



Ethics and consent in more-than-human research: Some considerations from/with/as Gumbaynggirr Country, Australia

Yandaarra with Gumbaynggirr Country including | Aunty Shaa Smith¹ |
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Abstract

A considerable body of recent work within the social sciences has attempted to engage more deeply with place, place-based knowledge, and more-than-human agency. Yet what this might look like in relation to ethical research practice, especially in the case of research proceeding on unceded Indigenous lands, is unclear. Taking more-than-human agency seriously means ethical research practice must be extended beyond a human-centric approach. As a Gumbaynggirr and non-Gumbaynggirr research collective researching on, with, and as Gumbaynggirr Country in so-called Australia, we offer a contribution to discussions of research ethics and protocols that centres the consent of Country: the lands, waters, and skies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelands, and the human and more-than-human beings that co-become there. In this paper, we share some of our learnings and discuss how we have tried not just to listen to Country but also to honour its agencies, knowledges, and sovereignties. As part of this honouring, we prioritise in particular the deeply placed Gumbaynggirr knowledges of Aunty Shaa Smith and Uncle Bud Marshall to explore what being guided by Gumbaynggirr Law/Lore and sovereignty means in practice and the challenges and possibilities of gaining consent of Country in ways underpinned by Indigenous Law/Lore. We propose a more expansive understanding of consent that includes attention to more-than-human sovereignties and draw on our collective's learning to reframe the need for limits on research as openings rather than closures. In sharing our Gumbaynggirr-led and Country-led perspectives, we aim to deepen decolonising research praxis within human geography and the social sciences more broadly.

KEYWORDS

Aboriginal Law/Lore and sovereignty, consent of Country, Gumbaynggirr Country Australia, more-than-human consent, more-than-human geographies, research ethics

1 | SOME BEGINNINGS

Working together as a Gumbaynggirr and non-Gumbaynggirr research collective from the mid-north coast of NSW, Australia, we have yarned many, many times about research ethics and what it means to research well. By researching well, we mean researching with respect, centring Gumbaynggirr Law/Lore,¹ and honouring Country and the Old Fellas (Ancestors). We have come to see that listening and learning from the Old Fellas, listening and learning from Country, and following Gumbaynggirr protocols are at the heart of how we approach research. Old Fellas and Country guide us, they teach us, they help show us what to do.

Gumbaynggirr Country² is on the east coast of what came to be known through colonisation as Australia. It reaches from the Clarence River in the north, to the Nambucca River in the south, to the Great Dividing Range in the west, and the Pacific Ocean in the east. It is Country for Uncle Bud, Auntie Shaa, and Neeyan, who are Gumbaynggirr custodians of this place. It is home also for Sarah, who lives with her family there on unceded Gumbaynggirr land. And it is a place of learning, work, and deepening connection for Lara and Paul, who travel from where they live on Awabakal and Worimi Countries to be with us. Yandaarra (see further below) is also our families and Gumbaynggirr Country itself. For all of us, in different ways, Gumbaynggirr Country has nourished, taught, guided, and healed us; it has brought us into relationship and offered the chance to critically engage with our diverse sovereignties and our different obligations to the custodial sovereign³ relationships of this place (Akama et al., 2017). Country keeps teaching us lessons that we try, although mis-steps are many, to learn as a collective, as Gungunbu, beings who belong together, and from our different places, histories, and relationships as senior Gumbaynggirr Custodians, young Gumbaynggirr woman leader, and guests living on, and coming into relationship with, Gumbaynggirr Country.

When we talk about Country, we mean the lands, waters, and skies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelands, and the beings, dreams, and relationships that nourish and co-become there (Grievés, 2009; Hsu et al., 2014; Kwaymullina, 2016; Rose, 1996; Suchet-Pearson et al., 2013b). Country is always different in the many Aboriginal homelands of Australia, with different names, different relationships, different legal orders, and different co-becomings (see, e.g., Barlo et al., 2021). For many Aboriginal people in Australia, Country, our/their relationships with and as place, is deeply nourishing. Country heals and gives generously and that means neither Country nor the more-than-human beings that co-create it can be taken for granted. If we are to take seriously the knowledge and agency of Country and more-than-human beings, it follows that we must seek their consent, acknowledge their boundaries and limits, and follow processes of meaningful engagement, consultation, and sharing, just as we might for human-centred research (see, e.g., AIATSIS, 2020; Bawaka Country et al., 2019a, 2019b; Cole, 2017; Johnson & Larsen, 2017; Louis, 2007; Tallbear, 2014; Wilson, 2008).

In this paper, we contribute to the ongoing discussion about more-than-human agency in the social sciences. We realise there are many people who are engaging deeply with place, who are considering more-than-human methodologies, working with weather and animals and land. Many Indigenous researchers and Indigenous-led collectives, in particular, like Bawaka Country et al. (2020, 2019a, 2019b, 2016), Darug Ngurra et al. (2019, 2020), Soren Larsen & Jay Johnson (2013; Johnson & Larsen, 2017), Tebrakunna Country and Lee (2019) are acknowledging Country, place, land, ancestors, and more-than-human beings as co-authors, and as agents with their own knowledges and Law/Lore (see also Barlo et al., 2021; Hughes & Barlo, 2021; Kimmerer, 2013; Kwaymullina, 2016; Todd, 2014, 2016; Tynan, 2021; Watts, 2013; Yunkaporta, 2019). From these thinkers and collectives, we have taken much inspiration and guidance. In return, we offer some thinking that comes from our own work with and as Gumbaynggirr Country, focusing on what more-than-human consent might mean and look like as part of a decolonising research practice that centres Country itself.

Taking seriously the knowledge and agency of Country means extending conversations of research ethics, and consent, beyond humans. This, we feel, is an important and logical next step in moving beyond human-dominated understandings. As such, in this paper we share some of our learnings about more-than-human research ethics and discuss how we have tried not just to listen to Country but also to honour its agencies, knowledges, and sovereignties. For us, as we talk about more-than-humans within a notion of more-than-human research ethics, we are referring to humans and non-human beings, understood in a way that underscores our relationality, our co-becoming (Arnold et al., 2021; Bawaka, et al., 2016; Graham, 2009; Tynan, 2021). More-than-humans are animals and plants and rocks, winds and waters, dreams and ancestors; many of these beings are not considered sentient within a Western frame; they are intangible, their meanings and knowings are not easily understood or communicated by humans, least of all in English. Yet these beings emerge with us, are part of us. Our actions, our responses, our more-than-human ethics are a matter of intra-action, of agency that emerges through relationships, between things that are co-constituted. In this way people may act on/with Country even as they are part of it (Barad, 2007; Bawaka, et al., 2016). The wind blows independently of human action

at the same time that humans breathe it, take it into their cells, and at the same time that both humans and winds are important in making a place what it is are both part of Country. Country itself has agency, the winds have agency, people have agency, we act upon each other as we emerge together: like family, like and as kin (Kanngieser & Todd, 2020; Tynan, 2021). This leads to a complex idea of relational agency and relational ethics; we never act on something separate from ourselves, but rather act through relationships. We are never a static entity, never discrete, but always emerging through relationships, our being and our acting defined through them. Our protocols are living protocols.

In this paper, then, we share some of this complexity, discussing how we have sought to attend to our connectivities with place, our more-than-human co-becomings, and, as an important part of that, to seek consent to be where we are, to be doing what we are doing, and, vitally, responding when Country's answer is 'no'. To do this means opening ourselves up to more-than-human communications, through senses, feelings, and intuition with the guidance of ancestors.

As Aunty Shaa shares:

I want people to know that we're not just taking from Country – we're in relationship with Country. We are giving and receiving and there are many other things that are happening between us. If we do not come with a good, respectful relationship, something essential is overlooked.

The discussions we share here have come about through our work as a research collective called Yandaarra (see Figure 1). Yandaarra means shifting camp together in the Gumbaynggirr language and our collaborative research has centred around learning and sharing what Gumbaynggirr-led caring for Country might look like today (Gumbaynggirr Jagun, n.d.). It involves the collaborative development and trialling of resources and protocols to help support natural resource management organisations to attend more deeply to Indigenous ideas of Country, and to Country itself (Smith et al., 2018). We have held workshops, yarned together, planted trees, reflected, gathered food, laughed, and shared. We're walking together, Gumbaynggirr and non-Gumbaynggirr, remembering different ways of knowing and being, coming into a shifted consciousness led by Country as we honour Elders and Custodians past, present, and emerging. This is how we have come to be in a place to share with you.

To be defined by and through relationships, through intra-action, does not mean we are all the same, that Country is an amorphous container or that a rock is the same as a person. Rather our relationships are also boundaries, places of coming together and of distinctness, that set patterns and order, and that must be respected. As we embark on this paper, then, we would like to emphasise that we share from our place(s) with acknowledgement and response-ability to our diverse histories and presents/presences (Daley, 2019). To do so is a part of important ethical research practice. As Palyku academic, writer and lawyer Ambelin Kwaymullina (2016) points out, as do the Yolŋu-led collaboration Bawaka, et al. (2016, 2019b, 2019a) and many others, it is simply not possible to exist separately from our relationships with each other or from Country. Given this, we aim to critically engage with the big issues of ethics in research, from our place(s), with Country, in relationship with each other, our diverse histories and positionalities, and in relationship with you, the reader, and your place. We can see no other way.



FIGURE 1 Yandaarra Collective (left to right): Sarah, Lara, Uncle Bud, Paul, Neeyan (foreground), and Aunty Shaa

We begin our paper with a discussion of the importance of moving beyond ideas of communication and consent as always and only human. We then share the importance of respect and of limits, and discuss the re-conceptualisation that would see the practice of following protocols not as limiting but rather as potentially leading to greater openness, connection, and understanding. Finally, we suggest that research ethics provide a way of engaging more-than-human sovereignties, underpinned by and supportive of Indigenous Law/Lore. This requires an expansive and Indigenous-led understanding of sovereignty as emerging through relationships, including more-than-human relationships and agreements, as opposed to stemming from domination or exclusion as per a Westphalian conceptualisation (Porter et al., 2020; Wright & Tofa, 2021). As Uncle Bud powerfully states:

I want to see that connection now. I don't care if they are black, brown, or brindle. It is about connection and respect. That is the important thing. That is the main thing I want to share.

2 | RESEARCH ETHICS IN A MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

Many people have emphasised the importance of doing research respectfully and, in particular, have raised important ethical issues associated with working as and with Indigenous people and with/from Indigenous cosmologies (Battiste, 2008; Hunt, 2013; Martin, 2008; Smith, 2012; Todd, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilson, 2004). This includes a need to understand research as always and already political. Research involving Indigenous people has long been deeply exploitative and colonising, with the knowings of Indigenous peoples, and indeed Indigenous people themselves, positioned as passive, useful only for the insights and power that may be gathered by non-Indigenous researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Tynan & Bishop, 2019; Watts, 2013). Such approaches tend to position Indigenous people and Indigenous worlds as only ever the 'known' to be explored, discovered, and exposed, rather than themselves as 'knowers' (Kwaymullina, 2016; Simpson & Smith, 2014). Such practices have long histories deeply implicated in colonialism and violence whereby research was used to 'prove' the inferiority of Indigenous peoples, 'prove' their lack of land ownership (and so pave the way for claims of Terra Nullius and the land theft it enabled/s), and 'prove' Indigenous peoples' inevitable demise. Such colonising practices remain, both through the legacies of land theft and trauma and through ongoing processes of extractivism, silencing, exclusion, and objectification in research.

In responding to these ongoing colonising practices, Ambelin Kwaymullina suggests that respectful research requires 'engaging with and through new modes of interaction that begin with the recognition of that which the colonial project has long denied: the inherent sovereignty and humanity of Indigenous peoples' (2016, p. 447). Within such a project, researchers would be held accountable, not to colonising institutions or KPIs, but to the people and communities with whom they are working. This would entail care-ful (Williams, 2017), accountable research: research that attends to researchers' different positionalities and histories, in ways that prioritise Indigenous voices and are underpinned by a recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty. It would also be underpinned by an understanding that research, the dialogue, the encounter, may not even need to happen in the first place (Kwaymullina, 2016; Simpson, 2007; Wright, 2018). As Kahnawà:ke Mohawk academic Audra Simpson (2007, 2014) suggests, this and other forms of refusal may allow for a way to disrupt and deny the assumed entitlements of colonialism through an assertion of Indigenous sovereignties and lifeworlds (see also Tynan & Bishop, 2019).

The importance of attending to Country, land, and Law/Lore within these discussions of research ethics is an important thread but a thread that is often not given a central place. As such, in this paper we contribute to these important discussions by focusing on what respectful research ethics mean for working with/on/as Country and for relationships with more-than-human beings. In particular, we suggest there is a need to consider the many vital ethical issues raised by those working with Indigenous methodologies through a more-than-human lens. Where AIATSIS, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, outlines its vital principles of ethical research and says that research 'must be founded on a process of meaningful engagement', with respect, responsibility, and reciprocity (AIATSIS, 2020, p. 14), for example, these are generally framed and read in human terms. What about Country, though? How might engagement and reciprocity be understood with Country, ancestors, and more-than-human beings at the centre?

For many researchers, whether they are working within more-than-human theoretical frameworks or in other areas of geography, the consent of Country is assumed or rather it is not considered. This is part of a broader issue of entitlement that comes with a colonised, and colonising, understanding of relationships and knowledge production.

It is another act of settler-colonial erasure that would deny the sovereignties and agencies of Aboriginal people, our/their Law/Lore, our/their relationships with Country, and of Country itself. As Aunty Shaa suggests, one should 'not think, because I am human, I can walk in there and do anything I like. We need to get to know Country, enter a space of co-existence and interconnectedness. This is about learning how to introduce and connect with Country using your senses and intuition.'

No one should be exempt from such place-based protocols, irrespective of one's research area or intentions. Consent of Country, its more-than-human beings and sovereignties, applies to all research proceeding on Indigenous lands (whether formally recognised as Indigenous or not, including those that are stolen, 'settled', contested, built on, and unceded). Climate change and species loss, for instance, have given rise to more geographic research rethinking human-centredness in knowledge production. Yet, it isn't always clear how ethical considerations such as consent and reciprocity enter into these research engagements. Nor has proper acknowledgement always been paid in research to the knowledges of Indigenous Custodians who have maintained relations with the land, its more-than-human societies, and teachings for millennia (Hunt, 2013; Sundberg, 2014; Todd, 2016; Watts, 2013).

Uncle Bud emphasises the need for people to come into awareness and to take care in their interactions with Country; to blunder about without thinking is disrespectful and dangerous. As he says, 'People don't know where they are walking. You can't just wander around. It's strong.'

Even when there are 'the best of intentions', if a person or Country's consent or involvement is assumed, there cannot be a respectful relationship. As we reflect:

Sarah: It's like the way Whitefellas want to learn from and relate to Gumbaynggirr but in a way that assumes it's okay and it's going to happen; as if consent is taken for granted and the idea is all set.

Aunty Shaa: Yes, it's this thing about, 'I want', and the emotional stuff around that. There is a mentality around that assumption in there, that it's how things are: 'I want this so I can get it; I can have it.' I don't know what that whole equation is; I don't know where that comes from.

Lara: It's like a consumerist way of thinking about it; 'If I have the money, I am entitled to it.' From that mindset, there are no other limits.

Aunty Shaa: Yeah, and there was a time last year, I started saying no to people. That was really hard to do that; it's the level of offence, of emotions, that people go into; there's offence, there's 'I couldn't possibly be doing the wrong things.'

Sarah: It's a strong reaction; when someone is called to account, even if it is just you saying, no, you don't want to do something. The reaction is too much and it puts things back onto you, Aunty Shaa, as if it's your problem and responsibility, and not theirs.

Aunty Shaa: Yeah, and I think that's why I feel like that, the Aboriginal people carrying so much; I don't want to see Whitefellas who are unconscious; we're carrying so much for them; I could go into guilt about saying no; thinking, 'I have to take on responsibilities for this' you know; I am carrying so much then, and I internalise it; then it becomes about us carrying all the trauma.

Aunty Shaa's responses underscore the heavy emotional burden that is put on Aboriginal people during discussions of consent and how white entitlement and possessiveness often show up in these encounters (Moreton-Robinson, 2020; Saad, 2020), re-traumatising Aboriginal people. Consent is tied to an expectation that the answer will be yes, and an enthusiastic and unconditional yes at that. When this expectation is not met, particularly when those asking believe they are acting with good intention, the reaction is often defensive and to stop listening (Kwaymullina, 2020; Saad, 2020). These interactions belie a deep, often unconscious, white possessive logic of unfettered rights to access, take, and benefit from Aboriginal lands and knowledges that serves to re-enforce the racialised social hierarchies of settler colonialism. Rather than asking with a fixed agenda, a more respectful and anti-colonial approach is to listen to what, if anything, is being offered.

As Aunty Shaa continues:

What we have to offer, our cultural knowledge, it is priceless. It is so valuable. Whitefellas take it for granted that we just give it to them all the time.

Here we are discussing relationships between people, but there is much to learn about relationships with Country too. The cultural knowledge that Aunty Shaa speaks about is part of a framework for knowledge and Law/Lore that includes agreements and protocols working with Country and its beings. This is Country's ability to refuse, to work on its own terms.

3 | LISTENING TO LIMITS AND RESPONDING TO OPENINGS

Uncle Bud tells of a time he went fishing and got too carried away about the catch, forgetting that you should never take more than you need. His Grandfather has continued to look over him since he passed away, trying many ways to communicate:

My brother-in-law [Aunty Shaa's father], he was married to my sister. He used to work up in the bananas [the area is known for its banana plantations]. As soon as he went to work, I said, 'I'll bring you some fish home for tea.' So, he'd go to work, I'd get my fishing gear ready and walk up the beach. I'd take a little spear with me. That is what I got the crabs with. That is the only bait I'll use. I won't get bait from shop. I was only using a handline, that is what my people used to use.

I continued up, sat on my little perch, there was a rock behind me too. I was sitting. You could see the bream [a fish species] right around the rocks. I caught about four big ones but I kept going. Next minute I hear the stones rattling, coming down the hill. I thought it must just be loose stones up on the hill. I turned around, fishing again. Same thing's happened again. I looked around again. It was really steep behind me, a cliff. Guess what was up there, a little padymelon [wallaby, small kangaroo]. I thought, 'How did he get up there? No one can get up there?' I didn't take any notice, kept fishing. This was another sign from Grandfather. Next thing, I heard a bump, a stone hit right where I was sitting. The padymelon was stunned, knocked out.

I thought, 'Ahh here, I got something big for tea for me and my brother-in-law.' I put the fish in my bag, I am ready to grab this kangaroo that was knocked out. I went over, it opened its eyes. I thought, 'I got you.' I was about to grab it by the tail. Then where I was about to go, the path, it started wobbling. I am chasing it, I am. I seen it, it went up the water course at the back of the beach. I am right there, about to grab it by the tail and next minute I got all this hair on me, the tail slipped away from me. I said, 'I'll get you.' I was determined to get it. It got strong and stronger as it got to the waterhole. It stood up, it looked at me, and I looked at it. It stood up, started scratching its chest, just like that.

I got worried. I thought, 'Look out, I might be in trouble here.' I went into the water. I walked back, it followed me the whole way. I was watching it, it was watching me. It must have been a spirit, sent by my Grandfather.

I got cut as I was leaving. Guess who turned up, my eldest sister and my brother-in-law. She said, 'Oh we gotta get this fella to the hospital.' Everything was alright then.

So that was strange. I cut myself when I jumped off the rock to get the wallaby. I was using a bottle with a line on it. The bottle cut me. Bleeding or not bleeding, I was determined to get the wallaby take it home for tea.

The message was from my Grandfather that I got too much fish. And I shouldn't have been there on my own. That was the only way he could warn me to get away from there. I was such a stubborn little kid.

Uncle Bud, in taking too much fish, being alone in a dangerous situation, was not following more-than-human protocols and agreements that are in place with Country. On Gumbaynggirr Country, we are bound by Gumbaynggirr Law/Lore and our place within it, which includes a system of multi-species agreements, learnings, attachments, and protocols. These can help provide guidance and make sure we live in relationships of continued nourishment and care. As Neeyan says:

What are the protocols? I remember the simple protocols the Old Fellas would say to us. You are not allowed to cross the river, not allowed to go over there. Because of Bidi, the spirit, the woman over there. It wasn't safe.

Both Neeyan and Uncle Bud's yarns centre safety and a deeply more-than-human understanding of how to live well through honouring relationships. Anishinaabeg academic Vanessa Watts points out that 'habitats and ecosystems are better understood as societies ... meaning that they have ethical structures, inter-species treaties and agreements' (2013, p. 23). Honouring relationships with such more-than-human societies and the beings that belong to/as them must always be contingent, based on the situation and the beings involved while also being underpinned with recognition of, in our case,

Gumbaynggirr Lore/Law. This is relevant for protocols that are enacted with an individual plant, a species, and a more-than-human society (ecosystem) (for example, for a discussion of trees in and as Country, with their own communities and family structures in Yuin Country, see Arnold et al., 2021). Such an approach significantly diverges from an extractive relationship based on rights or possession (Coulthard, 2010, 2014; Kimmerer, 2013). Here, ongoing protocols, treaties, agreements with spirits, animals, rivers, Country, form the basis of respectful relationships and balance. And so, Country is not only about stopping any person from doing things, although Country's refusal must be honoured, but rather is also a matter of nurturing respectful relations of give and take, of negotiating balance and mutual care. As Neeyan suggests, this requires the genuine acknowledgement of the respect and agency of more-than-human beings. Coming into relationship can move people beyond an acquisitive, egocentric stance:

If you look at the plants, they are their own beings, they are our ancestors too. They have a place just like us; acknowledging those plants are like acknowledging the ancestors too. That's how I see it. You open up to something more than 'I', than 'want'.

When protocols are followed, when relationships are deepening, Country gives positive feedback too. Often, respecting Country gives gifts and abundance. Neeyan and Aunty Shaa remember a time this happened, when Neeyan was a young girl. Neeyan tells the story:

Remember the first day Uncle Bud taught me how to fish? I kept reeling in the fish and you two didn't get anything [she's laughing now]. He kept saying, 'Look at this one, Shaa'.

Like with Stephen [Neeyan's son], he is learning. He got two the other day. Because he is learning, Country is helping him, welcoming him or something, getting him in. Saying, 'here, have fish'.

So, respecting Country is not only, or fundamentally, about limits, although limits form an important measure of respect. When Country is listened to, when relationships are built, when you can go beyond 'I want', there is an expansion of self as you are welcomed into relationship with Country. Such expansions are beyond 'I', the individual ego, and beyond 'want', the colonising desire always for possession (Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

4 | SOVEREIGNTY, THE SACRED, AND DOING RIGHT BY COUNTRY AND THE ANCESTORS

The agreements and protocols discussed by Aunty Shaa, Neeyan, and Uncle Bud are agreements between sovereign entities, beings that have their own Law/Lore, that have full capacity to make decisions (Watts, 2013). As Porter et al. write, 'Sovereignty is not an aspiration but a starting point' (2020, p. 3), reflecting the fact that custodial authority and the legal orders and authority of Country itself have never been ceded (Wilson, 2019). Within this framework, more-than-human sovereignties are manifestations of pre-existing and ongoing relationships, agreements, and co-becomings with/as land, sea, and sky; as 'the polar opposite of *terra* [and *aer* and *mar*] *nullius*' (Nicoll, 2002, p. 17) and the deeply racist assumptions these entail. In this context, consent is both explicitly more-than-human and political. As Kwaymullina explains:

Acknowledging sovereignty changes the conversation from considering whether to engage respectfully with Indigenous peoples to a meaningful exploration of how, and more broadly, of the ways in which we all might live together so as to sustain the land upon which all depend for survival. (2016, p. 442)

The 'we' here is a more-than-human 'we' and, in this way, respectful relationships become underpinned with a recognition of diverse more-than-human sovereignties. In this discussion of sovereignty, process and negotiation are central; protocols are living protocols. All beings are included within relationships and negotiations, made up by them, even as sometimes beings' interests may be competing or in contradiction. Here, the underlying issue is balance and respect, accountability to the Law/Lore underpinned by an always emergent question: how do beings act accountably in and through relationship? These are multi-directional and multi-level accountabilities and relationships made and negotiated with individual plants and animals, with communities, with species (Barlo et al., 2021). This is complex, yes, and a process, and a reality of all our lives: our beings, our bodies made of bacteria and changing

flesh, of oxygen and chemical reactions, of digestive processes and electrical impulses, of families and communities, of water and air that we drink and breathe, of place and Country and relationships; ethics of our more-than-human selves. In our research together as Yandaarra we have represented these relationships in a collectively devised artwork painted by Aunty Shaa (see Figure 2).

Aunty Shaa speaks in terms of sovereignty and sovereign relationships with Country as coming about through relationships. This must be done starting with one's own place. As Aunty Shaa says:

Yes, I can only be me. Sovereignty is, I'm in tune with and in harmony with my surroundings. Sovereignty doesn't mean you're over the top of something or somebody, it means you're autonomous within a network; you're in connection with your surroundings with where you're living, how you're living.

Such beings are interconnected; these are sacred relationships of co-nourishment and co-becoming. In acknowledging sovereignty and following protocols, there is a deep freedom.

Aunty Shaa: There is a strong sense of freedom for me in that; like walking on a piece of land and in Western terms being able to say this is mine ... I'm the boss here? I'm ... not the boss. But whoever comes on the property, you have to consult with me, relate to me. I'm part of Country, you know. That's how I see it, that it's not just metaphorically speaking. People are stepping onto this piece of ground where protocols have to be respected; Gumbaynggirr Country protocols have to be respected when stepping onto this bit of land. And there's... [long pause]

Birds: [calling, speaking]

Lara: As you were saying that about freedom and sovereignty ... there were birds in the background being really, really loud!

Aunty Shaa: Laughing ... I feel like I'm searching for words, expression, about what it actually means. Our Country, it's our belonging, there is a two-way thing there, self and Country. Other perceptions, the ego, these are barriers that stop me being who I am, essentially, who I am. It's from that place that sovereignty comes; 'I am sovereign!'

So, sovereignty is about being related with/as Country and sovereignty brings an expansion, it nourishes through deep interconnections and multiple co-becomings. The agreements that we make on Earth, too, the times we nourish respectful relationships (and the times we do not), affect not just now but also the past, present, and future. They affect the living and the dead. These agreements, protocols, and relationships are sacred: they hold Earth and spirit realms together. That is why consent and agreements are so important and profound. It is literally shaking up life after death if you act against Country.

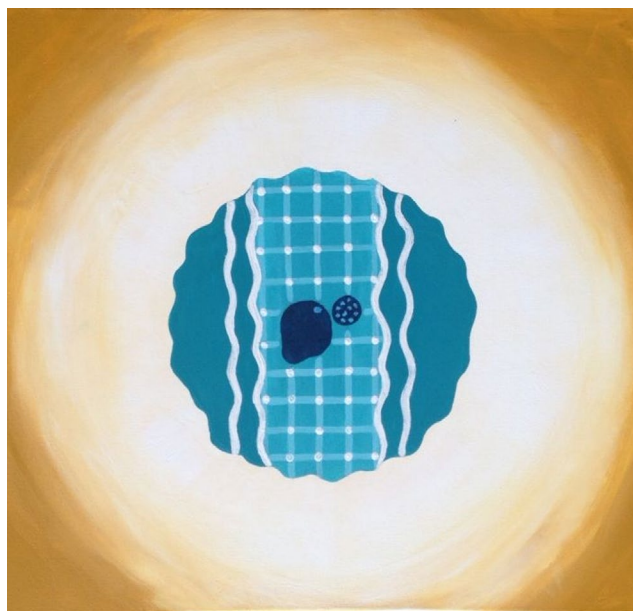


FIGURE 2 Yandaarra Artwork: The river running north to south, the rocks in the centre, the web of connections, the fluid circle, and outer glow acknowledge diverse more-than-human sovereignties in and as Yandaarra (Smith et al., 2020)

Sarah: It is a different way to approach the idea of limits on behaviour ... I was thinking in terms of a Whitefella way that there needs to be limits but the way you're talking about it, respecting protocols, is a freedom and an extension.

Aunty Shaa: Yeah, its ... [laughs], it is an expansion. There is a structure and there is a spiritual structure that's been put into place and there's a purpose for it. Our ancestors have lived by it and that has to be kept in place here on earth for them and for us. When you cross over, go back to spirit, that structure continues into spirit so what's been created on the earth has to be kept in place. There's not an emptiness there, there is something there to live by. It holds our consciousness in place. There is so much happening that we can't perceive, we don't know, from this limited perception that we're in. It's very limiting this Western perception.

As we write this piece, the depth of disrespect and the breaking of protocols continues in profound ways in Australia. In the days around our meetings, logging on Gumbaynggirr Country threatens sacred sites and some rare areas of forest unburnt in last season's intense bushfires (Gumbaynggirr Conservation Group, 2020; Koorimail, 2020). In Kurrama Country in Western Australia, the mining company Rio Tinto has blown up Juukan Gorge, a sacred site that showed 46,000 years of continual occupation and co-nourishment (Lawrence, 2020). Since the last ice age, Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura people, their ancestors and relations have lived and died, had ceremony, maintained relationships of sacred care. To bring destruction to such places is wanton, sacrilegious, and irredeemable. It is things out of balance, a disregard of the sacred, breaking of the Law/Lore. It is the horrendous power of 'I want' unchecked and out of control.

Uncle Bud points out how deep the hurt from exploitative relationships can go, particularly when sentient beings (which include minerals and water and things not generally understood as sentient in a Western frame) are used against their will. Here, he is talking about his involvement protecting Gumbaynggirr coastal Country from sand mining in the 1980s. He says:

The sand mining, I'd ask, what are they getting it out for? You know why, to mine for cannons and things for wars. I can see what it is doing to the world. Missiles and everything, it is coming out of the earth and the earth don't want that. They are just beings like us. That is how I grew up from the Earth.

Uncle Bud's knowledge of Country resonates with many Indigenous frameworks that insist that earth, water, and sand are not resources 'to be weaponized for the interests of capital' and the settler state (Yazzie & Baldy, 2018, p. 2), but kin 'with whom we engage in social (and political) relations premised on interdependency and respect' (2018, p. 3). To instrumentalise Country, even in less extreme ways, is to disrespect its sovereignties, agencies, and authority, to disrupt sacred and life-affirming relations.

5 | DOING DIFFERENTLY, LIVING PROTOCOLS

Seeking consent from Country, listening, learning, and heeding the Old Fellas and the more-than-human beings that make up land, sea, and sky has to be more than tokenistic. Intentions are important but, by themselves, 'good intentions' are not enough. We are talking about meaningful engagement and reciprocity, respecting and following more-than-human ethical protocols and agreements. This means listening to Country and, most importantly, responding, meeting, and honouring our responsibilities, responsibilities-as-Country (Bawaka Country et al., 2019a). For Bawaka Country et al., responsibility has two aspects, response *and* ability. Understood in this way, response-abilities require both an 'ability to pay close and careful attention, as part of more-than-human worlds; and, an imperative to *respond as*, rather than to be responsible to or responsible for, what is seen/learnt/understood/communicated in more-than-human, situated, ethical ways' (Bawaka country et al., 2019b, 2019a, p. 684).

In our work as Yandaarra, we have shifted our plans, stopped certain activities, and started others, in response to Country and more-than-human communications many times. On one research trip, we had wanted to fly a drone over an important story site. Our thought was to create a more-than-human multi-time mapping, one that would have multiple layers acknowledging Creation beings and Gumbaynggirr stories in the here and now, as part of the contemporary reality of living on/with/as Gumbaynggirr Country. At the site we greeted Country and proceeded to set up the drone to begin filming. Then the wind came in strong making it impossible for the drone to fly. We stayed on the headland a while, yarning, before moving down to a more sheltered spot on the river behind the beach. It was calmer and we started getting the drone ready to go again. This time, the wind came strong with heavy rain. We packed away the drone, it couldn't fly in that weather, and decided instead to follow the river in the boat. The clouds lifted and the sky turned blue. It was

about then that we finally realised we had come with our agenda and had neither properly introduced Alisa, who was to fly the drone, nor asked permission from Country to do the work. Once we had realised this, the day opened up. We yarned, Uncle Bud shared stories of his youth growing up with his uncles on Warrell Creek, pointing out old living sites and story places of Country. Alisa, though she had never fished before, was greeted with a fish; we swam in the crystal blue estuary. The day expanded. The idea for this paper was gifted to us. This learning and doing differently is linked to living protocols. And it needs to be a process of figuring things out and attending to Country as consenting kin, or as in our case, consent denied.

As a collective, we have a research agreement that we discussed in the early days of our collaboration (began in 2015). It explicitly acknowledges that ultimately 'we are accountable to the Old Fellas and Gumbaynggirr Country ... We acknowledge that the learning that comes from the Old Fellas and Country is associated with protocols about what can be shared, and how it should be shared. We will work to respect and honour these protocols and to let all co-researchers and participants know what these are.' Acknowledging protocols is one thing, though following them, adjusting to/with and as Country, is another. Agreements need to be lived, continually reflected upon, and sometimes attuned in our practice (Lloyd et al., 2012; Suchet-Pearson et al., 2013a). We still get things wrong; our agreement is not the final word. This is despite the fact that agreements are sometimes viewed as the ultimate green light in research work, as if doing the consultation and making one agreement is enough (for a discussion, see Ermine et al., 2005; Wilson, 2008). It is not enough. These are living protocols, protocols underpinned by eternal Law/Lore that emerges always and lives today. This is our evolving re-creation story.

As we create and follow more-than-human connections, continue a process of learning how to practise more-than-human ethics, it becomes clear that the limits are not Country, they come from, and exist in, our colonised selves. As we yarn together:

Aunty Shaa: It's our own mind that stops us from doing learning to come into that place of oneness, our tiny little brains ... but it is so doable. And we're in their world, the world of plants and beings and Country. We are in their space! They're the teachers! They hold the knowledge they hold the Law/Lore.

Zeek (Neeyan's one-year old son): [Speaks enthusiastically]

Aunty Shaa, during the first period of COVID isolation, was able to spend significant time alone with plants and Country in ways that helped shed some of these limiting Western perceptions. She reflects on the process of being open, approaching from a place of oneness, and following her emotions as a point of engagement and learning. She highlights that Country, and the beings of Country, have their own consciousness:

I was asking them [the plants] for what I needed ... And then standing next to the one plant and feeling the emotion ... (and thinking) you might have something for me? ... Emotions and guidance, they help me learn. In a certain way, the communication is not separate from the plant. And then asking them if I can have some of the leaves ... it's the acknowledgement of them as beings; I seek their wisdom, their intelligence in their place and in their world. That is part of the agreement and relationship building. The intentions for me were there and the feeling of gratitude; that plant was acknowledging me too; they were acknowledging me.

The beauty of the agreements and protocols is that there are so many beings, so many potential relationships and learnings, that it is infinitely expansive, always multiple. We are speaking of openness to relationships with plants, soil, wind, ants, all the beings and becomings of Country. As our yarn continued, Neeyan elaborated:

It opens up what is real. There is an alchemy that happens; something you need to do. You can become part of a different structure, something much bigger, more sacred; this Western structure is artificial and it's not sustainable.

But how do we learn to listen, to become more of a part of the different structure that Neeyan talks about? How do we deepen our ability to attend to Country's messages? Certainly, there is no clear and easy way, no definitive endpoint. Rather, Aunty Shaa, Neeyan, and Uncle Bud see it as a process of continual unfolding. Even for senior custodians like Uncle Bud and Aunty Shaa, and for young Gumbaynggirr people like one-year-old Zeek whose connection to the sacred is still fresh and strong, these are not straightforward processes and the learning-to-listen continues. For guests on Country, especially non-Indigenous people who come with a very different relationship to unceded Gumbaynggirr land and Law/Lore, the

relationships begin and emerge differently and the walls of closure, denial, entitlement, greed, and colonisation can be thick and robust.

Reflecting on the process of learning, Aunty Shaa and Zeek share:

Aunty Shaa: Yeah, [laughs with Zeek] ... oh Zeek ... yeah Sarah ... it's like a light coming on, this thing about learning how to communicate because it's like, I'm still learning about it. I don't think Country really uses words ... it's coming more from a oneness place where senses, feelings and thoughts are shared.

Zeek: [Communication, laughter]

Aunty Shaa: Zeeky, I can't explain it ... I just want to say there was an opening that happened where I didn't have to feel conscious of talking to the tree but a realisation that I was communicating with *beings* with an intelligence of their own and a medicine of their own. And I felt able to be with them, being very respectful and being with them ... It's just such a sacred act. Because there is like a pure communication happening.

This is a sacred oneness; a not-knowing, an emergent-knowing that comes through different senses and different ways of communicating. In a Western, dominant framework, we are often encouraged to be in control, to take steps to make things happen, to plan, be pro-active. Yet learning to listen is about being more modest. When we open ourselves up to certain things, we open ourselves to invitations in multiple forms. An invitation might come in the form of a personal connection, a request to go somewhere, an invitation to support an Indigenous-led rally, a weathery message, or a bird that calls you to Country. There are so many invitations taking place around us, all the time, and they are offered to us differently in relation to who we are and how we came to be(ing) here (Kimmerer, 2013; Snelgrove et al., 2014). What is needed is to be open to them, continue to educate ourselves so we can recognise Country's multiple communications. It's often subtle and comes in many ways beyond words. Aunty Shaa and Neeyan share:

Aunty Shaa: How do I feel them? I don't know, there is something that comes over me.

Neeyan: I feel something from my feet. My feet acknowledge it before anything else. I'll see something, a quick flicker and I won't know what it is until half an hour later.

Aunty Shaa: I feel it in my gut. It's knowing that you have to allow the subtle in ... to be open It's learning to sit back and watch.

Neeyan: Let's unlearn what we know. Let's be open, un-learning. We are babies of Country. We are learning how to be in Country.

Paul: That is so far from categorisation, accumulation of knowledge. It is like the opposite.

So, knowing and coming into knowing is not about getting knowledge. It is about coming into a place to harmonise to be with Country, to be the oneness. And, underpinning this is a need to move away from 'I want', from acquisitive and consumerist approaches to knowledge. Instead, there is oneness and sacred connection. The ancestors play a very important role in providing guidance:

Aunty Shaa: For me it's been communicating with my ancestors and opening my mind up to dimensions where we meet and communicate, that ground, learning about what the protocols are for that ... and it's all done by intuition and sensing; being tuned in to vibration and frequency; and then its understanding that the structure in that place cannot be destroyed. ... it's something that continues on there.

Neeyan: People are forgetting to learn about themselves, about yourselves ... It's about believing our ancestors are still with us. They're not gone; that feeling of them being here becomes real too and that relationship becomes stronger.

Aunty Shaa: The more time I spend with my ancestors, the more in-tune I've become and they just help so much. It was my father who helped with the learning around the plants; so you're walking with them.

Lara: It sounds like, healing with the plants, that ancestral relationships are an important part of consent?

Aunty Shaa: It has to be. I'm trying to find the words why it has to be ... our ancestors are like working their butts off to create this consciousness around oneness and relationships.

Zeek: [Speaks]

Birds: [Speak]

Aunty Shaa: Our Ancestors are setting things right so that the structure that's been put in place is recognised and acknowledged and lived by.

That continuing structure, the more-than-human protocols supported by Country and the Old Fellas (Ancestors) comes back to connection, the oneness, the respect, and more-than-human sovereignties. In our discussions as Yandaarra it emerges for us that coming into relationship with Country, researching on, with, and as Country involves knowing ourselves, and the ancestors who accompany each of us. Who we are can help guide us in how we approach people and Country, how we seek consent for our presence and activities. From our different places and positions on stolen land, we can learn to better announce ourselves and our intentions and take heed of Country's response.

6 | THINKING IT THROUGH, LEARNING TO LEARN, SOME GUIDANCE FOR ALL OF US?

In thinking this through and learning to learn, what might all this mean for more-than-human ethics and consent in research? Ultimately, we argue that there is a need to consider and practice ethical relations with and as Country, with and as place and land and territory, and with and as more-than-human beings in our work and research (Barker & Pickerill, 2020; Donald, 2012; Graham, 2009; Johnson & Larsen, 2017; Lewis, 2012; Fortier, 2017). While we can only ever speak from our place(s), we would like to suggest that some central dilemmas and processes are relevant to all of us as researchers (and as more than researchers): What might/do respectful and mutual more-than-human protocols look like in and from your place? How might they emerge, be negotiated in ongoing ways, and/or be recognised, in different places, at different levels, for different people as and with more-than-human beings? As Yandaarra, we feel an important first step is thinking about responsibility and connection from our own positionality; everyone has a story, has relationships and connections with how they came to be here, although these always look different for each of us (see also Snelgrove et al., 2014). For Yandaarra, on unceded Gumbaynggirr land, the role of Custodians and Gumbaynggirr Law/Lore is central. Aunty Shaa says:

The relationship with original custodians is vital. We're the key to people making that shift in their brains in their consciousness; because we're like the bridge to Country; we're the key or something, yeah ... I think that's vital.

The Indigenous and more-than-human peoples and protocols of where you are, the multiple sovereignties and legal orders, may provide guidance. But neither people, nor protocols, nor land should be approached in an entitled way, or with preconceived ideas, pre-formed agendas, or any assumption of agreement, even engagement. Invitations are there, if we are open, invitations to come into Lawful/Loreful relationships. There is also the opportunity to learn and nourish our own relationships with place, our own relationships with our Ancestors, always acknowledging the different paths that we have taken to get wherever we are.

In this paper, we have spoken much about our place(s), the specifics of our situation, our collaboration, Gumbaynggirr Country and Yandaarra. We have done this because there can be no separating out the ethics of research from the realities of the relationships we have with each other and with Country. No one person can research or be ethical as a lone, isolated subject. This is the conceptual, the philosophical, the theoretical, methodological, the ethical, the political *and* the place-based, the specific, the always-emergent reality of research, knowledge, and ethics.

Aunty Shaa and Uncle Bud emphasise that we are all in it together now, even as we meet through different histories deeply imbued with pain, violence, and intergenerational trauma (Atkinson, 2002). There is pain in the reckoning and there are healing pathways that emerge in the coming together. As Aunty Shaa says:

We each hold a piece of the puzzle of the trauma of this continent and where is that intersection? Where do we intersect? It isn't a story of polarity, it is asking, where do we intersect? And that is the meeting place. That is where, somehow, a relationship and the making of the Law/Lore has to come in.

The guidance on how to engage respectfully on stolen land will ultimately come from nurturing relationships with Country, listening to its communications, and heeding its Law/Lore. It's the relationships that hold us and make our living protocols true and real. It is the relationships that take away from the 'I want', from the colonising place. These need to be honoured.

Caring for Country is researching well; researching well is caring for Country, and respecting the knowledges and sovereignties of all who co-become there. This, for Aunty Shaa, Uncle Bud, and Neeyan, comes from a place of sacred oneness. In order to honour these sacred relationships, these obligations, there is a need to respond to and respect the same ethical questions for more-than-humans as we should do for humans. Country and its beings do not *have* to be part of a research project, they should not be coerced; Country and its beings can withdraw consent at any time as we found at Warrell Creek; Country and its beings should not be extracted from, imposed upon, taken for granted. Country should be given a chance to input into what we do, to have a say on what is wanted/needed through a collaborative process of research design. We should be reflexive of our positionalities, histories, and relationships to and with the lands upon which we research.

Respecting Country and its protocols, respecting the rights of more-than-humans and their diverse sovereignties, is an integral part of research ethics. We all work in, with, and as place. We all work as and with more-than-humans, even if we are taught not to acknowledge or even see it, even in a laboratory or the classroom. For Yandaarra on/with/as Gumbaynggirr Country, the sovereignties of Country are part of Gumbaynggirr Law/Lore. As Aunty Shaa powerfully says, 'We have learnt that Aboriginal people don't have any rights in terms of caring for their Country. That is where our Law/Lore has to come into play. We have to care for our Country.'

As Yandaarra, we have included Country as a chief investigator in our university ethics protocols (following the work of Bawaka Country et al., 2019b). This we have done as a step towards honouring Laws/Lores of mainstream ethics process in ways that support and respect Gumbaynggirr Law/Lore. These are two pieces of the puzzle of colonisation coming together, a way of meeting and moving forward together through these times of destruction and creation (Smith et al., 2021). Emerging from deepening relationships on/with/as Gumbaynggirr Country, we have recently initiated a process of Juungambala (setting thing right), with natural resource organisations and landholders working and living in Gumbaynggirr Country; we are trying to get land back, though it should never have been stolen in the first place. There is so much more, and the protocols and processes will be different in different Country.

The story, as Uncle Bud shares, is about protecting and nurturing ourselves and our relations, going beyond the limits of a Western understanding. As he comes back to his story of his Grandfather, he points out that he, like all of us, overdoes it sometimes. Now is the time to begin to listen:

That's the strength in me, coming from Grandfather because he got me out of a lot of places where I shouldn't have been. The story with him is about protecting other things. Not only myself but also other things. There are places I went where I shouldn't have been ... I overdone it sometimes. Like catching fish. I caught about nine bream that day when I should have got about five for my family. Through my grandfather, it is like a spiritual thing; through my grandfather telling me that I was overdoing it. When I was young I didn't realise that. It comes to me in a way to stop me doing things like that. It is like a spiritual thing, very strong.

That is nature, hey, and the cultural way, how I have been brought up. I don't want to lose that. It is so strong to me. I haven't been put through the rules or anything like that but I learnt. I know where not to go to, I have a strong guardian – that is my grandfather and my grandmother. But as old as I am, I am still stubborn.

Stubborn; we are happy, and lucky, that he is.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ We use Law/Lore here to underscore the non-dualistic nature of Gumbaynggirr Aboriginal Law/Lore that holds rules and regulations for conduct (all that might be called 'law' in a Western sense), relationships to/as place, more-than-human kinship, ceremonial obligation, and more, in stories, song, and culture ('lore'). This formulation has been specifically offered by Auntie Shaa as senior knowledge holder.
- ² Gumbaynggirr Country, like all Country in Australia, is also a site of ongoing struggles for land justice. In Australia, Native Title is the legal recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights and interests over land and waters, following traditional laws and customs. These rights are typically non-exclusive rights to occupy, hunt, fish, gather, conduct ceremony, and practice law on Country and do not include ownership rights (Australian Government Attorney-General's Department, n.d.; National Native Title Tribunal, n.d.). Native title is recognised by a legal determination under the Native Title Act (1993) and those seeking Native Title must prove continued connection to the area for which Native Title is sought. Native Title has been consistently critiqued for its limitations by Aboriginal scholars (see Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Watson, 2009).
- ³ No treaty has ever been made between any grouping of Aboriginal people and the Crown or Australian government. For this reason, it stands that Aboriginal sovereignty was never ceded and that Aboriginal people remain the rightful custodians of Country.

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