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Charles Darwin University

## Introduction to Special Issue

### Being Here Matters

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## Introduction to Special Issue: Being here matters

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**Figure 1.** Road sign, central Australia



Source: Photograph by Barry Judd

“Out here nothing changes, not in a hurry anyway, you can feel the endlessness with the coming of the light of day.” So wrote the singer songwriter Shane Howard who in the early 1980s had come to Uluru in central Australia and camped with Pitjantjatjara people in the hope he would discover himself and the continent that he called home. By the closing decades of the 20th century, the search for new and deeper meanings of both self and place that had brought Howard to the Centre reflected a kind of pilgrimage, a right-of-passage that had become a well-worn path for those seeking entrée to the authenticity of a place, a space, a landscape, and an imagining, that had come to define what many claimed to be the “real” and “true” Australia. In this way, the Centre has been transformed into a significant cultural landscape for settler-colonial society and narratives that invent, imagine and define the Australian nation.

Central Australia has played a pivotal role in shaping national imaginings since the first settler-colonists moved into the region during the 1860s. In the 19th century, the Centre became imagined as a remote place that existed at the very margin, as the northern frontier of the British Colony of South Australia. It was a place, distant and removed from the safety and

civility of the so-called “settled-districts” that lay far to the south. Explorers were soon followed by others including telegraph men who connected the region to the imperial metropole of London, pastoralists who brought cattle and sheep, missionaries who brought the bible, and police who enforced British law. Each group of settler-colonialists took possession of the place in their own particular way. They wrote home about their experiences, informing an emergent Anglo-Australian nation about the realities of life in an arid inland landscape they had conceived as hostile desert and an empty wasteland. Their stories augmented already well-established ideals of the nation and focussed on the bushman, the pioneer, the drover and the swagman as the archetypal Australians.

On this frontier of settler-colonialism, the importance of the Centre to national imaginings has always hinged on the place being a point of an uneasy, sometimes openly hostile, but nevertheless enduring co-existence between the incoming settler-colonialists and the Aboriginal peoples who have occupied the region for at least the past 20,000 years according to archaeological records, and since time began according to their own creation stories embedded in Tjukurpa (Dreaming). Being a region in which the economic interests of settler-colonialism have remained tenuous and the Aboriginal population significant has made central Australia important in settler-colonial efforts to define and represent themselves in contrast to Aboriginal peoples as the original occupiers of the country. The constructed self-image of Australia that was to emerge was an idealised bundle of attributes: modern, productive, enlightened and progressive. The self-image of the Australian people came to define itself against the negatives traits and values attributed to an Aboriginal people who became Othered. Aboriginal peoples then, became represented in settler-colonial discourse as stone-aged, child-like, lazy, treacherous, savage. In this way the representative stereotype of “the Aborigine” came to stand as the negative opposite of the Australian nation. The Australian self, in imagined and idealised form, of course, belonged within the new Anglo-Australian nation being contrasted. The Aboriginal Other did not. Aboriginal peoples, thus situated both discursively, and I would argue psychologically, in the national imagination as the antithesis of the nation were considered redundant to the “modern” task of contemporary Australian nation building.

In central Australia, the process of rendering a national identity in contrast to the alien otherness of Aboriginal peoples and their cultures commenced with the journals of the Scots explorer John McDouall Stuart, the first white man to traverse the region in the 1860s. Later the writings of colonists in region made it the last frontier of settler-colonial nation building. During the latter part of the 19th century, the various writings of Mounted Constable William Willshire some published as books, depicted the Centre as a wild and hostile place and its inhabitants savage. Willshire, a nationalist, was careful to style himself as the heroic Australian bushman, and his police work as absolutely necessary to bring Anglo-Australian (i.e. British) civilisation, law and order to region. The murders of Aboriginal men he is thought to have committed were ultimately justified by the project of nation building.

In the early to mid 20th century, central Australia attracted another group of settler-colonialists, including Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd, whose artistic works depicted visions of Australian nationhood through visual representation. In their central Australian works, these artists in their particular ways came to the uneasy realisation that Anglo-Australians remained outsiders to, and largely ignorant of, the continent on which they had built their white nation. Boyd in particular found the presence of Aboriginal peoples in central Australia an unsettling reminder of being somehow “out of place” and disconnected from the landscape despite personal and societal claims of possession. While other settler-colonial nationalists sought to emphasis differences between an Australian national identity and the “foreignness” represented by Aboriginal peoples, artists like Nolan and Boyd used their work in an effort to incorporate Aboriginal elements into the narrative of Anglo-Australian nationhood.

However, it is the writings of settler–colonial scholars and their contribution to Anglo–Australian notions of national identity and Aboriginal otherness articulated through engagements with central Australia that are most relevant to the theme of this, special edition, journal. Perhaps the most important intellectual relationship to exist between settler–colonial thinkers in this part of Australia was the most unlikely one that developed between Frank Gillen and Baldwin Spencer. Gillen, station master on the Overland Telegraph Line, in charge of the repeater station located at a place the settler–colonialist called Alice Springs but known to the Arrernte people as Mparntwe, formed a lifelong working partnership with Baldwin Spencer, a professional researcher and professor of biology at The University of Melbourne. Together, their ethnographic studies of Arrernte and other Anangu peoples, their cultures and in particular their complex systems of metaphysical belief did much to confirm the alien otherness of Aboriginal peoples as indisputable “scientific fact” and authoritative knowledge. Their works characterised the otherness of Aboriginal peoples as being incommensurate and incompatible in an absolute sense with the Anglo-derived culture of settler–colonial Australia; they concluded that Arrernte and other central Australian “tribes” had no future in a nation defined by ideas of white racial purity and British cultural superiority and its state apparatus, the Commonwealth of Australia.

In 1899, on the eve of Anglo–Australian political Federation, Gillen and Spencer published their globally influential work, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*. This emblematic ethnography of central Australian Aboriginal peoples did much to place Alice Springs and central Australia on the international map as a region of primary global importance to emerging intellectual understandings of human society and the processes of technological development as well as in the development of discrete traditions and belief systems. Most notably, the central Australian work of Gillen and Spencer became a pivotal text throughout the English-speaking world in terms of the insights these thinkers provided to the relative cultural and intellectual capacities of Aboriginal peoples. Gillen and Spencer argued that such differences had emerged as a direct result of biological differences associated with race. The collected writings of the ethnographical researchers Gillen and Spencer about the Arrernte and other Anangu of central Australia, and the findings of their field investigations, “confirmed” as “scientific fact” the populist ideas that circulated widely in narratives of Australian nationalism: that Aboriginal peoples were, as a matter of biological fact, inferior both racially and culturally to the settler–colonialists. In the domain of national politics, the works of Gillen and Spencer were applied in the service of the nation: to rationalise the exclusion of Aboriginal peoples from the Australian constitution of 1901; to formally deny them civil and political rights through government legislation and bureaucratic regulation and procedure throughout much of the 20th century; and to forcibly remove mixed race children without the consent of their Aboriginal family or kin and with no avenue to legal review, for reasons of racial hygiene and the eugenic well-being of the nation.

Emphasising the incommensurate difference between national self-identity and the alien otherness of Aboriginal peoples, the hierarchies of race and culture that emerge in the works of Gillen and Spencer lent intellectual authority to and continue to exert widespread influence on the ways contemporary settler–colonial nationalism in Australia represents Aboriginal peoples and seeks to exclude them from the nation and its imagined community of belonging. The continued influence of Gillen and Spencer in shaping the Australian national imagination has become so culturally and politically embedded it is *almost* invisible, but its influence is everywhere apparent. For example, the vast majority of Anglo–Australians who live in the highly urbanised south-east of the continent continue to believe that central Australia remains one of the few places inhabited by authentic Aboriginal peoples. Arguably, Gillen and Spencer made the physical and metaphysical manifestations of Arrernte culture iconic and representational shorthand for all Aboriginal peoples in Australia. Their works had the effect of homogenising and masking significant diversity in culture, economy and physical appearance

that existed across some 250-plus separate and distinctive nations that occupied continental Australia. Furthermore, ideas about Aboriginal incapacity that Gillen and Spencer circulated and propagated as “scientific fact” in publications that circulated and informed intellectual debates world-wide have continued to be implicit in Australian national political decision that impact on Aboriginal peoples today, whereby politicians and policy makers continue to position Aboriginal people according their supposed inherent deficit.

The story of settler-colonial incursion into central Australia outlined above indicates how the writings of Anglo-Australian newcomers in the region have shaped understanding of a national identity constructed in binary opposition to the alien otherness of Aboriginal peoples. As individuals, the settler-colonialists who came to central Australia, had little in common in purpose, interest, or approach. However, all might be said to be implicated in the process of Australia’s particular brand of settler-colonialism and – whether by accident or design – in the creation (or recreation), circulation (or recirculation) and verification (or reverification) of narratives about national belonging and national exclusions. More subtly perhaps, but so too are all implicated in ethical questions that arise concerning the engagement each had with Aboriginal peoples in central Australia. In the case of William Willshire, a man who notoriously misused his authority as a policeman to murder Aboriginal men with impunity, such misgivings are easily discerned. In the case of the painters Boyd and Nolan and the singer-songwriter Shane Howard, settler-colonialists whose nationalist agendas sought to appropriate and accommodate rather than denigrate and exclude Aboriginal peoples and cultures from the project of Anglo-Australian nation building, the question of ethics becomes more difficult to judge. And what of the ethnographers Gillen and Spencer? Gillen, the amateur ethnographer and collector of Arrernte stories and artefacts acting as sub protector of Aborigines, was the man who ensured Willshire would be charged and tried for the murder of two Aboriginal men at Tempe Downs south of Alice Springs in 1891. Spencer, who later became chief protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, used this position of colonial authority to implement the forced removal of Aboriginal children, propagating what would later be known as the stolen generations. How should we assess their intellectual and interpersonal relationships with Aboriginal people in terms of these being ethical engagements? Regardless of the ethical assessments that might be attributable to each of the settler-colonialists discussed in brief above, we might consider that each of them, with the possible exception of Howard, gave questions of ethical engagement, including the consent of their Aboriginal informants in central Australia, little or no thought.

The question of ethics is especially relevant to those who will read the articles contained in this special edition journal. Today, scholars who engage with Aboriginal people through their research activity are governed by national frameworks that require the informed consent of Aboriginal participants. Researchers also need to justify the nature of their research involvement with Aboriginal peoples in terms of direct and indirect benefits to the community. In previous writings I have drawn attention to the limitations of the national ethical frameworks that currently govern professional research engagements with Aboriginal peoples in Australia. In particular, I have questioned whether the conceptual framing of ethical practice within the western academe has any relevancy to the systems of ethics that continue to operate “on the ground” in specific Aboriginal group contexts. Such questions are highly relevant in this context, as the articles contained in this special edition speak to Aboriginal peoples who continue to be informed by practices and protocols that pre-date settler-colonialism as part of their everyday existence.

As the discussion of nationalist discourses above makes clear, consideration of research and the ethics of research extends far beyond the realm of the university to encompass the world of politics, public policy and modes of governance. The research conducted by the scholars

of today, their writings and public utterances, like those of settler-colonial thinkers of the past, do not operate in a vacuum. Just as the writings of Gillen and Spencer provided a “scientific” rationale that shaped and influenced the way in which the Anglo-Australian state sought to impose colonial governance on Aboriginal peoples, contemporary research engagements with and about Aboriginal peoples continues to be entangled with narratives of nationalism, ideas of national belonging and exclusion as well as powerful ideas of possession. Whether our scholarly writings are celebratory of the nation or critical in consideration of settler-colonial relationships with Aboriginal peoples, intellectual interventions in Australian Indigenous Studies are implicitly political. The political nature of research involving Aboriginal peoples remains particularly important in the context of central Australia which very much remains a northern frontier of settler-colonialism. Here, questions of national belonging and exclusion are fought out in the everyday exchanges between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In recent history, intellectuals and their “expertise” in the Aboriginal space, including those who claim an Aboriginal identity, have been at the forefront of debate concerning the nation and the limits of settler-colonial power and authority to govern and control Aboriginal peoples in the absence of treaty, compact or agreement that address and resolve issues that remain undone as a result of British colonialism in Australia. The ongoing linkage between academics, their research expertise and narratives of nation have been clearly demonstrated in recent times by the Northern Territory Emergency Response. In 2007, the Commonwealth of Australia instituted the NTER as a major policy intervention into the lives of Aboriginal people residing on remote communities throughout the NT. The NTER, or Intervention as it commonly became known, was enacted through the denial of racial discrimination protections for Aboriginal peoples living in so called “designated areas.” Research and academic expertise functioned to underpin settler-colonial state rationales for denying Aboriginal people rights associated with Australian citizenship. More often than not, academic support for the Intervention was forthcoming from “experts” who live, work and research in and write from the eastern seaboard of the continent.

Writing about central Australia with the authority that comes with being a professional researcher raises other questions concerning the ethics of research. Research, the scholars who conduct it, and who claim “expertise” about Aboriginal peoples in central Australia, are more often than not likely to be fly-in and fly-out “experts.” The nexus between research and settler-colonial narratives of nation, the determinations of national belonging/exclusions implicit in such discourse and the political impact that research has on the daily life experience of Aboriginal people must compel academic researchers to consider issues of representation as central to the process of research that involves, gives voice to and speaks on behalf of Aboriginal subjects and informants. Getting the story right as researchers is an imperative in the context of the power that narratives of nation continue to wield. “Knowing” the context in which research is carried out therefore becomes a key ethical consideration. As someone who commenced a professional research relationship with Luritja people at Papunya in 2011, and who attempted to “know” Aboriginal concerns – social, political, economic and cultural – in respect to the organisation of Australian (Rules) Football in central Australia, I quickly became aware of the many limitations inherent in the fly-in, fly-out model of research. I came to believe that my research could not accurately give voice to the people of Papunya when my direct interactions with them were limited to just a few weeks a year. I came to consider my status as a fly-in, fly-out researcher as unethical as I could never have deep insight into the experience of what it means to be a young Aboriginal footballer living at Papunya without living in the central Australian context myself. Being here makes a difference. Being here matters.

Being in place enables a different level of engagement to emerge. Relationships with Aboriginal peoples and their communities deepen, and in many cases gain a life of their own beyond the formalities of the project and the university. Relationships play an important role in keeping researchers honest in the way they represent the Aboriginal peoples with whom they work, and

on whose behalf they often speak in academic and public debates that occur in the context of national and sometimes global discussions and debate. But more than this, being in place allows professional researchers to gain greater insight and understanding of the issues, social relations, attitudes and ways of doing things that shape the everyday lives of all who live in central Australia. Concepts such as “remoteness” will never be truly understood by researchers who think flying economy class to Alice Springs from Melbourne or Sydney is a major hardship. Gaining insight into the daily realities of life in central Australia requires researchers with an ethical commitment and willingness to be in place. Being in place allows researchers to experience at least something of the issues their Aboriginal collaborators experience every single day. If colonisation is not an event but an ongoing process that continues to shape the character and power relations that underpin the Anglo-Australian settler-state, then being in place enables professional researchers to experience the consequences of the past in all their subtle and nuanced forms that continue to characterise, shape and maintain central Australian race relations in the present time.

A recent trip I took down the Ann Beadell and Connie Sue tracks underlines the considerable gains available to researchers who come to “know” central Australia by living in the region. Travelling with an old friend I have known since the 1990s when I worked at The University of Melbourne, we set off as a convoy of two in British 4x4s and as people who proudly identify as descendants of Aboriginal peoples of central Australia, me Pitjantjatjara and he Yankunytjatjara. The many ironies of this did not escape us. As people who had been regular visitors to central Australia since our childhoods we wanted to cross the Ann Beadell and Connie Sue for the peace that isolation in the arid inland provides. We wanted to traverse country and we wanted to make camp along the way. New ways of following well-worn paths, perhaps.

Yet my other motivation for this holiday lay in the darker history of the tracks as service roads for the British nuclear test program of the 1950s. Now these tracks are celebrated by Anglo-Australia as important places for remote-area 4x4 touring adventures, but no one seems to talk about or acknowledge the original purposes of these tracks and others like them that traverse the interiors of the Australian continent. At a place called Emu Field in the Great Victoria Desert, South Australia, a British nuclear weapon called Totem 1 was detonated on 15 October 1953. The detonation of Totem 2 followed two weeks later, on 27 October. For me, being at these sites made thinking deep and hard about the ongoing consequences of colonialism, settler-state nationalism and Australia’s entanglement in the folly of British imperial dreams unavoidable. But for the inscribed blocks of concrete that mark ground zero one might not know that the lands at Emu are poisoned with so much radiation they will remain of limited use to the Aboriginal peoples who claim ownership of the plains for many millennia to come. Signs in Pitjantjatjara inform local people that while Marlu (kangaroo) is safe to eat, Ngura (camp/home) remains unsafe. This is colonial dispossession every day and today. Totems turned from purposeful Dreamings into inexplicable nightmares, seemingly without end. Beyond the undeniable colonial dispossession of Emu Field the power of settler-state nationalism and its continued operation across central Australia is manifest in small acts of frontier violence that have become so embedded in Anglo-Australian culture they represent the normal order of things.

**Figure 2.** Warning sign



Source: Photograph by Barry Judd

While visiting the site of an old plane wreck 40 kilometres from the Pitjantjatjara-owned roadhouse at Ilkurlka in Western Australia, a group of old white men from Perth informed us, as a matter of fact, that the remote Aboriginal community of Warburton was a dangerous and violent place. As they proceeded to warn us that if we didn't watch our vehicles while refuelling all gear that wasn't "bolted down" would go "walkabout", one old man turned to my young daughter Tilly and pointing toward her said, "they'll steal her too if you don't watch her." About 200 kilometres from Warburton down the Connie Sue Track we met another old white man. This one carried a large hunting knife. He strongly encouraged us to take a side track close by to see a beautiful deep waterhole populated by the most zebra finches (nyi nyi) you will ever see. Given that our permits clearly specified that travel along side tracks was off limits we were hardly surprised that the side track in question was clearly marked with Ngaanyatjarra Land Council signs declaring the waterhole a sacred site with outsiders permitted no right of access. That this message from the Ngaanyatjarra people had been shot through with multiple bullet holes speaks to the continued disrespect and disregard for Aboriginal peoples claims of ownership to their lands and their sacred places. The persistent power of Anglo-Australian narratives of nation and of national belonging and exclusion continue to make it so.



**Figures 3 and 4.** A government sign and a Ngaanyatjarra people's sign



Source: Photograph by Barry Judd

At camp that same night, with the Great Central Road within reach, our thoughts turned to the idea of an ice-cold beer and how we might gain access as we moved closer to Uluru and the resort township of Yulara. With alcohol only available to those staying at the Yulara Resort and our preference for bush camping, we started serious deliberations on an elaborate scheme to get grog into our camp. I was meeting a PhD student at Yulara and it was decided I should call him on the satellite phone to request a slab and arrange a place and time for the transaction to be completed. After about half an hour of planning we looked at each other and laughed. I said, “now we know what the every-day is like for family who live on remote communities where alcohol is not permitted.”

Having insight into the lived experience of Aboriginal people who live in central Australia is a must for research that is grounded in knowledge and understanding of context, for research that is more likely to represent and translate Aboriginal perspectives into academia and the national public sphere with accuracy, and for research that is grounded in the relationships that make ethics front and centre of the research process.

Knowing the context in which we do our work as researchers is the purpose of the articles gathered together in this special edition about ethical research in central Australia. All the papers involve contributors who live and work in central Australia and all contributors are committed to better researcher engagements between professional researchers based in universities and the Aboriginal peoples whose country is the region we collectively now call central Australia. The writings contained here, although diverse in topic, share a commitment to the kind of ethical research that can only take place through an everyday engagement with context that comes by being in place. Charles Darwin University through its Central Australian Research Group and other engagements in central Australia has a proud history and growing national reputation for “knowing” central Australia in ways other Australian based universities who engage with Aboriginal peoples across this region do not and – in my view – cannot.

In the present time, the region remains important in the national imaginings of Anglo-Australia and in the policy agendas of the settler-colonial state that continue to shape race relations between Anglo-Australian settlers and Aboriginal peoples as the first Australians. The region also remains as significant as it always has been in the imaginings of Aboriginal peoples across the continental land mass of Australia and its adjacent islands. In 2017, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates numbering 250 gathered for a national convention at Uluru in central Australia in an attempt to reconstitute the Australian state by enlarging the nation to include the indigenous peoples of the continent. The Uluru Statement: From the Heart that emerged from the convention sought recognition and a first peoples' voice to be enshrined in the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia. The Statement also sought a process of national truth telling and peace making adapted from the Yolngu concept of Makarrata, which describes the practice of dispute resolution by ceremonial spearing of the wrongdoer. The Federal government led by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull rejected the Uluru Statement, saying its recommendations were inconsistent with the core principles of the Westminster system of government by which the Anglo-Australian state operates. This decision of the Prime Minister leaves Australia at an impasse when it comes to resolving longstanding issues that continue to make settler-colonial relationships with Aboriginal peoples backward looking and beset by seemingly insurmountable issues, problems and complexities. The answer, I believe, to resetting settler-colonial Australia and its narratives of national belonging and exclusion lies not with Canberra and its politicians but within Australia. It will be the people – Aboriginal, Anglo and many others – and the institutions of Australian civil society, football and netball clubs, churches, business associations, land councils, health services, art galleries, museums and universities that will progress the ideals contained in the Uluru statement. The researchers and research collaborations showcased in this special issue demonstrate that Charles Darwin University is committed to a vision of a better and forward-looking Australia; an Australia that is enriched, deepened and strengthened by a full embrace of Aboriginal peoples and their inheritance that comes of 75,000 years occupation of the Australian land mass. Speaking at the Garma Festival 2018, the widely celebrated Australian novelist Richard Flanagan said that finding a better Australia inclusive of Aboriginal peoples and their deep cultural inheritance requires us to accept that after 200 years we have become kin. Making this point Flanagan said:

*In Yolngu the word for selfish is gurrutumiriw, which translates as lacking in kin, or acting as if one has no kin. And Australia as a nation, after 200 years, is faced with a fundamental truth. We are now entwined peoples; by custom, by humour, by friendship, by love, by work and by sport, in art, in music, in words, and through the land; in all these ways we have over 200 years found ourselves in each other. Black and white, we have become kin. We cannot be selfish...*

*For Australia lies before us, waiting to be written into the Dreaming and the Dreaming into it. It is far from easy, but I believe that if the Uluru statement is taken to Australia, rather than to Canberra, that Australians are ready for this new story, that there has never been a better time, and that we must dare everything in our telling. Yothu yindi. Garma. Makarrata. Yolgnu words that mean: coming together. Working together. Making peace together. This is our indispensable task as a nation and we cannot shirk it one more day. It is our time. Let us begin our country, as nobly as we are able, with kindness, with courage, with the love of brother and sister for brother and sister. Let us seize the fire.*

The researchers whose writings are contained within this journal are aware of the truths that Flanagan speaks. I hope the insights into ethical research in central Australia outlined here will encourage the youth who aspire to do good research to also find these truths. Now more

than ever research that is accurate, ethical and grounded in place and in honest and enduring relationships is what central Australia and a nation in urgent need of reconstitution require. Shane Howard went to Uluru in central Australia looking for *Spirit of Place*: this volume in its small way continues that journey as we look into the heart of the continent to find new solutions and new futures that lay beyond the persistent settler–colonial agendas of white nation belonging and Aboriginal exclusion.

