

Inventing Ethnography

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I am afraid that I believe honestly that, if those old people were living today and seen what conditions we are in and what is happening with the culture, they would have no hesitation about never speaking again.¹

During the Hindmarsh Island Bridge controversy, a disparate group comprising pro-development forces, academics and journalists, politicians and the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission, privileged a particular version of Ngarrindjeri ethnography.² At the heart of this 'invention' was the testimony in the commission of two South Australian Museum curators Philip Clarke and Philip Jones. They asserted that there is absolutely no possibility that secret women's business could have existed in Ngarrindjeri culture prior to the advent of the Hindmarsh Island issue. They went further and argued that there was no gender-based exclusivity of knowledge in Ngarrindjeri society.³ Commissioner Iris Stevens used this expert evidence as a lynch-pin of her findings that the women's business associated with Hindmarsh Island was a complete fabrication.⁴ This allegation of fabrication has seriously undermined the position of Aboriginal people in Australian society and labelled Aboriginal people in 'settled' Australia as inauthentic, weakening potential native title claims. Importantly, anthropologist Deane Fergie argued in the commission that Clarke and Jones applied an inappropriate central Australian model of secrecy to the Ngarrindjeri context resulting in a 'fabrication' of a version of secret/sacred women's business that they believed was contained in the 'secret envelopes'.⁵

Several Ngarrindjeri people gave evidence to the commission that secret women's business associated with Hindmarsh Island does in fact exist and pre-dates the bridge issue.⁶ The Stevens report discounted this evidence and the complementary testimony of non-Aboriginal witnesses such as Fergie, Neale Draper, Betty Fisher and myself, instead privileging the ethnography developed by Clarke and Jones and the evidence presented by the opponent Ngarrindjeri women.⁷ I will provide a critique of the arguments that both Clarke and Jones made for the complete absence of secret women's business in Ngarrindjeri culture prior to the Hindmarsh Island issue. Their uncritical use of existing sources dealing with Ngarrindjeri culture, such as RM and CH Berndt *A World That Was* (1993), and their subsequent 'invention' of a Ngarrindjeri ethnography underpinning the commission's findings, will be a central focus of this discussion.⁸

To counter the categorical position taken by Clarke and Jones I will present an alternative reading of the existing 'ethnographic' sources which, combined with results of my own research experience, led me to argue in the commission that the long-term existence of secret women's business associated with Hindmarsh Island was entirely plausible.⁹ I point to examples of gender-based knowledge and secret and sacred categories in Ngarrindjeri culture, that bring into question the characterisation of Ngarrindjeri society as devoid of gender exclusivity. My perspective is also informed by my lengthy association with several of the senior Ngarrindjeri women, such as Doreen Kartinyeri, who claim to know the women's business.¹⁰ In particular, during my work with Doreen Kartinyeri, she has repeatedly told me that there are aspects of her culture that she cannot talk to me about because I am a man.¹¹

It was a warm day in late spring, a group of school children filed into the back of the main meeting room at Camp Coorong, Race Relations and Cultural Education Centre.¹² Instead of the basket-making classes or cultural talks that usually take place in the space, a court-room had been set up for a hearing of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission. George Trevor, one of the founders of the camp, had been too ill to travel to Adelaide so commissioner Iris Stevens decided to come to Ngarrindjeri 'country' to hear his evidence. The school children were at the camp to learn about Ngarrindjeri culture and history but their program was being interrupted by some senior members of their own community, on a visit that resulted in the branding of one of the camp's cultural instructors as a fabricator of cultural traditions. They were witnessing first-hand what the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Michael Dodson, has described as an 'abuse of human rights' and an example of 'state sanctioned racism'.¹³

At one stage during the cross-examination of George Trevor, the following interchange took place. It provides an illuminating example of the reception provided by the commission to Ngarrindjeri witnesses who argued for the existence of women's beliefs associated with Hindmarsh Island. It also clearly shows the more general sacred significance of the area and underlines the fact that women's business was not the only basis for the original determination by Tickner - a critical misunderstanding generated in part by media sensationalism.

- Q. How did you know that connecting the island to the mainland by a bridge, that is, the linking of the island to the mainland by a bridge, was somehow offensive to its significance as being a place of women's business?
- A. I think it is just common sense.
- Q. But you didn't know anything about the content of the women's business?
- A. No, I still don't know any of the content.
- Q. It may be that a bridge to the island from the mainland would have no effect on -
- A. It is still going through our waters.
- Q. I beg your pardon?
- A. It is still going through the waters.
- Q. You don't say the waters is the women's business, do you?
- A. I'm saying the importance of the waters.
- Q. The importance of the waters.
- Q. The importance of the waters is something to do with women's business, is it?
- A. It very well could be, but it is important to the Ngarrindjeri culture because of the meeting of the waters. I didn't want to say this, but the place of the waters relates to what we call - the Ngarrindjeri people call Ngatji, which is each clan group's symbolic totem, so to speak. Those places like that is where these things breed, where they live, where they feed, all those things. You upset the totem area, you are upsetting everybody. But I don't expect you would understand that, the Ngarrindjeri Ngatji.
- Q. Let me put a suggestion to you: what you are talking about is a disturbance to the environment. Is that right?
- A. No, more than that. To what those Ngatji are to the people. They are not just animals and fish and snakes and things to us. They are real. They are more like people. Spiritual.
- Q. So it is really nothing to do with women's business, is it?
- A. It is combined with all those things.
- Q. But -
- A. You can't get it.
- Q. You make an attempt to convey it to us, please.
- A. I have no -

Q. You were saying that the island is significant because it is a place of women's business, and that a bridge linking the mainland to this place of women's business would be a desecration. That's what you're saying, is it?

A. Yes, there is no way -

Q. And you don't know, do you, by necessity, a jot about what the women's business is, do you?

A. (WITNESS SHAKES HEAD)

Q. So you cannot tell us, can you, in what way a bridge would affect that spirituality of the island, which is women's business, can you?

A. No, I have no way in the world of trying to explain that to you. I never come here to talk about the women's business on that site.

Q. You are not in a position to talk to us about it, are you?

A. Because I can't, I'm a man.

Q. That's right. So your objection to the bridge really comes down to an en_vi_\ron_men_tal objection, isn't it?

A. No, a spiritual.

Q. A bridge is going to -

A. Spiritual.

Q. Pardon?

A. A spiritual.

Q. Is there some other spiritual aspect to the island which would be affected by a bridge, is there, not women's business?

A. I just finished talking to you about it, Ngatji related.

Q. I want to put a label on it so we can understand it. Is it the case that what you are talking about - that is, that a bridge cannot go to the island - is to do with some other spirituality of the island, not women's business?

A. I'm talking about my business.

Q. Can you tell us as much as you can about that?

A. I said it just now, N-G-A-T-J-I.

Q. Which is what you are talking about, is a question of protecting the environment from a lot of people coming to the island and ruining it? That's what it is, isn't it?

A. You interpret it as environment, I don't. We have different interpretations it seems. We cannot, as Aboriginal people, separate environment and culture. They go hand-in-hand.

Q. In this sense, that you are at one with the conservation movement, aren't you, who were interested in stopping the bridge to protect the birds, the wetlands, the natural habitat that's provided for bird life on the Island?

A. I doubt very much whether they would know much about Ngarrindjeri Ngatjis. They wouldn't know nothing.

Q. That's much the same sort of argument though, isn't it?

A. No, nowhere near it.

Q. You want to protect the environment?

A. Nowhere near it.

Q. The Ngatjis, that is the bird symbols and totems for the clans and people, are in fact the wildlife, aren't they?

A. As you view them, yes.

Q. Why are they different from -

A. Because - no, I can't talk to you about that. It is plain to see you would never understand that anyway.

Q. I am suggesting to you that your objection to the bridge, in the end, boils down to really protecting the island from too many people coming onto it and the degradations that would lead to in terms of wildlife, plants and that sort of thing. That's what it is about, isn't it.

A. Well, that's what you are calling it.

Q. You say it is more than that, do you?

A. Yes.14

The devaluation of Ngarrindjeri spiritual beliefs, into a natural science-based interpretation of the interests of the environmental movement, illustrates the course that the commission was following in developing its claim that environmental groups played a part in pressuring Ngarrindjeri people into fabricating the women's business. There also appears to be a clear unwillingness to accept evidence of Ngarrindjeri spiritual beliefs connected with 'country'.

For Ngarrindjeri people *ngartjis* are inherited from their parents, usually with the principal *ngartji* traced through the male line.¹⁵ Many Ngarrindjeri people still know their *ngartjis* and these 'protectors' add a further dimension to their connections with 'country', developed through life-experience and historical association. *Ngartjis* are often identified with sites that they frequent or places where Ngarrindjeri people commonly interact with them through, for example, hunting or egg collecting. In this way *ngartjis* provide Ngarrindjeri people with a descent-based connection to the wider Ngarrindjeri region - outside the missions, the former fringe-camps and local rural towns. Both Clarke and Jones argued in the commission that Ngarrindjeri people have largely lost their association with areas of the Ngarrindjeri lands external to the missions and reserves.¹⁶ The commission used this perspective, in its potted Ngarrindjeri history, to promote the idea that Ngarrindjeri people had largely 'lost' their culture and associations with parts of their country such as Hindmarsh Island and the vicinity.¹⁷

The following is an example of the complexity of contemporary Ngarrindjeri relationships with their country, highlighting the continuing relevance of *ngartjis*. In early 1993, just prior to her death, Leila Rankine, a prominent Ngarrindjeri woman made a 'ceremonial' visit to the Coorong and the former mission Point McLeay (Raukkan). Her funeral ceremonies ended with the scattering of her ashes on a pre-designated place on the Coorong sandhills, opposite the Tauwitchere barrage. These events have been described by an elderly Ngarrindjeri woman, Margaret Jacobs, in what can be characterised as an oral history, incorporating Ngarrindjeri interpretations of spiritual associations with country.¹⁸ In the story the presence of Leila Rankine's *ngartji*, the pelican, during a number of the sequences in the funeral ceremonies, functions as a signifier of her connections with the country. In this excerpt from Margaret Jacobs' account, the *ngartji* is described as 'drawing' Leila Rankine into her country and at the same time waving her goodbye at this particular site for the last time.¹⁹

when we down the punt at, on the crossing there, on that lake by that neck there. We - there's always four pelicans sitting no matter what time of the day or night you can go unna, there's always four pelicans sitting on them rails. Well this day we went through and there wasn't a pelican to be seen anywhere. Some time you see them on in the lake, on the jetty there's always ... all of twenty, thirty them *unna*. There wasn't one pelican to be seen. When we come to the, the punt, there was this one pelican sitting down. And it make, made you all goosy you know you went all goosy, and, this one pelican - this just goes to show you what, how we believe in our *ngartjis*. And, this one pelican was sitting there, and you know as we come nearer to him and, he just looked in at Leila at the bus, he just looked in to Leila, my sister-in-law, and Veronica, her sister said to her 'ah sister look, ah ... looking at you for the last time'. And you know this pelican - he really made me go all goose flesh. He just looked in at Leila, and he just went like this with his wings [Margaret Jacobs slowly flapped her arms like a sitting pelican - moving them outstretched in towards her stomach symbolising closeness]. Just waved his wings at Leila like that, much as to say he was just drawing her in.²⁰

Leila Rankine wrote poems about her feelings towards the Coorong, her country, and the importance of her spiritual ties to the area.²¹

The Stevens report relies almost exclusively on the expert evidence of Clarke and Jones, along with their interpretation of the Berndts' work, in its construction of an ethnography and history of the Ngarrindjeri people.²² In conjunction with the evidence of the opponent Ngarrindjeri women, the Stevens report uses this account of Ngarrindjeri ethnography to argue that secret women's business associated with Hindmarsh Island is an impossibility and, therefore, a fabrication. The report gives 'a brief history of the Ngarrindjeri people' in a separate chapter composed primarily from Clarke's statement, his thesis and the Berndts' *A World That Was*.²³ It lacks a perspective of cultural change in Ngarrindjeri society and reinforces a view of separation from the land. It also fails to take into account the connections that Ngarrindjeri people have been able to maintain and develop with their country, outside the realms of missions and town fringe-camps.²⁴ Both Clarke and Jones argued that detailed knowledge of dreamings and other spiritual or religious associations with the land have been virtually destroyed by restricted access to the land from the early twentieth century.²⁵ Although, in his thesis, Clarke documents some of the ways in which Ngarrindjeri people have continued to maintain access to their country, he develops a model of alienation that restricts his understanding of cultural change. He is further limited by a mission-based and largely economic understanding of Ngarrindjeri relationships to their country.

Through my research into Ngarrindjeri oral history and the mapping of Ngarrindjeri people's historical association with the land I have developed a broader understanding of the continuing and complex relationship that Ngarrindjeri people have with their country.²⁶ The existence of a web of 'Ngarrindjeri places', such as holiday-camps, fringe-camps, Aboriginal-run farms, fishing and hunting camps, has meant that Ngarrindjeri people have been able to maintain broader access to the land during the period since invasion. The unique character of the Lower Murray environment with the river, the lakes and Coorong, provided Ngarrindjeri people an opportunity to live away from the control of the missions. Parts of the environment, such as the river and the Coorong, provided an abundance of food and water for Ngarrindjeri groups, minimising competition with European farmers and pastoralists. Most mission-based Ngarrindjeri people spent time living at other 'Ngarrindjeri places', others spent very little time on the missions with their home-bases in other parts of the region.²⁷

During debates in the SA Museum about the Hindmarsh Island issue I argued that gender-based cultural domains existed in Ngarrindjeri culture and still exist in contemporary Ngarrindjeri society. I also argued that the existence of secret women's knowledge of the significance of the River Murray, Lakes, Coorong and features such as Hindmarsh Island, was in my view entirely possible. I pointed out that this view was based on my interpretation of the ethnographic evidence, my own work with Ngarrindjeri people and my confidence in the Ngarrindjeri women who had claimed knowledge of women's business.²⁸ During my research in the region I have not encountered these specific women's beliefs. I have, however, observed significant examples of gender-based cultural domains. One example is Ngarrindjeri women's avoidance of speaking to men about childbirth and associated matters. The fact that only a few women appear to possess the secret knowledge is wholly consistent with the severe impact that European

invasion has had on Ngarrindjeri society, the nature of cultural change and the patterns of knowledge transmission that have developed.²⁹

Once the existence of women's business associated with Hindmarsh Island had emerged it was clear that my views about the issue were very different to those held by Clarke and Jones. Clarke states the logic behind his approach to the Hindmarsh Island issue in the following excerpt from his evidence to the commission. Commissioner Iris Stevens is asking the questions.

A. That is a problem that I have within myself, in that, had there not been a question to do with this Hindmarsh Island business of: does secret sacred women's business exist say before the 1990s, then I could quite easily accept contemporary Aboriginal views of their past as being real, if they believe them. So I'm not challenging anyone's view of the past, except in the context of: Was there secret sacred women's business connected with Hindmarsh Island before the 1990s? I am having to sort of step back from an anthropologist's position, whereby everything is real and therefore everything is unreal type position, basically the post modern world view, which is that there is no sort of single world view. I am having to basically become more scientific and factual, and try and document when it was that people came up with a new formulation. Whereas often anthropologists would probably not be as interested in the historical side of what they are presented with, but be more interested in what they could describe in the present.

Q. I just want to be sure I am following what you have had to say concerning the formulation of 'secret women's business' and the way in which, as I understand it, you think modern Aboriginal women have persuaded themselves it existed. That is, that they have gone back to the past and obtained - and have, as it were, concentrated material from several sources and introduced it into the present.

A. Yes.

Q. And the distinction that you see between that process and your process [writing] of righting an historical account of white culture, is that you believe in the reliability of your sources.

A. Well, in a way. Although, there is some overlap in what I would be trying to do as a white academic, and what Aboriginal people would be trying to do in terms of explaining their own contemporary situation. The reasons why I, as a white academic, am doing it are quite different, in that therefore the methodology, the tools that I use, are quite different. Normally, I wouldn't put forward my views of the past on the basis of what I had records for, to challenge what a contemporary Aboriginal person thought was the case. I would not do it. If there are Aboriginal people, and particularly if it is more than just an individual, a number of people have got a certain belief, I certainly would not go out of my way to challenge their view, but, as I said before, unfortunately, this very issue about 'Did it exist?' is important and, therefore, I am coming up head on with an Aboriginal interpretation. I wouldn't say, by any means, a widespread belief in the past, but at least a few women have come up with this moral [model]. I am coming up, you know, head on with them, whereas, normally I would avoid that.³⁰

This passage highlights the clash occurring in this commission between indigenous, oral accounts of history and the western empiricist tradition dominating the legal system and both Clarke and Jones' style of anthropology and history.³¹ Clarke's approach to the discovery of 'truth', through the assembling of scientific facts, leads him to what can only be characterised as a 'traditionalist' understanding of Aboriginal culture.³² Together with Jones, he is therefore unable to adequately understand the meanings of the contemporary 'histories' surrounding the Hindmarsh issue and critically analyse the documentary sources upon which he places so much stress. It must also be remembered that both Clarke and Jones did not carry out a field-based anthropological investigation of the women's business with the proponent women. If they are going to deny, as they

have, a contemporary Ngarrindjeri view of Ngarrindjeri culture and history, largely using what they describe as 'ethnographic' sources, they should at least apply a more sophisticated understanding of their historical and anthropological value.

In the commission both Clarke and Jones argued that within Ngarrindjeri society there was no separation of knowledge according to gender. They further maintained that the secret women's business associated with Hindmarsh Island was a recent 'invention' - an argument based largely on their analysis of what Clarke described as the approximately 500 significant sources of 'ethnographic' detail concerning the Ngarrindjeri.³³ As Lucas has argued, most of these sources cannot be described as ethnographic in the anthropological sense - they were not produced during extended periods of anthropological fieldwork.³⁴ Even the work of the Berndts *A World That Was* is a re-constructive ethnography based on oral history research.

In criticising the categorical stand taken by Clarke and Jones in the commission, it must be pointed out that important sources of valuable information about Ngarrindjeri history and culture were either not available to them or not investigated by them. Two sources, in particular, require specific mention. The first is Catherine Berndt's important field-notes containing her early research in the Lower Murray - they cannot be accessed for thirty years. The second is Tindale's manuscript 'The World of Milerum', a reconstructive ethnography based on Tindale's research with Clarence Long and other Ngarrindjeri people. Although this manuscript was housed in the South Australian Museum during the royal commission and under the authority of Philip Jones, it was not used by either Jones or Clarke during the commission.³⁵ This work is of similar significance to the Berndts' *A World That Was*. At the beginning of the commission I sought access to it. At one stage I was effectively blocked and it was finally unpacked after the final submissions were made to the commission. The Tindale manuscript 'The World of Milerum' contains a number of references to Ngarrindjeri secret and sacred men's business, something that both Jones and Clarke specifically argued did not exist. It must be asked, given Jones and Clarke's absolute certainty that secret women's business did not exist in Ngarrindjeri culture, and the proposition that there was no exclusive division of knowledge along gender lines, how they could maintain such certainty, given their unfamiliarity with some critical sources.

The missionaries were an important early group of Europeans to write about the Aboriginal people of the Lower Murray. Their work must, however, be considered with an understanding of the contemporary influences on their thinking. The Reverend H.A.E. Meyer was the first missionary to work in the area and he wrote about the Aboriginal culture of the Encounter Bay area.³⁶ Meyer records the segregation of women during childbirth and menstruation and the female supervision of the act of childbirth.

The principal missionary to work in the region and construct accounts of Ngarrindjeri culture, was the Reverend George Taplin. He established Point McLeay Mission in 1859 and worked amongst the Aboriginal people of the Lower Murray until his death in 1879.³⁷ Taplin published several influential works on the culture of the 'Narrinyeri' (Ngarrindjeri) people of the Lower Murray.³⁸ His accounts are valuable sources but must be read in the context of the intellectual traditions influencing the racism and sexism of the mid-nineteenth century.³⁹ The social geographer, Fay Gale, used the following quote from Taplin's diary to illustrate the influences of nineteenth

century views on the characterisations of the role of women in Aboriginal society: 'the women are real slaves and are bartered continually, and so much below the brute are they that ... few husbands expect constancy in their wives, but many actually encourage and command the reverse'.⁴⁰ Significantly, none of the missionaries record the existence of women's initiation in the Lower Murray; its presence must have been concealed from the Christian authorities or possibly not recognised as significant by them. Given the descriptions of female initiation ceremonies obtained by the Berndts, and the complete segregation of these ceremonies from the males, it is likely that female initiation was concealed from missionaries such as Taplin.

Clarke, however, argues in his testimony to the commission, that missionaries were unbiased observers and that if a missionary such as Taplin had not recorded secret women's business then that was a clear indication that it did not exist.⁴¹ The following section of his cross-examination by Francis Nelson QC clearly indicates his lack of understanding of the critical approach that must be followed when using early sources in historical analysis.

Q. I didn't put that forward as the issue. I was suggesting there were certain deficiencies in earlier anthropological recordings because of the attitudes of the people recording the information.
A. I would go the opposite way and say that in some cases, the first ethnographers came up with perhaps better records for some aspects of Aboriginal culture precisely because they were people who were not heavily embraced by a particular discipline. Observers and some of the early missionaries are in this category whereby their records are simple observations without too much theory being, or that data being embedded in theory. They have come up with data that today is quite useful for re-analysis.⁴²

Clarke first elevates missionaries such as Taplin and Meyer to the status of 'ethnographers' and then attributes them with the remarkable capacity to record cultural practice in a relatively unbiased fashion.

Both male and female researchers in anthropology and related disciplines have carried out fieldwork in the Lower Murray region.⁴³ Most have worked within what would be considered today as out-dated theoretical frameworks, uninformed, for example, by feminist critiques of the social sciences.⁴⁴ This is certainly the case for early anthropologists who have worked in the area such as A. Radcliffe Brown and Norman Tindale.⁴⁵ Ronald and Catherine Berndt had a comparatively sophisticated theoretical approach to the anthropological research that they carried out in the Lower Murray in the late 1930s and early 1940s.⁴⁶ They were, however, heavily influenced by establishment anthropological thinking of the time which characterised Aboriginal women as 'profane' and their ceremonies as lacking the sacred status of Aboriginal men.⁴⁷ Their recent book about the culture of the 'Yaraldi of the Murray River and the Lakes', *A World That Was*, is a reconstructive ethnography based on the memories of elderly Aboriginal people.⁴⁸ It does not examine the lives of Ngarrindjeri people in the late 1930s and 1940s or the ways in which the world-views of older people such as Albert Karloan and Pinkie Mack shaped the cultural practices and beliefs of those around them. A 1930s ethnography of Ngarrindjeri culture would be an invaluable tool for understanding the changing status of knowledge in Ngarrindjeri society, providing essential insights from which to assess the possibility of secret women's business in Ngarrindjeri society.

Significantly, it appears that Ronald and Catherine Berndt worked together with Pinkie Mack and Albert Karloan. Catherine Berndt reports that during subsequent fieldwork in other regions they worked separately: Ronald Berndt with the men and Catherine Berndt with the women.⁴⁹ This joint approach may have impacted on the type of information that Pinkie Mack, in particular, provided to the Berndts. Catherine Berndt argues that in the Lower Murray 'gender-based differences in the sense of inclusion-exclusion, in religious and other affairs, were minimal'.⁵⁰ I argued in the commission that the ethnographic evidence contained in *A World That Was* does not support this statement and, in fact, provides significant examples of gender-based divisions in Ngarrindjeri society. It is also important to understand that Catherine Berndt's generalisation does not take into consideration an analysis of cultural changes taking place in Ngarrindjeri culture since contact.

Alison Brookman (nee Harvey), a female 'anthropologist', worked in the Lower Murray during the same period as Berndts.⁵¹ She gave evidence that Norman Tindale and Charles Mountford both wanted her to investigate whether a secret realm of women's knowledge existed in Lower Murray culture. Tindale specifically sent her to see Pinkie Mack because he believed that she was a potential source of such information - he obviously realised that as a man he would not be privileged to it.⁵² It was also clear from Alison Brookman's evidence that she only spent a couple of afternoons with Pinkie Mack. It is fieldwork such as this and the brief work at Point McLeay carried out by Dorothy Tindale, the untrained wife of Norman Tindale, that for Clarke and Jones constitutes extensive fieldwork carried out by female anthropologists working in what Jones in particular characterises as the feminist tradition.⁵³ This wishful thinking is clearly illustrated in the following passage from Jones' evidence.

There appears to be almost an entire generation of anthropologists operating today who imagine that they have a monopoly on feminist anthropology and it simply wasn't practised in previous generations. I think it is quite clear from a couple of the references that were made yesterday - for example, the work of Catherine Berndt, Dorothy Tindale and Alison Harvey in the 30s and, in fact, Adelaide's position in the anthropological scene across Australia, makes it plain that feminist anthropology - at least the data gathering principles that lay behind feminist anthropology, if not the actual theoretical interpretations which are subject to the fashions and fads of contemporary politics - were well in place in the 1930s in Adelaide, and there was a very strong commitment to investigate women's life, both in a practical sense and the spiritual dimension of that life.⁵⁴

Fay Gale, a long-term researcher in the Lower Murray region, has argued that the journals of the explorer Edward John Eyre provide evidence that Aboriginal women in the region had separate religious ceremonies.⁵⁵ Gale has worked with Lower Murray people for longer than any other researcher. She argues from her own research and a re-assessment of the ethnographic sources from the region, that separate 'women's business' appears to have existed in the Lower Murray.⁵⁶ In a telephone conversation with Fay Gale during the early stages of the commission, she stated that it is her opinion that secret women's business relating to Hindmarsh Island could exist in the Ngarrindjeri community today.⁵⁷

Clarke's recent PhD thesis on the Aboriginal cultural geography of the Lower Murray is the most recent substantial ethnography of the region.⁵⁸ His work, however, almost entirely lacks a recognition of the importance of gender in Lower Murray Aboriginal society. He does provide some accounts of differing women's and men's hunting and

gathering practices, but does not reflect on the importance of these differences in shaping the cultural geography of the Lower Murray. In the appendices to his thesis he mentions that female anthropologists such as Catherine Berndt and Alison Harvey, 'were able to focus upon the role of gender in perceptions of the landscape and culture' in the Lower Murray.⁵⁹ An examination of the references to which he refers reveals almost nothing of what could be described as a female perspective of the Lower Murray landscape - they deal with other regions of Australia. Most importantly, however, Clarke's fleeting reference to female cultural landscapes exposes the fact that what he describes as a humanised landscape is really just a masculine landscape that ignores the importance of gender. These are important criticisms given Clarke's role in the commission as an expert witness on the possibility of women's business and the weight given to his thesis as a commission exhibit.

Finally, it is important to note Doreen Kartinyeri's work as an Aboriginal historian focusing on Aboriginal family history in southern South Australia.⁶⁰ She has combined the oral history that she has learnt from her community with the skills of an academic historian. Her publications have received national recognition. She has a genuine 'insider's' view of Aboriginal history and is one of the key proponents of the 'women's business.'

Knowledge about Ngarrindjeri culture and history is varied throughout Ngarrindjeri communities and this was clearly demonstrated by the evidence of the opponent Ngarrindjeri women. Knowledge varies according to factors such as age, gender, life-history, general interests and family background. The severe impact that European invasion has had on Ngarrindjeri society has meant that knowledge is fragmented. The experiences of individual Ngarrindjeri people and families have often been very different. Some have lived on missions, others in fringe-camps and others in country towns or suburban Adelaide. All of these factors make it entirely possible that knowledge of women's business may be restricted to certain people in the Ngarrindjeri community. Other women of similar ages may know absolutely nothing of the women's business. Importantly, dispersal of knowledge can be witnessed in other areas of Ngarrindjeri culture, such as language, family history and the history of particular places and periods. It is possible, for example, for only one person to be the speaker of a particular language or dialect. Several of the older opponent women gave evidence that they had not heard of Ngurunderi until the SA Museum's exhibition.

On many occasions since I have known Dr Kartinyeri (since about 1980) she has said to me that there is certain information about Ngarrindjeri culture that she can't tell me because of my gender. When I was researching the Ngurunderi exhibition she was concerned about the 'Shelter and Clothing' diorama, and in particular, a model of a seated woman. She was worried about the seated position of the model. On one occasion, I taped a discussion about the Ngurunderi gallery, and during comments on the 'Shelter and Clothing' diorama, she told me, Winston Head and Philip Clarke that there were women's 'stories' that she could not reveal.⁶¹ Doreen asked me to switch off the tape so that she could point out the problem with the sitting position of the women - she indicated that position suggested menstruation and men knew to keep away from women in this condition.⁶²

In a 1989 conversation with Suzi Hutchings and Neva Wilson, Doreen Kartinyeri briefly discussed a story associated with Mundoo Island and its connection with death.⁶³

As with my other relevant records, I included this reference in my statement to the commission. It appears that the Stevens report has disregarded a consideration of this record when declaring the whole of the women's business to be a fabrication. The cultural significance of Mundoo Island is included in the commission's definition of the women's business and I have a record of at least an aspect of this significance that pre-dates the 1990s.⁶⁴

Commissioner Stevens' findings that the whole of the women's business associated with Hindmarsh Island is a fabrication are built on an 'invented' version of Ngarrindjeri 'ethnography', privileged by the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission and largely based on the expert evidence of Philip Clarke and Philip Jones. I have been critical of their categorical stance in the commission, that there is no possibility of secret women's business in Ngarrindjeri culture. This stance is based largely on their interpretation of an incomplete and often misread selection of the 'ethnographic' sources. I have also pointed to what I have argued is clearly an elevation in the status of particular categories of records. Clarke, for example, describes the writings of nineteenth-century missionaries as largely unbiased, ethnographic records and Jones claims the existence of a group of feminist anthropologists conducting extensive fieldwork in the region in the 1930s. This approach creates an unrealistic perception of the certainty and comprehensiveness of the Ngarrindjeri ethnographic record.

Notes

1 George Trevorrow: T6365

2 I use 'ethnography' to refer to an account of Ngarrindjeri culture and not necessarily in its anthropological sense, as an account based on long-term fieldwork. See Rod Lucas in this volume.

It has been argued that (in Iris Stevens', *Report of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission*, Adelaide, 1995 p 37 (Hereafter the *Stevens Report*). 'the groups of indigenous people who occupied the Lower Murray region prior to colonisation and their descendants are today called the Ngarrindjeri'. This is a very restricted definition of Ngarrindjeri. Some Ngarrindjeri people, for example, argue that their territory stretches from the New South Wales border on the Murray to the Victorian border in South Australia's south-east.

3 Jones: T4470, Clarke: T191.

4 Stevens, op. cit., p. 298.

5 See Deane Fergie, in this volume.

6 See the evidence of Clara Rayner, George Trevorrow, Tom Trevorrow and Veronica Brodie.

7 See Lucas, op. cit. for a discussion of the privileging of knowledges in the HIBRC.

8 Ronald M. Berndt, Catherine H. Berndt & John Stanton, *A World That Was: The Yaraldi of the Murray River and the Lakes*, Melbourne, 1993.

9 This account is based on my evidence to the HIBRC. I believe that it is important to provide a brief summary of my involvement with the Bridge issue in the period leading up to the commission. My stance has been characterised by some as the 'dissident' South Australian Museum historian. In the Stevens Report I am implicated as

one of the 'fabricators' of the women's business. I have known Dr Doreen Kartinyeri, the Ngarrindjeri woman at the centre of the controversy, since 1980. Over the last fifteen years I have worked closely with her on research projects and exhibitions. We jointly established the SA Museum's Aboriginal Family History Project. It was forgotten by the media, and the commission, that Doreen Kartinyeri is also a SA Museum historian and should have been described as one of the Museum 'experts'.

It was during 1994 that I became aware of the growing Ngarrindjeri interest in the Hindmarsh Island issue. Various Ngarrindjeri individuals and groups were involved. However, Sarah and Doug Milera seemed to be at the forefront of Ngarrindjeri opposition to the bridge. To my knowledge, Doreen Kartinyeri became involved in the Hindmarsh Island issue a few months prior to the temporary ban. On 12 May 1994 I was planning to meet Doreen in the museum to discuss an unrelated research project. The night before the meeting she contacted me and asked for any information that I might have relating to the Aboriginal significance of the Hindmarsh Island area. On the following day in the museum I met with Doreen and provided her with the few references I had. None of this information was connected with women's issues, the focus of these references was more on burials in the region. During our meeting Doreen asked me to type out a letter that she wanted to send to Robert Tickner to advise him of information relevant to the issue that had not as yet been considered. Doreen dictated the letter and I typed it out for her. I had no input into the content of the letter other than possibly very minor matters of grammar. It contained a reference to the existence of women's business associated with Hindmarsh Island. This was the first time I had ever heard of women's business associated with Hindmarsh Island. Doreen did not tell me any details relating to the women's business, only that she had received this knowledge from three women and this detail was included in the letter.

10 Have also worked with Margaret Jacobs for about eight years and she has told me, since the publicising of the women's business in the media, that she had known of its existence since she was young.

11 I supplied specific examples to the commission in the form of copies of 'diary' entries and a taped conversation with Doreen Kartinyeri made during the development of the Ngurunderi exhibition. These examples were not given the status of exhibits.

12 For an account of the functions of Camp Coorong see Steve Hemming, 'Camp Coorong - Combining Race Relations and Cultural Education', *Social Alternatives*, vol. 12, no. 1, April 1993, pp. 37-40.

13 Michael Dodson, 'Statement from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner' in Greg Mead, *A Royal Omission*, Adelaide, 1995, p. vii.

14 George Trevorrow: T6423-6425.

15 The Ngarrindjeri concept of the Ngartji has been documented by a number of authors for example: George Taplin, *The Folklore, Manners, Customs, and Languages of the South Australian Aborigines*, Adelaide, 1879, pp.34-35; Berndt, Berndt & Stanton, op. cit.; and very briefly and in relation to their 'traditional' meaning by Philip A. Clarke, 'Contact, conflict and regeneration: Aboriginal cultural geography of the Lower Murray', Department of Geography and Anthropology, 1994, PhD thesis, pp. 79-80 & pp. 179-180. I have used the contemporary usage of Ngartji in the plural form.

16 See for example Clarke T169, Jones T4401-4402.

17 Stevens, op. cit., pp.37-48. Veronica Brodie told the commission of her experiences on Hindmarsh Island as a child visiting from Raukkan. V. Brodie: T 6229-6230.

18 Margaret Jacobs is one of the senior Ngarrindjeri women who claims knowledge of the women's business.

19 It is considered very bad luck to say goodbye to a Ngarrindjeri person - goodbye implies a final parting.

20 Margaret Jacobs at Camp Coorong, 1993. Taped by S. Hemming.

21 Veronica Brodie read out one of her sister, Leila Rankine's poems to the commission during her evidence. Brodie: T6283-6284.

22 The Berndts' text *A World that Was* is interpreted to the commission by Clarke and Jones.

23 Stevens, op. cit., pp. 37-48.

24 Catherine Berndt, 'Retrospect, and Prospect: Looking back over 50 years', in Peggy Brock (ed) *Women, Rites and Sites*, Sydney, 1989, p. 13. 'Children growing up in or around Point McLeay or in places along the River were able to get acquainted with basic information about topography, resources and events that adults already knew: where whales could be expected to come in, at what seasons - and so on; and who had lived or died or was buried, or what happened at which places.' See also Steve Hemming 'River Murray Histories: Oral History, Archaeology, and Museum Collections', in Emma Greenwood, Klaus Neumann & Andrew Sartori (eds.), *Work in Flux*, Melbourne University History Conference Series 1, Melbourne, 1995, p.102-110.

25 Clarke: T169 & Jones: T4401-4402.

26 Steve Hemming, Re-naming the 'Country': Aboriginal oral histories and site recording, Paper presented at the 1993 Oral History Association of Australia Conference, Sydney. See Steve Hemming, 'In the Tracks of Ngurunderi: the South Australian Museum's Ngurunderi exhibition and Cultural Tourism', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol.2, 1994, pp. 38-46. Funding for the research projects mentioned was received from the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, the Australian Heritage Commission's National Estate Grant Program and ATSIC. The main community organisations involved with the research projects have been the Raukkan Council, the Ngarrindjeri Lands and Progress Association, the Lower Murray Nungas Club & the Mannum Aboriginal Progress Association. I would also like to thank the State Office of Aboriginal Affairs for their assistance. Philip Clarke assisted with the early stages of the Ngarrindjeri Sites and Social History Project. He, however, withdrew from participation with the commencement of his PhD thesis.

27 Jenny Grace, 'Murray River Woman, in Adele Pring (ed.) *Women of the Centre*, Apollo Bay, 1990, pp. 157-172.

28 After the claim that the Hindmarsh Island area bore a resemblance to female reproductive organs became public knowledge through the press, I remembered a conversation with Ronald Berndt in the museum tea-room concerning the possible femininity of the River, Lakes and Coorong. This was during the later stages of the development of the Ngurunderi exhibition about 1988. He said that working through his research material in more detail he was beginning to develop this idea. The fact that I mentioned this in an argument with Clarke and Jones, well after Deane Fergie's report

had been produced, has been used in the commission to imply that I had influenced Doreen Kartinyeri's account of the women's business - I did not.

29 In *A World that Was* the Berndts document the existence of specialist knowledge in 'traditional' Ngarrindjeri society and the associated restricted channels of transmission - see references to *putari*.

30 Clarke: T204-205.

31 For a discussion of the complexities of the relationship between Aboriginal history and the legal system see: Heather Goodall, 'The Whole Truth and Nothing But ...': Some Interactions of Western Law, Aboriginal History and Community Memory, in Bain Attwood & J. Arnold (eds.), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, A special edition of *Journal of Australian Studies*, 1992, pp. 104-119; Deborah Bird Rose, 'Histories and rituals: land claims in the Territory', in Bain Attwood, *In the age of Ambo: History, Aborigines and Australia*, St Leonard's, 1996, pp. 35-53; & Rosemary Hunter, 'Aboriginal Histories, Australian Histories and the Law' in Attwood 1996, op. cit., pp. 1-16.

32 For a discussion of the implications of 'traditionalist' approaches in anthropology see Gillian Cowlishaw, 'Studying Aborigines: Changing canons in Anthropology and History', in Bain Attwood & J. Arnold (eds.), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, A special edition of *Journal of Australian Studies*, 1992, pp. 20-31.

33 Clarke: T158, Jones: T4414

34 For a discussion of Clarke & Jones' misunderstanding of the nature of an ethnographic source, in the anthropological sense, see Lucas, op. cit.

35 Norman Tindale, 'The World of Milerum', unpublished manuscript, South Australian Museum.

36 H.A.E. Meyer, 'Manners and Customs of the Aborigines of the Encounter Bay Tribe', in J.D. Woods (ed) *The Native Tribes of South Australia*, Adelaide, 1879, pp. 183-206.

37 For an account of the history of Taplin's work with the Ngarrindjeri see Graham Jenkin, *Conquest of the Ngarrindjeri*, Adelaide, 1979.

38 For example: George Taplin, *The Folklore, Manners, Customs and Languages of the South Australian Aborigines*, Adelaide, 1879; George Taplin, 1879 'The Narrinyeri', in J.D. Woods (ed) *The Native Tribes of South Australia*, Adelaide, 1879, pp. 1-156.

39 See for example: Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, Sydney, 1982, chapters 2 & 7; Keith McConnochie, David Hollinsworth, and Jan Pettman, *Race and Racism in Australia*, Wentworth Falls, 1988, and John Mulvaney, 'The Australian Aborigines 1606-1929; opinion and fieldwork', in S. Janson & S. MacIntyre, *Through White Eyes*, Sydney, 1990.

40 Fay Gale, 'Roles revisited: the women of southern Australia', in Peggy Brock (ed) *Women, Rites and Sites*, Sydney, 1989, p. 99-119.

41 Clarke: T328-329.

42 Clarke: T323; See also Clarke: T323-326 & Clarke, op. cit., p. 64.

43 Clarke provides a list of women 'ethnographers' to the commission, Clarke: T183.

44 Jan Pettman, 'Gendered Knowledges: Aboriginal Women and the Politics of Feminism', in Bain Attwood & J. Arnold (eds.), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, pp. 120-131.

- 45 See for example: A. Radcliffe Brown, 'Notes on the Social Organisation of Australian Tribes', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. 48, 1918, pp. 34-63, 206-246, 322-341; Norman B. Tindale, 'Prupe and Koromarange: a Legend of the Tanganekald, Coorong, South Australia', *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia*, vol. 62, pp. 18-23.
- 46 Robert Tonkinson & Michael Howard, 'The Berndts: a biographical sketch', in R. Tonkinson & M. Howard (eds.) *Going it Alone? Prospects for Aboriginal Autonomy*, Canberra, 1990, pp. 17-42.
- 47 See A. P. Elkin's introduction to Phyllis Kaberry, *Aboriginal Women: Sacred and Profane*, London, 1939.
- 48 Berndt, Berndt & Stanton, op. cit.
- 49 Catherine Berndt, 'Retrospect, and prospect: looking back after 50 years', in P. Brock (ed) *Women, Rites and Sites*, Sydney, 1989, pp. 1-20.
- 50 Catherine Berndt, 'Retrospect, and prospect: looking back after 50 years', in P. Brock (ed) *Women, Rites and Sites*, Sydney, 1989, p 11.
- 51 Brookman: T4570-4571. At the time of her work in the Lower Murray, Alison Brookman was a volunteer at the SA Museum with an interest in Anthropology. She was studying history and classics at Adelaide University.
- 52 In one of her Lower Murray field notebooks, housed in the SA Museum's Anthropology Archives, Alison Brookman records a conversation with Pinkie Mack and indicates that aspects of childbirth were 'secret' to women. During the commission, however, she gave evidence that what she meant by this was separate and she argued that her field-notes did not provide any credence to the existence of secret women's business.
- 53 See Clarke: T183 & Jones: T4269.
- 54 Jones: T4269.
- 55 Gale, op. cit., p. 99-119.
- 56 Gale, op. cit., p. 129. 'It is evident that women in southern South Australia played a dominant role in the acquisition of daily food. It is also evident that this was not at the expense of involvement in ceremonial life, either in joint rituals with men, or in distinctly separate 'women's business'. An even cursory glance at the 19th century records questions virtually all our 20th century assumptions about the role of women in traditional Aboriginal society'.
- 57 pers. comm. Fay Gale.
- 58 Clarke, op. cit.
- 59 Clarke, op. cit., p. 422.
- 60 See for example: Doreen Kartinyeri as told to Milton Gale, 'Recording our History', in Fay Gale (ed.), *We are Bosses Ourselves*, Canberra, 1983, pp. 136-157; Doreen Kartinyeri, *The Wilson Family Genealogy*, Adelaide, 1989; Peggy Brock and Doreen Kartinyeri, *Poonindie: The Rise and Destruction of an Aboriginal Agricultural Community*, Adelaide, 1989.
- 61 This incident is on tape during a discussion relating to the Ngurunderi exhibition. (Doreen Kartinyeri talking to Steve Hemming, Winston Head and Philip Clarke, 22/08/88). I attempted to submit this tape, along with a basic transcription of the relevant section, to the commission during my evidence. I also referred to it in my statement.
- 62 In 1988 Doreen Kartinyeri and I interviewed Marjory Koolmatrie and Jean Gollan at Raukkan. In my notebook (pg. 13) I recorded the following, 'Talked about

delivery of babies and who helped on Raukkan - Doreen said people always said 'find a baby' you go and 'find a baby' not deliver. Never talk about pregnancy etc. on street - it not done'. A tape recording of the interview was made, however, the section dealing with childbirth and midwives is blank. I recall that most of the discussion was about particular women who acted as midwives - I also remember being told to turn the tape off (I must have turned the volume down - I have an early transcript of the tape showing the blank section).

63 Notes of a discussion between Doreen Kartinyeri, Suzi Hutchings, Neva Wilson and Steve Hemming, 29/5/89. 'Mundoo... She says certain times of year you can see smoke off this island this represents smoking of the dead. When they take skulls off after smoking platform head in water sea lice eat off flesh then use as drinking vessel'.

64 The *Stevens Report*, p. 287. It is also interesting to note the certainty with which the Stevens Report rules out the possibility of the Seven Sisters Dreaming having any history of association with the Ngarrindjeri people prior to its 'likely' introduction by Doreen Kartinyeri. Closer attention should have been paid to available sources such as Clarke's thesis, p. 123. He includes an account of the Seven Sisters relating to the Lower Murray, recorded in the 1960s by Annie Rankine, the daughter of Clarence Long.