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Chapter 1

Negotiating Aboriginal Participation in Research: Dilemmas and Opportunities

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Introduction

In this chapter, I reflect upon my experiences of negotiating Aboriginal participation for a research project on intercultural encounters in public spaces in the Darwin-Palmerston urban area, Northern Territory, Australia. The discussion shows that, although I prepared for fieldwork through reading and heeding the advice given by experienced researchers, as an Australian woman of Indian heritage, an outsider and a newcomer to the city, I found it difficult to engage residents who identified as Aboriginal. Through the course of my research, however, I discovered that my Indian heritage, evident through my physical appearance and skin colour, elicited curiosity about my home in Kolkata and enabled me to initiate informal conversations with Aboriginal people of diverse cultural backgrounds in public spaces. This chapter argues that my visibility as an outsider, a migrant Indian woman willing to share stories of Kolkata and deviate from mainstream ways of conducting ethical research, was instrumental in negotiating Aboriginal participation. Rather than thinking of the discussion that follows as self-indulgent, I see it as having implications for conducting ethical research, exploring Indigenous–ethnic minority relations and implementing just policies that show respect for Indigenous people of diverse cultural backgrounds in Australia.

My research findings suggest that Aboriginals find it difficult to feel respected in a climate of interventionist federal government policies. For example, the Northern Territory Emergency Response (2007), implemented through military intervention and the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 disempowers, discriminates and dehumanizes Aboriginal people. (Lea 2012). In 2012 this policy, which racialized and targeted Aboriginal peoples through compulsory health checks and income and alcohol management, was reinvented as the Stronger Futures Legislation despite strong opposition (McQuire 2012, Yolŋu Makarr Dhuni 2012). Such interventionist policies show that colonization is a living process for Aboriginal
peoples because dominant social and cultural norms that privilege whiteness legitimize practices that continue to deny Indigenous sovereignty and fail to provide a deep appreciation of Indigenous peoples (Dodson and Cronin 2011, Moreton-Robinson 2007). This lack of genuine engagement with Aboriginal people, particularly in the Northern Territory, is paralleled by a multicultural policy agenda introduced in the late 1960s that focuses on ethnic minority integration.

Although the aim of multiculturalism is to value diversity, the policy has been subject to considerable critique because it centres whiteness and Anglo-ness in understanding inclusion (Hage 1998). Hage (1998) argues that the implementation of the policy that focused on redistributive measures and the recognition of ethnic minorities also engendered anxieties of white decline and such negative affects were further exacerbated by the events of 9/11. The outcome was little support for a multicultural policy agenda during the Liberal Howard era. Today, there is a renewed emphasis on valuing diversity and producing a just, socially cohesive and harmonious society by incorporating respect for Aboriginal people (DIAC 2011). In practice, however, multicultural policy focuses mainly on the integration of ethnic minorities and its implementation by local government continues to be a considerable challenge (Lobo and Mansouri 2012). The outcomes of such separate policy frameworks of recognition have the unintended effects of positioning Aboriginals and ethnic minorities outside the white hegemonic space of the nation. As a result, there is little understanding of Aboriginal–ethnic minority relations. In Darwin, such institutional approaches to diversity provide a context for understanding my outsider position as a Melbournian and a migrant woman of Indian heritage eager to negotiate Aboriginal participation. I reflect in this chapter on this complexity of outsidersness that impeded as well as created points of experiential understanding in the research process.

Feminist researchers use critical self-reflexivity as a tool to draw attention to power relations in cross-cultural settings (Lobo 2010, Moreton-Robinson 2007, O’Connor 2004, Mullings 1999). In particular, they underline the insider–outsider dualism and the moral and
ethical dilemmas that arise in assuming these shifting subject positions. For example, O’Connor (2004), a white woman of Australian/Irish heritage, and Mullings (1999), a black woman of British/Jamaican heritage, attribute the difficulties they encountered in inhabiting neutral spaces of trust and cooperation in interviews with participants of the same colour and race to the instability of a temporary insiderness, a position they did not always consciously promote.

Migrant and Aboriginal women of colour in Australia have drawn attention to outsiderness and Otherness, which they attribute to the power of white racial privilege. They describe processes of racialization during interviews with white women and men as emotional experiences (Lobo 2010, Moreton-Robinson 2007). As an Australian woman of Indian heritage who had previously conducted interviews in Dandenong, a culturally diverse area in Melbourne, I found communicating with migrants of colour to be emotionally more comfortable, but it was also more difficult to move beyond discussing familiar cultural stereotypes of white working-class identities (Lobo 2010).

Within the literature on the insider–outsider dualism, however, there is little research that focuses on the negotiation of Aboriginal participation by migrant women researchers. My research, which focuses on Darwin, a mult-iracial city with a polyethnic history of Aboriginal–Asian contact that predates white settlement in the 19th century, introduces complexity into the insider–outsider debate because of my polyvocal subjectivity as an academic, a Kolkatan and a woman of colour from Melbourne or ‘down south’. Henry-Waring (2004) argues that such polyvocal subjectivities enable us to move beyond thinking within a framework of Otherness.

As a tropical north Australian city with a population of 120,000 in the resource-rich Northern Territory, Darwin prides itself as an evolving, dynamic, different and diverse city (Carson, Schmallegger and Harwood 2010, Darwin City Council 2008). Ford (2009) argues that the sentiment of being or doing things differently can be attributed to the prevalence of a North–South antagonistic discourse that positions Darwin as multi-ethnic and multi-racial compared to large southern Australian cities like Sydney and Melbourne, which have a dominant white majority culture. Unlike these cities, Darwin also has a high population ‘churn’ as it attracts
temporary migrant workers from ‘down south’ (Carson et al. 2010). Carson et al. (2010) emphasize that this mobile population includes young skilled workers employed in resource and construction projects, defence personnel and public sector employees who work with remote Aboriginal communities; long-term residents are more likely to be older and/or Aboriginal. This population ‘churn’ also includes tertiary students, humanitarian migrants and contract staff employed by a large transnational company that manages high-security detention centres that shelter but also imprison asylum seekers who arrive by boat. Newcomers from overseas are often from countries in Asia, the Middle East and Africa. For a researcher of Indian heritage living in Melbourne for the last 12 years, conducting fieldwork in a diverse city marked by high population mobility therefore involved being well prepared.

Preparing for Fieldwork

I prepared for fieldwork by communicating with researchers from Aboriginal organizations, tertiary institutions and private consultancies who had conducted fieldwork in Darwin. Through their support I contacted representatives from key government organizations and non-government organizations such as the local council, the multicultural council, faith-based community organizations, youth organizations, ethnic minority organizations, women’s organizations and asylum seeker/humanitarian migrant and advocacy networks. I followed up such initial contact by emailing information about the project and sending A3 coloured posters for display in public spaces such as libraries, community centres and shopping centres. The poster showed photographs of Mindil Beach, a popular place in suburban Darwin as well as the Waterfront, a recently developed residential and recreational area in the inner city.

I invited residents of diverse backgrounds to participate through a statement expressing my curiosity that read ‘We want to know where you shop, meet and relax’. I was sure that I would get a good response from residents of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. At the same time, as a Melbournian, a resident from a southern city, I felt like an outsider who had no right to access such personal information, particularly from socioeconomically disadvantaged Aboriginal people such as ‘Long Grassers’ who live ‘rough’ in public spaces of the city. I
communicated this discomfort to Rosanne, an experienced researcher who works with ‘Long Grassers’, and this was her response:

Obviously you are ultimately the only one who can decide whether you have the right to do research on any topic, but with highly vulnerable populations it is a more agonising process. You will probably ask these questions of yourself the whole way through if you decide to work with this population in Darwin. (I know I do!) My view is that there is a problem when you stop asking yourself. Anyway, one question I ask myself to help me work through the maze is ‘how will this research improve the life of the population on the ground on a daily basis?’ (May 2012)

Rosanne underlined the necessity for constant self-questioning through the research process. Such self-questioning is necessary given the debates on who has the right to speak on Indigenous matters and on behalf of Indigenous peoples (Fee and Russell 2007). Rosanne, however, was more concerned about how research findings can be embedded in practices that make a difference to the everyday lives of Aboriginal peoples. She argued that, although researchers ‘couch’ benefits for Aboriginal peoples in forms that are palatable to university ethics committees and disseminate knowledge in peer-reviewed academic publications and presentations at conferences, the ‘magic process’ of osmosis does not occur; there is little impact on the day-to-day lives of Aboriginal peoples. For her, ‘meaningful data’ could only be accessed by building relationships, empathizing with participants, listening to their stories and showing care in understanding their plight. Rather than making me aware of my powerful position as a researcher, Rosanne made me conscious of the potential challenges I might face in negotiating Aboriginal participation. For the first time, I became aware that my intentions to contribute to Indigenous wellbeing by providing an insight into the respect and care towards Aboriginal peoples in a multi-ethnic and multi-racial context could be quite difficult. Given the reading, support and advice I received before commencing fieldwork, I felt I was better prepared to negotiate participation and explore the complexity of intercultural relations in
Darwin, but my inexperience working in a multi-ethnic and multi-racial context so different from southern cities like Melbourne and Sydney soon became apparent.

**The ‘Imaginary Divide’**

I arrived in Darwin at the end of the dry season with enthusiasm and a spirit of adventure. When I went to the shopping mall to make a few food purchases, my position as a newcomer became evident. I exclaimed at the high prices of meat at the butcher’s shop in the large shopping mall and I was indecisive about what I intended to purchase. Such behaviour attracted glances, gestures and rude remarks from a young woman. In relation to whiteness, my Indian-ness apparent through my physical appearance, accent and comportment marked me as an outsider. Given my enthusiasm and the need to organize and conduct focus discussions with community groups and interviews with short-term, long-term and medium-term residents within a month, I soon forgot this racist response. Perhaps this was because many white residents who were professionals, community workers, religious leaders and activists were very keen to participate and help me with my research. Also, prior experiences of conducting research in Dandenong that involved critical reflections on emotions in the research process helped me to move beyond Otherness and value conversations across difference (Lobo 2010). As I expected, recent migrants from South Asia and the Middle East and long-term residents of Indian heritage, in particular, eagerly supported an ‘insider’, a female researcher who had left the comfort of home.

The majority of mature-aged residents of Anglo-Australian and ethnic minority heritage confirmed their lack of understanding of Aboriginal ways of life and few opportunities to mix with Aboriginal people. Brian, an Anglo-Australian religious leader who had been working with Aboriginal people in cities and remote communities for several years, spoke of the threat of cultural extinction. He said ‘White Australia just has no idea how Aboriginal Australians feel and think and live, survive. It’s like the rest of Australia just wishes you didn’t exist’. Ben, a mature-aged Anglo-Australian man who had been living in Darwin for six years, attributes this lack of understanding to an ‘imaginary divide’ that causes discomfort; he always feels like an outsider in public spaces where Aboriginals are visible. Women of ethnic minority heritage
from South Asia and the Middle East underlined that there were very few opportunities to mix with Aboriginal Australians. For example Jamila, who assumes a leadership role in a South Asian community and has been living in Darwin for 23 years, said ‘Personally I don’t have … I haven’t had many opportunities to mix with the Aboriginal people … with the dominant white culture, yes’ (October 2011). Alya, a woman who arrived from the Middle East as a humanitarian migrant and has been living in Darwin for three years, said: ‘I have not been very much in contact with Aboriginals, not very much. I have not been very close. They stay away, they are quiet. I heard they don’t want more people to come and take the land’ (Darwin, May 2012).

Perhaps the lack of opportunities for interaction and such misconceptions stem from an inability and reluctance to engage with Aboriginal people, which is influenced by dominant cultural stereotypes that pathologize and criminalize them. The outcome of such limited engagement, however, can be problematic for two main reasons. First, it inhibits the initiation of a conversation that can challenge everyday practices and policies that racialize and unfairly target Aboriginals as dysfunctional subjects prone to alcoholism and crime (Eldridge 2012, Taylor, Walker and Marawili 2011, Fee and Russell 2007, Povinelli 2002). Second, it disempowers Aboriginal people, affects their feelings of comfort and limits their motivation to participate in events and activities in the city’s public spaces where irreducible difference is always visible.

The effects of such visibility were clearer in the second phase of the research conducted in 2012, when I found it easier to engage Aboriginal women and perhaps was less of an outsider. Kim, a mature-aged woman who lives alone and prefers to avoid using the skeletal public transport services available on the weekend, said: ‘Some people as a general rule [on the bus] look at us like don’t come near me, don’t touch me. I just stay at home. It costs a lot of money to come in a taxi, lot of money, good practice for old age [laughs]’ (May 2012). This comment, which ended with a touch of humour, shows that, while public spaces and events in the city are supposed to facilitate the co-presence of people of diverse cultural backgrounds,
Kim, an Aboriginal woman, is reluctant and unable to avail of such opportunities. Miriam, a young mother with four children, also voiced feelings of discomfort in some public spaces in the city where she gets an ‘uncomfortable feeling’ or a ‘bad reaction’. I am not sure whether my insider status as a woman of colour encouraged such comments and made it difficult for me to listen to stories that unsettled the self–other divide. I think I found it easier to engage Aboriginal women during the second phase of fieldwork, because I was less focused on ‘breezing in and breezing out’ with meaningful data and more interested in listening to their stories of everyday life.

**Breezing In and Breezing Out**

During several interviews in the first phase of fieldwork I expressed the difficulties I was facing in negotiating participation from residents of Aboriginal ancestry. In two weeks I had interviewed only two women who identified as Aboriginal and I felt that I was missing some important insights into the complexity of intercultural encounters in public spaces. Brian, an Anglo-Australian religious leader, attributed this inability to involve Aboriginal residents to my position as an ‘outsider’, someone who was ‘breezing in and breezing out’ of Darwin and whose research practice conformed to mainstream norms:

Brian: If I want someone to share a bit of themselves I actually have to share a bit of myself, otherwise I haven’t got the right to do it. You don’t need relationships to do mainstream research. Generally speaking you just don’t need to develop relationships, but Aboriginally you’re fighting a losing battle if you don’t.

Me: Yeah, and I realize I haven’t been able to develop that with some people. In fact when I talk to them they have been very helpful, but when it comes to research, even though I may plead, they don’t reply. Yeah, and then I think perhaps I’ve offended them … email and say ‘did I do anything to offend you’, but I won’t get a reply.

Brian: Bet they won’t reply to that.

Me: Yeah. So I don’t know what I’ve done, you know what I mean?
Brian: No, no, well I don’t think you have done anything; it’s just that they haven’t been able to relate to you, yet, in a way where they can just respond to you like that. And maybe e-mails is the wrong way. (October 2011)

This conversation with Brian demonstrates the anxiety I experienced in trying to involve Aboriginal residents. When I positioned myself as a researcher in face-to-face encounters, residents rarely declined to participate, but instead asked for my phone number, sometimes gave me their e-mail address, but often I had no further contact with them. The question that often surfaced in my consciousness was ‘Why should they trust a stranger to the city with their personal stories?’ This trust was not about the minimization of harm prescribed by ethics review boards but about building relationships that demonstrate care, empathy and responsibility in research settings and being aware that as a researcher my questions could be intimidating despite my best intentions (Besio 2010). Dora, a community youth worker, made me aware of the possible impact of my questions when she said:

Often, like, people feel intimidated when they’re asked questions about themselves, and that can be anybody, not just Indigenous people. But I guess too, when you come with the research cap, a lot of people, particularly the older ones, tend to be a little bit sceptical and a little bit suspicious I guess, of what it is you want to come and research and because there’s been so many researchers that have come through communities in the past for many, many, many years. And a lot of researchers come in, get what they want, and go out. And then there’s no benefit to the community. (October 2011)

Like Dora, many local residents of Anglo-Australian and ethnic minority background wanted to help me with my research but also protect Aboriginal people from intrusive questions asked by outsiders. As caring rather than just paternalistic gatekeepers they underlined that Aboriginals are over-researched, suffer fatigue from being constantly questioned and are suspicious of researchers. Researchers are outsiders who provide few tangible benefits and unintentionally contribute to policy outcomes that are interventionist and exacerbate experiences of disempowerment, marginalization and racialization. Feminist researchers like Mauthner and
Birch (2002) have drawn attention to how gatekeepers aim to be ethical but often regulate access to less powerful and vulnerable groups, which may not always be productive.

As an outsider my interactions with gatekeepers in community organizations made me aware of my authoritative power as a researcher who could intimidate others with my questions. I became aware that conforming to the mainstream ways of doing research did not seem to be working. With time I became less anxious about negotiating Aboriginal participation and getting formal consent. I unconsciously began to draw on more informal methods that I used in fieldwork among participants in cities and towns in India more than 12 years ago and the results were surprising.

Casual Conversations Surprise Me: Meeting ‘Countrymen’

As I travelled by bus to different places to interview people I grew accustomed to talking to people in public spaces such as the street, shopping malls, shopping squares, at the bus interchange, on the bus and at local fresh food markets and tourist markets. I had several casual conversations with Aboriginals, particularly men, many of whom identified me as Indian. For example, when I sat near a young man at the rear of a crowded bus on my way to the Mindil Beach market on Thursday evening who was talking loudly to a group of friends in a language I did not understand, I introduced myself. I said it felt like home in Kolkata, India, a city where travelling by crowded buses is part of everyday life and people often speak loudly in Hindi and Bengali rather than in hushed tones like in Melbourne. When we reached our destination I was invited to come and see how Aboriginal people enjoy the beach, sitting on the sand along with friends and family in a shady grove away from the hustle and bustle of the Mindil Beach market. We talked about various things and I told them that sitting or lying on the sand was how my family enjoyed a holiday at the Indian beaches of Goa and Puri.

Perhaps such convivial conversations could be interpreted as having little value because it did not generate the collection of data that is rigorous and can be analysed. I see such encounters, however, as enabling because they allowed me to learn how to inhabit space by valuing the presence of others who share this space, and whose Aboriginality intersected with
other aspects of their identity such as gender and disability. For example, when I saw Bernie, a middle-aged man, at a suburban bus interchange I had no intention of interviewing him. He was in a motorized wheelchair moving past the different terminals, talking to people he met. Bernie approached me and asked me why I had come to Darwin. I told him I was a researcher from Melbourne, gave him some details about my research and showed him a poster.

Ten minutes later I was travelling on bus route 12 to Malak and noticed Bernie sitting on the bus. He called out and asked me to come and sit near him – he was curious, questioned me and wanted to know more about my life experiences. I told him that I had spent most of my life in Kolkata, India, and migrated to Australia 12 years ago with my husband and two children. He wanted to talk and I asked him if I could make a few notes in my diary, a practice I routinely engaged in during the day when I travelled by public transport and at night after a long day. Bernie agreed and said: ‘You’re Indian, even me a bit. I’ve got a bit of Sri Lankan in me. My great grandfather is from Mumbai’. He told me that his great-grandfather was an intelligent man who owned one of the largest cattle stations in the Northern Territory, but the family lost everything due to bad decisions made under the influence of alcohol. Bernie found living in Darwin very expensive and Christmas was a stressful time because he had four daughters and nine grandchildren. He enjoyed the daily visit to the shopping mall which gave him the opportunity to meet people on the bus, talk to the bus drivers and have casual conversations with strangers like me.

I responded by telling him that, while it is easy to talk to strangers in public spaces, they rarely want to participate in my research and, if they do, it is hard to get consent. Bernie attributes the lack of participation among Aboriginals to their timid nature and embarrassment when asked personal questions. He said, ‘You can only talk to our countryman if they are drunk’, but I disagreed and used our conversation as evidence. Bernie was keen that I communicate his views and said ‘Darwin is very expensive ... food. Give that to them for the survey’. I told him that I was unable to use the content of our conversation in my research as I did not have his consent. He asked me to read the form, borrowed a pen from me and added a
signature which was difficult to read. For the first time, I became aware that his hands were bound and I felt ashamed about asking for written consent. At Karama, a northern suburb, he called out to two boys to carry the wheelchair off the bus and he waved goodbye (October 2011).

Rather than just strictly adhering to the rules and procedures of ethical practice, which focus on getting informed consent through language, in this interview consent was first given through facial expressions and bodily gestures. Greenhough and Roe (2011: 53) argue that ‘embodied sensibilities’ that incorporate sensations and bodily responses are crucial to informed consent and ethical engagement rather than written or verbal forms of communication. As an outsider my encounter with Bernie made me aware of engaging with Aboriginals in ways that go beyond mere conversation.

Travelling by public transport and mingling with people in public spaces allowed me to immerse myself in the daily life of the city and unsettle fixed understandings of an authentic or stigmatized Aboriginal identity. Cowlishaw (2005) argues that conversing on equal terms rather than judging and demonizing others based on appearance, clothes and speech style is crucial to intercultural engagement. Perhaps this is what Iris, an Aboriginal woman, implied when she said, ‘down-south people don’t know how to interact with Aboriginal peoples’. Several participants felt that southerners, ‘city slickers’ and policymakers had few deep insights into a changing and alive Aboriginal culture. I soon realized that the practice of modest witnessing (Haraway 1997) that is open and acknowledges the partial and situated nature of research has the potential to unsettle popular stereotypes of Aboriginals. Rather than seeing Aboriginals who live in public spaces as drunks, homeless people or itinerants who disturb the order of white public space, it became easier for me to welcome them warmly as ‘countrymen’.

With the support of the Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation, I began to spend time with countrymen and women who camp at beach reserves and are supported by a program called HEAL (Health Engagement and Assistance in the Long Grass). The HEAL program aims at ‘Looking after Long Grass Mob’, or Aboriginal people who live in public spaces, by
providing essential health services and engaging them in the community through social activities such as painting (LNAC 2012). I attended several weekly painting sessions of about four hours during which participants, volunteers, visitors and community workers spent time together cooking, talking, joking, painting or just sitting quietly. During such encounters I was always identified as Indian based on my physical appearance, skin colour and accent. During these conversations we talked about how Indians wore colourful clothes and ate hot, spicy food. I spoke in Hindi and Bengali and taught them how to greet others by saying Kamon achhe? (Bengali) and Kaisa hai? (Hindi). They spoke in Tiwi language and tried to teach me a few words of greeting. We told jokes and riddles too.

With time I became more open to different ways of conversing, including short statements in English or ‘Tiwi language’ interspersed with long silences as well as jokes and riddles. In such encounters I was not the powerful researcher asking ‘personal’ questions but someone who participated in activities and contributed to a conversation over which I lost control. I was not always sure of the direction and outcomes of the diverse paths the conversation took. Such risk-taking is important in the co-production of knowledge because it enables us to resituate and reposition ourselves and focus on what we are doing rather than what we have extracted from the research process (Greenhough 2010). Such ‘doing’ involved receiving consent through bodily gestures and facial expressions from participants and engaging with mature-aged Aboriginal men and women who were happy to talk once they felt that my questions were not intrusive. Although the gift voucher I offered made them happy, I would like to think that sharing my stories of India and listening to what they had to say circulated happiness too. I think this was evident because when I met them at different public spaces in the city, a common experience in a small city like Darwin, they smiled, waved or talked and were very welcoming.

Conversations with Aboriginal Women: Dispelling Fixed Understandings of Aboriginality and Indian-ness
Stories of my Anglo-Indian heritage, Indian festivals and the hot weather in Kolkata, India, helped me to shift my position as an authoritative researcher and challenge my fixed understandings of Aboriginality in interviews with women. While many Darwinites spoke about how they sensed someone was Aboriginal, as a Melbournian who has limited everyday contact with Aboriginals, I lacked this embodied understanding. In fact, some women like Anne told stories of their Aboriginality towards the end of an interview after I had shared stories of India.

Fee and Russell (2007: 187) argue that in Aboriginal cultures it is necessary to introduce oneself, as well as know and understand the others, if ‘real stories’ are to be told and ‘productive conversations’ are to occur. Given my experiences in public spaces in Darwin where my Indian identity was always apparent through my skin colour and facial appearance, I felt that such introduction was not necessary. I therefore usually introduced myself as an ‘insider’, a Melbournian rather than a woman from Kolkata, India. Such an introduction, however, did not privilege my Indian heritage, and as a southerner I was paradoxically an ‘outsider’. Such an ‘outsider’ status can perhaps be attributed to an imaginary divide that draws attention to the easy-going lifestyle and multi-ethnic and multi-racial social context of Darwin in the Top End, or northern Australia, which is different from the larger southern cities (Ford 2009). It was only during the course of the interview when I told stories of Kolkata that participants were able to trust me with their stories.

The intersection of my gendered identity with my Indian heritage created some connections with women who challenged my essentialist understandings of Aboriginality. When I met Anne, a young woman, I felt sure she was Anglo-Australian because of her skin colour and appearance. Anne had lived in the Darwin-Palmerston urban area her entire life and seemed to guess I was Indian. I felt this was evident when she said ‘there’s a lot of Indians in Palmerston area … probably a huge Indian community’ (October 2011). However, I was more interested in listening to her stories and did not share stories of India. Instead, we talked about places in Darwin and I told her about my experience of watching the fireworks display on the closing night at the Mindil Beach market. Anne responded by describing the spectacular
fireworks display at several sites along the beach to celebrate Territory Day on the first of July, the day the Northern Territory assumed self-government. Anne also told me how families in Palmerston often lit fire crackers on the street in front of their homes. I told Anne that our family as well as our neighbours did the same on Diwali, the Festival of Light in India, which ushers in the New Year in October/November. I think such conversations enabled Anne to trust me with stories about her parents and grandparents. This was our conversation at the end of our interview:

    Me: So yeah, I think great stories. So, any other things you want to talk about?
    Anne: No, that’s it, yep. No, that’s fine.
    Me: It’s all good, yeah?
    Anne: Yeah, did you want to talk about, I don’t know if you’ll want to add it in about the Stolen Generation because you know how it affected a lot of people a bit. Well my mother was part of the Stolen Generation and we only met our family last year … and they’re all in Darwin, a lot of my mum’s real family. (October 2011)

Anne told me her grandmother was forcibly separated from her mother when she was young and grew up in a home for Aboriginal children; she belonged to the Stolen Generation, a generation of Aboriginal mothers who were racialized and not considered worthy enough by the state to look after their ‘half-caste children’ (LNAC 2006). The acknowledgement of the traumatic impact of such practices of separation on Aboriginals families were acknowledged and regretted by white Australia in an official apology in 2008. Healing the effects of such displacement and dispossession, however, is an ongoing process for which all settlers including newcomers are responsible. During my conversation with Anne I became aware of the impacts of such forcible separation on four generations of Anne’s family. When Anne’s grandmother was pregnant she had to give up her daughter, Anne’s mother, for adoption as she did not have the means to care for her. Anne’s mother’s early life in a mission home was difficult and she began to lead a privileged life only after she was adopted the second time by an Anglo-Australian couple. Anne and her brother were curious to trace their Aboriginal heritage even though they took pride in
their Irish ancestry and discovered in 2011 that they had 18 first cousins: ‘There’s like 18 first cousins, not including me and my brother. So there’s so many of them and it felt like, now we’re so close, feels like we’ve always known them, so yeah it’s good’.

The outcome was connections with members of her family living in Darwin who provide support during difficult times. I met members of Anne’s family and visited and interviewed her mother in the second phase of the research. I think it was our position outside white hegemonic space as Indigenous and migrant rather than as bodies of colour that created a connection. Such connections have been important in challenging what Paradies (2006) identifies as an essentialized understanding of Aboriginality that fails to appreciate Indigenous diversity,

Talking about the weather in Kolkata also helped me to communicate with Norma, a mature-aged woman, who said ‘long, long way back there is Aboriginal blood’. Although Norma had lost her home as well as members of her family when Darwin was devastated by Cyclone Tracy in 1974, these bad memories did not impede her enjoyment of the wet season. Norma said: ‘And I love the wet season. It’s my favourite time of the year because I love the raw energy of the wet season, the lightning, and the storms, even though I went through Cyclone Tracy’.

I responded by telling Norma that I experienced similar feelings waiting for the rain after months of heat and humidity in Kolkata, and asked her whether the streets got waterlogged. As the conversation progressed Norma began to talk about the relaxed and easy-going Darwin lifestyle that was so different from ‘down south’ but also shared stories about how she asserts herself to support countrymen and women and humanitarian migrants who face discrimination and racialization in public spaces. Norma’s mixed ancestry, which is quite common in Darwin given its history of Aboriginal–Asian contact, means that she positions herself as Chinese or Aboriginal in different social spaces. Paradies (2006), an urban Aboriginal-Anglo-Asian Australian man, has observed that such a shifting and hybrid identity is enabling rather than marginalizing. Norma uses such a hybrid identity to assume responsibility towards and support marginalized residents of Darwin such as ‘Long Grassers’, countrymen who live in open spaces,
asylum seekers and refugees. Perhaps, Norma’s stories made me aware of my mixed ancestry when I spoke to Maude.

Maude, a senior citizen whom I had an informal conversation with at a community centre, spoke of her mixed ancestry and forced separation from her family. I responded by telling her about my mixed ancestry as an Anglo-Indian and stories of my grandparents who were born in British India (Lobo and Morgan 2012). I also told stories of my aunt who was raised by a single mother and never knew her British father. Soon our conversation became more light-hearted and Maude told me several ‘jacky jokes’ to provide an insight into Aboriginal humour. She said such humour which is often irreverent can also be empowering because it allows Aboriginals to look at the lighter side of life despite the difficulties they face. Maude asked me riddles, recited limericks and poems and showed me a coolamon, traditionally used for carrying a baby or for cooking which she and her friends had crafted from the bark of a tree.

Through our conversation I got an insight into Maude’s carefree and welcoming nature. As a member of the Stolen Generation, she took pride in her Aboriginal identity even though she had painful memories. She asked me to be proud of my Indian identity and said something like this: ‘Don’t forget who you are. We don’t look down at you, your country and your background. Be proud of what you are’. I am not sure whether it is ethical to refer to our conversation because, although Maude was happy to talk for more than an hour and keen that I take notes, she did not agree with mainstream ways of conducting ethical research. She said that demonstrations of genuine care towards others were more important than getting written consent and assuring anonymity. Maude wanted to be identified by name so that her voice could be heard and her knowledge valued. Her pride and sense of self-worth empowered her to welcome me but she also questioned my performance as an ethical university researcher keen to adhere to mainstream norms. Such everyday acts of empowerment and welcoming are crucial to strengthening a multicultural policy agenda that appreciates the complexity of Indigenous–white–ethnic minority relations.

 Conclusion
This chapter, which focuses on the Australian context, shows that positioning myself as an insider, a researcher from Melbourne, elicited curiosity about my research but did not necessarily result in participation. To my surprise, it was my ‘outsider’ status as an Indian and migrant that enabled me to connect with Aboriginal people who valued rather than exoticized my Indian heritage. This was in contrast to my previous experience of conducting research in suburban Melbourne where my outsider status and stereotypical perceptions of my migrant Indian identity, particularly among Anglo-Australians, was initially emotionally unsettling (Lobo 2010).

My mobility has produced connections between Kolkata, Melbourne and Darwin and made me aware that I occupy shifting positions along the spectrum of an insider–outsider status. In my interviews with residents of Aboriginal heritage, I am not sure whether I was an outsider, insider or an ‘outsider within’, which is a common experience for Asian Australians (Stephenson 2007: 9). What I can say, however, is that my first experience of conducting fieldwork in Darwin has been an enriching experience because of the care and respect I have received from Aboriginal people. Rather than reproducing whiteness through hyperpoliteness, as observed by Moon (1999), Aboriginal participants welcomed me through their frankness, humour and bodily responses.

These experiences made me realize that an ongoing process of demonstrating responsibility and care to Indigenous people is required to respond to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, which is ‘How does the research project contribute to short-term and long-term benefits for Indigenous people?’ I would like to underline that Aboriginals benefit when Australians of ethnic minority heritage embody and demonstrate respect towards them in everyday life. Rather than responding with indifference or avoiding such contact in everyday life or supporting interventionist policies though silence or agreement, we need to engage with others to ensure respect for the land, law and languages of Aboriginal people, as stated by the Yolŋuŋ Makarr Dhuni (2012) in their open letter to the leaders of the Australian Federal and Northern Territory Parliaments. Perhaps, insights into local knowledge and the co-production of
knowledge provided in this chapter respond in a modest way to Lea’s call to explore the messiness, richness and pulsating nature of everyday life that can subvert the rationality and the order of bureaucratic responses that focus on the political and economic modes and displace the ‘marvellous and ordinary modes of inhabiting the world’ (2008: 226).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank residents of Darwin and the Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation for their support. Thanks also to Assoc. Prof. Yin Paradies, Dr Catherine Holmes and the anonymous referees for their valuable comments. This research was supported by an Alfred Deakin Postdoctoral Fellowship, Deakin University.

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