybe, next time you read a text that authoritatively presents how embodiment works in a different culture, some of the hedging and pausing of this article might intersect your reading practice, and might get you to wonder, curiously, about what remains unsaid. And with that, ultimately, does this kind of writing achieve its goal, furthering agendas of Indigenous people by disrupting productively the mechanisms of Western research? That moment, the moment in which this question is raised, might be this article's horizon of decolonizing methodologies.

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