Evans (Dharug), Jennifer. "Can men weave baskets in Queer country?." *Indigenous Women's Voices: 20 Years on from Linda Tuhiwai Smith's* . By Linda Tuhiwai Smith. London: Zed Books, 2022. 33–50. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350237506.ch-002>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 13:50 UTC.

Copyright © Emma Lee and Jennifer Evans 2022. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Can men weave baskets in Queer country?

Jennifer Evans (Dharug)

Introduction: decolonizing *nokegerrr* and queering *lutruwita* country

In *lutruwita* country (Tasmania, Australia), *loonner* (women) are of the sea (Cameron 2016; Cockerill 2018; *tebrakunna* country & Lee 2017) and moon (Ryan 1996), and *panner* (men) are of the sun (Ryan 1996). The practice of *nokegerrr* (basket making) is considered women's business and symbolizes the traditional carrying of seascape resources and continuation of *pakana* culture (Gough 2009; TMAG 2009). The uniqueness of *loonner nokegerrr* has made *terri* (baskets) desirable objects. However, there is a new wave of colonization in *lutruwita* country, where arts and curatorial movements are co-opting *palawa*¹ culture to buttress their prestige and privileged status. Tensions exist between traditional gendered *loonner* cultural revival and the legitimacy of non-gendered sharing and learning of *nokegerrr* practices. This new wave of colonization can be viewed as what Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith refers to as the material consequences of colonization, where Western conceptions of gender, space and time are used to determine "what counts for real" (Smith 1999, p. 44).

Absent in the discourse of both revival streams is the concept of agency of *melythina* (country) and its role in gendered cultural practices. Country has its own agency and power, commanding ontological relations with place temporalities (Evans 2019; Graham 2009; Lee 2017; West 2000). *nokegerrr* is both an act of connecting to country and responding to the power of the agency of country. If country is non-gendered, and has its own agency, what boundaries apply to gendered cultural practices including *nokegerrr*? Smith (1999, p. 151)

¹ The term *palawa* is also used by some to refer to all Tasmanian Aboriginal people regardless of gender.

argues that “[g]endering indigenous debates, whether they are related to the politics of self-determination or the politics of the family, is concerned with issues arising from the relations between indigenous men and women that have come about through colonialism”. Therefore, explorations about the agency of *melythina* and its role in gendered cultural practices requires a decolonizing lens and methodology to “talk[ed] back to” (Smith 2012, p. ix) heteronormative settler conceptions of connections to country.

Queerness, as it relates to Indigenous identity politics in Australia, is centered on narratives around Sistagirls, Brothaboys and Blak Drag Queens (see Browning 2018; Burin 2016; Kerry 2017; Maxwell 2018), and their acceptance and access to cultural practices. This emphasis on identity politics, whilst being an important act of claiming Indigeneity, leaves unanswered questions relating to the potential theoretical construct of queering of country and how it may apply to agency of country. This raises the question of whether country may actually be gendered and, if so, does it command gendered cultural practices and can queer theory apply to agency of country? Can men weave baskets as a response to agency of country and if so, is this a decolonizing act of queering country? My questions challenge Western notions of country, as I follow Smith’s (1999) view that “space has been colonized”; “compartmentalised with absolute parameters, qualities (including gender), and possibilities, that are dominated by mathematical constructs” Smith (1999, p. 51). By opening up the narrative of queering country, I am reclaiming an Indigenous world view of the agency of country whilst challenging the distorted Western spatial image of country (Smith 1999).

I use the term “Blaq” when referring to myself only, as it allows me to self-determine my Queer Blak female body while decolonizing and reclaiming both the terms “Queer” and “Black”. I follow Ku Ku/Erb/Mer visual artist Destiny Deacon in her original creation of the term “Blak” as a “vehicle to express identity and subvert the racist notion that Aboriginal people are ‘black’, or rather are only identifiable as having ‘black’ skin” (Baylis 2015, p. 16). As I identify myself as “Blaq”, I do so whilst respectfully acknowledging that “BlaQ/BlaQueer” is used by “people of Black/African descent and/or from the African diaspora who recognize their Queerness/LGBTQIA+ identity as a salient identity attached to their Blackness and vice versa” (Petersen et al 2020, p. 3). Recently in Australia, the term “BlaQ/blaq” is being used by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQ+ people to define their identity (see Sullivan 2020), with hashtags such as “#blaqMobs #blaqAs #BQmob #BlaqOut” emerging in social media (see BlaQ 2021). When I use the term “Blaq” I am doing so in the context of belonging to my Queer Blak Aboriginal mob in Australia.

As a Queer Dharug woman with kinship connections with *palawa*, responding to the agency of *lutruwita* country, I use Indigenous methodologies to set the conditions for gay *palawa* men who dream of weaving baskets and developing their own *nokegerrr* practice. In this essay I problematize the question, “Can men weave baskets?” As I work through the problematic, I investigate the proposition of “what does country think about men weaving baskets?” by applying critical and political theory to country itself. My methodological approach is critical and reflexive (Nicholls 2009) and intersects Queerness and Indigeneity (Fotopoulou 2012). I use my own Blaq body and connection to *lutruwita* country and kinship with my gay brothers to investigate the key intellectual curiosities surrounding this question, by exercising my Indigeneity and culturally framed understanding of myself, others and country (Kunnie & Goduka 2006; O’Sullivan 2017). I do this carefully, recognizing that the hyphen in “self-other” is present as I approach this research as both an insider and outsider (Nicholls 2009; Smith 1999) and as I collaborate with *palawa* and *lutruwita* country to create this counter-colonial research. I am seeking out what priorities for research methodologies are required to tease out the tensions surrounding the prospects for the male practice of *nokegerrr*. As I decolonize the position that men cannot weave baskets, I am propositioning what we can expect under an Indigenous view as a response to and from country. I will use the term “club” as a metaphor for the research methodologies that I will apply. Country is a reflection of our body (Bawaka Country et al 2014; Evans 2019; Lee 2017) and thus I use clubs to reflect how our body works in country.

As I enter into this investigation, I pay respect to *nokegerrr* practitioners past and present. I do not hold a critical view of the cultural knowledge shared by others nor do I wish to offend those who hold the position that men cannot weave baskets. My intention is to respectfully explore the possible gender boundaries for *nokegerrr* practice as it relates to the agency of country. I am highlighting the tensions around gendered and non-gendered approaches to the *nokegerrr* practices not for the purpose of resolution, but to provide an alternative interpretation for the agency of country and how it might relate to cultural practice. I am concerned about individual acts of decolonization and the exercising of Indigeneity for people, not just Blaqness. My purpose is to place the power of cultural practice *in country, from country, of country* and away from colonized cultural institutions.

Before I commence my investigation, I wish to situate myself within Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s seminal work, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Like many Indigenous scholars before me, I embarked on an

academic career in my mid-forties, having proven that I could produce research within the expected Western scientific norms. Throughout my PhD journey, I had many questions that laid unanswered, such as “where am *I* in all of this, why can’t I find literature that explains and supports my findings, why do my supervisors have not much to say about Indigenous business, methodologies and knowledges, and why are the methodologies I have to use so limited?”. It wasn’t until I started being employed as a research fellow, when I had full academic freedom to seek what I knew was missing, that I found Linda’s work. Understanding the depth and breadth of what decolonizing methodologies are, and can give, became a watershed to how I conceptualized myself as a researcher and my research practice. I quickly found a deep meaning to my work, and a sense of agency which had been latent, waiting to be set free. Reading *palawa* Elder Uncle Jim Everett’s words referenced in Linda’s “twelve ways to be researched (colonized)” (Smith 1999, p. 102) gave me confidence in knowing that my place in the world has not been ignored and that I too can have a voice. Since then, I often return to Linda’s work for inspiration, finding new strength in my Indigenous and decolonizing research by “researching back” to the academy, and “recovering” myself (Smith 1999, p. 7) through deploying my own *Blaq* scholarly practice.

Background: genderization of *nokegerr* and country

For millennia, *nokegerr* practices have provided necessary vessels for carrying resources that are borne of country from the natural fibers produced (Gough 2009). Although temporarily interrupted by colonization via British invasion in 1803, *nokegerr* practices in *lutruwita* have been revived by *loonner*, and now “represent in themselves the carrying onward, the continuation of culture” (Gough 2009, p. 3). Like *lutruwita* country, the *nokegerr* weaving method is unique and uses an s-stich that is a mirror of the z-twist basket weaving technique used in other parts of Australia (Gough 2009). *loonner* are coming together to weave this unique stich again, to connect with the old people and have “restored to the hands of Tasmanian Aboriginal women, secure in the knowledge that they are the custodians and owners of this traditional practice” (Gorringe 2009, p. 39). Country determines cultural practices in *trouwunna*² (Cameron 2016) and can

² Some *palawa* prefer to use language for the place name of Tasmania as *trouwunna*, which is sourced from Plomley (1976), while others use *palawa kani* (TAC 2013), which is *lutruwita*. I respectfully use the term *lutruwita* whilst acknowledging that the name *trouwunna* is also used.

geographically confine practices via distribution of resources and is therefore an agent in creating and maintaining traditions. The act of *nokegerr* is a signal and connector to and from country, “weaving . . . identifies movements in the country or on the land . . . first discovering the plant, to then discovering more about my own people” (Frost 2009, p. 27).

Whilst *loonner* are reviving *nokegerr*, what is the certainty that it is exclusively women’s business and has always been so? Until recent times, the written accounts of basket making were singularly penned by non-Aboriginal males (Gough 2009). Historic accounts of gendered business in *lutruwita*, concentrated on *panner*, were prejudiced in colonial anthropography and subverted the economic, spiritual and socio-cultural contributions that *loonner* made (Cameron 1994). *lutruwita*, at that time, was like many other colonized places where “white men whose interactions with indigenous ‘societies’ or ‘peoples’ were constructed around their own cultural views of gender and sexuality” (Smith 1999, p. 8). French explorers (see Baudin 1754–1803; D’Entrecasteaux 1739–93, cited in Plomley 1983), British invaders (see Robinson 1829–1834, cited in Plomley 1987) and English missionaries (see Backhouse 1838) feminized basket making and ownership. Although they admired the high craft, observing its perceived value, documenting its construction and use and the *loonner* reluctance to trade the objects (Backhouse cited in Plomley 1987; Baudin [1802]1974), they did so through their colonizing eyes and androcentric view. *terri* became desirable objects; romanticized and sexualized as exotic feminine primitive curiosities, and accordingly were traded, stolen and acquired (Gough 2009). The connotation that basket making was “the work of the females” (Backhouse cited in Plomley 1987, p. 244) can also be inferred by the observation of the *loonner* market at Wybalenna from 1836 to 1838, where 30 *loonner* sold *terri* during their post-contact incarceration (Gough 2009). During this time, basket making on Flinders Island was one of a few government-endorsed cultural practices (Gough 2009). The insinuation that basket making was a women’s only business by virtue that only *loonner* were present dismisses the economic reality of post-contact production by the surviving women. This contested history is a reality for contemporary Indigenous communities, where their oral traditions and ways of knowing are disputed against colonizer accounts and culture is en-gendered and objectified (Smith 1999).

Cameron (2016) provides a refreshing antidote to the question of exclusive genderization of *nokegerr* practice: “Collection bags were woven out of fibrous plants . . . the women undertook many other roles . . . most of these tasks were undertaken by the women alone and were probably considered as being outside

the interest or ability of males”(Cameron 2016, p. 43). Cameron’s approach cuts through colonizing narratives, turns the purview away from an anthropological lens, makes space for the realities of *palawa* life and situates gender roles. *terri* have agency: “the baskets are not empty. They are full of makers, their stories, their thoughts while making. The baskets are never empty. All of the thoughts jump out of the baskets onto all of us” (Nichols 2009, Frontispiece, para. 1). Country is the power medium to which *nokegerr* practices and *terri* are a response to, and product of, and therefore are unaffected by perceived gender roles.

The relationships that country holds with Indigenous Peoples have been extensively documented and are multidimensional and complex (Ganesharajah 2009). Western scientific paradigms fail to explain the deep interconnectedness between and within life-forces that Indigenous knowledges provide (Graham 2009). “Many indigenous creation stories link people through genealogy to the land, to stars and other places in the universe, to birds and fish, animals, insects and plants. To be connected is to be whole” (Smith 1999, p. 148). Connection to country is often interpreted as human agency contextualized to place through ecological knowledges and is used as a trope for the biophilia hypothesis (Kingsley, Townsend & Hendersen-Wilson 2013). The biophilia hypothesis asserts that humans have an innate attachment to nature and its life forms (Wilson 1984). Discourses cover extensive terrain and grapple with the notion of connection to and understanding of country using human-nature theory, post-nature theory, posthumanism, kincentric ecology, Indigenism, Indigenous expressivism, eco-feminism, ecopluralism, Dreamings, connectivity, anti-colonial critiques and decolonizing methodologies (see Bawaka Country et al 2013, 2014, 2016; Bignall, Hemming & Rigney 2016; Curry 2008; Jaimes Guerrero 2003, 2004; Kingsley et al 2013; Lee 2017; McGrath 2015; Plumwood 2003, 2010; Rose 2000; Salmon 2000; Samson 2001; Weir 2012).

In contrast to the positivist and reductionist Western academic explanation of connection to country, Indigenous Peoples interpret and value the human and non-human forces of the world as interrelated and holistic (Champagne 2015). “Connecting is related to issues of identity and place, to spiritual relationships and community wellbeing” (Smith 1999, p. 149). The restoration of rituals and practices by people on their traditional lands can be healing (Smith 1999). Everett (2017, n.p.) describes the action of being connected to country from a *palawa* perspective as a matter of philosophy: “[it’s] very holistic; you’re connected with the total-ness of country, everything that makes up the universe that you know you live in; and they’re reciprocal . . . all the animals and the plants, the waterways, the seaways and the heavenly universe”.

Country can be understood beyond human–country dualisms and acknowledged as a life-force within its own right that has agency, co-created with humans (Bawaka Country et al 2013, 2014, 2016), “[it] is not a passive background but an active presence; it grows you up, teaches you, misses you, and calls to you” (Neidjie, Davis & Fox 1985; Rose, cited in Plumwood 2006, p. 127). In country relationships between human and nature, culture and species are entwined, emanating laws and practices (see Kinnane 2002; Langton 2002; Rose 1996, 2000; B.R. Smith 2005; Stanner 1979; Weir 2012). Country holds inscriptive and interpretive practices that are able to be retrieved from the landscape and are not constrained as binaries (Rumsey 1994). The metaphysics of country extend beyond such practices to a vast world-and-life view that has powerful agency able to elicit Dreamings, totemic geographies, embedded knowledges and non-linear deep time (see James 2015; McGrath & Jebb 2015; Moreton-Robinson 2003; Paton 2015; Rose 2000; Tonkinson 2011; Weir 2012) that can be independent from colonization.

Given that country is an entity with its own right having powerful agency, my interest lies on the question of the genderization of country and if country commands gendered cultural practices. There is gendered men’s and women’s business; for example, reproduction, anatomy, ceremonies, taboos, hunting, conflicts, access to country (Maher 1999; Robertson, Demosthenous & Demosthenous 2005; Rose 2000; Toussaint 2004) that provides distinct gendered social division. Country facilitates connections to the past, to ancestors, and triggers physical and emotional responses and determines cultural practices (Cameron 2016; Lehman 2006; Torpey Hurst 2015), some of which can vary between and within genders (see Breen & Summers 2006) and can be influenced by gendered sacred landscapes (Evans 2019; Liljeblad & Verschuuren 2019). Cultural practices that create cultural objects can embody a sense of gender roles (Lee in Cockerill 2018) and in *lutruwita* country; for example, shell necklace and basket weaving traditions are the domain of *loonner* (Greeno & Gough 2014; Nichols 2017; TMAG 2009). Although gendered country, men’s and women’s business and gendered cultural practices exist (some of which are traditional and some revived), there is a danger of taking an essentialist view of the genderization of country and cultural practices. Even though Indigenous Peoples perceive an alternative rendering of the use of essentialism relating to connection to country (Smith 1999), space must be given for decolonizing modes of recreation of culture. Cultural practices and customs impart knowledge of country when the holistic philosophy of connection to country is understood (Everett 2017).

Methodology: casting decolonizing clubs on country

As I decolonize the position that men cannot weave baskets in *lutruwita* country, I acknowledge that my own Blaq Dharug body responds to the power and agency of country in a way that may not conform to *palawa* norms. I recognize that the application of critical and political theory can be complex and contradictory (Smith 1999) and that the deconstruction of fixed notions of gender through queering may have implications for those where gender differences matter (Johnson & Hendersen 2005). As I apply critical and political theory to country and *nokegerrr* practice, I am decolonizing my mind through my methodology as an ethical, ontological and political exercise (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017). I am exercising my Indigeneity, self-determining how I identify as a Queer “First Person” and pursuing my culturally framed understanding of country and *nokegerrr* practice (Kunnie & Goduka 2006; O’Sullivan 2017). As I use an Indigenous methodology, supported by kinship and agency of country, to collaborate with *palawa* and *lutruwita*, I am facilitating culturally appropriate narratives (see Evans 2019; Verschuuren 2019) about Queer Indigenous identity. Through this decolonizing enquiry, I am reversing cultural metanarratives and deconstructing the cultural discourse (Arnold 2018) of *nokegerrr*, so as to grapple the problematic whilst respecting the position of *palawa* and myself in this research (Cariño 2005; Pulani Louis 2007).

In order to employ a decolonizing methodology to respond to the proposition that men cannot weave baskets, I will apply critical and political theory to country, whilst reflecting on the cultural safety of gay *palawa* men who desire developing their own *nokegerrr* practice. My enquiry is a wicked problem (see Brown, Harris & Russell 2010; Sheehan 2011) caught in the tensions between decolonizing aspirations for some to restore traditional roles, rights and responsibilities (Smith 1999) and others who wish to decolonize the Queer Native body and recover their specific tribal gender and sexuality (Clark 2015; Driskill 2010; Finley 2011). Wicked problems require multiple tools and perspectives to disentangle colonial foundational concepts and elucidate Indigenous values (see Brown et al 2010; Sheehan 2011). I will use “clubs” (critical and political theories) as tools to create perspective as I explore my proposition. In *lutruwita* country, *panner* and *loonner* use clubs to hunt, and thus it is an appropriate non-gendered metaphor.

Country is a reflection of our bodies (Bawaka Country et al 2014; Evans 2019; Lee 2017) and clubs reflect how our bodies work in country. My decolonizing

methodology involves testing what clubs may be used to frame up the proposition that men can weave baskets and, if so, can they be ranked in their applicability? As I use these clubs, I will align them as they may lie in country, as a method for teasing out decolonizing insights. It is important for me to reflect on the pluralism of country (see McGrath 2015; Rose 2000). Country has distance and perspective (see James 2015; Paton 2015); therefore, I need distance and perspective to answer the question. My methodology is about positive relations to country (see Kinnane 2002; Langton 2002; Rose 1996; B.R. Smith 2005) and using inclusive clubs to identify potential boundaries where colonization intersects with country. I am using my Blaq body as orientation for the clubs, and country as a mirror to both my body and the clubs. In addressing this wicked problem, I will cast the following clubs on country: queer theory, queer ecology, ecofeminism and nature conservation using my decolonizing and Indigenous methodologies.

There are many examples of ways in which the diverse Indigenous Peoples of the world use decolonizing methodologies to redress the colonizing effects on their sovereignty and Indigeneity. Decolonizing methodologies have been used to empirically investigate the effects of heteronormative and heteropatriarchy settler-colonialism on queer theory and queer politics (Greensmith & Giwa 2013). Decolonizing discourses on sexuality have been used to challenge heteropatriarchy and biopower by aligning Native and Queer studies (Finley 2011). Queer theory has been applied to extend understandings of colonialism and Indigenous sexualities in Australia (Clark 2015). Further, there has been an invitation for Native studies scholars to expand their work to integrate queer theory and to interrogate Queer and Queer of color critique, as it has the potential to unsettle settler-colonialism (Finley 2011; Smith 2010). Viewing country through a postcolonial lens, the expressivist philosophy of Ngarrindjeri Yannerumi or “speaking as country” has been operationalized to deliver nonhumanist nature conservation (Bignall et al 2016, p. 457). As country is “continually co-created by both human and non-human agents”, the application of more-than-human nature research can expand the conception of how country co-produces knowledge (Wright et al 2012, p. 39).

As I proceed into this enquiry I visualize my methodology as a form of weaving. I see the longitudinal threads of critical and political enquiry (warp) being tested and shaped by the weft of the clubs. The action of my weaving creates a mixed voice of academic enquiry and my reflexive Blaq body as I use the clubs to explore my playing field.

Results: queering the clubs and country

I now turn to my first club, queer theory, and cast it on country. Queer theory has been called out as needing reinvigoration to reclaim its potential to spark surprise (Halperin 2003). It is the role of queer theory to dislocate binaries of personhood, and value conceptual elasticity, whilst rejecting labeling philosophies and recognizing that language fails to definitively represent phenomena (Adams & Holman Jones 2008; Hird 2004; Nicholas 2006; Smith 2000; K. Watson 2005; Yep, Lovaas & Elia 2003). Queer theorists revel in symbolic disorder, pollute established social conventions and diffuse hegemonic categories and classifications (Baudrillard 2001; Haraway 2003). Simultaneously, queer theory revels in the political commitment required to deconstruct the natural and normal by focusing on how bodies may serve as sites of social change as they grapple with power systems (Kong, Mahoney & Plummer 2002; Smith 2003; Yep & Elia 2007; Yep et al 2003). Queer theory is a politic of transgression that is anti-foundationalist and working to oppose fixed identities (Alexander 2008; Baudrillard 2001). "Queer involves the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning (that occur) when constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick 1993, p. 8). Others extend queer theory to embrace Queer inhumanism: a process of dehumanization of self so as to reconstruct what it means to be human, a blurring of line between self and the other to open up myriads of alterities (Anzaldúa 2012; Luciano & Chen 2015; Stone 1991).

This club flies deep into country, ricocheting off established norms and shaking the foundations of cultural revival from a traditional viewpoint. It is difficult to see where this club will settle and eventually lie in country. On one hand, it speaks strongly to the notion of country as an entity that is non-binary, inclusive and inviting of human interactions that care for and acknowledge its power and interconnectedness. On the other hand, it wields a strong and noisy trajectory into what some would see as the heart of country: Indigenous identity. Perhaps this club lays on the margin between non-gendered Indigeneity and Indigenous identity underpinned by gendered cultural practices. This margin is a slippery one, the moving site of colonization where Blaqs chose this club to decolonize themselves either individually or collectively. However, this club opens up the interiority of country for possibilities for engagement, reciprocation and co-creation of agency. The queer theory club is a distinctive club, one that may work for some and not others, or one that may be chosen on the basis of

identity that is free from gender and sexuality. This club does not need to be colonized: it is already decolonizing by nature.

The second club that I will cast on country is queer ecology. Queer ecology aims to develop sexual politics and theory as a constructive corrective to redefine the intersections between sex and nature, where the influences of sexual relations, environmental politics and the natural world collide (Schnabel 2014; Seymour 2015). Queer ecologies can “bring unique insights on who or what expresses agency and counts as a subject” (Schnabel 2014, p. 11). Queer ecology pushes the boundaries on subject–object dichotomizations, strives for greater inclusion, and privileges discursive and linguistic notions of agency to the neglect of material relations and processes (Schnabel 2014). The hierarchy of humans over animals is challenged in queer ecology where “natureculture” is viewed as inseparable, therefore providing scope for subjectivity and agency formation (Schnabel 2014, p. 12). Further, queer ecology contests Western heteronormative subjectivities so as to express the potential queering of “natureculture” and its agency (see Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson 2010). In queer ecology, Queer identity is perceived as discursive; bringing unnecessary human action and identity into the landscape and conceptualizing and weighting human relations (Alaimo 2010; Schnabel 2014). The exploitation of Indigenous Peoples and the environment at the hands of heterosexually driven capitalism is critiqued in queer ecologies; followed by the corrective requirement for recognition of the important role Indigenous People have in addressing environmental change (Schnabel 2014; Sturgeon 2010; Unger 2010).

The queer ecology club is attracted to the openness of country and supports its agency and inclusion of others who may want to weave their own personal response to country. But this club is not interested in material relations, particularly gendered and/or cultural practices and may not be supportive of Queer identity on country. The queer ecology club may be deficient in human Indigeneity, weighted with strong interests in restorative aspects of nature conservation or conditional values that Indigenous People can bring to such restoration. This club also does not travel far in country and falls a little flat in its trajectory, as it does not have much power. The undervaluing and dismissal of cultural practice and identity inhibits this club, and does not provide the muscle required for it to fly in the wide-open possibilities that it has for country. However, the queer ecology club may be useful for those who are truly free in their Indigeneity and not concerned about gendered cultural practice. This club may work for those who are responding to the agency of country individually or with those who support them. This club works for the “free spirits” who may not

be concerned with cultural safety or require support to develop cultural practices as their identity is not creating a barrier for them. I am not sure that queer ecology club is one suitable for Blacks, as we have vested interests in country and identity. Although, country may be open to this club, if those that throw it can bring their own decolonizing power to it.

I will now cast my third club on to country, ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is feminist environmentalism: a philosophy that is concerned with the epistemologies that avoid dualistic divisions between human and non-human life whilst rejecting the commodification of biodiversity (Cannella & Manuelito 2008; Plumwood 1991). Concerned with the connection between women and nature, ecofeminism implicates Western enlightenment along with patriarchy and colonialism as culprits for the exploitation and plundering of nature and women (Shiva 1995; Wane & Chandler 2002). Contemporary ecofeminism investigates the deep conceptual divides between female/male, body/mind and spirit/matter to comprehend how gender contributes to the roles of culture and economics in ecological crises (Plumwood 2003). Within the ecofeminism discourse, there is a counter narrative (spiritual ecofeminism) that embraces Indigenous values such as “Mother Earth” where women are perceived as having closer bonds to Earth than men through their shared reproductive abilities (Wilson 2005). Critics argue that spiritual ecofeminism has appropriated Aboriginal culture and spirituality, therefore deepening the commodification and exploitation of Indigenous Peoples and their culture (Smith 1993, 1997; Wilson 2005). Ecofeminism is a contested philosophy.

Spiritual ecofeminists, who choose to embrace women and nature connections, disagree with social ecofeminists, who maintain a separation between woman/man/nature/culture and argue that these categorizations are social constructs that perpetuate the devaluation of women and nature (Wilson 2005). Ecofeminism also incorporates “native feminist spirituality” that combines Indigenism and ecofeminism. Native feminist spirituality advocates for native women’s cultural rights, challenges male-dominated tribal politics and supports native women to exercise their subjective agency and reclaim their historical matrilineal/matrifocal roles (Jaimes Guerrero 2003).

The ecofeminist club is complicated, contested and unbalanced. On a fundamental level, the calling out of colonization and its neoliberalist plundering of nature, cultures and women is a powerful aspect of this club. However, the ecofeminist club becomes problematic involving its disagreements relating to the woman/nature binary/non-binary and Indigenous misappropriation. Further, the native feminist spirituality aspect of this club may not be helpful to

Blaqs as their identity and desires to patriciate in specific cultural practices may be counter to historical revivalism of matriarchy. Although, this club may be useful if Indigenous matriarchies were agreeable to share cultural practices with those of other Indigenous gender identities. I am not sure if the ecofeminist club even gets air as it is unstable. Country may see this club as too humanistic, noisy and jarring in its incongruent interests.

The last club that I will cast on to country is nature conservation. Nature conservation is a broad philosophy and ecologically based movement that aims to conserve nature and biodiversity. As a political theory and ethic, it has disparate value sets that can range from biocentrism to anthropocentrism, and thus creates space and tension for the contestation of human/nature/culture interfaces. It is recognized that Indigenous Peoples hold an environmental ethic and philosophy that is Indigenous, and have different needs and abilities to conserve country and its biodiversity from those of colonists (Langton 2003; Nietschmann 1992). Caring for country, caring as country, and speaking as country are vital ethical actions for Indigenous People, where responsibilities and obligations to belong, co-become and love country continue to happen (see Bawaka Country et al 2013; Bignall et al 2016; James 2015; Rose 2000). The unique relationship and interactions that Indigenous Peoples have with country that enhance and preserve ecosystems have been theorized as “kincentric ecology”; a philosophy of traditional conservation (Salmon 2000, p. 1328). Kincentric ecology illuminates the interconnectedness between Indigenous People and their country, by extending and situating ecology and its ecosystem to include all life, ancestors, kin, nature and their interactions (Salmon 2000). Despite the recognition that Indigenous Peoples have philosophies and means to conserve country, mechanisms to conserve nature through protected area management continue to socially exclude and marginalize Indigenous Peoples worldwide, and are enabled by historic and perpetuating colonization (Colchester 2004). There is a strong critique of the failings of nature conservation to recognize and fully engage with Indigenous Peoples and our values. There are multiple discourses on the failings of global conservation institutions, conventions and movements to recognize post-colonial power relations that limit Indigenous agency (see Dowie 2009; Liljebald & Verschuuren 2019; Reimerson 2013). In *lutruwita* country, the politics of nature conservation are embedded in wilderness values and stubbornly adhere to human/nature dualisms and attempts to co-opt *palawa* and *palawa* cultural heritage in arguments for selective conservation efforts (see Evans 2016, 2019; Evans, Kirkpatrick & Bridle 2018; Lee 2015, 2016a, 2017).

The nature conservation club is divisive and conditional. If this club is thrown by Indigenous people, free of colonizers and colonizing agents, allowing the love for and from country to flourish, this club may work. Under the right protected area management and decolonizing conditions, this club may facilitate full Indigenous relations with country. However, the nature conservation club is silent in its answering of the question about cultural practice, its genderization, or the genderization of country. This club may not be of much use to Blaqs. Perhaps the kincentric ecology philosophy aspect of this club may be beneficial; however, it currently lacks definition in relation to the boundaries for gender, cultural practices and traditionalist revivalism. Although the nature conservation club has positive qualities such as addressing biodiversity loss, enhancing sustainability and closing the human/nature gap, it is a very dangerous club in the hand of colonizers, as it perpetuates colonizing effects. I doubt that the nature conservation club could be decolonized, as it is proliferated with the vested interests of colonizers.

Discussion: can men weave baskets and is country Queer?

By casting the clubs (queer theory, queer ecology, ecofeminism and nature conservation) on to country, I queered and decolonized them. I am left with no definitive answer as to which club is most suited to answering my proposition that men can weave baskets as they are all inclusive in some way. However, the queer theory club has potential for men to weave baskets if supported by cultural safety. Similarly, the ecofeminist club may support men weaving baskets if they can gain the support of Indigenous matriarchies. The queer ecology and the nature conservation clubs are the least useful. Middle ground can be found by respecting all clubs and recognizing that the process of casting them on country has been useful in highlighting that country is decolonizing in itself. Country only cares about your connection, your kinship and reciprocity. There is no right or wrong in the seeking out of what country thinks of the proposition of men weaving baskets, as country neither cares about my proposition, nor feels that it has been queered. Country gives the fibers from the grasses that it grows; the growing of grasses and collection of them for fiber used in *nokegererr* are not predicated by gender. Country is all about love; burning country is a reflection of this love. We know country as Blaqs, Blaks, as colonizers, as decolonizers and as Queers, but do we know country as Queer?

Country is trans-dimensional and complex, as is its agency and its relations with the Dreamings (Moreton-Robinson 2003; Samson 2001). In country, a powerful creator and ancestral beings both shaped and are the land, are omnipresent, and provide potent ongoing impacts (McGrath 2015; Neidjie et al 1985; Plumwood 2010; Shiva 1995). The Dreaming has intricate ontologies, is metaphysical and dynamic (James 2015; Rose 2000; Stanner 1979). “Dreaming is the source which makes possible all maps and celebrations – life in its variety, particularity, and fecundity” (Rose 2000, p. 44). The Dreamings tell of ancestral beings changing form and gender and creation stories where the supernatural powers of flora, fauna, landforms, spirits and ancestors interconnect (Lehman 2006; Moreton-Robinson 2003). Dreaming law requires that “no species, group, or country is ‘boss’ for another; each adheres to its own law” (Rose 2000, p. 45).

The colonization of *lutruwita* has produced “gross dispossession, disempowerment and disruption of traditional Aboriginal culture” (Lehman 2006) and has impacted on the knowledges and sharing of the Dreamings and creation stories. The Dreaming story of the creation of *palawa* man and all the country by the creation spirit *Moinee* was told by “clever-man” Woorady and recorded by colonizers at contact (Lehman 2006; E. Wilson 2008). Given that the initial written accounts of the Dreamings and creation stories of *palawa* are those by male colonizers, how can we be sure that “clever-women” did not orate Dreamings and creation stories relating to *loonner* or gender fluid creation spirits, landscapes or sacred geographies? Although the transference of *palawa* Dreamings and creation stories has been impacted by colonization, in contemporary contexts the Dreamings are open to interpretation and change by individuals through their own dreams and lived experiences (Moreton-Robinson 2003).

I suggest that country, through collaborative and personal Dreamings can be queered and is able to invite Queer connections and relations with it. Country has characteristics that are consistent with the principles of queer theory. Country, and its relationship with the Dreamings, are complex phenomena (see Ganesharajah 2009; Graham 2009; Rose 2000) and, consistent with queer theory, language fails to definitively represent its complexities, conceptual elasticity, non-binary, more-than-human qualities (Adams & Holman Jones 2008; Hird 2004; Nicholas 2006; Smith 2000; K. Watson 2005; Yep et al 2003). Country allows our bodies to connect to it and deconstruct ourselves by focusing on our bodies and our unique Dreamings as sites of social change as we grapple with power systems that dictate cultural practices. Country is open to possibilities,

allowing our Queer identity to come in, and invites a Queer connection. Country is a place where the lines between human/country are blurred and receptive to alternative connections – a Queer connection. Country, therefore, is a place where men could seek to weave baskets.

I now turn to the proposition that men can weave baskets. *panner* participation in and development of *nokegerrerr* practices as an enactment of identity may be more important for some than exercising Queerness, or vice versa. In order to decolonize *nokegerrerr*, *palawa* regardless of their gender or sexual identities or Queerness may seek out opportunities to make baskets. If a *panner* practices *nokegerrerr*, under the support and direction of a *loonner*, with cultural safety, then they are both challenging the colonizing paradigm that *nokegerrerr* is a closed female practice, and thus are committing a decolonizing act. This can also be interpreted as a Queer act since it is removing binaries, allowing fluidity of gender and reinforcing decolonized valuing of patriarchy. This is possible if *loonner* chose to do so. *loonner* have the power to decolonize through their own agency as Blak females. There is precedent for such powers as argued by Aunty Dr Pasty Cameron: “*palawa* women are the sole custodians of our cultures, stories and spirituality, and due to colonization our community has emerged as predominantly patriarchal society” (Cameron 1994, pp. 65, 66). *palawa* patriarchal authority is also positioned by Matson-Green (1994, p. 70): “*palawa* women have had, as a matter of right, a great deal of power, both in traditional and contemporary society”.

There are cases of males learning basket making from *loonner* elders in *lutruwita* country (see Elliot 2018; Nichols 2017). Aunty Verna Nichols, when questioned about the appropriateness of males learning basket making (kelp baskets), gave the following account:

They say there's women's business and then there's men's business, and while I agree, I have grandchildren, but they are nearly all boys, and so how am I going to show that family because there are no girls? So, I have asked a group of women when we were together how they felt about it because I had shown a grandson how to make water carriers and why I had shown them. They agreed that they had felt that it was alright because we have to retain it we can't let it slip back and go to sleep again. If we don't have the girls, I really don't mind the men knowing how to do it. It's important and there are some really great basket weavers – men in other Aboriginal communities. That is a must, I don't care what practice it is; the elders need to pass it on and that's how it goes. And I suppose maybe it doesn't have to be the elders as long as it's instilled in our young fellas and we continue to make it and that way our ancestors are not forgotten. We make them

proud and they can look back and in acknowledgement of what has been passed down and feel proud that they have this object.

Nichols 2017, n.p.

Aunty Verna's view makes it possible for *panner* to not only make baskets but to participate in other cultural practices with or without eldership guidance. However, her position brings caveats, that objects are made with respect for the cultural practice itself and in honor of acknowledging the ancestors with the intent of keeping cultural practices alive. The opening of cultural practices to all gender identities (*panner* or *loonner*) perhaps is a predictor for its survival. For example, basket weaving on Norfolk Island has been a Pitcairn women-only craft, inherited from their Polynesian foremothers (Mühlhäuser 2015; Reynolds 2019). The craft has recently been opened to Pitcairn men to save the practice as few women remained. Men openly weave and plait and now one of the Island's finest weavers is male (Mühlhäuser 2015; Reynolds 2019). Like *loonner* weavers, Pitcairn weavers feel connections and a sense of continuity with their ancestors when they weave (see Grace, cited in Greeno 2009; Kleiner 2009; Shaw, cited in Greeno 2009; TMAG 2009).

The obligation to honor ancestors is important in the continuation and revival of *palawa* cultural practices. Country is the power source and medium, co-created with *palawa* – inviting connections with the ancestors and country (see Evans 2019). Uncle Jim Everett eloquently explains the production of cultural practice predicated upon connection to country: “Cultural practice is really the product of what people understand of their philosophy [country] and how they enact that. So, philosophy [country] is the core, culture is really the product” (Everett 2017, n.p.). Aunty Vicki West's account of her *nokegerrer* practice reflects this ethic of making, being and connecting to country and her ancestors “the country sort of informs you, it's part who you are and it's also important to connect back with your ancestors” (West 2017, n.p.).

Conclusion: the Blaq voice

This essay has not set out to provide a definitive answer of whether men can participate and develop their own *nokegerrer* practice. Rather, it is precursory to establishing the explicatory boundaries for men to develop their own *nokegerrer* practice in *lutruwita* country. This essay sets the conditions for the proposition that men may weave baskets by using critical scholarship to frame its potential

theoretical thresholds. Within this task, I have been mindful of matters of cultural safety and the contemporary discrimination of Queer Indigenous People (see Browning 2018; Burin 2016; Chisholm 2018; Kerry 2014, 2017; Maxwell 2018; Wriggs 2007). At the outset, I intended to interview my gay brother to bring his Queer voice to this exploration, but realized that it was not culturally safe for him or me to do so as conditions for theoretical approaches had not been met. Therefore, I acknowledge that the voice of Blaqs (beyond my own) is absent in this enquiry and requires further attention. There is a missing club that should be cast onto country in future research: the voices of Blaqs and those who wish to pursue gendered cultural practices outside their cisgender.

I propose that country has qualities that are Queer, and agency is able to invite Queering of oneself and Queer connections to it through personal Dreamings. However, for cultural safety, Queer *panner* and *loonner* may need to reach out and connect with other Blaqs globally, and seek support to develop non-cisgendered cultural practices as First Peoples. This way *panner* and *loonner*, like all Indigenous People under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Article 1, would be discovering, recuperating and self-affirming their Indigeneity (Verschuuren 2019). However, it is paramount for individuals to be culturally safe on country and in their cultural practice. The Dreaming may be the mechanism by which individuals locate themselves in country and within their practice. Here through their Dreamings, men may weave baskets respectfully whilst acknowledging the ancestors and with the intent of keeping the practice of *nokegerer* alive.