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Flesh, and Blood, and Deep Colonising

Deborah Bird Rose

I write from lived experience, from the life of the flesh, which is the life I know. I share with many women the conviction that androcentric images of God speak to our silence, our suffering, our marginalisation, our devaluation as human beings and the devaluation of our specific anatomy. Androcentric representations of God are one facet, but only one, of the structures which generate for us "the silence, absence and opposition of God" (Trible 1984:2).

This is a human issue which women experience differently from men, but which men also experience. Many men, I know, are convinced of the deformation they have suffered under androcentric images of God; they recognise a form of castration in being set always in opposition to humanity, as well as to everything else in the world. In saying that this is a human issue, I do not intend to make it neuter. Rather I write from the bodied experience of my life on earth, and I speak to your bodied experience. There are, of course, differences between male and female bodies. I follow the lead of the French feminist theoretician Luce Irigaray who contends that there is no such thing as a natural body (Grosz 1989:111).

This paper emerges from the urgency of two issues. The first is the possibility of expanding our understanding and acknowledgement of gendered, creative, sacred power. The second is the violence inflicted on women. These two issues converge as the sacred female places of this continent, and the Aboriginal women who own and manage them, are subjected to the violent practices of deep colonisation.

I have for many years been engaging with and learning from Aboriginal people. The greater part of my research has taken place in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory, and while there is significant regional variation, my analysis is applicable throughout much of Australia. My aim has been to explore the structure of relationships in which understanding emerges from the engagement of subjectivities. Before I begin I would like to make several points which are critical to the engagement:

1. Aboriginal people have adopted the term Dreaming; they use it as a noun as well as a verb. Dreamings are the creative beings who make possible the continued coming into being of the world; and they are living powers in the world. In the beginning, according to Vic River people, the earth was covered with salt water. The water pulled back, and out of holes in the ground came life. The earth is referred to by some people as "Mother"; she brings forth life. Some of this life is male, and some is female. Males and females, whether pythons, or kangaroos, or human beings, travelled the earth creating, amongst other things, a gendered landscape.

2. Religious practice, and religious beliefs, have both public and restricted contexts.[1] Restrictions are usually drawn along lines of gender, age, and locality. Locality defines ownership of knowledge; it is country and kin-based; female strangers, for example, have no right to women's business simply because they are women. Age divides children from adults, and further separates adults into different categories, each having access to certain knowledge. Gender separates males from females, defining some knowledge as appropriate only to one or the other. Some people relax gender restrictions in old age, so that old women and men are able to communicate with each other about some aspects of each other's business.

The penalties for transgressing these knowledge boundaries are several; at the extreme the penalty is death, either inflicted by human beings or by the power of the place or the Dreamings that were violated. It is fair to say that for Aboriginal people the differences between one place and another, the differences between men and women, and people's

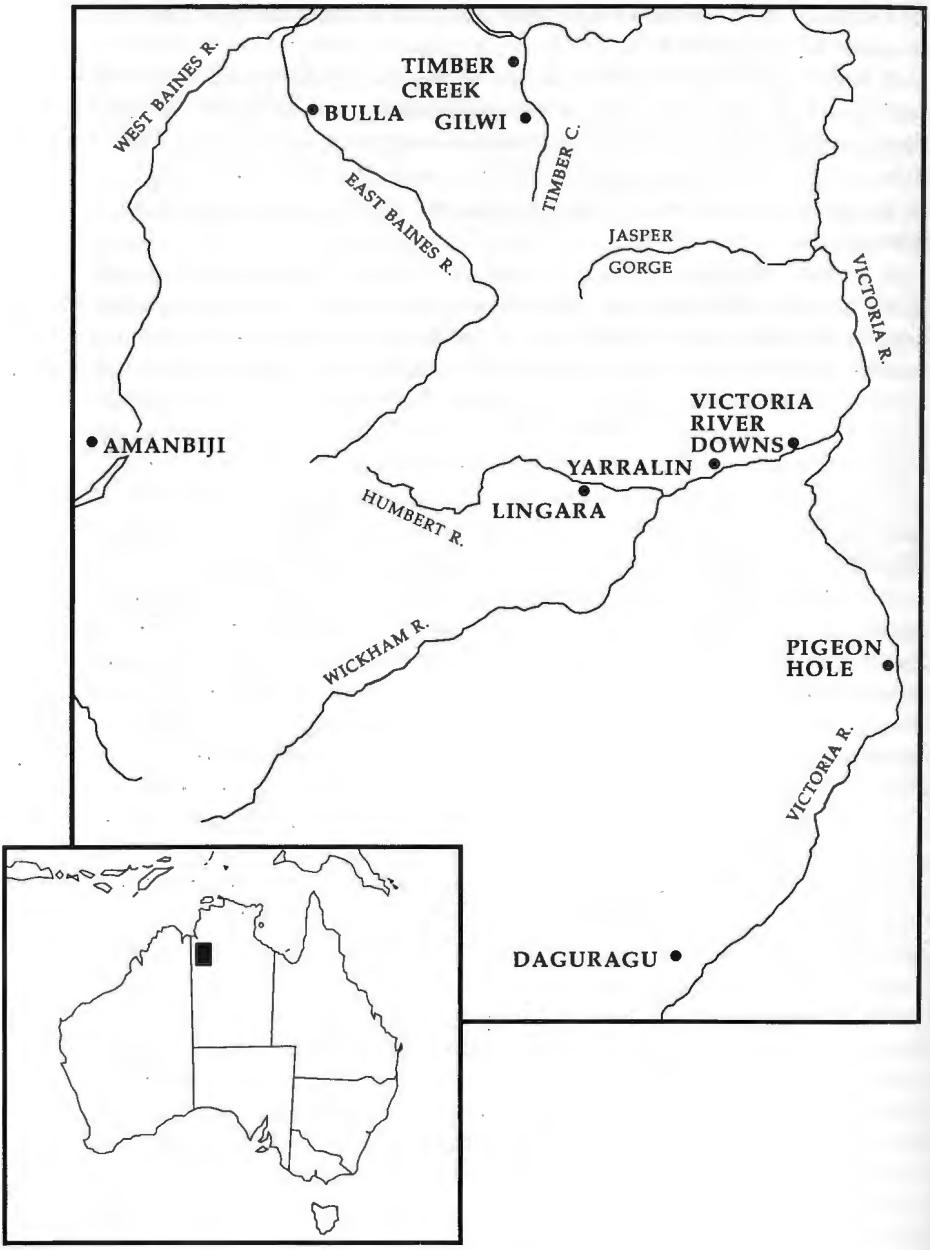
differential rights to knowledge are "differences that make a difference", to quote Gregory Bateson.

3. Information moves between contexts, and gender constitutes one such context. Women's and men's spiritual lives do not constitute disarticulated systems. What differs primarily, insofar as I am able to determine (not being androgynous), is the way in which knowledge can be represented, spoken of, asked about, and displayed as an exegetical system.

4. In the Aboriginal cultures from which I have learned, matter and spirit are not separate or separable categories. As I understand what people have taught me, the essential mystery is life, and life is always bodied. There are ontologically different categories of life, and Aboriginal people gloss some of these as "spirit", but to the best of my knowledge, there is no category of being, in life or in death, which is not bodied. What westerners call "spirit" is flesh, because spirit is life, life is being, and being is embodied. This is true of the Dreamings, of the land, of plants and animals, and of living and dead bodies. I am using the term "flesh" to include the bodies of trees, stones and ground.

5. I would suggest that Aboriginal people emphasise the contingent quality of continuity in the world. For the people from whom I have learned, it seems to me that what is given in the world is not given automatically or eternally, but is constantly being brought into being through the actions of responsible moral agents. The category of moral agents includes other living species and the earth, as well as human beings (see Rose:1987).

A final point: in the thirteen years which I have spent living with Aboriginal people, and reading about and experiencing both their culture and my own, I have become ever more conscious of the limitations of my culture. I have come to think that I understand very little of Aboriginal gendered spirituality, and I am not fully satisfied with anyone's written work, including my own. I suspect at times that I may not have the cultural equipment to enable me to understand what Aboriginal women (and men, in some contexts) are trying to get me to understand. Their vivid awareness of powerful creative women making and shaping the world can sound trite when it is put into words; even worse, it can be readily appropriated. In the presence of places, and in the presence of songs, in the presence of the women who carry on knowledge, songs, actions and care in these ordinary times, I sense a femaleness that is so powerful and so life-affirming that I am humbled by an awareness of how meagre are the words with which I can respond.



Map 1. The Northwest Sector of the Northern Territory.

Every story has a place, and virtually every place is a story. There is a hill which I will call Kajirri. It is near Jasper Creek, a tributary of the Victoria River, in the northwest sector of the Northern Territory (Map 1). From 1980 to 1982 I lived at the nearby settlement called Yarralin, and I have since spent part of every year there. Yarralin people have told me stories about this hill and other local Dreaming landmarks.

Kajirri is a place for the Black-headed Python, one of the great creative Dreamings who travelled from the sea near Wyndham in Western Australia to the sea off the coast of Queensland. People told me bits and pieces of the story over the years; in summarising, I sacrifice the Aboriginal structure of the narrative in order to leave myself scope for further issues.

She walked sometimes in the shape of a snake, and sometimes in the shape of a woman. In snake form she made ranges and valleys. She carried coolamons,[2] and in them she had her foods, the seeds of which she scattered as she went along. Resource sites and resource-defined regions in this area owe their existence and their organisation to the Python.

She also carried her children, but these, too, she kept leaving behind, although she seemed never to exhaust her supply of newborns. Some of these children are the ancestors of the Aboriginal people who now own specific portions of the Black-headed Python track, according to Aboriginal Law.

As she travelled, the Python spoke different languages and demarcated language-defined zones. Kajirri is the boundary where she changed from one language to another. One people own and care for the country west of Kajirri; another people have it to the east.

Powerfully generative, Black-headed Python stopped at Kajirri to rest. She stopped, and although she kept travelling, she also stayed. For several years, people had been telling me that if I climbed up to a certain place on this hill I would see the Black-headed Python herself. Sometimes people used the word "photo" to describe what I would see, but they emphasised that what is there is the Black-headed Python herself. Not just a pretty picture, they said, not something that people ever made, but really Dreaming (cf. Lewis and Rose 1988).

Kajirri is located on a portion of unalienated crown land, and because of its status it was possible for Aboriginal people to claim this land under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) 1976. In 1985, Darrell Lewis and I started research to document information which would form a part of the claimants' submission to the Aboriginal Land Commissioner.

We had been told years ago that the Kajirri site was "open"; that is, that there were no age or gender restrictions surrounding the site. When we began our research, one of the things we asked about, of course, was Kajirri. And we were told by two of the senior claimants, a sister and brother (both in their sixties), that men should not look at the Black-headed Python. If they do, they said, they will go blind. We told them that one of the oldest and most knowledgeable men, a man who is a generation older than the sister and brother, had told us that it was quite all right for men to look at the site, and that he had camped there as a child with his parents and grandparents. They reminded us that the old man was blind, and that seemed to settle the point.

We decided that the matter deserved further investigation, and we asked another old man whose country is adjacent to Kajirri and who had also travelled the area extensively as a child, what he knew about the site. "It's poison", he said. "Any man goes there, he'll die!"

At this time our interest in the site was primarily strategic. We expected that it would be spectacular, and we thought that it would be an excellent place to take the Land Commissioner. At that site the reality of Dreaming origins, boundaries, and current rights and responsibilities take on a tangible reality. We asked the claimants to try to come to some agreement about access to the site.

Several years passed, and in 1988 we were again in the area making final preparations for the land-claim hearing. Although there were still differing views on restrictions, in this context people decided that adult men could go to the site, but that young men and boys could not. We made our first trip with a small group of claimants, women and men, Land Council field staff and the claimants' barrister.

It was only at this time that we learned that there was far more going on with the gender restrictions surrounding this hill than merely the right to visit and look at the Black-headed Python. Now we learned that one side of the hill is available to men and women equally, and that the other side is only for women. We walked up the open side. Before we reached the saddle, the senior man called out to the Python and told her we were coming; when we got there, we sat down in front of her. The barrister sought to elicit evidence from the claimants concerning the site. The men were clearly uncomfortable and the women refused to speak.

After a period of general discomfort, the men went back down the hill the way we had come, leaving the women there to carry on in their own way. At one point, there were only two of us standing in front of the Python (Fig. 1). This woman, whom I will call Kitty, is about my age (mid-forties). She is an owner of Kajirri, tracing her rights to the site and

Fig. 1. The Black-headed Python.

the Dreaming through her mother, mother's mother, and mother's mother's mother.

Not only is there no such thing as a "natural" body; there probably is also no such thing as a "natural" site. The rock is part of the Python's body; she herself is living and conscious right there in that stone. The paint is neither old nor new. The claimants said that they never repaint this figure, first because it is Dreaming and is not to be touched like that, and second because it is not a painting but rather is the Python herself. Nevertheless, the area around the Python's genitals is clean and fresh. The flesh of her genitals has been rubbed with red ochre and beautifully cared for over the years.

Kitty and I stood in silence for a short while – the kind of silence-space which seems to encapsulate eternity. For me it was as if we were standing at the centre of the world, and all the world was attending to the three of us – Kitty, myself, and the Python. Through the complex subsection system which identifies people and Dreamings within named categories which are articulated through the medium of kinship, Kitty calls the Python "mother". And as we stood there, she did call the Python mother. Kitty looked at her. She touched her own head, and then reached out toward, but did not touch, the Python's head. She touched her own shoulders, and reached out to the Python's shoulders. Belly and knees were acknowledged. She spoke very softly to her, calling the Python mother; touching her own body and reaching out. At last, Kitty gave a great sigh, shook herself, and turned to me smiling.

Several days later, Kitty spoke with a group of women about her experience. We were in the bush, away from camp, refreshing the sacred objects which were to be used in women's business for the country; the business is restricted; it celebrates and re-creates the Python's and other female Dreamings' generative actions. She said that until that day she had not believed what her old people had told her: that the images on the rocks are Dreaming. She said that she had always thought they were pictures – until she stood there.

Kitty's visit spurred her to ask more questions of the one old woman who could answer them. On our next visit, which was during the hearing itself, Kitty and the other women still refused to give evidence about this site. But in a private women-only gathering after the men had gone, they told us a great deal more about the meaning of the marks on the rock. This time they led us down the west side of the hill, the side which is only for women. On this side is a site of and for women's blood.

Walking down the side of the mountain I began to reflect on the gaze, the recognition, the acknowledgement, and the empowerment that are involved in identifying one's self there in the creation of the world. Kitty's spiritual awakening had stimulated me as well, but I was not able properly to reflect upon what had happened until I returned home and had some time to myself.

I was listening to Handel's Messiah and heard the words: "yet in my flesh shall I see God." I understood my experience on the hill when it became refracted back through my culture, and I understood in two ways. I had stood there in the flesh and seen what I can identify as God – one of the creative beings and moments in the world. Equally, I can look at my own flesh and there I can see, feel and know (not an image of, but) a correspondence with God.[3]

The Black-headed Python faces east. Her position is the position for giving birth, and if I understand these matters properly, she is giving birth – to the language, culture, and people who are to the east. She travels, and she stops, and where she stops she generates the life that is to follow.

Women and men agree on this: at this place, and all along this Python track, this Python woman created the country, the plants, the people, the language and Law. She was carrying "business", her Law for bringing into being. Further along the track she was accosted by some men who took some of her Law. That Law, an extremely important men's ceremony, is now controlled primarily by men. The rest of her Law, that which men could not take, is still controlled by women.

The life of the flesh is the life of the spirit, and the Law that brings life into being is a Law that is managed by women and by men. The major rituals, said once to have been held exclusively by women, are now shared between men and women. As well, there are, of course, many portions of restricted ritual which are participated in by both women and men; there are rituals which are managed by women and are also carried out in the presence of men; and there are rituals, or portions of rituals which are exclusive.[4] The organisation of ritual parallels the organisation of geography: there are places which are managed jointly; places to which men may go but are not allowed to know the meaning of; and places where men can never go. In this physical landscape, all of which is spiritual, there is women's space and there is men's space – absolutely.

Male Dreamings, too, imprint themselves on the earth, and leave behind the traces of their activities, the sites of their actions, and their specific presence. When the salt water pulled back, as Victoria River people say, life emerged, or was "born" from the earth. Some of this life was male, and some was female. Males and females, whether flying foxes, or possums, or human beings, travelled the earth creating a gendered landscape. The land does not privilege women to the exclusion of men, nor does it set women in opposition to men, although it does acknowledge the competitive quality of desire. Gendered land locates women spatially and cosmologically. The process of bringing life forth into the world is indigenous, and it is female.

Daly Pulkara, one of the men who taught me, explained that this earth, referring to the country for which he is an owner within Aboriginal Law, has an Aboriginal culture inside. Other people made similar statements; for example, that everything – language, Law, kangaroos, trees – all come from the earth.

Life is a continuous bringing forth from within the earth. Bringing forth is giving birth. It is the powerful transformation: from within to without; from life contained to life embodied as itself; from being to becoming. Blood appears to be the key element in making this transformation.

For Yarralin people, women's blood, the blood of menstruation and childbirth, is integral to the process of generating life. In talking about women's blood, I am entering dangerous territory. Much of what I know about how women manage their blood is really not public; I'll just say that blood is a gift from the Dreaming. It is powerfully related to life, and also to love and to lust. Menstrual blood incites men to desire, and

young men are particularly cautioned to stay away from women and to have no contact with women's blood. Improperly managed, blood makes men "wild".[5] Blood is dangerous because it is powerful. Women and men both manage it.

Much of what I know about how men manage women's blood derives from the category of information which is publicly available but never subjected to public exegesis. It consists of hints, clues, indirections, metaphors, and sometimes even culturally consistent mis-directions. Rather than taking the time to go through these clues to construct an image of the knowledge and practice that lie behind them, I'll take a short cut and quote from Lloyd Warner's work with Arnhem Land men in the 1920s, which refers to blood let from the arm. In the Victoria River District, subincision is the mark of a mature man, and the blood is let from the penis as well as the arm. It bears a value similar to what Warner indicated when he quoted an explanation offered by one of his Aboriginal teachers:

> That blood we put all over those men is all the same as the blood that came from that old woman's vagina [referring to a creative female Dreaming being]. It isn't the blood of those men any more because it has been sung over and made strong. The hole in the man's arm isn't that hole any more. It is all the same as the vagina of that old woman that had the blood coming out of it.... When a man has got blood on him ... he is all the same as those two old women when they had blood (Warner 1958:268).[6]

There is blood, and then there is blood. In ritual and in creation, woman's blood and its cultural equivalents such as arm blood or red ochre is powerful and transformative. Who uses that blood, and what transformations they effect with it, is deep and secret business. The process of bringing the world into being is the work of women and of men, and it is never finished.

Woman Dreamings/Dreaming Women: Aboriginal Australia comes into being from the generative woman/body. From inside to outside, from life to life, from birth to death and back to birth, there is no transformation that does not emerge from and rely upon Dreaming women and their human descendants, female and male.

Most of the Northern Territory and parts of Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and New South Wales are marked by the travels of Dreaming and other extraordinary world-creative women. The Wawilak sisters, the Munga Munga women, the "Mermaids", the Seven Sisters, the Nanganarri women: these are some of the creative Dreamings whose actions, songs, ceremonies, and esoteric knowledge made and make this world.

In many parts of Australia, women's autonomous religious practice celebrates and regenerates the Dreaming women; in so doing women celebrate and regenerate themselves, their country, their knowledge, their power, their community. Women's autonomous religious practice celebrates creation and sings the histories of places and women. Neither Dreaming nor the celebration of Dreaming is a Garden of Eden. Women create, and the fruits of their creation are taken from them, as the Python lost some of her ritual business to men. In the stories of creation, sometimes women are chased, sometimes they are caught and raped, sometimes they are killed. Women experience love and grief – their sisters die, their children are left behind, their husbands die, their male relations fail to defend them. And still they travel and create, name and sing, generating power and purpose.

Women Dreamings are not so different from men Dreamings in this respect: Dreaming men fight, kill, die, betray, and desert. They also create, name, sing, and generate power and purpose.

In Dreaming Law the created world is never idealised or denied, never defined as all bad or all good. There is no Paradise from which to be cast, no perfection to mark a fall from grace. The created world is the world that is, and it includes the power to wound and destroy as well as the power to regenerate and to create.

It is a good thing that the created world contains the power to heal, for the women of the world are in need of healing. I say this with regard to myself and my friends, and I say this especially with regard to my Aboriginal friends. At the time of writing, four of the women with whom I have lived and studied have been murdered – three by their husbands and one by her sister-in-law (cf. Bolger 1991). The women with whom I have spent the most time and learned the most are, in their estimation, prevented from visiting their most accessible sacred site because the local missionary forbids women's autonomous religious practice.[7] The younger women are effectively required to give birth in hospitals; pregnancy and childbirth have been medicalised to a degree that would not be tolerated by "white" women.

I see physical violence directed toward Aboriginal women; I see bureaucratic interventions into Aboriginal women's minds and bodies, increasing sexual violence directed toward children (especially, but not exclusively, girls). There are the missionary's conservative gender constructs which privilege males only, and there is enormous pressure on Aboriginal people to make of their lives a set of statistics that will enable the Australian nation to represent itself credibly on the world scene.

I see discursive violence which denies women's autonomous religious practice, which denies women's domains of knowledge and social power, which denies women's care for their lives and destinies, and which reduces their actions to empty categories such as nature and biology and thus robs them of meaning and dignity. I see intellectual practices which construct women as objects of scientific and sociological/anthropological discourse irrespective of their own understandings of the social-geographical-spiritual sites of personhood. It is as though colonising Australia is determined to bleed Aboriginal women of their physical, intellectual and spiritual subjectivity.

None of this is especially unusual.[8] This is world history in general, and colonising practice in particular. In Australia the issues become especially acute. I would not say that this is a post-colonial world; rather I would say that here there is deep colonising. Here the practices of colonisation are so deeply embedded in our social consciousness and so institutionalised in political and bureaucratic practices, that they are almost unnoticed. Here women are targeted by a multiplicity of agents.

The practice of violence, like the practices of colonisation, are too complex to be analysed in depth, but in a book of feminist essays I speak with special urgency. The reign of terror which falls especially heavily on Aboriginal women implicates us all. Those of us who are not Aboriginal cannot appropriate Dreamings or seek to establish authority over women and their places. Nor can we assume that Aboriginal women interpret their experience as I or others do, or seek to alter the conditions of their lives in ways that I or others might choose. But our encounters with our gods, like our experience of our own bodies, will be constricted in the knowledge that violence is practised daily against the flesh of women, and against the sacred places of this continent, against Dreamings who continue to bring forth life, and against the women who hold and sustain that knowledge.

Luce Irigaray (in Grosz 1989:153) writes from a philosopher's set of references, and she writes for us:

> [A]ll women, except when they remain submitted to the logic of the essence of man, should imagine a God for themselves, an objective and subjective place or path for the possible assemblage of the self in space and time: a unity of instinct, heart and knowledge.

In Australia, where colonisation is a continuous process, the path toward God cannot bypass the places and women of this continent. For several millennia, if not more, social practices of the "civilised" world have tried to beat out of our bodies, minds and spirits the recognition of God in our flesh and in our world. I stated that I have been humbled by

the inadequacy of my cultural constructs. My inadequacy is historically contingent; it is the product of millennia of gendered violence during which the public face of God has been denied us.

Here now in 1994 while we attempt to reclaim our path toward God, we must know that colonising violence is being inflicted most specifically on Aboriginal women. I think we will not truly see God in our flesh unless we also contest the policies and practices which violate women's bodied, spiritual and godly experience.

Notes

1 Women's religious practice is discussed thoroughly by Bell (1983); see also Berndt (1950), Gross (1980), Hamilton (1981), Kaberry (1939) and Rose (1992). Merlan (1988) provides a critical overview.

2 Carrying dishes made of bark or wood.

3 Definitions of God ought always to be open to becoming. In addition, it is misleading, I think, to use the term with reference to Aboriginal Dreamings. I have been inspired and consoled by feminist theological studies, particularly those of Delaney (1977), Farians (1974), Plaskow (1990) and Trible (1978).

4 Women's ritual life is described and analysed in detail in Bell (1983), Berndt (1950) and Kaberry (1939). There has been some discussion about the content of women's ritual. Bell emphasises country and nurturance as key foci; Berndt emphasises sexuality and the control of men. Hamilton (1986) criticises Bell's emphasis (see also Hamilton 1981), as does Merlan (1988). In my work, I have seen less nurturance, but intense focus on country, Dreamings, sexuality and the control of men. It seems to me that women's ritual ("business") is broad enough to accommodate the range of women's life issues in their historic contingency. No single focus ought, I believe, to be taken as the defining feature of women's ritual life. Brock (1989) presents a number of essays which indicate a range of approaches and issues. Gross (1980) provides an excellent analysis of the issues I explore here; as far as I know, she was the first to take Aboriginal women's religious practices truly seriously.

5 According to Catherine Berndt (1950), women's blood is sacred, and while I have some problems with the designation sacred, insofar as its meaning relies on opposition with a category of profane, I believe that her statement accurately expresses the quality of the secrecy surrounding blood.

6 I quote Warner for the quality of his teacher's explanation, and not for his own analysis which, in this context, is heavily grounded in a sacred/profane dichotomy and fails to do justice to the multiplicity of sacred substances, beings, and events.

7 The power of the Assemblies of God missionaries waxes and wanes in the Victoria River District (see Rose 1988). At the height of their powers they strongly oppose men's religious practice and actively forbid women's religious practice.

8 Marilyn French (1992) has described violence against women on a global scale with devastating thoroughness; within Australia, see Bolger (1991). Aboriginal women describe their own position, when they have the opportunity, with directness and immense dignity (see, e.g., Gale 1983).

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