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Zohl dé Ishtar is an Irish-Australian Lesbian who works at the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, The University of Queensland, as a post-doctoral fellow. She has worked with Indigenous Australian and Pacific women since 1979 and has been a member of the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement since 1983. She is the author of *Daughters of the Pacific* (Spinifex Press, 1994) and editor of *Pacific Women Speak out for Independence and Denuclearisation* (Raven, 1998). Her third book *Holding Yawulyu: White Culture and Black Women's Law* (in press) to be published in August 2005 is her analysis of the impact of White culture on the Kapululangu Women's Law and Culture Centre project.

Living on the Ground: A Methodology for Whites Researching Respectfully with Indigenous Communities

Since, notwithstanding the increasing numbers of Indigenous researchers, Other-than-Indigenous researchers/consultants will continue to work in and advise government policy and service provision in Indigenous communities it is imperative that we – particularly Whites – develop research methodologies which are respectful of and embrace Indigenous cultural paradigms and advance Indigenous aspirations for cultural revitalisation and maintenance.

I recently conducted research with a group of women elders which led me to develop a methodology which incorporates both Indigenous and (White) feminist ways of knowing, learning and being. I call this methodology “Living on the Ground” for it consists of a triad of Relationship – with the elders, community and Country (immersion techniques) and feminist phenomenology (learning through the languages of the body), in a framework of Indigenous Self-Determination (participatory action research) with a commitment to producing tangible outcomes which immediately benefit the host community.

In conducting this research project I was responding to a request by a group of women elders in Western Australia's Great Sandy Desert to assist them to establish a women's centre which would run cultural programs for their grandchildren so that they might “grow” them up strong in Law and Culture” – religious and cultural knowledge. The elders were worried for their younger generations who were (/are) experiencing and expressing immense trauma as a result of ongoing Whitefella colonialism/racism. Their youth had recently begun to kill themselves and there can be no greater indication of cultural wounding than for a peoples' children to kill themselves. The elders believed that only by developing a sense of pride in their Indigeneity would the young ones find the strength to survive the disjuncture wrought by White cultural intervention.

Living together for two years (1999 to 2001) – 13 women elders, myself and 11 dogs in a one room tin shed – we created the Kapululangu Women's Law and Culture Centre, a *tjilimi* (women's camp) which as a gynocentric territory empowered the women to engage freely in Law (religious) ritual and customary practices in connection with their ancestral lands. This connection with the Land and the *Tjukurrpa* provided the elders with the visionary courage they needed to initiate a vibrant inter-generational cultural knowledge transmission project which involved running culture classes for young girls (using traditional teaching techniques), taking young girls and pre-pubescent boys camping to visit ancestral country, teaching young women hunting and dancing, and travelling along Dreaming Tracks performing rituals at sacred sites.

During this experience I saw that the women elders had engendered a creative cultural energy which I have come to call “Living Culture”. This is an amorphous, unassailable cultural force which is created when people – bound together by kinship and homelands – experience the fullest expression of their connectedness with the cosmology of their ancestors – with the *Tjukurrpa* (Dreaming). This force is so essential to the vitality of the soul that it stirs people’s imaginations and makes them capable of going to the edge of their dreams and beyond. It gives rise to a courageous daring, a spirited determination, for cultural survival. It generates cultural resistance and the determination to maintain cultural integrity. And wherever it is present it taps a source of power within the souls of “cultural activists” which encourages and empowers them to persevere against and to withstand the volley of obstacles which has been set against their peoples through long years of colonisation. It inspires them to transform their world even when to do so seems impossible.

It is my belief that White researchers wishing to form constructive cross-cultural collaborations with Indigenous communities and individual researchers must learn to comprehend and recognise the presence of Living Culture and commit to assisting Indigenous peoples in creating opportunities for its encouragement. It is also vital that Whites recognise that their unique contribution to research partnerships with Indigenous researchers/communities is as “insiders” to the colonising society and that this enables them to position White culture as the object of their exploration and analysis. It is imperative that Whites take a role in dis-arming White colonialism, and the Living on the Ground methodology provides a framework which enables Whites to engage in this process under the direction of and in communion with the women elders and the Indigenous host community.