Doing difference differently in Northern Australia today: Ground Up mobilisation of Indigenous and STS concepts

Responding to and continuing on from Helen Verran

By Cathy Bow, Matt Campbell, Jennifer Macdonald, Yasunori Hayashi, Michaela Spencer, Michael Christie

Helen Verran's essay *Doing Difference Differently: Deakin STS in the late 1980s* tells an origin story of Science and Technology Studies (STS) in Australia in the context of the new Australian universities in the 1970s and 80s, and of STS of that era. Her own connection to Northern Australia began early in her stay at Deakin University, and has continued since then in projects like *Indigenous Knowledge and Resource Management in Northern Australia*[1], *Teaching from Country*[2], *Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultants Initiative*[3], and *Remote Engagement and Communication – Indigenous Evaluation and Research*[4]. This has led to the creation of a northern hub of STS scholars at Charles Darwin University (CDU), of which we (the authors of this piece) see ourselves as a part. Helen's STS writings, which draw on her experiences with practitioners of Yolŋu Aboriginal knowledge practices, are a continuing inspiration for our group.

Today working across the Northern Territory (NT) – generally under the label of *Ground Up*[5] – our group of STS scholars are navigating our way within the complex institutional landscapes of the region. Helen's work, often undertaken with Michael Christie, has ensured that we have a rich legacy of documenting and interpreting careful collaborative practice between STS researchers and Yolŋu and other Aboriginal elders and knowledge authorities.

The STS we undertake at Charles Darwin University remains strongly connected to Helen's concerns with "how differences are generated in humans going-on together"[6]. These concerns began in her time in Nigeria and were consolidated in her work in Arnhem Land, undertaken during her time at Deakin University in the 1980s. Back then, with Helen's guidance, Aboriginal trainee teachers undertaking their fourth year of tertiary study through Deakin University successfully involved their own elders and their traditional knowledge practices in their university education. When, after graduation, these students took on active roles in their schools, Aboriginal elders also became involved in decolonising the practices of formal classroom education. This shift acted as an antidote to the assumed superiority of non-Indigenous students and Western knowledge and became fundamental to the philosophy and knowledge making practice of the Yirrkala Community Education Centre.

In recent years, a new generation of post-graduate students and early career researchers at CDU has driven forward the engaged forms of STS practice which are present here. This includes: developing digital language technologies which work with and accommodate Indigenous language practices (Cathy Bow); research into Indigenous evaluation of settler institutional practices (Matt Campbell); monitoring success in Indigenous land and sea management (Jennifer Macdonald); research into Yolŋu community-led water management strategies (Yasunori Hayashi); designing and evaluating practices for community governance, understanding practices of disaster management and preparedness in Darwin, and rethinking the nature and practice of voluntary service (Michaela Spencer).

Each of the projects undertaken in this space at CDU has mobilised a philosophy of Ground Up knowledge production and agreement making which could be seen as connecting with an Indigenous metaphysics and forms of philosophical pragmatism present in the Western tradition. This work, mostly funded by government and non-government organisations interested in doing their work differently, centres on issues of current concern in the ongoing interactions between Aboriginal people and their places and communities, and the non-Indigenous organisations and agencies with which they engage.

Our work takes seriously a metaphysics of emergence where new and unique worlds and ways appear in careful good-faith collaborations and practices in place. This provides the core metaphysical commitment of all this work. In our approach, received categories and practices continue to be transformed, engaging particular Indigenous approaches to knowledge production in the doing of a contemporary Northern Australian STS. In our day-to-day work, the CDU STS group does our best to inhabit an epistemic landscape which could be considered merely an *argument*[7], but which our research inhabits as an actively *embodied* collective form of life as we, explicitly and in good-faith, mutually articulate our differences as we go on together doing those differences.

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[1] https://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/ik/ikhome.html
[2] http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/inc/tfc/
[3] https://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/yaci/; https://iri.cdu.edu.au/
[4] http://recier.cdu.edu.au/
[5] http://groundup.cdu.edu.au/
[6] Verran. H. (2018) Doing Difference Differently: Deakin STS in the late 1980s.
http://stsinfrastructures.org/content/helen-verran-doing-difference-differently-deakin-sts-late-1980s
[7] As articulated in Gilles Deleuze (1994) *Difference and Repetition*, Paul Patton (trans), London: The Athlone Press; and Alfred North Whitehead (1978) *Process and Reality*, David Ray Griffin and Donald W Sherburne (eds), NY: The Free Press.