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Editorial

Working with multiple knowledges in Australia's Top End

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EDITORIAL

Working with multiple knowledges in Australia’s top end

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Orientation

As the ancestors moved across the land and waters singing, talking, crying, dancing, they left behind thousands of peoples-places in what became ‘New Holland’ then ‘Australia’. The Aboriginal English words ‘Country’ and ‘Law’ encompass a multiplicity of story, song, art, language, dance, water, land, animals, winds, and all the beings that exist in and make up a place, human and non-human. The various waves of visitors to this land—invited and uninvited, law-abiding and otherwise, European explorers, Macassans, missionaries, mercenaries, miners, hunters and public servants—introduced other sciences and technologies. In northern Australia, the region called the Top End, many Aboriginal people live on (or have responsibility for) their ancestral lands, speak their ancestral languages, perform ancestral ceremonies and observe traditional practices and social obligations. They also function within the Western economic rationalist ideologies which frame the schools, medical clinics, councils and other institutions provided in their communities.

In cross-cultural contexts, post-colonialism identified the pervasive but invisible pre-suppositions which forced all other knowledge systems into comparison with the ‘central’ Western scientific intellectual knowledge system (Said, 1978). Science was understood to represent ‘reality’ against which all other knowledge systems (beliefs) were contrasted. These post-colonial insights allowed those, seen from the centre as ‘other’ to ‘speak back’ to the colonial project. Post-colonialism also encouraged researchers to be reflexive in their practices. Working with Aboriginal knowledge authorities in the Top End of Australia, we take seriously their sovereignty, which they have never ceded, and their commitment to always maintaining and renewing the cohesion between peoples and places through ceremonial activities and everyday life. As settler-colonial Australian researchers we are in quite a different epistemic position, which needs to be recognised and addressed in collaborative work. Working research together with Aboriginal knowledge holders on Aboriginal land brings multiple often incommensurable knowledge traditions together. Science and Technology Studies (STS) is a field of research that unpicks the assumptions embedded in Western knowledge traditions, and provides resources for new forms of situated interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary research work. As TopEndSTS researchers we live and work on Aboriginal owned land - Country which has been sung with for more than 60,000 years. The focus of our research in the Top End involves working together and separately Ancestral and Australian governmental law and practices.

Origins of this volume

The authors in this volume make up a collective of practitioners working in northern Australia, which has become known as TopEndSTS (TopEndSTS, 2019). Our research is carried out under the authority of Indigenous elders and struggles towards research that works ‘in-place’. We come from a wide range of disciplines – community development, literature, archaeology, intercultural engagement, linguistics, law, governance studies, science and technology studies and education. Each is involved in different projects and research contexts, and all engage with Indigenous people in different ways, participating in different knowledge practices through government and non-government activities including university research, community projects, Aboriginal governance, among others.

The articles in this collection came from a set of experiences engaging with STS theory and practices, beginning as a reading group and leading to our attendance at the international 4S meeting in Sydney in 2018. This conference exposed us to a range of different voices in the field, as well as giving us opportunity to share our own experiences and research, casting them into the wider conversation. As part of this experience we also wrote a collectively authored piece in response to Helen Verran’s paper about the origins of STS in Australia (TopEndSTS, 2018; Verran, 2018), which appeared as part of the STS Across Borders exhibit at the 4S Sydney conference. Later that year we presented our papers locally at a one-day symposium in Darwin, which led to the idea of publishing versions of these in a special issue of the Learning Communities Journal, an open access, refereed journal produced by the Northern Institute at Charles Darwin University. More recently, our team was awarded a prize in the ‘Making and Doing’ section of the 4S/EASST conference in Prague in August 2020 for our presentation on ‘Working cosmologies together and separately’ (TopEndSTS, 2020).

While many of the articles in the present collection do not focus on science or technology as such, the analytic tools of STS are focused on the widely variable epistemic practices and cultures that thrive in northern Australia. STS methods undermine the absolute authority of ‘science’. By engaging the absolute authority of the sovereign people we work with, we allow room for the disparate knowledge systems to stand equally alongside each other. Such an approach encourages the researcher to step back, witness the ways in which our own positioning and partialities contribute to research design and implementation and encourage a “process of mutual interrogation and the negotiated making available of knowledge of one world in another” (Watson-Verran and Turnbull, 1995, p. 134).

The authors recognise the multiplicity of our roles as researchers ‘in the flesh’ and ‘in the text’ (Verran and Christie, 2013). As researchers in the flesh, we are often brought into adoptive kinship relations with the Aboriginal knowledge holders who are our co-researchers and teachers as well as their elders who oversee our work. These connections and our commitment to avoiding epistemic violence bind us to ongoing responsibilities, and demand that we work within intellectual norms outside the western academic tradition. Issues that are important in one knowledge system are completely irrelevant in the other, and to consider our work a form of ‘translation’ denies the reality of concepts that are both partial and incommensurable. As researchers ‘in the text’ we seek to negotiate careful ways of working these multiple epistemologies together within the academic system, honouring our Indigenous mentors and their knowledge practices. We use ethnographic and narrative tools alongside theoretical and analytic concepts as we seek to present our work faithfully, to connect and share stories of connection with each other and with our readers.

Overview of the papers

In the opening chapter, Michael Christie works with the idea of objects as sociotechnologies—“phenomena which are indivisibly both social and technical”—when engaging objects of transdisciplinary research from around the Northern Territory (NT). Using examples from education, health, housing and parliamentary processes, he suggests that the concept of sociotechnology “allows a researcher in the many unique contexts of Australia’s remote NT, to take seriously the understandings and methods of Aboriginal knowledge authorities, and work collaboratively and generatively with them.”

Catherine Bow also uses the notion of sociotechnology as an analytic tool in discussing three digital language infrastructure projects in Australian Aboriginal language contexts, and how these assemblages constitute connections and contrive equivalences between different knowledge practices. Sensitivity to the tensions implicit in these projects enables these sociotechnical assemblages to serve the needs of different audiences.

Matt Campbell’s article considers concepts of ‘home’ with an assemblage of stories from Central Australian contexts. Using stories to demonstrate that an Aboriginal home is more than just place and movement but also involves the more-than-human, he concludes that “while we are active in creating our own storylines, we are also configured by things much bigger than us which join us in ongoing becoming.” The paper argues for increased attention to configurations and embeddedness together and in-between in addressing some of the major socio-ecological challenges of our times.

A routine conversation with a post-graduate student in Greg Williams’ office led to a deep reflection on the importance of storytelling, and his paper addresses the experience of inhabiting a conversation where ‘difference’ and ‘knowing’ are done performatively. This ‘knowing in action’ can highlight the nature of stories as objects with agency, and the role of disconcertment and narrative in knowledge making.

The paper by Leonie Norrington emerges from the collaborative work of writing a historical novel set in the pre-colonial land of Aboriginal elders, landowners and knowledge authorities. It narrates a story of disconcertment in the understanding and explanation of the concept of ‘Spirit Child’ in various languages. She explores her own reconfiguration as an interpreter of Indigenous histories and knowledges to non-Indigenous audiences, and how ‘recomposing’ oneself might be useful in allowing for situations where ‘knowing’ is not possible.

Kirsty Howey’s paper addresses what appears to be the very concrete substance of gravel, yet her analysis shows the multiplicity of this substance which has particular agency depending on who and how it is being enacted. She demonstrates how reconfiguring gravel as people-place has implications on the contested work of ‘northern development’.

In a similar vein, Christine Tarbett-Buckley’s paper also identifies multiplicity in an object, in this case an encounter with Aboriginal rock art at a World Heritage Site. Through analysing particular components of a shared space within Kakadu National Park, she looks at heritage through the lens of cosmopolitics and reflects on disparate notions of ‘home’ and ‘shelter’.

Yasunori Hayashi tells of his contested position as a ‘boundary object’ as he interprets knowledge practices for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scientists, in a particular case of Yolŋu Aboriginal water epistemics and Western hydrogeology. His paper explores concerns of positioning, connection and cooperation, and the ethnographic retelling of his own experience with relational epistemics and attention to differences in order to maintain safety and respect.

In the final paper, Michaela Spencer engages with practices for designing micro-credential badges which work amidst different epistemic traditions – modern and Yolŋu Aboriginal Australian – and are involved in various market relations. Working with ethnographic storytelling she reveals important tensions and possibilities for crediting knowledge/s of Indigenous researchers engaged with others in designing and delivering research products and services in northern Australia.

We emphasise the multiplicity and the tensions inherent in our experience of living and working multiple cosmologies together in the NT at this particular time and place. Yet simultaneously, the situated knowledges we celebrate here are also vaguely whole and singular – creating an uneasy, troubled and troubling clot that is always focused on working together to create futures that are better than pasts.

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