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'Why can't we speak up for ourselves…?' Water Futures and Ethnographic Provocations

Anne (Wagaba) Poelina
Nulungu Research Institute, University of Notre Dame Australia

Sandy Toussaint
The University of Western Australia, and Nulungu Research Institute, University of Notre Dame Australia

Stephen Muecke
Nulungu Research Institute, University of Notre Dame Australia, and University of New South Wales

ABSTRACT

Via *a three-person dialogue, we engage with an inquiry posed for this special issue: 'What questions are ethnographers asking about water in Australia?' Canvassing such an inquiry led us to being both provoked and provocateurs, in part by following Luci Pangrazio's (2016) discussion about the value of provocation in the social sciences. Turning from provocation as heuristic tool, we then focus on the iconic* Mardoowarra*, Fitzroy River in Western Australia's northern Kimberley, and Aboriginal people's deep and enduring cultural, environmental and emotional interconnections and responsibilities with such a major water source. Contemplated also is the contemporary importance of inquiring into water-based questions relating to Australian Indigenous people that might be reconceptualized to become questions about ethnographers and ethnography in the 21st century.*

Keywords: Australian First Nations, ethnography, provocation, water futures.

EXPERIENTIAL SHARING AND EXPERIMENTAL WRITING: AN INTRODUCTION

Our contribution to this special issue of *Oceania* is in experimental response to one of the key questions posed by the editorial team: 'What questions are ethnographers asking about water in Australia?' We are also responding to the call to raise provocative issues, a call we respond to, in this instance, as provocateurs. We are encouraged by Luci Pangrazio's (2016) emphasis regarding the value of conceptualizing and heuristically applying the medium of provocation in the social sciences to reach more critically engaged analyses, especially in relation to showing a light on matters sometimes overlooked. In keeping with this special issue thematic, we explore an iconic river in Australia's north-west Kimberley known as the Fitzroy River – locally as the *Mardoowarra* or *Martuwarra* – to support our emphases.[1]

When considering how to approach a co-authored essay, with one of us (Poelina) a Nyikina woman with long-term cultural affiliations to Kimberley lands and waters, and two of us (Toussaint and Muecke) from European backgrounds but with long Kimberley research histories, we were aware we had a complex of both unique and shared experiences and knowledges. With these qualities in mind, we talked, wrote, emailed, phoned and/or

texted, and agreed on the process we could follow. We were living across three Australian jurisdictions at the time, and had three months to draft, revise and submit a co-authored essay, alongside (not unusually) having other demands on our time, a point that will resonate with many.[2]

Foremost in all our discussions was the *Mardoowarra*, Indigenous relationships to the *Mardoowarra*, and contemporaneous questions about ethnographers and ethnography. Foremost too, was that while anthropologists and ethnographic research have long been part of Indigenous people's lives in Australia and other colonized nations, especially in recognition of lands, sea, and freshwater claims in native title, our focus was the potential and the limitations of ethnographic work, as distinct from anthropology in and of itself.

WHAT IS A PROVOCATION?

What constitutes a provocation is not easily defined, especially when broadly conceptualized and applied across cultures, disciplines, places and times. In legal settings, the complexity of what constitutes a provocation can be used as a mitigating factor, including in murder and assault cases when the accused can argue he or she was provoked into committing an illegal act. Luci Pangrazio (2016), by contrast, urges methodological and ethical approaches to analyses of provocation in the social sciences as these have the potential to critically reflect on and engage with important topics that may otherwise be obscured or marginalized.

Similarly to Pangrazio, our intention is not to irritate, generate anger or seek mitigation but to respond to this special issue's emphases. In particular to consider whether ethnographic study is likely to produce research of descriptive and practical benefit to water futures in an increasingly endangered environment.

In 21st century Australia, we also query the role of an interlocutor conducting ethnographic research in water planning and decision-making, by inquiring whether 'stories about water' when put directly by Indigenous people themselves to state and federal planning and infrastructure authorities, might now be more advantageously meaningful to future outcomes.

STORIES ABOUT WATER

Our dialogue concentrates on Western Australia's Kimberley, especially with respect to Indigenous groups and the intrinsic value of the *Mardoowarra*, also known as the Fitzroy River Catchment which traverses the traditional lands of the *Nyikina*, *Ngarrinyin*, *Warrwa*, *Mangala*, *Karrajarri*, *Bunuba*, *Gooniyandi*, and *Walmajarri*. Our discussion, clothed as both discursive and dialogic, commences with Aboriginal leader and Traditional Kimberley *Nyikina Warrwa* guardian and *Mardoowarra* custodian Anne (*Wagaba*) Poelina.

Anne (*Wagaba*) Poelina

Ngajanoo nilawal Wagaba, *ngayoo yimardoowarra marnin*. My traditional name is *Wagaba*, I am an Aboriginal woman who belongs to the *Mardoowarra*, sometimes written *Martuwarra*, the Fitzroy River in Western Australia's Kimberley. *Bookarrarra*, the Dreaming, intrinsically brings together past, present, and future life, including *via* stories about the river and all water sources. In belonging to *Mardoowarra* I am bound by a law of obligation to protect our ancestor serpent being's right to life and to maintain its flow. As a *Yimardoowarra Marnin* [woman from the *Mardoowarra*] I am a descendant from ancestors who have managed one of the oldest water industries of *Mardoowarra* from the beginning of deep time and for all time (Poelina et al. 2021, 2023; RiverOfLife et al. 2021).

'Ethnographies are all right, but… we can tell our own stories'

Ethnographies are alright but we don't need them to tell us about the *Mardoowarra* and we can tell our own stories. We know those stories and what they mean for the future. What we need now is for people to hear us, to listen to and to learn from Aboriginal people. Maybe that is Water Futures for us. As Australian Aboriginal people we are born into a world with a totem, a *jadiny* or *jarriny*, a creature we are bonded to for life. We learn as much as we can about our *jadiny*, and we learn how our *jadiny* can teach us how to be a human being.

Yoongoorrookoo is the most sacred serpent being and the serpent became two, emerging from my grandmother's country, *Mijirrikan*, near the *Yungngora* Community at *Noonkanbah*. Our ancestor *Woonyoomboo* dived down into the *Mardoowarra* to spear the two large barramundis guarding the opening to the underground cave. Spearing and throwing the two barramundis on to the surface, where they were transformed into stones, releasing the second serpent. Swimming to the surface and straddling the two-giant serpents *Woonyoomboo* continued the formation of the mighty valley tracts of *Martuwarra*, changing the spelling as everything is place-based. Rosie Mulligan puts it this way: 'We were calling out, where you, where you, old man… but nothing, you couldn't catch up to him, he was gone' (Milgin et al. 2020a, 2020b; Madjulla & Griffith University 2019).

Stephen knows that story, too, here he continues to dialogue in talking, hearing, writing to, responding and sharing with Sandy and I.

Stephen Muecke

Yoongoorrookoo, or *Yungurugu* as I transcribed Paddy Roe's stories in *Reading the Country*, appears when the old man goes back to the springs on Roebuck Plains, where he was born.

'… these springs, permanent springs, you know from *bugarrigarra*… he bin like that water snakes never go 'way from this part of the country' (Benterrak et al. 1984:51). Roe is telling stories at *Garrigarrigabu*, *Djarrmanggunan*, *Mimiyagaman*, springs along the edge of the plains where the old *Nyikina* people used to camp when Paddy was a boy. He told how the snake's watery realm extended to rivers, clouds, and cyclones. It had the power to punish people if disturbed.

Ethnography is most valuable, I think, when it makes no judgements. When it listens carefully it hears: '*Yoongoorrookoo* has special powers to do with water.' It does not convert that to 'Aboriginal people *believe* that *Yoongoorrookoo* has special powers…'. Good ethnographies, and I use that term advisedly because we are raising issues around what that means in practice, avoid the *they believe/we know* trick, which in the name of rationality sucks out *Yoongoorrookoo*'s power and makes it ordinary. Let it stand, that power. It makes you think, or at least, pay attention to country, as you know so well as a *Nyikina* woman, Anne, and Sandy and I have learned during the last forty years.

Anne (*Wagaba*) Poelina

I started my e-dialogue with my identity and acknowledgement of my *Mardoowarra* Country. I frame my world not from ethnography or any other western frame. I know what I know, and I am in dialogue with two people I respect and have a reciprocal relationship with, who know and have practiced ethnography. I trust our dialogue will be interactive and powerful, even though we are thousands of kilometres from each other. I will leave the ethnographic frame for my two learned colleagues and friends. Instead, I write from what the old people have taught me to write and talk about the meaning of a story.

Sandy Toussaint

I understand, as well as value 'the meaning of story' and of reciprocity, *Wagaba*, and how knowledges and practices handed to you from predecessors such as your late and much-loved sister and *Nyikina* Elder, Lucy *Ngarbal* Marshall, are consistently precious. I have also been privileged to learn about the depth and breadth of cultural issues from so many Aboriginal women and men, especially from *Walmajarri*, *Gooniyandi*, and *Wangkajungka* people, as well as *Nyikina*, *Gija*, and *Kukuja*, in the Kimberley since the early 1980s. Many years ago, I was accorded the bush name *Gijela*, and allocated the skin or kinship subsection *Nangala*, a cultural etiquette that continues to be interactively meaningful. Meaningful too, in my experience since the 1980s, is that I've not only studied and worked as an academic; I've also undertaken long-term research with major commissions and inquiries, such as the 1989/1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the WA Aboriginal Land Inquiry, Aboriginal Education, Kimberley Language Resource Centre, Mangkaja Arts, the Aboriginal Legal Service, and the *Marra Worra Worra* Corporation. These were not consultancies, nor would I describe them as coming within the sole frame of applied anthropology, but simply as a 'working anthropologist'. This work drew on a combination of practice, description, integrated theory, critique, and analysis as covered in the volume *Anthropology Put to Work* (Field and Fox 2007; see also Toussaint 2007).

You, Stephen, and I have written, spoken and published extensively about the Kimberley, and now you have both raised the matter of writing, and its relationship to cultural knowledge and ethnographic research. Interpretive anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1990) also drew attention to the centrality of writing in anthropology long ago, in particular, regarding the privilege of writing about other people's lives. Writing has been valuable to me not only in anthropology but in the arts world to which I also belong. Pondering our current dialogue and exchange of ideas may lead us to considering whether it's time to think more about writing, what it can scope out, describe, and lay claim to. Stephen's point is prudent when he states that ethnography can be at its best when it makes no judgement which, in a way, returns us to various generalizations about how ethnography can be defined. Should similar questions be asked about the writing of ethnography, especially about the conceptualisation, methods and use of the word 'ethnography'? An 'ethnography' tends to retain a singular meaning reliant on an interlocutor, a method originally created and influenced by American and European thought in the 19th century. In a way, many people, especially interpretive anthropologists and critical thinkers, have become more aware of the complexities of a cross-cultural life, cross-disciplinary expertise, and the value of increasing epistemological analysis around an ethnographic critique (Marcus 2007; Taussig 2010).[3]

Of cautionary interest, too, is that while implementation of the National Native Title Act in 1993/94 followed the significant 1992 High Court Mabo Decision which resulted in a native title application process for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, that process has tended to become reliant on the production of detailed ethnographic, historical, and legal work for lawyers, historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists, alongside Aboriginal testimony. Recognizing that some Aboriginal women and men have gained university degrees in arts, social sciences, environmental studies, and law, perhaps this moment in time could and should allow for a different process to be initiated, ethically and creatively expanded, and legally ratified. In this way, as *Wagaba*, describes it Aboriginal people who have managed the oldest water industry in the world could have the opportunity to share their water-knowledge-authority with non-Aboriginal people now working in the same industry about and for future water source management. What possible danger might there be for Aboriginal Australians with cultural authority and generations of lived experience to interact with, speak and write directly to water planners, government and industry? And, again, what possible danger could there be in the wealth of data Aboriginal custodians could

bring to the table to be taken seriously? As Anne wrote to Stephen and I, and as an echo from above, 'we can tell our own stories'.

A further reflection has been inspired by one of the current research projects with which I am engaged – 'Remembering the 1983-1984 WA Aboriginal Land Inquiry 40 Years On'. Briefly put, and based on being the ALI Research Officer for two years, the current reflective process involves reviewing, classifying and giving further life to 1980s material (written submissions, oral testimony, meetings, reports, fieldnotes, photos, correspondence) gathered from Aboriginal women and men throughout Western Australia as part of a major government campaign. Hundreds of people in remote, rural and urban locations throughout the state explicated their claims to, and interests in land and water. People's evidence showed clearly the long-term value of homelands, cultural connections overtime, and presented substantive ideas and models for future land rights legislation reported by ALI's Justice Paul Seaman QC, in a discussion paper (Seaman 1984a) and final report (Seaman 1984b; State Records Office of Western Australia 2022; Toussaint 2023).

While neither the WA nor Federal governments took up the recommendations, and a controversial watered down 'Land Rights (Western Australia) Bill' did not pass muster in 1985, the data collected provided substantial material that fully embraced Aboriginal land and water entitlements and aspirations ten years before recognition and implementation of native title at a federal level. Non-Indigenous people as individuals and from industry, government, church groups, pastoralists, and social scientists also contributed to the ALI. A reliance on ethnographies was, however, minimal. In the ALI case, it is clear that Aboriginal people contributed directly and positively to the process, but their strong evidence was not heard or acted on (Toussaint 2023; Toussaint et al. 2001). A huge opportunity lost. Anthropologists, as 'working anthropologists', were involved in a great deal of documenting, clarifying and translating material, but it is an open question as to whether that research could be called ethnography.

Of notable interest here, too, is that the ALI recommendations included a Tribunal to hear claims directly from Aboriginal people themselves, rather than through intermediaries, and that land reserves originally listed as being for 'the use and benefit of Aboriginal people' would be returned to Indigenous groups, neither of which progressed.

As a cultural theorist who has produced descriptive work, what are your thoughts, Stephen? I remember we once had a vigorous written exchange that, in a sense, challenged the why, what, when and by whom of cultural description. Perhaps this was one of many previous provocations? It certainly made a number of people think further about the then relationship between anthropology and Cultural Studies.

Stephen Muecke

Yes, I remember something of that exchange. If I recall, I was into discourse theory, worrying about what kinds of languages were representing the real, and thereby creating it. Constructivism, in other words. The provocation at that time was the reduction to 'everything' being socially constructed. Which if it is the case, there was nowhere else to go with that kind of all-powerful critique.

Today, I think it is more helpful to say, with Bruno Latour, that things are not *merely* constructed, but have to be *well*-constructed. Our knowledge about waterways, for example. Our descriptions should be really good ones. Describe before theorizing, is a slogan I like to use (Muecke et al. 2023). Because if you just go with a cursory description of a problem, which can sometimes occur in an ethnography, leading then to a generalization in anthropology, the solutions will tend to be those of the status quo. But the more detailed it gets, the more likely the description is to call out for the right kinds of expertise. These descriptions

are constantly open to revision, through dialogue. Rivers used to be described in such a way that a modern dam would have to be built. Later, accounts were given about fish not being able to migrate upstream. These fish were starting to have a say, even if their agency was expressed through the detailed descriptions tabled by specialized scientists. Now, it seems, there is a compelling 'logic' to the way in which sawfish at home in the *Mardoowarra* 'think' about the river's flow.

Anne (*Wagaba*) Poelina

The provocation comes, with defining what is 'truth', and who and how we hold it. Importantly, for me it begins with the stories of *Yoongoorrookoo* firstly, as the creator of the Law. My understanding of First Law is how it teaches us as First Peoples, and through our relationships with animals, birds, serpent beings, right from wrong. Values, ethics, codes of conduct for how we negotiate and self-regulate our behaviour for the greater good of all, especially our non-human family, our kin. These First Law stories use animals to create a distance, a lens through which we find the meaning of relationships, respect, trust, honesty and integrity. We learn about leadership, governance, diplomacy, balance, peace and harmony. We incorporated justice through dialogue, and if agreed, punishment, sometimes sending the perpetrator, who broke the 'law', out for periods of time, but always bringing the person back once they had been shamed and ostracized. In a severe case, death was a punishment for the greater good of stabilizing harmony and peace. Can ethnographic work embrace all these continuing cultural qualities, nuances, stories, especially when we're all concerned about water futures for future generations?

'Why can't we speak up for ourselves?'

We sometimes hear, read, write about and exchange cultural stories such as one we know as *Mubura*, the water serpent and rain-god who rules the land from his watering hole at a place we call *Nargandja* as a provocation because the meanings embedded in the story can be re-interpreted by different people and groups through deep time and in the now. How might such interpretations be understood in an ethnography that holds more weight than the story-telling of our ancestors and present-day Traditional Owners, especially when we are trying to deal with issues such as fracking, gas projects, and developments imposed by industry (Poelina et al. 2021)? Can ethnographies help us when we are left with the questions around water security, water, procedural and distributive justice for our rivers and living water systems? Why can't we speak up for ourselves, why must our stories be explained through ethnography? We are in a moment in time where we need a way to tell the stories creatively and emotionally to bring the people with us, to as the Elders teach us to 'wake up the snake'. To wake the consciousness of the people to touch the human spirit to bring the people with us to transform their own situations. To send the dream out and walk in it with people who believe we need a reset of our values, our ethics, and our domination of 'land and living waters'. *Nyikina* people have been 'speaking back' to these injustices for over four decades using film as a powerful way to take the story beyond the immediate place of contention and in some cases, celebrations. The *Noonkanbah* dispute is a powerful example of our struggle and our resilience (Hawke and Gallagher 1989). We each remember what happened at *Noonkanbah*: Aboriginal people were just trying to speak up for themselves. I know that Sandy and Stephen agree; they know that story too.

Stephen Muecke

I totally agree, no mansplaining, please! But, somehow, we have to be persuasive. And amplifying your voices through documentary film, as you do Anne, is excellent. Similarly, ethnographic films can have an important impact.

I think there are good provocative ideas in the background waiting to pounce. I also think they are becoming more foregrounded with the upheavals of climate and other environmental crises. One such provocation might be: 'Are you sure you are human?' Sounds silly unless you get a bit philosophical. Remember Deborah Bird Rose (1992) writing *Dingo Makes Us Human* back in 1992? We can't be human without all the other forms of life that sustain us, that are part of us. Bruno Latour (1998:230) is saying the same thing: '…what would a human be without elephants, plants, lions, cereals, oceans, ozone or plankton? … more alone even than Robinson Crusoe on his island. Less than a human. Certainly not a human…' This 'construct', that of the lone individual human, is something Western humanist philosophy has worked hard to establish, with the help of Daniel Defoe. But it no longer makes any sense in the context of recent ecological thought.

Sandy Toussaint

Yes, I remember *Noonkanbah*. More than forty years on I think the cultural and more public evidence 'written in plain sight' in art, film, dance, literature, performance, song, music and sport has really evolved, especially in story-telling (Lawford and Ma 2015; Madjulla Inc and Griffith University 2019). Might these be regarded as ethnographic insights or vignettes, not really, but they are culturally revealing about what matters most in daily life, relationships to lands, waters, history and each other, and associated socialities and economics. However vital an interlocutor may have been in the past, thirty years after the Mabo Decision, and increasingly toward acceptance of the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017), embodying Aboriginal Voices, a reconciled Country, healing, and truth-telling, it appears to be time for anthropologists to reflect on ethnographic modes from the past that continue to hold unnecessary weight in the 21st century.

Consideration might be given, for example, to re-defining methods, asking hard questions about cultural ethics and re-conceptualizing the extent to which ethnographic research is often (not always) central to contemporary anthropological description and analysis. Could it be that provoking the need to realign anthropology's strengths away from a seeming reliance on ethnographic production could better inform water-planning authorities and governments, as well as structurally, equitably and legally shift to working professionally and directly collaboratively together with Aboriginal people? Of course, some will argue that this process is what has occurred in the past and continues in the present, and that Aboriginal people as current and future anthropologists will be faced with the same issues. But will they, or does a distinction need to be made between how ethnographies are characterized, by whom, when, where and why? Furthermore, what do Aboriginal people themselves think of ethnography's past, keeping in mind that it is ethnographic production that is the issue here, not anthropological research and thought and its future. We are each, I think, reaching similar conclusions relating to the guiding inquiry of our article, which is that, firstly, we are unsure in 2023 what ethnographers can contribute to water issues in Australia and, secondly, we are sure that ample room must be made for Aboriginal people to 'speak up for themselves' on all water matters that directly impact their own and other people's lives.

A further issue, relevant to the above, takes us to cross-disciplinary research in water use which has been shown to be highly productive, for example, anthropology working collaboratively with human geography, ecology, environmental studies, and hydrology

(Jackson and Head 2022; Laborde et al. 2012). Cross-disciplinary research presents no reason why or obstruction to Australian Aboriginal people communicating directly with government authorities, physical scientists, and bureaucratic planners about water futures, especially in the 21st century.

Noting a sometimes partiality, I have argued elsewhere about the past and potential value of ethnographies about water (Toussaint 2021), and Stephen has observed the contribution of ethnographic film. In the future and as ecological damage becomes more obvious, the high value of Aboriginal voices, in Australia and elsewhere, is not an opposing view. Disciplines have begun to reconsider past approaches to and emphases in working with Indigenous peoples, and water planners are required to work closely and consistently with Cultural Custodians.

Perhaps what's happening now presents an opportunity for change, or do we sit back and find that one day the sometimes lengthy and often cumbersome processes, procedures and outcomes of existing native title requirements are reproduced in planning and decision making about water futures? Acknowledging that some (not all) anthropologists argue against an anthropological critique of its own practices and analyses, claiming that the implications of post-colonial literature has led to 'Indigenization', there is so much epistemological and ethical room to avoid the reproduction of past methods, practices and processes, especially as a new Federal Government (elected in 2022) emphasizes substantive support for First Nations Australians.

The late and great Noongar leader Rob Riley cautioned in 1992 that Aboriginal people may not directly benefit from the Mabo Decision and native title, unless Indigenous groups themselves were given cultural and political involvement and authority (Toussaint 1992). Similar questions arise when topics such as what to do about Water Futures are considered. You've also been around for a long time, Stephen, what are your thoughts?

Stephen Muecke

Yes, well. Certainly, change is happening in terms of the recognition of Cultural Custodians' expertise, and how it is delivered, including in the native title arena. That might involve some reform of structures of knowledge in institutions. I am thinking of the imperative to 'put it in writing'; the tabling of reports, policies, that may not even be read. How different is an ethnographic report, in the end? In relation to storytelling, I think that the most important values are still conveyed by word of mouth, *via* the intimacy of kith and kin. For water studies, the hydrological sciences are no doubt doing a great job, in the field as well as on the page, and some researchers include the names of custodians as co-authors. I think this is very important in a practical way, because it recognizes expertise in Indigenous institutions, and these peoples' professional reputations can thus be built up.

There is also the recognition of different forms of reliable knowledge. Isn't that what science is, reliable knowledge that can be used again? But it doesn't have to be reliable solely in an engineering numbers-based way, as if abstract forms can be imposed from one place to another. As if forests are just wood, or waterways are just H_2O. Reliable knowledge can include stories about how specific places are lived-in by all their native life forms, that these places, and lives have to be nurtured, otherwise we have nothing left….

Sandy Toussaint

It is clear that resonating thoughts and experiences have coalesced as our three-person dialogue has increasingly focused on questioning the use of what is now variously known as ethnography. A dialectical theme has been to assess the value of understandings about, and protection of, water use for the future of such a vital resource, and the long-term

Custodianship and interconnectedness of Aboriginal past, extant and future generations and the broader environment. We are agreeing that it is way beyond time, but especially in 2023, that Aboriginal people are entitled to 'speak up for ourselves' on all water-related matters, and that story-telling and other visual and rigorous methods used by Aboriginal people themselves, perhaps should be complemented by anthropology or cross-disciplinary research, rather than the other way around. These appear likely to be the best means to achieve equitable and meaningful outcomes for all, especially Australia's First people, as the world-wide climate crisis takes further hold. Significant opportunities are evident for all to see, hear and cooperatively incorporate, to ensure Australia's Aboriginal people not only 'speak up for ourselves' but are ethically, constitutionally and culturally included, with all the entitlements and authority that are embedded in such significant overdue recognition.

AND THEN ONE DAY THE *MARDOOWARRA* RISES…

> *'It's not the same Martuwarra flood we know each year that comes to clean up the Country…'.*
>
> *Walmajarri man, Yirritjarra, Fitzroy Crossing, January 2023.*

The three of us are bringing thoughts, texts, drafts, conversations, conclusions together, getting ready to submit our draft. And then one day during this process the *Mardoowarra* rises. It is January 2023, and we are far from alone in becoming acutely aware of the massive flooding of the Fitzroy River across the towns of Fitzroy Crossing and Derby, and Aboriginal communities in the Fitzroy Valley. Indeed, *Wagaba* and her family are directly impacted. 'The Fitzroy Flood', as it becomes widely known, is not only local and state-wide news; it also finds its way into national and international news.

What becomes increasingly notable is that the river has not only flooded throughout the entire Fitzroy Valley in its perennial and annual release of wet season rain to 'clean up the Country…', it has evolved into 'the biggest *Warramba* [major flood] we have ever seen' (Yirritjarra 2023).

The significant Fitzroy Crossing Bridge usually travelled by hundreds each day between the town and communities, tourists touring back and forth from the East and West Kimberley, and road transport bringing necessary food supplies, has suffered extreme damage requiring replacement. Families and communities are isolated, dead wildlife and pastoral station cattle are swirling among the torrents of water, houses and offices destroyed, and high levels of practical, emotional and psychological stress become evident.

As the flood starts to subside, recovery continues and plans to re-build are pondered, it is obvious that there is much to re-build: the main Fitzroy Crossing Bridge on the national Northern Highway, housing, community roads, transport, and support for the everyday lives of old, young and in-between. Stories about *Mardoowarra*'s stress also arise, including stories about serpent beings who created the river being worried about and reacting to implications of the climate crisis, and threats of fracking and water irrigation for a river that sometimes floods, and is sometimes dry (Poelina et al. 2023).

There is also great local and continuing resilience: People and their dogs being rescued by small watercraft, communities supporting each other by sharing supplies or saving each other from rooftops, and local organizations such as *Marninwarntikura, Ganduwa*, *Nindinlingarri* Cultural Health, *Martuwarra* Fitzroy River Flood Relief, and Marra Worra Worra pitching in to provide practical support. A *Wangkajungka* man posts on Facebook:

'Fitzroy Comin Bak!' which receives hundreds of Likes. Government officers, engineers, fire and rescue, local shire, the army and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal volunteers work hard to assess the damage to housing (including the growing health problem of mould) and roads, facilitate health treatment, and re-establish schools, at local businesses. At *Mangkaja* Arts, careful work is undertaken by staff and artists to try to save and restore paintings that have suffered markedly from water damage, with many being tragically beyond repair. Resilience is present, but there is still a very long way to go.

'What questions are ethnographers asking about water in Australia?' returns us to one of the key questions posed for this special issue. Can we say that ethnographic research has helped the recovery or offset the dramatic circumstances *Mardoowarra* and local populations in towns like Fitzroy Crossing and Derby, and local communities, are currently facing to recover and re-build from such monumental damage? Not really, but we can claim (perhaps provocatively) that it is way beyond time that Indigenous people can and do 'speak[ing] up for ourselves… [and can]… tell our own stories'. An enduring moment to listen, hear and act on the heritage and cultural knowingness of Australian Indigenous Voices is waiting, as is the future of water.[4]

ENDNOTES

1. Aboriginal language, place, and organization names italicized throughout.
2. Sandy Toussaint collated all the written, recorded, notations, and contextual material as part of developing a dialogic process across time and place during the three months of developing a draft. Each author reviewed, added to, or re-drafted sections until we each collaboratively decided our essay was ready and it was time to submit.
3. There are many broad definitions of ethnography, critiques of the ethnographic method, and uses to which ethnographic research can be put. Our key interest is in the broad and most often applied definition of ethnography the translation of knowledge gleaned in fieldwork to the written text, which may be more of a 'narrowcasting' of knowledge to a limited audience, than a broadcasting. For an authoritative discussion see: George Marcus (2007), and for a 'baroque' provocation see Michael Taussig (2010).
4. A majority of Australians voted against an Indigenous Voice to Parliament in an October 2023 Referendum.

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