gendered substances and objects in ritual: an australian aboriginal study
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ABSTRACT
The creative action of the foundational beings known as Dreamings lies at the heart of Aboriginal Australian ceremony. In ritual, gender is drawn into a nexus of generative action and interaction. I will make the case that gender characterizes country, ceremonies, many sacred sites and many objects and substances. People, country, sites and ceremonies are integral to the bringing forth of the life of the world, and draw on a root paradigm of birth. I will examine that paradigm from the perspective of gender in domains of blood, ritual, country, men and women, and objects. The analysis will show that while gender is most assuredly a difference that makes a difference, in Gregory Bateson’s famous words, it is the play of difference itself that is most productively worked with in ritual.

Keywords: Aboriginal Australians, ceremony, fertility, secrecy, land claims
Introduction
If you are a woman are you always and entirely a woman? One of my Aboriginal teachers told me about a woman in a neighboring community who had failed to respect the boundary around a ceremony from which women are excluded. She intruded, and as punishment they drew on men’s power and turned her into a man—but only from the knees down.

This story provocatively introduces an organization of gender separation that is severely defended: how else to explain punishment of a woman who intrudes into a men’s zone? At the same time it equally provocatively suggests a domain of gender that is open to recombination. Along with other papers in this special issue of *Material Religion* (Kenyon, Lohmann, and Straight, in particular), my analysis opens gender, objects and action in ways that confound ideas of gender as a totalizing construct defined by “either—or.”

The teachers I discuss in this paper live, or lived, in the open savannah country of the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory of Australia. There in the monsoonal tropics the grasses are yellow and gold, the soils are red, white-barked eucalypts are crowned with dusky green-gray leaves, and the sky is large, blue, and encompassing. Mesas and cliff lines interrupt the open plains and the big rivers snake through the country marking their paths by the denser green of the riverine trees. I have been working with and learning from Aboriginal people in this region for over twenty-five years. Several languages and communities are located within the area of my research, and I refer to the people collectively as Victoria River people.

White settlers established broad acres cattle ranches in this region just over 100 years ago. Overrunning the homes of the indigenous peoples of the region, they first shot and hunted away the local peoples, and later pressed them into service on the cattle stations as an unfree and unpaid labor force. In the mid-1960s Aboriginal people in this region went on strike against the appalling system of oppression that ruled their lives. Citizenship was granted in about 1969, and has enabled people to participate in national and international struggles for equity and cultural survival. All of my older teachers worked in near slavery for white ranchers for greater or shorter periods of their lives; most went on strike, and all have achieved some measure of land rights.

In recent years Pentecostal missionaries have worked to suppress or eradicate the indigenous religious life, but their efforts have not yet been successful. I have discussed their actions elsewhere (Rose 2004) and perhaps there will always be more to say about the chaotic confusions that arise when missionaries try to impose either—or distinctions and hierarchical dualisms and to eradicate a cultural logic founded in both—and and nuanced contextuality. In this paper I hold my analytic gaze on nuanced contextuality, focusing on autochthonous religious life as it is expressed in major ceremonial events (known in Aboriginal English as “business”). These include the initiation of young men, in which both men
and women are key participants, and the gender restricted ceremonies in which men and women separate into closed or "secret" spheres in order to perform their ceremonies. Secret business separates men and women, defining some knowledge as appropriate only to one or the other (see Michaels 1986 for an excellent discussion of secrecy).

I avoid secret matters for reasons of respect as well as ethics. As will become clear, while I cannot speak of men's business because I am not privy to it, I am able to draw on published work that offers some insight into that sphere, and while I am unable to speak of women's business because so much of the knowledge is secret, I am able to discuss matters that have both a public and a secret face. In peer-reviewed academic writing, as in Aboriginal verbal, gestural, and iconic communication, one seeks to say that which may be formally unsayable but which is communicable using allusion, homology, and other techniques. Secrecy thus poses interesting challenges for standard expository writing, especially in our social science mode where the aim is to explain as clearly and comprehensively as possible. I approach this challenge by bracketing my exposition with images of two objects and inviting readers to contemplate each in itself and to consider how they resonate with each other. In between these two images I take an expository approach to issues of creation, sites, country, substance, and male/female gender constructs.

Dreaming Origins, Earth Processes
In the beginning, according to Victoria River people, the Earth was covered with salt water. The water pulled back, and life came forth. Referred to by some people as "Mother," Earth brings forth life. The creative and shape-changing ancestors—the Dreamings—came traveling into country, shaping it, marking it, naming it, laying down human groups and their non-human kin, ceremonies, plant communities, and animal habitats. There were men and women Dreamings, and their actions created gendered geography. Dreamings also created the territorial units known as countries: areas that are small enough to accommodate face-to-face groups of people, and
large enough to sustain their lives. The ceremonies, including
the songs and designs, belong to the people of the country
as instituted by Dreaming. Performance “lifts up the country,”
people say, enhancing its capacity to flourish.

The origins of the Dreamings themselves are spoken
of allusively: they emerged from holes in the ground. This
emergence lays out the basis for the birth-like process by
which all life comes into being. Law in Aboriginal English
invokes the whole domain of ecological complexity: how
things came into being and how they must go on if life is to
continue to come into being. The process, defined by my
teacher Hobbles Danaiyini as coming up out of the ground,
is foundational for an analysis that explores motion and
substance. From inside to outside, from life contained to life
emergent, there is no metamorphosis that does not emerge
from and rely upon the paradigm of birth, the sacred sites,
and the ceremonies.

In another paper (Rose 2003) I suggested that the
West’s long history of equating the sacred with the eternal
and immutable ill equips us to imagine a world in which
life is valued for its qualities of birth, change, motion, and
temporality. I proposed that the work of bringing life into
embodied being, work that is accomplished primarily in ritual,
involves this metamorphosis: from inside to outside, from
potential to actual. Motion is integral to the ongoing creation
of the living world, but so too is fixity. Dreaming men and
women imprinted themselves on the Earth, leaving behind
the traces of their activities, the sites of their actions, and
their specific presence. Many of the “sacred sites,” as they
are known in contemporary Australian culture, are sources or
reservoirs of potential life.

Earth itself is thus both the origin of and the artefact of
Dreaming action. From a fixity perspective, the geography
can be understood as a sacred and gendered artefact. From
a motion perspective, the analysis goes in the direction of
understanding gender difference as a foundational pattern
in the ongoing bringing forth of life. In the remainder of this
paper I will explore the intersection of motion, gender, and
artefact. In doing so I link my analysis to that of Magowan
(2001) in considering Dreaming kinesis. The analysis moves
away from ideas of objects as bounded things, and look

toward the fluidity of interacting substances. In the Victoria
River context, I will be saying, gendered objects include Earth,
other subjects, and the substances that flow between them.

Hobbles asserted the birth-like Earth origins of life saying:
“Everything come up out of ground—language, people, emu,
kangaroo, grass. That’s Law” (in Rose 2000: 57). Hobbles
hated what the missionaries were teaching—that Aboriginal
Law was the work of the devil—and he rarely missed an
opportunity to say so. After asserting that Earth origins are
Law he added: “Missionary just trying to bust everything up.
They fuck ‘em up right through. Gonna end up in a big war.
Before, everything been good—no war, no missionary” (in
Rose 2000: 57). When the Assemblies of God missionaries
finally established themselves in the community of Yarralin
their first attacks on indigenous Law were targeted at women: at the nearby sacred site, at ceremony, and at the long tradition of autonomous sacred work. I shouldn’t have been surprised. This is a familiar story with an ancient imprimatur. Even knowing enough of biblical history to appreciate the pattern, I was still shocked when it started happening before my eyes, and happening to women whose knowledge I so deeply respected.

Blood
Dreaming women traveled, and they bled. They bled, and they gave birth. Women’s blood is one of the most prominent traces of life force in the sacred geography. Places where the Dreaming women bled and gave birth today hold the presence of the blood of creation; they continue to be sources of life and Law. Menstrual blood (as well as other forms of blood) remains in the ground as red ocher deposits. Some sites are accessed exclusively by the women of the country where the site is located; some are accessed exclusively by the men. Both men and women have an interest in protecting the integrity of these sites. Dreaming blood is dug up and used in ritual as people are rubbed with fat and then rubbed with the ocher so that they glisten and glow with a shining redness that connects people to the processes I have been discussing—birth, flow, emergence, life. In some contexts, as I will discuss below, human blood as well as the ocher that is understood to be Dreaming blood, is used in ceremony. This powerful substance also offers a perspective on fixity and motion: it is contained within sites, and it continues to flow in and through the bodies of living things; both forms are worked into ritual.

Blood flows outward from the body and into the ground. New life emerges from the ground and, with pregnancy, into the bodies of women. Menstruation constitutes a moment of intensified participation in the flow of life between country
and the transitory bodies of the people of the country. As an event, menstrual blood is an announcement: something is happening. The question is, what does menstrual blood announce? In a survey of menstrual symbolism, Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) note two contrasting ways of construing menstrual flow. One way is as a sign of failed fertility, thus associating it with death. The other way sees blood as a sign of onset of fertility and thus associates it with life. The two are contrasting but not necessarily mutually exclusive. Evidence from Aboriginal Australia derives from both public and secret contexts (see Berndt 1950; Gross 1980). As my discussion of Dreaming blood seeks to articulate, blood is life-oriented; it signals the possibility of, and perhaps calls forth, new life.

I pause briefly to consider feminist studies of gendered bodies in the Western world that have critically exposed an extremely different form of menstrual symbolism. This literature starts with a consideration of the body as the bearer of particular kinds of subjectivity (Grosz 1994). Thus, Western liberal democracies rest on a concept of subjecthood, or subjectivity, which is implicitly male and individuated, in the sense that there are clear and clean boundaries between persons (Kristeva 1982; Rosengarten 1996: 16–27). Grosz makes the point that the good subject is in control of the body—that is, the body is fully enclosed, and the boundaries are under the will of the person. Clearly human and other bodies do not conform to these ideals, and the feminist critique focuses on how the familiar gender binary is deployed to cast women in the role of the transgressive, and by default to cast men in the role of the proper subject. Within these idealized images of the embodied subject, women appear to be extremely transgressive. The wetness, fluidity, and “leakiness” of menstrual blood escape the requirements of a clean and proper body (Douglas 1966; Kristeva 1982; see Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). The permeability signaled by menstrual blood suggests a lack of proper subjecthood, so that for women to achieve subject parity in Western societies, menstrual blood must be hidden, and the fact of individual menstruation concealed from public knowledge (Rosengarten 1996: 27–66).

I offer this very brief summary of feminist critique of Western embodied subjectivity because it poses an invigorating question for analysis: what do we learn about gender, life, birth, and fertility from a radically different way of conceptualizing bodies? What shifts are required in our understanding when permeability, rather than being a debility, is absolutely central to a full life?

One of the things that is highlighted is that the mystery of life depends on metamorphosis, and that blood is central to this metamorphosis. And so we see that for people whose purpose it is to promote the flourishing of their country, permeability and blood are simply too important to be confined to one sex only.

Recent studies suggest that Aboriginal women formerly would have experienced very few menstrual periods in the course of their lives. Later onset of menstruation (compared
to the present) combined with long periods of lactation, and in all probability with periods during which body fat was below the critical threshold for menstruation are key factors. Diane Bell has stated that in her interviews with senior Aboriginal women, she found that women could remember each menstrual period of their fertile lives and count them on their fingers (quoted in Buckley and Gottlieb 1988: 45). Nancy Howell's (1979) research with the Dobe !Kung people of the Kalahari in southern Africa assessed the data in light of the critical fatness hypothesis and concluded that normal fatness levels of the !Kung may often have been close to the critical level and may have played a role in preventing or delaying conception.

If, as seems likely, these factors were operative among Aboriginal people in arid and semi-arid zones such as the Victoria River region, then it is also likely that critical fat levels responded to cycles of rain and drought for humans just as for most other mammals. Chris Knight (1988) makes an interesting case for the possibility that prior to colonization Aboriginal Australian women menstruated in synchrony. The ethnographic evidence is sketchy but compelling. The significant aspect to synchrony, in my view, is that in the savannah it would have been linked to the extreme variation between wet and dry seasons. A further cycle of synchronicity may have connected with the longer cycles of drought and rain characterized by the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO).

In the Victoria River region, most years offer a period of abundance (late wet, early dry) and a period of extreme stress (late dry, early wet). It is probable that amenorrhea would have been most common during stress times (especially during droughts), and that women who were ready to menstruate would be most likely to do so in the period shortly after the wet season when food was in abundance. This was also the period when people gathered for ceremony, most of which concerns fertility. Aboriginal women have remarked upon how vigorous activity tends to stimulate menstrual flow, and it may be that dancing all night instigates or enhances the flow of blood. Synchronicity would thus have been linked to ecological cycles, and the release of menstrual blood as it flowed down women's legs and was danced into the ceremony ground imbued that ground with power. It constituted one of women's contributions in fertility rituals, and may have offered evidence of the efficacy of ritual.

**Gender in Country**

Women's blood is a powerful, generative substance, and women and men both manage it. I will focus on men's management of women's blood as the published literature provides an entrée into matters that otherwise are rarely discussed publicly. Men's ceremonies have the intention of invigorating the fertility of the country (both in reference to specific totemic species, and more broadly in reference to overall fertility). In some ceremonies, certain men dance a dance that is similar to women's dancing (Wild 1977/8: 18). These men reopen the subincision wound on the penis,
so that as they dance their blood splatters their thighs and flows down their legs (Wild 1977/8: 19). Some authors have contended that this replication of women's blood by men is a symbolic appropriation of women's reproductive power (Swain 1993: 191; see also Buckley and Gottlieb 1988: 17), and some go even further to claim that men transform women's blood into symbolic capital which they use to dominate women (Linke 1999: 4–5).

These ideas are misleading in the Victoria River context. Ideas of symbolic appropriation set men and women in opposition to each other, whereas they are actually in complementary and procreative relationships. Furthermore, ideas of appropriation sustain, and even reinforce, the theory that gender categories are given in nature. Culture, in these explanations, is a mechanism whereby the naturally given can be culturally supplemented, or even supplanted. Men are men, and women are women, the idea seems to be, and in their separate sphere men work culturally with that which belongs naturally to women.

In contrast, I draw on Gertrude Stotz’s (1993) innovative work to suggest that in ritual events, people go into their male–female separated spheres in order to embody the procreative gender identities of mother and father. In the context of men’s ceremony, men enter an exclusive zone within which they then become either father or mother. The boundary defined as “men only,” and which is so clear in one context (exclusion of women), enables a zone within which men differentiate, moving into dialog with country as procreative partners. Wild states that “in men’s rituals, the ... men for whom the country is mother's country’ dance in women’s styles” (1977/8: 18). It thus becomes clear that the blood from the male “mother” is a flow of fertility-making male menstrual blood.6

Within this subtle understanding of the complexities of gender, we can see that in any given ceremony men who dance for their mother’s country dance as “mothers,” and the men who dance for their father’s country dance as “fathers.” Similar observations could be made in the context of women’s business—the gender category women (excluding men) enables a zone of gendered procreative partnerships involving mothers, fathers, and country. Together, women with women and men with men, but also together as “mother” and “father,” people dance up the fertility of the country. The work of bringing life forth is thus the work of men and women, separately from each other and in conjunction with their country.

Contemplation of Objects
Procreative work is embodied practice, and is shot through with uncertainty, unpredictability, contingency. Men and women carry out some of this work in their separate spheres, and they work with their permeable bodies to generate flows: from within to outside the body, and from outside the Earth to inside as people’s feet and blood imprint the ground. At the same time, they call forth the life that is contained within
the Earth and the sacred sites. The very permeability of the Earth enables life to be brought forth into connection, and the very permeability of living bodies enables new life and new connections.

When women do ritual, they work with sacred objects some of which are in the shape of digging sticks. They make the designs on the ground and they penetrate the design and the Earth with their sacred sticks (Watson 2003). The design and the implanted pole become a focal point of power and flow.

Visually and imaginatively we can see a lot of gender complexity in women’s ritual work with this and similar objects. Another layer of complexity might be apprehended when we consider that in Victoria River languages and rituals the pole is identified with a snake as well as a penis, and that snakes are associatively linked with a variety of meanings that include not only penis, but also testes or clitoris, according to context (Berndt 1950: 33–4, 51).

Figure 1 shows two clap sticks, one male and one female; sticks like this are suitable for use in either open or secret contexts. As I look at them, I consider how similar they are to each other, and how that similarity enhances the idea that it takes two—for music, as for procreation. Figure 2 shows a more differentiated set of gender imagery—the sacred pole and the circular design which is penetrated. Cultural knowledge ambiguates the obvious differentiation, not only because this is women’s work, but because the Earth is not being impregnated, but rather is being sung up into the world of ephemeral life.

In sum, the gendering of country, sites, human bodies, substances, ritual, and objects serves both to sustain difference and to work procreatively with difference. The complexity of gendering lies here: that the joy of ritual work draws people and their substances and objects into a fullness of male–female/father–mother action.

The World of Flow

In 1988 I was working with a group of Victoria River people on a claim to land brought before the Aboriginal Land Commissioner under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. There were women’s sites within the claim area, and the women had secret ceremonies for the Dreamings. Women wanted to prove their relationship to country in the deepest way possible, and that meant doing secret business. The Land Commissioner, a Federal Court Judge, was a man, and for the ceremonial action to count as evidence it would have to be witnessed not only by him but by the lawyers (all men) including those representing opponents to the claim. The women decided that in spite of the Law excluding men, they would make an exception. On the morning of the day of their ceremony the men all went off on site visits that did not require women, and the women all went off to the area where they had been preparing a ceremony ground. They had brought the sacred objects from the keeping place, and their plan was to spend the
day preparing for ceremony, which would be witnessed in the late afternoon. Not long after we had assembled all the women and their gear the senior women told me there was a problem. They wanted me to go back to camp and convey the message that they had decided not to show the ceremony after all. As they explained: "From Dreaming right up till now no man has looked at this. We can’t lose that Law." They spent the rest of the day doing the ceremony—for the country and Dreamings, for themselves, and for the non-Aboriginal women who had been invited to the business. It had no evidentiary value other than that I was able to note for the record that it had occurred.

I did what I was told to do that morning, and as I drove the truck back to camp I was burning with the lack of equity that this intercultural encounter imposed upon women. But along with my indignation at the injustice of the procedure, my thoughts also were drifting around my ambiguous position. On earlier occasions women had brought me into secret/sacred business and my teacher Jessie Wirpa had instructed me: “You are inside the Law now. You’ve got to take care of this.” “Taking care” meant working on land claims, and thus for me meant being enough on the outside to serve as consultant and expert witness, and to be the go-between carrying messages back and forth between the main camp and the gender restricted ceremony ground.

The ethics of this inside–outside position are not new to anthropologists, but they are forever challenging. How to sustain secrecy and at the same time acknowledge porosity and flow? Does “taking care” include finding ways for information to move differently in the world and for the life-giving force of blood to find new sites of power? Along with dancing blood into the ground, is it perhaps possible also to inscribe it into texts? Flowing across cultures, events, and a multiplicity of media, can blood affirm a metaphysics of birth, motion, and metamorphosis in a world that seems increasingly dominated by death?

notes and references


2 Montague (1974) devoted a major study to “Coming into being among the Australian Aborigines.” He limited his focus to questions of beliefs about human procreation, thereby approaching but never managing to engage with the larger issues of life in all
its differentiation, connectivity, and permeability.

3 The metamorphosis that works across boundaries of inside-outside, or life contained and life brought forth is central to a multitude of cosmogonies around the world (for example, see Lovin and Reynolds 1985).

4 Other forms of blood include the blood of animal Dreamings, such as the famous Parachina ocher which is variously identified as blood from a Dingo giving birth to pups and blood from Emus who were chased by Dingoes and who transformed into ocher (McBryde 2000). A parallel study could focus on the interactive presence of semen, in sites and in ceremony. Nancy Munn (1973) deals elegantly with semen and its transformations in her study of Warlpiri culture.

5 Buckley’s and Gottlieb’s Blood Magic (1988) is an exemplary text that holds to the possibility of making cross-cultural and comparative sense of human experience. It may be a measure of the embeddedness of ideas of pollution in Western thought that some scholars find in Blood Magic a message of the universality of blood as pollutant, for example, Linke (1999: 73).

6 There is a body of literature, too large to be discussed here and especially notable in the context of Papua New Guinea, on men’s use of blood in ways that connect their own blood to menstrual blood. Equally, permeability is well discussed in some of that literature (for a recent example, see Bonnemère 2004).

7 A similar object is pictured on the cover of Bell’s 1983 book, Daughters of the Dreaming.

8 There is a large literature on this topic, but no one has probed the complexities of these cross-cultural encounters more fully and with greater critical insight than Povinelli (1993; 2002).


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