

Stephen Muecke

## Creativity, Critique and the Problem of Situated Knowledge

In their book, 'Human Rights and Narrated Lives', Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith investigate "local and global transits of storytelling", recognising not only "published life narratives", but also seven additional sites which they analyse in detail: "fact-finding in the field; handbooks and websites; nationally-based human rights commissions; human rights commission reports; collections of testimonies; stories in the media; and other scattered venues through which narratives circulate"<sup>1</sup>. This chapter explores further examples of storytelling 'transits' between local relevance and more universal mastery.

It was with a story that I once began a talk at the University of Melbourne. To be precise, it was on Thursday, 23 May 2019. I began: "Imagine a New Guinea highlander being taken on a tour of a physics lab here in Melbourne". I now want to retain the 'spatial demonstrative' or 'deictic' part of speech 'here' in this written version. If I edited it, I would be doing what writing often does, taking the statement out of its time and place, and in the process making it more universal in its application.

Begin again:

Imagine a New Guinea highlander being taken on a tour of a physics lab here in Melbourne. His hosts are careful to avoid indulging in condescension towards this person who has never seen such a facility before. Imagine the visitor saying, after gazing at some machine, "They tell me that in your culture you have things called atoms, is that right?" The scientists laugh heartily, quite unselfconsciously. "Atoms are everywhere", they assure him, "in every object, every living thing, in the whole world". They explain a bit more, using one of those artefacts with large coloured spheres stuck together.

The visitor listens politely, and then ventures, "No. We don't have them, not in my village. Our ancestors never spoke of such things". Then, one of the younger scientists pipes up, "Actually, ours do. It goes back to the Jains in India, but it was Democritus who coined the term 'atomos' around 450BC [...]" but he trails off as his colleagues give him The Look. Ancestral heritage is not the issue here. Do not dare provincialise scientific knowledge when such important universals have been finally achieved, after much labour. Well, they are universal for a good part of the world, at least for all those who call themselves 'modern', which might be a minority in fact

My fictional narrative illustrates Schaffer and Smith's storytelling transits. So much of its meaning depends on perceived spatial and temporal differences, ones that follow the vectors of colonialism and modernism: the New Guinea highlander would be *exotic* and *premodern*, not *with us here and now* in our certainties about atoms.

1 Kay Schaffer, Sidonie Smith: Human Rights and Narrated Lives, p. 35.

My story owes much to Bruno Latour's 'We Have Never Been Modern', but also, much further back, to a foundational text by Donna Haraway which set me on the path of thinking about situated knowledges:

We, the feminists in the debates about science and technology, are the Reagan era's "special-interest groups" in the rarefied realm of epistemology, where traditionally what can count as knowledge is policed by philosophers codifying cognitive canon law. Of course, a special-interest group is, by Reaganoid definition, any collective historical subject that dares to resist the stripped-down atomism of Star Wars, hypermarket, postmodern, media-simulated citizenship. Max Headroom doesn't have a body; therefore, he alone sees everything in the great communicator's empire of the Global Network. No wonder Max gets to have a naive sense of humor and a kind of happily regressive, preoedipal sexuality, a sexuality that we ambivalently – with dangerous incorrectness – had imagined to be reserved for lifelong inmates of female and colonized bodies and maybe also white male computer hackers in solitary electronic confinement.<sup>2</sup>

This was 1988, and second wave feminism was at a high point. What interests me is Donna Haraway's style, which, if you are a philosopher "codifying cognitive canon law", you will find annoying, because it gets in the way of straight thought. In any case, my claim is that Haraway's famous notion of situated knowledge was lobbed into the field of science studies as a feminist intervention, and it upset the certainties of traditional masculinist science. And she did it in style. Had she not written the way she did – with great originality, range and iconoclastic power – would her article have been as well-cited as it is today?

I imagine – here I go, storytelling again – that you in the audience are mostly academics too, so I know how you love your metrics. How well cited is this article ("Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective") that appeared in 1988 in 'Feminist Studies'? Let's try to calculate the impact, with the 21,019 Google Scholar citations it has accumulated, starting well before the time Google Scholar, or the internet, even existed.<sup>3</sup> In 1988, people would have photocopied it and put in the post to their friends. The impact is never direct; the article transits in a haphazard fashion through the world on its academic career, with specific kinds of movement. It is not just a broadcast model of communication. Each reading of the paper and each citation *relocates* the paper, or one of its ideas, or one of its quotable phrases, in a new situation with its heterogeneous support act of other citations, other ideas, other political "transits" or vectors. Everywhere the paper lands, something new, something slightly new, happens.

But the style is extraordinary. It doesn't stick strictly to its topic, having a broad range of references. There's the pop culture reference to 'Star Wars' and the figure of Max Headroom, a feminist target with his "happily regressive, preoedipal sexuality". There's the political target that is the President at the time, Ronald Reagan. She targets Reagan because of his attack on "special-interest groups", among whom her feminist readers, who are now thus politically *situated*. The rhetoric plays into the argument. Reagan, at the time, was trying to cut \$50 billion out of the budget and he was making his pitches in his weekly radio broadcasts

2 Donna Haraway: Situated Knowledges, pp. 574-575.

3 As at 25 October 2021, 1:30:13 pm.

– radio, can you believe it? – And it was the “special-interest groups” that were popping up in the landscape to oppose his cuts to public programs.

I want to stress the means of communication in play (radio, photocopies, the postal service, and later email and Jstor) because they are means of distribution of these knowledges I am enjoining you to see as situated. They start, in one place, the text itself being composed out of a network of references and then getting distributed by one or several means, broadcast or networked. Let’s put this concept of ‘distribution’ to one side for a moment because I want to come back to it to analyse it in real and abstract terms. Distribution, I will argue, can be abstract whenever conceptual tools are used to push entities into particular arrangements, like ‘trees’ for the descent of species in Darwinian biology. Deleuze and Guattari, of course, proposed a counter-metaphor, the ‘rhizome’. I think, in principle, that it’s no good talking about *situated knowledges* without the corollary of their *distribution*.

But it is time to summarise Haraway’s argument in this early Science and Technology Studies (STS) article, forging a feminist position therein with its references to Freud, Marx, Althusser, Latour and Strathern. Those theorists are needed to situate the subject, as we have seen, within a field of entrenched gender-inflected inequalities. But her main aim is to attack a masculinist version of objectivity, and then revive it in feminist form. This “masculinist version of objectivity” exists more as rhetorical positioning than as the product of actual scientific inquiries. Its danger lies in the uses to which science is put, by non-scientists:

From this point of view, science – the real game in town – is rhetoric, a series of efforts to persuade relevant social actors that one’s manufactured knowledge is a route to a desired form of very objective power.<sup>4</sup>

This happens whenever someone brandishes a fact, claiming it is naturally occurring, rather than painstakingly produced by a laboratory. That claim allows for an unmarked version of the scientific gaze, an omniscient gaze from nowhere and everywhere, one that Haraway calls the ‘God trick’.

But she is definitely not a social constructionist, nor a relativist. She argues against the idea that all forms of knowledge are mere social constructs. Rather she wants to define the articulations, and doesn’t recuse from the feminist critique of how male hegemony lines up with the broader dominant power structures:

the conquering gaze from nowhere [...] makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation. This gaze signifies the unmarked positions of Man and White, one of the many nasty tones of the word ‘objectivity’ to feminist ears in scientific and technological, late-industrial, militarized, racist, and male-dominant societies, that is, here, in the belly of the monster, in the United States in the late 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

The next step, in building her feminist reconstruction of objectivity, she retains vision, but embodies it. It becomes partial and situated:

I want a feminist writing of the body that metaphorically emphasizes vision again, because we need to reclaim that sense to find our way through all the visualizing tricks and powers of modern sciences and technologies that have transformed the

4 Donna Haraway: *Situated Knowledges*, p. 577.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 581.

objectivity debates. We need to learn in our bodies, endowed with primate color and stereoscopic vision, how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name. So, not so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.<sup>6</sup>

That, I would claim, is Donna Haraway in a critical mode, but something of a creative one as well. The metaphors and other figures of speech that give the article its *style*, have the effect of nudging thought out of its usual pathways. She reaches far and wide, even bringing in the figure of the trickster Coyote in Southwest native American thought to “make room for surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production”<sup>7</sup> as the agency of objects becomes visible, and Nature ceases to be conceived of as a passive resource, where matter is extracted for the benefit of culture, matter conceived of as either dead or about to be dead.

### ***Indigenous Sciences***

It is on pressing questions such as these – naturalism, agencies of the non-human, extractivism – that the Indigenous sciences are starting to emerge more strongly as a field of endeavour.

I talked earlier of abstract distribution. Actual distribution refers to the real ways in which forms of knowledge are distributed, such as the spread of the idea that all matter is composed of atoms. It can only increase its sphere of influence, expanding from being relevant in only a small locality, becoming relevant for a whole country, then onwards more globally, if the idea is published in multiple forms, popularised and taught. It took centuries for Atomic Physics to consolidate the kind of influence that generates the kind of money that it takes to build and maintain the Large Hadron Collider in Europe.

But an *abstract* distribution also has an effect on how we think about things like atoms, things we habitually think of, are taught to think of, as purely natural. This is part of a more general metaphysical problem. Suppose you encounter something new in the world, like a new kind of fish dredged up from some deep ocean channel. You might have no problem classifying it as a part of Nature, even if you haven’t yet determined its genus and species. But you may not have asked a fundamental metaphysical question: “how is it this fish and I are on this Earth together?” If you go to the familiar Nature/Culture divide, it gives you an easy answer, all too easy: The fish must be a part of Nature and you are a part of Culture. And the very next question flows from that same distribution that has

6 Ibid., pp. 582 f.

7 Ibid., p. 594.

made Nature passive and exploitable: “*Should I eat it*”? But that abstract distribution is by no means universal. We find out it is provincially European if we read anthropologists Vivieros de Castro (‘Cannibal Metaphysics’) or Philippe Descola (‘Beyond Nature and Culture’).

If you went to Broome (where I do my ethnographic work) in the old days, you might have found out all sorts of interesting things about fish, including a different kind of answer to the metaphysical question about why we are on Earth together. Someone catching salmon might say to herself, “Big mob of salmon here, I’d better hand them over to the elders for distribution”. Or: “I shouldn’t even have caught this kind of fish because my *jalnga* (totem) prohibits it”.

In this culture, as in those studied by Vivieros de Castro in the Amazon, there is no concept of a singular Nature, rather the human and non-human worlds are entangled in all sorts of rights and responsibilities. This is just what Haraway was urging in her recrafting of masculinist science towards a less alienated relationship with the world, what she called a more ‘conversational’ one.

I know, ‘masculinist science’, ‘Western science’ – these are terrible generalisations, but the fabrication of the Nature-Culture divide was real enough, and we can now identify it as being provincial, situated in post-enlightenment Europe. It extends right through to the revolution of thought in the Humanities and Social Sciences that was the structuralist movement, from the mid-twentieth century to about the time of Haraway’s article. All those oppositions they loved to produce hinged around the fundamental Nature-Culture one: man/woman, raw/cooked, day/night, etc.

The Anthropology that came visiting in Aboriginal Australia may not always have been structuralist, but was itself founded on the naturalist ontology based on the separation of nature and culture, and to this day many of its practitioners can’t think without it. After all, anthropology is the study of *human* society, by definition. No-one in the Australian branch of the discipline, except perhaps Deborah Bird Rose, has articulated how violently European naturalism has wrenched Aboriginal thought away from its non-human articulations, that is, a brilliant kinship system that includes plants, animals and humans in reciprocal relationships. A quite different distribution to the one articulated in Bruno Latour’s ‘modernist settlement’ (1993). It is a distribution that is part of a process of colonisation, making sure it knows what to relegate to the basket of ‘mere beliefs’, and what to take seriously.

Back to atoms: However solid the achievements of atomic physics in the objective domain, it is also the case that they are a part of culture, and not just firm laws of nature. The knowledge is cultural not just because it can be mobilised for political or military ends, but because it needs our support. Knowledge of atoms would no doubt eventually lapse if our institutions didn’t continue to keep funding it, keep teaching about it, keep making it relevant, keep hitching it to other discoveries.<sup>8</sup>

8 Zoe Todd updates Haraway’s rhetoric: “Through the logics of its own science, white supremacy seeks to categorize humans in such a way to stretch its spindly white fingers back through the mammals, the dinosaurs, the marine creatures, the stromatolites, the nucleated-cells, the archeans, the prokaryotes, the very carbon and oxygen and hydrogen

With that institutionally-based approach – which underpins Bruno Latour’s ‘Modes of Existence’ project – the questions are not so much about the *existence* of atoms, but about what makes knowledge of them *persist*, Latour’s thesis ever since ‘Laboratory Life’ is all about the *heterogeneity* of the arrangements necessary for science to thrive. Science is not, was never, pure.

### **European Paganism**

Before Europe was modernised it had a pagan system going that had elements in common with totemism. Before Christian monotheism, ancient European worlds were replete with gods and demi-gods: household gods, naiades in fresh-water springs and rivers, the *aurae*, nymphs of the breezes. You knew not to anger Poseidon if you wanted to sail the seas safely, better to make a small sacrifice before embarking... all these were swept aside, as mere superstition or hereticism, by the rise of the One God, whose sacredness did not lie in any territory, who travelled with the book, whose temples could be built anywhere, who gave Man dominion over Nature...

But what if Aboriginal totemic systems were right? By which I mean they ‘have something going for them’. That’s all I’m interested in analysing these days, what institutions *have going for them*, their attributes, their attachments, how they *belong* together in their disparate elements. You might prefer that vernacular translation to the more formal *process ontology*: by which Alfred North Whitehead meant not what something *is*, but how is it that it *persists*? What elements does it have to acquire or shed to keep going, or what happens when it hits a roadblock and gets interrupted?

Soon as one says, in this post-critical fashion, “what if Aboriginal totemic systems have something going for them?”, you might pay attention because you think, “is this an idea I could get attached to”?<sup>9</sup> And soon as you get attached to it, it expands its sphere of influence as you take it elsewhere, perhaps making other connections. Aboriginal totemic systems were both highly situated as knowledges, tied to specific sites, yet covering the whole country, it seems, doing really well for millennia, assisting in sustaining these civilisations that were then interrupted by the modernist, naturalist idea that said, “sorry, that kangaroo is not part of your more-than-human society, part of your clan’s identity and being, no, it is an exploitable, dispensable part of Nature. It might be cute, but that’s all it is”.

So, to summarise, there are two steps in my move from critique to post-critique. First, I historicised and provincialised the Nature-Culture opposition, then I described another configuration called totemism and suggested it might have something going for it. If you thought it responded better to your way of thinking,

and nitrogen and atoms and electrons and quirks and quarks and energy that comprise this existence – they try to stretch that spindly finger back to the very beginning of being here on this planet, in the forms we understand being to take. [...] Artifacts are products of a specific and singular march of euro-western time, a march that drills down deep through the current epoch [...] all the way back to the first geologic eon, the Hadean” (n. pag.).

9 Rita Felski: Limits of Critique.

you might form an attachment. A positive link is made, an alliance is formed. Then, traditional critique (as outlined by Rita Felski and others, and implicit already in Haraway's article), usually denounces wrong ideas from a position of critical distance. This kind of critique might urge you to abandon your false consciousness, and do so in the name of freedom. You will be liberated from those bad ideas of the past as you join the elect few, the enlightened ones.<sup>10</sup> Not unlike the way that modern Science and Christianity worked in concert to smash those pagan superstitions.

With a post-critical method, you are not quite so revolutionary. You love your heritage. You love modern Science and you are devoted to western philosophy, but you are thinking about new future conditions and how your disciplines might have to be rebooted to survive. What do you have to add to, or subtract from them, to help them survive under these new conditions? This process of adding or subtracting applies to any element of the laboratory: add funding, remove gender bias, try it on a different machine, reverse the procedure, consider epistemological structures. This process might improve the science, and it regularly does, but not because the science is universalised as it is purified, or vice-versa, purified as it is universalised, but because partial side-ways steps are normal, tentative footholds for the continued relevance of a project. Relevance is never maintained by falling back on the authority of the facts, as in 'Nature has spoken', nor on the disinterested authority of the objective scientist, whose task was nevertheless one of taking 'situation-dependent' knowledge out of a lab and into the world where it continues its 'adventure of relevance' where relevance is "something coming to matter [...] an 'event of the world', not a subjective appreciation".<sup>11</sup>

I should offer a more concrete example. You wander around and you come across something that makes you think, because it sets up a puzzle in the way that Isabelle Stengers talks of as enigmas and Peter Sloterdijk talks of as riddles: "what drives thought [...] is not resistance, but riddles, that make one think. Having a big 'No' inside you leads to therapy, at best. But if you have a little riddle inside you, you arrive either at art or philosophy".<sup>12</sup>

### ***What the hell is this?***

Here's a riddle: how can the Wolfe Creek meteorite crater, located in the Western Australian outback, be *both* an object of Western science *and* be embedded in Walmajarri and Jaru knowledge without the one cancelling the other out, without cheap relativism, and without that old-style scientific condescension that has 'us' acknowledging 'their' *beliefs*, while *we* really *know*?

It's very situated, right, and there is knowledge about it. But my approach is not to ask existential questions, but ones related to process ontology: "what's it got going for it?" As soon as western science arrives on the site there is what

10 See Bruno Latour: Why Has Critique Run out of Steam.

11 Stengers quoted in Martin Savransky: The Adventure of Relevance, p. x.

12 Peter Sloterdijk: Selected Exaggerations, pp. 3 f.

Anna Tsing calls a “rush of stories”,<sup>13</sup> often in the form of numbers around this resource. A meteor hit the Earth here about 300,000 years ago and the crater is 850 x 900 metres in diameter. Ask the Walmajarri and Jaru people and you get a different rush of stories about this place called ‘kandimalal’ and the snake ‘warnayarra’.

My approach to the problem is this: one can’t extract the fact of the crater being one thing or another from all the other kinds of knowledge that sustain the fact, what is often called the broader culture. The important thing is that an isolated fact about a star hitting the Earth will not explode Jaru/Walmajarri knowledge systems. It can’t make the Rainbow Serpents disappear because they have been around for many generations, possibly for thousands of years. They are habitually treated as viable agents, acknowledged especially for doing the work of creating rivers. They are sacred and dangerous, connecting in multiple ways with water courses, storms, people and other creatures. They have been translated and exported into the mainstream. They have gone from oral to anthropological and fictional literature, and into new forms of visual culture, in a network too extensive to trace out or cite here.

The same caution applies in the other direction across the cultural divide. A Jaru elder insisting to a White scientist that the Rainbow snake curled around and made the crater, will not explode the scientist’s scientific culture, and everything that extends and sustains it, unless the scientist decided for some reason to accept that as a fact along with everything else that keeps Jaru culture alive. The scientist would probably have to start inhabiting a different cosmos, and start living *like a Jaru person*. The same could apply, in principle, to some other Jaru person hearing the story of the falling meteor. “Oh, whitefella must be right, all that Rainbow snake story must be only humbug”. Or they could try for some kind of accommodation, or synthesis, of the two accounts.

Shifting the emphasis from the *existence* (of a fact) to the *process of maintaining* it has the effect, in the case of my contrast, of making us talk about the *extensions* of Indigenous knowledge (or science), and the extensions of Western science. These extensions can be pretty weird.

So, in the case of the crater, we can imagine ‘Western Science’ arriving in Jaru country and being initially stranded, without the usual support group that helps to generate its habitual (factual) knowledge. No labs, no instruments; its “rush of stories” is slowed to a trickle. Until someone saves the day by finding a theodolite in the back of the truck and they can be happy measuring the size of the crater (numbers!). Then a rock is taken away for carbon dating (more numbers!) and the rush of stories can start again.

Things get a little queerer. *Situated* north of Perth there is a kind of scientific theme park, the Gravity Discovery Centre. At this site, a serious scientific facility is co-located with a public education exhibit where visitors can learn about Wolfe Creek; “Timeline of the Universe”. We then see there is a little pedagogical exercise where you can ‘create your own impact crater’ by dropping a water-filled balloon from a specially-constructed 45 metre tower into a sand pit.

13 Anna Tsing: *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, p. 37.

The Gravity Discovery Centre has indeed gone to a lot of trouble and expense to *extend* the science and the *reliability* of its knowledge with a primitive kind of replicable experiment that actually proves very little about real meteorite impacts. It tries to be a simulation, but it is actually a kind of allegorical fiction. One has to ask: which extension is queerer? From crater to Rainbow snake, or crater to water balloon dropped into a sand pit by school kids? That contrast is a pretty stark one, but now I want to move to more hybrid, collaborative forms of science.

### ***Bilbies as Environmental Activists***

Today, following the protocols governing research in Aboriginal Australia, you may even find your modern science rudely interrupted, *put in its place*, situated. What you thought was universal knowledge about, say, bilbies, turns out to be not quite right. There is additional, local knowledge about bilbies that would add to, possibly reorient, the fund of knowledge. But to access it you have to change your method. First of all, you have to engage the traditional owners (TO), the knowledge-holders, in conversation, and then, following protocol, engage them as expert colleagues, if they agree to work with you.

“Expert colleague”, by the way, is an important designation. The older identity was “informant”, a subaltern anonymous designation that functioned like a valve in settler-colonial knowledge acquisition. It made sure that the Indigenous knowledge was transformed into something acceptable on the way out, and that nothing was transformed on the way in. Thousands of these valves kept the local knowledges local, while feeding the spread of sciences and social sciences around the country. The Modern sciences and social sciences thus continued their universalising mission.

But anyway, in Broome, my ecologist friend Malcolm Lindsay does increasingly interesting work with Indigenous rangers. At the time of the major environmentalist political campaign run against Woodside petroleum, Lindsay and his team intervened on behalf of the bilbies of Dampier Peninsula and gave these previously invisible beings a presence through a report and public discussion. As with some of the other critters, like the new species of spinner dolphin that was confirmed, there was a risk of the private scientists not finding them, the consultant scientists who did the Environmental Impact Report for Woodside Energy, at great expense. Talking to me, Lindsay stressed the importance of “having people on the ground for a long time, because endangered animals are by nature very rare and hard to find”. The Woodside consultants had come from Perth, were staying in Broome and only taking day trips to look for the animals, while Lindsay had a core team of three and they spent 6-8 months looking for bilbies. While he was a qualified scientist, the people he worked with had different skills:

[...]there was Damo, who'd lived with the Goolarabooloo for a while. Non-indigenous, but he'd spent a lot of time out in the bush and had incredible tracking and bush

skills. And there's Craig who's a Koori man from southern NSW. Same thing, he'd done a lot of tracking with his mum when he was younger.<sup>14</sup>

Malcolm, as the ecologist, ended up doing "all the *gardiya* [whitefella] stuff, drawing the maps, entering the GPS points, taking the photos, cataloguing and writing the report". They were able to confirm 5 bilbies and the possibility of 10. The bilbies they found were active and using their burrows. But a bilby expert Malcolm spoken to considered that the usual way to survey is:

[...] flying over in a helicopter, and see their burrows, 'cos they have a large spoil mound. And you can imagine lush vegetation with a big fresh pindan pile. It is quite visible – in the Tanami desert. And I said, 'Oh you won't see it here, there's too much foliage, undergrowth of acacias etc.' He said, 'Oh well if you can't see it from the air, they won't be there'.<sup>15</sup>

And that was a case of falling back onto the authority of a universalising science. The danger with that, according to Lindsay, is that when such an expert opinion is delivered, the ecologist will *not* assume that 'an absence of evidence is evidence of absence', but the corporate boss could easily make that leap when writing up the executive summary, the text that prefaces the body of the report, the text that is the only part that politicians and other executives will read. These are the kinds of shortcuts that can be made in the writing up, to enhance the chances of environmental clearance.

With the work of such scientists who work closely with Indigenous rangers, we find that the science is changing in interesting ways, things are added and subtracted to make it respond better in terms of relevance, "putting the adventure of shared relevance over and above the authority of judgement" as Isabelle Stengers says.<sup>16</sup> Indigenous knowledge, which has stood the test of time and maintained relevance through intergenerational transfer, assures its rigour through replicability, rather than statistics and other forms of measurement. To the extent that it and more mainstream sciences reinforce each other's results, and change each other, previously subaltern Indigenous knowledges may well end up acquiring the designation 'Indigenous science' (rather than traditional ecological knowledge (TEK)), and universalising in dialogue with other Indigenous sciences in other parts of the world, all of them gaining relevance in times of climatic upheaval.

Maintaining relevance is about maintaining a belonging to the world which does not fall back on the authority of judgement or the purity of methods. In this new heterogeneous space, I suggested, a post-critical attitude, and set of techniques, are enhanced by way of attachments and networks. We had as a premise to this argument the idea that knowledge is situated, but it was never stuck in one place, pinpointed; it was always looking to move out, by hitching its concepts, techniques and affects, to available networks. The critical attitude also moves knowledge, but by way of detachment. But while this peculiarly modern form of critical detachment was highly suitable for diasporic European thought, erasing forms of ancient know-how and heritage as it progressed, it is hardly

14 Stephen Muecke, Paddy Roe: The Children's Country, p. 92.

15 Ibid.

16 Isabelle Stengers: Another Science is Possible, p. 42.

adapted to the new set of territories becoming visible once again under what Latour calls the “new climatic regime”, an assessment that calls for resetting the parameters of this modernity in dialogue, he says, with those colonised by that form of modernity.

### ***Creativity and Attachment***

As we marvelled at Donna Haraway’s flamboyant turns of phrase, and became envious of her citation numbers, we realised that her concept of “situated knowledges” was too attractive to stay put. People cottoned onto it. It was relevant to a certain kind of feminism in an emergent STS context, as it provincialised an idealism called “masculinist science”, something that might belong more to some dominant scientific culture than to the practices of actual scientists in labs or in the field, taking things slowly, doing good work, not being taken up too quickly by industries and markets demanding that the results fit the usual capitalist criteria for relevance.<sup>17</sup>

What of creativity? I don’t think it is confined to the formal devices, as in: *first* you have a good idea, *then* you write it up carefully choosing your metaphors. The reason my examples have come from science studies is that this is where – also in the Environmental Humanities – philosophical concepts leave their comfortable networks to test themselves in other domains – like mainstream science – where simply being critical, denouncing bad ideas, is not enough to create momentum. If you leave one network it is probably because it is becoming irrelevant. You are not liberating yourself from an oppressive regime, as much as you can leave that regime because you have found footholds, new attachments, in emergent networks with momentum: a perception that a version of feminist science might provide new methods, that Indigenous science has new interspecies, reterritorialized solutions to problems older sciences and social sciences just couldn’t negotiate.

I want to finish with another fictional story about a famous novelist’s research process, ‘getting something going’. He was working on a new book about a part of the country where his family had grown over three or four generations. He thought it would be a good idea to contact the local Land Council to talk about his project; might be some interesting leads there. He got onto a lady eventually – these Land Council workers are pretty overcommitted – who asked him for a one-page synopsis. He sent it in and was surprised to hear back in 24 hours.

“This is interesting, what you are planning”, said the contact. “And I have someone who may be able to help you. But the Board of Directors does want to have oversight of the project. This is our country, you know; we have Native Title. We can’t stop anyone writing a book – we really don’t want to – but for a long time now, generations really, white people have told stories about our country and our history in their [...] you know [...] from *their* point of view.”

“OK”, said the writer, “Sure. Let me think what to do”.

17 Ibid., p. 79.

The writer emailed his agent who rang the next day.

The agent was adamant. “Look, don’t let them push you into anything. You have a reputation to uphold. Anyway, the publisher doesn’t want any mucking around. This is *your* story. Your unique voice.

And what’s this nonsense about a clause in the contract including this what-name Land Council?”

Our writer was faced with a dilemma and thought about it for a long time. Finally, his curiosity got the better of him – who was this person willing to talk to him?

He got the contact from the Land Council; rang the number, with some trepidation, early one morning. Sounded like an old lady who came on the line.

By the time they stopped talking, his cup of tea had gone cold.

He drove out West the next Saturday, past the dry creek beds, the fallow brown fields.

He pulled up at a cottage on the outskirts of town and the old lady was waiting out front on her porch.

“Oh, good. You have a four wheel drive”, was the first thing she said. And as they sat down at her kitchen table for a cuppa, they paused and looked kindly at each other.

The famous author realised later – and it became part of the story – that this was the moment when he lost the plot, that plot he had sketched out on the one-pager.

“We’ll go for a drive in a little while”, his new companion said. “A drive and a little walk. There’s this tree I want to show you.”

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