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Freedom dreaming from the university-community nexus: Relational praxis as counterspace

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Abstract

In this article we draw on storytelling and bricolage to reflect on critical accompaniment as relational praxis with cultural workers from the African diaspora inside/outside/in-between the university-community nexus in Australia. We write together weaving our voices as we re-member our journey and our coming together fuelled by our shared desire, to tell our own stories on our terms; to contest virulent racisms and misrecognition of the African diaspora in media, academic, and political discourse; and to create spaces, settings, and narratives for identity, community and belonging. In reflecting on this journey we distil some insights on our efforts to enact just methods, our routes and roots of creating praxis inside/outside and with the university. We suggest that our relationships, forged through critical dialogue and examination of racism in settings that we intentionally create, is central to developing communality. Drawing from the rich history of African and diasporic archives, we also advocate for expanding ecologies of knowledge and practice and modalities for endarkened counter storytelling.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

> …when you talk about that connection with community and universities, often community shy away because we know that there's this kind of elitism and classism that is attached to the narrative of existing in academia, that you have to be a professor, that you have to be this type of person to be involved in this type of papers or to be involved with this type of projects. So, it's just about that reclamation of being like, no, you just have to have wisdom… and it's letting go of that kind of linear process and practise that I often see in academic spaces where it's like there's a framework, there's a way of doing it…now fit.
>
> (Ruth Nyaruout Ruach—group discussion)

At its heart, this is a story about the relationships we hold with one another. Connections that have persisted across time, spilling across boundaries, transforming ourselves, and the spaces and settings we inhabit. Our relationship has formed at the nexus of community and university, as researchers (Chris, Rama) and community-based creatives and cultural workers (Ruth, Ez Eldin, Geskeva—collectively known as Next In Colour). We are differently positioned in many ways, yet we also recognise that our connections have been formed through belongings, identifications, and desires—many shared, and all embodying the complexity of our personhood. What we do share: we are migrants or children of migrants from the Global South, from Africa (Chris, Ez Eldin, Ruth, Geskeva) and Indonesia (Rama), our home is on the unceded lands of the Kulin Nations on the Southeastern part of Australia; we have been othered and racialised on these stolen lands that have been reimagined as a white nation (Hage, 2000); and we share a desire to nurture struggles for freedom and self-determination through critical community-engaged research and action.

We acknowledge where power and privilege have flowed towards us. We are racialised yet benefit from the legacy of colonial violence that dispossessed Aboriginal people of land, culture, and family, dismembering ways of knowing, doing, and being. We are entangled in this historical, social, and political landscape of settler colonialism, and First Nations struggles for sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Our work together necessitates a grappling with these histories and dynamics, a task that is supported through the orientations and conceptual tools we describe below, and that form the critical and liberatory approaches that we engage to create counterspaces and form solidarities across the university-community nexus.

2 | CARVING CRITICAL SPACES WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY

In this essay we draw on narrative epistemology, an understanding of the world, our selves and our relationships as constituted through stories, and storytelling as a method for constructing experience. Through this stance we centre our experiences and the theoretical and cultural resources that have guided our space-making work (Sonn et al., 2013). As a form of bricolage—the drawing together of varied theories, methods, and perspectives for critical, emergent and pluriversal forms of inquiry (Levi-Strauss, 1962)—this essay contains academic writing, excerpts from transcribed discussions, and art, and brings multiply positioned 'voices' together in dialogue. The excerpts and creative artefacts are not 'data' but the voices of co-authors who have chosen to share in ways other than written text. As a group we have met in person and online to share ideas and reflect on the story we wanted to tell. Through these dialogues, we have brought these forms together to craft this counterstory as a whole. Yet the story remains

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provisional as it continues to unfold and take new shape in new forms and in new tellings that contest dominant misrepresentations of the African diaspora. The story is also shaped by its audience and its medium, and is primarily an academic text, evident is what has been included and what has been left for other tellings.

While we (Chris and Rama are speaking from the university context—elsewhere, *we* and *our*, represents us all collectively) wish to trouble the simplicity that 'university-community' suggests, we cannot disavow our membership to the university, the discipline of psychology, and our entanglements within the systems of power that both uphold. There are various critiques of the university, and disciplines such as ruling Western Euro Psychology, which have been challenged as being culturally bounded, decontextualised, and rooted in individualism and the entrenchment of neoliberal and market rationality driving educational reform (e.g., Kagan & Diamond, 2019; Teo, 2005). The university and disciplines like psychology have long been complicit with colonial and imperialist projects in various regions referred to as the majority world (Bulhan, 1985; Henrich, 2021; Smith, 1999/2012) including, in Australia, inappropriate use of treatments and diagnostic systems with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, silence in matters of child removal that resulted in the Stolen generations, and extractivist research (Carey et al., 2017). However, as researchers and educators in the university navigating these crises and the emergent opportunities for alternatives, we don't leave our cultural commitments behind (Fine, 2024, personal communication). Our goals are to make visible how coloniality is produced and maintained and also to elevate, retrieve, and support the ways of doing, knowing and being of groups historically marginalised and excluded, and these goals have aligned with many calls to create and harness psychology for liberatory purposes: Martín-Baró et al. (1994) put it this way:

> … it is a question of whether psychological knowledge will be placed in the service of constructing a society where the welfare of the few is not built on the wretchedness of the many, where the fulfilment of some does not require that others be deprived… (p. 46).

We have created a university-based group, the Community Identity and Displacement Research Network (CIDRN), which for over 10 years, has been co-creating community engagement and research settings with organisations and community groups, and resources such as conferences, books, research reports, podcasts, and community forums. Through critical dialogue and inquiry, we seek to respond to and resist forms of symbolic and structural violence and make spaces of joy, for celebrating wins and culture. This opposes research praxis that focuses on trauma and deficit, and narratives of damage and otherness, resonant with Tuck's (2009) proposal for desire-based frameworks and to 'dream out loud' (Kelley, 2002). From the disciplinary counterspace of critical and liberation psychology (Montero et al., 2017), we draw on conceptual tools from decolonial feminist scholarship (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015; hooks, 2015), critical Indigenous studies (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Watego, 2021) and critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 2003) that aide and grow these efforts toward epistemic justice (see Sonn et al., 2024). Relational epistemology and ethics are central guiding coordinates for our efforts seeking to transform limit situations, that is, the circumstances that constrain liberation (Burton & Kagan, 2005; Freire, 1972; Montero et al., 2017). We examine the colonial matrix of power, that is; various interlocking mechanisms of control including racism, gender, and sexuality and knowledge (Collins, 2000; Quijano, 2000), and how it shapes and informs our relationships, subjectivities, and freedom dreams. We also understand people and culture as co-constituting (Shweder, 1990), and culture as a site for understanding reproduction of dominant narratives, discourses as well as counter-narratives. These counter-narratives are important for disrupting dynamics of oppression in everyday settings, social relations, and research practice (Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Hall, 2019; hooks, 2015, 2018; Malherbe, 2020; Reyes Cruz & Sonn, 2015). Retrieval and retelling of ways of knowing, doing, and being through cultural practice are key liberation practices that sustain racialised communities, and help expose the practices that silence our stories from—or mispresent and distort them in—public spaces and institutions (see Sonn & Baker, 2016).

Arts practice with community has been a fitting canvas for conceptual tools and has been central to CIDRN and its collaborators. Arts practice with community is an intentional, process-oriented practice where artists and community

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members work together to articulate identities, aspirations, and community stories (Kasat, 2020; Segalo, 2016; Sonn et al., 2022). We connect arts practice with community and arts-informed inquiry (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013) where arts entail methods, processes, and meaning-making. Through our research collaboration, we have complicated arts practice with community with critical theories to make visible the hidden curriculum and racial contract (Mills, 1997), those unspoken rules that govern pervasive racialised social dynamics. These approaches reveal how discourses of individualism in 'white talk' reproduce privilege and dispossession while Aboriginal stories of everyday racism and misrepresentation reveal ongoing coloniality in the Australian context (Quayle & Sonn, 2013).

This is a story about our relationships, as researchers, creatives and cultural workers, unfolding over years. Our coming together is fuelled by our shared desire to create counterspaces in which we can examine imposed dominant narratives of identity, community and belonging; to tell our own stories on our terms; and to contest virulent racism and misrecognition of the African diaspora in media, academic, and political discourse (see United Nations Working Group of Experts of People of African Descent, 2023). This story weaves together three projects that Geskeva describes as our 'container, [the] journeys that we've been through', borne from our individual and collective experiences, created with and by community, through critical reflexive praxis, and documented and supported through critical inquiry. Each of these projects also represents a transformation of our space/setting/process/relationship. Reimagining and deepening the university-community relationship by attending to dynamics of power and privilege, we ask: how are we creating counterspace as a node connecting multiple relations and networks; and how do we mobilise freedom dreaming through cultural practice and critical solidarity praxis with the academy (Dutta et al., 2023; Fine, 2018).

3 | AMKA: A JOURNEY OF BEING, BECOMING AND EXISTENCE

AMKA was a multi-modal theatre performance produced by a collective of creative artists from diverse African diaspora backgrounds, including authors Geskeva and Ez Eldin who, along with others, would form the Next In Colour collective described later in this piece.

> AMKA (pronounced um-kuh), is described as an artistic approach to the writing of a significant chapter of the experience of the African diaspora in Australia through multiple art forms. The production explored identity, dispossession and cultural conflict within the African Australian experience and combined poetry, music, dance, theatre and projection through a series of individual and ensemble pieces that interpret stories of the African diaspora in Melbourne. (Sonn et al., 2018, pp. 5–6).

The word, Amka means 'wake up; get up' in Swahili. The use of the term 'Amka' in most contexts in Swahili culture has an emphasis on urgency and frankness when articulated. At the time, this was something that the collective felt was important in capturing all of the themes within the project processes and creative outcomes. To create an authentic representation of themselves the artists needed to have complete autonomy in how they wanted to tell their stories and in what way, most importantly as a narrative resource for the African diaspora in Australia, but also to insert their stories within broader discourses of what it means to be African in Australia. To do this they had to consciously locate themselves, and their relationship with the coloniality of Australian society and re-centre the African narrative (Sonn et al., 2018).

Chris had been building a relationship with members of Next In Colour, exploring mutual interests in critical cultural work and how to imagine evaluation, research, and pedagogy alongside community arts organisations; contributing to critical discussions about race and whiteness; and across many years embodying various roles as mentor, as critical friend to provoke thought, as evaluator, and as researcher (Sonn et al., 2018). Through this relationship, Chris was invited to document the AMKA project, and to support the collective's goals to create a

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legacy, a liberatory archive of the processes and practices of creating and performing AMKA, and to examine how this group were mobilising arts practice for individual and collective change. This would form Rama's (who was a graduate student at the time) minor thesis and represent his beginning on this shared journey. For Geskeva, who was the lead producer of AMKA, this research partnership was important to archive stories that priortised Afro-centric perspectives, experiences, and identities. Together, we wanted to recentre this speaking position and tell stories as narrators, and in this way produce knowledge from our onto-epistemic locations.

Rama and Chris attended meetings, observed rehearsals, and made decisions with the group about what research questions need to be asked that would support the work. They documented the stories of the cast members, and their personal and family journeys of migration, displacement, and being 'out of place' (Agung-Igusti, 2017). The cast member's personal and collective stories, in part, were transformed into powerful theatre performances hosted at a premier venue in Melbourne's arts precinct and attended by a diverse audience. The image in Figure 1 shows performers wearing golden masks that symbolise historical and contemporary practices that silence black voices but also convey that *our stories are our truth, they are golden and worthy*.

Chris and Rama theorised the performance as an encounter space for differently positioned subjects, where the art opens multiple possibilities for interpretation. Their analysis of responses (95 of 700 attendees) to an open-ended survey eliciting audience experiences, showed the power of the encounter, of how aesthetic witnessing can trigger empathy and move the audience to wide awakeness, a sense making and deeper understanding of the world (Greene, 1977), as audiences actively engaged with and reflect on the work and its varied meanings for self and others. Social locations and cultural lenses shape the witness experience (Sajnani, 2012). For some people who defined themselves as Anglo or white Australian in the surveys, the performance generated various effects, for some the injustice conveyed revealed a psychological distance, as one person shared that what they had learn from the show was a

> reiteration of how as a white person being seen as 'the norm' in society, how much is so easy for me. But that this is not always a good thing, in ignoring our own culture, ancestry and history we're muting our own understanding of ourselves and the world and limiting our connection with others (Audience Member, as quoted in Agung-Igusti & Sonn, 2020, p. 61).



FIGURE 1 The awakening of black bodies. Photograph by Damien W. Vincenzi.

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For others it produced a sense of shame, and others rejected the discomfort, choosing not to see injustice, 'I do not get anything from a piece of theatre when the actors are only playing aggression to get their point across' (quoted in Maxwell & Sonn, 2020, p. 55). For those who identified as from African and other racialised diasporas, there were resonances, the story was familiar, and their parents had shared similar stories of displacement, of being othered, and of re-membering cultural practices in the re-mooring of stories, metaphors, and memories.

Through processes of listening, reflection, and transforming relationships, Chris and Rama created space for collective members to reassess the university:

> know, for me, when I talk about our relationship and our journey, it's like working alongside you allowed me to also imagine my existence in the academic world. It exists in that space because gatekeeping does not always have to be in physicality, but also the way you access that space. So the fact that we were able to connect with somebody who was part of that system and created that access point allowed us now to expand our critical thinking and expand our language and our literacy, not just in academic form but how we also use academia as a vehicle to investigate… to drive the ideas that we have and to drive the thinking that we have and how that journey has occurred in that self-realisation and that self-practice, of validation of being, like where every time I look at the [AMKA report] it validates the fact that I'm able to exist in this space. (Ruth - group discussion)

AMKA powerfully signalled the possibilities of the multiple avenues and levels of impact of arts practice with community, and how, critical accompaniment—to walk alongside, and journey with those in their struggles and actions towards liberation and humanisation—(Watkins, 2015, 2021) can produce solidarity between community and those positioned within the academy, across hierarchies of race/class/gender/ethnicity. This happens through information sharing and critical dialogues about our roles and the university as a knowledge partner. Being-in-relation and co-creating spaces for critical reflection lay foundations for expanding language and literacy, and the validation and recognition 'that I'm able to exist in this space'. The group wanted to build on AMKA, they/we wanted to push from 'waking up/getting up' and resisting to have resources that they have control over to enact their desires for self-determined art practice in community.

4 | NEXT IN COLOUR: MULTIMODALITY AND MAKING SPACE THAT REFLECTS THE COMMUNITIES WE COME FROM

Next In Colour would be an opportunity to build on AMKA and enact self-determination in the ways that had been imagined. Geskeva and Ez Eldin came together with other young creatives from the African diaspora, including Ruth, to form this new creative collective. They were auspiced and successfully secured funding that supported them to develop a series of projects creating culturally safe spaces for young people of African heritage. Projects included supporting emerging artists through workshops and low-cost studio spaces; exhibition, performance and event spaces; facilitating inter-generational dialogues with Elders in African diaspora communities, and critical conversations about race, identity and belonging; and self-representation through creative works. A requirement of the funding agreement was for the initiative to be evaluated. Rather than undertaking a traditional program evaluation to primarily meet the needs of the funding body, the collective reapproached Chris and Rama to build on the work that had started with documentation of the AMKA project and

> …undertake a research project that will follow the evolution of the project. The research project will train the collective members as peer researchers so that they are engaged in data collection from the beginning of the project. The research will explore and critically theorise the relationship between [the auspicing organisation] and the…collective and their communities, arts practice as critical

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> discourse, and self-determination through arts practice. (excerpt from early proposal of the Next in Colour initiative)

This decision was premised on the existing relationship fostered through shared trust, vision, and commitment to relational ways of working. Through discussions between Chris, Rama and the collective, a project was developed to reflect the outcomes that were important to the collective and their communities. Central to the project was the notion that 'art' is a process and an outcome and pivotal to the creation of spaces and resources for healing, resistance, and communality. With this as the starting point, together we continued to articulate a process for research as a critical accompaniment, which included the researchers taking on different roles formulated as critical friendship (Evans, 2015). As critical friends, we crossed and redrew boundaries as we formed relationships rooted in radical relationality. Together we shed light on challenges faced by the collective, emanating from tensions within the larger institutional context of the health organisation where the collective was based, and, importantly, the members' desire to unshackle from the relationship with the organisation. A relationship which demanded their dependence on funding and organisational rules and regulations that undermined their agency and community cultural obligations, and resulted in, as one collective member shared in a qualitative interview:

> a lot of stolen time in having to explain my blackness and having to explain why that's the thing that I have to explain, and then having to explain why that's the thing that you should stop doing to me. That's a lot of stolen time, a lot of stolen energy when I could be expressing something so much more.

This speaks to the constant labour of not only needing to explains ones existence within white structures and systems, but educate others on how those systems and structures perpetrate racialised oppression (Agung-Igusti, 2024).

The documentation of the Next In Colour initiative spanned four years inclusive of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns that limited mobility and gathering in public spaces for significant periods in Victoria (Agung-Igusti, 2022). In this time the collective re-shaped parts of their original vision and mobilised its community arts practice to produce projects through diverse modalities of arts such as an online publication (The Colouring Book) containing curated prose, poetry, photography, and other visual art forms; photo exhibitions, and short films. These modalities capture complex themes, but one central theme that is carried through much of this body of work is that of diaspora and carving out spaces of belonging. Ez Eldin speaking on the meaning of some of his photographic work exhibited as part of Next In Colour, talks of dislocation, love and possibility:

> My journey back to Sudan brought a storm of happiness but with it a rainfall of bullets. The sadness I felt was enough to break my heart apart. It was a challenge not to listen to people who discourage your thoughts of love as they have lost their love and are blinded by thoughts of the slavery of their cultures and beliefs that are locked in stone. (Ez Eldin Deng, cited by Colour Box Studio, 2021).

Depicted in another photo by Ez Eldin (see Figure 2) is:

> … one boy facing the camera while another looks on – a truck driving past behind them. These are representations, for some, of home, and for others, ancestral place. These are representations that evoke memories or serve as an affirmation of imagined places that some may have never seen or have been too young to remember (Agung-Igusti, 2022, p.186).

Next in Colour's film, '*It's Crooked Wood That Shows The Best Sculptor*,' also 'speaks directly to the South Sudanese community's unique journey, the importance of culturally specific mental health literacy and the transformative power of communication'. As explained by Next In Colour (2023), 'the title itself draws upon the

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FIGURE 2 The red truck presented as part of 40 days—journey back in memory. Photograph by Ez Eldin Deng.

universal wisdom found within the African proverb of the same name. This powerful proverb speaks to the nature of our struggles as human beings and how they shape us into something beautiful'. Through these strands of creativity and cultural action, the collective is contributing to a digital archive centring Black, Brown and First Nations counter-storytelling, enacting visions and practising freedom. And this has been supported through affirming relational research praxis that carve spaces in the academy for endarkened storytelling (Agung-Igusti et al., 2021).

4.1 | Challenging epistemologies of privilege: The launch of Next in Colour

While we (Chris and Rama) are members of and represent the university at the university-community nexus, we are not the university embodied. We inhabit a privileged position of access to institutional power and resources, yet see our role as diverting these to support communities to self-determine, to transform the university-community nexus, and to carve out our own spaces to widen our methodological imagination (Fine, 2018). The launch of the Next in Colour report represents a nexus point where community comes into contact with the broader institutional structures of the university.

Our work documenting the Next In Colour initiative was presented in a report using images and poetry that complement and lift the research findings (Agung-Igusti, Sonn, & Du Ve, 2021). Together with the collective we decided to launch the report at the university. This was a way for the group to speak back to the university and engage in dialogue on their own terms. At the event, we curated a conversation between the collective members and Rama. Collective members spoke about their imagination, their desire for spaces and autonomy to narrate their stories, and their process over time, across the various projects documented. Significantly they invited 'the university' into a dialogue, to show how we had cultivated deep relationships and shared material resources, skills, and community and cultural wisdom that builds community power. Rama and the collective invited the audience to consider a provocation: what are the implications of their story for university-community-engaged research?

This provocation threaded through multiple insights that the group offered. Ruth spoke of the violence experienced in their own higher education journey as well as the exploitation by researchers who extract knowledge with no return:

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> working with a lot of institutions especially experiencing education, experiencing violence in the education system, there's that hesitation of being exploited especially as researchers and thinking that oh they're just gonna come and traumatize us to talk about these type of things that we experience within our community and then just leave… (Ruth – the launch panel discussion)

She contrasted this experience with a reflection on our research journey, of contesting hierarchical power relationships and building nurturing spaces that are key to radical relationality:

> I think that part of the processes that we created in this research journey was around deconstructing those hierarchies and really leading all in that equation and I think that I let my guard down to be more vulnerable and to speak about things…. I think for us we just really wanted to create a space where we echo the strength and the resistance and the revolution that is still happening or will continue to happen in terms of validating the lives of African communities and also… creating a space where those communities feel empowered that there are organizations and groups and collectives that are there in the fight. (Ruth – the launch panel discussion)

Geskeva remarked that each person contributed and acted as part of whole:

> … I don't see [Chris and Rama] as separate to Next In Colour…. They're more part of the team and one of us as creatives but their work and [their] contribution to what we're doing just looks differently … the work that we're creating with them is alongside and they're part of our team as Next In Colour, we don't see them as [Victoria University] and we don't see us [as] separate. Because I think when we create this "us and them" type of dynamic then we kind of start to focus on different agendas and different values…and a core part of that was having the same values in terms of the work that we were doing in regards to like naming structural violence… (Geskeva - the launch panel discussion)

These are powerful observations refusing the university as the primary knower and asserting their agency and capacity as knowers, shifting to a community-university relationship (Kagan & Diamond, 2019). Our struggles are tied together, in the university, with communities of Black, Brown, Indigenous, minoritized and othered people, we are in a shared struggle to name and challenge structural violence, hegemonic whiteness, and to share experiences and knowledge, 'to speak to the different power dynamics and our cultural safety'. (Ruth—group discussion).

5 | ANCESTRAL DISSERTATIONS: ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE, MEMORY AND ENDARKENED STORYWORK

Ancestral Dissertations is a project with its foundations firmly rooted in black consciousness, spirituality, and aesthetics. While still being formed, its conceptual and cultural roots and routes are strong—deeply connected to an ancestral knowledge and memory that is both embodied in the now and in the process of becoming. The Ancestral Dissertation is also still in becoming, and what is written here depicts the thinking that gives shape to this work. Speaking on Ancestral Dissertations, Geskeva emphasises the importance of African scholar activist, Bantu Stephen Biko's (1988) 'I write what I like' in Next In Colour's vision for prioritising Black community cultural wealth. This includes a deep understanding of the importance of Black consciousness as both philosophy and political project in how Next In Colour have imagined Ancestral Dissertations (Suffla & Seedat, 2021). This project is about asserting a locus of enunciation—the social, political, geographical, historical, and embodied contexts from which a subject produces knowledge (Grosfoguel, 2011)—firmly rooted in black consciousness and aesthetics, and the collective's lived experiences as members of diaspora (this is embodied in Figure 3, Ruth's

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FIGURE 3 The girl with the silver hoop earring. Photograph by Ruth Nyarout Ruach.

photograph reimagining Johanness Vermeer's painting, the girl with a pearl earring. This photograph centres black subjectivity, beauty and experience). This work is not isolated, but part of local and transnational efforts aimed at epistemic freedom (Ndlovu-Gathsheni, 2020), and towards the democratisation of knowledge and centring pluriversality.

Ancestral knowledge and memory are central to how Ancestral Dissertations is being dreamt. For Ruth,

> Knowing is more powerful than believing – knowing is entrusting that you know what destiny or journey you've been appointed to exist in, and you know that you are divinely protected and guided through that process – knowing is trusting your ancestors – and recognising that in doing that you are becoming an ancestor yourself – recognise what we will be leaving for coming generations – leaving a blueprint and a foundation. (Ruth – group discussion)

Next In Colour is paving a way, creating epistemic resources, and weaving together memories and stories that have been passed on to create a better foundation for the next generation. This process includes multiple community engagement actions to create and document conversations that will form a repository of community knowledge around thematic such economic empowerment, cultural preservation, and intergenerational relationships and their expression within the African diaspora in Australia. While the desire for Next In Colour is to be self-sufficient in its efforts towards this, to sustain themselves in ways that do not rely on the state or university, we are all entangled within a colonial matrix of power that constrains us in significant ways. This is evoked by what Next in Colour call ancestral regulation, a concept that is deeply connected to building legacies that are in dialogue with entangled histories of racialised oppression and resistance across geographies and negotiated in the present on unceded Indigenous lands.

The deepening of understanding of both coloniality and the community cultural wealth of the African diaspora has been an important part of Next In Colour's journey of archival retrieval, collective remembering, and community making. There is a refusal to focus on the Eurocentric knowledge process, white supremacy, and knowledge that has supported anti-blackness. Feminist and liberation scholars have long written about the importance of naming and contesting coloniality and oppression as part of healing (hooks, 2015; Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018; Levins Morales, 2019). Our work resonates with Endarkened storywork. For Toliver (2022) Endarkened storywork, '…

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chooses to remember our joy, our community, our connection to the land, our traditions. As a radical response to traditional research methods and anti-Black portrayals of Black existence, Endarkened storywork chooses life, community, nurturing, spirituality, and love' (p. xix). Along these lines, we draw from university resources and we also value the knowledge and wisdom grown in community on its own terms.

6 | CONCLUSION: FREEDOM DREAMING IN THE COLONY

We have shared how we are creating counterspaces and mobilise cultural practice in freedom dreaming and critical solidarity praxis with the academy. As outsiders on the inside of institutions, our collective shared stories are woven together from different materials about our coming together to do freedom dreaming in pursuit of epistemic freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). We revisit knowledge left out of the academy, we lean on Black consciousness philosophy as articulated by Biko and others in the diaspora, -- together we set out to 'write what we like', about us, what brings strength to our communities, what we need to reclaim our narratives, to remember our languages, stories and histories. Claiming agency to narrate counter stories through multimodal arts practice with community was foundational to becoming Next In Colour; we are able to create settings for bonding and healing as well as to create narratives and cultural resources for identity, resistance and solidarity. Yet as noted by Munanjahli and South Sea Islander woman, Chelsea Watego (2021), freedom dreaming is not an easy task in the colony, and 'African Diaspora Australians are settlers, on black land—Aboriginal land-of which sovereignty has never been ceded.' (Clarke, 2019, p. 1) African diaspora are also negotiating belonging, othering and discrimination, and the entanglement with a history of colonialism as settlers. Whether the university, or the institutional contexts encountered by Next in Colour, managerialism and extractive approaches derail freedom dreams, reinforcing the need to imagine otherwise (Agung-Igusti, 2024). This is most evident when faced with constricting neoliberal discourses of risk management, efficiency, and managerialism. As Agung-Igusti (2024) argued, in the neoliberal context of racial colourblindness, the raced subject is transformed into a risky subject whose surveillance and control becomes sanctioned. This makes the work emotionally intense, exhausting and at times defeating, and in these moments our focus then shifts from creating and enacting freedom dreams to retreating, so that we can digest, restore, and heal through creative practice and being in relation with one another.

Yet while counterspaces for healing are not always reproduced in institutional settings—they are made at the generative borderlands (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015). Our counterspace thrives at the border, and is constituted by our relationships, it exists within all that what we have shared and all that we have dreamt together. In this way it transcends institutions, it transcends 'space'. Our enduring relationship is our counterspace, flowing within and between community and institutions. It offers opportunities for respite, for repair, and for imagination, and accountability to each other. Together we harness material, social, and cultural resources from different settings, from the community as the producers and custodians of knowledge and the university as the translation centre. Our work is perhaps an example of community-university engagement in place that is closer to the scholar activism of a reflexive university (Kagan & Diamond, 2019) that embraces epistemic plurality in efforts to address vexing social issues. Knowledges from below, from Indigenous struggles, from community memory, from the diaspora are now the focus, and the bases for our radical imagination.

We advocate for critical and liberation scholarship to expand its processes of knowledge and doing, and to embrace diverse epistemologies and modalities used in arts practice with community. From our respective social locations and relationships, we are creating spaces to manifest freedom dreams by mobilising arts practice with community to re-member and tell counterstories, and we seek to create resources together and across generations that evolve from black, brown and Indigenous lifeworlds:

> People see legacy as leaving something, but our legacy is weaving together of stories that have been passed on, and the stories of each of those journeys and the small impacts they have created, to then create a better foundation (Geskeva—group discussion)

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No conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Ez Eldin Deng is a South Sudanese film and music video director, producer, and writer. He has directed and produced numerous music videos, which have reached millions of views in total on YouTube. Deng first arrived in Melbourne, Australia in 2004 with his family and to this day, Melbourne is still his home as he continues to break new grounds within the Australian film and television industry.

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