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Telling stories in, through and with Country: Engaging with Indigenous and more-than-human methodologies at Bawaka, NE Australia.

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Abstract

Recent work in ethnographic and qualitative methods highlights the limitations of academic accounts of research interactions that aim for total objectivity and authority. Efforts to move beyond totalizing accounts of both the research experience and the investigator raise questions of how to engage with, make sense of, and (re)present embodied, sensual, visceral, and the ultimately placed qualities of collaborative research interactions. Our response to this set of questions entailed recognizing and respecting the knowledge and agency of the human and non-human actors involved in co-producing the research. In this paper, we analyze transcripts, research notes and conversations between non-Indigenous academics, Indigenous researchers, and Bawaka, northern Australia itself to explore storytelling as a collaborative, more-than-human methodology. We argue that in research, storytelling consists of verbal, visual, physical, and sensual elements that inform dynamic and ongoing dialogues between humans (academics/co-researchers/family members), and between humans and non-humans (animals, water, wind). To move beyond the human/non-human binary in our storytelling, we look to Aboriginal Australian concepts of Country in which place is relationally defined and continually co-created by both human and non-human agents. . Acknowledging and engaging with the embodied, more-than-human nature of research contributes to an enlarged understanding of how knowledge is co-produced, experienced, and storied.

Keywords: Australia – North East; Indigenous; Storytelling; Methodology; Collaborative Research; human/non-human.

Introduction

“So you have to learn and take this knowledge, you two [authors 1 & 2]. So you and me come together in one like a basket” (Laklak Burarrwanga, 21 January 2007).

For university academics Sarah Wright, Kate Lloyd, and Sandie Suchet-Pearson,¹ doing research in Bawaka in North East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia has woven relationships that traverse professional and personal life-worlds, encompassing people in Bawaka, our families, children, and Bawaka itself. Undertaking research between three female academics from South East Australia and Laklak Burarrwanga, a Yolngu woman (a Datiwuy and Rirratjingu Elder and Caretaker for Gumatj), and her extended family, was – and continues to be -- an exercise in mutual collaboration: We are seeking to support the work and lives of the people of Bawaka, and the knowledge we co-create also supports the academics’ work and lives. Similarly, our relationship with Bawaka Country² is a crucial and active part of our research and indeed, of our very being. For Laklak, the research entails a multigenerational relationship of kinship, responsibility, and nourishment; for Sarah, Kate, and Sandie, it has required ontological and epistemological shifts as we begin to see ourselves as connected in profound ways within more-than-human worlds. These research relationships have transformed us by entwining our lives together and with Bawaka itself (see also Burarrwanga *et al.* 2008; Lloyd *et al.*, submitted; Suchet-Pearson *et al.*, in press). Our research collaboration at Bawaka began in 2006 when Sarah, Kate, and Sandie formed a partnership with Laklak and her extended family who own and manage the successful tourism business Bawaka Cultural Experiences (BCE). BCE is centered on Bawaka homeland two hours south of Yirrkala in north east Arnhem Land, an area seen as remote from mainstream Australia. BCE attracts a range of visitors including local, national, and international day tourists, government staff on cross-cultural education tours, and women

on specialist programs.

The key aim of BCE is to communicate Yolngu ways of life to tourists, policy makers, government staff, local non-Indigenous people and academics, and show what is important and valuable to Yolngu through a range of experiences on and with Country. The business is thus a social enterprise developed to share knowledge of Aboriginal culture with non-Indigenous people and provide sustainable revenue for extended family members. The academics collaborate directly with members of BCE in a partnership that acknowledges and tries to advance the needs and goals of all involved. For BCE members, these include the social, economic, and environmental goals of the business, the family, and Bawaka itself. For the academics, the aims focus on conducting collaborative research that results in manuscripts of publishable quality. The partnership is based on mutual trust, respect, reciprocity, and flexibility.

In this paper, we write as a collaborative Indigenous and non-Indigenous research team to explore the methodologies involved in writing our two books (Burarrwanga *et al.* 2008; Burarrwanga *et al.*, in draft) and other academic and non-academic products (Burarrwanga *et al.*, accepted; Lloyd *et al.*, submitted, Lloyd *et al.* 2010; Suchet-Pearson *et al.*, in press; Wright *et al.* 2009). We have also included Bawaka as a co-author on this paper as an acknowledgement of the agency of Country and non-humans, as they actively shaped our research, encouraging certain connections, suggesting themes, propelling activities, opening possibilities, and sometimes closing them off. We examine what is usually left untold from interview transcripts, research notes, and research reflections. As with other feminist and postcolonial researchers, we draw on the notion of storytelling as a means of thinking through the complexity, contingency, and plurality of co-creating knowledges (see Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006). In our case, this co-creation goes beyond the researcher/participant relationship to discuss the way we co-create stories with other humans

(including family members) in verbal and non-verbal ways, with non-humans, and with Country itself. We focus on how our research interactions are based on the ongoing telling of stories that are embodied, emotional, sensual, and placed. They are constituted by the agencies of the people directly involved, of other humans and non-humans, and of places. Rather than an orchestrated discussion between designated people, our research interactions involve contrapuntal stories that are simultaneously told, heard, felt, sensed, and recorded by humans, non-humans, and Country.

Our discussion is situated at the nexus of several lines of inquiry that explore how to make sense of the corporeal and embodied nature of research and knowledge. Consequently, we structure the paper in three sections that explore three dimensions of research methodology relevant to our collective experience through a review of the relevant literature: (1) relationships between humans (researchers, co-researchers, and “participants”) and the nuances of engagement beyond the omnipresent researcher; (2) relationships between humans (co-researchers and family) and how they shape research practice; and (3) relationships between humans and non-humans, places included, and the implications of each of these in research encounters. Finally, we look to Aboriginal Australian concepts of Country, in which place is relationally defined and continually co-created by human and non-human agents, to think beyond the human/nonhuman binary and question the way we sculpt our shared moments into new knowledge. We suggest that the stories told, experienced, and co-authored in research are co-created from the temporal and spatial weavings of people and nonhumans in, through, and with place. These stories are dynamic and continue to unfold as they are re-told, heard, and read over and again.

Relationships between humans.

In this paper we displace the idea of the disembodied, objective researcher and engage with

reflexivity as an opening point for thinking about our innate subjectivity, its indelible traces in our research, and the interpersonal dynamics of research encounters (Chacko 2004; De Carteret 2008; Nicholls 2009; G. Rose 1997). Such reflection brings our subjectivities (those of “researcher,” “co-researcher,” “participant”) and their intersections within discourses of power, colonialism, and race into focus and reveals their inescapable influence on how knowledge is produced and shared (Besio 2005; Kim 2008; Louis 2007; McNicholas and Barrett 2005; Smith 1999). In this light, research encounters are uncertain, dynamic, and fragile sites of engagement, filled with improvised but knowing performances. “Researcher,” “co-researcher,” and “participant” draw on identities that are fluid, flexible, and deployable, and that elude confinement into fixed categories or stereotypes (Delph-Janiurek 2001; Domosh, 2003). These encounters are not “knowable” in the conventional sense; rather, they constitute the actual production of knowledge.

Feminist, post-colonial, and Indigenous studies scholars point out that reflexive engagement with identities and positionalities helps to personify and thereby destabilize the authoritative and disembodied practice that characterizes many standard research processes. Recognizing that identities are “[u]n-centred, un-certain, not entirely present, not fully representable” (G. Rose 1997, p. 314), and that research “never capture[s] the whole picture [because] no whole picture exists” (Hyndman 2001, p. 267), opens spaces for reflection and engagement with the vulnerabilities, limitations, and possibilities of how and what we know.

Since our first encounters at Bawaka in 2006, we have come to see each other as co-researchers, meaning that there is no simple or single way of delineating researcher and participant. Who holds the power and who controls each interaction? Our relative positionalities certainly are important, but this does not translate into fixed identities or inherently uneven relationships. Our encounters are a product of the agency of both the non-Indigenous academics and Laklak and her family (Figure 1).

Insert figure 1.

A key principle in our collaborative relationship is the shared desire to create and distribute knowledge. Laklak and her family are keen to teach the academic women, and knowing that they also teach, are keen for the knowledge to be passed on. Laklak uses the partnership as part of her educational agenda to propagate stories and information about Yolngu culture. She sees books and other outputs as a way of communicating Yolngu knowledge to diverse audiences that include tourists, university students, and the general public. It is also a way of reclaiming knowledge that has been provided to academic researchers but is no longer easily accessible to Yolngu people, and of creating a rich resource for cultural transmission for their children. Reflecting on our collaboration during our first book on weaving, we wrote:

We feel that writing this book has been like creating a basket. We have tried to make sure that the colors go together and that we have woven something big and beautiful that's full of meaning and knowledge. We've made a connection with each other that's like a thread linking us together. In the same way the baskets are connected we are all connected now. We all have a desire to work together to build understanding between cultures and to help others learn about, and learn from, Yolngu culture (Burarrwanga *et al.* 2008, p. 36).

Underlying our aim to contribute to intercultural understanding is a desire to achieve mutual benefits. As such, we have created a research agreement in which we detail the story of our relationship and discuss actual and potential projects. In this agreement we elaborate our desired outcomes in a way that recognizes the resonances and divergences

among our different needs. We also detail how we see these mutual benefits materializing, which includes academic payments for time and access to Bawaka, co-authorship of (both academic and non-academic) research outputs, and the production of interpretive materials for tourists. Financial benefits from our first book on weaving, for example, feed directly back to Laklak and her extended family and support BCE. Writing, producing, and promoting the book also increased confidence among Laklak and her family, and helped to promote BCE as a business role model for other Indigenous communities. For the academics, the collaboration's outputs and publications contributed towards their professional development and careers.

These relationships, however, are uncertain and constantly in negotiation. While a research agreement implies a straightforward endeavor, the realities of our work together are much more complex; sometimes they are fragile or confusing, and often they involve unexpected turns. It is in the everyday interactions around our research relationships that power can be seen in its most fluid and messiest forms as each of us directs, controls, authorizes, interrupts, manipulates, gets frustrated, is enlightened, feels awful, is reassured. The following reflections are from Laklak and Sarah as they consider the ongoing process of working together:

Laklak reflects:

I was very shy when we first met. We also worry a lot about how to get you to Bawaka, how to transport you. Even when Timmy's not here, he's worried too, nervous and worried about how to transport you. And when you're here, the whole idea of asking questions and responding is different and difficult for us. We're used to telling and being told. Listening to your questions and feeling like we have to answer has taken us a while to get used to.

Sarah reflects:

In some ways I feel so relaxed at Bawaka. It is such a nourishing place and now we have been adopted into the family there is a level of acceptance there that is really profound. But with that comes responsibility too and that sometimes make me anxious - are there things I should be doing, or shouldn't be doing as a granddaughter, sister or aunt? I know there must be. Kate, Sandie, and myself have often angsted over everything from how to talk about research, to money, to buying food (how much meat should we take??), to trying so hard not to ask too many questions. We are constantly challenged and are constantly learning how to be good research partners, open to and respectful of Yolngu ontologies, and good family members. Lucky Laklak and her family are very forgiving of our often klutzy efforts!

What remains constant are our attempts to relate to one other: We communicate and respond, reveal and clarify, talk and listen, question and remain silent, understand and confuse. We all knowingly create and engage our research space to enable our ongoing research relationships and attend to our common desire for mutual benefits.

Relationships between humans: Beyond words...

In challenging the limitations of academic knowledge and research, recent work in ethnographic and qualitative methodologies has focused on the mechanics of representation and the writing process (Crouch 2001, De Carteret 2008). Extracting neat textual interpretations from improvised, awkward, and exciting interactions conceals the "complexity

and messiness of the research process” (Nairn *et al.* 2005, p. 236), and excises modes of expression and knowing that cannot be contained within words from the findings (Laurier and Philo 2006; Mazzei, 2007; St. Pierre 1997).

Although (oral) conversation is often taken as the focus for research interaction, fieldwork is an embodied process; silences, body language, interruptions, laughter, gestures, sights, smells and feelings are ineluctable and transgressive presences in the spoken “data” produced through research encounter (Mazzei 2007; Nairn *et al.* 2005; St. Pierre 1997). These nuances “often slip away unnoticed and/or undocumented” in research notes and transcripts (Longhurst *et al.* 2008, p. 213). For example, Kim (2008) and Mazzei (2007) argue that silences, the halting pauses in the flow of conversation, are not simply gaps in dialogue but add shape to and carry what is spoken. Similarly, laughter and banter, though slippery and ambiguous, can mark shared positions, nervousness, sensitivity, and polite refusal or deflection (Delph-Janiurek 2001; Nairn *et al.* 2005).

The emotional work of research is also significant. Numerous accounts of fieldwork attest to the emotional investment and connections between those involved and the topics of discussion (for example, Askins 2009; Bennett 2009). In this sense, emotions shape the experiences of research participants in multiple, often unknowable ways. Yet, the “behind-the-scenes” emotional work of preparing for research, building relationships and rapport with others, thinking, conversing, and representing is typically removed from conventional academic accounts. Emotions serve as a basis for affect, mutuality, and empathy, and thus cannot be excised from critical geography research agendas or equally, from our understanding of how knowledge is produced and authored (Anderson 2006; Anderson and Harrison 2006; Davidson and Milligan 2004). As Dewsbury (2003, p. 1907) put it:

The imperceptibles elided by representation include emotions, passions, and

desires, and immaterial matters of spirit, belief, and faith – all forces that move beyond our familiar ... denoted, world. These are not light matters for they forge the weight of our meaningful relation with the world.

In our work at Bawaka, experiences beyond the spoken word are critical to our research relationships. By way of example, the intonation at the end of a question has changed meaning for us over time and is therefore indicative of our changing relationship. As illustrated in the reflection above, the sound of a question initially signaled unease for Laklak because in Yolngu culture you do not ask questions or expect answers. Having to answer questions from tourists and authors Sarah, Kate, and Sandie was frightening at first. Observing the way other Yolngu respond to questions and answering the questions from the university practitioners, however, eventually made Laklak feel strong and confident in her interactions with non-Indigenous people. Indeed, in our recent interactions, Laklak frequently asked the first three authors challenging questions about their own world views and understandings of the topics under discussion. Acknowledging the way that cues and pauses dance around the spoken word expands the “circumference of our consideration” of how knowledge is co-created (Mazzei 2007, p. 640).

Indeed, for Laklak it was a feeling quite beyond words, “inside her heart,” which helped her decide to work with the the academics:

After sitting down and telling stories to the university women, I felt inside my heart, inside my soul, that [they] were good, kind people that believed the stories and that understood. My feeling was that they would hold the knowledge in the dillybag (woven bag usually made of pandanus leaves) inside their head and heart. I then told my sisters and my family how we would

all work together.

While Laklak grappled with responding to questions and listening to her heart and soul, for the university researchers, the relationships and co-creation of knowledge meant letting go of their Western senses of what seemed right and wrong, and trying to let go of some preconceived ideas about academic practice and interviewing. An “interview,” for instance, can happen without questions. They also had to let go of questions such as *So when did this really happen?* and accept multiple truths and ambiguous time scales. First-hand experiences at Bawaka, such as hearing Bawaka’s protective spirit Bayini moving through the bush, assisted this process. Writing, too, has been challenging as the academics try to be true to the active agency of Country and non-humans, and to evoke place through the written word. They do feel, though, that the embodied qualities of research get lost in writing the story down: the reader can’t feel the hot sun on their skin, the cuts from the gunga, the sweat or the sea breeze; they cannot hear the children laugh and squabble, or the sound of the waves; they can’t taste the tea or salt, or smell the sea or smoke from the fire. Yet by listening carefully and essentially writing with Bawaka, the team has tried to consider the more-than-rational in its research and writing.

We are currently working on a new co-authored text on Yolngu hidden mathematics and the connections that saturate and enable the Yolngu cosmos (Burarrwanga *et al.* in draft). After recently discussing the tone we want to use in our new book and collecting stories about how non-Indigenous people can learn from Laklak’s family, Laklak asked Sarah and Sandie, “Do you understand? Do you feel it? Because you need to feel it and have emotions about it to write it in the book and for the readers to start understanding it.” For Sarah, Kate, and Sandie to be able to meaningfully engage with Laklak, her family, and Bawaka and to incorporate those engagements into our research relationships and products requires a deep

emotional investment (Figure 2). These emotional entanglements are fundamental to our work and need to be explicitly acknowledged and foregrounded. Indeed, exploring the terrain beyond the words of our research invigorates our reflections and findings, adding other registers for meaning and understanding to be conveyed and developed. To borrow de Carteret's (2008) metaphor, words from our storytelling encounters become like the thread for patterns in lace: the spaces in between make the patterns visible and more meaningful.

Insert figure 2

Relationships between humans: Who's speaking? Who's listened to?

The discussions above reveal that research interactions are produced by much more than dialogue alone. By focusing on the researcher/co-researcher/participant relationship, however, we risk excluding other people and beings that may be physically or metaphorically present in the research. Doucet (2008, p. 82), for example, has suggested that (intended and potential) audiences, institutions, political groups, and epistemic communities have a haunting presence in the research process, "influencing, guiding and moving us towards particular ways of seeing and writing." Furthermore, academic narratives frequently minimize the often complex and unpredictable influence of family, friends, and pets on doing research, tacitly perpetuating the idea of researchers as disembodied, lone observers from nowhere (Cupples and Kindon 2003; Swanson 2008).

Yet personal relationships and obligations can significantly influence research and fieldwork. Frohlick (2002, p. 54) wrote that because she brought her children to base camp on Mount Everest during her fieldwork, "the social contours of the mountaineering base camp became more crystalline to me than they might have otherwise... [and] our presence in turn changed the geographical imagination of the place itself." Julie Cupples (in Cupples and

Kindon 2003, p. 214) similarly observed that “My children were, undoubtedly, a focus around which people could question me on my mothering, and the questions asked helped me to understand issues surrounding motherhood in Nicaragua.” For these researchers, fieldwork and family are clearly intertwined; the physical presence of their children helped shape the research space and ultimately the knowledge produced. In this paper, therefore, we suggest that taking seriously the contributions, agency, and subjectivity of other humans outside the researcher relationship invites a fuller understanding of how knowledge is co-constructed.

Our first main project, a book on weaving and culture, was clearly shaped not only by who we are but also with whom we relate. During our first research encounter, a focus on the process of basket weaving was made possible by our being women, since in Yolngu basket weaving is women’s business. However, additional stories about basket-making were enabled due to our shared womanhood, including our families and children. The following extract is from a transcript of one of our research encounters.

DS220022: 21 January 2007

[Sandie]: Easy, author 1. You can do it.... It’s the bending. You actually bend it over. And break it like that. And then...pull it down...

[Laklak]: Yeah.

[Laklak]: Want to try it?

[Sarah]: OK. I might muck it up though.

[Laklak]: I’m going to be right here. (?)

[Sandie]: No pressure.

[Laklak]: There. Remember the two.

[Sarah]: No, that won’t go.

[Laklak]: There. Pull, pull

[Sandie]: Pulling, pulling.

.....

[Sandie]: Or else it will break?

[Laklak]: Yeah.

[Sandie]: It's going off.

[Laklak]: pull those together. Same time. Then thisthis is a(?)

[Sandie]: Together.

[*Rhian 'Lalu'*]

[Sandie]: You're going to walk all over our things.

[Sandie]: Ohhh....nasty.

[Laklak]: Ohh....flies.

[Sandie]: Sandflies

[Laklak]:sorry..... There you go..... Lalu. It's the corner of the mouth.

[Sandie]: That sandfly bit her right there.

[Sandie]: Is that what that mark is?

[Sandie]: All right. Walk behind Mummy, walk behind me. OK. There we go. That's all right. All gone.

[*Rhian, baby talk...*]

(big pause)

[Sandie] Yay...you did it.

[Laklak]: You see.

[Sarah]: Wow, I got through to the end.

(...sound is too bad)

[*Rhian, baby talk...*]

[Laklak]: Understand? It's like folding together.

Although the research focus is on Laklak trying to teach authors Sarah and Sandie about the process of weaving (in this case splitting the *gunga*, the pandanus leaves), the transcript is punctuated by Sandie's one-year-old daughter Rhian/Lalu's baby talk and movements, and our reactions to her. The presences of Lalu and Kate's nine-month-old daughter Hannah/Miyapunu not only shaped our learning of the craft of weaving but this maternal atmosphere also enabled deeper conversations around why weaving is fundamental to the way Yolngu women are connected within cosmology, and so enabled an affinity to be built, written into our book, and conveyed to readers. Together we are not only conducting an interview, a description that seems almost preposterous given the circumstances, but are spending time with each other and our extended families, working together, learning and exchanging, and actively caring for the children.

The "messiness" of the transcript also reveals the complexities and uncertainties intrinsic to these interactions. Here Laklak guides and directs Sarah and Sandie as their awkwardness and ignorance of weaving is disclosed, all the while building new skills and relationships. The transcript also highlights the non-verbal moments that usually take up much more time than verbal interactions, as the co-researchers spend anywhere from minutes to hours practicing the technical aspects of weaving, sitting under the trees on the beach, and tending to their children's and grandchildren's sandfly bites. Rarely are these moments in the research process acknowledged or shared, but often they form the very essence of our research relationships.

The presence of children and family members provides openings and closures, and suggests and directs the research as well as our broader interactions. The presence of Arian, Laklak's nephew, and Matt, Sarah's husband, led to the inclusion of a chapter on hunting in the second book as Arian and Matt went out hunting together over several days, providing an

abundance of food for Laklak and the family in the process. Writing a chapter on gurrutu (kinship) involved using interactions between our extended Yolngu and non-Yolngu families as a way of explaining some of the complex patterns and relationships involved. Kate's daughter Miyapunu and Laklak's granddaughter Nanu shared a song on *miyapunu* (turtle) that gave depth to a chapter on counting (Figure 3). Attending to these aspects of our research interactions shows that people who are usually excluded from the process are more than an undertone in the work. They in fact help to fashion the research, what we learn and how we learn it, and bring family in as active contributors to the emergence of shared knowledge.

Insert figure 3

Relationships between humans and non-humans: More-than-human research

Although there is much to be learned from paying attention to the deep, rich, and unexpected nature of the human-to-human relationships that constitute research, a Yolngu ontology takes seriously the more-than-human beings and influences that co-produce our world. This perspective resonates with recent work in cultural geography that has identified the need for an ontological opening to more-than-human subjectivities and agencies (Castree and Nash 2006; Johnston 2008; H. Lorimer 2007a; Lulka 2009). Geographers have used diverse theoretical traditions to destabilize strict boundaries between humans and nonhumans, and reveal the ways in which elements as varied as humans, animals, rocks, genetically modified organisms, and trees are interconnected in political, economic, historical, and ultimately quotidian ways (Castree and Nash 2006). A corollary of moving beyond Cartesian binaries is to ask who – or rather, what – has subjectivity and the capacity to act:

Many other societies and cultural worldviews have been prepared to see

capacities for agency distributed much more widely across the many different things of creation – humans, animals, spirits and the elements all included – thereby disrupting what Westerners have normally taken to constitute the properties of consciousness, self-awareness, intentions, thought and language (Philo and Wilbert 2000, p. 15).

Acknowledging the subjectivity and agency of nonhumans means that “the nonhuman becomes more than a presence, it becomes a ‘strange person,’ caught with us in the fabric of space and time” (Johnston 2008, p. 637). This enlivened understanding of the world generates deeper and more expansive terrain for political, ethical, and moral consideration in scholarship (Braun 2005; Emel *et al.* 2002; Hobson 2007; Lynn 1998). It also draws attention to the challenges involved in writing about, from, and *with* a more-than-human world. This is a complex endeavor for those caught up in Western categorical ways of thinking, and the implications of this ontological opening for research methodologies and practices still remain unclear (Dewsbury 2003).

Research encounters occur in sites of human and nonhuman coexistence and overlapping territories. Therefore, human and nonhuman beings can provide shape to research, making certain activities possible or impossible, prompting certain topics of discussion and closing others, generating shared moments and highlighting differences. In Bawaka, a range of nonhumans constantly shape and influence research encounters between the university practitioners and Laklak and her family. As illustrated in the extract from the transcript above, the wind, ants, flies and sun provide routine interruption. The basket itself, the *gunga* (pandanus), along with the sandfly, guide that particular interaction. As the transcript makes clear, the “interview” is in fact crafted and conducted predominantly by non-humans. The humans are forced to react to (e.g., pulling the *gunga*, trying to swot the

sandfly) rather than control this situation. Laklak recognizes the agency of baskets and the stories they can tell:

I ask them, what's this? They say, "It's a basket." I say, it's not a basket, it tells a story. *It is* a story. Like you might write a story in a book. But without books, we have our hands and the basket – the colors and patterns in a basket are like letters, commas, capital letters. They are the message. With the different colors, the different stitchings, you start from small up and up and up. It's like going through the university (Burarrwanga 2008, p. 19).

Figure 4 illustrates a key moment well into our first research visit when we discussed/drew/mapped the storied Country of Bawaka and created a shared understanding of what stories Sarah, Kate, and Sandie could hear, and what stories they could tell to different audiences. This critical moment, however, was not foreshadowed or planned. It was not a conscious effort to please ethics committees or form an agreement. The moment emerged from a blustery wet season January afternoon when the wind blew away any words we spoke around our usual meeting spot on the beach and a monsoonal storm swept in from across the bay. We quickly relocated indoors. With voices raised to compete with the rain hammering down on the roof, we found ourselves pulling out a big book and marker pens and co-creating an annotated storied map. The figure emphasizes both the basket, container of its own stories and guider of our book, and the map, point of agreement, revealer of information and law. Both of these objects are more than artifacts; they are active participants in our research collaboration.

Insert figure 4

Nonhuman agency saturates our research interactions at Bawaka. In writing our book on Yolngu hidden mathematics, the structure and themes were not pre-determined by any of the humans involved. As we sat at Bawaka, the material we collected for the book was prompted by a range of nonhuman agents emerging from the moment, the people, and the place. For example, experiencing the re-emergence of Nike the crocodile after a two-month absence (see figure 5), watching Warrawarra the Dhuwa sunset, the gathering of storm clouds across the bay, and reflecting on the interlacing layers of paperbark (rangan) used to start the fire, all led to LakLak expanding these as potential themes for the book. As the text explains:

We haven't seen Nike for a couple of months now, not since before Christmas, not since wulma and the first thunder and lightning. We know that bäru can hear the thunder and when we and the animals hear the first thunder we all think, 'Ah that's the time, first thunder.' And so bäru knows it's time for nesting. So they mate first and then they go, working together to build their nests (Burarrwanga *et al.*, in draft).

Insert figure 5

Interacting with non-humans at Bawaka means attending to presences, absences, silences, and communication. Sometimes we can't hear anything because the wind is blowing or the sand crunches as someone walks by. In the end, we can only share what we are permitted to share and hear what we are allowed to hear.

Bawaka is in our stories, and our stories are in Bawaka

What emerges from this discussion is the eminently placed nature of our research: This is knowledge generated with humans and nonhumans *at, through* and *with* Bawaka. Bawaka is in our stories, and our stories are in Bawaka. Geographic research more generally affirms the centrality of place for understanding and making politics, identities, and lives, and moreover asserts that politics, identities, and lives are central to constructing places (Castree 2004; Dirlik 2003; Escobar 2001; Massey 2005). Escobar (2001, p. 143) has asserted that place is fundamental in social research because:

...it is our inevitable immersion in place, and not the absoluteness of space, that has ontological priority in the generation of life and the real... This means recognizing that place, body, and environment integrate with each other; that places gather things, thoughts, and memories in particular configurations; and that place, more an event than a thing, is characterized by openness rather than by a unitary self-identity.

Reflecting on our work at Bawaka, we seek to contribute to this discussion by looking at the Aboriginal concept of Country to help understand place and our research. Indeed, we maintain that the agency of place and its contribution to our partnership and to what and how we research is such that it is a co-author of knowledge. Laklak talks about what Country means in our new book *Rajan*:

Do you understand the concept of Country? Let me explain because it's very important.

Country has many layers of meaning. It incorporates people, animals, plants, water and land. But Country is more than just people and things, it is also what connects them to each other and to multiple spiritual and symbolic realms. It relates to Laws, custom,

movement, song, knowledges, relationships, histories, presents, futures and spirit beings. Country can be talked to, it can be known, it can itself communicate, feel and take action. Country for us is alive with story, Law, power and kinship relations that join not only people to each other but link people, ancestors, place, animals, rocks, plants, stories and songs within land and sea. So you see knowledge about Country is important because it's about how and where you fit within the world and how you connect to others and to place (Burarrwanga *et al.*, in draft).

Country is grounded in Aboriginal ontologies and it references a notion of place through which landscapes, seascapes, animals, seasons, and people are actively engaged in “nourishing” relationships that mutually constitute life (D. Rose 1996; Weir 2008). Country signifies a place in which everything belongs and is sentient and active, continuously weaving life through different relationships and interdependencies. As Laklak says in *Rajan*:

The land and the spirits, the sea and all the beings are respected in a Yolŋu world. They all have their place, their own mathematics. The sea there, it has its own wāŋa, its own mathematics. The guya, the fish, stingray and the miyapunu, the turtle have all got their own language. They have their own rules, style of talking and living with one another. The birds and animals know where to sleep, where to put their babies, where to build their nests. The same for trees, bushes. The land knows what their language is (Burarrwanga *et al.*, in draft).

Although punctuated at times by the questions and answers referred to earlier, our experiences at Bawaka are imbued with myriad messages constantly sent out by

active, sentient beings in and through Country, to the land, nature, Yolngu, everything: “The world is always talking to us. The birds, butterflies and plants, they let us know what to do – but we need to pay attention to what they say” (Burarrwanga *et al.*, accepted). They are telling *stories*, such as when the *larrani*, apple, is ripe:

... there is the first lightening and thunder. This lightening and thunder is sending out messages to other countries and other homelands telling everyone - Yolŋu , animals, plants, everyone – that barra’mirri mayaltha [a particular season] is coming. Are you listening? Are you looking, smelling, feeling, tasting it? Quick bāru [crocodile], there’s a message here for you, don’t miss it. It’s very hot and humid during the day now and we’re starting to sweat during the night. The night sweating is a message telling us fruit like larrani, apple, is getting ripe (*Rajan draft material*).

For Sarah, Kate, and Sandie, Bawaka is no longer a place where we go to do our research or a place we write (and dream) about. Rather, we have become a part of Bawaka and Bawaka has become a part of us as we have been adopted into Laklak’s family. We have been given a place to belong: given a name and a place in the family and the ordered system of kinship, told about our ancestors and our Country and how these extend beyond ourselves to include our families and loved ones. As we have found ourselves woven into the complexity of Bawaka, we have realized that with belonging comes responsibility to Bawaka and the myriad interrelated beings that now are a part of us. This is not to say that our relationships are bounded by Bawaka as a locale. Laklak and her family have participated in a *marae* (a place in Māori society where culture, language and customs can be shared) and conference in

New Zealand, a weaving exhibition and book launch in Sydney and Newcastle, and shared dinner in our homes down south. The relationships formed at, through, and with Bawaka join us in space and time. As Laklak remarks:

...by working together we would help build long lasting relationships that could continue through the generations. The children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of the women both from Bawaka and the universities could grow up together, teach each other and all lead together.

Reflecting on what it means to do research on and with Country expands and deepens our understanding of how we are making knowledge together at Bawaka. The interdependency and mutuality encapsulated within Country provides a useful basis for thinking beyond binaries that designate who (which humans) and what (humans, animals, weather) can “speak” in the research space, and for acknowledging the coalescence of subjectivities and agencies that makes our research possible. It suggests that our research is contingent on Country and co-constructed with the capacities of all beings embedded in Bawaka. Put differently, our research depends on and is constituted by a range of actors that extends far beyond the human collaborators. The understandings developed are situated by our interactions in place; they stand in an ongoing and dialectic connection with humans, nonhumans and Country. This suggests important methodological challenges for researchers. Instone (2004, p. 134, 137), for one, argued that “Capturing the complexity, multiplicity and contradictions of our relations with nature calls for a multilayered methodology that refuses the temptation of certainty and closure,” and advocated for “methodological practices of co-construction and inclusion”.

The end of our story?

We draw on storytelling as a methodology to invigorate our research, create possibilities for plurality and polyphony, and open spaces for transformative engagements in research. We propose that we need to make space in our reflections and stories for others whose presence (or absence) shapes our opportunities to know, for expression that is not conveyed in words, and for the way that Country nourishes us, our relationships, and our knowledges. In thinking through our stories of Bawaka and Bawaka's stories, the totality of our experiences cannot be captured within words. But as our analysis of the "messy" parts of our transcripts and research notes illustrates, the construction of knowledge in research always occurs in, through, and with place, which brings in the agency of a range of humans and nonhumans that far exceeds the co-researchers themselves. This interweaving and co-construction of humans and nonhumans forms an important starting point for thinking about how we listen to and tell stories in and from our research. In experimenting with storytelling as a methodology, we seek to explore our re-tellings as an opening rather than a closure of experience and knowledge. In essence, our stories are dynamic and always in the telling; they are (part of) the "vibrational unfolding" of lives, knowledges, and places (McHugh 2009). In reflecting on the weaving book, Laklak underscores the importance of listening to and telling these stories, and also the responsibilities that accrue:

Remember, this basket we have made, it holds stories and knowledge to share.

I hope that as we wove this story together you gained knowledge and stories that you can pass on to your daughters, your granddaughters and to the world..... Through weaving the basket we brought it all together. Now that it's made it's a big big beautiful basket. The final step is to put the handle on it to hand it over to you, the reader, in the hope you will carry the knowledge

carefully and share it with others (Burarrwanga 2008, p. 37).

Telling stories at Bawaka has challenged us to recognize that it is not only explicitly research-oriented stories that are important, and also that not only humans tell stories. Stories are multilayered, complex, and interwoven in and through time and space; without clear beginnings or ends they are constantly told and retold. As Sarah, Kate, and Sandie learned to listen to the stories of Bawaka, these stories are woven into their life-stories. They also retell the stories to new audiences in different contexts. All agents are variously positioned as listeners, tellers, messengers, and participants. Laklak tells us that *manikay*, Yolngu songs that tell the story of Yolngu life worlds, weave through the web and bring it all together. The shape of all things – valleys, mountains, plains, people, actions, events – can all be sung:

There are songs for the sea and for the freshwater and the land. Bawaka songs. Yirritja people sing songs about going out with the boat. Yirritja people sing songs about this land Bawaka, about people sitting in the shade of the *djomula* (casuarinas trees), looking at Bawaka and nice and calm water (*marrawulwul*), the *naykuna* (flat) water, and they sing all the rocks. The rocks up here are called *rirralin* and *bakitju* – where the kids swim in the water hole in rocks. The rocks have lots of names of significance to Gumatj and they sing about them 3-4 times and then stop, then sing about the calm water. Then they sit and see the islands from Bawaka and sing the names of places like Nanukala, each beach and island has got a name.

Just as the stories *manikay* sing about weave people and place together, this paper represents a weaving of numerous threads that feed into research and knowledge. But at the same time,

it represents an unwinding of the tidily braided verbal dialogue between researcher/co-researcher/participant, deconstructing and reconstructing these into the many threads that form research encounters. The idea of storytelling as a methodology emerges, therefore, as a way to think differently about the complex dynamics that inform our research. Taking an inclusive methodological approach suggests the need to respect and consider the capacity and affect of researchers, co-researchers, families, and nonhumans in place. Such reflexivity is transformative, and has ethical dimensions. The interweaving of our personal/professional lives is a key aspect and goal of the ongoing research collaboration between Sarah, Kate, Sandie, Laklak, and many others at and with Bawaka. Consequently, as we engage in storytelling for academic audiences (and for friends, family, colleagues, etc.), we need to think about the ways that we are immersed in and responsible to the peoples/places/Country with whom we research.

Notes

1. Matalena Tofa assisted the other authors in conceptualizing, researching, and writing this paper as a research assistant but has not been directly involved in the research at Bawaka.
2. Country is a term used in Aboriginal English to describe land as a “nourishing terrain” (Rose 1996): sentient, sapient, multidimensional, and intertwined with Indigenous kinship, ancestry, law, language, and culture. Country is used to refer to specific clan estates with which Indigenous people have kinship connections. We elaborate further on the meaning of Country in the context of Bawaka, and its role as an active partner of our research collaboration, below (see section entitled, *Bawaka is in our stories, and our stories are in Bawaka*).

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