Reframing development through collaboration: towards a relational ontology of connection in Bawaka, North East Arnhem Land

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Abstract *This paper draws on the collaborative experiences of three female academics and three generations of Yolŋu women from an Aboriginal family from Bawaka, North East Arnhem Land to contribute to debates in development around participation, power and justice. Through a reflection on the process of collaboratively co-authoring two books and associated outputs, the paper discusses the way the collaboration is guided by collective priorities that are held as paramount: trust, reciprocity, relationships and sharing goals. The paper draws particular attention to the essential role that families and non-human agents play in shaping these priorities*. *The relational ontology which underlies this collaboration is inspired by a Yolŋu ontology of connection that requires us to acknowledge ourselves as connected to each other, to other people and to other things. Guided by this Indigenous ontological framework, we reframe the concept of collaboration and of development as inherently and always relational.*

Dominant approaches in development studies continue to be challenged by social movement actors, post-development and postcolonial scholars, and development recipients and practitioners, calling for a development that moves beyond its modernist and colonial roots.[[1]](#endnote-1) Indigenous people, in particular, have called for a fundamental reframing of development; for a development that grapples with its modernist and colonial legacies, that asserts Indigenous questions, concerns and practices in the production of knowledge, and that centres, rather than marginalises, Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies.[[2]](#endnote-2) While many scholars and practitioners, including post-development and postcolonial researchers, have tried to respond to these calls,[[3]](#endnote-3) the question of *how* development can be remade in this way remains a thorny one.

Within postcolonial studies, the emergence of Indigenous-academic research collaborations is creating new understandings, methodologies and opportunities to co-construct knowledge and practice.[[4]](#endnote-4) Such collaborations have the potential to enable Indigenous voices, to address issues of power and progress opportunities for reconciliation. While they focus on collaboration in an academic rather than a professional development context, they nonetheless provide insight into how a post-development, a decolonised development, may proceed. Research and the academe are clearly important players within the development industry. Here, then, we might find some hints of those alternatives to mainstream development that continue to elude post-development thinkers. Despite this promise, and its relevance to questions that continue to plague development studies, little has been written within development studies about the process of nurturing and sustaining research collaborations.

In this paper, we look at Indigenous-academic collaboration as a way of contributing to remaking and reframing development. We explore what it might mean to centre Indigenous ontologies in development studies by reflecting on our collaboration—centred on the relationships between three female academics and four generations of Yolŋu women from an Aboriginal family in northern Australia. We discuss our collaboration, and particularly the process of co-authoring two books and associated academic and non-academic outputs. The paper describes the way the collaboration is founded on common priorities of trust, reciprocity, relationships and sharing goals, and argues that families and non-human agents are critical in actively shaping these priorities. Seeing the collaboration as a process of co-creation—that involves diverse human and non-human collaborators—is inspired by a relational Yolŋu ontology of connection. A relational ontology of connection means understanding all beings and things as inherently connected. Neither one’s identity, actions or ethics can be understood in isolation from other research partners, family members, other people, or the natural world. Rather, humans, animals, plants, winds, rocks, spirits, songs, sunsets and water, indeed all things, are connected together in a web of kinship and responsibility. After engaging with the literature on collaborative research approaches within development, and the emerging work from authors engaging with Indigenous-academic collaboration, we examine our own experiences and discuss how a relational ontology can contribute towards a (re)conceptualisation of Indigenous-academic research collaboration. We find that centring an Indigenous ontology requires different understandings of the processes, outcomes and agents of development. Working with an Indigenous ontological framework and the ethics of collaboration it has nurtured, thus reframes the concept of development as inherently and always relational.

Collaborative Research Approaches

Development programs increasingly strive to promote meaningful participation of all community members in the design, management and evaluation of development activities, to promote community ownership of development processes and ensure that outcomes meet the diverse needs of community members. Participatory approaches are becoming increasingly relevant to development programs because solutions driven by external parties have proven to be largely inadequate in affecting social and economic change.

Participatory research approaches, such as participatory action research (PAR), that have emerged as traditional academic methods are questioned in cross-cultural development contexts. PAR practitioners emphasise transformative social change and participant engagement, and represent a substantial shift from academic traditions in which the researcher entered ‘the field’; undertook data ‘collection’, then withdrew, leaving ‘the field’ unchanged.[[5]](#endnote-5) Consultation, cooperation, co-learning and collective action between researchers and research participants feature strongly in PAR as priorities are community-defined and set in motion along an iterative cycle of action-reflection.[[6]](#endnote-6) Embedded within many PAR approaches is an explicit political agenda which often promotes participant empowerment[[7]](#endnote-7) along with an acute awareness and sensitivity to the often inequitable power relations inherent in any act of research.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Methods such as PAR are used by development agencies to identify and inform programs promoting improved health,[[9]](#endnote-9) gender equality,[[10]](#endnote-10) community livelihoods and agricultural practices.[[11]](#endnote-11) Recognising that development agencies rarely have the resources to undertake research alone, that research has potential transformative impacts for agency practice, community outcomes and academic learning,[[12]](#endnote-12) and that funding agencies increasingly require partnership approaches in community-based research,[[13]](#endnote-13) development researchers are increasingly pursuing collaborative research arrangements with development organisations and communities. Indeed, collaboration has become a watchword for development practitioners and theorists. Literature on participatory research focuses on either direct relationships between academics and research participants or ‘communities’, or relationships between researchers and development organisations working in the desired location that bring their local knowledge, connections and programs to the relationship.

Whilst the language of collaboration and partnership is often used unreflexively by development agencies and researchers, in reality collaborations between development organisations, communities and academic researchers are complex. The concept of collaboration is applied in diverse, sometime superficial, ways—often with a focus on collaboration in ‘field work’, with analysis, outputs and financial management remaining the purvey of academics and their institutions. Community collaborators are often minimally involved in research design, and whilst seen as essential to community-based processes, can be excluded from analysis. This can create a perceived hierarchy of expertise between academic and community researchers. Financial aspects of research can undermine relationships unless addressed, with differences in income, unequal control of financial accounts, inappropriate payment and unfair expectations of voluntary labour threatening transparency and trust.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The different priorities and objectives of academic and community researchers can affect the value placed on outputs: whilst community researchers may value outputs that lead to local level advocacy and practical outcomes for community members, academic reward systems preference processes and knowledge that contribute to academic debates at national or international levels.[[15]](#endnote-15) Moseley points to development organisations being reticent to form research partnerships because of perceptions that academics are ‘parasites’, benefiting more than development organisations or communities from research collaborations, providing little back to their research partners, preferencing scholarly papers over development outcomes, and bringing an overly critical lens to development projects that can lead to adverse publicity that can be detrimental to accessing funding.[[16]](#endnote-16) While collaboration, then, has become central to both research on, and practice in, development, it remains tied to the agendas and, more deeply, to the ways of knowing and being associated with development agencies and universities. We turn now to work in Indigenous-academic collaboration that calls for collaboration to be radically reframed.

Indigenous-academic collaboration

Indigenous-academic collaborations challenge academics to recognise and value Indigenous communication protocols, relational practices, and behavioural and belief systems in their collaborative practice. In addition to relinquishing power over the direction of the research, academics are called upon to suspend their own cultural frameworks, as far as possible, as they communicate and relate to Indigenous collaborators, adopting Indigenous relational frameworks as part of their methodology.[[17]](#endnote-17) In doing so, Louis argues, research on Indigenous issues may become ‘more sympathetic, respectful, and ethically correct … from an Indigenous perspective’.[[18]](#endnote-18) It also enables researchers to promote alternatives to the colonising nature of much academic research and development practice, challenging power relationships and engaging directly and respectfully with Indigenous knowledges.

Collaborative concepts such as an ethics of responsibility and the building of a responsibility structure have become increasingly acknowledged and valued in Indigenous research. For Spivak, ‘finding the subaltern is not so hard, but actually entering into a responsibility structure with the subaltern, with responses flowing both ways ... that’s the hard part’. McLean, Berg and Roche contend that a focus on responsibility is needed, a responsibility that embraces attention to appropriate spaces, rituals, negotiations and ‘border crossings’ regarding knowledge production, cultures and research output. These approaches clearly address relations of power and rights within the research process as well as the central question of whose reality might gain dominance and legitimacy throughout the research process.[[19]](#endnote-19) These processes also highlight a range of methodological considerations including the need for long-term relationship development, flexible and extended research timeframes, appreciation of competing priorities, communicative variants and cross-cultural sensitivity and awareness.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Indigenous methodologies challenge development studies to open up spaces for transdisciplinary research.[[21]](#endnote-21) Christie argues that transdisciplinarity not only recognises the co-existence of different knowledge systems and practices but acknowledges the often incommensurate nature of these systems.[[22]](#endnote-22) Transdisciplinarity calls for expansive recognition of knowledges produced in places *beyond* the university. In other words, Indigenous-academic collaboration occurs both *within* and *without* the university. For development studies, this means a commitment to engage with Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Rather than just ‘working together’, post-colonial theory and work in Indigenous studies tells us that collaboration requires a decentreing of Western priorities, knowledges and traditions.[[23]](#endnote-23) What though, might such a decentreing look like? If this is, as Spivak suggests, ‘the hard part’, how might it be achieved in practice?

Reframing development through a relational conception of collaboration

This section documents how we have grappled with our collaboration, attempting to reframe academic approaches to build upon, and draw from, a Yolŋu relational ontology. This relational ontology pushes the collaborators beyond a Western, modernist ontology grounded in understandings of autonomous actors working in tandem, to embrace a more empathetic, relational way of knowing grounded in the nexus of being-on-Country.[[24]](#endnote-24) It is an ontology of connection, where everything is understood as not only connected, but brings with its relationships expectations of an ethics of responsibility and reciprocity. This relational ontology requires an acknowledgement of ourselves as connected to each other, to other people and to other things, and a recognition of the active agencies of more-than-human worlds. It requires a deeper commitment, one that means opening oneself to different ways of being in, and understanding the world.

Our aim throughout this section is to understand what this relational ontology might mean for our work together. A relational ontology infuses all aspects of our collaboration including day-to-day logistical, even mundane, activities which are ultimately reflective of fundamental ways of knowing and understanding the world. It is in these details, of the establishment of our work together, the development of a research agreement, in sitting together, writing together and acting together, that different ways of being in the world are practiced and brought into being. We thus begin by describing how our Indigenous-academic research collaboration was established. We then discuss our efforts to collaboratively design mutually beneficial outputs based on a continually revisited research agreement. We go on to challenge the researcher-centredness of much collaborative literature by discussing the way those not traditionally seen as ‘researchers’—the families of all researchers involved in the collaboration, and Bawaka Country itself—actively shape, and are shaped by, our collaboration.

Establishing our research collaboration

In 2006 Kate, Sarah and Sandie (three female academics from South East Australia) formed a partnership with Laklak Burarrwanga, an Indigenous Yolŋu elder from Bawaka, North East Arnhem Land, Australia, and her family, to undertake collaborative research. Laklak and her family own and run a successful family business, Bawaka Cultural Experiences (BCE) centred on Bawaka homeland (see Map 1). BCE attracts a range of visitors including local, national and international day tourists, women on the two-day specialist woman’s program, and government staff on cross-cultural education tours. The key aims of this family-owned business are to communicate Yolŋu ways of life to visitors and share what is important and valuable to them through a range of experiences on and with Country.[[25]](#endnote-25) BCE is thus a social enterprise, developed to share knowledge on Aboriginal culture with non-Indigenous people, and to provide sustainable revenue for extended family members. Established in 2006, the business is seen as a model Indigenous-run tourism enterprise by government and development agencies, who are keen to gain insights on its operation and function to support the development of other Indigenous-led social enterprises.

Figure 1: Location of Bawaka, Northern Territory, Australia.

Source: map created by Olivier Rey-Lescure, 2012

The collaboration itself was seeded in a planning workshop attended by Laklak and her family in 2006 and organised by the Northern Territory Department of Business, Economic and Regional Development (DBERD). Through this workshop the Yolŋu women detailed their plans to start a women’s cultural exchange program and decided there was a need to develop materials to support the initiative. The facilitator of the planning workshop knew the academics through their work on Indigenous tourism and laterintroduced Laklak and Djawundil, Laklak’s daughter, to the academic partners. The academics spent two weeks on Country, starting to grapple with Yolŋu ways of knowing the world, and through establishing a (sometimes fraught) basis of recognition and trust, started to challenge their own methodological and intellectual approaches, and opened themselves to a relational ontology.

From the beginning, our research collaboration involved an organic process and was characterised by a mixture of enthusiasm and uncertainty. Like others who have shared their experience of establishing and negotiating research collaborations,[[26]](#endnote-26) we all acknowledge the way in which ethical problems infuse every stage of the research process. In developing our relationship, we all experienced uncertainties and insecurities, unforeseen events and ecstatic experiences. For the three academics, that meant really trying to get outside their own ontological assumptions and experiences. As Sarah reflects:

Every time I visit Bawaka I am forced beyond myself in unexpected ways. It is an amazing privilege to begin to see the world in a different way. You can read it and hear it but the first time you really *feel* your kinship to the wind, or really *hear* the sand talking to you, really *understand* yourself as just another part of the web, same as that turtle, well that is an amazing thing. But wow, you also realise how ignorant you are about basic protocol and behaviour. How do you show the respect, really? The cues that we learn from our own upbringing (asking questions in an enthusiastic way, for example), they can lead you astray.

Kate, Sarah and Sandie were conscious of wanting to give something valuable, yet they were also aware that there were complexities around speaking, hearing and understanding what valuable might even mean in this context. As we got to know each other and shared our aspirations and values, ideas of how we could collaborate began to form. For Laklak, it was the first time she had worked with women from the university. She describes how she came to the decision to work with the academics:

After sitting down and telling stories to the university women, I felt inside my heart, inside my soul, that Kate, Sarah and Sandie were good, kind people that believed the stories and that understood. My feeling was that they would hold the knowledge in the dillybag[[27]](#endnote-27) inside their head and heart. I then told my sisters and my family how we would all work together.

For the academics, being female and bringing their babies and children to Bawaka on the initial and subsequent visits has been an important factor in building the relationships. Focusing on the children’s interaction with Laklak and her family decentred the ‘research element’ of the visit and also provided an explicit way into the webs of kinship that underpin Yolŋu ontology (see section *Fieldwork and families* below). This process reflected all the angst and joy involved in the establishment of new relationships and emphasised how crucial this process is to long-term trust and reciprocity.

For all of us, the connections that we make have become intergenerational and transcend the immediacy of our time together. As Laklak explains:

And when I go away from Bawaka, I bring my grandchildren too. We went down to Sydney and Newcastle for a book launch, an exhibition and some workshops. We stayed with Kate, Sarah and Sandie down there. Taking our kids was important. Nanukala made lots of friends playing and exchanging culture. Sometimes when Kate, Sarah and Sandie leave, I cry, I miss them. I think about them when they are gone. In Yirrkala, we talk about them. We’re always thinking about family.

We decided to work collaboratively on a book about women and weaving as our first project. This fit in well with the work Laklak was doing through the women’s program and enabled her to share and document the stories associated with weaving so that they could be shared with other non-Indigenous women both locally and internationally. She also saw the book as a way of communicating Yolŋu knowledge to diverse audiences including tourists and the general public. It is also a way of reclaiming knowledge that was provided to academic researchers but is no longer easily accessible to Yolŋu, and to create a rich resource for cultural transmission for their children.

Following the success of our first book project we embarked on our second, *Rangan*, which builds further on Laklak’s desire to teach non-Indigenous people about Yolŋu knowledge. This book focuses on the notion of Yolŋu mathematics, or the patterns of belonging that underpin Yolŋu relationships with each other, other people, and with Country. Sharing authorship in the two book projects and their associated outputs has shown how we all knowingly create and engage with and in our research spaces to enable our ongoing research relationships and to attend to our common desire for mutual benefits.

Mutual benefits and research agreements

There were many reasons for the collaboration, with the academics initially interested in the nexus between development, post-colonialism and Indigenous knowledges and supporting research with practical benefits for communities. Laklak and her family sought out the partnership originally with the hope of getting support for the running of their business and for the women specifically, and assistance with how to share knowledge of Country and Yolŋu culture. As trust developed between us all, the Yolŋu women made known their desire to document their knowledge to influence external perceptions of their community and Aboriginal culture, and all began to work on publications as an income stream to fund community development activities.

Laklak, a Datiwuy Elder, and eldest sister of her family has many decades experience sharing her knowledge through her work as a teacher, artist and currently as founder and co-director of BCE. Her connection to this collaboration is also a function of her role as eldest sister, as she holds important cultural and ceremonial obligations including the need to educate others about nourishing ways of living with Country. As such, the key shared interest in establishing our collaborative relationship was the desire to create and distribute knowledge. Laklak and her family were keen to teach the academic women, and, knowing that they also teach, were keen for the knowledge to be passed on. Laklak utilises the partnership as part of her educational agenda to propagate stories and information about Yolŋu culture.

Since our first encounters, we see each other as co-researchers, in which the agency of the academics, Laklak and her family, and Bawaka Country, all shape fluid and ever-changing encounters. In an effort to avoid colonial inequities in these encounters and relationships, we have created a research agreement in which we detail the story of our relationship and discuss actual and potential research projects with the aim of achieving mutual benefits. The agreement, which can be seen as a legalistic, prosaic tool, is in this context part of actualising a relational ontology in the way it forges connections between agencies, is built upon broad networks of responsibility and reciprocity, and acknowledges temporal and spatial relationships as fundamental to our work. The agreement is between the members of the research team, including a wide range of family members, and was initially developed in January 2007. It outlines the history, details and aspirations of the collaboration and particularly focuses on the development of research projects which will produce mutual benefits. As McLean, Tipa, Panelli and the Moeraki Stream Team also found, a research agreement provides a ‘practical foundation for conducting relevant and appropriate research’, however the construction of this responsibility structure is a complex process requiring negotiation and time.[[28]](#endnote-28) The research agreement is continually revisited and updated as new situations and projects emerge.

In this agreement we elaborate our desired outcomes in a way that recognises the resonances and divergences among our different needs. We also detail how we see these mutual benefits materialising, which includes payments for time and access to Bawaka through the academic’s research grants, co-authorship of (both academic and non-academic) research outputs, and the production of interpretive materials for tourists. Financial benefits from the first book on weaving, for example, feed directly back to Laklak and her extended family and support BCE. Laklak also retains ownership of the books and materials produced during the research for the book (notes, photographs and recordings). Writing, producing, and promoting the book also increases confidence among Laklak and her family, and helps to promote BCE as a business role-model for other Indigenous communities.

In our work we design our outputs collaboratively to ensure they are mutually beneficial. Our desire to contribute to the creation of new institutional spaces that favour, facilitate, and give due recognition to alternative research products and to new forms of collaboration, are inspired by a range of other human and non-human collaborators.[[29]](#endnote-29) As a result, collectively, we perceive our outputs to include communication of knowledge through traditional and non-traditional mechanisms (including co-authorship of books for popular audiences, educational documentation, workshops for the community, exhibitions, changes to policy, the sharing of family connections, and academic journal articles and conference presentations), concurrent and consequential change in our lives and those of our families, institutional change created by challenging dominant conceptions of ‘academic knowledge’ (through our teaching both at the universities and at Bawaka) and importantly playing a part in engaging with country at Bawaka including nurturing it and contributing to its being. As both Nagar and mrs kinpainsby discuss, it is about moving beyond academic boundaries, or boundary crossings, where non-traditional outcomes can be institutionally recognised—‘not as the extra-curricular activities that are undertaken on the side—but as research products that require special skills and time and energy commitments, and that are central to scholarly knowledge production’.[[30]](#endnote-30)

While as a group we have given much attention to non-academic outputs and, in doing so, challenged the academy’s expectations that the academics’ focus should be primarily on scholarly outputs, the academics still recognise the need to meet their career/research needs and view the opportunity to share Indigenous knowledge with a non-Indigenous academic audience as significant. This is particularly important in an institutional environment that is western/euro-centric and discounts Indigenous voices. Like others, such as mrs kinpaisby and Gibson-Graham, we try to challenge the citation game. Our academic papers are co-authored with each team member, including the non-human, Bawaka Country, alternating as key author.[[31]](#endnote-31) This strategy replaces the notion of sole authorship with one that genuinely recognises and encourages collaboration—not only in shaping the outcome of research—but also in articulating and framing our research priorities and questions and critically in co-constructing new knowledges.

These relationships, however, are uncertain and constantly in negotiation. While a research agreement implies a straightforward endeavour, the realities of our work together are much more complex; sometimes they are fragile or confusing, and often they involve unexpected turns. It is in the everyday interactions around our research relationships that power can be seen in its most fluid and messiest forms as each of us directs, controls, authorises, interrupts, manipulates, gets frustrated, is enlightened, feels awful, is reassured.

Fieldwork and families

Personal relationships and obligations can significantly influence research and fieldwork and can result in more productive research endeavours. Academic narratives frequently minimise the often complex and unpredictable influence of family and friends on doing research, perpetuating the idea of researchers as disembodied, lone observers from nowhere. Exceptions include Frohlic, Cupples and Kindon who see fieldwork and family as clearly intertwined; the presence of their children helping to shape the research space, and ultimately, the knowledge produced.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Being women, having children and families, has had a substantial impact on our Indigenous-academic research collaboration and our professional and personal roles have become increasingly entwined. There is a clear understanding between the research team that while we take the role of researcher, teacher and student we are also mothers, partners, and friends. As a result, our personal lives are interwoven which reflects in part a Yolŋu ontology of connection within which the notion of an individual, free-floating (lone wolf) academic is almost incomprehensibly foreign. In this way Kate, Sarah and Sandie continue to challenge the academy and its more traditional ‘solitary fieldworker model’[[33]](#endnote-33) through a vision of collaborative research or what they have referred to elsewhere as an interwoven learning exchange.[[34]](#endnote-34)

In a Yolŋu ontology, the question of family is understood in terms of kinship and connection or *gurrutu*. *Gurrutu* is a concept that encompasses what Western frameworks might understand as an extended family, but it goes beyond this in several ways. Firstly, *gurrutu* emplaces everyone in relation to each other. It is a broader cyclical pattern by which every person, and indeed every thing, every bird, tree, wind and rock, is placed in relation to each other. Thus, *gurrutu* is not only non-individualistic, it is fundamentally relational and more-than-human. Further, *gurrutu* signals rights, responsibilities and reciprocity. Not only are people placed in relation to each other and the environment, they are also placed in relationships of trust, obligation and responsibility with every person and element within our world. In this way, *gurrutu* underpins and connects everything. As Laklak explains in the current draft of one of our co-authored texts:

*Gurrutu* is our pattern of kinship. Who is related to who. Who is related to what and how. When we say related to, we *do* mean who is your aunty, your cousin, your stepmother, but it is more than that too. These patterns of kinship cover all people and things. *Gurrutu* is an interlocking system that includes everyone and everything in relationship to each other. Related means, how are you connected? How do you fit? Where are your ties, your obligations, where is your place in the world?

Yolŋu people who work for extended periods of time with non-Indigenous people may adopt them into their families, thus emplacing them within this broad network of *gurrutu* and its associated obligations. Rather than simply collaborators, adoption for the academics in the collaboration discussed here redefines them as kin. As Laklak explains:

Giving names and adopting Kate, Sarah and Sandie and their families into our family has been a way of giving back. It’s very special. They and all their family will always be a part of our family now. Their children and parents, they will always belong here. When they are old, they can come and visit their family in Arnhem Land.

The context of the collaboration, its cultural constructs, family-based structure, and, more profoundly, its acknowledgment of *gurrutu*, has shaped the collaboration into something very special for the research collaborators and holds lessons for the ways academia and development studies view research. Indigenous family organisations may be based on different kinds of relationships—with work assigned in ways that may reflect family practice—not expected in Western organisational behaviour and structure. These relationships extend beyond business partners and even extended family (understood in a Western sense) to include all Yolŋu as well as the non-human environment (rocks, water, tides, spirit beings, clouds, plants, animals etc). So the way in which researchers relate to an organisation given its context and status, given *gurrutu*, is entirely different. Moreover, as the Yolŋu researchers are simultaneously research partners, business owners, family members and community members placed within a broad web of kinship, they prioritise and manage a wide range of outcomes and aspirations. This brings to the academic-community research relationships advantages including improved research and community activism outcomes[[35]](#endnote-35) alongside employment and skills development for community members, the provision of networks and connections both within and outside the community, an ability to integrate research findings into practice, and a long term commitment to supporting community development.[[36]](#endnote-36) These are all understood as part of a web of relationality and reciprocity.

Families, and *gurrutu*, figure in other ways too. The academics try to ensure that at least two academics are at Bawaka if the other academic has family or other work responsibilities. They see this as a process of recognising and reconfiguring power relationships as they, together with their Yolŋu co-researchers, reconsider the mutuality and reciprocity of academic processes and outputs. It means that we all claim ownership of our research together (for example, in co-authoring articles, even if at different times some of us have not been present during the field work or have not taken the lead). Laklak also draws on family support, for example recently sending her sister, daughter and nephew to New Zealand for a geographers’ conference and to work on a draft of our new book. The field is therefore not necessarily in Bawaka, be it in the north or in the south, our partners, children and grandchildren are not simply accommodated by our work but enable it and enhance it. Our various loved ones actively and constantly shape the type of research we want to do and the type of research we can do. As Laklak remarks:

by working together we would help build long lasting relationships that could continue through the generations. The children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of the women both from Bawaka and the universities could grow up together, teach each other and all lead together.

Collaboration and non-human agency

Our research takes place in sites of overlapping human and non-human coexistence and territories. Renee Louis, in her discussion of Indigenous methodologies, alludes to the expanded networks in which research is embedded and to which it should be should be accountable. She points to four unwavering principles in relation to Indigenous research agendas: relational accountability, respectful representation, reciprocal appropriation and rights and regulation.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Relational accountability ‘implies that all parts of the research process are related, from inspiration to expiration, and that the researcher is not just responsible for nurturing and maintaining this relationship but is also accountable to ‘all your relations’’.[[38]](#endnote-38) These relations do not only include human relations, but incorporate limitless ‘non-human’ entities, what are usually described as the elements, animals, trees, landscapes and so on in western contexts. In Yolŋu cosmology, these relations are characterised by ‘dense webs of connection’, with all cosmological elements embedded within the webs.[[39]](#endnote-39) This precludes the possibility of separating human relations from any other relations and embeds human, non-human animals, tides, moons, elements, trees, plants, landscapes, places in the same relational frame.

At Bawaka, non-humans—landscapes, seascapes, animals, wind, sun, moon, tides and spirits such as Bayini, a spirit woman of Bawaka—constantly shape and influence our research collaboration. This collaboration and the way we make knowledge together are situated on, through and with place. The Australian Aboriginal concept of Country adds new dimensions to our research understandings as Country refers not only to a territorial place, but contains multiple connotations that go beyond ‘place’. As Rose[[40]](#endnote-40) states:

People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy … country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life.

Recognising non-human agencies as sapient and purposeful contributors to our research collaborations opens spaces for more meaningful engagements with ‘place’. In the context of our collaboration, it enables engagement with Country so that the non-human agencies which constitute Country—animals, plants, moon, sun, rain, wind, creator spirits, protective spirits—all interrelate to sanction our work, mediate what can be done, and inspire research directions.[[41]](#endnote-41) We acknowledge the importance of place, and of non-humans in the research collaboration by including, in our most recent papers, Bawaka Country as a co-author. As Laklak says:

Land is your family too. Place is your family too. You always come from the land. This place, Bawaka, is mother land to me. I am caretaker, the public officer. This is the Yothu Yindi relationship. You always have to think about the land, without it you have no *matha*—language, identity, culture, kinship.

Such an understanding radically reframes what it means to collaborate. Collaboration becomes a more-than-human event. As all co-researchers begin to see themselves as deeply connected to each other, to non-human others and to Country, the lens of understanding shifts. In place of an autonomous individual meeting and working with another individual (two lone-wolves talking to each other), collaboration means understanding ourselves as relationally constructed and profoundly accountable. Country itself acts, guides, tells and listens. Country must be respected, nourished and responded to just as it will respect, respond to and nourish us. As stated in our draft text *Rangan,* researchers sit within:

… one big network of kinship and relationships. It is a web of life. Life that goes from one person to another person to land to trees to rocks to water, wind, clouds, rivers, creeks, waterholes. The network of *gurrutu* is what makes land and what makes a person who they are. It is what links a person to their land, to the nature and to other people. It is so complex that everything fits and makes a whole. If one unpicked it, everything to do with *gurrutu* would link to everything else. It is the centre of everything. It’s an everlasting web. It stands so strong. It’s a web of civilisation of the Yolŋu core. The essence.

Conclusion: Towards a relational ontology of connection

Our aim in this paper has been to grapple with a relational ontology, exploring what it might mean for collaboration and, more broadly, for the practice of development. We have asked, ‘What might it mean for development studies if we are to heed calls to embed our thinking and our practice within non-Western relational ontologies?’ Development studies has variously been urged to attend to power relations, Indigenous epistemologies and emotion as practitioners, development ‘subjects’ and scholars call for a development open to different ways of knowing and being.[[42]](#endnote-42) Development studies has struggled to address criticisms of Euro-centrism, of having a narrow, economistic, modernist approach, and foundered in shedding its colonial and imperial roots. While many post-development scholars have tried to move beyond this modernist and colonial history, scholars such as Corbridge, Pieterse and Nustad point out that post-development has been unable to realise its lofty goals.[[43]](#endnote-43) Indeed, while post-development approaches have heeded calls for an anti-colonial development, the practicalities of how this might happen continue to allude. Where, many ask, are the alternatives promised by post-development? Can there ever be a development that is truly post-colonial? Drawing upon post-colonial scholarship, Indigenous geographies, and our own experiences working together as an Indigenous-non-Indigenous team, we have tried to contribute to this project, the project of a decolonised, post development.

Reflecting on our collaboration as a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars has highlighted a range of important lessons for doing the doing of post-development research, for conducting research that is ethical and relational, and that draws upon and respects, in the deepest way, non-Western ontological and epistemological frameworks. We have found that relationships need to be nurtured and underpinned by commitments based on patience, reciprocity and respect. These include methodological considerations such as long-term relationship development, flexible and extended research timeframes, appreciation of competing priorities, communicative variants and an understanding that engagement also depends on many contingent factors that are open to continual change.

Our collaboration values the diversity of experiences, multiple realities and different roles of each member of the team, understanding our collaborative process as one of co-construction, of working and creating together. This is reflected in our research agreement where we acknowledge the different priorities of individual members of the research team yet undertake negotiations to ensure that all participants in the research collaboration contribute to the conceptualisation and development of the aims, process and outcomes of research. By continually revisiting the agreement, recognising it as always becoming, the fluidity of our relationships is also acknowledged. We are aware of our limitations, recognising that while we are trying to forge a different path, this is difficult and incomplete. Our process is full of uncertainties, of potential misunderstandings, of possibilities missed. Yet, emphasising the value of negotiation, of slow steps and the building of relationships has helped us on this journey.

Our research collaboration has been based on striving to ensure our outputs are mutually beneficial, with the very idea of ‘benefits’ broadly understood and always negotiated. As we do this, we challenge the structure of the academy and the constraints and values embedded therein. Engaging with knowledge produced beyond the university has required new ways of relating, and thinking beyond the human/non-human binary. It also means acknowledging the often incommensurate nature of these alternative knowledge traditions and the constraints of university and government bureaucracies which often fail to acknowledge or engage with the new ways of doing.

Ultimately, we have tried to embed our research within a relational ontology. We have seen ourselves as members of a broad web of kinship that involves not only us as co-researchers, but our families (both Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu), and the more-than-human world. Inspired by the collaborative and transdiciplinary approaches of other research collaborations,[[44]](#endnote-44) we are committed to forming and sustaining collaborative partnerships with academic and non-academic actors in ‘other’ worlds.[[45]](#endnote-45) Recognising that knowledges are produced in places beyond the university, we argue that it is critical that knowledge created through research collaboration be produced and shared in ways that are simultaneously accessible and relevant to multiple audiences *here* and *there*,[[46]](#endnote-46) ‘both within and without the university’.[[47]](#endnote-47) We feel that we have gone some way to achieving this, through both our non-academic and academic outputs. The impact of the research collaboration can be seen in the transformative potential of these projects to strengthen communities and progress self-determination through the documentation and communication of Indigenous knowledge for non-Indigenous audiences.

Through this approach, the very meaning of development is changed. The outcomes of the development process are rethought, are understood differently. What is valued is no longer narrowly economic, though questions of livelihood do come into play. Rather, outcomes are defined through a broad accountability of each of us to the members of the research team, to other Yolŋu family members, to Bawaka itself. Outcomes include the act of sharing a Yolŋu world view with non-Indigenous others as part of a process of decolonising non-Indigenous, as well as Indigenous, minds. They include our stories told together, baskets woven, children nurtured, relationships forged. Those doing the developing, the nurturing, are not the non-Indigenous academic researchers (who are themselves most definitively *not* the experts in these interactions). Neither are the Yolŋu collaborators in isolation seen as the sole developers, as somehow pure and authentic purveyors of Indigenous experience. Rather, the developing is done by all of us, the research team, our families, the Country itself, and, most importantly, the relationships between us all.

Engaging with extended networks of collaboration calls forth an ethics of collaboration. This includes recognising and valuing Indigenous relational frameworks, and in this case a Yolŋu ontology of connection, which has meant that our research is embedded in considerations that stretch beyond academic demands. In other words, we see an ethics in which relationships, responsibilities and accountabilities are no longer contained within the researcher-researcher dynamic, but draw in a range of other non-researcher centred agencies. The needs of our colleagues, research partners, family members, loved ones, animals, spirits, seasons and county itself actively and constantly shape our research. In this way we feel that our Indigenous-academic research collaboration has not only created new pathways for Indigenous individuals and groups to define and influence the research agenda and drive the research agenda but it has offered the opportunity for all participants to undergo a process of learning and transformation through co-creation.

1. **Notes**

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22. *Ibid.* p 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
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