

Karen Hughes

Fluid waters: cultural exchange in the land of the Ngarrindjeri, a poetics and a politics

Abstract I: In this article I examine the fluid dialogic relationships, inherent in storytelling modes and women's lived practices across cultures, as a political economy of kinship and exchange between cultures sometimes present at the intersections of Indigenous and settler Australian women's lives. This project is part of a larger micro-history of women from Lake Alexandrina in the lands and waters of the Ngarrindjeri Indigenous peoples in southern Australia. Here I reflexively explore the politics and poetics of exchange relationships that not only shape the writing of history but reinscribe the persona of the historian to produce histories that are not merely cross-cultural, but cross-culturalised (1). I further discuss how the hints and revelations in the Lake Alexandrina women's stories present an alternative reality, in post-Apology Australia, the richer tapestry of a still possible mutually constituted world.

Abstract II: In questo articolo esamino la relazione dialogica e fluida, che è parte integrante della modalità del raccontare le storie e delle pratiche vissute dalle donne di culture diverse, in quanto economia politica di relazione familiare e scambio tra le culture presente a volte alle intersezioni di vita di donne indigene e australiane. Questo progetto è parte di una micro-storia più ampia di donne del Lago Alexandrina nelle terre e le acque dei popoli indigeni Ngarrindjeri che vivono al sud dell'Australia. Questo lavoro di ricerca è una riflessione sulla politica e la poetica delle relazioni di scambio che non solo danno forma alla scrittura della storia, ma riscrivono e inscrivono la figura chi narra la storia per ottenere alla fine storie che non solo sono cross-culturali, ma "cross-culturalizzate". L'articolo

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discute inoltre di come i suggerimenti e le rivelazioni nelle storie delle donne del Lago Alexandrina presentino una realtà alternativa che offre possibilità di costituire un mondo mutuale e complementare nel contesto di un'Australia che ha offerto le scuse ufficiali della nazione agli Aborigeni per i genocidi e ingiustizie perpetrati nel corso dei secoli.

Ellen Trevorrow, a renowned fibre artist and grand-daughter of the oldest living Ngarrindjeri (2) woman, the revered storyteller Aunty (3) Hilda Wilson, speaks of a poetics of weaving, "stitch by stitch, circle by circle, all things are connected", she says "in the Ngarrindjeri way" (Bell *et al* 2008: 10). From her I have learnt stories told and teachings imparted during this process. I have watched as Aunty Hilda Wilson at the age of almost ninety took up the rushes (*Cyperus gymnocaulos*) without effort in the manner of her mother Olive Varcoe and continued her story: of women, of men, of country; spinning yarns, weaving threads. The woven object is artefact, text and signifier. It holds memories of socio-cultural eco-place, of land, water and sky worlds and of relationships between human and other sentient beings. In between the woven object and the weaver is a narrative inscribed within the infrastructure of each.

I did not know my great, great grandmother Louisa Coad, who lived in the time of Ned Kelly (4), but she made patchworks across the Lake at Milang. A few of them survive. She and my great grandmother Ada Pavy would stay up talking by the window that looked across the water, stitching together utilitarian objects of beauty and strength. My mother's cousin Marjorie Quinn continues that tradition, also by Lake Alexandrina, making quilted objects, often in a communal setting as women talk and tell stories that are often other to the dominant local discourse, that are within a gendered domain of being and knowing.

The women's stories, Ngarrindjeri and settler, are about such acts of suturing and the political economy of this exchange within and across cultures. Their speech

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events constitute extraordinary cultural and political documents that are acts of generosity and grace. In the remembering and sharing of their stories with a wider audience the Indigenous historians invite an inclusivity. This is a continuance of a tradition of exchange and diplomacy that can be traced in the records of white explorers and missionaries to the first moments of colonisation but has often been misread or overlooked. The first sub-Protector appointed to the Ngarrindjeri lands at Wellington in 1842, Scottish-born policeman and soldier George Mason formed a long term love relationship with a powerful local woman of the *Jaralde* clan, Grandmother Louisa Karpany, although both were married to others. Two children were born of their relationship, and a large present day Ngarrindjeri dynasty founded (Bell 1998: 433-4). But after Federation and its whitening, segregating impulses of 20th century interwar Australia, the creolised south was barely a memory (Hughes 2010).

For the white women living around the Lakes of the Ngarrindjeri lands, acts of speech and memory are transgressive occurrences. In speaking of cross-cultural and Indigenous pasts they break a silence that both ruptures and gives voice to a prior complicity with the masculinist domination of the colonisation that led to the clash and then the separation of Indigenous and settler cultures around the Lake, with a Christian Aboriginal mission on one shore, the "white" town on the other (Hughes 2007). The women's stories, each in their own way can be read as narratives of possession, of belonging differently to place. The implicit dialogues between them allow a narrative interface to occur that destabilises and reconfigures cultural and historical space. These are insurgent realities, what Foucault (1980: 81) called the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" that make a fluid conduit between past and present, offering a new position of being human, figured on kinship and reciprocity within the cross-cultural *lacunae* of Ngarrindjeri country. Walter Benjamin (1970) recognised the transgressive and revolutionary turn, in the darkening times of 1930s Europe (paralleling that of a deeply assimilationist Australia) for unauthorised

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autobiography and *ego-histoire* (5) to cosset "moments of danger" that can implode "authorised" narratives. Such are the lights under the bushels of common sense pragmatism. Deborah Bird Rose writes that:

[t]he many recent shifts in Australian society and culture have confirmed that, far from being the consolation of the powerless, remembrance is an active force for social change. (Rose 2001: 79).

Aunty Hilda Wilson's story privileges prior Ngarrindjeri ownership of the lake of her birthplace and the cultural and discursive authority that is invested in her speaking position of senior Ngarrindjeri *hutchu* (6), the oldest traditional owner of *Kayinga* (Lake Alexandrina). This status is situated in her maternal genealogy that traces ownership to the waters and land of *Milangk* (Milang), *Kumarangk*, (Hindmarsh Island), *Kurangk* (the Coorong) and *Raukkan* (the ancient camping ground). It is expressed through her position within the (Sumner-Rankine) family as "the eldest daughter of the eldest daughter of the eldest son of the eldest daughter of the first tribal marriage of Ben Sumner and Kundjawara" (Kartinyeri, 1998), who was born at Milang in the 1820s. It is resonant also in her contemporary status of seniority within the wider Ngarrindjeri community extending to other regions of South Australia, most notably Adelaide and Point Pearce (Yorke Peninsula), and in her active mothering role ("the heartbeat of our family" as her great grandson, the celebrated AFL football player Michael O'Loughlin put it at her recent 90th birthday celebrations), as a reproducer of culture through her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren many of whom continue the traditions of political activism and cultural custodianship of Hilda's forebears. The centring of her narrative acknowledges the moment of recognition, on our first trip to Raukkan together, of the spatial, temporal and metaphoric underpinnings that her life shared with that of Dorothy Johnson my grandmother born in the white town in 1909, through the deeply complex, tangled post invasion history of the Lake - that preceded these women's births

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by as little as two to three generations. It was a history on which my grandmother, reflective of both her gender and the wider context of her times, was largely silent despite a lived reality that was contrary.

In the wider ongoing project that this article arises from – one that looks at the interconnections of Ngarrindjeri women and settler women in the around the Lakes of the Lower Murray in southern Australia - Hilda Wilson's is the longest and most detailed of the women's narratives, a fact that reflects many things – her openness to sharing narrative; an imperative to create an historical space that reaches and educates a wider audience; the long Indigenous performative tradition into which she is comfortable speaking; the closeness that has developed between us during this project, and the time I have needed to spend learning other ways of being in the world that such a partnership in research, friendship and epistemology can offer (7).

Our collaboration has developed during many actual and imagined journeys over a seven year period. It has involved several important trips "home" to Raukkan, the site of the former Aboriginal mission, where she was born in 1911, and to other places of memory and knowledge in the surrounding Coorong and Lakes region of the now threatened Lower Murray waterways (8). Hilda is exceptionally clear about emphasising Lake Alexandrina and Raukkan as her ancestral and spiritual place of belonging despite having lived much of her adult life several hundred kilometres away. Firstly on Point Pearce, on the Eyre Peninsula, where her father moved in the late 1920s in search of full employment denied at Raukkan; and from the early 1970s onwards, after the 1967 Federal Referendum which allowed the Commonwealth rather than individual states to legislate on behalf of Aboriginal people (9), in the northern suburbs of Adelaide where she has lived since in the company of her youngest son and his family. One of the themes made clear in her narrative is the continuity of knowledge and cultural practice through movements and disruptions, both exilic and chosen, and how knowledges and country travel with the body through a relationship of self-reflexivity (10).

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Our very early discussions of history, family and place began in the home of Hilda's younger sister, Ethel Karpany a talented historian and wicked raconteur, gifted with an acerbic memory for narrative description and detail. A large photographic archive housed in albums and boxes that spilled from suitcases under her bed and wardrobe shelves – family snaps and reclaimed museum material – complemented this talent. Sadly, Ethel Karpany has passed on and was not able to take part in this project. This story however acknowledges her and her desire to make the past known in the present and to find the present in the past (11).

Kitchen tables and domestic spaces – places of socialisation – have been significant sites of exchange within and across cultures. Mostly our recording sessions have occurred during conversations around kitchen tables in Hilda's Adelaide home, in mine and in Cabin One at Camp Coorong, the Ngarrindjeri cultural education centre co-founded by her granddaughter Ellen Trevorrow, our second home on these journeys home. Sometimes our conversations have been in the company of Hilda's family and friends. Through their own relationship to a particular narrative event, as actors or custodians, they have contributed episodically and contextually to this performative exchange. Similarly parts of our recording process have occurred, very often spontaneously, always at Hilda's instigation, on visits to her family and friends within the wider Ngarrindjeri community living in metropolitan Adelaide and over a range of community events. These have included sitting together in the elder's box at consecutive Aboriginal football and netball carnivals across the breadth of regional southern Australia in the late 1990s to the mid 2000s, where Hilda remarked that this was not possible a generation ago, that white and black could not sit side by side (12); a journey by riverboat with one hundred elders along the Murray from Tailem Bend into Lake Alexandrina to participate in a two day public *Ngrilkulun* (cultural festival) on the Ngarrindjeri lands at Raukkan where Hilda was spontaneously invited to perform *Pata Winema*, "the old corroboree song" (13), not far from the place near the water where she had learnt it at ceremonies

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from her great grandmother, Ellen Sumner; a reunion of members of the large Sumner family descent group to celebrate the launch of Doreen Kartinyeri's four volumes of Sumner family history (1998), in which Hilda's story is situated.

Hilda has urged that I digitally record these celebrations, often directing me to include particular shots of country or family, to augment for their cultural significance so that at a later date the DVDs can be taken out as an artefact, much like the weavings deployed to evoke memory, events, people, or the boxes of photographs under Ethel Karpany's bed, to induce further story ("spinning a yarn" (14)) at a later time. This way they can make their way through the generations of community in often hidden domestic spaces - weaving, suturing and encouraging further extensions of story.

The places we have visited during our work are locations where Hilda has lived, played, been educated in Ngarrindjeri and European traditions, celebrated, loved, worked, resisted domination and raised up her family of eight children, with her husband Robert Wilson and later after her move to Adelaide as a sole parent and economic provider. The synaesthesia of place, story and social relations, walking and conversing in and on those places has been accompanied by the mnemonic effect of recalling and connecting events that had occurred there, others who have lived there and stories that were set there. They map a sense of space around the Lake that extends into the wider regions of South Australia and beyond, that is often gendered and specifically Indigenous.

It must be said that I consider seven years a relatively short span of time, within our other lives, for such acts of disclosure and understanding, especially within a cross-cultural framework which until the still relatively recent recognition of Native Title through the Mabo High Court Judgement (1992) and the Reconciliation movement that followed in often halting steps has not been supported by broader social constructions in Australian society. Now the Rudd Labour Government's 2008 National Apology to the Stolen Generations has perhaps brought us closer to the possibility of an ethical and promised home.

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The Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission of 1995 had made it particularly clear for many Aboriginal people, that sharing culture was a risky and dangerous thing to do (15). Processes of exchange and utterance shifted meanings as they moved across cultural boundaries and were often subject not only to misunderstandings but betrayals of trust. The potentiality of cross-cultural conversations while beginning to be valued and legitimated in places within the academy are nonetheless mostly enacted within and constrained by academic research expectations that have been shaped by, and continue to be located in, principally white and masculinist cultural practices that require closure, fixity and a linear demarcation of time. I consider such research engagement a work in progress at the early stage of understanding and producing shared stories - one in which we need to think and work cross-culturally. Minoru Hokari talks about this pedagogic infoldment in reference to his project of cross-culturalising history. He describes it thus: 'Instead of focusing our historical practice on Aboriginal pasts we must learn the Aboriginal way of constructing the past, and then interact with their mode of history' (Hokari 2000: 38). And Diane Bell reminds that:

[s]tories and memories of loved ones sustain and structure the Ngarrindjeri social world; explain the mysterious; provide a secure haven in an otherwise hostile world; bring order to and confer significance on relationships amongst the living; hold hope for future generations; and open up communication with those who have passed on.....Everything has a story, but not everyone knows every story. Nor does everyone have the right to hear every story, or, having heard it, to repeat the words. (Bell 1998: 45).

Hilda Wilson's life narrative is a series of episodic interlocking and overlaying stories performed in social contexts that link to others stories either told or not told that chart a sweep of history much bolder and broader than that of a single

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life or a community intergenerational history. These stories are spatially and relationally located and hold important complex moral, ethical and historio-cultural knowledge. "Verbal learning", cautions Deborah Bird Rose, "although it may seem straightforward, is often opaque to the newcomer" (Rose 1992: 29).

Aileen Moreton Robinson argues also that such stories are inter-dimensional:

Oral histories and collective memories make visible and affirm the continuity and persistence of Indigenous subjugated knowledges in spheres of interdependent cultural domains which are peopled by both spiritual and human beings. (Moreton-Robinson 1998: 97).

Aunty Hilda Wilson's stories are highly political in that they are produced within a system of foreign domination. Their narrative strategies are part of an Indigenous epistemological practice that is characterised by an openness and flexibility that is able to widen to include non Indigenous practice, global concerns and partnership strategies within its value system. In Australia such embodied stories at the intersections of lived experience and place at the boundaries of culture (16) have the power to redress the "cult of forgetfulness and disremembering" (Stanner: 1968). They are a re-turn as well as a re-membling, and when heard together they connote a state of wholeness. Such relationships and knowledges have the potential to change bodies and nations.

NOTES:

1. See Hokari 2000.
2. The Ngarrindjeri Indigenous Australian peoples are a federation of 18 clan groups (*Laekinyeri*) whose traditional lands and waters are the in the Lower Murray region of South Australia.
3. "Aunty", "Uncle", "Grandmother" etc are used as respect terms for Ngarrindjeri elders, a common practice across many parts of southern Australia.

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4. Ned Kelly (1854-1880) was a famous Australian bushranger and outlaw, now deeply connected with notions of rebellion and the underdog in the national psyche. See Carey 2001; Brown 1980.
5. See Nora 1987.
6. Hilda Wilson offers this word to represent "grandmother" in the social sense. She used it specifically when referring to Glanville Harris, her maternal grandmother's sister in law who was also the midwife who attended Hilda's birth, giving them an especially close bond.
7. See Eisler, M. 1987.
8. Recent prolonged drought, climate change, and the over-allocation of Murray River waters upstream to irrigators is causing the increased salinity and dramatically receding water levels in Ngarrindjeri country, threatening many aspects of the environment, Ngarrindjeri culture and cultural practices. See *Ngukkan.Kunnun.Yunnan* a 22 minute DVD made with 20 Ngarrindjeri community members, led by Edith Carter, during a Hero Project Workshop.
9. See Attwood and Markus 2007.
10. See Bell 1998:262-266 and Hughes 2007: 48-9 for an explanation of the entwined relationship between land and body.
11. See Denning 2001.
12. Consorting laws were introduced in 1934 under the *Aborigines Act SA* in an attempt to prevent social interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.
13. See Bell 1998 for more on this.
14. Ngarrindjeri use this term frequently, indicative of the strong relationship between weaving and story.
15. See Langton 1996.
16. I use the concept of boundaries here in relation to Heidegger's (1971) perception that a "boundary is not that at which something stops but, as

the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing".

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