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Leaching the poison – The importance of process and partnership in working with Yolngu

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Dedication: We wish to acknowledge and dedicate this paper to our co-author Dr. Raymattja Marika-Mununggiritj who passed away in May 2008, before this paper could be published. She was an important role model for our community and her work has inspired us and her memory continues to live on in our hearts. We also wish to acknowledge and dedicate this paper to another colleague Mrs. Badangthun Munyarryun, who passed away in 2007, whose work about the *ngathu* metaphor in the Yirrkala school inspired and motivated our paper.

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ABSTRACT

The popular construction of rural places as 'white' spaces has significant repercussions for ethnic, Indigenous and 'other' groups who do not always fit within prescribed dominant processes. This paper provides new insights for rural scholarship through an engagement with Indigenous specific experiences of governance and decision making in rural and remote areas. Drawing on powerful Yolngu metaphors from northeast Arnhem Land, Australia, it makes Yolngu law and perspectives visible. Like the cycad nut that has poison within its flesh, so have government impositions on Indigenous people in remote areas. This paper is written to leach the poison out, to let it be cleansed.

1. Introduction

Like the cycad nuts
That have poison within their flesh
So has our Government's policies and attitudes

Leach the poison out
Let it be cleansed

Issues of governance and decision making in postcolonial contexts are the consequence of the construction of places as 'white' spaces, in which the hegemonic status of whiteness denies the diversity of rural populations (Bonnett, 1996; Dyer, 1997; Pini, 2003; Gibson and Davidson, 2004; Nelson, 2008). The 'whiteness' of these spaces is constructed as culturally neutral and 'never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations' (Lipitz, 1998, 1). Indeed, in some rural areas whiteness is '(re)scripted as a solution, rather than as a source of, inequalities' (Vanderbeck, 2008, 1132). Emerging research into issues of race and ethnicity in rural studies is demonstrating the unfair stigmatisation of the rights of particular groups in rural settings. Holloway (2007) demonstrates the racialization of rural landscapes through her engagement with Gypsy populations and Hubbard (2005) discusses opposition to asylum centres as racialized and sexualized fears. Scholars discussing diversity in rural communities in relation to Belizean rural youth (Haug, 2002), schools of Mauritius (Erikson, 1993), ethnicity in China (Harrell, 1995) and Indigenous issues in schools in Pakistan (Kazi, 1987) provide evidence of the ways that the needs of diverse

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communities often do not fit within the state's neat management categories and are therefore alienated in policy approaches.

Australian scholars argue that 'whiteness' in Australian countrysides is not simply the presence of 'white' ethnicities but that 'whiteness' erases and silences other ethnicities (Gibson and Davidson, 2004). There is reluctance to recognise the 'governmental status' of Indigenous groups in the management of resources (Palmer, 2006) and in making decisions for their own lives. Power imbalances and institutional racism are embedded within formal governance structures that emanate from the state (Carter and Hill, 2007). In July 2007, when we first started to write this paper, the Australian Howard Government announced an Intervention in Indigenous Affairs which we believe provides evidence of racially motivated discrimination into the lives of Indigenous Australians denying Indigenous agency and governance[1]. Using the Intervention as an example, this paper contributes to rural scholarship by providing Indigenous counter-knowledge for understanding rural/remote places and guidance on how best to work with Indigenous people when governing from a distance. In this paper, we talk from a Yolngu perspective. Yolngu are the Indigenous people living in northeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia. Whilst there is uniqueness in our discussion about Yolngu, we believe that our discussion resonates with experiences of Indigenous groups around the world who also challenge state governance structures (see Sparke, 1998; Koschade and Peters, 2006; Shaw et al., 2006).

The application of 'white' bureaucratic procedures and impositions in so-called 'remote' areas is of significant concern to us. The structures and processes framed by governments operating at a distance (O'Malley, 1998) position 'others' as 'rural' or, in the case of Indigenous people in Northern Territory Australia, as 'remote.' Indigenous specific cultural governance and decision-making structures are then also imagined as being 'remote' from the 'mainstream.' For Indigenous Australians, however, it is connection to country[2], to our physical and spiritual homelands, that makes one feel 'in place.' We are not remote, but at home on our country despite its distance (geographically and ontologically) from 'mainstream' administrative centres. We challenge the idea that it is Indigenous people that need to have their 'capacity built,' based on Eurocentric understandings of capacity (see Howitt and Suchet-Pearson, 2006), and argue that bureaucrats, policy makers, researchers and others wishing to work with Indigenous people need to learn to see outside their own cultural frameworks.

Issues of visibility and voice are fundamental to challenging colonial power relations and racialised rural landscapes and decolonising academic disciplines (Smith, 1999; Louis, 2007). Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak (1988) articulates the issue of visibility and audibility of research participants by questioning whether the Subaltern can speak. Spivak seeks to reorient the task of postcolonial studies to examine the operation of power that has so effectively silenced and objectified the subaltern and challenges academics to speak *with* rather than to speak *for* or merely try to listen *to* the historically mute subaltern.

This paper addresses Spivak's challenges through co-authorship between three senior Yolngu women and one non-Yolngu post-graduate student. By working together, we want to engage with Smith's (1999, 125) concept that research should be 'about bringing to the centre and privileging Indigenous values, attitudes and practices'. By repositioning our discussion from the particularity of Indigenous context we seek to unsettle the universal claims of dominant society and 'whiteness' in rural imaginaries and scholarship (Louis, 2007; Howitt et al., 2008).

As authors, we do not aim explicitly to position our paper within a research paradigm, rather we draw our authority as traditional owners, from our contextualised experiences and knowledges. In a similar way to Watson and Huntington (2008) we challenge the traditional ethnographic positioning of non-Indigenous authors as 'subjects' and Indigenous people as 'objects' of research. In Watson and Huntington's (2008, 259) words: 'this narrative style serves to recognise the authorship not normally accepted as legitimate expertise unless the 'consultant' is cited as evidence'. We hope that the authority of Indigenous ways of knowing can be embraced by the readership, to contribute to Whatmore's (2004, 1362) ideas of 'actively redistributing expertise beyond engaging with other disciplines or research fields to engaging knowledge practices and vernaculars beyond the academy.' This autoethnographic approach is a mechanism of inserting Indigenous perspectives within a Eurocentric paradigm (see Pratt, 1992; Butz and Besio, 2004) and in so doing reconfiguring these spaces.

This paper has been written and developed through a series of conversations between the four authors to 'situate' our knowledges through 'conversation' (Haraway, 1999). It stems from our concerns and frustrations working within existing structures and processes and the associated impacts. The writing has been a cross-cultural process in which we have worked together to articulate ideas, concerns and commentary on current Indigenous affairs policy. We come from different perspectives and we want to explicitly recognise these differences. However, we collected ideas and prepared it together, as women – just like the appropriate process for collection of *ngathu* (cycad nut) discussed in the paper. We worked collectively to bring forward our experiences from Yolngu and Ngapaki perspectives.

We decided to use the term 'we' in this paper because we are working together[3]. Writing as 'we' is not intended to create a dualism of Yolngu/non-Yolngu as we recognise the multiple and fluid identities between and within these groups (see Shaw et al., 2006). Neither do we wish to position Yolngu perspectives as superior. Instead, writing from Yolngu perspectives, we engage with the specificity of experience in an effort to unsettle the dominance of hegemonic 'whiteness' in rural spaces (see Howitt et al., 2008). 'We' do not purport to represent the diversity of voices of our community in our discussion here. However, we draw on our communal knowledge traditions and metaphors to discuss issues of process and governance that are important to all Yolngu. As per Yolngu custom, we requested permission to share these metaphors from the custodians of the knowledge and sought clarification about the messages for broader audiences. In this way we are confident that the custodians of the knowledge share our concerns and our arguments in this paper.

[1] The 'Intervention' was based on an 'emergency response' to child abuse in Indigenous communities in Northern Territory Australia. Following the release of the *Little Children are Sacred Report* (Wild and Anderson, 2007) the Federal Government introduced 'emergency' measures to address child abuse. Their approach introduced special legislation, removed the permit system for Aboriginal lands, overturned the *Racial Discrimination Act* to quarantine Indigenous people's income and introduced 'law and order' into communities. 'Coercive reconciliation' (Altman and Hinkson, 2007) is an edited book, coordinated as a prompt critique to the Intervention demonstrating the paternalistic racism evident in this approach.

[2] Country is an Aboriginal English term that refers to land or sea. When Aboriginal people refer to their country, they refer to their home, their hearth, where they belong. Being 'on country' is an Aboriginal English term for visiting their country and being in place.

[3] It was a collective decision to use the term we, to position ourselves from the Yolngu perspective. We acknowledge that one of our authors is non-Yolngu but her involvement in our community for four years, her work in our community institutions and adoption into our society means that we are comfortable including her as the 'we' of the paper.