

Becoming Rosalind's daughter: Reflections on intercultural kinship and embodied histories

Karen Hughes

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Abstract: Taking a reflexive auto-ethnographic approach, this article explores the unique process of transcultural adoption by which Aboriginal people have selectively extended their family formations to include as well as “manage” outsiders. Focussing on my longstanding friendship and research collaboration with the respected Ngukurr Elder, and skilful historian, Rosalind Munur, I discuss some of the ways in which adoption into her family has profoundly reset my understanding of the discipline of history and contributed to a new and extended sense of family and personhood. I explore these changes within the concept of a feminist ethics of risk (Welch) that is tied to Aboriginal women’s agency. In recounting this story, I draw attention to some of the ethical and epistemological responsibilities of engaging with Aboriginal Australia.

Keywords: Aboriginal history; Aboriginal women; auto-ethnography.

Introduction

Rosalind Munur (Bulwaark), my Aboriginal mother, was a gifted, accomplished historian and a senior Warndarrang law-woman.¹ She died just before Christmas 2005, at the age of 74. Over the twenty years that we intermittently worked together she taught me more about history than anyone else I have known. She approached history in a holistic way, seeing caring for stories as inseparable from active custodianship of Country,² and overall family and community wellbeing. It was her firm belief that histories resided in the bodies of people and in the land, and that knowledge is inalienable from this nexus.

Although I did not realise it until much later, Rosalind began the slow process of adopting me as her daughter in 1984, when I traveled to her homeland in the Roper River Arnhem Land community of Ngukurr, to research the film *Pitjiri: The Snake That Will Not Sink*. The documentary tells the story of South Australian nurse, and policeman’s wife, Ruth Heathcock and the Aboriginal women who worked with her at the Roper River police station in the 1930s, including Rosalind’s grandmother Norah Durlubul (Wonamgai) and her mother Cara Thompson (Ngangigi). Destabilising the stereotypical colonial relationship of white mistress and Aboriginal domestic worker, one of widely asymmetrical power relations, these women became her teachers and her collaborators.³ Together they ran a covert operation, for almost a decade from 1935 until 1943, to medically treat people suffering from leprosy in Country, in order to

prevent their removal to the often feared offshore leprosarium on Channel Island, in Darwin Harbour, under the Northern Territory's repressive and racially oriented public health policy.⁴

Crucial to the Roper River women's work with Ruth Heathcock (and to my collaboration half a century later with Rosalind Munur) in telling their story to a wider audience, is the concept of transcultural adoption: the bestowing of classificatory kin relationships. This involves a flexible widening of Aboriginal family circles to include non-Aboriginal kin, for a variety of pragmatic, strategic and interpersonal reasons. In the case of the women's work with Ruth Heathcock in treating leprosy patients hidden from authorities (including Ruth's policeman husband) at Burrunjui in remote escarpment Country, adoption into families aligned with Burrunjui's Law and Dreaming, enabled necessary access. Such practice is firmly grounded in complex Aboriginal knowledges and values that are inextricable from the epistemological and ontological underpinnings expressed through Dreaming and Law that also shape cultural transmission and reception, and thereby the way that histories are articulated. This plays out today as much in regional and urban as so-called traditional settings (Bell 361-371). This can underly a partnership approach to history writing in Australia and similar settler colonial spaces that, in the words of Minoru Hokari, calls for *cross-culturalising* the very discipline of history itself through direct engagement with "Aboriginal modes of historical practice" (Hokari 2001 16-18).

Across shifting frontiers and changing social circumstances Aboriginal people have asserted agency and sovereignty, mediated change, and often reshaped and, to varying degrees, *indigenised* settler identity through either the temporary or permanent incorporation of outsiders into kinship and thereby, knowledge networks. A famous, but by no means unique, exemplar is that of the runaway convict William Buckley's (Murrangurk) enfoldment into Wathaurang society in colonial Victoria (Morgan). Adoption is also a way to celebrate deep affective bonds and invite lifelong reciprocity. As much an adept strategy of political diplomacy and a way of bringing outsiders under Aboriginal control, transcultural adoption, I argue here, is also a decolonizing methodology that profoundly inverts settler-colonial power paradigms, and imagines a new ethics of living. Indeed it works actively against the logic of the eugenics policies and consorting laws of early and mid-twentieth century Australia.⁵ As opposed to 'breeding out' Aboriginality, it enfolds others into an Aboriginal sovereign framework; and rather than segregating cultures, it sutures them. Transcultural adoption by Aboriginal peoples is, furthermore, located in the Aboriginal knowledge-value of *sharing* (Grievies 25, 28, 45) and what the feminist theologian Sharon D. Welch defines as an *ethics of risk*, characterised by "three elements each of which is essential in order to maintain resistance in the face of overwhelming odds". She argues for:

a redefinition of responsible action, grounding in community, and strategic-risk taking. Responsible action does not mean the certain achievements of desired ends but the creation of a matrix in which further actions are possible, the creation of the conditions of possibility for desired changes (Welch 19, 20).

Drawing from my formative experiences of working under Rosalind Munur's expert guidance, from the 1980s to the mid-2000s, and deploying the reflexivity of auto-ethnography (Reed-Danahay) as a means of storytelling and social exploration, my essay reflects on the lived-nuances of kinship across cultural borders, and ultimately its creation of such "conditions of possibility for desired changes" (Welch 20). In particular my interest lies in the multiple ways in which the Aboriginal-led pedagogy of incorporation across cultural boundaries creates a different kind of subject, as well as a different paradigm of history, as illuminated above by Hokari: one that is sustaining of cross-cultural futures.

Arriving in a new place

It is 1984 and I am heading along the Roper Highway. It is a road I have now driven more than thirty times, in as many years, and still find enthralling. Stretching east from Mataranka towards the Gulf of Carpentaria, the single-lane highway is the main corridor to south-east Arnhem Land and the Aboriginal community of Ngukurr. It is rare to encounter another vehicle. Signposts point to dirt tracks that spider off, echoing the names of cattle stations that are now also self-administered Aboriginal communities: Elsey Station, Roper Valley Station, Hodgson Downs, Nutwood Downs, Urapunga.... What strikes me is the palpable feel of a landscape alive with active sacred sites maintained through a regular cycle of ceremonies. Country shaped by ancestral Giants, Lightning Men, Goanna, Barrumundi, Kangaroo, Rainbow Serpents, Mermaids and Mimis. The road passes through pockets of tropical lushness, hard cattle-station country, forests of yellow kapok and silvery acacia, crimson escarpments, and finally to Roper Bar. It was near here at the bordering of two worlds that Ruth Heathcock had worked and lived with the Roper River women and their community at the former, now vanished, Roper River Police Station.

Forty-five kilometers on, I arrive at dusk in the small hilltop community of Ngukurr on a paperbark-lined bend of river, known in the Warndarrang language as *Mirlinbahwah*. Young families walk the streets heading home in the warm evening. Children dance to the sounds of Michael Jackson's *Billy Jean* played on small cassette recorders. The sky turns blood orange lighting the escarpment beyond, then deep, deep crimson, before fading to black. I am directed to two senior lawmen, Willie Gudabi and Old Sam Thompson and their wives, Moima Willie and Una Thompson, powerful women in their own right. They know about my project from the letter I sent ahead requesting an entry permit, and are delighted to learn that Ruth Heathcock is still alive at 84 years of age. Indeed Ruth had insisted that before I proceed further with my idea for a documentary that I travel to consult with people here, to see if it indeed was a venture they welcomed.

"Ah, there's that lovely lady", Una smiles when I show her a photograph of Ruth.

Willie Gudabi, perhaps informed by his acute sense of visual culture, offers support to the project, explaining that he wants history recorded "so it can be *seen*".⁶

"We'll look after you while you are here", Old Sam says. "Sister Ruth looked after me when I was sick, from little-boy", he recalls, raising his hand from the ground to indicate the intervals from boyhood to manhood. Old Sam's parents, Long Tom and Old Judy, worked with the Heathcocks in the 1930s.

“Are you her daughter?” he asks.

“No, just a close friend”, I explain. “Ruth didn’t have any children”.

But the daughter thing stuck. How otherwise could I tell her story? Positioning me as her classificatory daughter became a way of making sense of who I am, and why I was here. It also, I soon discovered, determined who I should meet, which places I should visit, and which families I would ultimately become intimately connected to, and the lens through which I would understand Roper River history.

I was allocated room in a blue weatherboard school teachers’ house, across from Willie and Moima’s place at Middle Camp, shared with Anna and Dave, visiting potters from Sydney, there to give a series of workshops.⁷

I slept deeply and arose late. When I emerged to fix breakfast, Dave interrupted, “There’s a woman outside who’s been waiting for you. She’s been there for more than an hour. She didn’t want to come in”, he said, “and she wouldn’t let us wake you”.

An attractive middle-aged woman, fine strands of grey in her dark wavy hair, wearing a navy and white floral shift stood under a shady mango tree, her young child leaning affectionately into her waist. As I came down the steps she moved towards me, stretching out her hand.

“I’m Rosalind Munur, and this is my daughter Wendy”, she said in a soft slow voice that had a soothing musical quality, underscored by a tone of solid authority. Wendy clung tighter to her mother, and cast her eyes at the ground. “My mother was Cara, who worked for Sister Ruth. She knew Mr. and Mrs. Heathcock very well. Old Sam told me you were here”. Old Sam was Rosalind’s brother (or cousin-brother in the western way). Her father Pat Thompson and Sam’s father Long Tom were brothers.

We walked down the red dirt road past the run-down store, where people were beginning to gather outside to socialise, to Rosalind’s house at Bottom Camp, not far from the river-flat and the men’s ceremony ground, a place I had been instructed to avoid the night before. Rosalind reiterated those instructions. We drank strong sweet billy-tea from luxuriously big enameled pannikins by a fire kept gently burning in the backyard. Ivy Bennett (Purrulma), Rosalind’s sister joined us, and sometimes her husband, Charley Munur, stood nearby to listen. Ivy had been living at Hodgson Downs (a cattle-station on the Hodgson River, south of Ngukurr) but after her husband died, she came here to spend time with her sister.

Rosalind who was born in 1932 and Ivy born eight years earlier, were small children when their parents, Cara and Pat Thompson, worked at the Roper Bar Police Station with the Heathcocks. They stayed with family, either at the Roper River Mission or on outlying cattle-stations, when their parents were away on police work. As young women they worked with the cattle, moving mostly between Roper Valley, Nutwood Downs, Hodgson Downs and St Vidgeons. Sometimes they cooked for the workers, but often, they recounted with a sense of pride and accomplishment, they performed challenging jobs normally undertaken by men; riding with the cattle along the stock route to Katherine, and helping construct station buildings. This independence and mobility

allowed women to expand their knowledge and associative kin networks, particularly through exchange with women ritual leaders in other parts of Country.⁸ More recently at Ngukurr Rosalind established a women's centre.

Keen to tell a story that had currency in both worlds, and which emphasised the foresight of their women kin, Rosalind and Ivy embraced my film initiative, and Rosalind, in particular, because Ivy was unwell, began to take charge of shaping its research.

"The work that Sister Ruth did here is an important part of our history", Rosalind affirmed. "And we'd like other people to know that story too, as well as for our children and their children. Sister Ruth did a lot of work with our sick people. A lot of people had that leprosy, and we didn't want them to be taken away to Channel Island". Rosalind elaborated on their mother, Cara's, imperative in this enterprise, placing the story purposefully in a wider matrix of Dreaming and Law:

My mother, her name was Cara, Ngangigi, totem Catfish, Country for my mother is Wiyagiba, Burrunju and Wanmurri, where I've got a place now. Catfish had to travel from Wanmurri to Ruined City (Burrunju).

There were sick people out in the bush and Ruth used to go with my mother and father for two or three days like that on foot and on horseback. They used to stay with Old Sam's mother and father. Some of the old men used to stay with Mr. and Mrs. Heathcock. They were really ill, no hands, no nothing. They used to come and get them before the sickness might spread. A big group got away from Old Mission; they dug a hole under the fence and ran away—Ngungubuyu mob, from Rose River.

Some Aborigines used to be afraid but my mother used to talk with language and tell them not to be afraid and give them an understanding. A lot of work they used to do. Sister Ruth said, "You don't have to be frightened. We're all the same, same body different skin." She really understood our Aboriginal way. She understood Kriol and our language. People at Ngukurr remember Mr. and Mrs. Heathcock well.

Rosalind's family had a long history of cross-cultural outreach, particularly through the agency of its women. From 1890 to the present each generation faced different challenges as intruders entered their Country, from the killing times to the mission times, to self-determination times. In reaching out selectively to pro-Aboriginal non-Aboriginal people, such as Ruth Heathcock, certain missionaries and people on cattle stations, women were able to ameliorate conditions for their people (Hughes 89-93).⁹

"My grandmother had really nice skin and eyebrows like a Malay," Rosalind recalled. Norah Durlubul, who influenced Ruth Heathcock to work with the leprosy sufferers and became her closest friend and confidante, had Macassan ancestry, testimony to hundreds of years of productive exchange between Arnhem-landers and Indonesians (Stephenson; McIntosh). Norah grew up as witness to the "killing times" of the multinational cattle company invasions of the 1890s (see Merlan 72-6; Morphy and Morphy 460-2; Harris 2-4), and as a young woman took an active role in negotiating the

establishment of the Roper River mission on her traditional land in 1908, as a pragmatic response. “My Nana was angry” Rosalind recounted. “I don’t like Munanga,” she said when the first missionaries appeared as ghosts on the water, “...but I just have to carry on”. During “mission times”, Norah’s daughter Cara, bolstered from her experience of assisting Ruth Heathcock, became the first Aboriginal nurse on the Roper River Mission in the early 1950s before her sudden death in 1953. Now, in beginning to work with me on this broadcast documentary, Rosalind was in a sense continuing this ethic of risk, and expanding her skills as a historian across new communicative territories.

Indeed from that first morning, Rosalind made my task easy. Patiently she led me through a detailed complex of necessary protocols: who I should ask for access to film on which parts of Country (*djungaiyi* as well as *minyanni*), who owned which stories, which Elder needed to give authority for these to be told, what forms of payment people required, who needed to accompany me when filming, etc.

We travelled through the densely networked Country (belonging to a range of different language groups, Ngandi, Ngalakgan, Alawa, Marra, Warndarrang) around Ngukurr, to meet the surviving senior women who worked with Ruth in the 1930s, and others who held important parts of the story: in particular Edna Nguluk, cousin-sister to Cara, and the midwife at Rosalind’s birth, and the two elderly wives of Old Walker (the *djungaiyi* for Burrunju in the 1930s), Nellie Huddleston thought to be over one hundred, and Minnie George, in her eighties. Later we spoke to people (or their descendants) who had experienced leprosy, some who had earlier been incarcerated on Channel Island. Rosalind continually emphasised the importance of getting each element of the story “straight” by consulting the correct knowledge holders, the owners of stories, and, wherever possible, listening to stories on Country where events had occurred.

Dennis Daniels, *djungaiyi* for an important ceremony *business*¹⁰ closely associated with Burrunju, a tall impressive Elder with a deep baritone voice, elaborated on the interconnections between the journey of Ruth Heathcock and the women to Burrunju in the 1930s, and the foundational travels of the ancestral Catfish in Creative times – an intersection enabled through kin across human, animal and land forms. His complex recount grounded events in a broader epistemological context that gave apprehension to the ways in which historical events cohabit the present, the recent past, the ancestral past, as well as the secular and sacred worlds simultaneously (see Hughes 94). Daniels added that the 1930s journey was now incorporated into the performance of important present-day *business*, associated with that Country.

With permission from the *djungaiyi* for Burrunju, Old Sam, and the traditional owners, the Huddleston family, Rosalind and I drove with Dennis’s younger brother Dawson Daniels in his DAA¹¹ vehicle to follow the storyline through Country. We stopped overnight with some of the Joshua family–Dinah Garadji, Eva Rogers, Andrew Joshua and their families–at Boomerang Lagoon where they had an outstation with a small bough-shaded schoolhouse and a mustering yard. Old Joshua, their father had worked as a guide and translator for the anthropologist Donald Thomson in the 1940s (Thomson 30-42). In 1948 he was found to have leprosy and moved to Channel Island, finishing there in the 1950s. After twelve years of protracted negotiations finally his children had been able to get his remains back, thirty years after his death. Two weeks before I

arrived they held a proper funeral to see his spirit safely on to “the next world” as Eva put it.

That evening Dinah explained how the lagoon and the Country around were created by the ancestral giant Ngakaran: the place where he hurled down his boomerang in his travels to the first *business*. I wondered how big this giant was, mentally invoking the Cyclops from Homer’s *Odyssey* for comparison. Dinah paused, thinking deeply before responding. “I don’t know”, she said, “but when he died in 1958 it took a long while for his body to decompose. Some people carried his body to a cave near the coast, and they said his spine was this wide”. She stretched her arms two metres or so apart, adding, “It took four men to carry his boomerang”.¹² Stars filled the night sky almost touching one another. Dinah Garadji’s answer came as a further history lesson, pointing me, as Dennis Daniels’s story had earlier, to a different sense of temporality and indeed of time-space continuum, that confounds and indeed shatters all notions of western historiography. It wasn’t only *Munanga* (white people) who became enveloped in stories told as part of *business* originating in the Creative period, but ancestral beings crossed over into modern times, traversing the postwar world into which I was born. “Historical stories”, including on occasion those in which white people played a significant role, I learned, were not separate from, but part of the big ceremonial stories, belonging to a temporality far deeper and more complex than I had hitherto imagined, in which locale and kinship superseded—or perhaps swallowed—time.

On arriving at Ngukurr, it had been Old Sam and Willie, senior men with ceremonial responsibility, to whom I was formally introduced and who sanctioned my visit. Now it was mainly Rosalind, along with other senior women, who engaged the pillars of story, place, people, and time, that enabled “proper understanding” of this rich complex of stories. And as it was the path of Ruth and the women that we were tracing, it is not surprising that the finer nuances of contextualizing such knowledges mostly resided specifically with women, and required a woman-centred approach.¹³ It also became clearer why the classificatory daughter relationship mattered, and how in choosing to work with me Rosalind was establishing a correct and respectful relationship to this knowledge.¹⁴

Trade Winds

After the film was completed, many visits followed over the ensuing decades. Firstly, I arrived with a 16mm print of *Pitjiri* and armfuls of video-copies that made their way rapidly through the outstation networks. Rosalind by then had established an outstation at Wanmurri in her mother’s Warndarrang Country, by the Mermaid lagoon *Mira Lura*, the place where the Catfish met the Mermaids on his way to Burrunjui, in “quiet snake” Country. Rosalind liked to sing the Mermaid song there, *Bambiliwaar*, but she also sang another song in Warndarrang, about prisoners in chains. We slept on soft sand warmed by fire that billowed smoke over us to keep the mosquitoes at bay (figure 1). Rosalind caught turtle and fish for breakfast. I returned to Ngukurr soon after with my former partner, and some years later with our daughter, Elle (figure 2).



Figure 1: Karen Hughes, Rosalind Munur and her sister in law Kathleen Rami at Wanmurri outstation, 1986. © Karen Hughes

We travelled on this occasion with Connie Bush, mother-in-law of Rosalind's eldest daughter Audrey. I brought funding to work on projects with women about bush medicine, Rosalind's expertise quietly driving it all. Rosalind moved to a new house at Ngukurr, the Yellow House in Middle Camp. In the hours when I wasn't working or sleeping her wide verandah was a refuge at the end of each day. Wendy had grown to a beautiful young woman and had two children, who tumbled, along with many other grandchildren into Rosalind's lap at night to listen to her stories by the warmth of the fire.

When Audrey first met my daughter Elle, she painted a story for her on the back of a large calico flour-bag. The cross-hatching in the background was the Country of Ngukurr, she explained, as well as the long time her family had known us "because of Sister Ruth". The white-ochre figures in the foreground were the moon-maiden and her mother, a story about women given by Audrey's grandmother Alice Mungurra (Miningirri)—but they were also, Audrey said, Elle and me. The story of the moon-maiden was further concerned with leprosy, and thus evoked Sister Ruth and Audrey's foremothers.



Figure 2: Elle Blanks, Karen's daughter with Anisette Peters and other children at Costello outstation, 1997 © Karen Hughes

Skin

Then one bright dry-season morning in the late 1990s, Rosalind's grandson collected me from the airstrip, and dropped me with my luggage at her gate. This time Rosalind had invited me to stay at her house, and Wendy had cleared a room that opened onto the verandah. Rosalind was waiting at the top of the steps, as she always did. As I got out of the car her grandson asked,

“What's her skin, *Gagu*?”

“*Burlanjan*, she proclaimed, adding to my great exhilaration and total surprise, “She's my daughter.”

With this came a surge of great joy and recognition. Our relationship had felt something of this bonded quality all along. Perhaps I felt this all the more keenly because my mother had died when I was young. But often too I had felt a clumsy *Munanga*, failing at certain things along the way. Although this moment came as an apotheosis, I had been incorporated slowly over time, as trust was tested and deepened.

People around the community began to suddenly call me mummy, sister, aunty, daughter, *abigi*, *gagu* (grandmother/granddaughter), and so on. With this naming, Rosalind's teachings intensified, and also the pace at which we worked together accelerated. That evening around the fire she sketched a genealogical map of what my skin meant, how I was related across the community and how my skin worked with others in the family. She told me my Country and its languages, and expressed her hope that I could live there for longer periods of time. Alice Mungurra (Miningirri), Rosalind's mother-in-law, assisted with instruction as we travelled through Country. A celebrated linguist still at the prime of life in her early eighties, she spoke twelve Australian languages but did not speak English, so Rosalind or Audrey translated her teachings. The women made it clear that these were places I had responsibilities and

obligations towards. I realised that transcultural adoption is an enormously complex and ongoing process that entails serious scholarship, “being there” and a commitment for the long haul.

After everyone had gone to bed, Rosalind began to speak much more about important aspects of her own story. She had been involved in some of the grand narratives of the Northern Territory and indeed Australian history, which had mostly been told without an Aboriginal perspective. Her social father Pat (Big Pat) Thompson, for example, was police tracker to Albert McColl, when McColl was killed on Woodah Island in 1933, allegedly by Dhakiyarr Wirrapanda.¹⁵ Indeed her family history contains knowledge of events not yet publicly recorded, which shed valuable new light on this nationally significant case, extending the history held by Dyakkiarr’s family. Now that we had completed the stories around leprosy and Channel Island, and stories around Ruth Heathcock,¹⁶ and around women’s knowledges of medicine plants, Rosalind wanted to collaborate on recording her history, for her family as well as for a wider non-Aboriginal audience. We planned to finish this the following year.

But before this happened, Rosalind’s health began to fail. The community health clinic urged her to undergo dialysis at the regional hospital several hundred kilometers away in Katherine. But she chose to return to Ngukurr, not wanting to die away from her Country, and the world that she both knew and to which she was known. She kept asking her children to call me so we could finish our work but, as Audrey told me when I phoned two months later, the piece of paper with my number on it had gone missing from the zipped pocket in her handbag. She said to her children in her last days: “Promise me you’ll keep working with Karen on the history.”

Paradoxically, this coincided with the moment when former Prime Minister John Howard weighed publicly into the history wars debate, arguing that a linear narrative of heroic British conquest be adopted in school curricula (see Grattan, 1; Howard, n.p.; Shanahan, 1). In unfolding her stories Rosalind had taught me much more about the process of history, and how easily such knowledges can be lost when knowledge-holders pass on. She encouraged me to see history through a strikingly different lens, as something that was embodied and unalienated from the knower, in contrast to the disembodied textual records of much *Munanga* history. Her stories shed new light on events that white Australians think are familiar and known, adding insight and complexity to our shared stories. She showed me how knowledge travelled intergenerationally through genealogies, linked to specific songlines and belonging to place—encapsulated in the Aboriginal notion of Country, and nourished by the return of her Wanmurri homeland. Finally, Rosalind had drawn me into a correct relationship with that knowledge and had begun to instruct me in an ethics of working and being by which it might be possible to begin to move toward “desired changes” (Welch 20) as much socio-political and scholarly, as they are deeply personal.¹⁷

Sadly I wasn’t able to attend her funeral, as I had promised her. When I came back the following Dry, Rosalind’s absence was everywhere. Everything I’d ever known here had been mediated through her. Charley and her children, despite their grief, made me especially welcome. We visited her grave carpeted in bright flowers at the new cemetery on the hill and spoke with her as if she was there. After, an enormous butterfly

with brown patterned wings, the size of my palm, flew into my bedroom and settled on the wall, remaining for the rest of my stay.

When I was leaving Audrey and Linda, worried their mother's spirit might follow me, took me down to Yalawata billabong to ritually smoke me, tapping my body with hot branches of ironwood leaves. This was a women's spot where we'd all spent so much time together fishing, talking, cooking and harvesting water-lily seeds, and they before me as small children learning at their mother's side.

Generations

Audrey, Linda, Rose and Wendy have all stepped into strong leadership roles and raised large, strong families. Audrey Bush, a knowledgeable, devout ritual expert, worked with disengaged youth from the southern cities and operated a small cultural tourism business so that others could experience the healing of Country. As the oldest daughter she has inherited all the culture passed on by her father's side at Walker River. Linda Huddleston is in charge of a revegetation program on Groote Eylandt, and Rose Munur teaches at the Ngukurr School, while Wendy Munur works as a director with the night patrol for the Ngukurr Women's Shelter.



Audrey Bush holding her grandson Keanu Bush on the verandah of the Yellow House, Ngukurr, 1997 © Karen Hughes

As skin-sisters we look to each other in times of triumph and crisis. "Being there" is made easier in the mobile phone age. Rose calls me from the ceremonial ground while she waits for the dancing to begin: we talk while I am driving home from work, negotiating traffic on Melbourne's Eastern Freeway. "*Bobala*", we say to connect in times of grief: the Kriol expression for "I'm very, very sorry from the bottom of my heart".¹⁸

Last year our big sister (Rosalind and Charley's oldest daughter) died and it gutted us all. This time I was determined to be there for her funeral. Just before we arrived, Linda

told me, she saw her mother standing at the top of the steps, waiting. Rose took me aside to tell me that the family had held a meeting. After I'm gone, she said, they want my daughter to keep coming back with her children, and for them to bring their children, and so on, down and across the generations of our families. The deep and complex connectedness of incorporation into a skin system, as Big Sister's painting for my daughter Elle foretold, moves across time, space, generations, and cultures yet is also very specifically grounded here in a particular lineage and place. These events, among the most important in my life, shift my subjectivity and infuse my scholarship in ways not easily explained.

The trade winds keep blowing. The young ones have laptops and the glow of screens amplify the campfire light at night. More than 25 years after my first visit, we watch *Pitjiri* under the stars on a laptop, perched on a plastic chair, around Rose's fire. Of the older generation only Charley's brother Johnny is there, a quiet and dignified Wagilak Elder from Walker River. "Good one", he pronounces.

Rose Munur, taking on a new leadership role, is starting to put the family history together for the digital age. Together we have been recording, discussing and writing their mother's story, and now their stories as well. Rose, whose name is also *Mungranjyajua*, born in 1967, expresses the "survivance"¹⁹ sentiment of her forebears, also capably negotiating between worlds. "In my young days", she writes:

when I started getting my senses and my memory, seeing what things were happening in life, I started understanding. And the first thing we were taught by my parents is the Law. All those things had to come first, even though when we started going to school, things were a bit different from there from what we were brought up though. So we've learnt both ways, both our culture and *Munanga way* (Munur 23).

Everyone comments on Rose's striking physical similarity to her great grandmother Norah Durlubul. Norah "became a church lady at the end of her life", and since her older sister's passing, Rose has found clarity in the distinctively Aboriginal church, balancing this with her ritual responsibilities.

This 2013 dry season, we're coming together at Rosalind's cherished Wanmurri homeland to gather all of our stories and workshop them into a truly co-authored book (see Bell 112-4 for methodology). My daughter and Rosalind's grandchildren plan to video our efforts. But it is a story that cannot be confined to digital images or printed pages. It is a story that keeps on writing itself across the bodies of new generations, mine and theirs, and ours, weaving the contemporary social fabric as stories always have, down and across, back and forwards, casting a long skein beyond individual lifetimes and onto the land itself.

Endnotes

¹ For greater understanding of a rich tradition of transcultural adoption and collaborative knowledge production see, for example, classic evocative essays by Diane Bell on her relationship with Topsy Napurrula Nelson generally, (Bell) and Bill Stanner on his close friendship with Durmugam (Stanner). See also White *et al* generally and Tamasari's work on personal acquaintance.

² Throughout I use the Aboriginal English term "Country" (as distinct from the standard Australian English meaning), which encompasses home, clan estate, and the powerful and intimate complex of spiritual, animate and inanimate forces that bind people and place within the ontology of the Dreaming.

³ See Hughes 2005 for a more detailed account; see also Haskins for her illuminating treatise on Aboriginal domestic service as a contact zone, and Burton on the expected "civilising" role of white women in a transcolonial context.

⁴ The Northern Territory Ordinance for the Suppression of Leprosy, instituted by Cecil Cook in 1927, failed to account for Aboriginal social and religious concerns, particularly the importance of dying in one's Country. See for example Hughes 1986, 2005, in press; and Saunders. For greater understanding of the way tropical medicine was used as an astute weapon in colonial expansion see Edmond, generally.

⁵ See Haebich generally for a comprehensive historical exploration of these policies and their social impact.

⁶ A few years later, from 1987, Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie were among the extraordinary group of painters at the helm of the Ngukurr art movement.

⁷ This was the beginning—soon to be followed by printmaking classes—of art workshops in the old school house, repurposed as Beat Street, that preceded the Ngukurr art movement, that burst onto the scene in 1987 (see Ryan).

⁸ This mobility put them in touch with other Country and other women ritual leaders which enhanced their ritual expertise, particularly in regard to the *munga munga*, as Diane Bell (7) and Toni Bauman (45-47) pointed out in their work with women for the Cox River Land Claim.

⁹ For comparable work see Goodall and Cadzow's exploration of cross-cultural engagement along the Sydney's St Georges River, especially 87-116 (Goodall and Cadzow).

¹⁰ The Aboriginal English term *business* is used here to describe important ritual and ceremonial work.

¹¹ Department of Aboriginal Affairs

¹² Dinah Garadji, Personal account, 1984.

¹³ Women, until more recently, have been too often rendered either absent from contact histories or cast stereotypically as victims, for example through their association with white men. Much feminist scholarship, however, has firmly refuted this and demonstrated the enabling and leadership roles of Aboriginal women in their communities as well as across cultural boundaries (see for example overall Bell; Gale; Moreton Robinson; Taylor).

¹⁴ As Patricia Hill Collins suggests in a different but not unrelated context of North America, "black women intellectuals have laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive standpoint on self, community, and society and, in doing so, created a multi-faceted women's intellectual tradition" (395).

¹⁵ See Read, 9.1-9.10

¹⁶ See Hughes 2005 generally for our work on these histories.

¹⁷ See also Janke, generally, for specific discussion and guidelines as to the ethics of conducting research into Aboriginal knowledges and cultural property. See also: http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/docswr/_assets/main/documents/working_with_aboriginal.pdf

¹⁸ Rose Munur, Personal account, 2011.

¹⁹ A term used by the Native American scholar Gerald Vizenor to express the conflation of survival and resistance (10-12).

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Karen Hughes is a Lecturer in Aboriginal Studies at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne. Her research focuses on intimate gendered histories of the contact zone in settler-colonial societies, incorporating transnational perspectives. She is currently collaborating with Victoria Grieves and Catriona Elder on the ARC-funded Children of War project that explores the phenomenon of mixed-race children born in Australia during WW2 when foreign, mostly US, troops were stationed there. Other projects include a cross-cultural collaboration between Aboriginal communities in southern Australia and the United States and an intergenerational women's history project in Ngukurr, NT. Her research pursues de-colonising methodologies through a partnership approach to ethnography.