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Gendered fields

Women, men and ethnography

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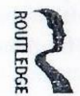


London and New York

Reflections of the author

aboriginal living in Australia

Who are better researchers?
males or females from the perspectives
of in depth understanding of the
interviewing rape victims or such
Sensitive topics.

Who you are accountable to?

1 Yes Virginia, there is a feminist ethnography[1]

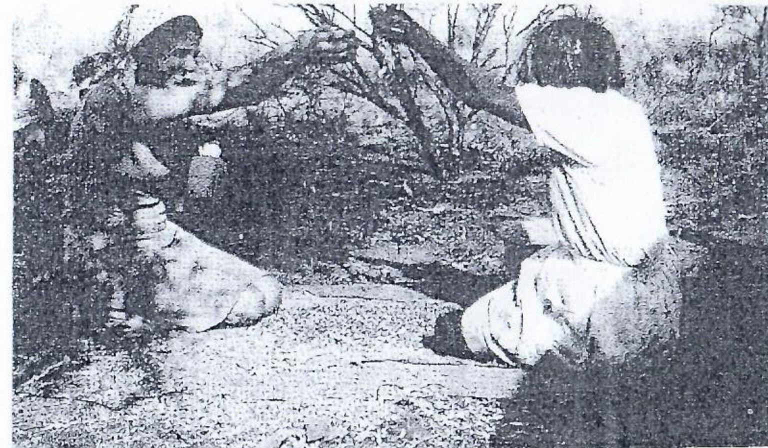
Reflections from three Australian fields*

Diane Bell

It was only a glance. I was crying and so was she. It was two full years after the official mourning period, but there we were at the women's ceremonial ground, quietly crying for her father. The other women were intoning the songs that recalled the travels of the totemic ancestors and it was of her father's country that they sang. The falling cadence and the words were familiar. What had caught my eye was the finely crafted design being painted across her breast. It was not appropriate to speak, so I had signed: 'Whose?' She responded: 'My father's.' We had visited his sacred places shortly before he died and although he was blind, he had 'seen' the country. Now it was time to revisit the store of ritual associated with him, and this symbolic representation of her relationship was the signal that she was assuming the responsibility for that country. It was her decision when, where, with whom, and how the rituals would be reactivated. Without her skill, creativity and dedication to the religious life, this knowledge would disappear. The first to learn of her decision and to see the designs were the women, all close ritual kin, with whom we sat. Then would come the performance and men would attend. This time it was special because an Aboriginal land claim to her country was in progress and officials of the court would be present. The ceremony for which we were preparing was the women's evidence of ownership and exercise of responsibility for their land. In this moment the interdependence of the separate worlds of men and women in the maintenance of sacred knowledge was stark. But, how was I, as the anthropological consultant to the judge on this case, going to give expert evidence on the local system of land tenure?

There are moments in the field when we move so finely attuned to the logic of the host culture that it feels as if we belong; participant observation becomes almost indistinguishable from living the culture; ethical dilemmas dissolve; and possibilities for tracing the rhymes and rhythms of the society in an ethnographic text seem boundless. The truth of the moment is blinding, it sears into the consciousness, yet when we come to write of our fieldwork, we move back from that profound experience, almost embarrassed to admit we've been taken out of ourselves into another world, been transformed in some subtle, immediate way.

The indelible imprint of these field encounters on our personalities and characters is revealed in anecdotes, diaries, letters, sometimes novels, but, with



Diane Bell and Nampijinpa winnowing the seeds of *acacia coriacea*, Central Australia 1976.

notable exceptions, has not been the stuff of professional discourse. We don't have the language to begin to talk about the emotionally charged moments in which the jigsaw pieces of another culture arrange themselves with clarity, only to defy description, to be beyond scientific discourse. It is the association of objectivity, the hallmark of science, with an absence of connection to one's subject matter, that have drawn the ethnographic lines in the sand. If one passes beyond the line, speaks of self as feeling, interacting, or as an element in a relational field, one becomes 'subjective', and one's work is no longer 'good science'. It bears the stamp of the observing-participating self and hence is biased, interested and partial, all terms that are paired with woman in the gender-inflected dualism (partial/impartial, personal/detached, emotional/rational) of post-Enlightenment rationalist thought.

Feminists' critiques of the cult of objectivity raise the question: should we deconstruct objectivity, attempt to reclaim the devalued term 'subjectivity', or do both (see Abu-Lughod 1990)? My preference is for the latter because my intuition is that perseverance with the doing and writing of feminist ethnography is central to the articulation of a reflexive tradition I find honest and compelling; it encourages ethnographic experimentation that is politically and ethically responsible; it grounds in praxis the deliberations of the so-called 'awkward relationship' between anthropology and feminism; and it allows one to assume a pro-active stance and to resist reactive engagement with the 'new ethnography' on the subject of its neglect of gender (see Caplan 1988). The epistemological sophistication now being achieved in the work of standpoint theorists (see Harding 1986; Hartsock 1983), if taken seriously, turns the criticism of feminists' lack of 'balance' and detachment upside down (see Haraway 1988; Harding 1990). Not surprisingly, mainstream anthropology has been reluctant to engage,

and many feminists have moved onto the defensive, or attempted to weld their critiques to those of the postmodernists (see Jennaway 1990).

Rather than asking whether there can be a feminist ethnography (see Abu-Lughod 1990; Stacey 1988; Reinharz 1992), I begin with the assumption that feminist ethnography is what I have been doing, and that more interesting questions concern its politics, style, ethics and epistemology, as well as the tactics of those advocating a more 'balanced' approach to ethnography. I began from a sort of naïve feminist empiricist stance, where I thought that data would make a difference to the portraits of society generated by men talking to men. It seemed so obvious that if the gender of the fieldworker impacted on one's findings, especially given that in my case it was woman to woman, there were good reasons to reflect on the commonalities as well as differences. I stated my interests and orientation and made explicit the research agenda and methodology. The ethnography I wrote was reflexive and it was data-rich, but that was not enough. I found that I was pigeon-holed: my ethnography was designated as feminine and feminist, and was dismissed as subjective and political. The knowledge was tainted. I critiqued male/male encounters masquerading as universal truths. I knew that neither a gender-blind approach nor 'add women and stir' was a satisfactory solution, but at the time all I could do was anticipate a 'feminist paradigm' (Bell 1983: 241–50).

I now see my reflexive feminist empiricism as a first step without which I could not have begun to write of women's culture, but a decade later I want to refine, critique and problematise that stance by reference to standpoint theory. In a sense this is 'work-in-progress', but let me sketch the epistemological dimensions of my feminist ethnography. First, I begin with the proposition that it is worth talking to women about their lives. Woman's knowledge I take to be grounded in her experience, practice, feeling, thinking and being. By privileging woman as knower, man is ethnographically decentred, and this is a profoundly political act. Secondly, I would endorse Catharine MacKinnon's argument: 'A perspectivity is . . . a strategy of male hegemony' (1989: 121). There is no ungendered reality or perspective, but rather the power to declare one universal and the other partial (ibid.: 120–4). Thirdly, I have sympathy with Nancy Hartsock's (1983) feminist reading of historical materialism wherein gender, class and race oppression generate epistemic privilege. Consequently, standpoint theorists acknowledge the need for 'an open-ended and dynamic approach to methodology' (Waters 1990: 6). Fourthly, following Sandra Harding (1986: 249), I am rejecting crude relativism, endorsing a form of 'objectivism', and stating a preference for working within an evaluative framework that is 'anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-classist' and that distinguishes between 'coercive values' and 'participatory values', on the grounds that such an approach will 'illuminate rather than distort' (ibid).

The ethnography I write is 'situated, perspectival, contextualised, and partial' (Hekman 1990). In short, it is proud to proclaim the possibilities of feminist ethnography, clear regarding its own politics, but not yet sure how to proceed politically in imprinting its understandings on the gendered field of anthropology

(see also Viswaswaran 1988). Feminist ethnography opens a discursive space for the 'subjects' of the ethnography and as such is simultaneously empowering and destabilising. It is therefore perhaps no coincidence that as a fully fledged feminist epistemology has become possible, a number of anthropologists appear to have taken a right-hand turn into the postmodern politics of representation and eschewed an interest in the politics of theories of knowledge (see Caplan 1988; Mascia-Lees *et al.* 1989). I want to claim there are distinctive feminist perspectives, and I want to reclaim the category 'woman' from the deconstructions it has undergone in recent years (see de Lauretis 1989). I want to speak in a 'different voice', not because it is feminine, but because it acknowledges the invigorating tensions generated by engaged, rigorous scholarship, is sensitive to difference but not immobilised by it, and promotes a holistic analysis of the conditions of production of knowledge including the politics of the academy that silence, marginalise and mute feminist critiques (see Stanley 1990).

Here, I am focusing on three 'experimental moments' in my doing and writing of feminist ethnography. The first concerns participant-observation work on Aboriginal women's religious beliefs and practices in Central Australia in 1976–8 (see Bell 1983, in press a); the second is applied work in the Aboriginal legal rights arena from the late 1970s to the late 1980s (see Bell and Ditton 1980/4; Bell 1984/5); the third piece of research, on generational links between Australian women, was undertaken in the late 1980s (see Bell 1987b, in press b). A common feature of this work is that it has all been done 'at home'. This has a certain charm, convenience and political accountability that I have pondered in different ways at different times. When I was living in Australia I felt as if I was always in the field. On a daily basis I was enmeshed in the cut and thrust of issues which bore directly on my research and confronted the grim realities of engaging with questions of social justice in cross-cultural contexts (see Bell 1991). Now that I am living in the United States and have a measure of distance – political, emotional and geographic – Geertz's (1988) distinction between being 'there' and being 'here' has some resonance.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s I reasoned that, as a citizen, I had more direct access to and a deeper appreciation of the political process than an outsider. I was acutely aware that as an insider one's views were never taken as seriously as the 'expert' from abroad whose ideas and stylistic quirks were more exotic than the home-grown product. But I also knew that critiques heard from overseas experts can be contained: the person eventually leaves, can be dismissed as insensitive to 'local conditions', and accused of hypocrisy abroad. So, to my reflections on the pursuit of feminist ethnography, I am adding citizen/alien to the list of gendered dualisms for this autochthonous anthropologist. The transformation from student/girl-child to researcher/female-citizen is never quite complete. It's not only that one has stayed at home, it's as if one is still a child within the family, it's like trying to do one's graduate research where one was an undergraduate.

GATEKEEPERS TO GENDERED FIELDS: 'CHOICES', CONSTRAINTS AND CONFUSIONS

My co-researcher and I needed a few days in town before we headed 'out bush' to begin our project. I applied for access to a university house maintained for researchers. Yes, I could stay there, but my children, who might disturb the 'scholars', were not welcome. I agreed they would not sleep in the house but would bunk down outside. My sincerity in keeping this outrageous provision was never tested, for when I arrived I discovered that the local manager of the property, as a favour, had allowed an old friend from another university, his wife and their children to stay in the house. I learned of this as I opened the door and found the family in residence. I thought this to be a clear case of mismanagement and discrimination, not to mention one of insult and inconvenience, but I needed somewhere for us all to sleep. We repaired to the local hostel. Eventually the university agreed to pay the difference between the hostel and house. There was no apology. Instead, an inflammatory letter addressing my inability to accept the reality of the fact that as a mother, I could not expect to enjoy all the benefits of being a scholar, was sent to the university. I only found this out when, many years later, a member of the cosy club of gatekeepers, administrators and male scholars broke ranks.

Constraints on women's access to the resources of the scholarly world assume diverse forms. Leaving school in the fifties my 'choices' were teacher, nurse, secretary or factory-hand. I trained as a primary school teacher, married, had two children, and divorced. As a single mother in the early seventies, I found my career options severely restricted (see Bell 1987a). I completed high school at night school, gained entrance to university, completed an honours degree and was accepted into a Ph.D. programme. I was 33; my children were 9 and 7; and my combined income from scholarship and government pension was $8,000 per annum. Contemplating fieldwork abroad as a single mother with these meagre resources seemed foolhardy, and I was already too old to qualify for certain fellowships. Had I wanted an allowance to take a dependent wife to the field, there was a category, but a 'single mother' was an anomaly and there was no allowance for dependent children. When I argued the point with the principal of the major grant-bestowing body, he suggested I leave them with someone. I planned to be away for over a year!

During my undergraduate years, I had little time to attend on-campus meetings of women's liberation groups. My consciousness was nicely raised by the daily business of balancing multiple agendas of full-time student, mother and worker. My appreciation of culture as a male construct was heightened as the virtues of Australian egalitarianism were extolled in undergraduate courses as the centre-piece of a national history that yet had little to say of the 51 per cent of the population who were female. As a graduate student, my work was caught in the world of gatekeepers to the field, grants, supervisors and seminar schedules. I raged against the assumption that someone else was maintaining the home, or that I was a solitary scholar. The scheduling of 4.15 p.m. seminars, when I needed to

be in the kitchen, I found to be set in customary cement. When I asked for child-care facilities at conferences, I was told this would encourage people to treat the occasions as holidays! My male supervisors/advisers were encouraging as I prepared for the field, but did not suggest I seek out other women who had been in the field. I was at a large research university which specialised in Aboriginal Studies, but there were no women in my chosen field. Along with several interested lecturers and graduate students, I formed a feminist reading group. I had worked on a similar project as an undergraduate and gained a reputation for being obsessed with sensitising the curriculum to gender issues, and attempting to hasten the glacial pace of global warming for women in the academy.

By reading the few feminist texts then available – Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan, Shulamith Firestone, Juliet Mitchell, Sheila Rowbotham – I learned to name the structures of oppression and to identify the pervasive power of patriarchal relations to render my experience personal and private, and men's political and public. The willingness of several women to bend the rules and provide safe spaces for a student-mother sustained my notions of the possibilities of a sisterhood. On the other hand, the hostility which my efforts to get an education aroused in some women underscored what I already knew: 'woman' was no unitary category. Class, educational background, ethnicity, age, marital status and sexual preference intermesh and overlap in significant ways. In the field, this appreciation of our multiple selves deepened, shaping both my own feminism, and my ethnographic presentations.

In locating a field site, I consulted with other anthropologists and was firmly warned by one senior woman in the discipline not to intrude on her territory, but generously offered a small segment of a region she did not intend revisiting: the territoriality of Aborigines is only surpassed by that of their ethnographers. A sort of geographical comity exists and one crosses those ethnographic lines at one's peril. With a dwindling number of 'traditional peoples' to 'study', and the restricted scale of the academic economy in the Aboriginal field in Australia, a quasi-feudal system of field relations has operated. The ability of a few to control the field and to set the intellectual agenda (see Wise 1985; Peterson 1990) has had a dramatic impact on the number of women in the field and the projects they have undertaken. One senior woman told me I was 'ruining my career': working with women would marginalise me and, to boot, Aborigines were the 'most boring people in the world'. This reality counselling was reinforced by the parting *bon mot* from a seasoned anthropologist, who quipped: 'Going to work with women on religion? You'll be back soon. Not much to write about there.' When I came back with data dripping from my notebooks, I was told that it was 'women's business' and *ipso facto* not about religion.

I chose to negotiate entry to a community where there had been no previous in-depth anthropological work undertaken (see Bell 1983) and it was anything but a band of pristine hunter-gatherers. Rather, it was a bitterly factionalised settlement, a monument to the folly of the era of assimilation. My initial approach was to write to the local community, which meant writing to the Village Council,

a colonial artefact, all male, with little authority in matters of traditional law and religious life, but none the less the first gate through which I needed respectfully to pass (see Bell and Ditton 1980/4: 5–8). In my first meeting with the Village Council, I simply said I wanted to learn from women of their lives and ceremonies, and to record their stories. I was not sure on what basis they understood my request, but their reply was clear: you are welcome to undertake research here, but confine yourself to the women and children. Such a condition could have rankled a researcher intent on a gender-neutral 'study of mankind', but I was delighted. My intent all along had been to try to establish what women understood of Aboriginal religion and to do so from their perspective.

Fortunately, the then community adviser had some familiarity with the nature of anthropological research and was favourably disposed to having me there. This has not always been my experience, nor that of other fieldworkers. Local advisers are often extremely wary of outsiders, especially 'know-all academics', even worse meddling women and, the biggest nightmare of all, 'women's libbers'. 'First you'll be talking to people outside the store, then in their camps, then you'll be living with them', the area director of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs once sneered at me, 'Just like a woman'. Later, when he saw me working on some old welfare records, he observed, 'I'm pleased to see you doing some proper work'. These records, I hasten to add, were a rich fiction of the accuracy of welfare officers, but considered a sacred point of reference by their authors. It was where they had authoritatively recorded/conferred personal names, place and date of birth, and where they had noted 'consorts' (wife was not available as a classification, as 'traditional marriages' were not recognised by the state). When I began work in the courts, the same individuals were to be found advising local governments and mining interests hostile to Aboriginal land rights settlements. They would trot out their records and impugn the reliability of a woman whom they knew had participated in the daily lives of the persons who were claimants, and who had been seen complaining about the failure of their office to issue Social Security cheques to qualified persons.

En route to the 'field' in 1976, my children and I attended a three-week intensive language course in Alice Springs where we met local Aboriginal politicians, the professionals employed by the organisations, and a frightening array of rights-for-whites, neo-assimilationists and soft-edged paternalists. What bound them together was that this was a highly masculinist culture. The few Aboriginal women I met in the town who were in positions of power were mission-educated and often had spent many years away from their home communities, and were themselves struggling to find comfortable personal and professional niches. Over the next decade, as I got to know some of these women a little better, I heard of their resentment of the positions of power occupied by men, and their conflicts over how best to address the imbalance of power. To identify as a feminist was risky. The media image of feminism as a fearful conspiracy perpetrated by a few frustrated man-haters was prevalent, and several competent women were fired/eased out of their work place for raising questions

of sex inequalities in service delivery and the structure of decision-making of Aboriginal organisations.

During this period, I attended a party at which there were both black and white guests – an unusual happening. There was much drinking, and a great deal of humour of a tone I came later to cherish, but it bit hard. One of the most articulate of the black activists regaled me with his story of fighting in Vietnam, but added that his pride in war service was tarnished when he realised that he'd been 'fighting a honky war'. The language of black power had infiltrated the emerging political elites, but had not yet made it into the bush communities. He asked me to dance, and then enquired into my interest in 'making babies'. The notion that white women who worked with blacks could be propositioned with a much different outcome from the advances made towards the wives of station (ranch) owners and welfare officers was novel and had many manifestations. If one declined, the standard retort was 'racist', or 'white trash'. Another Aboriginal activist asked who the hell I thought I was to come up there and think I could have anything legitimate to say or do. I later learned that this was a pass, and the fact that I didn't swoon indicated that I had no sense of humour and that 'southern city girls just can't take it' (see Aickin 1979). I was on the way to the field but I knew I was still at home: resources were gendered, sexism was visceral, to speak of women as a woman was to speak in a gender-inflected voice.

THE FIRST MOMENT: FINDING MY FEET IN FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY

'How do you support yourself?' local women asked as soon as I arrived. I later learned this to be a loaded question: could I be trusted with women's secrets, or was there a man who may have felt he had the right to ask about my daily activities? 'I get a pension from the government and a scholarship from the university in Canberra,' I explained. At that time I was in receipt of a single mother's benefit and 'pensioner' was a known category, and a respected one, for a woman: pensioners had an assured income, meagre though it was. Canberra was understood as the source of all wealth and power, so some reconciliation was necessary. The pensioner image was shattered when, three months later, my first grant payment arrived. The local operators of the telegraph system (nominally confidential) received notification that a Canberra-generated cheque was on the way. It was a quarterly payment, but soon the news spread that I was receiving that amount per week. From there it was an easy jump to imagine that I was a government employee; that is, spy. This news of vast amounts of money at my disposal was of greater interest to local men who lusted after second-hand vehicles, than to the women who were already into a pattern of borrowing money from me on the off-pay week and repaying it the next. They knew the extent of my resources and our ledgers were in the vicinity of $20–30, not the thousands which the men sought. When I left the field, the unpaid loans were men's. Women worked on a quick turn-around and sent me off with presents, so I was the one who was indebted.

The Aboriginal women had a restricted range of role models for white women: teacher, nurse, wife. The only other role model was a woman of quite remarkable derring-do, who, it seemed, could shoot and swear like a man. I failed to meet expectations: I don't shoot. I wanted to enter the world of women as another woman, and that integration on the basis of shared experience was high on the list of priorities of the women with whom I eventually became friends and worked. I was asked about my husband. On explaining I was divorced, there was a knowing chuckle and 'just like us' from the ritual bosses of the women's camps. I found myself among women who in temperament were most congenial. They were outgoing, independent of mind, capable of undertaking wide-ranging tasks, raunchy of humour, tolerant of personal traits, willing and patient in teaching a newcomer.

Their constant seeking for explanations for personal preferences, physical features and psychological disposition brought me within the ambit of their law, and was an excellent instructional strategy. The more points of contact between our worlds that could be established, the better I could learn, for it was only by being part of their world that I would be able to read 'the signs of intent' from the landscape. In reflecting on the incorporation of the anthropologist into the field, I have always written as if there were many happy coincidences that positioned me favourably. But it was also that the women worked hard to incorporate me at a level which best suited what they took to be my interests and character. At another level, what I learned was always contingent upon my location within their world, and, as I was given access to a great deal of ritual knowledge, encouraged to participate and entrusted with various items, I have tended to write of these experiences as positive elements of fieldwork.

I went to the field with two children, aged 7 and 9. Had they become ill, I would have had to terminate the work (see Howell 1990; Cassell 1987). I had few options in constructing a field self: the children were vocal and always there. The women ritual experts with whom I wanted to work were all mothers, and certain knowledge was only available after one has raised children. This was, of course, another of those self-fulfilling prophecies: I had access to certain information because I had children of a certain age, a boy nearing the age of initiation and a girl whose betrothal should have been imminent. The anomalous female, old enough to have children, but strangely unaccompanied, faces problems that I did not (see Golde 1970). The down side was that whatever I did in the field entailed planning for the children, carrying a swag (bedding) for three, provisions for three, always thinking through likely conflicts of needs, and taking actions to minimise or obviate problems.

The reflexivity of the self of that ethnography was that of the seventies in terms of the preoccupations of feminists with sexism and bias, and the anthropological critiques of the cultural imperialism of the discipline. The struggle for me was not only to find a way of researching and writing that allowed women's self-perceptions to be accorded legitimacy, but also to contextualise the ethnographic silence towards gender relations within the broader structure and history of Australian frontier society. Women and men spent much of the day apart, participated in sex-specific rituals, and observed a sharp sexual division of labour

in economic activities. That ceremonial activity and knowledge was marked as 'women's business' and 'men's business' was acknowledged by both Aborigines and anthropologists. What was contested was how to conceptualise the separation and the points of integration (see Bell 1983).

My initial accounts of Aboriginal religious practice in Central Australia began within the spaces – residential, ritual and discursive – that women control. My preference is still for an ethnographic presentation, but I am now prepared to be more explicit regarding the benefit of feminist ethnography to an understanding of Aboriginal religion *per se* (see Bell in press a). There is little written on Aboriginal women's ritual life, and what does exist mainly ignores women: it is either blind to the historical transformations of gender relations, non-reflectively endorses as holy writ male expressions of power and social reality, or categorically excludes women's activities from the religious domain (see Bell 1983). By beginning with a detailed account of one region, one where the separation of the sexes is marked, it is possible to demonstrate that much of the generalising about women's religious life has been premature and its sureness of vision has constrained research. A woman-centred ethnography reveals that certain behaviours of women, which appear anomalous if mapped with male as ego, are in fact part of a consistent set of practices. It also renders coherent otherwise inexplicable male behaviours (see Bell 1983: 212–26).

THE SECOND MOMENT: FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY GOES TO COURT

He claimed he had acted as of right. His wife and her two younger sisters brought sexual assault/rape charges. Despite the evidence of authoritative women – mothers and aunts with a direct responsibility for the abused women – that the violence was not 'customary law', his behaviour was contexualised as cultural and the women's as personal and mission-influenced. He was supported by male lawyers. The court was held many miles from the support of female kin, it was intimidating, and due to a technicality, the rape charges were not pursued. The message heard in the local community was that there was no one to speak for women. There was no one in the court with any expertise in women's law on the matter of violence, and the men who might have spoken out feared for their own safety. It is those who are party to the dispute and their families who know where justice lies and may properly speak, not the local council or other interposing gatekeepers (see Bell 1991: 402–6).

This, and several other 'customary law' cases in which I have become involved, have brought home to me the need to persevere with feminist ethnography; to explore the evaluative frames of standpoint theories that allow one to move beyond cultural relativism and to privilege woman as knower (see Harding 1990).

One dramatic example of the gendering of knowledge occurred in a land claim. It concerned the submission of evidence that, according to their law,

technique in tracing the contours of women's culture was to track the transmission of objects from one generation to the next, and this made an analysis of social structure and kin systems possible. I could write of the way in which women's transmissions routinely subvert and mock patriarchal rights in property and kin lines. The ethnography entailed a mapping of the mundane, finding structure in the idiosyncratic, searching for ways to read the known, and imprinting these private reflections on the public consciousness of the society in which I was raised.

I had a complex chain of accountability to publishers, the Australian Bicentennial Authority, my research assistants, the photographer, and the women whose lives had generated the database for the book. It was an interdisciplinary experiment in multivocality and dialogical research with all the attendant horrors and revelations. I think the methodology holds promise. Ann Moyal (1989) has already used it in her research on women's use of the telephone in Australia. What continues to sustain and delight me from that project is the correspondence from the women who participated, their families, and the experiments of other women trying to write of their lives.

Those who resisted the notion that a woman-centred ethnography might be a valid ethnography thought my work would be more 'balanced' if I were to work with men also. Received wisdom notwithstanding, I did work with men, in all three fields, but I did so as a woman. In the work on Australian women's culture, I found much of men's knowledge of transmission of objects from one generation of women to the next to be on the fuzzy edge of their consciousness. Frequently they would dismiss their ignorance with a shrug reminiscent of my Aboriginal fieldwork: 'That's women's business.' In my work in Aboriginal communities, I did not ignore men. I was simply not privileging their experiences and assessments of the religious domain. They knew that I had had access to women's ritual worlds and that I respected the knowledge boundaries and would not trespass on male territory. I worked with men on genealogies, on country and dreaming affiliations, on sacred sites locations and mythological associations, on social and local organisation, on dispute settlement and conflict resolution. Senior men sometimes requested that I be present at certain ceremonial exchanges and willingly answered the questions I asked, especially when it had to do with land rights and registration of sacred sites. By that time I knew how to seek information without giving offence. Sometimes my circuitous style would develop into a playfulness, especially with men who stood in the relationship of father or father-in-law, and we could express affection in our exchanges.

GOING TO THE FIELD BY STAYING AT HOME

As my colleagues explain how they have a set of publications which are available locally and ones which are primarily for the consumption of their colleagues, I listen with interest. Such a distinction is a luxury rarely enjoyed for Australians working with Aborigines. The ethics of research and publication are always foremost, and a degree of self-censorship and constraint intrudes. True, anthropologists working in 'remote' villages now face scrutiny, but abroad one may build a fieldworker role that can both mesh with and contrast to local gender expectations. At home all the constraints on women apply and those of the field situation are added.

There is a long tradition of women undertaking fieldwork at home, mainly with exotic minorities, but also with sub-cultures of the dominant society (Dube 1975; Powdermaker 1966). In the late 1980s to early 1990s there has been a resurgence of interest in applying anthropological modes of research and analysis to one's own culture (see Ginsburg 1989). What distinguishes this moment from earlier ones is the sophistication of the discourse regarding the exotic other, the critique of anthropology as complicit in the colonial encounter, and the voices, often angry, of indigenous scholars. What remains constant is the resistance to scrutinising gender (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

In this article I have artificially constructed three moments in order to talk about gendered fields, but in reality they overlap. To ask that relationships between indigenous peoples and the state be scrutinised has become part of our anthropological stock in trade. To ask that we explore the points of articulation between a gendered state and male privilege within the academy, or between a masculinist basis in the framing of rights and the structuring of the institutions of self-determination movements, is a step which the discipline, feminists and political activists are yet to take with any certainty. In Australia it is particularly difficult because the field is so small and the persons with whom one interacts wear many hats. For an autochthonous anthropologist, the 'natives' of the field are one's fellow citizens, one's gatekeepers, and also the audience for one's publications. Publishing a critique of misogynist practice of power-brokers and politicians constitutes a different sort of a threat over 'there' to being 'here'.

Working with a minority population within my own country had many practical advantages which are now difficult to disentangle from my feminist politics. To work at home is less glamorous, and I have been arguing that it is more difficult to be taken seriously, especially if one is a woman. Without being able to assert a distance, the assumptions which attach to being a woman at home are not renegotiated as one enters the field, but simply transported. One's location within the host society is scrutinised in terms of location within one's own society; that is, one's biography, politics and relationships become part of the fabric of the field. For women and more particularly a feminist, the consequences of always being 'there' have drawn me to see the interdependence between feminist critiques of the state, standpoint theories, and feminist ethnography (see Bell 1992). Only in the last few years have those interested in questions of women-centred accounts and gendered knowledge begun to develop a meta-discourse which holds the promise that moments of 'truths' in the field may become legitimate signs on the ethnographic landscape.