Indigenous critique on the crossroads of culture, race and gender

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The first day of the Aboriginal Family Violence Policing Conference in Yirrkala was nearly over. The hosts have organised a wonderful evening in Nhulunbuy, where the most of the conference participants were staying, with a welcome to country and beautiful musical performances. After a couple of hours, me and another young woman from a legal aid organisation set off for a good night sleep before the upcoming conference day. Our block was only a couple of minutes away and we walked, discussing the first impressions and enjoying the fresh night air. Almost at our goal, as we were groping for our way in a poorly lit area consisting of identical small houses, we've ran into a middle-aged Indigenous man, who greeted us and asked what all those people have come for.

He seemed a bit annoyed about the conference title, saying that "it's not about black or white", that violence has not been there "before the English came", that the police was established to pursue the English interests and is still doing so, only that now it is called Australian interests. "So you have to know our history," he concluded. It was only after I have already started engaging him that I have noticed my companion's reaction: She replied and looked in a manner indicating that she rendered the man a bit delusional and the conversation pointless. Her body language suggested that she wanted to

leave. This made an idea cross my mind that this encounter might have been unwanted or even dangerous, but I have also somehow sympathised with the man's arguments and experienced a need to assure him that the conference did not imply violence being a specifically Indigenous phenomenon. I also said that the police seemed to be very aware of their role and looking for ways to work together with the communities. Thus, we exchanged a couple of words and each of us set off to continue one's way. My companion was visibly annoyed about that incident: "I am working hard every day in that sphere. How can someone living here at the mine far away from everything say, that we're not doing anything?!"

My companion's reaction has disconcerted me. Our Indigenous[1] conversation partner expressed his concern about foregrounding race while approaching the family violence issue in Indigenous communities and about ignoring the issue's causes in the colonial past and postcolonial present. He expressed his doubt in the commitment of the police to solving the issue, suggesting that they were pursuing the interests external to Indigenous communities. He was apparently troubled about that and appealed to the need of acknowledging the colonial history, which appeared as a rational argument. My companion, however, seemed to experience this critique as a personal attack on her work and commitment. Although she decided not to engage, rendering any negotiation with that person rather useless, she expressed her annoyance about his comment after we have left. Whilst I respected her commitment to working with Indigenous women, I was also quite excited and sympathetic of an Indigenous person expressing his political views so directly. My companion's comment disconcerted me as it was both familiar in her commitment to Indigenous women and alienating in rendering a critical political opinion of an Indigenous person delusional and unworthy of engaging with.

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[1] In this article both terms "Indigenous" and "Aboriginal" are being used. The first one includes the two distinct cultural groups of Indigenous Australians made up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a respective manner referring back to the recognition of the Indigenous peoples' status and rights as in The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The latter foregrounds the political self-affirmative meaning of the term "Aboriginal".

Now, this feeling of disconcertment may be viewed as an individual reaction. At the same time, it is illustrative of experiencing the difference of knowledge practices, or logics, causing an interruption in routinised practices or a perceived deviation from anticipated procedures, an irritation as a source of "both clear delight and confused misery"[2,] leaving one struggling with intense feelings welling up inside. These cannot be easily explained though, as one's own knowledge practices are usually not being questioned or reflected upon. This is why the experience of disconcertment is often dismissed or explained away in a relativist move, by which difference is ascribed to another culture and essentialised as its feature – a move that produces new boundaries and only allows for two options in (post-)colonial societies: Either the heroism of resistance against the dominant culture, or the tragedy of alienation,[3] dismissing the complex entanglements and generative tensions.

For my positioning in this story that would mean being caught between the need to either "eliminate the core elements of my White enculturation"[4], to become the other, while inevitably remaining the same, or to take on the subject position of a middle-class white woman unable to understand Indigenous struggles as lying outside of her experiences, body, culture, memories and identity.[5] But I was none of the above. In fact, I was privileged to go to Australia due to my belonging to a Western university, as well as by my 'passing by' as German or even Australian and, indeed, by my whiteness. But I was also limited financially, restrained in physical movement and infantilised both by my inability to drive and, in social action, by my lacking knowledge of certain conventions, feeling extremely uncomfortable and concerned about the observed racism while I was not targeted by it directly. I intended to conduct a project from a feminist standpoint, privileging the Indigenous women's experiences, their ways of knowing and doing. Similar to the researchers who wanted to enter the world of Indigenous

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[2] Helen Verran: *Science and an African Logic*. Chicago 2001, p. 5f.

[3] ibid., p. 27.

[4] Zohl dé Ishtar: *Holding Yawulyu. White Culture and Black Women's Law*. North Melbourne, 2005, p. 56f.

[5] Aileen Moreton-Robinson: *Talkin' Up to the White Woman. Indigenous Women and Feminism*. Queensland 2000, p. 165.

women as other women but were constantly reminded of being white women, for whom both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people had a restricted range of role models,[6] I wanted to encounter Indigenous women as a "third world" woman whose origin and experiences lie predominantly outside of the "first world", but I had to find out that there was no respective subject to encounter. I had to bear in mind that, despite of the long history of writing about Indigenous women, I did not know what it meant to be a woman in the realities of Indigenous Australians' lives; that their subjectivities, experiences, knowledges were multiple, sometimes uniting, and sometimes incompatible. I had to learn – and it was both disconcerting and enabling – that there was no way to wholly be in any of the privileged or subjugated positions structured by race, gender or class, that besides the search for a "fetishized perfect subject of oppositional history", subjugation or privilege is not grounds for an ontology; that the knowing self is never simply given as a whole, but is partial, "always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another", capable of collective knowing and doing without claiming to be another.[7]

Now, how can I write about the knowledges, practices, and, possibly, a standpoint, which are not mine? How can I write under the conditions where no object precedes scientific writing, but is created in the process of writing; where social sciences do not perform any kind of translation, for "it is not for us to know the meaning for them unless it is already known to us both, and, thus, needs no translation, but only a kind of reminding"[8]?

One possible solution is to focus on that, which is 'already known to us both'. These are the settings where the term "cross-cultural" potentially does not qualify, as culture and knowledge are conceived in materiality of constitutive practices, being done in situated collective work; where differences in

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[6] Diane Bell, Pat Caplan, Wazir Jahan Karim: *Gendered fields: women, men and ethnography*. London/New York 1993, p. 36.

[7] Donna Haraway: Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. In: *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1988), pp. 575-599., here p. 586.

[8] Stephen A. Tyler: Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document. In James Clifford, George E. Marcus (Eds.): *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, Los Angeles/London 1986, pp. 122-140., here p. 138.

knowing particular issues are performed and respective concepts are re-composed and "clotted in a set of agreed metaphysical resources that will hold just as long as it holds" to enable collective knowing and doing.[9]

Here a complex of framing images and stories constitutive for the situation of any action is to be analysed, as well as the ontic-epistemic commitments to certain imaginary and the invisible work of purification being done to (re-)produce the purity of the categories and boundaries.[10] Such an analysis may allow going beyond the proclamation of heterogeneity and turning to the politics of the respective ontic-epistemic commitments, defusing the hierarchy of different imaginaries.

Turning back to the story, it was exactly the difference in perceiving political critique that has disconcerted me. Whereas our Indigenous counterpart was criticising *how* the issue was approached, my non-Indigenous companion perceived it as a claim that "we're not doing anything". She perceived herself as a part of those "we" of the public sector, together with the police, but viewed her work as contributing to solving the problem of domestic violence and rejected the very idea of it being related to the issues of colonialism. She emphasised how much is being done and discarded the man's critique of how it is being done and discursively presented. She also undermined his authority through presenting him as "someone living here at the mine far away from everything", creating an image of involved non-Indigenous people as knowledgeable subjects on the one hand and of Indigenous people, for whom remoteness was equated with ignorance, on the other hand, and contributing to the stereotyping image of the Aboriginal man. Indigenous opinion, officially encouraged during the conference day, was rejected as unworthy of dealing with when spontaneously appearing in such a clear form. Postcolonial critique, acknowledged as adequate in regard to Australian history, was perceived as a denial of the family violence problem

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[9] Helen Verran, Michael Christie: Doing Difference Together: Towards Dialogue with Aboriginal Knowledge Authorities through an Australian Comparative Empirical Philosophical Inquiry 2015. Retrieved from ResearchGate: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267804951 (last viewed on 22.06.2019). Originally published in *Culture and Dialogue*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2011), pp. 21-36, here p. 12f.

[10] Helen Verran: Re-imagining land ownership in Australia. In: *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 1, No.2 (1998), pp. 237-254, p. 239

and an attack on non-Indigenous engagement and authority of a female legal aid worker when applied to current matters.

These diverging framings of Indigenous participation and critique may have tremendous effects when enforced by the street-level bureaucrats who "implicitly mediate aspects of the constitutional relationship of citizens to the state [and] hold the keys to a dimension of citizenship"[11], and even more so by the governments.

While the 1970s have officially marked the start of the 'self-determination' era, it has neither been fully implemented, nor abandoned. The sources and solutions of lasting Indigenous disadvantage were viewed as lying with the service delivery on both sides of the political divide and policies have been continuously oscillating between the entire mainstreaming of services and their delivery in consultation with an Indigenous representative body.[12] The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, being the only representative Australian Government body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, was abolished in 2005, the Northern Territory National Emergency Response was introduced in 2007 with its army intervention, suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act, partial abolition of the permit system and compulsory income management, constituting considerable limitations of land rights and personal freedoms.[13] The current government speaks of its policies in terms of closing the gap, while the statistics are indicative of continuous Indigenous disadvantage of tremendous extent. While promoting the narrative of systematic development, the policy may be viewed as directed towards integrating Indigenous people in existing structures to achieve statistical growth and seemingly less concerned about the qualities of services and structural causes of disadvantage. The Closing

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[11]   Michael Lipsky: *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York 1980, p. 4.

[12]   Stuart Bradfield: Indigenous affairs: Post ATSIC, not post-colonial. In: *Australian Review of Public Affairs*. The University of Sydney 2004, June 7. http://www.australianreview.net/digest/-2004/06/bradfield.html (last viewed on 22.06.2019).

[13]   Castan Centre for Human Rights Law. Monash University. What is the Northern Territory Intervention? Retrieved from Monash University 2018. https://www.monash.edu/law-/research/centres/castancentre/our-areas-of-work/indigenous/the-northern-territory-interven-tion/the-northern-territory-intervention-an-evaluation/what-is-the-northern-territory-inter-vention (last viewed on 22.06.2019).

the Gap report provides examples of culturally appropriate and cooperative projects as best practice[14] while these remain sporadic and often struggle for funding on the everyday basis "according to the priorities of the government of the day under short-term, uncertain and highly prescriptive funding arrangements"[15]. The report emphasises working with Indigenous people and uses the cooperative work with the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples as an example[16] while rejecting the proposed constitutional amendment for establishing a national representative body of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders,[17] which has been one of the main calls of the Congress.

Much of the rapid deprivation can be attributed to the policies of the postcolonial period and proclaimed self-determination when many of the control mechanisms by state, church and private enterprises have been displaced, leading to the collapse of existing employment and settlement structures, welfare dependency, access to alcohol and drugs, disruption of local disciplinarian regimes, both imposed and traditional, as well as family structures and devaluing of traditional male roles. This, together with the psychological legacy of dispossession, assimilation and racial discrimination as well as personal mourning, generated the sense of purposelessness and lowered self-esteem among many Indigenous people.[18]

> Every tribe in Australia can take you to a place in their country where the white man came in and wiped out whole families. They can point out what waterholes were poisoned, where dozens of their tribe were shot, where people were rounded up and their children taken away. There's ones still alive who can remember the chains around the necks of our men and what happened to the pretty girls when the coppers came [...] Our pain today is those young ones going to the prisons and the ones hanging themselves. The kids around here see that and they'll remember that body hanging there even though they are only little. They

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[14] Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet: *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2018.* Canberra A.C.T. 2018, p. 30ff.

[15] Empowered Communities. Wunan Foundation Inc.: *Empowered Communities: Empowered Peoples Design Report*. Canberra 2015, p. 57.

[16] Commonwealth of Australia, Closing the Gap, p. 19.

[17] Ibid., p. 29.

[18] Peter Sutton: The politics of suffering: Indigenous policy in Australia since the 1970s. In: *Anthropological Forum*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2001), pp. 125-176, here p. 128ff.

see the alcohol and the yarndi and they see their fathers bashing their mothers. How are they going to get [out] of those memories?[19]

Under such conditions, social change is urgently sought by many Indigenous people. While the responsibility for Indigenous disadvantage may be effectively relocated onto the colonial history or previous governments, and the responsibility for developing and, to a considerable extent, delivering the solutions – onto the Indigenous communities themselves,

> Aboriginal people are expecting less and less from other people, or nothing, and are trying to make the impossible journey to our vision of the future achievable [...] trying to take responsibility for our own survival in an almost impossible situation of continuing generational loss and injury, and we are trying to build our own expertise, trying to find our own solutions, trying to build subsistence economies, because we know full well how governments will keep failing us [...] we are becoming experts in the expectation of loss, and yes, greater experts in hope.[20]

Performing those tasks is complicated, given the limited resources Indigenous community members can draw on and pre-defined priorities. In the programmes like the Empowered Communities and the National Empowerment Project launched in 2014 and 2012 respectively empowerment of individuals and communities is understood as empowerment to take responsibility to opt in to the introduced goals.[21] Pointing to the pre-defined and non-negotiable priorities of the programme, the narrowing of development to economic growth and reframing of agency as making the 'right' choices,[22] Klein raises the question of the programme's resemblance to neo-assimilation and neo-paternalism where "governments and policy makers empower themselves to nudge, sanction and discipline Indigenous agency to make the 'right choice' towards economic

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[19] Queensland. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence, Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, Boni Robertson: The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Task Force on Violence Report, revised ed. Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development. Brisbane 2000. p. 22f.

[20] Alexis Wright: What Happens When You Tell Somebody Else's Story? In: *Meanjin Quarterly* 2016, Summer. https://meanjin.com.au/essays/what-happens-when-you-tell-somebody-elses-story (last viewed on 22.06.2019).

[21] Empowered Communities, p. 19; ibid., p. 30.

[22] Elise Klein: Empowered Communities: review of the empowered communities design report. In: *CAEPR Topical Issue*, No. 1 (2015), pp. 1-9. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. ANU College of Arts & Social Science. Australian National University: https://phrasenreich-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/148924/1/TopicalIssue1-2015(31Aug15)_0.pdf (last viewed on 22.06.2019), p. 6.

development"[23]. While the approach of the National Empowerment Project is based on prioritising Indigenous knowledge, culture and community ownership,[24] it is framed as a programme in social and emotional wellbeing, not a governance model.

It may be argued that by emphasising the governments' willingness to support Indigenous communities' self-management and the lacking capacity of the latter, the policies contribute to the 'deficit discourse' framing Indigenous identity in terms of deficiency and disempowerment, where Indigenous people are conceptualised as either deficient in not being 'really' Aboriginal, or deficient because of being Aborigina.[25] While Australian governments continue to publicly adhere to the idea of Indigenous self-determination, it is clear that a shift has occurred around the turn of the century towards what Sullivan calls normalisation of Indigenous people: the new period "turns its back on the vision of a semi-autonomous, decolonised and modernised discrete realm for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, where they would largely manage themselves in culturally appropriate ways"[26]. Indigenous people, thus, have to promote their visions within or parallel to the development interventions pursued or supported by the governments that privilege particular meanings of development, while demonstratively supporting Indigenous 'self-determination'. Rose refers to this as "deep colonising" where diverse colonial-like practices are embedded in seemingly de-colonising institutions, thus, concealing and naturalising those practices and undermining the very possibility of critique.[27] Observing the discrepancy between the governments proclaimed goals and continuous Indigenous disadvantage is painful for many. Referring to the Royal Commission and Board of Inquiry into the Protection and Detention of

[23] Ibid.

[24] National Empowerment Project: *Cultural, Social, and Emotional Wellbeing Program Evaluation 2014 – 2017*. Crawley 2017, p. 6f.

[25] Cressida Fforde et al.: Discourse, deficit and identity: Aboriginality, the race paradigm and the language of representation in contemporary Australia. In: *Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture & Policy*, No. 149 (2013), pp. 162-173., here p. 162.

[26] Patrick Sullivan: *Belonging Together: Dealing with the Politics of Disenchantment in Australian Indigenous Policy*. Acton, A.C.T. 2011, p. 100.

[27] Deborah Bird Rose: Land rights and deep colonising: the erasure of women. In: *Aboriginal Law Bulletin*, Vol. 3, No. 85 (1996), pp. 6-13, here p. 6.

Children in the Northern Territory of 2016-17, Wright wonders: "Why is it that no Territory politician or government has shown a shred of decency and guts and said, this is the wrong form of governance arrangement for the Northern Territory. We do not know how to govern for Aboriginal people. Let's not do this any more. Let's find a better way"[28].

In the discourse on multiculturalism in Australia, the emphasis has been made on the common culture and common future, on harmony in diversity instead of difference. Multiculturalism is seen not as a basis for a new Australian identity, but an attribute of the existing common culture, which, radically taken, may be viewed as a euphemism for Anglo-Australian culture.[29] Reference to sexual equality attracts attention as one of the core elements of this common culture to be recognised by all Australians, implying the advanced position of the majority culture in regard to gender equality compared to other cultures. It also implies suspicion towards cultural rights as oppressive of women.

> The logic is that tradition and human development are inescapably incompatible, and thus that human rights are best realised through assimilation rather than through adherence to customs and traditions. For Indigenous women there is a double entrapment here. To the extent that colonising institutions erase the living presence of women and promote facsimiles of their own patriarchy, women are disadvantaged. And to the extent that women are disadvantaged, colonising society can then claim a right to intervene to rescue women from the disempowering effects of male dominance. In this double entrapment, the greatest loss is women's personal and collective rights to assert the legitimacy of, and to control their own, institutions of power and knowledge.[30]

It is both possible and necessary to imagine the relations of women and cultures differently: women as subjects playing a significant role in both keeping and developing the culture; cultures as providing foundations for development of subjectivities and meaningful orientation frameworks, but also as dynamic entities, emerging in collective actions and capable of

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[28] Wright, When You Tell Somebody Else's Story.

[29] David Carter: *Dispossession, dreams & diversity. Issues in Australian Studies.* Frenchs Forest, NSW 2006, p. 342f.

[30] Deborah Bird Rose: Does Cultural Survival Have a Gender? Indigenous Women and Human Rights in Australia. In Tovi Fenster (Ed.): *Gender, Planning and Human Rights*. London/New York 1999, pp. 123-132., here p. 130.

transformative accumulation of re-interpretations. The state's role then lies in providing legal and institutional conditions for guaranteeing individual rights in culturally appropriate ways.[31] General training on leadership skills and project management may not apply and a focus on women's empowerment may trigger unnecessary divisions if Indigenous understandings and protocols are not respected. Solutions need to correspond to Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, where the role of families is emphasised, and healing and reconstituting the community's integrity are seen as primary goals. Solutions based on non-Indigenous understandings only have proven unsatisfying and leading to further complications:

> […] we yolŋu have been searching for your Balanda [European] law for a long time, you taught us, and made us like babies, and we learnt from you your balanda rom (way), through the school side, how we must bend to you, and supposedly understand your rom (ways), and only you rom (culture) will get bigger, through work and jobs, how about you learn something about our rom (law)?[32]

Indigenous people's 'talkin' up' to non-Indigenous persons and institutions in their own interest and re-presenting their own ideas of change may be rendered a political act challenging the very boundaries of the political. Alexis Wright describes it as "battles with barriers, where we have tried to break through the impersonal narratives in order to breathe, to tell and have heard our own stories of what it really means to us, but sadly on too many occasions our own thinking was already compromised and contaminated"[33].

While speaking out often means proceeding against the barriers of impersonal and silencing discourses, the democratic standards of participation and transparency have often turned out to be coercive and offending to Indigenous practices of public dialogue where individual entitlement to speak and publicly represent collective position is strictly determined by one's relation to country, positioning within the kinship

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[31] Shachar, Ayelet: Feminism and multiculturalism: mapping the terrain. In A. S. Laden, & D. Owen (Eds.), *Multiculturalism and Political Theory*. Cambridge 2007, pp. 115-147, here p. 126ff.

[32] Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultants Initiative: Gifted and Talented Children. Charles Darwin University. Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultants Initiative 2008. https://www.cdu.edu.au/-centres/yaci/projects_gifted_talented.html (last viewed on 22.06.2019).

[33] Wright, When You Tell Somebody Else's Story.

system, seniority and knowledge of the Law and, currently, one's experiences with non-Indigenous ways; and where "having the right people in the accountable space is always ontologically prior to the work of making truth"[34].

> Not only are we telling our stories differently, but we are listening differently too. We are listening for our people's abilities and knowledges and skills. We've been knocked so many times that we often don't think very well of ourselves. But we're finding ways to acknowledge one another and to see the abilities that people have but may not know they have. Without putting people on pedestals, we are finding ways of acknowledging each others' stories of survival.[35]

Under these conditions communication depends on translation: linguistic or conceptual, however, as the following quotation demonstrates, none of those is power-free:

> We are constantly defined as 'other', but we are never permitted to be genuinely independent [...] One could well ask, what is it about genuine difference which is so threatening that it must always be translated and sanitised into more of the same? One answer may be that to allow our difference and our independence would threaten the boundaries of identity, knowledge and absolute truth, which give the subject a sense of power and control.[36]

Asad argues that the success of translation depends not on the translator's attitude, but on the ability to "test the tolerance of her own language for assuming unaccustomed forms" and push beyond the limits of habitual usages,[37] where it is not just language, but the broad complexes of framing concepts that are actually at stake. Australians seem to be good at including Indigenous terms in topography, social services and academia, and English words are used in Indigenous languages but the consequences of such

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[34] Verran, Christie, Doing Difference Together, p. 10.

[35] Barbara Wingard: Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger. Exstract from B. Wingard & J. Lester. Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications 2001. http://www.narrativetherapylibrary.com/media/downloadable/files/links/T/e/Tellstory_2.pdf (last viewed on 22.06.2019), p. 4.

[36] Dodson, Michael: The Wentworth Lecture. The end in the beginning: re(de)finding Aboriginality. In: *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, No. 1 (1994), pp. 2-13., p. 8f.

[37] Talal Asad: The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology. In: James Clifford, George E. Marcus (Eds.): *Writing Culture*, pp. 141-164, here p. 157.

adoptions and translations are very different for Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors.

It is often seen as responsibility of the leaders to "decode and decipher what the Western world is saying and doing", relate it to the epistemology of their 'world', consult with the elders, explain to and discuss with the community, after which some collective position may be argued.[38] It is these practices of translation, re-production and negotiation of meanings, in which the very objects come into being, differing from one setting to another. Such multiple objects can only be viewed as 'holding together' as a result of certain ontological politics: "a politics that has to do with the way in which problems are framed, bodies are shaped, and lives are pushed and pulled into one shape or another"[39]. These do not only concern the object at stake, but also the subjectivities of the actors involved: as subjects capable of knowing, defining and doing. In the processes of translation, closely associated with numerous negotiations, the actor identities are defined, mobilized, re-associated and obliged to remain faithful to their (new) alliances.[40] And whereas all actors pursue such politics, enact the objects in their practices and negotiate the meanings, the effects of such actions differ depending on the actors' power positions.

> Aboriginal people live with the narratives of government policies, such as the Intervention or Closing the Gap, even though among ourselves we think that we are smart by learning how to appropriate whatever becomes the latest catch word, fad or theme to distract attention from the personal and so much of the communal and family suffering that has been created, while we are being thrown around in yet another policy direction.[41]

It constitutes a quest on itself to decipher what is actually meant by the terms like self-determination or empowerment defining the necessary conditions for

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[38] Joy Damousi, Kim Rubenstein, Mary Tomsic (Eds.): *Diversity in leadership: Australian women, past and present*. Canberra 2014, p. 40.

[39] Annemarie Mol: *The body multiple: ontology in medical practice*. Durham/London 2002, p. viii.

[40] Michel Callon: Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay. In M. Biagioli (Ed.): *The Science Studies Reader* (Abridged ed., pp. 67-83). New York/London 1999. First published in J. Law (Ed.): *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge.* London 1986, pp. 196–233, here p. 81f.

[41] Wright, When You Tell Somebody Else's Story.

Indigenous participation in governance, access to funding, labour market or social services. The analysis of the governmental narratives in Indigenous affairs demonstrates variations in the usage of terms like self-determination, development and empowerment even in the 'Western' terms, raising questions about the seemingly commonsense meanings and ontological politics involved in governance and policy-making processes.

The inability and unwillingness to recognise Indigenous political critique as such and accept it seems to constitute a considerable obstacle for equal negotiations. It promotes an imaginary of Indigenous people expressing their political opinion as uncooperative and their critique as unconstructive. Cooperation between particular groups within the community with the governmental agencies on the latter's terms may then appear as a questionable act compartmentalising the community. Especially women seem to be concerned about this. However, as the following story demonstrates, Indigenous women continuously develop strategies of negotiating that are capable of resisting the Aboriginalist concepts and engage the whole community to implement own visions in an integrative manner.

It was the second half of the conference workshop, which was held in a church – probably one of the most unusual conference locations I have ever experienced. The building did neither have proper walls (except of the front wall with a cross), nor windows – just a kind of parapets and a construction holding the roof. It created shade and let the air in, which made me truly enjoy the location, except perhaps for the wooden floor, which was squeaking loudly as children were running around. The church was quite full and unusually many people from the community joined the session. It was the first one to be held by Indigenous people at this conference. The woman, who was to speak now, was not a professional speaker: she came from a remote community in the East Arnhem Region and her speech was about change, personal and social. She started with telling us how quiet she used to be before, how she has found strength to stand up against family violence in her community – verbally and physically – and to follow her vision of community development. "Now nobody can stop me," – she said. She told us how she made it possible for other women to become empowered in a similar way and of the current state of the project of the women's center,

drawing attention first and foremost to the work and commitment of other women, some of whom were present at the session.

She spoke about the difficulties as well, one of which was obtaining funding, but the other was defending the project from men, some of whom were against the woman's shelter at first. She switched into in language, then translating the whole into English to describe her defending the shelter in public. She recalled one man standing up and retelling a story of two ancestral beings, two sisters, who came to that area holding Law and Culture in their dilly bags, which were stolen by men when the sisters went hunting. "Now it belongs to men. And we need you men, cause you're strong leaders in our culture. But how about we work together?" – she concluded.

I thought it was a nice metaphor, but I could have never imagined the reaction that came from the Indigenous people present. First vocal approval was given through that familiar "mhm...", and then people just started speaking out. First an older man stood up to confirm the story and express approval of the speaker's interpretation. Then an older woman took over the word, and the whole church filled up with lively discussion. Such intense reaction was beyond my understanding and I could not stop gazing at the people around me, excited and disconcerted at the same time. I really felt the need to share my emotions saying to my neighbour: "Have you seen it? She told that story and it just exploded, and everybody wanted to have a say!"

I admired what the speaker was saying, but the way she was doing it seemed unusual to me. She was speaking in a very specific manner underlining the role of the other women prior to her own achievements, emphasising the need to work together with men. She did not tell the audience how to solve the problem of violence, but she was providing an example assuring that Indigenous women's leadership is possible, wherever one comes from, however shy one is, telling stories of her standing up against the violence and demonstrating that Indigenous people do not need to feel shame but to start speaking out as they do have solutions to their problems and courage to implement those. She was speaking in stories, about herself and other women from her community. But her most powerful argument was presented in a story of a man telling a story about the ancestral beings and power over the Law and Culture. It was this recurring

nature of that story that would certainly ensure it being retold many times after that by the participants of the workshop. Through expressing her point in a story told in language first, the speaker has engaged the audience. She referred to a familiar narrative, appealing to their collective memory, making a strong point but leaving it open for interpretation, creating space for Indigenous imaginary and voices speaking in language. And interpretation was exactly what the other participants started doing immediately. They were verifying the story, adding and underlining certain aspects. I wondered about that form. I was not sure if the speaker would be able to communicate her argument successfully that way and I was surprised about the audience's reaction. It was the first time at the conference when Indigenous participants actively engaged in discussions. Non-Indigenous ones might have experienced a slight disconcertment like me; however, it only reinforced the message and its perceived significance, together with the excitement about the participants' engagement. It seemed that this kind of storytelling had a great potential to integrate diverse audiences through re-telling the familiar narratives.

Such re-telling and re-imagining, reframing the narratives of Australian history could be an instrument of getting rid of stories that "play around with the sense of Aboriginal identity – that impose a sense of self-censorship, shame and friction in the Aboriginal community itself"[42]. Ethnographic storytelling may then appear as the "critique generative of postcolonial times and places"[43], postcolonialism meaning not just the rejection of colonially imposed knowledge practices, but the "struggling through and with colonial pasts towards different futures"[44], whereas different logics can be perceived in their interconnectedness and entanglement and made to be the basis of future practices. This process resembles poetry decomposing events into units that implicate the past in the present in recitations and point to the futures[45] or the ceremonial dialogue of Garma "locating the new, the

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[42]   Wright, When You Tell Somebody Else's Story.

[43]   Verran, Science and an African Logic, p. 38.

[44]   Ibid.

[45]   Verran, Science and an African Logic, p. 42.

emergent and the productive in the interstices between the performances of divergent yet interrelated ancestral assemblages of people, places, names, images, melodies and the connections (and separations) these enable"[46]. It also takes place in daily interactions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and it is a crucial task to make it common practice in politics and research.

These re-imaginings would require acknowledging the differences in logics underlying both official and informal policy making. Recognising the ignorance of these differences in the past and the rigidity of logics as obstacles to meaningful negotiations and sustainable change in Indigenous communities might allow for re-imagining the social contract and deal constructively with Indigenous critique. Whereas the perspectives of such re-imagining remain precarious, Indigenous women and men develop strategies to demonstrate leadership, promote Indigenous role models, visions and solutions, integrating the community for the common goal of evoking change and working together with governments and service providers.

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[46] Verran, Christie, Doing Difference Together, p. 9.

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