An Ode to Mob Memory (For Nan)

Darcy Hytt

I wish I could remember my nan's face.

Here's what I remember: she had deep auburn hair, short and big like a halo glowing behind her. I can see pieces of her when I close my eyes, as I recall images from the one family video we ever had. The VHS was labelled 'Holiday Video', even though most of it was filmed at home or a nearby park or my uncle's house. He filled the tape with still shots of his Commodore.

There was some holiday on there. Just not mine. My uncle and sister had travelled to a woman and a place I have only ever touched by drawing blood. There are shots of them inside Nan's house, the one that lives in half-faded stories and manufactured memories somewhere behind my eyelids.

Back when people still spoke her, they would talk up the view from Nan's kitchen window. It was something you might find trapped in souvenir shop postcards—kin haphazardly disguised as the fruits of peaceful rescue and well-earned egalitarianism. I can see it.

I can see Nan and my sister in a museum, mouths agape in awe at the dinosaurs towering above them. I can see them in a park. I can see Nan holding my sister in her arms in her lounge room.

But I can't see Nan's face, no matter how hard I try. She is just out of reach. I can feel her brush past my fingertips, somewhere on the periphery. But I cannot grasp her.

A year or two later she was dead.

A year before she was dead, we would talk on the phone every night.

I don't remember what we talked about. I don't remember her voice. I don't even remember the calls. It's just a story I've heard repeated time and time again, with a familiarity that tells me it was once attached to a memory, but with a distance that means that when I try to focus on it, my brain just makes shit up in a desperate attempt to fill the gaps.

Over time, the differences between the memory, the story, and my efforts to bridge the in-between chasms become less and less clear. I do not know how much of it is real.

Even if I did know, could I write it down?

If I write Nan down, could I bring her back to me? Could I re-scrawl her into my memory? Clear the fog that clouds her face? Make her vivid again; lively?

I do not wish to bother her. I do not wish to selfishly snatch her back from home. I only

wish to hold the parts of her that never died. Not to take, but to go to. Not to claim, but to feel. To be with, to be as. She can never be forgotten by the breeze she breathed or the soil that she returned to, once beneath her nails.

But she could be forgotten by me. If I'm not careful.

*

In my later years of high school, once I was finally permitted to imagine making it past year 10, I naïvely dreamed of going to uni to, in part, learn about 'my culture'. I thought of Indigenous Studies as a breath of fresh air compared to the cultural void of primary and high school curricula. While I was conscious of the irony of needing to seek cultural knowledge within the confines of colonial higher education, I still understood it as some kind of liberation. I still understood myself as culturally deprived, begrudgingly accepting the academy as my saviour. I thought if I learned the inner workings of the colonial imagination, it would then bolster my efforts in undermining it. As if that wasn't already my lived reality.

This aspiration was admired and endorsed by mob and non-mob alike. For mob, this endorsement lauded relationality and reciprocity, while for non-mob, it amounted to the colonial rescue of a dying pillow. To know not to know, versus to long to know.

Colonial structures of knowledge maintain that by virtue of being Blak, I must be bereft—it led me to believe that I could never really be whole, that there would always be something missing. The colony produces and depends upon this sense of lack to manufacture a system of reliance.

Even in its failed attempts to genocide kin and Country, the irrevocable devastation of these efforts is undeniable. In the absence of eradication, the colony capitalises on the damage that has been done by imbuing mob with an unshakable sense of deficiency—a feeling it then wields as a weapon against us.

And so, we see manifest, among other sinister things, the great irony of mob being expected to be living, breathing Blak Fact Repositories. Our proficiency in this role, of course, is a measure of our legitimacy as Blackfullas. Responding to whitefullas' irrelevant and inappropriate questions with 'I don't know' invites all kinds of scepticism. What do you mean you *don't know* what this symbol means, this here Aboriginal Art Symbol that belongs to the Songlines of mobs from out central and western desert ways, far from any Country or kin you've ever known? How can you possibly *not know* the intimate details of how a particular

type of colonial violence shapes the lives of mob in this specific community that you have no relation to?

Sometimes, we're expected to regurgitate knowledge that was stolen from us by colonial violence; sometimes, it's business that was never ours to begin with. These interrogations reflect and fuel colonial narratives and expectations around knowing and authenticity.

Us mob aren't immune to these perceptions, either.

The colony instils a longing to know. It dangles the possibility of knowing what it has taken from us in our faces and tries to convince us that we can only ever reach our truths by subscribing to colonial ontoepistemological practices of knowledge re/production.

The desired outcome is that we depend on the colony to know ourselves. This is what an Indigenous Cultures and Histories major did for me. It attempted to indoctrinate me into a myth of Blak inadequacy.

And you know what? I reckon it could've succeeded if I wasn't surrounded by mob, those who knew better, and those who weren't afraid to tell me to pull my head in. Yawuru Professor Mick Dodson put it best when he said 'We have never really totally lost ourselves within the other's reality. We have never fallen into the hypnosis of believing that those representations were our essence.'[1] Mob may not be immune to colonial myths, but community continues to keep us grounded.

Mob knowledge protects us, just as we protect it.

*

In her unflinching text *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, Koenpul Quandamooka woman and Distinguished Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes: 'Knowledge is never innocent or neutral. It is a key to power and meaning. It is used to dominate and control.'[2]

The pursuit of knowledge has a long and continuing violent history in this colony. It operates in tandem with the need to memorialise extracted knowledge as inherent and indisputable through the written word. The weaponisation of knowledge and writing

[1] Dodson, Mick, 'The Wentworth Lecture: The end in the beginning, re(de)finding Aboriginality', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 1, p. 9.

[2] Moreton-Robinson, Aileen, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, University of Queensland Press, p. 93.

perpetuates ongoing epistemic violence, positioning the written word as the one true method of knowledge transmission to discern so-called ‘fact’ from ‘fiction’.

There are things that I have always known that I never knew I know because the colony would only permit me to long to know. But never to know. Never to know that I know. The colony assumes an unfounded entitlement to know, endeavouring to indiscriminately consume and devour knowledge. To usurp it. To own it. To assign it a certain morality. Colonial knowledge re/production practices frame the pursuit of knowledge as inherent. The knowledge it pursues is ascribed value only based on its legitimacy within a colonial epistemology.

There are things that I do not know and that I will never know because mob Law does not permit me to know. And that I must not assume to know. Because to assume to know is violence. Instead, we know not to know. We know that knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge is not benign or neutral, and that we are not always entitled to know. We know that acknowledging the limitations of our knowledge and the existence of other knowledges is the basis of relationality.

This is the balancing act that mob navigate: between our ways of knowing and our ways of being, and the colony’s ostensibly benign knowledge, its pursuit of knowledge, its means of transmitting knowledge, and its ways of coming to know.

According to the colony, I cannot know Nan. I cannot feel her breath move the air across my cheek as she speaks into the receiver. And when she left my side a thousand kilometres away, and I cried myself awake in the dead of night as I screamed for her not to go, hours before my parents got the call, that was not real. It was merely the lovechild of coincidence and grief. True God, ay.

What does it mean for me to trace Nan, trace our relations, carve them into the earth, using the sharp blade of the coloniser? What does it mean for me to wield the exact weapon I’m criticising to resist it?

*

Where the colony slips up, as it has time and time again, is in underestimating the power of mob sovereignty. And, look, you can’t really blame it, hey? How do you account for the unrelenting strength and persistence of something, when your whole schtick is insisting it doesn’t exist? You cannot kill what isn’t and never was.

Driftpile Cree poet and academic Billy-Ray Belcourt contends that to write Indigenous love and joy is to expose colonial knowledge of Indigeneity as myth. And to expose the seemingly benign, seemingly inherent colonial knowledge of Indigeneity as myth, is to reveal a means of escaping it.

As such the pernicious question of 'why write?' becomes a whole new beast for colonised storytellers. When we write, we take a weapon that has been used to try and eliminate us, our memory, and our knowing, to then turn it back on the colony. Re/claiming and re/appropriating the language and conceptualisations of the coloniser is an exercise in power and sovereignty. It is an assertion of our right to exist on our own grounds.

In *Talkin' Up*, Aileen Moreton-Robinson discusses what is inevitably lost in translation between mob self-articulation and white interpretation. She describes this as 'incommensurability', a term lent from cultural studies scholar Ien Ang, who defines it as 'the limits of and the partiality involved in all forms of communication and affiliation across lines of cultural division'.[3] Thus, Ang explains, incommensurability 'pertains to the residue of the irreducibly particular that cannot, ultimately, be shared'.[4]

Incommensurability guarantees that there will always be some degree of unbridgeable distance between how we as mob understand and express knowledge of ourselves, and how those around us understand and interpret us and our expressions. Yet incommensurability also affords mob knowledge some protection from the colonial gaze, regardless of how this knowing is transmitted.

In other words, merely writing mob relations, responsibilities, practices, and histories is not akin to co-signing their destruction. Our knowledge is not so fragile. The incommensurability of mob systems of knowing and being does not make them immune to epistemic violence. But the apparent elusiveness of our ontologies and epistemologies certainly helps them evade the clutches of the colony. We must be careful and follow cultural protocols when wielding this sharp instrument, as we know all too well the horrors it is capable of. The written word has hurt us many times before.

Yet, to shy away from the written word, to claim our use of it is assimilation, is to position Blakness as static and unchanging. It is to undermine the fact that we have had and continue to adapt to the changing conditions of tens of thousands of years on this earth. We can

---

[3] Ang, Ien, 'Comment on Felski's "The Doxa of Difference": The Uses of Incommensurability', *Signs*, vol. 23, vol. 1, pp. 57-64.

[4] Ibid, pp. 57-64.

sit with the contradictions that our current colonial, capitalist, white supremacist world presents, while also resisting it. We can find value and comfort in the written word as one of many—many!—methods of storytelling, knowledge transmission, and survival.

Blackfullas tower over this colony with the epigenetic, somatic, relational, and physical knowledge and presence of thousands of generations of kin, Country, culture, knowing, and being. Yugambeh writer Maddee Clark asserts that 'Indigenous sovereignty others the settler presence in Australia, and forces it to perform its identity over and over'.[5] In an environment where the continued operation of 'Australia' as a colonial project depends on its control over what we know, to what extent, how we come to know it, and the purpose this knowing serves, Blackfulla ontologies and epistemologies pose an ongoing threat.

The colony cannot take from us that which it cannot glean from our words. It cannot take that which is incommensurable, and thus unequivocally ours and ours alone.

And so, for me to write Nan is to only tell pieces of her, while the remainder stays at rest in a mob memory that the colony cannot taint, cannot access.

'Our memories are not chemicals in our heads, but our flesh and our voices and our ways of seeing.'[6]

*

As I sit here and write of the power of mob resistance and liberation through written storytelling and the inversion of colonial power dynamics, I notice I'm still consumed by the tendency to position myself as bereft. Still compelling myself to remember. Still burdening myself with the sole responsibility of returning what the colony has taken from me.

Navigating the colonial labyrinth reveals itself as a cycle. As soon as we are certain we've made it out of one maze, we discover it to be part of something even bigger—layers and layers of sticky colonial webs deployed to ensnare us at micro, macro and meso levels. This is the horror.

---

[5] Clark, Maddee, 'Are We Queer? Reflections on "Peopling the Mirror" Twenty Years On', *Colouring the Rainbow: Blak Queer and Trans Perspectives* (ed. D Hodge), Wakefield Press, p. 250.

[6] Dodson, Mick, 'The Wentworth Lecture: The end in the beginning, re(de)finding Aboriginality', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 1, p. 10.

In this essay, I was seeking to explore knowledge and the written word as a tool of colonial violence, investigating it within the context of colonised peoples preserving our knowledge and memory through writing. But I was also seeking to mend gaps in my own memory—gaps that bear the stench of the colonial apparatus. As if the absence of Nan's face within my mind's eye brought my identity as a Blackfulla into question, as if its presence would validate my mobhood, I managed to find new ways to reproduce colonial narratives of mob incompleteness.

But this is the reality of resistance, the reality of a colonised existence. It is messy and nonlinear, made up of mistakes and contradictions. The irony of me critiquing a gammin colonial system of education using some of the ideas it has taught me does not escape me. I mean, let's be real, I might not have made it past the first page of *Talkin Up'* without an Indigenous Cultures and Histories major, let alone reference it alongside words like 'ontology', 'epistemology', and 'incommensurability'. And, if I'm honest, I'm fucked if I know how to make sense of this tension. Mob been yarning up about this tension for years, we're still tryna figure it all out. And maybe one day we will.

But we also know we don't need to know.

On articulating queer Blak identities, Maddee Clark writes: 'We don't need to be able to construct ourselves in written historical accounts in order to consider ourselves real and whole'.[7] The colony will always find a way to problematise mob existence. It beckons us to live in hope that maybe, just maybe, the colony might accept us, if only we construct a pristine account of mobhood.

In the words of Munanjahli and South Sea Islander writer and academic Dr. Chelsea Watego, 'fuck hope, be sovereign'.[8] Our conceptualisations of ourselves and our worlds don't need to be faultless to be real. Our anti-colonial practice doesn't need to be airtight to be worth committing to. And this here is why I write. To fuck up (or not), and figure it out (or not), in an ongoing dialogue with and for mob.

*

'There are cavernous gaps in my memory in which people I love… don't exist'.

---

[7] Clark, Maddee, 'Are We Queer? Reflections on "Peopling the Mirror" Twenty Years On', *Colouring the Rainbow: Blak Queer and Trans Perspectives* (ed. D Hodge), Wakefield Press, p. 242.

[8] Watego, Chelsea, *Another Day in the Colony*, University of Queensland Press.

We may go in circles.

'Rather than let those gaps swallow me up, I plant flowers of all sorts there'.[9]

But we can also break them, reshape them, turn them into something new.

I will no longer chase the image of Nan's face. I will no longer seek out her memory as 'material out of which to make art'.[10] I do not need to dig Nan's face out from my memory to know it. I do not need to see it to feel it. To be it. As she is the dirt under her nails. As we are our Ancestors.

Nan, I breathe you each time my chest rises. Each time, I breathe (y/our) sovereign love and joy. I breathe (y/our) mob memory. I breathe (y/our) mob futurity.

No gub measure of time or distance or knowledge or death or existence can sever us.

We have never not been whole.

[9] Belcourt, Billy-Ray, *A History of My Brief Body*, University of Queensland Press, p. 19.

[10] Ibid, p. 24.