Collaboration: When Place Matters

Robert Hoskin
Australian Catholic University

This article briefly analyses a collaborative effort which took place in October 2010, as families from the Mowanjum Aboriginal community in the Kimberley reconnected with their traditional lands with non-Indigenous support. For the non-Indigenous participants the journey included the challenge of crossing thresholds from the familiar into the Other, of following protocols, and of being invited to be a part of a wider relationship of people, land and spirituality. Thus issues of place and hospitality profoundly affected the collaborative relationship. Being with Aboriginal people on their land and on their terms challenges a Western understanding of collaboration, which is often time and work-centred. Furthermore, the Aboriginal people became hosts in their land, which affirms among collaborators the importance of protocols, of right actions and following rather than leading in the relationship. As a small group of non-Indigenous participants discovered, such relationship with Mowanjum families as they returned to land brought new opportunities for learning and being together with an understanding of what it meant to be a guest on Aboriginal lands.

Introduction

It has been my privilege to work with the Mowanjum Aboriginal people over the past decade as they shared their annual cultural festival with tourists and locals. The festival has been a collaboration bringing together non-Indigenous and Indigenous people in its production. In recent years, I have undertaken research as the people of Mowanjum journeyed to their traditional lands, supported by non-Indigenous friends who helped to make these journeys possible. It is my contention that such journeys to traditional land bring a new understanding of what cross-cultural collaboration means, particularly as the Elders, such as Eddie Bear, affirm their role as hosts and traditional owners of the land. I discovered that being on traditional Aboriginal land changes the nature of the Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationship, because being on country raises issues not normally posed in other locations. One way to understand this dynamic is through considering the inter-relationship between host and guest. Such collaboration on traditional lands reverses the power relationship, for as a non-Indigenous stranger to this land I clearly become guest of the Traditional Owners. I am reliant on Aboriginal skill and knowledge to survive in this alien country. My life and well-being can be in their hands.

I begin this article by exploring general issues and limitations surrounding the concept of ‘collaboration’, then present a brief outline of a collaborative journey involving seventy people, mainly Indigenous, taken with Eddie Bear and his family to their traditional lands of Majaddin in the Kimberley in October 2010. My focus is not on the work undertaken or achieved, as collaboration is only part of the larger cross-cultural relationship. Rather, I explore the nature of the Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationship and the impact that place has on that relationship. I note the dynamics of crossing into the other’s place and what it means to be a guest in Aboriginal land. Finally, I recount how this work translated into the vision and values of a non-Indigenous community/church group operating from Perth which was working with the Mowanjum community, the Boab Network.¹

¹The Boab Network is an outreach of the Floreat Uniting Church in Perth. The Network involves church and community members interested in assisting the Mowanjum community with a diverse range of projects. The Network initially provided holiday activities for children and youth at the invitation of the Mowanjum community. They have since engaged in community projects such as a
Collaboration

The nature of Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaboration is part of what Torres Strait Islander scholar Martin Nakata writes as the complex interrelationship that occurs between the culture of Indigenous people of the Torres Strait and the dominant Western culture. He argues that the ongoing Islander analysis “has remained subjugated by Western attempts to explain the position of Islanders” and that a new theoretical framework should take more account of Islander experience. In other words, a contemporary researcher should not repeat past practices which undervalue or ignore the Indigenous voices and understandings. In this respect, the term collaboration is symbolically loaded when it comes to working with Aboriginal families and community in the Kimberley (and indeed in any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community). In simple terms, “collaboration” means working together toward a common goal. But this relationship can include friends, strangers or even enemies collaborating together. Aboriginal people and communities have experienced a wide range of collaborative engagements since colonisation with various outcomes. Such collaborations have often involved an imbalance of power, with non-Indigenous people controlling the relationship and the outcome. This power imbalance has taken, and continues to take, many forms. For example, many missions operated with a collaborative relationship between the white administration and the Indigenous Elders. This involved a new and unfamiliar governance system which, by its very nature, placed Indigenous people into an inferior position.

The people of Mowanjum near Derby have experienced a long history of collaboration, beginning with the Presbyterian missionaries who visited them on the far north coast in 1911. Such collaboration resulted in the Worrorra, Wunambal and Ngarinyin people leaving their homelands on the coast or inland to settle at Mowanjum near Derby. As a consequence they experienced a loss of power and control, despite the efforts of the Mission to consult and engage them in this process of change. They were settled on land not their own. Other families which remained on traditional lands had a history of collaboration with the pastoral industry, but were clearly placed in a paternalistic relationship. Ironically, the greater the Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaboration, the less likely that Mowanjum people would be in control of their lives and destiny and the less able they were to maintain their important connection with traditional lands. Mowanjum people and their forebears began their life on their traditional lands. Although they lived on the mission or pastoral stations, they were able to hunt, fish, and undertake their ceremonial life in close connection with their sacred sites. The move to Derby made this connection more difficult, if not impossible, for most people. They experienced
a collaboration which took them away from their home. Although the Presbyterian mission encouraged the people to participate in decision making, as Maisie McKenzie’s history of the mission illustrates, the people were encouraged and prepared to be integrated into a White community. The term integration was used in favour of the dominant policy of assimilation because the missionaries recognised that it was important to preserve the community’s cultural integrity despite relating to a mainline Australian culture. Despite this challenge, the people maintained their connection to country, which was affirmed by the non-Indigenous legal system in recent Native Title Determinations. The Mowanjum people have fought hard to regain their role as hosts. Until recently, white intruders usurped this role and forced the Mowanjum people to adopt different roles, either as guests of the mission or workers on pastoral stations. Such forms of collaboration therefore became overloaded by the unequal power relationships that emerged. As my journey illustrates, the people’s return to land as hosts to non-Indigenous people is an opportunity to relate in a different way to that which often occurred in this historic cycle of dispossession and disempowerment.

Early researchers in the Kimberley, as in other parts of Australia, were clearly interested in collecting stories and cultural artifacts for their benefactors, primarily the universities of Europe. Indeed, this form of collective anthropology was used as a tool to support Western philosophical assumptions regarding race and ‘civilization’. Such collaborations, if they could be called that, were affected by political constraints. Anthropologist Geoffrey Gray similarly speaks of the constraints historically placed on Australian anthropologists, which would have naturally affected their collaboration with Aboriginal people. Many anthropologists like A.P. Elkin, who worked with the forebears of Mowanjum people, needed to obtain government approval to undertake research with Aboriginal people. They were then placed in an ambiguous position of having to steer a difficult course between the demands of their science and that of a colonialist government. In addition, they were naturally cautious of bringing social justice concerns to public attention for risk of offending the government officials who controlled their ongoing relationship with Aboriginal communities.

How then to conceptualize this relationship across distinct cultures, taking account of such power imbalances? Celia Haig-Brown and Jo-Ann Archibald write of border work noting that

---

6M. McKenzie, *The Road to Mowanjum*, p.283. McKenzie describes the policy of integration as distinct from the government’s policy of assimilation. It was not absorption into white society but a gradual process of learning to live in white society. However, this policy still led to unequal power relationships reflecting that of the dominant culture.


8Andreas Lommel, for example, spent several months in 1938 with three Aboriginal groups: *Wunambal, Worrorra and Ngarrinyijn*. See A. Lommel, *The Unambul: A Tribe in Northwest Australia*, trans. Ian Campbell, First English Edition, Takarakka Nowan Kas Publications, Armadale, NSW, 1997. His exhibition and publication, which included a visual record of the daily life of the people regarded as “a Stone Age Hunter Gatherer people” was translated into English in late 1990s. Lommel was a member of the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt, specializing not only in African culture, but in rock paintings from all over the world.


First Nations people are border workers by the nature of their aboriginal claims to traditional homelands, lands with traditionally established borders which conflict with and lie within the borders of a land called Canada.  

We in the Boab Network also work in a similar border, between those Aboriginal people resident at Mowanjum with claims to land that coexists through Native Title with shared use with the dominant Australian culture. Such a border has a painful history of dispossession and conflict together with recent struggles for land rights and control.

Mary Louise-Pratt writes of the contact zone. It is a social space “where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.” This contact zone is therefore not a neutral space, but often charged with the differing expectations of those who are in relationship. Margaret Somerville and Tony Perkins bring these two concepts together to speak of ‘border-work in the contact zone’. That is they critically reflect on and analyse the process of their collaboration as they struggle with issues of bringing traditional knowledge into the public domain. They add that “Research in this paradigm asks questions about whose interests and in accordance with what values, do we research? Who benefits, and how do they benefit from our research?”

While I find these questions and conceptual basis helpful, I sought primarily to understand the nature and process of a cross-cultural collaboration and the dynamics involved. However, although I can speak of a shared contact zone and certainly work at the border of two groups with differing historical backgrounds, this does not sufficiently acknowledge the dynamics of the relationship that was formed. For this, I turn to concepts of hospitality, of being the guest and the host, and the relation between the two.

The recent interest in collaborative anthropology is also pertinent to my research because of its focus on collaborative processes of researching an Indigenous community. For example, such processes sought to involve the Indigenous community in both the process and writing up of the research, including taking into account oral presentations. Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe and Joanne Rappaport write of both rethinking fieldwork and ethnographic writing in the light of these issues, while Xochitl Leyva Solano, together with Rappaport, explore methodology which incorporates an audio book.

Thus, in contrast to the many early anthropologists who collected knowledge for academic institutions working from a stance of ‘scientific’ objectivity, many contemporary anthropologists work in collaboration with the people for the benefit of the people. For example, anthropologist Valda Blundell has worked closely with Mowanjum people. Together with Worrorra Elder Donny Woolagoodja, Blundell wrote Donny’s father’s life story about his own involvement in repainting significant Wandjina figures on the Kimberley Coast. This work is similar to Mary Ann Jebb’s edited compilation of the Mowanjum story, which recorded Indigenous history from the Mowanjum people’s viewpoint; her process clearly empowered Aboriginal

---

people. These examples illustrate what it means to research collaboratively and clearly reversed the power imbalances of the past, whereas I had different focus. I sought to research a collaborative relationship rather than research collaboratively.

One work that does record the actual journey or process of collaboration is *Yorro Yorro*. David Mowaljarlai, an *Ngarinyin* Elder, faced the complexities of relating his traditional culture to a white dominated world. He had to fight for land rights and argue the case against government and community opponents. He sought through his writing and other interactions to open his world to non-Indigenous people and attracted us to journey with his people to explore creative possibilities for collaboration. Mowaljarlai collaborated with photographer Jutta Malnic, taking her on a journey through his country. Together they produced a book designed to transmit aspects of the *Ngarinyin* story inextricably linked to the land of which it is part and the account of their collaborative journey. Malnic’s awe-inspiring photography adds to Mowaljarlai’s story and allows the reader to appreciate a little of the mystery of this country.

I see my research as focussing on the actual process of collaboration, rather than its product. Like Mowaljarlai’s journey with Malnic, I want to present the relationship in all of its complexity rather than simply an account of what was achieved. To do this I seek an appropriate theoretical understanding of the dynamics underlying such collaboration. In other words, there is more to a relationship than the production of a work or sharing of intellectual capital.

In the following section I briefly describe an encounter with place and the effect that it had on me and others. This encounter led me to find a new power relationship that avoids the imbalance of the past. I experienced Aboriginal hospitality and learnt what it meant to be a guest in their traditional lands. This learning and awareness would provoke me to seek a new way of understanding and defining our collaborative relationship.

**A collaborative journey to Majaddin**

We, a non-Indigenous group involving the Boab Network and other local non-Indigenous personnel, were supporting a number of Mowanjum families as they visited traditional lands. The product of our collaboration was the trip itself, which required substantial organization, planning and general support. The original trip to Majaddin (October 2010) involved at least seventy people: families from Mowanjum, Rangers, members of the Boab Network and several other community members. It evolved from conversations with Eddie Bear from Mowanjum and Ross Gobby from the Boab Network. Eddie Bear, a traditional owner of Majaddin, invited the Network and other families in the Mowanjum community to join with him and his family for several days in this remote location. Majaddin is found between Walcott Inlet and Mt Elizabeth station in the Western Kimberley, well off the Gibb River Road. It is *Ngarinyin* land, part of the Wilininyin Native Title.

I spoke with Eddie, our host about the history of his involvement with Majaddin and the reason why it was so important to him and his family. According to Eddie, the people began to return to Majaddin in the 1970s. Eddie recounted:

---


Most of the old people started talking about their country ... They said, “Well you can go back to your country.” They kept this going by taking the “little ones up” every two or three years. [I asked Eddie why it was so important for him to return.] Well the old people wanted to go back there, so I wanted to. I want to keep the dream alive, and just to get up there. I want to get our young ones interested in it too.\(^17\)

I then asked him why it was important that he make this available both to us and the wider Mowanjum community. He replied, “I am the Elder of that country ... and when people come ... I feel good about people coming to look at my country and me speaking about it.” I asked him about his vision for the future. His vision included living at Majadden with as little impact on the land as possible.\(^18\)

We in the Boab Network were keen to support Eddie’s vision. From a work point of view, this collaboration meant that the problem of getting over seventy people back to country could be overcome. Here Eddie relied on a collaborative effort involving a range of non-Indigenous people including Peter Croll, cultural coordinator at the Mowanjum Arts Centre, and participants from the Floreat Uniting Church in Perth. I spoke with Peter and asked him for some background thoughts. He stated that one of the more enjoyable aspects of his job, being cultural projects officer, is being able to organise back to country trips. Peter deals with the logistical side of sourcing funding involved with these trips, as well as engaging volunteer help. He is responsible for financing as well as logistics, food, fuel, and accommodation. As Peter reminded me:

> There are huge costs involved with the fuel and food and being able to sustain themselves out there for a reasonably long period of time. You would be limited and only be able to get a certain number of people out there like your own maybe, your own immediate family. Whereas on these back to country trips you can get a lot of people who have connections to that area.\(^19\)

This led me to ask what collaboration meant for Peter. He spoke of all the behind the scenes work that went into the trip:

> Well, I have to liaise with community members to get an idea of who wants and who needs to go. Or to find who is important in the scheme of things: to find whose country it is. It is important that they go.\(^20\)

Peter also had to arrange with the Wilinggin (Ngarinyin) rangers to see how many vehicles they were taking. They would bring staff, firewood and support vehicles in case vehicles were broken down. I asked Peter what would have been the greatest challenge of the trip. It was a matter of finding a suitable time, of talking with the people to see if they were available and whether they were healthy enough to go. He spoke of many other behind the scenes tasks and offered the following image: “It is like taking a circus on the road. Because if you end up in between towns you’ve gotta be geared up for it.”\(^21\) Peter’s account clearly speaks of collaboration as a doing experience. We would not have achieved this major trip without significant work from many people – Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

---

\(^17\)Eddie Bear, conversation with Robert Hoskin 13 July 2011, held by interviewer.
\(^18\)Ibid.
\(^19\)Peter Croll, conversation with Robert Hoskin on 9 July 2011, held by interviewer.
\(^20\)Ibid.
\(^21\)Ibid.
Beyond collaboration: crossing to another place

Although it took collaborative effort and work to achieve a successful trip, this is a small part of the story. We crossed to Eddie’s place, which made a significant difference to our understanding of our collaborative relationship. The first crossing of our journey was Magpie Jump Up. This steep descent marked the transition between Mt Elizabeth Station, a white leased property, and Eddie’s land. The track which descended dramatically onto the plains below challenged our driving skills. We ‘inched’ our four-wheel drives down a water course on the face of the plateau. In a sense this descent marks a transition to a different way of thinking and being. From that point on we became guests of the traditional owners and the Spirits of the land.

Our second crossing was more profound. Our hosts took us to visit their caves with special images that left an indelible imprint on my mind. I collected leaves with Eddie to be used in the smoking ceremony to precede our visit. We were smoked and then heard the Elder call out in Ngarinyin language to the Wandjina to announce our arrival. The Wandjina are the creation spirits believed to create and nurture the land, the people and the creatures of the land. They are humanoid in appearance with large eyes, and rarely a mouth or ears. They generally have rings around the head representing clouds and lightning, with white areas on the face and chest representing mist.22 There are many Wandjina figures through the Kimberley linked to particular sites like Majaddin.

We heard stories as generations before us, recounting the importance of the Wandjina to the people of the land. In effect we had passed through to another time space, bringing us in contact with realities well outside of Western philosophical and spiritual thinking. We were experiencing what it meant to be guests in a strange land. Being guests, we had to be very careful that we observed the correct protocol, which included not taking photographs of the caves. I was, however, given permission to record the sounds of the experience and later gave the recording to the Elder who spoke to the Wandjina, told the stories and sung the songs.

But what of the meaning of collaboration? In what way did this journey challenge or enlarge my understanding of collaboration in the light of transition? A simple definition of collaboration is to work or labour together. We certainly did this, in the effort of getting to Majaddin and once there, in helping with the physical tasks, which included installing the plumbing. But, this was only a small part of our collaboration. We were invited into the Ngarinyin world view and through this, into a new form of relationship.

Anthropologist Franca Tamisari writes of what it means to be adopted into the community at Milingimbi in the Northern Territory. Hers was a crossing, involving a welcome and a relationship to a particular family in the community. She uses the term personal acquaintance to describe what it meant to be writing from personal experience with particular people. In such an epistemology of the encounter, Tamisari distinguishes between that impersonal knowledge about the other to that knowledge which arises from being together.23 I relate to her work, though I would not use the word acquaintance. I believe that this word fails to do justice to the depth of relationship encountered. While Tamisari’s crossing was into communal space, our crossing was also particularly linked to land and place.

This theme of crossing into a special place is explored by Edward Casey, who writes of that place of crossing which he calls the edge.24 This edge or gateway is where strangers are received and made welcome. Such an edge can be physical but involves many other factors such as differences in language, history and tradition. Casey quotes philosopher Jacques Derrida who writes of ‘absolute hospitality’ which requires that one opens up one’s place and home to the stranger in an unconditional acceptance. Yet, as Derrida then argues, such hospitality is impossible. Likewise, the presence of a border or edge contradicts the notion of a universal or absolute hospitality. Hospitality is thus conditional with laws and the expectations of the host. In our experience, we were certainly given a gracious and open welcome into Aboriginal land and their home. But equally we were made aware of the protocols involved which included not taking photographs in special areas such as the caves, being careful of where we walked, and respectful of Aboriginal community.

The primacy of place: being a guest in Ngarinyinin country

We were Eddie’s guests and therefore our collaborative relationship was naturally affected by this guest/host relationship. Jacques Derrida in his philosophical exploration of hospitality notes that the French word for both host and guest is hôte. Derrida argues:

So it is indeed the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage – and who really always has been. And the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host. The guest becomes the host’s host. The guest (hôte) becomes the host (hôte) of the host.25

The host has invited the guest, yet the host is dependent on the guest accepting the invitation. In other words, we were not simply working in collaboration, we were living and being in such relationship that our actions affected Eddie and his people and vice versa. Although Eddie’s people took the lead in this relationship, they were deeply impacted by our presence. This journey was a positive experience for both non-Indigenous participants and the Mowanjum families. As Eddie states, “I think when people come out, it’s a healing process too we go through you know.” This healing relationship occurred at many different levels as Eddie recounted:

Well it does it bring people together. Sometimes you can look back on when Aboriginal people started to work for a ringer, in a stock camp and station, and some gardyia bloke (Whitiefella) were real bad, treat them like dirt and you know work them. [Eddie did not want to describe the bad treatment; rather, he continued] You see what happened when you guys come in? That’s a different thing to the past, in the way it feels. It’s all different (the experience of Whitiefellas). You guys come up there to share our culture. It makes me feel real good!26

Eddie’s words affirmed my contention that there was far more to our relationship than a work focussed understanding of collaboration. This shared return to land offered non-Indigenous participants such as me the opportunity to enter into a

26Eddie Bear, conversation with Robert Hoskin.
relationship with the people that had the potential to heal past injustice. David Trudinger in his PhD thesis writes of the relationship of Presbyterian missionaries at Ernabella with the Aboriginal peoples of Central Australia. He quotes Derrida's words spoken at an eulogy for friend Emmanuel Levinas. Derrida explored the issues of unconditional welcome, noting that the host has first received the hospitality of his own home: "The one who welcomes is first welcomed in his own home. The one who invites is the one invited by the one whom he invites."27 Trudinger thus noted of the missionaries who welcomed those who were seeking safety and relief from the colonial invasion:

        Did not the best of the missionaries sense they were in a profound way, being invited by those they had invited, and that their guest was in fact their host?28

This strange interplay between the host and the guest is pertinent for a recurring change which takes place for the Mowanjum people. They who were once host of the missions became guests, and in a dramatic reversal lost contact with their lands as the mission brought them closer, physically and economically, to mainline Australian society. As McKenzie notes, "Kunmunya was an outpost of civilization, a small oasis in the wilderness of the Kimberley." They invited the local people into this outpost organizing sports days, caring for the sick, and beginning their education into Western thought and ways.29 This intention to control Aboriginal people continues. Government and community groups and individuals will often seek to control Aboriginal communities, such as in the recent Northern Territory Intervention.30 We from the Boab Network did not want to repeat this power imbalance in our relationship with Eddie and his family by taking control, but as will be admitted below, there were times when we tried to become the host and control the hospitality offered. These reflections and the notion of being a guest led to change in our values and intentions for the future.

        However, in this visit to Majaddin, our presence allowed Eddie and his family to come home in a new way. Brian Treanor, building on Casey and Derrida’s philosophy of hospitality, argues that hospitality is defined by a place. He states "Only an implaced person can be hospitable."31 In this respect a displaced person can be generous, the giver of gifts but not welcome the guest. This means that we have an important part to play in this ‘drama’. Entering into the responsibility and grace of being a guest, we can host Eddie into claiming his home in a new and unexpected way. I spoke with Eddie Bear some time after the journey and it was evident that he came to see his vision for the return to Majaddin in a new and more complete way. Majaddin ceased to be simply a family home, but a place where he could share with others from Mowanjum and beyond. It meant a

29M. McKenzie, The Road to Mowanjum, pp73-83.
30Aboriginal Elders Kunoth-Monks and Djiniiyini Gondarra challenged the Northern Territory Intervention and the elimination of the Racial Discrimination Act. Their views and many others is recorded in Sabine Kacha (ed.), Walk with Us: Aboriginal Elders Call out to Australian People to Walk with Them in Their Quest for Justice, Vega Press, East Melbourne, 2011. The Intervention is a dramatic illustration of the opposite of being the guest in Aboriginal lands, and seeking to take control of Aboriginal affairs.
great deal to him for the Mowanjum people and his non-Indigenous friends to join him in this important visit. He said:

   It was real something to see other people look at my country ... The stories told by our old people could live and non-Indigenous people and even our young ones too, to understand that you know.32

In other words, Eddie has a vision of Majaddin being a special place not only for the Mowanjum community, but for non-Indigenous people as well. Of course, non-Indigenous people would not be privy to all the cultural knowledge that would be passed on to younger Ngarinyin people. This welcome speaks of the restoration of Eddie’s relationship with his land. Eddie has truly come home to his place in the act of being the host. In this respect hospitality is given in a particular place by one who is at home in that place.

   Thus we who were non-Indigenous entered into a guest relationship with our host. But as we experienced, it is never easy to give up the natural tendency to control. For example, in visiting the caves, several non-Indigenous participants became impatient and wanted to go before everyone was ready. This impatience was noticed and commented on later. This impatience stems from a radically different understanding of time. For Aboriginal people there is right time and wrong time. We, on the other hand, were still operating from our Western understanding. Another example concerned camp organization. The non-Indigenous participants took control of the cooking without an understanding of how this might have affected our Indigenous hosts. Even though we were mindful of Eddie and his family being our hosts, we sought to organize the cooking in a central location. This meant that an Aboriginal way did not occur, that of individual family groups taking responsibility for cooking at their own fires. We have since changed our approach and have had opportunities for discussing our approach. It is very easy to surreptitiously move into the role of host, by trying to control when action takes place and how it takes place. Neither action destroyed our relationship with our hosts, but certainly became important issues of reflection to ensure that we were more careful in the future.

   We were invited to be guests and to enjoy hospitality. We spent time swimming, sharing food, stories and enjoying each other’s company. Karen Martin describes the world view and ontology of her people the Quandamooka as a means of explaining her approach to Indigenous research. Like Eddie’s people, the Ngarinyin, the Quandamooka’s world view is based around stories of the ancestors, the Creator Spirits who created the land and the creatures of the land. This worldview is one of relationship in which the land, the Spirits, the flora and fauna, and human beings are interconnected. Her ontological premise therefore is one of relationship, in contrast to our Western ontology which is one of individuality and separation.33

   To be a guest is to move beyond a collaborative and workcentred paradigm to one of being and relating. Martin speaks of ways of knowing, ways of being and ways of doing with knowing at the centre and doing as a consequence and outcome of the knowing. She notes that the central questions for knowing are, ‘who your people are’, ‘where your country is’ and ‘how you are related to the entities’.

   We were given an understanding of such questions in the stories shared as we experienced the caves. Eddie and others shared their relationship with the Wandjinjas and other totems painted on the cave walls. We were told of a conflict

32Eddie Bear, conversation with Robert Hoskin.
which had been resolved and then asked to help search for any spear tips or other signs which might be hidden on the ground. The connection with the past was very present, and demonstrating that this link with place had never been severed. This raises the question of ethics. Derrida writes that “hospitality is not some region of ethics ... it is the whole and the principle of ethics.”\(^{34}\) To enter such a host/guest relationship as this, we support Eddie and his family as they struggle against those forces that would sever or diminish their relationship with their lands. For example, archaeologist Ian McNiven and historian Lynette Russell summarise the continuing struggle taking place in Ngarinyin country concerning cave art. They write of diffusionism, a recurrent theme which suggests that the quality of certain art (Gwion Gwion or Bradshaw) demonstrates the presence of an earlier race of people.\(^{35}\) Diffusionism suggests that these ideas came from advanced people either through immigration or visits. Such arguments were advanced to delegitimize the Traditional Owners’ right to their heritage. As McNiven and Russell note,

The Kimberley region, seen as Australia’s last major frontier, is not only home to one of the world’s great Indigenous rock art traditions but is also the stage for a final showdown of colonial archaeology in Australia.\(^{36}\)

In other words, as we enter Ngarinyin lands, we are challenged to respect the people, the Laws, the lands and its creatures. This is no easy matter, for we are reliant on our hosts to help us understand the nature of this respect, and not to step outside of protocol or endanger our lives or the community by disrespectful actions. This requires a much larger understanding of collaboration, because it challenges the stranger to seek to understand the values and world view of the host. The stranger and guest are also challenged to be responsible and accountable, but with guidance from the land, from the sea and sky, from Elders, and from the community. Lynn Meskell and Peter Pels argue that this is an ethics embedded in the actual relation and context that one encounters.\(^{37}\) It is not directed by an external agent such as the University ethics committee but arises out of the collaboration itself between the guest and the host. Meskell notes in relation to archaeological issues in North Africa, that ethics is neither neutral or value free. Archaeologists cannot impose their own value systems which arise from their dominant philosophies, either economic rationalist or preservationist values in a foreign context.\(^{38}\) Rather ethics is constantly shifting and needs the negotiation with divergent interest groups. This obviously will make field practice more complex, as it deals with such a diverse range of interests from the global to the local and indigenous. This is unlike the ethics and actions of those who colonized the Kimberley, many times acting without responsibility to the land or the people of the land and certainly not seeing themselves accountable for their actions. Our actions thus become the outworking of ways of knowing and being. This is radically different to a Western framework in which we often take action without regard to the knowing and sense of being in relationship.

---

Footnotes:

34 J. Derrida, Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas, p.50.
36 Ibid, p.179.
37 L. Meskell, & P. Pels (ed.), Embedding ethics, Berg, Oxford, UK, 2005. Drawing on insights from various disciplines, they propose “a view on ethics that emphasizes the priority of practical ethical engagement” as distinct from a dis-embedded, exteriorized ethics alienated from the local setting, (p.1).
The following diagram illustrates this movement from a collaboration as mutually organizing the journey, through a crossing into Eddie’s place in which we are invited into relationship with Eddie’s people and the land as guest.

---

**A relationship and place centred approach to collaboration**

1. **We collaboratively organize and undertake a journey**
2. **We make a crossing to a special place**
3. **We enter a host/guest relationship involving being and learning together**
4. **We reflect on the experience leading to change of values**

The cycle may repeat itself through many collaborative journeys with changes in our values impacting the way we approach collaborations.

As the diagram illustrates, we move from a work focus where we might be in control to being in relationship. This includes both knowing and being, and in a sense is paradoxical because we are completely in the hands of our hosts in order to understand where and how to begin in this strange land. We engage in a period of learning, in which we are further taught the complexities of living with the community as the people relate to their land. Finally, we reflect on this relationship leading to a change in our own values and approach to future actions within an ethical framework.

Collaboration is a part of this relationship. We may work or labour together, but our relationship incorporates other dimensions, including an ethical stance. I and other non-Indigenous participants were learning how to respect the land with its extraordinary history of Aboriginal occupation, just as I was learning to be with both land and people in new ways, including those ancient rituals such as the smoking ceremony and calling out to the *Wandjina* associated with the visits to the caves. I use the term *being in relationship*, echoing the thought of Kenneth Gergen, who argues for the “primacy of relationship in all that we do.”

He speaks of relational beings to describe creative relationships which transcend the idea of individual, bounded selves. He speaks of affirmation as the birth and restoration of collaboration. As we affirm another, we pave the way for new possibilities in a collaborative relationship. As explained above, we affirmed Eddie as our host, and in doing so, enabled him to come home to his own land in a remarkable way that countered that collaboration forced on him and others by a colonialis intervention. This return to land, and another trip since then, has reinforced my understanding that our Western comprehension of collaboration is limited, focusing on shared work or activity. When the focus is on the work, relationship then becomes secondary. In shared journeys to land, relationship is primary and the trip becomes an opportunity for healing and restoration of past injustice.

---

**Return, reflection and a change in values**

This collaborative journey to Majaddin had several unexpected outcomes. Eddie asked me to help him to write the story of his family as they moved from Majaddin...

---

40Ibid. p.167.
to work on Kimberley Pastoral stations and then live at Mowanjum. This story includes the importance of his traditional lands as he and his family reclaim their family relationship with this land. It also enabled me to determine the major question of my research, namely, what does it mean to collaborate on such journeys to traditional lands? I would also contribute to Boab Network’s ongoing relationship with the people of Mowanjum. The 2010 journey to Majaddin led me to explore an appropriate conceptual basis which acknowledged the relationships involved.

This understanding of the significance of being a guest in Aboriginal land has implications for the future of the Boab Network and the way in which our people relate to the Mowanjum community. The Boab Network expressed this in a recent Strategy Day in July 2012 in which we determined our vision, mission and values for the future. The meeting drafted a value statement which read, "Our core value consists of basing our relationships on our developing understanding of our changing roles as guests as we affirm Mowanjum as our host."

To be the guest does not mean that we will never be the host. The Boab Network and Floreat Uniting Church will continue to host youth and Mowanjum families in their visits to Perth. We will also act as host as we continue to develop the Community Resource centre with its many computers and the technology that backs this enterprise. We acknowledge, however, that being a host is contingent on a prior understanding of what it means to be a guest, and that any collaboration is dependent on this recognition. Furthermore, the meeting crafted several vision statements for further thought:

**Vision statement 1:**
We will engage in a positive relationship with the community (children and adults) so that all facets of community can function in a cohesive and fulfilling way in the contemporary world. We dream of an empowered community reaching its dreams and fulfilling its needs.

**Vision statement 2:**
To befriend the people of Mowanjum and through relationships and understanding of both cultures, together, build a better world.

Both statements acknowledge the importance of relationship which, as has been developed above, is critical to any future collaboration. We have been privileged to enter in a relationship with the people which is place oriented; that is, many of us have had the opportunity to visit traditional Aboriginal lands and begin to understand relationships from the perspective of Aboriginal people.

To collaboratively engage on traditional lands is to literally and metaphorically make a crossing into a shared space where two groups with radically different cultural and spiritual backgrounds have the opportunity to undertake the work of being together on country. It is shared work because it requires extensive preparation and resources, as well as that organization that is necessary to enable a large number of people to live in a remote location. However, this journey has made me aware that relating and being together on land is more than work or shared activity. The notion of host and guest affirms the unique relationship that is experienced on traditional lands. The two roles are not independent of each other but entwined. As we who are non-Indigenous participants recognize and understand what it is to be a guest, so we affirm and enable Eddie and his family to be our hosts and, in this process, come ‘home’ in a significant way. This journey was

---

42Ibid.
the first of many to come and therefore provided an important understanding and framework for future journeys.