



Silenced Issues 2

Stumbling upon a History of STS Concepts in Aboriginal Australia

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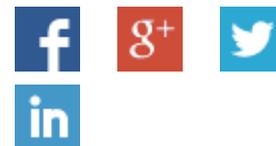
STUDENTS

Silenced Issues 2: Stumbling upon a History of STS Concepts in Aboriginal Australia

Helen Verran

13 March, 2017

An alternative history of STS, previously invisible even to me who has made a virtue of doing STS in Yolngu Aboriginal Australia, in situations many academics think is ‘really’ the domain of anthropology: this alternative history happened to me and a few others several years ago in Australia’s Northern Territory. My friend and colleague of many years [Michael Christie](#), a linguist, was the recipient of a prestigious [Australian Learning and Teaching Award](#) as part of which we had funds for an international seminar around the role of communication technologies in Yolngu Studies teaching and learning. We were fortunate to have Leigh Star, Geof Bowker, and Paul Dourish travel from California to Darwin to help us. In the image



Backchannels / Reflections

Commentary on the current and future state of the field or subfields within science and technology studies. Can include interviews, meditations on particular concepts or methods, biography / autobiography, essays, and other more personal and less formal writings.

Tags

[silenced issues](#), [history of sts](#), [distributedness](#), [leigh star](#), [concepts](#), [body](#)

below we see the back of Leigh's head, Geof's head and Michael's head (among others) as they listen to a panel of Yolngu Aboriginal experts discuss the epistemic practices of teaching Yolngu language and culture from their homelands. The image is from the final report of the program which can be found [here](#).



Leigh Star was ailing and some days it was difficult for her to get to the other side of pain for long enough to inhabit her familiar self: that highly distributed persona much loved by those who knew her. But she invariably did so, delighted to have found herself amongst equals in this matter of distributedness. Yolngu Aboriginal Australians grow up through a formalized kinship system ordering people and places as relations. Rather than face a relentless pressure to clot themselves as singular beings, Yolngu children face an implacable insistence that they distribute their being through the world as people-places. Leigh unexpectedly found herself among equals in the matter of distributedness, and responded in kind.

The distributedness of concepts, including the concept of the figure of the analyst who inhabits an ecology of knowledge practices, does not come easily to some would-be STS analysts. Others experience it as a welcome relief from the seemingly relentless pressure that moderns face to 'clot themselves' as more or less coherent. Leigh Star fell into this second category, and what's more she had over many years cultivated it not only as an analytic figuration, but as a mode of existence. This well developed capacity served Leigh well when, to-

wards the end of her life she spent some time amongst CDU researchers and visited Yolngu Aboriginal homelands in north east Arnhem Land.

STS recognizes bodies in several of its analytic traditions - clumsy in the laboratory (Latour), fertile/infertile (Cussins), as ethnographic presences in clinical settings (Mol), to name just a few examples. But the body of Leigh Star in its being allergic to onions was conceptualized in a way which reveals that ontological commitment in STS in particular ways. This concept recognises its interrupting in the everyday. Being as a body allergic to onions and articulating that as a distributed concept reveals the distributedness of a food norm and systemic discrimination — albeit a trivial form of discrimination. In 2009, amongst Yolngu Aboriginal Australians in Australia's Northern Territory, a history for this commitment to conceiving concepts (including bodies) as distributed came into view.

It took a day or so, but Leigh Star's evident capacity in this matter of exchanging properties with the milieu became explicable — at least to our Yolngu friends and colleagues. To everyone's delight — not least Leigh's — she was recognized as the intellectual granddaughter of a man adopted by Yolngu in the 1920s. Lloyd Warner, trained by Yolngu, in turn trained Howard Becker, who in turn trained Leigh Star.

So who was Lloyd Warner? Californian by birth, he failed in his hope of becoming an actor in New York and went back to studying anthropology at Berkely in the 1920s. Through the intervention of Malinowski he landed up at the Methodist Mission Station at Millingimbi in Australia's Northern Territory in 1927, and over the next two years seems to have become interested in more or less everything to do with everyday Yolngu life. By 1936, he had written his classic anthropology text *A Black Civilization*, managing well enough to find anthropological worries and concerns in several facets of Yolngu everyday life. For those familiar with contemporary Yolngu life it's not hard to read against the grain of the 1930s anthropological preoccupations displayed there, so that

the persona of the author-in-the-text (W. Lloyd Warner) emerges as decentred and distributed, inhabited by and inhabiting, Yolngu “constellations”, Warner’s name for the various, intersecting and often interrupting Yolngu working imaginaries that choreography Yolngu epistemic practices.

Interestingly it is not only Yolngu Aboriginal Australians who claim Lloyd Warner as one of their own, as profoundly influenced in his thinking by Yolngu traditions of thought. In 1950 the American neoconservative [Commentary Magazine](#) ascribed him this position.

“The new sociology of social class in America, as it is being developed by W. Lloyd Warner and his many students, serves as more than a mere description or reflection of our order. Bringing to the study of class a particular point of view, it bids fair to help mold the class system of our society according to a set pattern, in line not only with what Warner sees, but with what he preconceives as fitting and proper... A moral ideology [is] implicit in the theoretical foundation of this class analysis...[derived from experience among] the Australian blackfellow.”

Perhaps Leigh’s recognition by Yolngu Aboriginal Australians as one of their own is timely? It seems that disinterring the origins of Warner’s democratic conception of the concept of class in America as a constellation within which Americans grow, as distributed in the everyday of American life, as systemically (re)enacting the distributions of multiple inequalities, is salient in 2017. This seems to be a good time to remind Americans of the multi-rootedness of their vibrant democratic traditions.

Helen Verran is Senior Researcher & HDR Network Coordinator at Charles Darwin University's Northern Institute. She spent twenty-five years teaching and researching in History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Melbourne in Australia. During that time she worked closely with Yolngu Aboriginal knowledge authorities and scientists as they tried to work together in respectful ways. In the 1980s Helen worked in Nigeria for eight years, learning a lot from the Yoruba teachers she work-

erd with. Nowadays her research is concerned with governance, policy and politics in the areas of environmentalism and indigeneity, in Australia.

Call for Blog Contributions: Silenced Issues - Alternative Histories and Practices of STS

Backchannels is currently looking for short form writings to reflect on the topic of alternative, forgotten, ignored and silenced 'histories' as well as epistemic 'practices' of STS. Ideally contributions would be made to the blog in a short form of 700-1.000 words. We encourage contributions with visual material or with extended links to alternative forms of media.

Contributors may want to bring into focus those voices that have shaped our field, but were - and perhaps still are - silenced and ignored. Additionally, a contribution may focus on contemporaneous topics shifting the temporality of this task.

Moreover, if you would like to recommend but not necessarily write on this topic then the editors would be really interested to accept suggestions for us to follow up. We also accept reblogs but are specifically looking for new material specifically for the Backchannels readership.

For further information, or to submit contributions, please send us an [E-Mail](#).

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