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## **'It's not about believing' – exploring the transformative potential of cultural acknowledgment in an Indigenous tourism context**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper directly challenges the persisting argument that in the host-(uninvited) guest relationship of Kimberley coastal tourism in Australia's far northwest, Traditional Owners (the hosts) have a pedagogic responsibility to first educate the tourism industry (the guests) of their impacts on them in order to facilitate culturally appropriate and sustainable tourism experiences. We contend that such an argument reflects a deeply entrenched context of erasure and power-imbalance between Australian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. We highlight, using three decades of public records, that government and industry have and continue to ignore knowledge and learning shared by Kimberley Aboriginal peoples in attempts to rectify serious issues of cultural impacts and risks to visitors arising from unsanctioned tourism activities on Traditional Owners land and sea country. We argue for the possibility of tourism operating in a mutually satisfactory hybrid space in which acknowledgment, tolerance and respect discharges the need for *understanding* different ontologies that operate within that space but provides the *potential for learning*. Using Bourdieu's notion of transformative practice, we propose that the development of such a hybrid space could transform the problem of unsanctioned tourism access to the Kimberley coast into an iteration that could facilitate its taming and thus a shift towards sustainable practices based on mutual recognition and respect.

### **Keywords:**

Indigenous; hybrid space; Kimberley, Western Australia; transformative practice; tourism; host-guest relationship; erasure; tolerance

## Introduction

This paper specifically addresses a pragmatic issue surrounding host-visitor interactions in the remote area tourism context of the Kimberley in far northwest Australia: the persisting argument that the Traditional Owners of the area (the hosts) have a pedagogic responsibility to first educate the tourism industry (the guests) of the industry's impacts on them in order to facilitate culturally appropriate and sustainable tourism experiences. This argument has been voiced repeatedly over several years by tourism and government representatives and even researchers during formal and informal discussions, in research interviews, and during workshops attended/observed by the authors and was further reiterated by an anonymous reviewer of a recent paper. We use the case of expedition cruise tourism along the Kimberley coast to counter this argument and propose a theoretical framework to facilitate a paradigm shift necessary to bridge entrenched ontological barriers and ways of acting/being in this arena.

The first section of this paper briefly touches on host-visitor interactions as a fundamental element of tourism. Then, in section two, we contend that the above argument reflects a wider and deeply entrenched context of erasure and power-imbalance that exists more generally between Australian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In section three, we highlight the importance of respecting local symbolic representations as a way to recognise the Other. Section four demonstrates that government and industry have and continue to ignore knowledge and learning shared by Kimberley Aboriginal peoples. This knowledge was shared in attempts to rectify serious issues of cultural impacts and risks to visitors arising from unsanctioned tourism activities on their traditional land and sea country. Finally, in section five, we argue for the possibility of tourism operating in a mutually satisfactory hybrid space. In such a space, tolerance<sup>i</sup> and respect would discharge the need for understanding the different ontologies – Western and Indigenous – that operate within that space. Using Bourdieu's notion of transformative practice, we propose that the development of such a hybrid

space could contribute to the transformation of the long-standing and complex problem of unsanctioned tourism access into an iteration that could facilitate its resolution.

## **Cultural influences through host-visitor interactions**

The motivation of experiencing 'otherness' is a fundamental aspect of tourism (Hollinshead, 1998; MacCannell, 2001), whether it be by a passive desire to simply be away from home, or the active desire to explore and learn about a new environment, engage in new activities, and experience different cultures and people (the Other). Thus the host-visitor relationship, whether explicit or implicit, is at the core of a tourism experience. As illustrated by acculturation theory (Nunez, 1977) or the conceptualisation of cultural drift (Collins, 1978), the engagement between hosts and guests is bound to affect social and cultural change. Mathieson and Wall (1982) highlight the dominant view that such change is generally detrimental to hosts. Despite the rise of alternatives to mass tourism such as eco or responsible tourism, tourism practice has fallen short of delivering on the aspirations of sustainability with regard to social and cultural aspects (Camargo *et al.*, 2008; Jamal *et al.*, 2010). This is particularly so in contested (Indigenous) contexts of settler nations where tourism can become a (neo)colonial agent perpetuating historically imbalanced power relationships between Western and Indigenous cultures and the privileging of the dominant (scientific) knowledges over traditional and local knowledges (Jamal *et al.*, 2006; see also Figure 2). This paper provides an example of such a relationship and proposes an approach that could contribute to a fundamental power shift necessary for the shared vision of a sustainable tourism industry along the Kimberley coast.

## **The case of expedition cruise tourism along the Kimberley coast**

### ***Study area***

The context of this paper is expedition cruise tourism in the geographic setting of the coastal Kimberley region, in far northwest Australia. Specifically our focus is on Wanjina Wunggurr saltwater country which encompasses the Uunguu, Dambimangari and, to a

lesser extent, the Wilinggin native title determination areas (NNTT, 2011). From hereon, the term Traditional Owners will be used to refer to Wanjina Wunggurr saltwater country Traditional Owners. Expedition cruise tourism provides the main means of visitor access to the sea, rivers, mainland and islands of this remote area. In terms of management, the area is subject to two significantly different worldviews: that of the Traditional Owners - we will call it Indigenous worldview from hereon - and that of mainstream government and industry - which we will call Western worldview. A comparison of the management approaches under these worldviews reflects some key differences. The government's management approach is segmented by boundaries such as between land and water and/or according to jurisdictional boundaries whereby specific areas (e.g. a Nature Reserve) or activities (e.g. fishing during an expedition cruise) are the responsibility of individual government departments. The Traditional Owner's notion of country is a tenure blind view based on belonging and responsibility (according to ancestral relationship and Aboriginal Law) and a seamless integration of land, sea and air, as well as those human and non-human elements that sustain the country (Blundell & Woolagoodja, 2005; Howitt & Suchet-Pearson, 2006).

### ***Issue of tourism access***

A major management issue for the Indigenous people of the Kimberley coast is that tourists and tour operators access their country without their permission (Scherrer & Doohan, 2011; Smith *et al.*, 2009; Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation, 2001, 2009). This issue is not unique to the contexts of the Kimberley or tourism, as examples such as the Traditional Owner confrontation with the mining industry and government at Noonkanbah (Hawke and Gallagher, 1989) and assertions in the Yolngu Sea Country Plan for northeast Arnhem Land about unsanctioned recreational access illustrate (Dhimurru, 2006). Tourism, in conventional Western terms, is generally not seen as a high impact industry when compared to extractive industries which might operate in the same geographic spaces. According to the Traditional Owners of the Kimberley coast, however, tourism is considered as, potentially, having a much larger footprint with

regards to cultural impacts. This is in part because tourism remains unmanaged, geographically spread across a vast area yet at the same time contributing to concentrated site use. Though most importantly, it is because the tourism industry has not yet established formal mechanisms to facilitate negotiations regarding the seeking and granting of permission to access Traditional Owner land and sea country. To the Traditional Owners seeking and being granted permission are the material expression of respect and the establishment of an appropriate or correct form of relationship between themselves (as hosts) and the tourists (as guests). The seeking and granting of permission to access is a fundamental aspect of Kimberley Aboriginal people's culture and is embedded in the more esoteric tradition of the Wunan<sup>ii</sup>, aspects of which deal with the establishment and maintenance of reciprocal relationships (both secular and sacred). It is thus an important cultural expression that forms part of the overall Indigenous governance system of local Aboriginal peoples; and non-Aboriginal visitors become a part of this system by their mere presence in country.

Concerns about unsanctioned tourism access within the coastal Traditional Owner communities have persisted for over 30 years and continue to this day despite the explicit engagement of Traditional Owners in the Western management paradigm on numerous occasions over these years. The expedition cruise industry continues to operate in an Indigenous culturescape with virtually no Traditional Owner involvement and without permission (required under both Aboriginal Law and Western law) despite clear messages that access requires permission (e.g. Part III of the *Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act 1972* and more recently the respective native title determinations; and documents such as the Ngauwudu Management Plan (Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation, 2001: 5)). The financial benefits go to private industry, the sense of pleasure and adventure to the visitors who love the spectacular setting, while, at the same time, it creates cultural risks for Traditional Owners who are responsible for the health and wellbeing, through Aboriginal Law and customs, for these areas and those who visit them: 'As Traditional Owners, we have a responsibility to

ensure the safety of people on country and bear the consequences of accidents and disturbance of sacred places' (North Kimberley Saltwater Country Steering Committee, 2010: 33).

### ***The argument***

As indicated in the opening discussion of this paper, the argument by tourism operators is in essence that they (as guests and facilitators of visitation by guests) need to understand why they can and can't do certain things in order to change their behaviour (to be more respectful and act appropriately); that they first need to be educated (by the hosts) in the local cultural traditions and the details of why they need permission, why they can or cannot access certain sites, why they can or cannot conduct certain activities and say certain things.

This argument is similar to the arguments about mining and Traditional owners, which in many ways have been proven wrong in practice. For instance, in the case of the Argyle Diamond mine in the East Kimberley the traditional practice of *manthe* (Doohan, 2008: 117) has been incorporated into the company's occupational health and safety regime and experienced by new employees and contractors without the participants 'knowing' what it means. Similarly many exploration companies undertake 'heritage protection' or 'work program clearance' exercises and agree that they do not have to know the meaning of these places and processes but agree not to damage them and/or to change their proposed activities to avoid damaging important places – the terms of the agreements define the nature of the relationships (Doohan, 2008). In the following section we contend that the 'need to know' argument reflects a deeply entrenched context of colonialism, erasure and power imbalance between Australian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

## **Knowledge, power and erasure**

'You have an obligation to accept me, but no inherent right to know me' (Errol West, deceased Australian Aboriginal Indigenous rights advocate).

The notion of *terra nullius* has deeply affected Australian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations since colonisation (Langton, 2001; Martin, 2003: 203) and is reflected in 'the overall policy of "de-Aboriginalising" Australia, to establish a new nation with a European base' (Dodson, 1994). It fundamentally shaped power relations and perpetuated representations of Aboriginal peoples as deeply inferior to the colonisers (see Dodson (1994) for a glimpse at some of the early classifications of Aboriginal peoples). Aboriginal people were seen by non-Aboriginal people as 'objects of curiosity...to be seen but not asked, heard or respected' (Martin, 2003: 203). Despite legal recognition of native title in 1992<sup>iii</sup> followed by the passage of the Native Title Act 1993<sup>iv</sup>, it is this 'deaf curiosity' that continues to hamper progress in relations between Kimberley Traditional Owners, industry and government representatives in the context of tourism. As a senior Kimberley Traditional Owner stated: 'White people think this place is empty – it is full. You treat us like rubbish – you sweep this country clean for white men' (Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation, 2001: 13).

### ***Onus of proof – a fundamental power imbalance***

The argument in question forces the hosts (Traditional Owners) to show cause as to why an activity or an area should be off limits to tourist visitation and transfers the responsibility and onus of proof of impacts onto the hosts. West (2000: 52 italics in original) called this line of argument 'the ultimate form of racism: *the need for Aborigines to explain ourselves and the pre-determined conduit of expression the written word in English.*'

This 'you disclose' approach is not unique to Kimberley coastal tourism but is found in many other contexts where Indigenous people are required to provide the 'proof' of



their connections to and knowledge of their own country, their own Laws and customs and their responsibilities and obligations to their kin and cosmology as well as their concerns about all elements of their lives. For instance, native title processes demand that Traditional Owners prove their connection to an area within the frame of Western legislation, the Native Title Act (1993). The process of 'proofment of country' (as one senior Aboriginal man once called it) also continues in the context of resource exploration programs and mining projects<sup>v</sup> or the creation of conservation estates such as National and Marine Parks (e.g. Kimberley Land Council, 2010a; Mayman, 2011). In effect, the 'you disclose' framework immediately disadvantages the Indigenous people and at the same time provides an avenue to expose, challenge and thus erase Traditional Owner realities, knowledge and continuing ancestral connections that go back far beyond Western presence in Australia (Dodson, 1994; Martin, 2003). We believe that these requests for explanation and proof reflect deeply held and embedded assumptions of doubt and disbelief within the dominant society and Western governance mechanisms. These doubts are an inherent manifestation of the continuing colonising process directed (even if not intentionally) to the erasure (Cross, 2008; Dodson, 1994) of the Indigenous presence and associated world view(s). Rose (1999) has called this 'deep colonising'. These processes are not limited to governments and large corporations; they are also played out within 'sympathetic' structures including local Aboriginal organisations and small-scale tourism operations.

Howitt (2001c: 76, 80) explores 'The problem of "seeing"' in Western resource management and highlights an urgent 'need for peripheral vision' in land managers and decision makers to include and empower social processes and relationships. These are often outside the frame of reference under Western (scientific) ontologies yet particularly in cultural geographies of Indigenous culturescapes – 'places of the heart' or 'nourishing terrains' – are fundamental to sustainable management (Howitt, 2001c; Rose, 1996). Symbolic representations are an important aspect of cultural communication and interpretation and 'what one sees reflects much of what one

already knows or expects to see' (Howitt, 2001c: 164). The following section highlights the importance of symbolic representations in the Kimberley context and illustrates that the seeking of prior informed consent for access is likely to facilitate 'seeing' by affecting the visitor's expectations and thus commencing transformative practice.

## **Recognising Indigenous governance embedded in symbolic representations of and in country**

### ***Symbols as evidence of the Other***

Within the Laws and customs of the Wanjina Wunggurr saltwater community there are only certain Aboriginal people who are entitled, and senior enough, to know and disclose the meaning of symbolic cultural representations such as the Wanjina images displayed in rock art galleries and large-scale stone arrangements (Figure 1).

Nonetheless, the inherent 'power' of these symbols of order and respect can indicate something important and beyond the ordinary even to the uninitiated. They are evidence of the Other in that space/place. In the context of expedition cruise tourism along the Kimberley coast, where visitors regularly come into contact with such symbols, the granting of value, legitimacy and respect to Traditional Owners' governance systems and symbolic representations are of great importance to the Traditional Owners.

#### **INSERT FIGURE 1**

**Figure 1:** Symbolic representations of (a) Wanjina and (b) Wunguur Creator beings.  
Photos: (a) Pascal Scherrer and (b) Kim Doohan. Published with Traditional Owner permission.

For Traditional Owners, asking permission - from the cosmos and from other human beings - is a fundamental part of their culture, a deeply held obligation to care for and protect visitors to country by mediating between the phenomenological and the

mundane domains of being in place to ensure safe passage. When unknown and uninvited people enter country, the Wanjina Wunggurr cosmological domain is offended and becomes unstable and potentially destructive (Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation, 2010). However, appropriate engagement with symbolic representations can rectify disorder in the world that might have been created – deliberately or inadvertently – and reinforce the order of the world (see e.g. Dixon, 1990: 90-91). In the context of tourism, one of the key indicators of disorder in the world is evidence of unsanctioned presence on country. Examples include tracks to art sites in shelters, evidence of camping and fishing on islands, presence of rubbish, internet postings of images of art sites and locations of galleries and commercial advertising in tourism brochures (Scherrer *et al.*, 2008). The lack of respect and contravention of Aboriginal Law (which in these cases is supported by Western law) that this evidence represents has an impact on the Traditional Owners and their communities, the country itself and the Creator Beings who continue to reside within the country (see e.g. Scherrer *et al.*, 2011; Smith *et al.*, 2009). Thus for the Traditional Owners (within their Indigenous ontology), these activities are at the heart of the disorder that they experience - what we call a major 'cultural impact'. However, within the tourism industry (and thus in the Western ontological frame) these activities are not generally recognised as being 'high impact' or, in the context of physical impacts, they are considered to be manageable in biophysical terms (Scherrer *et al.*, 2011).

The argument in question poses that a detailed understanding of the symbolic representations is a prerequisite to appropriate behaviour. However, *uninvited* visitors cannot be appropriately informed. This means that they cannot appreciate the wider meaning of these symbolic representations, let alone the magnitude and significance of these symbols to Traditional Owners of the country where they are located. This lack of understanding is further accentuated, as Scherrer *et al.* (2008) have shown in their analysis of the local expedition cruise industry, where tourism marketing primarily focuses on the themes of 'wilderness', 'pristine' and 'luxury'. Thus, despite featuring

frequent visits to rock art sites, current tourism operations are essentially neglecting the fact that they are operating in a living Indigenous culturescape subject to an embedded Indigenous governance system. By ignoring the Traditional Owners' continuing connection to country and their tangible and intangible presence in country, they are effectively erasing the Indigenous presence - past, present and future - from the country and from the tourist experience of the Kimberley coast.

### ***Tourism engaging with symbols***

We suggest that the granting of 'power' to the symbolic representations of Indigenous governance systems is a potential starting point from which to create a transformative context to the current problem of formalising tourism access to Kimberley coastal country. This is about recognising, for example, that symbols such as Wanjina rock art are part of living cultural models such as the Wanjina Wunggurr traditions (Blundell, 1982). For visitors, this need not be an overwhelming process of engagement or relationship formation, but is about respecting (not understanding) symbolic representations of Indigenous governance and recognising that there can be other realities and ontologies at operation in a particular space. First and foremost, nevertheless, it is about acknowledging that one is entering the space of another by extending a simple and basic courtesy of introduction and request for permission to visit.

### **Opportunities missed and risks ignored – the dangers of 'deaf curiosity'**

The call by Traditional Owners for tourism operators and tourists (as any other visitors) to seek and be granted permission to access the Kimberley coast is well documented. It has been explicitly and consistently highlighted for at least three decades in public records including government and interagency reports (e.g. Johnston and Tann, 1991), reports and records of meetings by Traditional Owners (e.g. Kimberley Land Council, 1998, 2000, 2004a, 2004b; Kimberley Land Council and Waringarri Resource Centre,

1991) and with industry and government (e.g. Kimberley Land Council, 2008, 2010b), published and unpublished research (e.g. Blundell and Woolagoodja, 2005; Crawford, 2001; Scherrer and Doohan, 2011; Scherrer *et al.*, 2008; Scherrer *et al.*, 2010; Scherrer *et al.*, 2011) and specific management documents (e.g. North Kimberley Saltwater Country Steering Committee, 2010; Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation, 2001, 2008) which present local Indigenous culture, values, responsibilities and aspirations in the so called 'high English' format, an unfamiliar language, but the language of government. These records demonstrate that Traditional Owners have deliberately and proactively engaged with Western ontological and epistemological frameworks in continuous attempts to get their key governance mechanisms recognised and to rectify serious issues of cultural impacts and risks to visitors arising from unsanctioned access to their country.

Our evidence demonstrates multiple iterations of 'deaf curiosity' on the part of agents of government and the tourism industry despite repeating assurances that they recognised the importance of the issue and would seek to address and resolve it (Johnston and Tann, 1991; Kimberley Land Council, 2008, 2010b). They have ignored (and continue to do so) shared knowledge and opportunities to learn about Traditional Owner ontologies and to negotiate appropriate outcomes. This is pertinently evidenced by tourism operators and their clients continuing to access the area without permission and the inaction by government informally sanctioning the status quo.

The recent determination of native title in 2011 on Wanjina Wunggurr coastal lands is hoped and has been promoted by some<sup>vi</sup> to provide a mechanism through which to curb unsanctioned visitor access to Traditional Owner country and enhance their culturally derived right to be asked permission. Evidence from elsewhere, nevertheless, shows that having won their native title claims (to country that they never abandoned) some Traditional Owners find that this new recognition of 'ownership' does not release them from or equip them better to deal with the continuing avarice of those who want access

to and use of that country (e.g. see also the current moves by the Western Australian Government to create a series of Marine Parks along the Kimberley coast). While recognising the symbolic importance of determined native title, we argue that these legal changes are unlikely to progress the issue of protection from unsanctioned access. Our argument is based on the reality that previous legal provisions on paper provided strong protection, but were not enforced. Indeed, despite the tangible evidence of visitors contravening section 31 of the *Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act 1972*, there have been no prosecutions for trespass on Part III reserves in the Kimberley region (Collier, pers. comm. 2012). Thus, rather than continuing to engage at the level of legislation and/or enforcement, our focus is on affecting the underlying level, the foundations of the relationship between industry/ government and Traditional Owners. We believe that the notion of transformative practice as outlined in the following section provides an avenue to challenge 'deaf curiosity' and contribute to a genuine shift in will to engage.

## **A framework for transformation**

We propose a framework for respect and cultural tolerance based on the construction of a third space, a co-existence space of Indigenous and Western ontologies where the differing worldviews and associated praxis provide remedial rather than confrontational or erased outcomes. It aims to create a space which recognises parallel realities-the power of the Wanjina and Wunggurr and the desire for a high value sustainable Kimberley coastal tourism industry - and which validates the presence of the Other, setting the basic building block of respect and recognition (Howitt & Suchet-Pearson, 2006; Martin, 2003). Within the notion of transformative practice in the Kimberley tourism context, the pinnacle of performance of respect is asking for permission; and learning and knowledge is an outcome of the process, not a precursor. We argue that such a space facilitates an environment in which transformative practice- asking for permission - can bring about positive behaviour changes and enhanced tourist

experience to dilute and/or tame conflicts arising from ontological differences and political positioning in contested inter-cultural contexts.

Figure 2 illustrates a way to consider, begin to understand and reconfigure responses to the current situation. It draws on the work of Bhaba (post-colonial perspectives) and Bourdieu (critical sociology) in terms of the meta narratives of hybridity and transformative practice (Bhaba, 1994; Bourdieu, 1992, 1997; Hollinshead, 1998) and, in the Australian context, the work of Howitt and Suchet-Pearson (Howitt, 2001c; Howitt *et al.*, this issue; Howitt and Suchet-Pearson, 2006; Suchet-Pearson, 2002) both of whom offer alternative ways of thinking about engagements in the intercultural space of resource development, tourism and Indigenous people. This paper also draws on Doohan's (2008) recent research in the East Kimberley where she found that it was critical to 'take culture seriously' when attempting to both understand and analyse Aboriginal responses to intruders on their country; and when attempting to formally negotiate access to and use of Traditional Owners' country and resources.

**INSERT FIGURE 2:**

**Figure 2:** Framework for transforming ontological barriers between Western and Indigenous worldviews into a third/hybrid space through transformative practice.

In essence we understand that there are two ontologically distant worldviews – the Western and the Indigenous worldview – contributing to the unresolved nature of the problem: unsanctioned access to Traditional Owner country. In the current context, the Western worldview is clearly dominant and has a thick, almost impervious veneer that is resistant to intrusions of alternative worldviews and in fact believes itself to be the only (real) world view. It also has legislative, administrative and political power. In the aspired hybrid state of engagement, the parties meet as (valid) entities engaged in negotiations about accessing place - the Kimberley coast - effecting their own destinies

with all the symbolic and administrative power that they can muster (some of which is more obvious and tangible than the rest). This space has also been described as being in relationship, co-existence or co-motion and as a liminal or littoral space (Bhaba, 1994; Howitt, 2001b; Howitt & Suchet-Pearson, 2003). It is a dynamic environment which requires flexibility and ongoing negotiation.

Taking into account the Traditional Owners' cultural capital and their own cultural frameworks (or 'habitus' as Bourdieu (2005) calls it), the contemporary politics of everyday life and multilayered meaning-making that exists in the Kimberley coastal regions, it is clear that 'being asked' to access and use country is one way in which Traditional Owners enact and reproduce their relationships to their cosmos and enlivened country. It also becomes more apparent that, in asking, tourists are (or would be) inevitably transformed by this act. These are complex matters and not easily measured in empirical or tangible ways. Nonetheless, in drawing on what Bourdieu (1997) articulates as the transformative effect of practice, we are intending to emphasise that the relationship generated by seeking (or not seeking) permission is one that impacts on the lives of tourists, tour operators and Traditional Owners.

The politics of permission seeking (or not seeking) is one of many elements of Traditional Owners' everyday lives over which they are struggling to exercise control. As such, it is an important aspect of peoples' socio-cultural and economic realities and an element of their and their country's cosmological wellbeing. In this way, tour operators and/or tourists, in asking or not asking permission impact on the lives of Traditional Owners in significant and meaningful ways – for the Traditional Owners and the tourists. In this way, transformative practice and the transformative effect of practice, as articulated by Bourdieu (1992, 1997), makes peoples' lives meaningful. For the Traditional Owners, meaningful in terms of the fundamental ongoing viability of their everyday lives lived in an enlivened country and particular cosmology. That is, for the Traditional Owners, to seek permission is to seek safety from the inherent dangers of



their country, to honour and respect the Creator Beings of that country and those who, in the contemporary world, care for and look after that country and those who are in it.

Bourdieu's theorising and articulation of the power of practice to transform behaviour provides a frame for understanding what appears to be a simple act as something more. It allows us to see why asking is in fact so hard - because to ask is to enter into a complex 'habitus' of the Other where asking clearly symbolises more than just a polite (but rather trivial) exercise and indeed more than just a contemporary political position. Asking, in this context, is to agree to engage in something unknown but known to be necessary if one (e.g. the tourist/tour operator) is to appropriately engage with, participate in, or in some way recognise the particular 'sensitivity' (as Geertz (1976: 1478) calls it) of the Traditional Owners' relationships to their country and their cosmology; albeit transformed in this contemporary context of coastal tourism. Thus asking permission (or not) is not theoretical but has very real impacts and establishes very particular relationships and ways of being 'in country' for both the Traditional Owners and the tourists. We are suggesting that it is the transformative process of 'asking' that demonstrates and creates alternative outcomes and impacts for the Traditional Owners of Kimberley coastal country and the tourists and tour operators.

The path to achieve the transition from current to aspired state is transformative practice which in the case of the Kimberley cruise industry has great potential to be fully situated (see also Suchet-Pearson, 2002). Transformative practice is an iterative process whereby, in our case, the simple practice of acknowledgment of the other by asking for permission to access, will gradually lead to a transformation of the Self, the relationship with the Other and the issue at hand through iterations of recognition, acceptance and respect. The culmination is a dynamic state based on tolerance and respect – the third or hybrid space – in which multiple ontologies exist on an equal basis. These continue to evolve in parallel in respected recognition and acceptance of each other yet with

appropriate exchange and interaction without having to dilute or reconfigure each other.

So how can this process commence in practice? The following are some practical steps and priorities for practice and research in order to recognise and support the process of transformation and through it facilitate a mutual learning process:

- Acknowledging the Other – recognition of Indigenous cultural practices and knowledges as legitimate alternatives (e.g. through the performance/ritual of asking for permission to access country).

It is important to note that the absence of acknowledgment in practice has effectively barred any progress in the resolution of the long-standing problem of tourism access to the Kimberley coast and thus is a non-negotiable essential first step. Other performative steps which could facilitate transformative practice include:

- Openness to engage in a negotiation process (i.e. ‘being in relationship’);
- Flexibility (e.g. flexible itineraries);
- Openness to risk and opportunities (e.g. divulging sites accessed might lead to closure OR better understanding OR both);
- Local empowerment through devolution of control and responsibility (e.g. tourism operators no longer insisting on how and where potential access fees would be spent).

Transformative practice is about listening, experiencing, learning, sharing, and communicating. It is about recognising the intimacy and intricacy of being simultaneously obliged to each other but on unconditional terms. Thus there are clear risks for tourism operators (and indeed all parties) involved in transformative practice – risks that some operators may not be open to. In the Kimberley context, Traditional Owners have stated repeatedly that they are not against tourism *per se* but simply want tourism to occur in respectful and appropriate ways (e.g. North Kimberley Saltwater Country Steering Committee, 2010: 36; Smith *et al.*, 2009: 87; Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation, 2001: 24, 25). We argue that in this context and particularly

with recent determinations of native title, the risks of engaging in transformative practice are far outweighed by the risk of being excluded through legal or regulatory means and the opportunities for achieving a culturally sustainable, flexible, world-class tourism product.

So returning to the argument that the hosts (the Indigenous people) have a pedagogic responsibility to first educate the guests (the tourism industry and its clients) before they in turn could act appropriately, we argue that these statements on the part of operators are indicators of their intransigence and lack of willingness to accept the relationship that they have entered into by accessing Traditional Owners' country, an unwillingness to accept their own status as guests in another's country. Once the participants acknowledge their roles appropriately - guests in a hosted situation (asking for and being granted permission) – an (intercultural) environment of recognition and a negotiation space is created. Inevitably, there is an interchange of cultural viewpoints and mutual learning embedded in the process and the practice of being with the Other. Learning about the Other is, nevertheless, an *outcome* of not a *precursor* for changes in practice.

Evidence from the literature suggests that engagement by the tourism industry in transformative practice can enrich the tourism product (Tremblay, 2007) and thus could produce a win-win situation through culturally sustainable activities and increased economic participation on the part of the Traditional Owners. Certainly for those people who have had the experience of being formally welcomed to country - such as both authors have experienced - one does feel different, safer and more comfortable about being in someone else's country. Empowered participation of Traditional Owners in the tourism experience further has the potential to unlock a heightened awareness and appreciation of the deeper meaning and symbols of the embodied land and seascape, as the following quote from an international visitor to Uunguu traditional country highlights: 'I realised that I was coming on a pilgrimage - this is not an ordinary visit. I

was coming to this sacred place. When I heard the power of the [Traditional Owner's] voice calling to the Wanjina, I could hear that it came from deep in his stomach' (Doohan, field work June 2011). Thus, rather than permission being seen as process to deny access, it should be seen as a process to enhance access in that it is bound to inherently enrich the relationship and experience.

## **Conclusion**

We believe that governance of Kimberley tourism under the Western paradigm has demonstrated, at best, a severe 'emotional intelligence deficit' - a major lack in awareness of Self and the Other – and, at worst, a perpetuation of the colonising, dispossessing and continuing erosion and erasure of Indigenous presence. In practical terms this has resulted in the assignment of legal, policy and administrative capacity deficits to Indigenous peoples whilst ignoring or even denying any capacity deficits on behalf of industry or government (cf. also Howitt *et al.*, this issue). As Howitt (2001a: 149) argues, 'good intentions are not enough' especially when those good intentions are embedded in a Western epistemological frame which denies alternative ontologies about place, presence in place and action on place. Clearly continuing to act in ways that have demonstrably failed in the past is foolhardy, disheartening and unproductive. Instead, alternative frames and ways of acting have to be imagined and enacted at the local level (Escobar, 1995). The deeply colonised context of the continuing 'relationship' between Traditional Owners and those involved in regulating tourism access is crucial and must be acknowledged as a fundamental obstacle if there is to be a transformation of the problem into something that redresses the power imbalance, re-recognises and privileges the Indigenous construction of being in country. Transformative practice offers a flexible, imaginative and contextualised approach suited to the naturally situated Kimberley tourism industry. If initiated by tourism operators, the process is not dependent on government but may ultimately contribute to their engagement also in the future. Imagine the alternative whereby one is invited to experience the rich culturally enlivened Kimberley coastal country; imagine the transformative potential of

being invited to engage with the Other in a context of respect and recognition rather than ignorance and denial.

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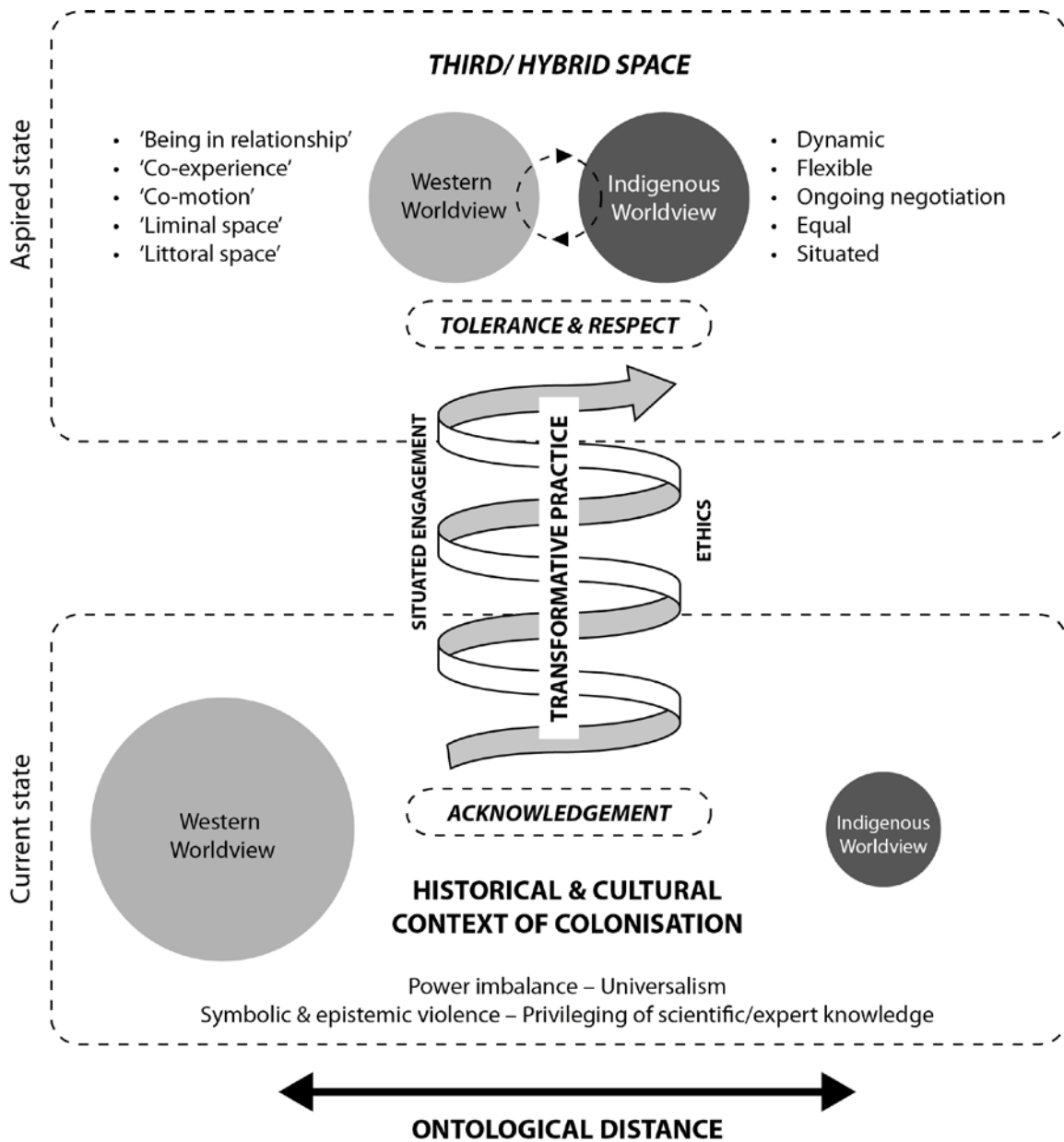


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**Figure 1:** Symbolic representations of (a) Wanjina and (b) Wunguur Creator beings. Photos: (a) Pascal Scherrer and (b) Kim Doohan. Published with Traditional Owner permission.



**Figure 2:** Framework for transforming ontological barriers between Western and Indigenous worldviews into a third/hybrid space through transformative practice.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Using the traditional definition of ‘tolerance’ in the sense of ‘non-judgmentalism’: the willingness to recognize and respect the beliefs or practices of others without sharing them.
- <sup>ii</sup> The term Wunan refers to a ‘trade route’ that embodies a structured network of social, economic and ritual relations (see Doohan, 2008:65-70 and Blundell, 1982).
- <sup>iii</sup> Through the High Court decision on the *Mabo vs The State of Queensland and Another (Mabo vs. Queensland (No. 2) (1992) 175 CLR 1)*
- <sup>iv</sup> Subsequent amendments to the Native Title Act following the High Court decision in the *Wik* case (1994) ‘substantially stripped Aboriginal people of their customary property rights’, almost immediately eroding the rights gained as well as the notion of self-governance by Aboriginal peoples within the framework of Western law (Langton, 2001: 14).
- <sup>v</sup> There are exceptions to this whereby the resource developers agree to abide by Traditional Owners’ decisions concerning particular activities at certain places, the so called ‘no means no rule.’ This is a major shift in the thinking of resource developers in the Kimberley but has not yet systematically entered Government practice.
- <sup>vi</sup> E.g. A lawyer from a representative body advising Traditional Owners at a meeting in 2010 strongly pushed the notion of being able to use native title to enforce access control under common law, despite admitting that this had not been successfully achieved elsewhere and that there were no legal precedents to back their confidence.