

**Title of Paper**

Towards Relational Methodologies: Relationality and Ethical Know-How in  
Indigenous Research

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### **Title**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper I consider whether guidelines and principals such as those found in AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies (2012), are in themselves enough to achieve these aims if the fundamental premises of western research related to engagement in Indigenous contexts remain the same. Central to the discussion in this paper are the ethical challenges and dilemmas confronting “outsider” and non-Indigenous researchers working in the field of Indigenous research and the question of whether non-Indigenous researchers are able to occupy the space of Indigenous studies. I attempt to demonstrate how Indigenous notions of relationality and relatedness fundamental to protocols of engagement with Indigenous communities in research might enhance ethical know-how and impact of cross-cultural research, involving human participants across the general field of research in more profound and practical ways. Drawing on Indigenous scholarship, I examine issues such as positioning, privilege, appropriation and homogenization as they pertain to engagement within research contexts and consider how this might refigure the role of “outsider” researchers in ways that may help to imbed, more self-reflexive and more culturally appropriate modes of engagement in cross-cultural research.

### **Biography**

Estelle Barrett is an Honorary Professorial Fellow of the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne. She has co-edited three books with Barbara Bolt including *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, (2007; 2010), as well as reviews and articles in: *Cultural Studies Review*; *Zetesis*; *Real Time*; *Artlink*; *Text*; *Social Semiotics*; *Double Dialogues*; *Studies in Material Thinking*; *The International Journal of Critical Arts* and the *Journal of Visual Arts Practice*. Her monograph, *Kristeva Reframed*:

Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts, (2011), examines the relevance of the work of Julia Kristeva for the creative arts and creative arts research.

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## **Towards Relational Methodologies: Relationality and Ethical Know-How in Indigenous Research**

**Keywords:** Engagement, Relationality; Positioning; Ethics; Appropriation  
Indigenous Studies; Research

*I would like to acknowledge the Wathaurong people who are the traditional custodians of the land on which much of the material this work was developed. I would also like to pay my respects to Elders both past and present and to other Aboriginal people from many parts of Australia, especially my research students from The Institute of Koorie Education who have shared their knowledge.*

In pointing out the questionable ethics of western research and research on or with Indigenous peoples, Indigenous scholars have raised a number of vexed issues related to non-Indigenous or 'outsider' researchers conducting research within Indigenous communities. Central to these is a need for understanding Indigenous modes of engagement with specific groups of participants as well as with how notions of relationality may be extended to actual approaches and methodologies throughout the research process. In this paper I will first consider some key issues or barriers related to engagement with in the research context; these include: positioning of the researcher; homogenization through disregard for national and international diversity of First Nations peoples; a lack of acknowledgement and validation of oral tradition and storytelling as a mode of knowledge production and transmission; the appropriation and misappropriation of Indigenous knowledges by non-Indigenous researchers and finally the incommensurability of academic conventions with Indigenous ways of doing and knowing that can lead to the abstracting of theory from practice and from the ongoing material realities and the needs of communities - and in particular, struggles related to Indigenous land ownership and sovereignty.

## **Positioning**

In previous publications (Barrett 2018, 2019), I have positioned myself as a non-Indigenous academic and researcher with extensive experience and knowledge in the field of creative arts research methodologies - and for the past five years working with Indigenous researchers including those who are completing their Masters by research and PhD degrees across several disciplines. Through the latter, I have also come to understand positioning as a form of reiterative and situated ethical practice that neither erases history nor confers absolution; as Linda Tuhiwai Smith reminds us, Indigenous research is often a humble and humbling experience (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999: 6).

Fiona Nicoll observes that statements of positioning can be viewed as a 'coming out' or confessional utterance - a public revelation of membership to a community of people who have also made this revelation (2000: 381). However, not only is this something that Indigenous scholars already know of non-Indigenous researchers in the field, but as Sara Ahmed further observes, such declarations are not performative. They do not make whiteness visible to white people and do not remove underlying white privilege, racist perspectives or lead to self-conscious and critical understandings of whiteness as the norm or as the unmarked mark of the human. (Ahmed, 2004, n.p). Ahmed is concerned with examining how sayings are not always doings and with how, 'investment in saying as if saying was doing can actually extend rather than challenge racism' (Ahmed, 2004: np). Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang expose what they call 'settler fantasies' of easier paths to reconciliation and the reproduction of white privilege that results from self-confession or 'moves to innocence' that aim to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt and responsibility whilst at the same time, producing distractions and diversions from the realities of colonization (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 1-4).

Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000) argues that Feminist critiques of the homogenization of women are embodied in the experience of middle-class women and continue to be underpinned by privilege tied to colonisation and notions of a deracialized gendered universal subject. She uses the term 'subject position' to denote a socially constructed position, whereby one's behaviour is significantly shaped by 'what is expected of that position rather than by conscious intention' (Moreton-Robinson 2000, xii- xviii). Moreton-Robinson asserts that, recognising that there are multiple social locations from which to speak do not remove the issue of power and privilege and the incommensurability between Indigenous and colonial or

non-Indigenous perspectives based on the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty. However, she suggests that an Indigenous standpoint underpinned by the recognition of the legacy of dispossession, racism and sexism as well as those meanings grounded in different realities to those of white women, may open the way for voices from those locations to make differential experiences visible (Morton-Robinson, 2000: 58). Central to this perspective is the sharing by Indigenous peoples, of an inalienable connection to land as well as resistance and activism as an aspect of research. This is endorsed by Dennis Foley who draws on the work of the late Japanangka Errol West (1998) and Lester-Irrabina Rigney (1997) in his discussion of Indigenous ontology and fundamental principles of Indigenous standpoint theory, which argues that indigenous research should be conducted by Indigenous practitioners who are well versed in the both the affordances and limitations of western research paradigms; the research must be of benefit to the researchers' community and where possible, the traditional language should be the first form of recording (Foley, 2003: 50).

What is to be done then, other than for non-Indigenous researchers to remain silent or to vacate the arena of Indigenous scholarship and research? The overwhelming response to this question, from colleagues and Indigenous higher degree research students and scholars I have worked with over many years - for example, in developing guidelines for engagement through pre-ethics procedures (Barrett, Martin Koolmatrie et al. 2016 ) - has been their protest against this course of action as being similar to turning one's back on the other – a bodily act of protest, which like silence, is enacted to indicate resistance and refusal to enter into dialogue with the other. An allusion to the response by some Aboriginal people to the then opposition leader, Brendan Nelson's apology speech of 2008 (Eckermann, 2008). My hope is that non-Indigenous researchers might find self-reflexive ways to take on Ahmed's (2004) challenge – one which necessitates dialogue, but which, as Ahmed emphasizes, requires much harder work: working within racism as an ongoing reality in the present (Ahmed 2004 n.p.).

Nicoll (2000: 369) notes further, that finding ways to put an ethical politics of difference into practice will require that white race privilege to be owned and challenged. For scholars in the field, this turn also relates the question of audience address and the use, for example, of the third person passive or of first person plural forms of address which need qualification since they may imply on the one hand, membership of a privileged group or on the other the assumption of objectivity and

an homogenous audience. In this account, my use of 'I' is underpinned by Donna Haraway's notions of partial perspective and situated knowledge (1988).

Haraway contends that, because knowledge claims always emerge from subjective and situated positions, knowledges are therefore always provisional and partial. However, I follow her credo that, 'We do not seek partiality for its own sake, but for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible' (Haraway 1988, 584). My use of 'we' is underpinned by the hope that differential meanings and interpretations of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars may emerge through dialogue to advance a deeper ethical understanding and know-how. The use of 'we', here, also relates to the context of research and readership within a national and international field and pays particular respect to the illuminations afforded by Indigenous scholars and readers, not only in Australia, but also those from elsewhere. This leads into a further ethical issue that of homogenization.

### **Homogenization**

Because of the diversity of languages and cultures across indigenous communities both within and beyond Australia, some scholars have expressed concerns related to adopting a pan-Indigenous approach, or risking over generalization in the conduct and reporting of research. Whilst recognizing that each community faces its own particularities of culture and confronts problems and issues that are specific to lived experience, burgeoning Australian and International Indigenous scholarship and literature in the field suggest that some common threads link Indigenous modes of thought across various cultures and geographical locations. It is not my intention to homogenize groupings within Australia and globally nor, to conflate Indigenous experiences with that of non-Indigenous people. With regard to the former, my discussion is located within the context of the work of a range of both Australian and International Indigenous scholars, including that of Tuhiwai-Smith (1999), Dennis Foley (2003), Margaret Kovach (2005), Terence Kildea (2018), and others referred to within this chapter, who point out that despite the differing ontologies, epistemologies and languages of Indigenous or First Nation cultures, a number of core beliefs and values are common to most. This is reflected in the comment of Canadian Opaskwayak Cree Scholar Shawn Wilson who states that while differences between cultures is something to be acknowledged and embraced, commonalities are also evident across vast geographical terrains (Wilson, 1999, n.p).

Tuhiwai Smith notes that research raises numerous ethical, cultural and personal issues that emerge from diversity: clan, linguistic, age, gender and geographical boundaries and that Indigenous researchers often occupy insider/outsider positions. However, whilst the unqualified term 'Indigenous' used by outsider researchers may be seen as a collectivizing or homogenizing of distinct populations of vastly differing experiences (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999: 6), This term has more recently been used to strategically internationalize Indigenous struggles. The final 's' acknowledges that there are real differences between different Indigenous peoples, and allows different Indigenous groups to plan organize and struggle collectively for self-determination on local and global stages (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 7).

Engagement is two-way; whilst Indigenous researchers incorporate western approaches into their research, the practice of incorporating Indigenous modes and approaches is yet to become the norm in western research. I suggest that respectful undertaking of this by non-Indigenous scholars might highlight the value and importance of the emerging paradigm of Indigenous research to solve the real-world problems of Indigenous as well as other communities. Two terms "relationality" and "interpolation" have come to be the ones that have allowed me to articulate and exchange how Indigenous methodologies are relational and emerge as open conversations or yarning (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010), that involve reiterative and self- reflexive positioning – examining one's own ideas, values and that of others to bring individual and collective or group stories and world views into dialogue (Barrett, 2019).

### **Story Telling**

Story telling continues to be a primary mode of production and transmission of knowledge within Indigenous communities. I suggest that acknowledging the importance of storytelling, both as content and mode of knowledge production, underpins ethical know-how and engagement within and beyond the context of Indigenous research.

One of the underlying issues related to debates around the fictionalizing of history is the ongoing privileging of certain forms of discourse over others in western discourses. – a tendency that often leads to the dismissal of non-western modes knowledge production and transmission. However, within the context of Indigenous and creative arts research, it could be argued that is not so much the source, but



rather what a story signifies that matters more. Also sharing of stories and histories is a crucial aspect of engagement in Indigenous research.

Creation stories of indigenous peoples tell how place came into being as one with its peoples and other entities (Tuck and Wang, 2012: 6). The world is populated by spirits which connect places and people – bird calls, dreams and animals. Stories of these entities are used for moral education. Moreton-Robinson continues:

Indigenous spirituality encompasses the inter-substantiation of ancestral beings, humans and physiography. The spiritual world is immediately experienced because it is synonymous with the physiography of the land. In the life writing the reality of spirituality is a physical fact. (Moreton-Robinson, 2000:19)

In this context what in a western perspective may be viewed as ‘myth’ or as ‘imaginary’ images that have no direct correlation to objects in the outside world, in Indigenous practices have real material effects. The notions of the ‘fictional’ and ‘imaginary’ in a western sense, do not hold in relation to Indigenous story telling. Understanding this is crucial to engagement with Indigenous participants.

### **Appropriation**

A question that has worried me in working with Indigenous researchers and scholars and in my attempts to articulate what I have learned from this experience, is the issue of appropriation and misappropriation of Indigenous knowledge. In an earlier paper (Barrett, 2019) I discuss this in relation to relationality and interpolation as aspects of data collection and interpretation (Barrett, 2019). A strategy that researchers at the Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin University has been to develop a set of Pre-Ethics Guidelines that require researchers to negotiate all aspects and terms of their research including that related to ownership of intellectual property with community participants *prior* to the commencement of research (Barrett, Martin, Koolmatrie et al., 2015).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 3) suggests that the relative worth or worthlessness of research relates to both the material and practical benefits to communities, but also to the acknowledgement of alternative epistemologies that might offer more ethical groundings for future research. Within an institutional context and the international arena of research a measure of the worth of research also relates to impact and the

broader uptake and application of methodologies and outcomes. This raises an additional ethical dilemma for non-Indigenous researchers and their engagement with Indigenous knowledges: the issue of validation versus that of appropriation. Whilst institutional and other procedures attempt to ensure probity, Indigenous researchers advise that where 'outsiders' are involved in conducting research, repeated member checking with participants, and open consultation with Indigenous scholars are also crucial to ethical practice and arriving at shared perspectives. The notion of 'shared perspectives' relates to the final issue related to outsider engagement in Indigenous research to be discussed in this paper: the fundamental incommensurability between Indigenous and western ontologies and the unresolved issue of Indigenous sovereignty.

### **Incommensurability and Metaphorisation**

The incommensurability between Aboriginal and western worldviews, assumptions and epistemologies is derived from how the relationship to land articulates Aboriginal world views and spirituality. Morton- Robinson (2000) observes that to know an Indigenously constructed world one must experience it from within rather than imposing a conceptual framework from outside. Kildea<sup>1</sup> (2018) comments on the complexity Aboriginal spirituality; spirituality shapes ethical core of Aboriginal self, defines identity, relationship to land nature and community and also defines how Aboriginal people undertake meaning making (Kildea and Kumar 2018, 207). Indigenous knowledge is holistic and dependent on relationships to living, non-living and other entities. In this sense it is also relational moving between the objective and the subjective. Crucial to understanding Indigenous modes of being, doing and knowing is a recognition of interrelationship and continuity that exists between all entities, material, spiritual and metaphysical.

Hence, dilemmas confronting researchers revolve around whether it is possible to traverse the disparity between academic convention, Indigenous notions of spirituality and material communal needs. Tuck and Wang (2012) assert that disruption of Indigenous relationship to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological and cosmological violence (2012: 6). They point to the issue of abstracting theory from material realities through the metaphorising tendency of academic and theoretical discourse: "The problem with limiting ourselves to

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<sup>1</sup> The aboriginal knowledge in this article co-published by Terrence Kildea (deceased) and Margaret Kumar in 2018 is derived from Kildea's knowledge as an Aboriginal elder.

discourse about methodology is that we risk turning decolonization into a metaphor. Decolonization as a metaphor turns decolonization into an empty signifier (Tuck and Wang, 2012: 7). The western metaphor, *terra nullius* is a typical example given the negation of Indigenous sovereignty and ongoing material, social and economic ramifications of this with regard to the lived realities of Indigenous peoples. In her 1998 Wentworth lecture (to which I will return presently) Australian Yolngu Aboriginal leader, Raymattja Marika, uses a number of Yolngu words that reveal an alternative mode of doing and knowing. She points out how in ceremony (*manikay*) content and context are not separate. Language words are metaphors that link ideas to material reality. For example, *garma* refers to a place or open ceremonial meeting area where ideas are circulated and agreements reached. (Marika, 1998: 8) The word is also a metaphor for collaborative and engagement and learning. Unlike the knowledge held in western science's generalisations and laws, the knowledge or learning that emerges is always contextual, participatory and situated/related to location and land. Within a research framework this would help to ensure that theory and practice are closely linked and that outcomes are negotiated and directly related to lived experience.

## **Conclusion**

Given western research's tendency for abstracting universalising laws, it would seem then, that there are no empirical criteria available to make comparisons between Indigenous and western worldviews. Such a predicament poses seemingly insurmountable barriers to engagement. However, Kildea and Kumar note that like-minded Aboriginal researchers world-wide are seeking research methodologies and methods from both western and non-western epistemologies in order to position Aboriginal perspectives within the discourses and practices of the academy (Kildea and Kumar 2018, 205). This involves theory and practice not as appropriation, but as an acknowledgement of the value of Indigenous perspectives and providing some account of what forms of generative relationality they may produce within the broader research and knowledge community.

Here the notion of *ganma* as outlined in Raymattja Marika's, 1998 Wentworth lecture is illuminating. *Ganma* theory, which describes genuine two-way knowledge sharing to create something new is related to the Ganma Lagoon, 'an area within the mangroves where the salt water coming in from the sea meets the stream of fresh water coming down from the land' (Marika 1998, 7).

Marika recounts how the swelling and retreating of the tides and the wet season floods can be seen in the two bodies of the water. Marika uses this account to explain the coming together of two ways of thinking in the development of maths curriculum for Aboriginal students. It involves western and Yolngu modes of thought working together: Both cultures need to be presented in a way where each one is preserved and respected. 'This theory is *Yirritja*' (Marika, 1998: 7).

Marika's account demonstrates that metaphor is also a part of Indigenous modes of communication. Indigenous stories, art, song and dance contain vivid metaphors and allegories. The difference between these metaphors and western metaphors is the inextricable relation between metaphor and material reality. I suggest this connection articulates aesthetic modes of knowledge production that incorporate both objective knowledge and intuition – and further that such modes may go some way to linking discourse and practice and extending a dialogue between Indigenous and western modes of thought. This may provide researchers and scholars with a conceptual bridge for linking western and Indigenous modes of enquiry. However, as I have attempted to show in this paper, without an acknowledgement of the value of Indigenous scholarship and research, the inequities and incommensurabilities that underpin 'top-down' western research approaches and colonial structures will continue to present challenges to engagement.

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