Changing Country, Telling Stories:
research ethics, methods and empowerment – working with Aboriginal women

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Howitt, R and Suchet-Pearson, S (2003) Changing Country, Telling Stories: research ethics, methods and empowerment – working with Aboriginal women. Paper presented to Fluid Bonds: Gender in Water Resource Management Workshop, Australian National University, Canberra, October 13, 2003. Aboriginal women often best reveal their concerns about and relations with water by telling stories. More than a decade ago, Ross (1990) suggested that 'storytelling as method' offered a way for community collaborators to exercise control over research. Indeed, using storytelling as a research method requires an ethical engagement between listener(s) and speaker(s) that offers foundations for relationship building, information and skills transfer, collaborative analysis and explanation, and other ways of operationalising the ideal of collaborative 'research'. Yet, in many research settings legal and ethnographic methods risk reducing 'storytelling' to a means of capturing people's knowledge and transforming it into evidence for presentation in alien settings such as courtrooms, impact studies and environmental plans. In many cases, this approach to research, ethics and methods marginalises Aboriginal women from decision-making about changing or managing country, taking their knowledge from their own control and commodifying it for use by others on their behalf. This paper considers more empowering ways of developing collaborative research with Aboriginal women on issues of water management, environmental planning and community development.

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During the creation period … ancestral beings made journeys and performed deeds as result of which there arose the topography of the earth and all that exists upon it ... Not only did the spirit beings give the world a shape, they imbued it with a moral structure - handing down eternal ceremonial and social laws whereby all contemporary humans have equal intrinsic value, and a share of goods. Because no distinction is made between material and spiritual, ancestor, story, sacred site, song and singer are all, in essences, the same thing. Dreaming tracks (or stories, or songs) lace the whole of the continent. Australia, then is a narrative (Davidson, 1989: 2, 6).

Gendered Landscapes

Many processes – all of them complexly gendered – shape Australian cultural landscapes. Many of the institutions responsible for managing Australian resources and environments, however, operate as if gender does not matter. In their everyday operations these institutions, and the systems of which they are a part, narrate new stories of exclusion and erasure. In many cases, even their procedures for participation and inclusion are constrained and conditional and require conformity with the dominant narratives of science and society in ways that, even with the best of intentions, produce further erasure and colonization.

For Indigenous women major difficulties persist in securing appropriate recognition and respect in resource and environmental management systems. The social and administrative narratives of Australian law and development are deeply gendered narratives that actively marginalize Indigenous women. Many of their cultural, social and environmental roles are actively erased by the gender blindness of the everyday operations of administrative structures. Language and narrative thus constructs landscapes from which Indigenous

interests have been displaced and in which the social and environmental destruction of 'development' is naturalized.[1] For example, despite nearly three decades of research and practice in Northern Territory land claim processes – a key interface between Aboriginal people working to secure their traditional territories and non-Aboriginal efforts to incorporate them into the contemporary institutions of Australia – many professionals working in the field still do not understand, recognise or respect the implications of gender in dealing with Australian cultural landscapes. With the best of intentions, the legislation has returned land to Aboriginal ownership in ways that undermine women's roles in many processes of Aboriginal self-governance, narrating men into the principal authorized roles of mediating relations in cross-cultural settings.[2] Langton observed that women were often marginalized by the way that Northern Territory land claim were undertaken:

> *Women witnesses have often been silenced by the conduct and organization of land claims, and thus much of the significance of 'women's business' in the general affairs of society have been missed (Langton 1997: 88).*

Keely goes further, suggesting that land claim and heritage protection procedures place Aboriginal women in

> *… an invidious position whereby they must either break their own law in order to protect it or compromise by not giving gender restricted evidence which [decision] may result in failure of [their claims] (Keely 1996: 172).*

Similarly, Rose suggests that

> *(i)n a large majority of land claims there is marginalisation of women as managers of country, kinship and other social relations, as well as of ecological, geographical, religious and other forms of knowledge. The spiritual dimension of their lives is sometimes not even mentioned (Rose 1996: 189).*

So, despite the widely acknowledged scope of Aboriginal women's social, cultural, economic and intellectual contributions[3], and longstanding efforts to challenge the dominant androcentric orthodoxy of Australian Indigenous Studies[4], we find that academic research, government administration, legal process and the popular imagination all continue to reflect a regrettable failure to engage constructively with Indigenous Australians' right to self-determination, and in particular with the rights of Indigenous women, their knowledge and their perspectives on a range of key issues – including water and country.

Many of the critical disputes that have punctuated debate about Aboriginal women's knowledge, roles and power have been associated with debates about water, water rights and the nature of water in Aboriginal cultures.[5] Many of these cases have been canvassed in the literature and it is not appropriate to simply revisit them in this paper. Rather this paper seeks to consider some lessons from those disputes in terms of research ethics and methods.

Academic researchers often consider themselves immune from the sort of criticism that Keely, in her comments about the land claim and heritage processes in general (1996) and the Junction Waterhole dam proposal in particular (1992), directs at judicial procedures. In this paper we will suggest that researchers are deluding themselves if we think we are above criticism. Indeed, we want to argue that well-intentioned research is often part of the problem and that ethical engagement with Indigenous people and open debate about method in forums such as this are critically important in shifting research practices towards Indigenous self-determination, sustainability and justice.

An ethics of engagement

Research that sets itself up as advocacy research risks usurping the right to self-determination of those whose interests it purports to advocate. While generous advocacy might be more palatable than the blatant erasure of the colonizing methodologies of research that is 'inextricably liked to European imperialism and colonialism' (Smith 1999: 1), it still constructs erasure. In Australian universities, it is a

[1] For an example see Arthur 1997, who discusses representations of the landscapes of the East Kimberley region before and after the construction of the Ord River Dam to form Lake Argyle.
[2] Rose (1996, 1999a) refers to this situation as 'deep colonising'.
[3] Langton (1997: 88-9) offers a substantial list of women's ritual observances in Aboriginal society.
[4] See, inter alia, the work of Diane Bell, Marcia Langton, Deborah Rose
[5] In particular we refer to the examples of the Argyle Diamond Mine (see eg Doohan in prep), the Alice Springs dam (eg Keely 1992; Craig 1991; Wooten 1994; Jacobs 1994) and Hindmarsh Island (Bell 1998, Bin-Sallik 1996; Langton 1996)

legislative requirement that research involving human subjects is formally reviewed and approved by a properly constituted Ethics Committee before proceeding.[6] In considering research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is necessary for university Ethics Committees to specific guidelines[7] even where no specific guidelines are developed within the University. Yet it is still possible to find research undertaken by reputable researchers without this legally required ethical oversight. While peer review by a properly constituted ethics committee is a legally required minimum standard, it appears that even this is not achieved in some universities and research institutions.

Of course, as has become clear in the case of native title processes[8], compliance with minimum legal standards is no guarantee of appropriate acknowledgement, recognition or respect when it comes to Indigenous rights and interests! As the new draft guidelines suggest, ethical engagement rather than narrow legal compliance is a more appropriate way to frame researchers' relationships with Indigenous peoples. In the context of the principles of Indigenous self-determination and research involving water, it is crucial to establish processes and protocols that specifically acknowledge gender and respect and respond to existing systems, structures and processes of Indigenous governance.

For the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, relations between the dominant culture and others are best understood in terms of an ethical imperative in which it is embodied, face-to-face encounters that establish the terms of the relationship (1989 [1947]). In other words, the ethical imperative is shaped by and derived from the experience of what Suchet refers to as 'situated engagement' (1999).[9] From this perspective on the ethical imperative, it is not enough for other ontologies to be acknowledged as existing:

> *The ontologies of other peoples need to be understood and engaged with in active partnerships in the construction of knowledge (and power). New interactions and relationships open new possibilities (Howitt & Suchet-Pearson 2003: 565).*

In such hybrid time-spaces, research-as-advocacy is revealed as an extremely limited sort of partnership. The ideal of collaborative research that engages with ontological pluralism as constitutive rather than a problem for the research manager opens up new sorts of engagement. It takes seriously the links between 'people, country and protection of culture and cultural properties' (Tarran 1997); it accepts 'mutual interrogation' (Nader 1996) rather than some Eurocentric assumption as the benchmark for intellectual endeavour; it engages rather than erases, and in the process it simultaneously reaches out, in and across the dominant knowledge-power nexus to create the possibility of new processes, experiences, discourses, systems, structures, outcomes and ideas.[10]

In terms of collaborative research with Indigenous groups on water, it seems to us that this ethical imperative must affect process and method. As Keely, Langton and Rose have argued in relation to land claims (see above), it is necessary to take gender seriously as an ontological element in water research. In Indigenous ontologies, water is not simply a material substance, a resource, a property: it is a creative/destructive, sentient element. It is contextualised in a cosmology as well as an ecology and political-economy.

Implications for Research Methods: the case of Indigenous water rights

As researchers, many of us struggle to develop practices that reflect, prioritise and contribute to Aboriginal self-determination, sustainability and justice. Yet our institutional settings are

[6] This is a clear legal requirement under the provisions of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans*(National Health and Medical Research Council 1999). The Australian National University, for example, requires that "research projects being undertaken by staff, visiting fellows, postgraduate and graduate student and Honours level undergraduate students are reviewed by the HREC" (from the ANU website at http://www.anu.edu.au/ro/ethics/human.php - reviewed?).

[7] Currently, Ethics Committees are required to consider both the 1991 Guidelines and Draft Guidelines circulated in November 2002 (National Health and Medical Research Council 1991, 2002). The National Statement also anticipates compliance with ethical standards such as those provided by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies as a condition of funding research projects (AIATSIS 2000). Most Universities have established procedures and guidelines to meet these requirements, see eg Macquarie University [http://www.ro.mq.edu.au/ethics/human/ethicsa.html], James Cook University [http://wwwtest.jcu.edu.au/office/research_office/Ethics/indigen_ethics.html], Murdoch University [http://www.research.murdoch.edu.au/ethics/hrec/absethics.asp], Curtin University [http://gunada.curtin.edu.au/circ/research/irs.html], Victoria University [http://w2.vu.edu.au/equity/kdsu/res-guide5.html], University of South Australia [http://www.unisa.edu.au/orc/ethics/guideform.htm#INDIGENOUS RESEARCH], Northern Territory University [http://www.ntu.edu.au/cincrm/research/ethics.html], and Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute [http://www.ahuri.edu.au/attachments/Ethical2004.pdf]. While all universities have properly constituted Ethics Committees, not all university websites provide specific guidelines on Indigenous research ethics.

[8] See eg Agius et al 2003.

[9] Similar ideas are developed Rose as 'situated availa bility' (1999a), Jacobs and Mulvihill as ' viable interdependence' (1995) and Nader as 'mutual interrogation' (1996).

[10] The image of 'reaching out, reaching in, reaching across' comes from Ellis 1998.

often hostile to some elements of these practices. The pressures to produce outcomes that meet institutional criteria of 'research outcomes' is often antithetical to the ethical imperatives of cross-cultural engagement. Publication deadlines, funding cycles, the currency of particular theories or methods, the competing demands of teaching commitments and administrative responsibilities are all likely to bring 'our' research into some level of conflict with the needs and understandings of Indigenous collaborators from time to time. The ideal of 'collaborative research' in cross-cultural settings remains difficult to operationalise because the capacity of most universities and research organizations to facilitate – or even to value – equitable collaboration, to respect alternative frames that might contextualize and value research differently in different cultural settings, is severely limited. But it is not just our institutional structures that are hostile to expanding the research narrative to be responsive to a more ontological pluralist context. Many of our basic conceptual and methodological tools are also poorly equipped to tackle the complexities of the cultural landscapes of Indigenous Australia. As in other aspects of cross-cultural engagement, many basic research tools have been dominated by the needs and concerns of the dominant culture and its destructive colonial agenda (Rose 1997, Smith 1999, Howitt & Jackson 1998).

In the early-1980s geographer David Harvey called on his discipline to develop an "applied peoples' geography", to harness the skills and understandings of geography to the service of ordinary people in difficult settings (Harvey 1984), and Howitt (1993) used that idea to suggest a more collaborative approach to doing social impact assessment research. Yet relatively little of the work sanctioned by the universities and funded by the major funding agencies meets the sort of challenge articulated by Harvey. For example, in pursuing questions of Indigenous water rights that might arise from the recognition of native title, debate in Australia has largely been restricted to discussion of legal issues within the framework of the *Native Title Act*. It is as if the ancient jurisdictions that give content to native title within the whitefeller legal system simply do not matter to the legal fraternity. It is whitefeller law that is authoritative, and it is, by and large, research within that framework that will be authorized to produce answers to the question of Indigenous water rights.

What might an alternative approach to the question of Indigenous water rights look like? How might 'research' contribute to Indigenous peoples' efforts to exercise governance over their ancient jurisdictions in relation to water? How might collaborative research projects construct practical arguments within Indigenous frameworks that might demonstrate the continuing reality of Indigenous jurisdictions over water in its various forms in cross-cultural settings in which the power politics of knowledge about water are played out?

We are happy to acknowledge the importance of legal research in contributing to our understanding of legal constraints and issues[11], but it seems to us that it is unlikely that a basis for recognition of Indigenous water rights is waiting to reveal itself within the whitefeller legal tradition, which colonising authorities used for over two hundred years to assert that *terra nullius* was the foundation for law-making in this country. Similarly, we are unlikely to find immediately obvious foundations for inclusion of Indigenous customary practices in relation to water and water-based resources in regulatory bodies that have denied the Indigenous presence in the landscapes they manage for many decades. In a context where Indigenous water rights have been erased and continue to be rendered invisible, we need politicised collaborative research that simultaneously interrogates and challenges dominant structures, and nurtures recognition of and respect and support for Indigenous rights and governance. We need, for example, to "explore how recognition of indigenous peoples' ways of seeing, understanding, using and relating to rivers might affect entrenched systems of management, power and governance" (Eggleton 1998: 6). We also need to unmake the authority that is invested in Eurocentic

[11] See Craig 2003 and Scanlon *et al* 2003 for recent examples of relevant valuable work within a legal research framework.

thought[12], which is often characterized by efforts to relate to cultural landscapes through the imposition of 'multiple boundaries that seek to divide and subdivide places, people and resources into manageable units' (Howitt 2001: 233). No division into environmental categories is as fundamental to Eurocentric thought as the Biblical separation of the land from the water.[13] Yet in many of Australia's coastal cultural landscapes this ostensibly ontological separation seems far from 'natural' as

> *the Wet season regularly inundates coastal plains so that the 'land' looks very much like a swamp whose continuities with estuarine environments are at least as notable as their continuities with terrestrial ones. Sea, sky and land mixes up as Country; saltwater, freshwater and the land entwine and interpenetrate in a complex and fecund embrace of coexistence (Howitt 2001: 239-240).*

In the story of the separation of land and water in Genesis we can see many foundational elements of Eurocentric thinking. Fundamentally, the story reveals the importance of boundaries, separation and relationship in Eurocentric thinking. Clearly there are many other stories that could be (and are being) re-read in such terms.[14]

The idea of 'story' as a means of representing complex relations between people and places is familiar in Indigenous Australian Studies. In representing the account of Genesis in terms of story, we offer an insight into the relativity between Eurocentric and Indigenous accounts of such relationships, and we seek to open the possibility of displacing the dominant narratives of water, water rights and water management in Australia.

Storytelling as Method?

More than a decade ago, Ross (1990) suggested that 'storytelling as method' offered a way for Indigenous community collaborators to exercise control over applied social research. In that case, she was referring to the Turkey Creek community study undertaken as part of the East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project. But perhaps there are some wider implications to be drawn from Ross' suggestion. Storytelling as a research method requires an ethical engagement between listener(s) and speaker(s) that offers foundations for relationship building, information and skills transfer, collaborative analysis and explanation, and other ways of operationalizing the ideal of collaborative 'research'. But is it more than simply an ethnographic methodology?

Smith (1999, chapter 8) identifies storytelling as one twenty-five Indigenous projects within a complex and ambitious research program. She acknowledges storytelling as a "research tool", but also suggests that storytelling as an Indigenous project is not just about research method:

> *Intrinsic in story telling is a focus on dialogue and conversations amongst ourselves as indigenous peoples, to ourselves and for ourselves. Such approaches fit well with the oral traditions which are still a reality in day-to-day indigenous lives (Smith 1999: 145).*

Smith also identifies 'testimonies', 'claiming', 'reading', 'writing', 'representing', 'gendering', 'reframing' and 'naming' as projects alongside storytelling, and each of these actions intersect with the idea of storytelling as both method and methodology.[15]

Such storytelling, of course, is not simply an ethnographic or oral history interviewing method. Nor is it, as Ross (1990) anticipated, a straightforward means for Indigenous community interests to exercise control of participatory research. Social science seeks 'data' which is decontextualized, much as the colonial frontier seeks land, resources and information. Once spoken, recorded and transcribed, the embodied, ethically engaged 'story' risks disarticulation from its context to become the 'data' for someone else's project.[16] Clearly, in the hybrid time-space of collaborative 'research', such storytelling is not merely 'data'. It is always radically contextualised in

[12] We use the term 'Eurocentric thought' to characterise those systems of thought, philosophy and representation that reflect the diverse traditions of Western philosophy and, in the context of Indigenous affairs, colonial effect. For discussion of the term see eg Suchet 1999.
[13] *Genesis* verses 6-9.
[14] Arthur (1997) offers a concise example.

[15] Drawing on Sandra Harding (1987: 2-3)), Smith makes the distinction between method and methodology in the following terms: A research methodology is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed, and a research method is a technique for gathering evidence (Smith 1999: 143).
[16] Turner (2001) discusses the difference between permission to speak and permission to write in her relations with Ngaanyatjarra artists working on mining issues. In referring to her limited discussion of the content of three paintings discussed orally in a conference setting, Turner notes: "These paintings are not landsca pes. They are 'selfscapes' that contain vast amounts of personal and Aboriginal cultural information, much of which can only be told by their creators" (2001: 31). See also Turner (2003).

Indigenous domains.[17] Like the traditional ecological knowledge that has so quickly become a source of new scientific knowledge, there is much debate to be had about academic appropriation of Indigenous narratives for academic purposes.[18]

Similarly, in environmental discourses, New Age and Deep Ecologist appropriation of Indigenous narratives, however, is an ever-present danger[19], as is academic appropriation of stories told in particular settings for particular purposes. Jane Jacobs grapples with this issue in her account of the Arrernte struggle to protect the Junction Waterhole sacred site / dam site known as Welatye Therre:

> *The Arrernte deliberately allowed selected members of the press to see and photograph the site. Reports by chosen journalists were sensationally explicit about the content of the site. … [Their] narrative flirts with the knowability of the sacred content of this site. Readers are simultaneously being told a story and being told it is a story they cannot know. The report [in The Age newspaper] continues, taking us into the explicit realms of the unknowable. I am not going to quote this section of the 1983 press report. This detail was released into the public domain under the specific pressures of development, not the conditions of the production of this chapter (Jacobs 1994: 185).*

As Jacobs goes on to discuss, however, "the idea of appropriation is at the very least complicated by Arrernte women's agency" (1994: 188). As we've seen from work which has challenged the power of colonization as a singular meta-narrative[20] and opened a different view of the frontier where

> *[t]he rights hand of conquest can be conceptualised as beneficent: it brings productivity, growth and civilisation where these had not existed before. The left hand, by contrast, has the task of erasing specific life. Indigenous peoples, their cultures, their conceptualisations of time and history, their sources of power and their systems of ecological knowledge and land-management practices … The left hand creates the tabula rasa upon which the right hand will build its civilisation (Rose 1999b: 11-12).*

Conclusions

This more complex view of the narratives of colonization open the possibility of multiple narratives, with multiple purposes – much like the storytelling that Smith (1999) refers to as part of her view of the Indigenous project that encompasses 'research'. A more pluralist approach – to ontology, to methodology, to purpose – will reshape our (Indigenous and academic) understanding of and relationships with 'research'. It demands an ethical engagement rather than merely transparent methods. It demands that we (academics) acknowledge Indigenous women's stories about water are complexly constructed and engaged than simply as alternative narratives of contested landscapes. The experiences of Ngarrindjeri women during the Hindmarsh Island Bridge conflict demonstrate this complexity powerfully in the context of both national and academic politics. Bell's extraordinary account of the Ngarrindjeri experience in the 1990s (Bell 1998), when a Royal Commission investigated their religious beliefs and, without testimony from the women involved, concluded that certain beliefs were fabricated, offers some powerful insights into the politics of knowledge. Bell's work carefully contextualizes the stories of Ngarrindjeri people in ways that are beyond the scope of a short paper by people who were not involved in the processes.[21] But it is worth noting that in this case, as in the Arrernte case referred to previously, it is complex relationships between water, identity, culture and power that constitute the key issues. And it is in these complex relationships that we need to reconsider the notion of 'water rights' and the rights of Indigenous women, not in some Eurocentric master narrative of 'water law' or 'native title'!

Gelder and Jacobs (1998) refer to the unsettling of master narratives in terms of uncanniness. The 'uncanny' experience has a capacity to be simultaneously both in and out of place, to

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[17] Note, for example, Sonja Peters' introductory comments to *Yarrtji*, a collection of life stories from six senior Ngarti and Kukatja women, where she suggests that the publication "is a journey with the women through their country and lives within a cultural, historical and contemporary context", but that it also became "a 'photo album' for the authors to share with their families" (Napanangka et al 1997: 12). These comments draw us back to questioning just what sort of 'journey' is constructed by such a text and how it might be used in various settings not anticipated by the authors.

[18] See eg Agrawal (1995) and Deloria (1995) for further discussion.

[19] See eg Jacobs (1994), Taylor (1997) for discussion.

[20] Eg Gill (2000), Cooper (2000), Baker (1999), Rose (1997, 1999b) *inter alia*.

[21] For further discussion see, eg Brunton (1996), Gelder & Jacobs (1997; 1998 Ch 7) and Edmunds (2001).

combine the familiar and the unfamiliar so that "the one always seems to inhabit the other" (Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 23). Indigenous storytelling within collaborative research processes is similarly uncanny. It can never be quite what it seems be at first speaking, because it is always being recontextualized. Likewise, the "Indigenous projects" that Smith (1999) refers can never quite be the sort of 'research' projects that will be familiar and comfortably at home within university settings. The project, it seems to us, is not to establish a research agenda for 'gender and water', but to recognise the "fluid bonds" that link Indigenous women to their wider societies (in all the ambivalence that we can muster for this term), and to pursue the task of decolonization of Indigenous women's lives; Indigenous peoples' domains. The collaborative task, then is to narrate new stories of self-determination and the exercise of rights that the dominant narratives of water management seek to erase, constrain and force to conform to a particular, and peculiarly (even uncannily) Eurocentric set of scientific and social scientific imaginaries.

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