

# Quiet activism through Dharug Ngurra: reporting locally grown – not from the European South<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

As nation-states flail ignominiously (some more than others) in uncoordinated response to rapid global systemic climate challenges that threaten air, water, earth and fire systems, segments of the so-called 'Australian' government persist in ignoring the pending catastrophe despite major physical warnings across various systems and despite scientific alerts (IPCC 2021). However, the gap between governmental bureaucratic inertia and citizenry determination to respond to the realities and threats of future human-induced climate catastrophes opens the possibility for a citizen-led activism that goes beyond protests in the streets. 'Quiet Activism' is an approach that is already happening on the ground, where localised responses by people who care about their local area are opening opportunities to disrupt the complacency and fossil-fuelled corporate greed of bureaucratic systems (Steele, Byrne, Hillier, et. al. 2021). This paper contends it is not just non-Indigenous people undertaking 'quiet activism'. Using three sites on Dharug Ngurra, also known as Sydney, Australia, the paper demonstrates how Indigenous cultural practices, that have been undertaken for thousands of years prior to colonisation, are continuing. By showing leadership that cares for Country-in-the-city, utilising sustainable 'cool fire' cultural burns, culture camps, and educating for connection, caring and belonging, this paper argues that colonising 'Possessed-Possessor' practices can be turned around – away from perpetuating climate catastrophes, toward sustainable futures. As such this paper is reporting about the 'locally grown' – not from the 'European South'.

## Keywords

Dharug, 'Quiet activism', 'Possessed-Possessors', Colonisation, Dharug Ngurra/Nura

## Introducing the landscape: a complex agentic web

As nation states flail ignominiously (some more than others) in uncoordinated response to rapid global systemic climate challenges that threaten air, water, earth and fire systems, segments of the so-called 'Australian' government persist in ignoring the pending catastrophe despite major physical warnings across various systems and despite scientific alerts (IPCC 2021). Three high profile examples impacting the continent known as 'Australia' today provide facts on the ground. They involve the Great Barrier Reef (GBR), the 2019-20 megafires in south-eastern Australia, and rising sea levels.

Firstly, the GBR has suffered more frequent coral bleaching events (three in five years since 2017) indicating it is already experiencing the consequences of climate change (2021). Secondly, in the south-east Australian megafires of 2019-2020, more than 10 million hectares burned, including "suitable habitat for 69% of all plant species (17,197 species), with 44% of

Australia's threatened plants being burnt" (Gallagher et al. 2021, 1166). Thirdly, according to the 6<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report (IPCC 2021, 9 SPM A.2.4) "Global mean sea level has risen faster since 1900 than over any preceding century in at least the last 3000 years (high confidence)". According to Flannery (2020), the Earth is close to reaching dangerous tipping points which will ignite threatening climate consequences, including the collapse of the Earth's ice sheets, temperatures warming above 1.5 degrees Celsius and destructions of coral reefs, permafrost and Amazon rainforests (Flannery 2020).

However, while the bureaucratic responses of governments at Federal and State levels have been less than inspiring, if not downright obstructive by refusing to establish a plan, a recent Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) climate poll showed 67 per cent of 15,000 voters believed the government should be doing more to address climate change, including a majority in all 151 national seats (O'Malley and Perkins 2021).

As such, the gap between governmental bureaucratic inertia and citizenry determination to respond to the realities and threats of future human-induced climate catastrophes opens the possibility for a citizen-led activism that goes beyond protests in the streets. According to Steele et al. (2021), 'quiet activism' is an approach that is already happening on the ground, where localised responses by people who care about their local area are opening opportunities to disrupt the complacency and fossil-fuelled corporate greed of bureaucratic systems. They argue this localised 'quiet activism' provides innovative leadership for mutually supportive benefit. However, Steele et al. (2021) note that there are missing actors at the table of localised 'quiet activism' in the context of their research. These absentees include Indigenous peoples' perspectives and activism. For localised 'quiet activism' to truly be effective, I argue it *needs* First Nations peoples' perspectives. After all, in the context of the continent called 'Australia', localised 'quiet activism' has been undertaken for more than 65,000 years. This longevity makes Indigenous peoples the specialists in sustainability because those knowledges continue, not only in remote and regional areas, but also in the city.

As such, this paper firstly responds to the absence that the work of Steele, et al. (2021) presents. Aruna D'Souza (2018) uses the term 'whitewalling' (verb) in the title of her book for such absences, where topics or contexts extinguish Indigenous presence and voice, as if any colour or Indigeneity does not exist. Secondly, it draws in the role of 'whitewalling' as a perpetuation of colonising forces, their bureaucracies, and how insidious these practices are in the context of contesting extinction industries and transforming relationalities between humans and other-than-humans in the future. Finally, the paper offers an Indigenous response that speaks back and demonstrates the power of Indigenous local 'quiet activism'. It does so through the context of Dharug Ngurra, also known as 'Sydney, Australia'. Through 'quiet activism' creative interventions that articulate the courage of hope and actions for change are made.

### **‘Whitewalling’ localised ‘quiet activism’**

Firstly, it’s important to note, that calling out the absence of Indigenous examples of local quiet activism is not to fail to recognise the importance of drawing attention to examples of non-Indigenous localised effort. Such work is a significant addition to the discourse in the search for solutions to the malevolent negligence and lack of leadership by governments and bureaucracies in ‘Australia’, as they try to support extinction industries, such as globalised oil, gas, and coal sectors.

However, by leaving out Indigenous perspectives the silencing practices that have underpinned white European hegemony since colonisation are perpetuated. Continuing such a hegemonic ‘whitewalling’ continues the colonisation of First Nations’ presences, places and people (D’Souza 2018). Colonisation fosters mentalities and systems that privilege human-centricity – an approach that I argue underpins the warming of the planet by fostering unsustainable solutions that negate and make extinct other-than-humans. Thus, ‘whitewalling’, human-centricity and colonisation become entwined forces that perpetuate the demise of the Indigene and undermine sustainable wellbeing (Pugliese 2020). This paper, therefore, challenges the persistent silencing and exclusion of Indigenous perspectives, practices and caring by systems that only consider Euro-centric and more broadly human-centric positionality. In so doing, I argue, they continue colonised thinking and consumptive ‘Possessor’ practices (Pugliese 2020, Moreton-Robinson 2015). I call them ‘Possessed-Possessors’, being the agency that underpins continuing consumption of the Indigene.

### **Blaklighting localised quiet activisms on Dharug Ngurra**

The discourse on the importance of ‘quiet activism’ emphasises the threats that humanity and other-than humans are now facing based on the privilege given to human-centricity at the expense of the natural systems and bio-diversities in any given area, especially towns and cities. To frame this within an Australian context, according to the Australian Conservation Foundation report using figures from Ives, C. D., Lentini, P. E., Threlfall, C. et al. (2016), nearly 90% of Australia’s human population lives in its towns and cities (ACF 2020, 7). Towns and cities in Australia are where 25% of the nationally listed threatened plants are located and 46% of threatened animals are located (ACF 2020, 2). Thus, human-centric systems and urbanised areas are fundamental to the threat faced by other-than-humans. Additionally, according to Ward et al. (2019), across Australia, more than 7 million hectares of habitat have been destroyed by human beings (ACF 2020, 9). Given urbanisation is not simply an Australian issue, it is reasonable to recognise these imbalances can be globally extended. It is clear therefore that globalised ‘quiet activism’ must be located where the deepest problem lies and that is in urbanised areas across the globe. Recognising ‘localism’ as the parameter that underpins ‘quiet activism’ highlights a point of symbiosis with the approach that Indigenous

people have always maintained in their caring for Ngurra. Localism underpins custodian stewardship by communities as caring for Country within language groups. Thus, taking a turn towards Indigenous sustainable practices is to recognise the importance of a nuanced approach for sustainable futures. Global futures start with localised solutions. Given that Dharug Ngurra (aka Sydney, Australia) represents one of the most urbanised areas in Australia (geographically and by human population), it is logical that 'quiet activism' being undertaken by Dharug traditional custodians is a site from which others can gain insights and opportunities from which to contextualise their own areas of connection, caring and belonging.

### **Nuancing the solutions - a woven Dharug approach**

Ever since Dharug Ngurra (aka Sydney, Australia) was colonised in 1788, traditional custodians have had to take a nuanced, quiet approach for survival. I call it 'Goanna walking' with footsteps on the left (Dharug cultural way) and footsteps on the right (bureaucratic, institutional white-Anglo way) (Rey and Harrison 2018). It requires walking between people, presences, and places and just like a Goanna's track in the sand, the trailing tail/tale shows there are no straight lines between the footsteps. With the arrival of the First Fleet ships in 1788 and the smallpox pandemic just one year after, Dharug community and their neighbours have known their lives and futures have been under threat. Similarly, as has been shown above, the other-than-humans of Dharug Ngurra have also, and continue to be, under threat.

The strategic response can be summarised as "keep your head down and survive". Up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century simply speaking Dharug language in public would get you thrown in jail for a few days ('Ringtail Possum', Rey 2019). As the area with the longest experience of colonisation, Dharug and their neighbours had to learn early to have strategic, localised responses. As such, 'quiet activism' is a system that has facilitated survival. How? By systematically providing sustainable practices that foster resilience and wellbeing that provide strength and continuity over a long period of time. In a human-centric model, it is known that human populations need to be resilient, that is, they need to be able to have the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties, if they are to be sustainable. Further, for such a resilience a sense of wellbeing is required. Similarly, for other-than-humans, sustainability requires the same conditions of wellbeing and resilience to be able to continue over a period of time. As it has always been recognised that humans not only receive from and depend on Ngurra, it has also been recognised that humans must offer reciprocity, that is, they must support the wellbeing of Ngurra, for the resilience of Ngurra, for the sustainability of Ngurra.

A sustainable strategy, therefore, requires reciprocity. Across 234 years, this has been extremely difficult, requiring constant transitioning as access to food resources, places of sacred ceremony, language and community were subjugated. Thus, sustainable strategies took culture indoors, into domestic spaces, where language and storying continued, as well as

outdoors in family groups so that connections to presences, places, and people could quietly continue.

Over time, when whiteness was so embedded as the controlling agency, when the Possessed-Possessor felt so safe, having removed the existence of Dharug peoples and their neighbours from the general population's consciousness through the education system, 'loud activism' through protest marches produced some recognition that the dire circumstances of Indigenous peoples generally was necessary. Those 'loud protests' in Redfern and other places tested that strength, especially as many Indigenous people were coming to the city looking for work and searching for a place of cultural belonging after being removed as children. This process is commonly referred to as the 'Stolen Generations' (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997). However, with typical consumption ambitions and practices, those efforts of 'loud activism' resulted in many being consumed into government Indigenous bureaucracies, which in turn consumed Indigenous workers as they were compromised by the need for employment and housing and health services (Foley 2007; Foley and Read 2020). Understanding how this created a re-colonisation process is critical to showing how 'quiet activism' is the resultant next step in the path of 'Goanna walking'.

While there are many examples of 'quiet activism' on Dharug Ngunna over the last twenty years, this paper focuses on traditional custodians undertaking this process through three sites. Together they provide a path from the foot of the Blue Mountains, with cultural education camps and a cool-fire Indigenous burn at Shaw's Creek, on the western edge of the metropolitan area, to the heart of the Cumberland Plain at the site of the Blacktown Native Institution, now called Oakhurst. The path then leads almost to the harbour, at Brown's Waterhole, in the upper section of the Lane Cove River, within the Lane Cove National Park. Each site and the associated 'quiet activism' connected there will be outlined, for the purpose of demonstrating Dharug resilience, wellbeing, and sustainability, for both humans and Ngunna. Each of these sites enacts the web of Interrelatedness (Fig. 1) that involves connecting, caring and belonging to presences, places and cultural practices (Rey 2019).

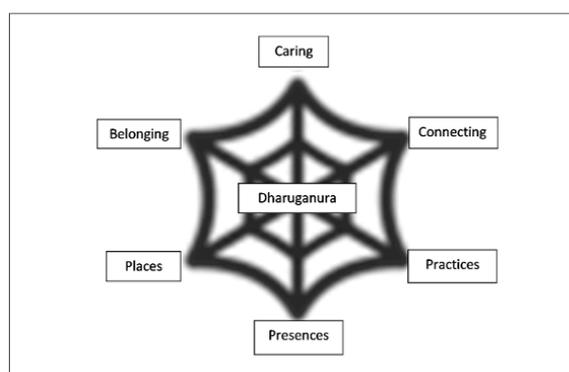


Fig. 1: Dharug Web of Interrelatedness Image: 2019, 318

## Getting on with it: doing Dharug activism

### 1) Shaw's Creek Aboriginal Place – Activating Connecting, Caring, and Healing

Dharug-led 'quiet activism' has been undertaken at Shaw's Creek Aboriginal Place in a variety of ways. These include educational culture camps, which involve both Dharug community members, school groups and academic researchers. Under the auspices of '*yanama budyari gumada*' (to walk with good spirit), education and research have brought people together (Dharug and non-Indigenous) to implement intercultural caring for Country that recognises entangled connectivities and ways of engaging healing practices (Ngurra et al. 2019, 280). As such, strengthening cultural knowledges, activating, and growing wellbeing through experiential engagement on Ngurra concomitantly strengthens resilience for humans and other-than-humans, while producing opportunities for sustainable futures.

Additionally, caring-as Country at Shaw's Creek has been enacted through Indigenous cool-fire burn activations. However, a close examination of the governmental account, through the Australian Government National Land Care Program website, shows persistent privilege given to bureaucratic promotion and collaboration, and merely reluctant acknowledgement of the benefit gained from Dharug custodial participation (Australian Government 2021).

The final paragraph on this webpage opens with a note of optimism, yet quickly descends into bureaucratic authoritarianism. The Possessed-Possessor must always take control and inflict its power of subjugation. From a Dharug perspective, statements about "the land owner, manager, and funding provider" can retraumatise community grief, in relation to the fact that Dharug sovereignty and land ownership remains at the behest of the coloniser.

Through the implementation of this program there has been an opportunity for cross cultural exchange and relationship building, not only with each other but with the landowner, manager and the funding provider, Greater Sydney Local Land Services. The NPWS of the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) *agreed to allow* [my emphasis] this on-ground burning program to take place on a site in the Yellomundee National Park. Key elements for this project included: reconnecting people back to country, maintaining interest and diversity in voluntary bush regeneration on the site, capacity building, knowledge transference and intergenerational exchange, combining traditional knowledge with science.

For this Dharug community member, reading this takes me back to the time when Governor Lachlan Macquarie was establishing the Native Institutions, the Governor was issuing declarations of power over the landscapes of Dharug Ngurra and cold observations and judgements were being made *about* Indigenous people. To simply list the elements of the cultural burning reflects no relationship, thus is devoid of relationality which is at the heart of Indigenous Law. There is no sense of relationship to these events, to the people involved, the place, its presence or its storying. And yet, the quiet activism of community opened a doorway, set a precedent and allows us now to argue that this has happened once, so it can happen again. Our hope for resilience, our hope for wellbeing, our hope for sustainability relies on the future. Let's hope!

This paper now takes a turn and we will go to the second site of quiet activism, that of the Blacktown Native Institution at Oakhurst in the Cumberland Plain of the western Sydney metropolis. This is not about cultural fire. This is about getting physical possession of some of our stolen Country: the land – getting our land back and regenerating it, our culture, our connections and caring.

## *2) Blacktown Native Institution (BNI) - Activating Cultural Agency*

The Blacktown Native Institution is the second site selected for inclusion in the MUFIR research project (2020). It was selected because of its colonial history and because my three times great grandmother, Ann Randall was placed there by 'Fanny', her mother (Frances Randall, the child of the partnership between Dharug Kitty, and Black African First Fleet convict John Randall). Uncovering this heritage led directly to my own involvement in seeing the return of the Blacktown Native Institution site returned to Dharug community. The final iteration (after generations had previously strived) of this effort took five years of negotiation with one of the agencies of the 'Possessed-Possessor'. Between the direct ancestral heritage, the years of 'quiet activism' of which I was a part and the poor condition in which She was returned to community, the BNI site was selected as the second site for the MUFIR project (2020) and for this account of 'quiet activism' on Dharug Ngurra-as-Sydney, Australia.

Dharug Country was consumed by the 'Possessed-Possessor' from 1788. Steadily over two centuries, Dharug Ngurra has been settler-consumed: residential block after residential block. Developers and capitalists have also consumed Her: commercial block after commercial block. Our Ancestral places, presences and practices have been disregarded, dishonoured, and devastated. Industrialists have poisoned and consumed the waterways, the forests, the animals, the life of Dharug Ngurra, for the sake of 'progress' and 'civilization' and the 'Industrial Revolution'. Human beings have carved across Her face, extracted from Her belly and inserted toxic industrialised objects into Her skin and waters, killing off Her landscapes, Her flora and fauna and Her custodians. But we, the Dharug custodians, survived through strategic sustainable practices and some of the Indigenous other-than-humans have done likewise.

Between 1810-1821 Governor Lachlan Macquarie, after whom Macquarie University is named, ordered the take-over of places, the killing of people, the destruction of families and the terrorization of the first human inhabitants of the majority of what is called the Sydney basin today, as his ambition drove the change from a convict penal settlement to a British colony (Karskens 2010). He was not alone. The emancipated convicts and immigrant settlers enacted his ambitions and their own. Towns such as Windsor, Richmond, Castlereagh, Pitt Town, and Wilberforce were all commenced in 1810, the year of his arrival (Karskens 2020). Four years later, he established the Parramatta Native Institution (PNI), which was later followed in 1823 by the Blacktown Native Institution (BNI), following the demise of the PNI when Dharug families refused to allow their children to attend (Brook and Kohen 1991, Norman-Hill 2019). The BNI

itself was disbanded in 1829, once again a failure, but not before children died, families were broken, language desiccated and desecrated.

The site of the BNI sits on the corner of Rooty Hill Road North and Richmond Road. The site was chosen as it was proximate to the land grant, returned to Nurragingy and Colebee by Macquarie in 1819. This land grant was as a reward for “‘fidelity to Government and their recent good conduct’ as native guides and, significantly, ‘to have and to hold forever’” (Norman 2015).

The choice by Nurragingy to select that particular site is strategically linked to the area of land today known as Stonecutter’s Ridge. So-named as it was the place for sourcing silcrete and other stones important for making tools. Such a site has been subject to important archaeological investigation, with nearby burial sites and evidence of continuing connection to the vicinity (Munt and Owen, 2022). The BNI site is within 500 metres of this land grant and sacred place. Proximate to both was also the site of gathering of many Dharug who were surviving the onslaught of colonial-settlement and Macquarie’s governance and take-over.

Ever since this land grant site was confiscated by the Aboriginal Protection Board in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century from the descendants of Nurragingy and Colebee, generations of Dharug have been trying to see the restitution of the land, which Macquarie has stated was for Dharug ‘to have and to hold forever’ (Norman 2015). In 2012, it was placed on the State Heritage Register (Norman 2015). While local government bureaucracy has provided land for the so-called ‘Nurragingy Reserve’ (though not located on the actual land grant site) managed by the Local Blacktown Council, on the one hand, another NSW government bureaucracy, the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE), went ahead with building the suburb named Colebee neighbouring the Oakhurst golf course, both established over the top of Stonecutters Ridge, against much Dharug community protest. Current research findings within this MUFIR project suggest that doing so impacted all 22 sites recognised as having Aboriginal artefacts, being thousands of years old. Although the hand back (October 13, 2018) realised Dharug community holding legal title to the BNI site through the Trusteeship of the Dharug Strategic Management Group (2020), activation did not simply commence then. Transgenerational effort by Dharug community to see its return is a legacy of ‘quiet activism’ that makes evident the continued presence, connections and relationality with Ngurra by Dharug people (Rey 2021).

Indigenous artist’s camps have been engaging in quiet activism and activation on the site for several years beforehand. Across 2014-15, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) held a series of artists’ camps that included Dharug and other Indigenous artists activating culture, art, music, ceremony and dance on the site. The two Artist Camps were held in November 2014 and March 2015 and a Corroboree celebration was also held in November 2015 (MCA 2021).

In 2021 and currently, ‘quiet activism’ at the BNI site and through Dharug Ngurra is being undertaken within the research project through the Macquarie University Fellowship for Indigenous Research (MUFIR). Yarning with Dharug Elders who have a long connection with the site across generations is being undertaken. Additionally, regeneration of the riparian areas along Bells Creek is also anticipated at the time of writing. Such an activation will bring community together to plan and undertake the work. Regeneration, while healing Country through the site and the creek, strengthens cultural connections, caring and belonging and enacts the Dharug Web of Interrelationships that Rey’s (2019) research recognised (see Fig. 1 above).

### 3) *Brown’s Waterhole (BWH) – Activating Quiet Presences, Places, People and Practices*

The third place of ‘quiet activism’, the BWH, brings together the presences, places and people by enacting Dharug connections, caring and belonging. As such this also provides evidence that the Web of Interrelationships (Fig. 1 above) that is at the heart of continuing Indigenous cultures broadly and, specifically on Dharug Ngurra, is providing agency and activation. It is also the third site within the MUFIR research project (2020).

There are several reasons why the BWH site was selected for research. Geographically, it was specifically selected because it is physically directly down the hill from Macquarie University, making it accessible for potential teaching and learning activism, that can be centred on Dharug Ngurra, Her ontologies and epistemologies. As Dharug Ngurra is Country-as-Sydney that suffers through colonising urbanization, pollution, and disrespect, finding ways to turn-around practices that have been embedded by colonising education bureaucracies requires changing educational practices and priorities. Bringing students to an awareness of relationships with Ngurra requires experiential educational practices. It recognises the interplay between western cultural systems that dominate in the city and traditional custodians’ practices of care and nurturing as Country that continues the fight for survival as Dharug Ngurra.

Secondly, the ‘Brown’ of Brown’s Waterhole (BWH) is a convict Ancestor who married Frances Randall, from whom I am descended and connected to Dharug community. The latter being the same Ancestor who was the mother of one of the first seven children placed in the BNI (as mentioned in the BNI section above).

The third reason for selecting the BWH site is Her location in the Lane Cove National Park (LCNP). She functions today in many cases as simply a place to pass by, as people walk, or cycle past Her at breakneck speed. She is also a neglected place, stuck between three local Council bureaucracies (Ryde, Hornsby and Kuringai). From Her appearance, the BWH and surrounds seem ignored, perhaps easily overlooked as another bureaucracy’s responsibility, that of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). Her role, however, goes way before colonisation. Her role as a waterhole recognises Her as connected with the Dreaming and Songlines. She has always been a meeting place. On one bank, the north-eastern side of

the *Turrumburra* (Lane Cove River), She met with Turrumburragal, the freshwater people of the area. On the south-western bank, She meets with the saltwater Wallumattagal people, those of the Black Snapper fish. BWH is found in the freshwater part. Her continuity is realized also through the Aboriginal Presences that remain engraved in her sandstone nearby. Additionally, She is a part of an ecological refuge, being within the LCNP, her Presences include a wide variety of threatened and local other-than-humans (NSW Department of Environment and Conservation National Parks and Wildlife Service 2006). Together we all co-become agentic Ngurra (Ngurra et al. 2019).

As such, BWH is a ‘third place’ (not just a third site for the research). She is that interface (Nakata 2007) between western, bureaucratic, colonising, and disrespectful ‘modernity’, the place and context of the human-centric ‘Possessed-Possessors’ and our other-than-human agency, on which we depend. Rey recognised and identified this ‘third place’ in her doctoral journey as ‘Goanna Walking’ (Bhabha, 1990, Dudgeon 2006, Rey and Harrison 2018, Rey 2019). There, in the ‘third place’, walking between the mentalities of ‘Possessed-Possessor’ and understandings of co-becoming as Ngurra, it is argued, transformation, as critical reflexivity, can be found; there resilience, regeneration and sustainability can be found.

Following Moffatt, Ryan, and Barton (2016) reflexivity is defined as the mediations and adaptations between our inner and outer circumstances involving responsive action within context. According to Kelly and Neale (2020, 60-61), this is the place of the ‘third archive’ between western ‘salvage’ mentality towards preserving Aboriginal knowledges and the Aboriginal activation of our cultural continuity.

While Country is an archive of ancestral actions, the full extent of the archive can be accessed and worked only by the custodians with the knowledge and authority to do so. As with all archives, the archivist doesn’t just guard the archive: they interpret and add to it, engaging creatively with it to keep it alive, or to keep its knowledge relevant and active in the present. For the Aboriginal archivist [...] They are effectively present-day incarnations of their archive. (Kelly and Neale 2020, 60-61)

As such, working with Dharug Ngurra, across the three sites, is to work with the incarnations of our archive. Doing so involves critical reflexivity, critical reflection, activisms, and creativity and together we co-become in the experiential, doing-learning, between the binaries that are the agency of change. I argue that it is here, in this doing-learning that provokes critical reflexivity, that the decolonisation process takes place.

Following Larsen and Johnson (2017), therefore, it is argued here that agentic change in Country-as-city is enacted in the specificities, the localities, and the “down in the dirt” of messy place, interacting with the presences, and the webs of connections in which both colonisation and its antithesis, decolonisation, occur. Where relationships with localised presences (human-other-than-human), places (human-other-than-human) and practices (human-other-than-human) are entwined, and where opportunity for change occurs.

It is here at the BWH that Dharug ‘quiet activism’ as ‘doing-learning’ in proximate relation to the Macquarie University and the relevant bureaucracies, is happening, as a decolonisation quiet activism.

### ‘Doing-learning’ – ‘quiet activism’ as a praxis for decolonisation

Decolonisation, through recognition of Country as the Indigenous archive, is being engaged within a first-year undergraduate Indigenous Studies unit (ABST1020: *Dharug Country: Presences, Places and People*) at Macquarie University, in the Dharug clan area of the Wallumattagal – the people and place of the Wallumai (Black Snapper fish). Through in-situ, out on Country experiential learning that is broadly self-selected, students meet Ngurra: Her presences, places, and people, through Indigenous (Dharug) protocols. These include the acknowledgement of other-than-human presences resident in that place. Cultural protocols require our respect. So, when we enter other-than-humans’ places (including Ancestors), we are entering their abodes, their places of belonging, connection, and caring. Just as we would when we go to visit another’s house, we don’t barge in. Instead, we knock, make our presence known and we ask permission to enter. This simple practice brings us into an equitable relationship with the other-than-humans there. We are not positioned as superior. We practice our humility and recognise our interdependence with the ecologies around us and within us.

Having asked permission to enter, we wait, listen and engage our senses. We transform ourselves from cognitive-dominant beings to multi-sensory beings. It also makes us “attentively present”, a term Val Plumwood engaged (Rose 2013). We relate and with this relationality we co-become. If we are fortunate, we recognise ourselves as being a part of Ngurra’s archive, the living continuity of text through place, in harmony with the agency and activism that is life (Kelly and Neale 2020). We understand ourselves as Ngurra and more-than-human (Ngurra et al. 2019). In so doing, students are not ‘positioned’, but position themselves through the process. It is within the specificities of their experience that individuals can find transformation and change agency. They can be reflexive. Every situated learning context becomes an opportunity for agency through choices and reflections. So, through the web of interconnections, over time relationships can also transform and decolonisation is activated. Over the two and a half years since the unit began, more than 200 students have awoken to their relationship with Ngurra, activating their sense of connection, caring and belonging to the Presences, place and people of Ngurra as they become familiar with the agency that She has on them.

A second form of doing-learning is also currently being undertaken through the MUFIR research project. It is through the proposition that the BWH site opens the opportunity for a Dharug-led ‘cool-fire’ cultural burn that deep reflexivity and quiet activism can lead to profound change given the current climate-challenging contingencies. The context since the summer

megafires of 2019-2020 has brought the realization that the relevant bureaucracies cannot continue down the path they have followed in the last 232 years. As such, recognising that the First Peoples of this continent have been sustainably engaging with gentle fire for healing purposes, as caring for Country practices, for more than 65,000 years, is starting to become a familiar theme within NPWS and other government agencies. While other 'Possessed-Possessors' are undoubtedly still active, consuming the presences and places of Dharug Ngurra, nevertheless, perhaps they too are forced to pause, as they come to understand that in order to possess, they must have something worth possessing. When fire has ripped open the Country all around the city, it is only a matter of time, that megafires will reach within the urban-scapes and. when that happens, the multiple billions of assets that underpin the Possessed-Possessors' own presence will be destroyed.

As such, now the Possessed-Possessor is quiet, having to listen and watch, as the quiet activism of Dharug community, led in this instance by Dharug women, work towards undertaking the first cultural, 'cool-fire' burn close to the inner-urban business district of Macquarie Park, the Macquarie University itself, Macquarie Hospital, and residential housing areas. It is in this complex setting within the Lane Cove National Park, at Brown's Waterhole, such an historic attempt is proposed.

Unlike a western 'hazard reduction' burn, this is a gentle, relational process using fire to engage the animals, to protect their habitats, to 'clean up' the weeds and colonising urban invasive plants. Across 2022 and 2023 a collaboration and activation is anticipated, involving the people and stakeholders connected and caring for and caring about the presences, places and people of the Lane Cove National Park inclusive of the Ancestral practices of reciprocity that underpin Aboriginal Law.

This will be the first time since 1788 that such practice has been engaged so close to the Sydney Harbour and the Warrane/Sydney Cove. It brings the opportunity for doing-learning, for critical reflexivity: critical reflection, experiential and contextualised creative learning through Ngurra. This acts as a precedent for other urbanised National Park areas, where protection of threatened species is so necessary. It brings change from relationship based on Possessed-Possession to a relationship with Ngurra based on respect and reciprocity. Ngurra can be seen, heard, and cared for through Indigenous relationality. Ngurra can provide sustainable futures for Indigenous leadership, employment, and cultural continuity, that can provide resilience and wellbeing for all sentient beings through our Law of reciprocity. Our storying can continue.

### **Looking ahead - not just a conclusion**

This paper has undertaken three tasks. It has argued that, in the context of climate changes and challenges, there must be responses that are inclusive of Indigenous People's voices,

values, and practices. It is no longer good enough for non-Indigenous researchers to make responses that leave out Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. In the face of climate threats, whether it be in the oceans, through the air, or across the landscapes, human beings can no longer ignore the webs of interconnectivity upon which they belong. They cannot continue to suck from the systems that provide balanced agency across diverse habitats. They can no longer privilege human-centricity that undermines and destroys the presences, places and ultimately the people's wellbeing, resilience and sustainability.

Secondly, it has talked back to the silence created by non-Indigenous researchers, bureaucrats, the corporations that are causing 'extinction industries', whether it be through fossil-fuel extractions, corporations that thrive on 'development' or globalising systems that produce narratives that enact and support continuing colonisation consumptions. This has been undertaken in the early phases of this paper in order to clarify and demonstrate the need for a different approach – one that puts localised, Country-centric, Indigenous-led, 'quiet activism' at the top of the list of choices for sustainable futures. In the process, it argues that more than 65,000 years of relationship based in reciprocity, interwoven caring for, with and as Country, and continuing cultural practices, provides a unique opportunity for humanity to respond sustainably for the wellbeing of futures.

Thirdly, using Dharug Ngurra (aka Sydney, Australia) as the site for demonstrating localised, Indigenous, 'quiet activism', it offers leadership to other Indigenous mobs, whose Countries have been turned into urbanised concrete megacities. Engaging three sites (Yallomundee, the Blacktown Native Institution and Brown's Waterhole), the paper has shown that local Dharug people – who are the traditional custodians of this area, who are the descendants from the First Peoples residing here for thousands of years before the "Possessed-Possessors" (also known as colonising consumers) descended – are 'quiet activators' who are leading the way in providing examples for sustainable futures, by following localised cultural Law.

They do this by activating local places and their presences: through culture camps, cool-fire burns, through storying, engaging in dance, weaving, and customary cultural relationships with other-than-humans; activating local knowledges: they are bringing together both written and oral storying, through Dharug language classes and putting Dharug language into workplaces, homes, and bureaucratic organisations. Activating local caring is strengthening communities, as cultural burning brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups. Such caring strengthens Ngurra and in the process strengthens communities as they come together, to share time together, to connect to the presences, places and people that underpin reciprocity, the backbone of Aboriginal Law. Strong communities produce strong families; strong families produce strong individuals – strong in caring, connecting and belonging. Together they provide ways of knowing, being and doing that quietly activate respectful

Presence, Place and People. Together, we have the web of Interconnectivity that is at the heart of sustainable resilience, wellbeing and futures.

Yanama budyari gumada,  
Walking with good spirit.

## Notes

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