

Resistance, Resilience and Renewal: Sounds very Waradah to me

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Image: Waratah, Darling Causeway – J. Rey (2015)

Abstract

In 2019, climate-changing Ngurra (Country) wrought havoc on many human constructions: property, businesses, and workplaces, through physical activations such as mega-fires, cyclonic-floods, and drought. Lives were challenged, shattered, and sometimes extinguished. Now, in 2020, Ngurra is also wreaking havoc across human relationships and minds: through viral activations. In the presence of COVID-19 the “climate” on Dharug Ngurra is changing. From stable, accommodating, and negotiable conditions, where futures were figured as feasible and substantially secure, in this viral context Ngurra now presents as a place of checking, surveillance, and lockdown, where fear, threats and denials dominate daily existence, and relationships are fraught with dis-connection. In the process some lives, livelihoods, and minds are being challenged, shattered, and, sometimes, extinguished.

For Dharug and other Aboriginal peoples, the question arises: are we experiencing colonization in a different, other-than-human form? One reminiscent of the 1789 invasion of smallpox on Dharug Ngurra, spreading like settler-colonial invasions of the late 18th and 19th centuries across the continent. Is Ngurra taking back Country? Can Dharug and others maintain sustainable relationships with presences, places, and practices in order to maintain resilience, renewal, and regeneration in such a context?

This paper considers these complexities, as experienced through this researcher’s context: living alone, in the post-65, “susceptible”, age bracket, attempting to teach online undergraduate students about core cultural caring-as-Country relationships, premised on experiential pedagogy, while simultaneously envisioning and planning a post-doctoral research project that hinges on being ‘out on Country’, place-activations, and relationships with Ngurra. Sounds very Waradah to me.

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Introducing COVID in Sydney

In Dharug culture, the Waradah (Waratah) is a symbol of resistance, resilience, and renewal. In the image above, one such presence sits in glory against the backdrop of burnt-out bush. Over 230 years, Dharug community and our Dharawal neighbours, have faced not only threats requiring resistance, resilience, and renewal, we have trans-generationally borne witness to and given testimony to the decimation of culture, language, practices, and lands. Across those generations Dharug have been keeping knowledges, connections, and the fundamentals of Law/Lore, often forced for survival reasons, alive within the relative safety of domestic spaces. Despite this form of “lockdown”, our resistance and resilience persist through our ontological belonging to our Nura (Country) (Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

In the summer of 2019-20, climate-changing Nura wrought havoc on many human activities. Physical activations such as mega- fires, cyclonic-floods, and drought challenged, shattered, and sometimes extinguished lives, businesses, and other productions. Then, in autumn 2020, Nura was also wreaking havoc across human beings, relationships, and minds: through viral activations. In the presence of COVID-19 the “climate” on Dharug Nura (most of Sydney, Australia) was changing dramatically. Change was the dominant operative. Realities altered from stable, accommodating, and negotiable conditions. Futures which were mostly figured as feasible and relatively secure, in this viral context, became insecure. Nura presented as a place of checking, surveillance, lockdown, and broken economies. Fear, threats, and denials dominated daily existence, and relationships were fraught with dis-connection. Places of business, sites of food access, exercise and social hangouts were barred. In the process, some lives, livelihoods, and minds were being challenged, shattered, and sometimes, extinguished.

By early winter, 2020, COVID-19 as an agentic presence, appeared less threatening for the majority, with case numbers stabilizing and lockdowns eased. However, this calming was temporary, as the impact of the spike in cases in the southern state of Victoria, resulted in strict border closures, that to many seemed interminable. Large numbers of people were impacted, and as Australia watched on, fears of further lockdowns in the future was felt a real possibility.

For this Dharug woman, and perhaps other Aboriginal peoples in the Sydney area, questions arose: were we experiencing colonisation in a different, other-than-human form? One reminiscent of the 1789 invasion of smallpox on Dharug Nura, spreading like settler-colonial invasions of the late 18th and 19th centuries across the continent? Has our sacred relationship of reciprocity with Nura become so broken by modern carelessness that humans are losing the balance? Can Dharug and others maintain sustainable relationships of caring with presences, places, and practices to maintain resilience, renewal, and regeneration in such a context? While the extremity of autumn seemed reduced, COVID-19's continuation as a presence remains and holds human's wellbeing in a precarious balance. As such, for myself and some other Dharug people, a resonance with colonisation, both human and biological, could be felt as people in 2020 went into "lockdown", wore masks, socially distanced, and kept to themselves. Memories and stories of such behaviours in earlier generations re-surfaced.

Another Colonisation?

If "lockdown" for COVID-19 means people stay indoors, wear masks, and keep their distance from others, then it could be said Dharug and other Aboriginal cultures have been forced into what could be considered a form of 'cultural lockdown' for generations, as they held remaining cultural knowledges, transgenerational storying, and languages behind closed doors, and wore "masks" of whiteness, as our skin lightened, both for personal safety and for the protection of

children (Rey, 2019).

Just like in the summer of 2019-2020, when multiple threats were tearing across presences, places, and people on Dharug Nura, the summer of 1788-1789, saw the multiple threats from colonisers: both human and other-than-human (in the form of smallpox). According to an early account from Woolawarre Bennelong, it was estimated around 50% of the Dharug-speaking people died as a result (Smith, 2013). From that disaster, the survivors came together in smaller groups for protection and as an act of resistance and resilience.

Today, we are reminded of the fears such a pandemic must have created in the minds of those remaining Dharug people, particularly the elderly, as they watched the world in which they had grown up change beyond belief. The mourning for the lost peoples, the lost practices, and forbidden places, and the physical fear created by both ill-health from an unseen force, and the domination, with later genocidal intent, of the colonisers (Tatz, 2017).

One of these colonial oppressors was Major General Governor Lachlan Macquarie, after who Macquarie University was named in the 1960s, a time before Aboriginal people were even given the right to vote. As a Dharug person I am reminded constantly of the deeds of Lachlan Macquarie. He was a British army officer and the Governor of NSW from 1810-1821. While the colonisers remember him with great fondness admiring his actions (Kieza, 2019). Dharug people remember him for ordering the massacres of our people at Appin. He then ordered others to be hung by their necks as examples to other Aboriginal people of what happens to recalcitrant Blacks – “to strike the survivors with the greater terror” (DSMG, 2020; “Historic Site Returned to Traditional Owners”, 2018; “Landcom Hands Back Land to Dharug People at Historic Event”, 2018). Watching these invaders instilling their rules and regulations and ways of

ownership across the landscape must have been horrendous.

While we have survived and adapted, the transgenerational storying we receive keeps the connections to those stories alive, as respectful memorial, so that they become presences across Nura today. Those memorials are the soil and fertilizer for the renewed blossoming of our Waradah resistance, resilience, and regeneration of Dharug community, our voices and our spirit, in spite of the ‘burnt’ backdrop of colonisation across Nura.

It was not until in the mid-to-late 20th century when many considered it relatively safe to ‘come out’ within the broader context of Aboriginal activism that blossomed across the continent, somewhat in line with Black American protest movements (Foley and Read, 2020).

Metaphorically speaking, for some Dharug, cultural ‘social distancing’ is still somewhat at play, as Dharug and other Aboriginal communities negotiate the complexities of continuing colonising bureaucratic power that blankets the pre-existing Law/Lore that was the sovereignty - interwoven political and geographical landscape - of Dharug Nura and her neighbours, prior to 1788. The historical legacy of colonisation and associated disruptions to family and kin, involved dispossession of traditional lands, prohibitions to traditional food sources, child removals, and mission-based upbringings (a practice and legacy generically known as an era of ‘the Stolen Generations’). Broken family and broader kin relationships resulted in disconnections which eventually led to many young Aboriginal people leaving the missions, coming to Dharug Nura seeking re-connection and work opportunities in the city (Foley & Read, 2020). In many cases the local Gadigal and nearby inner-city Dharug and Dharawal communities provided support and a collective activism arose demanding social justice and political response. Such activism, inciting resistance, resilience, and renewal sounds very

Waradah to me.

In response, State authorities responded to the ‘loudest voices’, rather than recognising traditional custodianship, traditional Law/Lore, involving the rights and obligations to care for Country that is still present across the broader metropolitan area and practiced within Dharug community. Local Land Councils, made up of the growing population of Aboriginal people from other places, were established and legitimised as State-endorsed bureaucracies for the purposes of undertaking and representing Aboriginal peoples in the Sydney metropolitan area. In the process, Dharug custodians were de-legitimised, and traditional custodians’ rights and obligations for a voice were silenced again (Foley & Read, 2020).

...or a Decolonisation?

However, it is not that we simply close our doors and ponder the past. Just like the COVID pandemic, as the wave of repression eases, so the context for Dharug community is changing, as the NSW government becomes more cognisant of the presence of the traditional custodians of the majority in the Sydney basin. The universalisation of ‘Aboriginal’ has given way to recognition of the diversity of groups, diversity of languages, diversity of Countries that make up the first peoples of this continent labelled ‘Aboriginal’. That blanket of ignorant repression is being slowly lifted.

More informed citizenry and bureaucracies recognise that the custodians of the majority of Sydney do exist, and this has allowed some respectful engagement with its local traditional custodians. This is evidenced by the return of the Blacktown Native Institution (BNI) site, to custodians, on 13th October, 2018, rather than to the Land Councils. As such, Dharug custodial voice is being heard. As the world faces the challenges of a climate impacted environment,

people question how caring for Country was undertaken for thousands of years. Working with custodians who have the stories of connection to the presences, places, and peoples of the Sydney basin, requires recognition of Dharug continuity and the re-negotiation of our Aboriginal cultural landscape across Dharug Nura. Like all other Aboriginal peoples across Australia, we insist on the recognition of traditional custodianship, along with the associated rights and responsibilities when Country is a city.

Today, we continue to walk between worlds, as we confront contemporary contingencies and narratives of domination, while searching for resilience and the wellbeing of our Community, our families, and our Nura. Moreton-Robinson (2015, p. 11), speaks of this adaptation as creating a doubleness whereby Indigenous subjects can “perform” whiteness while being Indigenous ... a subject position that can be thought of as fixed in its inalienable relation to land. This subject position cannot be erased by colonizing processes, which seek to position the Indigenous as object, inferior, other, and its origins are not tied to migration. In my doctoral thesis completed in 2019, *Country Tracking Voices: Dharug women's perspectives on presences, places and people*, positions this “doubleness” in other-than-human terms, as ‘Goanna Walking’ and I argue that given the spread of the earliest colonisation took place predominantly on Dharug Nura and Dharawal Country, the longevity of this process positions us as enacting “doubleness” and/or “Goanna Walking”, the most efficiently. Rather than recognising it as problematic, I argue it is a skill that can be deployed strategically for the benefit of Nura and Community. Arguably this approach was deployed by Dharug Kuradji Elder, Yarramundi, when he entered his daughter, Maria Locke, into Governor Lachlan Macquarie’s “civilisation” experiment at the Parramatta Native Institution in 1814. By attending the Institution, she was able to learn and utilise the literacies of the colonisers for the benefit, survival, and resilience of Dharug Nura and her peoples.

However, the BNI site is an example where such activism has resulted in real transformations, visible to all. Even though the foundations of the building only remain as physical archaeological artefacts, locked behind cyclone fencing due to remnant lead in the soil, its presence continues to transmit its storying of resistance, resilience, and renewal across generations in spite of children's lives lost there. The BNI site's transfer to Dharug custodianship (held in title by the Dharug Strategic Management Group (DSMG)) was the first time any Dharug territory has ever been returned since colonisation. As Andrew, et.al. (2019, p.37) note, recent art activations on the site, have enabled it to "become a living memorial to Australia's Stolen Generations and a site for renewed Darug cultural practice." As such it could be said the BNI site is our 'Waradah'.

In this spirit of activism – the resistance, resilience, and renewal of our Waradah - until COVID-19 over-ran us, I have been bringing cultural ways of engaging with Dharug Wallumattagal Country (generally speaking, Ryde area), to students within Macquarie University. This is undertaken through an experiential pedagogy that enacts Dharug and more broadly Indigenous ways of relating with Country, through Dharug cultural protocols, as an alternative praxis of knowing and being for the first time. As both a research and teaching university, Macquarie University encourages enquiry-based learning while simultaneously replicating an orthodoxy built into the physical structures required by a mass education system that is sourced in Anglo-European mentalities: their ways of knowing, being and doing. Those 'brick walls' (Blair, 2015) reconstruct and privilege certain relationships, while neglecting others. In the process they re-form Nura: physically, when new buildings are constructed, and metaphysically, through the networked understandings that affect, and effect, the millions of interrelated beings across Dharug Nura. These affects and effects (often neglected in daily urban life) include understandings about human inhabitants' responsibilities and relationships with the presences,

places and practices involved in caring for Nura, so that in turn Nura can care for us. What becomes overlooked is the relationship of reciprocity. As such, bringing non-Dharug humans into the ways of knowing and doing on Dharug Nura enacts a resistance, a persistence, a resilience, and a renewal that grows another iteration of Dharug and more broadly Aboriginal continuity, while establishing ethics of reciprocity in the minds of these inhabitants.

The resistance enacted prior to COVID-19 interruptions, in the teaching of the first-year Indigenous Studies unit at Macquarie University called *Dharug Country: Presences, Places and People* decomposes narratives of objectified separations, human-centric hierarchies, and detachments from our dependencies on other-than-humans. It involved students leaving their comfortable learning spaces behind desks, in classrooms, with teacher at the front. Instead, they were required to choose a Dharug site on Nura, from those readily available, and they were asked to engage with that site through Dharug protocols: ones which acknowledge in-situ ancestors, other-than-human beings, paying respect to our human dependency on these agencies, and self-reflecting on the impact of their time spent “out on Country”. Learning to engage through a Dharug Aboriginal cultural perspective, spending time in intimate relationship with places and their ecologies, building memories through their senses of connection, with the purpose of building a greater sense of belonging, is the basis of a pedagogy that is experiential. It includes a consciousness of the spiritual, diminishes the drive for materialism, and expands a sense that without our natural places we are lost – not just physically, but also emotionally and mentally.

This engagement acts to build relationship as a resistance to human-centricity, builds resilience (emotionally, physically, and mentally), while renewing deep connections that humans have with the landscapes that their ancestors across the planet always engaged in, no matter who,

where or when they lived. This deep nurturing encourages a caring for those places, their stories, which, when strong, enables communities to care for the continuity that Nura provides even when Dharug Nura is a cosmopolitan city. Supported by community members' perspectives (via videos), relevant readings around the colonising his-stories, and face-to-face yarnings, the unit opens students to the reflexive place of their engagement and relationships, their responsibilities towards caring for Country. This practice I call in Dharug language, Waradah Muru (Waratah Path), and it reflects the foundation of sustainability that has enabled Aboriginal peoples, presences, places, and practices across the Australian continent to not just survive, but to thrive. This interrelatedness I have described as a web of caring, connecting and belonging (Rey, 2019).

Once COVID-19 struck, suddenly going out on Country was forbidden. Lockdowns began. Within a fortnight adaptation had to be made. Rather than learning deeply through all the senses, students remained at their (home) desks, in front of their (home) computers, required to research websites *about* the places, the presences, the practices of Dharug peoples on Dharug Nura and read articles and book extracts that engage with the written knowledges, the his-stories, the geographies, the archaeologies, and the politics *about* Dharug Nura. Immediately students were challenged by the removal from the experienced knowledges, more challenged to find a connection, to grow a sense of belonging, with only an intermediary lens for relationship.

This was the power of COVID-19 over the unit, and over those students' learnings, and how their memories of this unit are not going to be as strong and intertwined with their spirit as those of the students who were able to engage with Nura previously. Perhaps one of the strongest learnings will be about the contrast these students experienced. While the majority of

the unit was affected by the lockdowns, the first two fortnights were COVID free, and so they did go out and get a taste of another way of learning, but against the previous possibility of seven thematic engagements, the residual memory is anticipated to be weaker. For those ‘attentively present’ for those two sessions, perhaps their relationships with places will be strengthened in any case (Rose, 2013).

As COVID descended, we worked from home, the sociality that underpins workplaces declined in a face to face manner. Yet humans are social beings, and it wasn’t long before zoom became a significant presence in our lives with z-offees, z-ot chocolates, and Friday 5.00 p.m. z-ines (zoom-wines) emerged. Anecdotally, for some younger workers once the original novelty wore off, they couldn’t wait to get back to the office, not having to mix workdays with child-caring, adolescent-management *and* dog-walking. Complications around how many computers can be used around a table at the same time, how much noise can be tolerated when concentration is required, and how many hours in meetings online can be undertaken with mental health maintained. Lockdown for COVID has engaged us as a very intrusive presence.

In the meantime, for others and me included, as COVID passed over us at home, we noticed how the congestion in the city evaporated. The air pollution disappeared. The stars at night became visible. The noise of industry faded. The rush and urgency of work as an “occupation” retired. For me, life was suddenly reminiscent of earlier times, during the 1950s and 1960s when you could count to 1000 between passing cars; when the birds in the trees became companions; when an aeroplane was an amazing sight; and when people actually looked forward to having a chat, as they walked the dog in the park – not as an obligation to be fitted in between the rush from work and the making of dinner. During this lockdown, there was time to reflect – on what we’ve lost (for many this includes jobs) and what we have become and co-

become as Nura. It challenges us to re-imagine our futures. For those still with jobs, work life became transformed to 'lifeworking' (Mitchell, 2016), where meaningful living and working are entwined, not separations of hours spent working for cash, and other hours spent as 'life'.

As this re-imagining time unfolded during the peak of the lockdown planning for a post-doctoral out-on-Country-in-the-city project became stuck in an uncertain hiatus. How would one engage with Nura if we weren't permitted to be out and about? How could Dharug yarning with community members in-situ bring to life the connections of Elders with their sites of significance over Zoom? How could caring for Country bring experiences of connection when collective participation couldn't happen? Relationships would be stuck in the COVID hiatus. While elements of return have seen us on Dharug Nura re-engaging with pre-COVID conditions, as we watched the lockdown of people in Naarm (Melbourne), Victoria, in nine towers of housing, we became aware that the continent called Australia cannot lock itself down and expect life to return to "normal". In fact, we are changing, and watching ourselves change in the process, as we renegotiate our relationships with not just the people around us, but with the places, and presences that we have taken for granted and neglected for so long. It's how we manage the changes that makes the difference.

Waradah Muru (Path)

I argue that resistance, resilience, and renewal, as symbolised by our Waradah, can be achieved through our conscious engagements with the presences, places and practices that Dharug community have engaged, and continue to do so, for sustainable futures. Colonisation by humans has forced resistance, resilience, and renewal through selective adaptation. An adaptation that entwines the values that have underpinned Aboriginal continuity for more than 65,000 years with the demands of modernity. That weaving offers opportunities for those who

are attentively present to the fundamentals of life: recognising our vulnerabilities, our dependence upon our ecologies, and balanced life. As we watch and/or experience the mega-fires of summer, the damaging floods, the scorching droughts, the trauma of our wildlife, and the lockdowns of pandemic, we are affected, and in that we are changed, we become and co-become more consciously. It is in our consciousness that we find our resistance, our resilience, and our renewal: our Waradah muru futures. *Yanama budyari gumada* (walking with good spirit).

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