ELSEVIER

Women's Studies International Forum 28 (2005) 357–368

WOMEN'S STUDIES INTERNATIONAL FORUM

www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

Striving for a common language: A white feminist parallel to Indigenous ways of knowing and researching☆

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Synopsis

In "Striving Towards a Common Language" I outline an innovative methodology which consists of three strands encompassing an Indigenous-centred approach based on Indigenous Self-determination (participatory action research), relationship as central to socio-cultural dynamics, and feminist phenomenology. This methodology – which I call "Living On the Ground" – was created in direct concert with 13 Indigenous women elders who were my hosts, teachers and *walytja* (family) as we worked together to create a dynamic cultural revitalisation project for their community, one of Australia's most remote Aboriginal settlements. I explain the processes I went through as a White Irish-Australian woman living with the women elders and their 11 dogs in a one room tin shed for two years, and tell of how the nexus of land, Ancestors, and the Tjukurrpa (Dreaming) combined with White cultural practices came to inspire a methodology which took the best from Indigenous and (White) feminist ways of knowing and of being.
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Introduction

The women elders of Wirrimanu[1] in Western Australia's Great Sandy Desert are widely respected for their knowledge of *Yawulyu* (Women's Law), and for the strength of their ritual practice. Living a nomadic lifestyle before they settled in the Catholic Mission from the 1940s to the 1960s, they were raised in the ways of the *Tjukurrpa* (Dreaming/Law, the cosmic universal life-force). They retain their relationship with their ancestral lands and are passionate in their belief of the role of *Yawulyu* and Indigenous cultural practice in strengthening their people's pride in their Aboriginality and healing the traumatic effects of White[2] cultural colonialism.

The elders' determination to care for their younger generations resulted in the creation of the Kapululangu Women's Law and Culture Centre. Situated on the Women's Law Ground, on the outskirts of the settlement, Kapululangu established a *Tjilimi* (women's camp). This gynocentric territory provided a place where women's religious and customary practices could flourish as the women elders celebrated, practiced and enjoyed their cultural life. It was also a place

☆ NB: This article strongly draws from Zohl dé lshtar's PhD Thesis and her upcoming book *Holding Yawulyu: White Culture and Black Women's Law*, Spinifex Press, 2005.

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doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2005.05.006

for the passing on of their knowledge as elders to their middle-generation daughters raised in the Catholic dormitories who have been most heavily affected by the assimilation era,[3] and to their young women and girls who will one day have to take their place in a globalised world. The *Tjilimi* was my home and the elders were my teachers from July 1999 to July 2001.

Invited to the settlement by the women elders to establish and administer their women's organisation and its activities, my research project fitted within the Kapululangu initiative (dé Ishtar, 2003). It was contained within their living environment, relied upon their participation (in that it was tied to the activities of their Kapululangu organisation), and was directed by their expressed and ever-changing needs and aspirations.

As my research project coincided with the creation of the Kapululangu Women's Law and Culture Centre, it was essential that I developed a methodological design which was rooted in a strong action basis which involved the elders directly, reflected their cultural parameters, and was unobtrusive in their lives. My project needed to be flexible, responsive and responsible to the elders' needs, both immediate and longer term, and to resonate with their lives and include their realities — their concepts of the meaningful.

The outcome was a methodology which responded to the depth of Indigenous women's knowledge and the passion of feminist commitment. It incorporated Relationship, Feminist Phenomenology and Indigenous Self-determination (participatory action research). These are two foundations to this methodology. One is Indigenous, which issues from the experiences of the Wirrimanu women elders as they lived their cultural initiative. The other is radical feminism and stems from my own involvement in the Kapululangu project as its coordinator. This article seeks to explain how the two tracks were synthesised to create a praxis that, encompassing an Indigenous-centred approach, utilised and developed both.

Striving towards a common language

The focus of my research was White culture, and its historical impact on the Indigenous elders' cultural practices and on their contemporary organisation. I believe that the challenge facing White feminist researchers is to find ways of turning our gaze upon our own society with the aim of actively dismantling our inherited cultural processes which oppress and subjugate Indigenous peoples, and ourselves. There is an urgent need for feminist sociological exploration of White cultural practices, epistemologies and ontologies and their impact on Indigenous women's Law and on the cultural well-being of Indigenous peoples as a whole. Radical feminism asserts that researchers positioned on the delivery-side of racism, and colonisation *should be*, are *capable* of being, and are *obliged* to be just as passionate as its recipients, and should take responsibility by contributing their skills towards fundamental social transformation in joint ventures with Indigenous women.

Knowledge is constituted differently depending upon experience influenced by location and context. While Indigenous researchers are positioned to provide a critique of colonisation and racism from the position of the colonised (Caufield, 1979: 311, in Wolf, 1996: 15), members of colonising societies have the potential to access related insights from "inside" the colonising society. Just as Indigenous women have access to deeper insight into what it is to be an Indigenous woman within a racist society, White women are positioned to contribute perspective into what it is to be a White women within the same society, although this potential is not always activated. As our lives are inter-related, so are its solutions (Collins, 1991; Said, 1993, 1995).

In researching with Indigenous people, White feminists need to engage in reflexive involvement. As it is impossible to escape the cultural attitudes and values (pre-judgements/prejudices) in which one has been socialised, White feminist researchers can use these pre-judgements as "building blocks" for extending knowledge of one's self and thus insights into one's own society's enculturated prejudices and behaviours (Gadamer, 1976, in Nielsen, 1990: 28) and to take note of the patterns of relationship between the colonised and the coloniser (Gorelick, 1996: 40).

By turning our gaze upon ourselves and our own society, White researchers can investigate the interactions of White society with Indigenous society, and the effects of Euro-centric behaviours on both societies. An examination of the interaction between the two societies is imperative, for to ignore half of the

picture is to defeat the endeavour at its outset. To achieve success in this project, White women need to work in partnership with Indigenous women, giving primacy to Indigenous social and cultural concepts and mores. For White feminists to forge a partnership with Indigenous women, they need to develop a methodology that can navigate two divergent cultures, two ways of knowing and of being.

This sentiment formed the framework for the Kapululangu research project. The processes and strategies which developed through the life-cycle of the project – its birth, growth, and evolution – were immersed in a relationship between the women elders and myself as partners in that unfolding initiative.

Living on the ground

My research resonated with the guidelines offered by Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith in that it was related to being Indigenous, connected to Indigenous philosophy and principles, based on the validity and legitimacy of Indigenous culture, and concerned with Indigenous peoples' struggle for autonomy over cultural well-being (Smith, 1999: 185). Whether carried out by Indigenous or Other-than-Indigenous and White researchers, inquiry in and with Indigenous host communities is obliged to respect Indigenous cultural paradigms, position authoritative Indigenous leaders and elders as guide, involve the researcher intimately within the local life style, and be sustained by relationships with the elder and their families and with the land and its multiple entities (Abdullah & Stringer, 1997; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Fielder, Roberts, & Abdullah, 2000; Smith, 1992, 1999, 2000).

I sought to develop a research methodology which drew upon the women elders' knowledge and ways of knowing and, fitting with Indigenous process, incorporated the women elders' world-view, their cultural base and their ways of being. At the same time, it was also important to base my methodology on my own perspectives and the processes of knowledge which came from my experience as a feminist *Kartiya* (White). The research had to resonate with who I was. It had to reflect my own personal ways of thinking and behaving, and thus be intricately linked with and defined by my skills, my strengths and weaknesses. And it had to respond to my obligations and my accountabilities, not only to the women elders but also to my own *Kartilya*-based influences. Thus I developed a research template which I have called "Living On the Ground", which grounded in relationship, bridged Indigenous and feminist knowledge, required the researcher to be passionately involved, and produced tangible outcomes which immediately benefited the project's hosts.

Grounded in Relationship: The research methodology needed to fit within the parameters and templates of the women elders' lifestyles, their knowledge and their ways of perceiving their world. Respecting Indigenous lifeways meant that I had to actively engage in relationship, not only with the women elders, but with their families and the wider community. Further, the research needed to proceed as much as possible under the direction of the elders, and certainly with their guidance in all matters pertaining to culture—their religious and customary knowledge and practices.

Bridge Indigenous and Feminist Knowledge: The methodology needed to incorporate both Indigenous and feminist ways of knowing. Positioned within an Indigenous environment, I had to attune myself to Indigenous ways of learning which emphasised learning through the senses, rather than through the intellect. I needed to remain open to the metaphysical knowledge which, while not favoured by White academic inquiry, influence the women's lives on a constant basis. I decided to use a feminist phenomenological praxis to facilitate my involvement with the women and their community.

Passionately Involved and Immediately Useful: The methodology had to be structured so that it facilitated the women elders' aspirations for the cultural well-being of their grandchildren, families, and community. It not only had to be of direct, immediate use to them, but it had to belong to them, to be directed by them, and it had to incorporate their ways of effecting change. At the same time, to be successful, it had to be able to extend the women elders' influence into the dominant White world that governed so much of their lives.

All of these factors contribute to each other, creating a triptych which encompasses the creative dynamics of Indigenous-centred self-determination, draws on relationship with self, others and the land, and is embedded in phenomenological sensitivity. I call this

methodological umbrella "Living on the Ground", for it places the researcher within the terrain of connectivity and encourages them to engage fully with their environment. When White researchers work with Indigenous hosts, this process can contribute towards culturally unburdened communication, for it is not only enlightening but it also challenges culturally-held perceptions, beliefs, and misunderstandings.

Relationship as praxis

When I arrived in Wirrimanu, rather than settling in the White enclave, I moved immediately to the Women's Law Ground (on the elders' invitation) where I joined the elders in forming the Kapululangu *Tjilimi*. And so I entered the women elders' world. "Living on the Ground" with the elders, I actively set out to adapt to their ways. Keen to fit the research methodology within the parameters and templates of the women elders' life patterns, their knowledge and their ways of perceiving their world, I intentionally positioned myself so that I lived under their guidance and direction, and with their demands.

Relationship is the most important social factor for Wirrimanu's people: the union of self–family–land–Ancestors forms the key tenet of all aspects of identity. Life is communal and shared. Autonomous persons operate through the independence made possible by responsibility to family and kin (Bell, 1984, 1998; Myers, 1986; Rose, 1992, 1994). These interactions were portrayed in intricate patterns of shared and mutual responsibility and reciprocity that were based on kinship.

When I took up residence with the elders, I did not do it lightly. I was fully aware that by doing so I entered into their world and I placed myself willingly into the role of "daughter/niece/granddaughter", accepting the full depth of commitment that that status entailed. I adapted to what, even for me, was an extremely minimalist lifestyle (and I have, by choice, "roughed it" most of my adult life). It was a choice that demanded a high degree of fealty which often challenged and extended my emotional, cognisant and physical parameters. However, the adaptation was not all one way; the women elders had to adapt to having a *Kartiya* around them all the time, and to the issues of relating with an alien culture that that brought up for them.

Our relationship forged the research project. Not only was it the basis of a shared commitment to joint action, but it also provided the circumstances for my learning. The women elders were keen to teach me, to "grow me up" in their Law, their stories, and to share with me the markers of their experiences with *Kartiya* society.

My residence at the *Tjilimi* enabled, and required, me to use "deep immersion" as the major component of my methodology. I chose this method in part, because I wanted to lessen the influence of my cultural practices and values upon the women elders. Diane Wolf suggests that immersion "provides one way to downplay one's privileges and difference, and it may provide a less intrusive and obtrusive methodology" (Wolf, 1996: 9). There are risks with this technique. Some researchers describe culture shock as withdrawal from self, disempowerment, and dependency (Wolf, 1996: 9–10). I too felt the weight of immersion. For example, I could not read for three months because I sensed that private reading in front of the women (who did not read or write) created a barrier. But I was missing reading terribly. One day I found a *Phantom* comic blowing along the ground, I retrieved it and slunk off to the toilet, devouring it word for word. The *Phantom* is one of the most racist, misogynistic comics to manifest in White society but I was hooked on it! Similarly, I also rejected the idea of taking notes in public as too disruptive and distracting, and managed to keep a diary only by staying up late into the night, long after the elders had gone to sleep. After six months I ached so much for the ease of understanding which comes when one is surrounded by one's own language fluently spoken, that I was actually delighted when the women elders announced that they wanted to buy a television. I had learnt that living in a society which is not one's own is psychologically exhausting. The Kapululangu women elders have to do this every day; I did it by choice.

The immersion technique has an effect on the host community as much as it does on the researcher. I remained distinctly myself – with all my idiosyncrasies, needs, aspirations, worries, and concerns – and I brought an alien cultural dynamic with me when I entered our shared living environment. In the *Tjilimi* context I was the "Other" (and I was aware of that constantly). It was I who was alien. I had been raised and socialised in – and benefited from – a culture that

was not only diametrically opposite to the elders' own, but had historically proven itself to be antithetic to their well-being. Even while I was living with the women, I inevitably continued to live also in the world of privilege, control, and power, affording me for no other reason than that I was White. While I strove to find a way to lessen that impact as much as possible, there was no way that I could leave my *Kartiya*-ism at the gate when I entered the Tjilimi. As Diane Wolf says, "Successful immersion may create more sensitive researchers and ethnographies but cannot change where we come from and where we return to" (Wolf, 1996: 9).

The primary reason I used "immersion" techniques was because I was conscious that to do otherwise would have undermined the very reason for the research project in the first place – that of strengthening Indigenous cultural practices and values. It was also a way of better understanding the elders' "natural standpoint" (Ridler, 1996: 246) so that I could assist them with their project of protecting their culture. What I sought was a "*mutuality* (as opposed to *difference*)" (Ridler, 1996: 247) through the ability to resonate (reach a sensibility of feeling–thought in tune) with the elders (Wikan, 1990: 268–276, in Ridler, 1996: 247).

The researcher's ability to access this symbiotic awareness is limited by the constraints of her own cultural enculturation. "[W]hen one is not grounded in the traditions or does not share the attitudes and biases of the group" (Carty, 1996: 124), one is forever a stranger (Simmel, 1921). Linda Carty recalled how (although Caribbean-born and researching in the land of her birth) she felt "naked", erased, and excluded, with few tools with which to navigate a difficult terrain (Carty, 1996: 124). Brackette Williams points out that it is often the researcher who is viewed and analysed, as the hosts – the "translated" – engage in "translating the translator" (Williams, 1996: 72). Australian anthropologist Toni Bauman recalls situations when, working in Indigenous communities, she was left in no doubt that "it is I who am the goldfish in the bowl, under the constant gaze of the 'Other'" (Bauman, 2001: 218).

There were many differences between the women elders and myself but language was perhaps the most apparent. Although I could grasp the occasional Kukatja word, it was only because the elders habitually included isolated English words and sentences in their speech that we managed to live around the edges of my disability. Because it was necessary to turn my language limitations around, I learned to be a fluent reader of bodies. Although I could never be as good at it as the elders themselves, it was this focus on the body with its multiple languages to which I turned as one of the main sources of my data and the instrument of its collection. This encouraged the development of feminist phenomenology as a key aspect of my research design.

Feminist phenomenology as praxis

The methodology which permeated my research project developed organically in the field as I lived under the guidance and direction of the Indigenous women elders. I had entered the study with the idea that I would collect substantive oral histories and opinions that I could then build into a report which gave voice to the women themselves, but I soon learnt that the depth of the Kapululangu experience could not be captured on tapes. I did attempt a few taped interviews in the early stages, but the women were extremely uncomfortable, and their answers awkward.

Even when the women elders spoke English (their third or fourth language), our words often missed each other because we were operating out of different cultural concepts. Many of the questions that raced through my head, particularly in the first months of my stay in Wirrimanu, did not translate cross-culturally. I found that whenever I asked a woman "Why?" something had happened, she would respond emphatically, "It is the Law!" This happened so often, even concerning what I thought to be mundane matters, that I began to wonder if the problem lay with the word. So I translated "Why?" into the local Kukatja language ("*nganaku?*"), and got exactly the same response. The problem lay with my concepts. I learnt that one does not question the Law. If I was to understand the women elders of Wirrimanu, I had to open myself up to their ways of thinking, their ways of transmitting knowledge. I had to find other ways, ways that did not simply add the women's words to my own pre-conceived thoughts but which arose out of, and revolved around, their Indigenous knowledge and sciences. And so consequently, within the first month I had shelved the tape recorder and had started

to focus on simply living (living simply) with the women.

I began to engage with the elders in a research framework which recognised that Indigenous knowledge is grounded in oral traditions, and thus learning is based on the senses – visual, aural, and tactile (Silko, 1990) – and "acquired through observation, practice and the guidance of *kaumatua* [respected elders]" (Smith, 1999: 173). Throughout my time at the *Tjilimi* the women intentionally taught me their culture by including me in the everyday events of living. I learned by watching and by participating. If an elder told me something that I did not fully understand, I waited for another spontaneous story-lesson or for an event to occur that would explain what had happened. I had to experience something two or three times and fit pieces of information together until I slowly came to comprehend. Calling this incremental way of building knowledge "patchwork learning", I came to respect that it is the learning path which was important, rather than the definitive answer. Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose also realised the value of waiting for knowledge to develop. "An event happens, but to understand it fully one must wait to see what flows from it. The process of knowing is built up over time" (Rose, 1992: 226). To gather information is one thing but to fully comprehend, one must synthesise knowledge.

Thus my research became grounded in feminist phenomenology — the study of experience within a feminist framework. According to Michael Jackson, the value of phenomenology is that it focuses on "being-in-the-world" (Jackson, 1996: 1) ... to "describe human consciousness in its lived immediacy, before it is subject to the theoretical elaborations or conceptual systematizing" (Jackson, 1996: 2). It explores the context of people's lifeworld – their *Lebenswelt* (Husserl, 1931) – "the world of immediate experience, of sociality, common sense, and shared experience" (Jackson, 1996: 16, also 1983, 1989). Phenomenology recognises that, people live in community with others, construct their meaning with others, and are able to change their world (Bourdieu, 1977: 184, 1991; Schutz, 1967). We communicate with each other through our physical encounters and to the extent that we communicate, there is an intersubjective exchange, we touch on each other's life world, and thereby gain limited access to an understanding of each other's lived realm.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964a, 1964b, 1968) pointed out that meaning resides not in the mind, nor is some external agent called "society", but in the lived experience of everyday life, which is felt and expressed through and upon the body. He posited that body activity is primal. Meaning is in the action itself. Body comes before mind. Mind is constructed by experience. And it is these meaning which are acted by, in and on the body which are then thought about, reflected on, in the mind. "My body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my...'objectifying function'" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 140–141). He calls this process of understanding praktognosia (practical knowledge).

"The dawn of language lies in emotional gesticulation," writes Monika Langer (Langer, 1989: 62), critiquing Merleau-Ponty (1962). Michael Jackson asserts that "the first 'language' of life is gestural, postural and bodily" (Jackson, 1983: 132): people think through their bodies. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of knowledge as expressed and conveyed through bodily postures, facial expressions, gestures – his *hexis*, the relationship between social world and inscription on bodies – includes all the unremarkable ways that people move themselves, present themselves, and mark space with their bodies (Bourdieu, 1984: 466, in McDowell, 1999: 41; also Bourdieu, 1977). Gestures are perceived as emotions, not as *representations* of emotions: "[t]he fist shaken under my nose does not prompt me to think of anger; it *is* the anger," asserted Merleau-Ponty (1964a: 184, in Langer, 1989: 60).

Language is much more than verbal. Non-verbal means of communication are much more powerful than the verbal, and "a substantial part of the social meaning of a message is carried via non-verbal channels" (Singelis, 1994: 275). Indeed, non-verbal means of communication are "multichanneled," consisting of visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile channels, which work together to convey a message (Singelis, 1994). Spoken language is overrated as a means of communication. Ted Singelis (1994) notes that when we are working in a second verbal language, the reliance on non-verbal communication increases significantly. Tamara Kohn (1994) recalls that her experience in the field had taught her that imposed muteness heightens the senses, which, as they kick into gear, become highly tuned to the subtlest of bodily

gestures, tones of voice, taste, smells, and touch of one's lived-in space. Paul Stoller realised that "taste, smell and hearing are often more important for the Songhay [of Niger] than sight, the privileged sense of the West. In Songhay one can taste kinship, smell witches, and hear ancestors" (Stoller, 1989: 5). For the Kapululangu elders, coming from four different language groups, with each woman speaking at least two Indigenous languages and understanding others, speech is not their preferred medium of communication. Instead they tend to place more importance on the five senses, and have actively honed their sixth psychic sense to keep them in touch with the *Tjukurrpa* which forms the foundation of their culture.

Sense is primal. We are sensibility. Our consciousness, our being-in-the-world, arises from and draws upon our senses. It is here, through and in our bodies, that the communication between our worlds are relayed to us. Our senses are inseparable from the spatiality of our existence, and all senses are co-existent and mutual prior to reflection (Langer, 1989: 19). It is impossible to think without first sensing the world, and this reflexivity draws on all sensations.

Indigenous people raised in the ways of their ancestors know this connectivity intimately. Their customary understanding extends far beyond the reaches of White science and many elders (such as the Kapululangu women) remain capable of fathoming the generative force of metaphysical creation. Body is the base of knowledge. It is reflected in relationships with self, kin, ancestors, place, land, and *Tjukurrpa* (Bell, 1984, 1998; Jackson, 1983; Meggitt, 1954; Rose, 1991, 1992; Tamisari, 1998). The Kapululangu women elders have retained the knowledge of how to transverse the boundary between body and world (physical and metaphysical), and how to experience the depths of the sacred triad of body–mind–spirit.

Through insisting on the primacy of our senses, phenomenological processes provide a means by which White feminist researchers can begin to overcome the limitations of their bifurcated cultural structures. The skill is in perceiving the body within its *habitus* (its cultural milieu) (Bourdieu, 1984), in the active conduct of its everyday secular and sacred behaviours, both in its loneness and in its dialogue with other bodies.

Tapping into this source, I learnt to look between and behind the words. I learnt to read gestures, to grasp at the odd word (English or Kukatja), to listen for tones and undercurrents filtering through conversations, to participate with the women elders as they meandered skillfully through their days, and to watch the interactions between people, and between people and their world. I learnt to see the tracks in people's interactions, to trace the patterns. Engaging all my senses, I learnt to use all of my body as a vehicle for my learning — my physical, intellectual and spiritual body. I learnt to dream and to feel and believe in the *Tjukurrpa*. Living on the Ground *with* the women elders enabled me to experience the women's world: not in place *of* them, but *with* them.

This intimacy with the women's lives eased cross-communication, and our mutual empathy provided a bridge between ourselves, and our worlds. By empathy I mean the ability to open oneself to the other while maintaining one's own integrity. This is similar to Maria Mies "double-consciousness" — the ability to relate to the other's experience through a feeling of closeness, while actively maintaining distance (Mies, 1991: 79). But it goes beyond the intellectual–emotional process to sensuously connect – bodily – with another person. In moments when I have been engaged in deep ceremony with the elders, I have experienced the full depth of this mutual communication. The feeling is so vibrant that it opens paths into the metaphysical.

It is my understanding that many of the women elders access this plane on a constant basis, with some residing there almost permanently with occasional forays into the more secular side of life as demand arises. It is from this place that the Indigenous elders, raised in the full dimensions of Indigenous notions of self, blend with the *Tjukurrpa*. While spoken language is a source of meaning, it is in those places beyond words that much knowledge is heard and expressed. There are contexts where language is inappropriate, or not used, or where utterances are barely offered. To reach this meaning, the feminist researcher draws on the language of the body. Spoken language cannot replace sensuous embodiment; it is but one element of human expression.

Indigenous self-determination as praxis

As I have explained previously, the research project developed out of the women elders' determination to

revitalise their cultural practices and to pass their values onto their grandchildren. Strategies were developed which relied on the elders' abilities to formulate their needs and to physically engage in practical events that would result in their desired outcome. That strategy the elders called "Kapululangu". Kapululangu was based on the notion of self-determination: the inalienable right of a people to define their own needs and to determine what actions they are going to take to fulfil those needs. The women elders were determined, prepared, inspired, inspiring, and resolved to instigate social changes and, as their coordinator and researcher, I became involved in their ambitions.

Radical feminism, with its commitment to social transformation, has always maintained an intimate relationship with activism (Bell & Klein, 1996; Klein & Hawthorne, 1997; Mies, 1991; Morgan, 1978). Linda Tuhiwai Smith has identified both Indigenous and feminist research as being committed to bringing immediate beneficiary results to the host community (Smith, 1999: 166). Although the links between participatory action research, feminism, and Indigenous research are relatively recent, they all derive from a shared commitment to and involvement in active transformation. Reason and Hilary (2001) describe action research as a verb, the intent of which is to heal the planet and its people through research based on engaging with the full re-sacralisation of the world, the valuing of creation for its own right as a living presence.

Arising from specific local contexts, participatory action research is unique to every moment, every circumstance. It is flexible, adaptive, and sensitive to its hosts (Gianotten & de Wit, 1991: 67). It involves its hosts in all aspects of its development from conception through to outcome and relies on the people's "common sense" (Fals-Borda, 1991: 149), their "critical consciousness" (Gianotten & de Wit, 1991: 65). It assists them to "discover and apply their half-hidden science – their own 'people's knowledge' – for their own benefit" (Fals-Borda, 1991: 149).

Participatory action research's strength arises from its "freedom to explore and to recreate" (Fals-Borda, 1991: 149). This autonomy is exercised by the hosts themselves, working in mutual interest with the researcher. This transforms the researcher/researched relationship as all participants work together to seek new knowledge and practice strategies to overcome local problems (Fals-Borda, 1991: 153). Participatory action research's commitment to the principle of autonomy and identity (ownership) in collective research rests, Orlando Fals-Borda asserts, on the observation that people "cherish and fight for their culture and their personality to the last, and for good reason – their lives depend on it" (Fals-Borda, 1991: 153). It is the role of the researcher to facilitate this process of self-determination. Thus the Indigenous Self-determination (participatory action research) praxis provided the medium for the establishment of the Kapululangu Women's Law and Culture Centre, and for its diverse cultural program.

Kapululangu was established through a series of gatherings (September 1998, April 1999, June 1999, and July to August 1999) in which the women discussed their perceptions of the problems which challenged them and their families, identified the causes of those problems, and decided on some strategies which they thought might alleviate those problems. The elders identified petrol sniffing, alcoholism, early pregnancy, and domestic/family violence as their primary concerns. Although they were concerned for all members of their community, it was the children and youth they worried for most. They also believed that the trauma evident in their community had resulted from their people beginning to "lose" their cultural knowledge. This was occurring, the elders asserted, because people were losing connection with their land, and had few opportunities to learn and practice their cultural heritage. They wanted to teach their grandchildren "culture" to "bring them up properly". To do this they wanted to take children camping and teach them about country; to tell the girls and young women stories and teach them hunting and how to dance; and to assist their menfolk in engaging in similar work with the older boys and young men. They thus decided to establish the Kapululangu Women's Law and Culture Centre which would access funding and develop a series of cultural programs. They would also establish a *Tjilimi* where they could live together, thus enhancing their opportunities to enjoy and practice their culture and women's *Yawulyu* (Law, ritual practice).

My task was to assist the women elders to set up and run their new organisation. My role as Kapululangu's coordinator and my position as researcher thus coincided and were mutually inclusive. I was respon-

sible to the women elders to assist them in developing the infrastructure and in seeking resources necessary for their cultural revitalisation project. This involved organisational administration, fund-raising, and providing logistical support for everyday living. It also included assisting the elders to document their cultural knowledge and stories as videos, photographs, audiotapes, and paintings which have been placed in the Kapululangu Keeping Place.[4]

As participatory action research, the Kapululangu project was built upon an ongoing circular process of assessment, evaluation, planning, action, and re-assessment, but it was not the well-oiled and highly controlled processes which the literature too often suggests is possible to achieve in the field. A dynamic process, it rejected Kurt Lewin's attempts to abide by pre-ordained spirals of action, reelection, action (Lewin, 1946, 1952). I learned the importance of being flexible and adaptive; and I did a lot of rapid, spontaneous thinking on my feet. For example, I quickly learned that meeting did not happen – not in the White sense – and that decision-making is neither straight-forward, nor certain. As a result most of our "meeting" consisted of chatting around the breakfast fire. Someone (often the women themselves) would raise an issue which was then talked about briefly, then circulated organically through impromptu one-to-one and small-group discussion over a period of several days and then the discussion returned to the *Tjilimi* where the matter would be further discussed. This decision-making process ensured that the matter had been adequately raised and that everyone who should have been involved had an opportunity to contribute. Although I was often part of these discussions at some point of their rounds, it was only after this process had been completed that the decision would be relayed to me (formally or informally) at our communication nexus: the breakfast fire (*waru*). I called this process "fire-politics".

This pattern was, of course, sometimes contradicted by decisions that needed to be made spontaneously, often in the heat of a crisis. To achieve this I had to learn to "listen" to the women, particularly when they did not always say what they wanted, or intended. I had to learn to read their movements, their facial expressions, their tones of voice, and in all ways to rely on phenomenological readings of the circumstances. There were times that I failed to comprehend but generally, on a daily basis, I managed to successfully perceive the women's hidden meanings, although I could not always adequately provide the required outcome. There were times when decisions once made had to be reconsidered because changed circumstances brought new information, or experiences gleaned from one program led to a change in direction or focus.

Participatory action research is above all else fluid and adaptive. In focusing on the host group, rather than on the researcher, it is responsive to their needs, their aspirations, their frustrations and visions. Based on their physical action, it is limited or expanded by the degree to which the host group is part of the project, the degree to which they actually participate. Nothing that took place under the rubric of Kapululangu could have been possible without the full participation of the women elders. As coordinator/researcher I was obliged to remain open and spontaneous, as well as very, very attentive at all times. Above all, this research methodology insisted that I did not pretend neutrality, that I did not shy away from the full weight of engagement with the women elders.

Conclusion

My research project responded to the women's visions — their aspirations to confront the social problems facing their families and to hold on to their culture for their children. It combined Feminist Phenomenology and Indigenous Self-determination (participatory action research) within a framework of mutually beneficial cross-cultural relationship.

The project's theme was self-determination, enjoyment, and the revitalisation of Living Culture — culture lived. Living Culture is a formidable "cultural energy" (Kleymeyer, 1994) which was generated when the women elders lived their lives on the ground in direct communication with their land and in total consciousness of their relatedness with the *Tjukurrpa*. It occurred when, through their cultural practice, the elders made ritual part of their everyday living, and the everyday part of their sacralised lives.

Living Culture is so power-filled that it stirs the imagination with visionary knowledge of the possible such that it empowers its practitioners to challenge – using creative, innovative, and radical pathways – the

multiple oppressions in their lives even when to do so seems impossible. In Kapululangu's case, Living Culture was both generated by and in turn generated a vibrant inter-generational cultural knowledge program directed at encouraging local youth to take pride in their Aboriginality. The women elders had been spurred to create Kapululangu by the horredous trauma being experienced and expressed by their grandchildren. Wirrimanu's youth are so distressed that they had begun to kill themselves, or failing in their suicide attempts lived to suffer from extreme cases of self-harm. There can be nothing more indicative of cultural wounding than for a nation's children to begin to kill themselves. Living Culture enabled the Kapululangu elders to act courageously in an attempt to heal or at least temper some of their grandchildren's cultural anguish.

The intention of the Kapululangu elders to raise their grandchildren in the ways of the *Tjukurrpa* was reflected within the words of one of the women as we were sitting around the *Tjilimi* fire on the eve of Kapululangu's second anniversary of its genesis, telling stories at the end of a long day's hunting. The elder reached over to me and placed her hand on my leg to get my attention. Looking into my eyes, she reported on a conversation she had with some of the young women while they were digging for a goanna (lizard):

They [young women] want to know that *Yawulyu*. They want to know everything. Because when they pass away – those first people – all the young fella can help now. That really important. Culture can make 'em strong. They want to know everything those girls. They want to keep in *la* [the] mind and they can learn. They come up and ask old women, "We want 'em *Yawulyu*". "Okay, you can have 'im. We get 'em every thing for you mob". Paintup and singing and dancing. We bin call 'im "Kapululangu" (Kapululangu Elders, personal communication, April 2001).

Living with the women elders and working with them towards creating an environment in which they could enjoy their cultural practices and pass their knowledge on to their grandchildren and future generations, I came to understand the triadic connections between relationship and interconnectedness, the sensual body and innate knowledge, and self-determination through passionate action.

The research project engendered a Common Language, a shared foundation, which forged a partnership between two cultures — Indigenous women and White feminist. Thus the Kapululangu Women's Law and Culture Centre formed the basis of my exploration of the interaction between White and Indigenous cultures and Indigenous women's resistance to the vicious impacts of white cultural colonialism.

Endnotes

[1] Wirrimanu (a.k.a. Balgo) lies on the north-eastern edge of Western Australia's Great Sandy Desert, 850 km north-west of Alice Springs and 270 km south of Halls Creek.

[2] When I use the word "White" I am generalizing. I understand there to be a continuum with White at one end and Indigenous/Black at the other. While neither a White nor an Indigenous or Black person can attain the opposite end of the spectrum, most people live in the space in between the extremes and their position on this continuum is constantly in flux changing in relationship to multiple factors.

[3] The "assimilation era" was a series of social, economic and cultural reforms by the Australian governments which occurred from the 1930s to the late 1960s. A shift away from earlier segregation and protection policies, the "assimilation policy" was designed to train and "civilise" Aboriginal Australians to live according to monocultural ideals of Australian citizenship. This was achieved through "legal controls, surveillance, punishment and tutelage of families, and the removal of children to segregated institutions" (Haebich, 2000: 460). These policies are now widely condemned as being premised on an attempt at the cultural genocide of Indigenous Australians.

[4] A "Keeping Place" is a safe and secure storehouse for religious and ceremonial items which are central to the maintenance of Indigenous cultural integrity. This is not a museum, as sacred items placed into the Keeping Place are used for ceremonial purpose on a regular basis. Nonetheless, the custodian places her/his sacred items into the Keeping Place in the expectation that they will be available for younger members of their families when it becomes their time to take up the responsibility of being the principle holders of sacred ceremonial knowledge. The Keeping Place, and the items kept there, remain under the care and control of the elders as the knowledgeable Law keepers of their people. With the Keeping Place containing this religious power it is considered dangerous to the uninitiated, particularly to people of the opposite sex. In Wirrimanu, both women and men have their own separate Keeping Places.

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