And right spang in the middle of the web there were the words ÔSome Pig.Ô The words were woven right into the web. They were actually part of the web, Edith. I know, because I have been down there and seen them. It says, ÔSome Pig,Ô just as clear as clear can be. There can be no mistake about it. A miracle has happened and a sign has occurred here on earth, right on our farm, and we have no ordinary pig.

‘Well,’ said Mrs Zuckerman, ‘it seems to me you’re a little off. It seems to me we have no ordinary spider.’

Since the 1970s, ‘Aboriginal Woman’ has been neatly woven into feminist discourses on Aboriginality. She has been placed at the centre of some anthropological and historical texts, where the words that authoritatively constitute her in the present (through references to the past) seem to contain clear messages: Aboriginal Woman is now a doubly burdened victim (under interlocking systems of sexism and racism), who is yet wise ‘sage’ and saviour of her family and community. In these frameworks, we are led to believe we have captured her image. And she is no ordinary woman.

But we can choose to follow the direction of the words, and believe what they signify (with Mr Zuckerman), or we can choose to look at what they say, then wonder about the web’s construction (with Mrs Zuckerman). If we do that, we may see something different.

I’m with Mrs Zuckerman. What we have here is no ordinary spider.

* * *

When anthropologist Diane Bell constructed a picture of Aboriginal women’s place in the realm of the sacred (as well as the material) in the Central Australian desert, her work was radical in two senses. First, because Aboriginal women were her central concern, in striking contrast both to most work by male anthropologists, and at a time when many feminist historians continued to ignore them; and second, because the theory that framed her work

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with/on Aboriginal women was that of radical feminism. This form of feminism asserts that the primary divide in society is that of gender. It is a perspective that is vociferously challenged by Aboriginal historian Jackie Huggins. For her, race, rather than gender, is the primary social divide. At first glance, these two perspectives on Aboriginal women seem to be polar opposites, but I have argued elsewhere that on closer examination they are remarkably similar. Each claims to be uncovering the truth about the historical position of women in Aboriginal society, and locates itself as a challenge to other ways of knowing. Each dredges the past to find evidence from Aboriginal women’s experience to underpin a political position in the present with authoritative knowledge about how things really were, seeking particular experiences (and not others) as they construct the identity positions of both themselves and ‘Aboriginal women’ through the mechanism of identity/difference. The writing styles are also similar, with few discernible signs in the texts of any uncertainty about what is being claimed, and little critical reflection on the processes involved in claiming it. Cause and effect are generally seen as being relatively clear-cut – in the one case, as being structurally linked to patriarchy, in the other to colonialism, each concept itself perceived to be neatly bound and knowable, though connecting. This dependence on

2 The word ‘radical’ is being used in two different senses here: first, in the colloquial sense as in radically different to something else; and second in its relation to fundamentals. Radical feminist theory is said by its adherents to have arisen from the ‘grassroots’ of women’s experience: ‘Like radishes’, write Diane Bell and Renate Klein, ‘radical feminists ... go to the root’ (Diane Bell and Renate Klein (eds), Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed, Spinifex, Melbourne, 1996, p. xxiii).


5 Both Bell and Huggins have noted that their writing styles may alienate readers, locating the fault with the reader rather than the writer. Bell: ‘my style ... grates with some more sombre writers’ (Diane Bell, Daughters of the Dreaming, 2nd ed., Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1993, p. 295). Huggins also uses language, as much as its content, in a confronting/affronting way. See Jackie Huggins ‘A Contemporary View of Aboriginal Women’s Relationship to the White Women’s Movement’, in Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns (eds), Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994, pp. 70-79 on p. 70; Jackie Huggins, ‘Pretty Deadly Tidda Business’, in Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman (eds), Feminism and the Politics of Difference, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1993, pp. 61-72.
metanarratives refuses a reflective methodology.\(^6\)

In this article I will concentrate on the ways in which the preferred radical feminist research project of ‘listening to women’s experiences’ in order to form knowledge has impacted upon Bell’s work.\(^7\) I will tease out how this knowledge-building stance has both informed and at the same time made problematic that work with/on Aboriginal women, suggesting that the effect has been to produce historical knowledge that positions Aboriginal women as ‘speaking objects’ rather than as bearing complex subjectivities. Aboriginal women’s experiences have entered the academy in particular and limiting ways.

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For all intents and purposes, Aboriginal women did not exist within the discourse of feminist history before the mid-1970s. Perhaps this is not surprising, since Aboriginal people in general did not feature as contributors in Australian history books until the 1970s.\(^8\) It was not until Diane Bell’s *Daughters of the Dreaming* first appeared as a book in 1983 that feminism moved Aboriginal women to centre stage in a more lasting, albeit controversial way.\(^9\) Bell’s work presented a picture of Aboriginal society in which gender relations were fairly rigid divisions, and argued that the status of Aboriginal women within their societies had diminished post-contact. The theoretical underpinnings of her work emanated from radical feminism of the 1960s and 1970s.\(^10\) This form of feminism


\(^7\) I concentrate on texts written by Bell between 1980 and 1996.


distinguished itself from the ‘hyphenated’ feminisms (liberal feminism, socialist feminism and so on) by its assertion that women are oppressed as women, rather than as members of another structured form of domination/submission, such as class or race. Women are viewed as having ‘shared identities’ which need to be ‘reclaimed’. Three main features of radical feminism are its methodological emphasis on the importance of forming knowledge through ‘listening to women’s experiences’; its insistence on the validity of seeing ‘woman’ as a universal category of existence that holds true across other aspects of identity which divide people; and its emphasis on women’s experiences in the private sphere (as sexualised, gendered beings) which is seen as being just as political as what takes place in the public sphere (‘the personal is political’). This form of feminism thus came to concentrate its practice and theory on women’s daily lives. The linked institutions of the family (seen as the major site of women’s oppression) and of (hetero)sexuality, assessed as being about dominance and submission, are therefore prime focal points for radical feminists and have been subjected by them to searing critiques.

Radical feminism was not the only grounding for Bell’s work on Aboriginal women. She was also an anthropologist, situated within a discipline that has historically sought to present to its audience an authoritative account of other cultures through methodologies that include participant-observation, systematic data collection and cultural description, all processes for examining others that can also objectify them. Cultural description is a form of collecting that links and makes uniform the things/people collected. Through such means cultures are made to tell a particular story in a certain (in

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12 A major problem with this methodology is the assumption that what women articulate about their experiences is ‘knowledge’. There is little reflection either on factors that mediate experience, or of the space between experience and knowledge in which interpretation takes place. For a discussion, see Joan Scott, ‘Experience’, in Judith Butler and Joan Scott (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Routledge, London, 1992, pp. 22-40. What happens to this methodology in fields such as history and anthropology where our knowledge comes from inference from studying contemporary groups of Aboriginal people in less disrupted areas? (Nancy Williams and Lesley Jolly, ‘From Time Immemorial? Gender Relations in Aboriginal Societies before “White Contact” ’, in Saunders and Evans (eds), *Gender Relations in Australia*, pp. 9-17, on p. 10).


both senses of the word) way. While anthropologists study ‘difference’, they generally focus on differences between cultures, rather than those that exist within a particular culture. This can seduce an anthropologist into seeing a culture as static rather than as an internally contested and dynamic domain. The concentration upon differences between cultures is paralleled by a concentration on differences between anthropological subjects. Differences within an individual subject/informant may be elided. Yet, as anthropologist Henrietta Moore has argued, these are the ‘very differences that constitute [people] as subjects.’

In addition, anthropologists make choices about the selection of informants and subject matter – what is deemed worthy of collection (and concomitantly, what is marginalised). Anthropological collections of others’ cultures are always contingent. Until very recently most anthropologists have been attracted to studying exotic others, those least changed by colonial interactions, in order to make meanings from ways of life seen as quintessentially different to the anthropologist’s own. Bell herself chose to study a remote Aboriginal community following her realisation that she could not afford an extended period studying the Other overseas. James Clifford has suggested that the anthropological study of the Other is an inherently ahistorical process that gathers what is ‘traditional’ rather than what is hybrid; and that anthropologists avoid, rather than pay due attention to history.

In Aboriginal Australia there is little hope of working with those who have been untouched by contact with non-Aboriginal people. As Nancy Williams and Lesley Jolly have noted, ‘we have, in fact, no information about Aboriginal societies before they were radically affected by the processes of so-called “white contact”’. So the attempt to demarcate ‘tradition’ holds myriad problems, as reconstructions of pre-contact times are sought through the medium of memory. Searching for and studying those least contaminated by white contact, or asking people to remember (purely) back past the pollution and clearly articulate and give meaning to what they see in the interests of making truth-claims, is a methodology full of tensions.

In the discussion that follows, I will explore the way in which ‘listening to women’ (a methodological tool both of feminism and feminist anthropology) can place both listener and informant in difficult positions when the quest is for ‘truth’. Feminist anthropologists such as Bell brought with them to the field a sense of ‘sisterhood’: an assumption that a relationship based upon gender could be forged between women who research, and women who inform researchers. Bell wanted to ‘enter the world of women as another woman’ and tells us that ‘integration on the basis of shared experience was [also] high on

16 Bell, ‘Yes Virginia’, p. 32.
18 Williams and Jolly, ‘From Time Immemorial?’, p. 9.
19 For a discussion about the treatment of gender within anthropology, see Moore, ‘The Differences Within’, pp. 193-204.
the list of priorities of the women with whom I eventually became friends and worked’. 20

Such an assumption could deter critical reflection on the problematic place of informant *vis a vis* anthropologist, which has been acknowledged in others’ reflections on the anthropological method. 21 Instead, what informants tell researchers may be read literally, with each action and speech act given a significance that it perhaps does not have; for the ways in which informants describe their reality do not necessarily reflect that reality, but more formal and masterful notions of it, as anthropologists ask questions which ‘produce normative, value-oriented statements about what it is believed ought to happen, rather than a valid description of “what goes on”’. 22 In Bell’s anthropology, her informants are seen as giving nothing but ‘facts’, ‘information’ and ‘evidence’, as ‘acting to no-one’. 23 The effect is soporific. The lightening bits you have to create for yourself, as a reader, perhaps most as a reader who is not an anthropologist, who reads anthropology strangely. I found one in an increasing sense that Diane Bell felt that she was becoming an Aboriginal woman.

**Dreaming Daughters**

*Daughters of the Dreaming* firmly locates Aboriginal women at Warrabri at the centre of their culture, in ‘the design and structure of desert society’. 24 In it Bell contrasts their rich and powerful traditional place in Aboriginal society with their contemporary position as ‘sex object, wife and mother’, and looks for signs of continuity and change: in what ways, she asks, had ‘the past ... been encapsulated in the present, [and how did] the present permeate the past?’ 25 Specifically, ‘how may women be reclaimed from the male-oriented and male-dominated record and given their historical due?’ 26 Unlike many other anthropologists at the time, Bell located her own perspective. When working on *Daughters* she was ‘an older woman with activist politics intent on pursuing a career’. 27 *Daughters* was written following

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20 Bell, ‘Yes Virginia’, p. 36.
21 For example Pierre Bourdieu (see Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, Routledge, London, 1992), but also see articles other than Bell’s in Shelley Schreiner and Diane Bell (eds), *This is My Story: Perspectives on the Use of Oral Sources*, Deakin University, Geelong, 1990.
24 Bell, *Daughters*, p. 7.
25 *ibid.*, pp. 46, 47.
26 *ibid.*, p. 47.
27 Bell, *Daughters*, 2nd ed., p. 3. Bell has located herself in the following ways since writing the first edition of *Daughters*. She is a feminist anthropologist undertaking ‘a sort of reflexive feminist empiricism’ (Bell, *Daughters*, 2nd ed., p. 277). Her speaking position is from the standpoint of a woman, which she understands to be a ‘subaltern’ position (Bell, ‘Introduction’, in Schreiner and Bell (eds), *This is My Story*, p. 4). Bell differentiates herself from the majority of anthropologists of her time by the fact that her field is within her country of birth, naming herself an ‘autochthonous anthropologist’, an ‘insider’ for whom ‘the “natives” of the field are one's fellow citizens, one's gatekeepers, and also the audience for one's publications’ (Bell, ‘Yes Virginia’, pp. 31, 41). This uncritical self-understanding underpins an attempt to erase differences between herself and those she studies: they are ‘fellow citizens’ and women, two categories through which they can be designated
eighteen months of participant-observation in the field, a period that Bell says

literally changed my life. It was not just living with people of a very
different culture, it was the clarity with which I began to see the dynamics
of the diverse ways in which women are trivialized, ignored,
 misrepresented, marginalized and demeaned by western societies and the
strategies of resistance, survival and strength I learned from my
Aboriginal women friends. I went into the field with a well developed
feminist consciousness.28

Bell begins *Daughters* in a challenging way by telling a story to illustrate a young
Aboriginal girl’s sense of her own autonomy (‘I am boss for meself’), and the approval of
that view by older Aboriginal women who, with Bell, are returning from their participation
in male initiation rites. We are meant to sit up and take notice. Bell was there, a woman
who had played a role in male initiation, and she has the authority to speak.29 Her study
concentrated on women’s self-perceptions of their ritual lives and relationship to and
enactment of the Law of the Dreamtime, an ‘all-encompassing, all-pervasive force in the
lives of desert people’, in which ‘past and present fused’.30 Bell locates women’s
(independent) centrality in desert society to their ownership of and relationship to the land,
that was enacted in material and ritual ways connected to their society’s Dreaming. This
view contrasted strongly with that of most male anthropologists, against whom Bell had
consciously situated her project.

equal to her. While Bell has co-edited texts that deal with ethical and other dilemmas faced by
feminist anthropologists and historians, she has not used the space available to her in those texts for
critical self-reflection.

29 Bell, *Daughters*, p. 7. Women’s role in relation to male circumcision ceremonies is an area of some
ambiguity. Bell’s work infers interdependence of the sexes here, but Annette Hamilton is less sure.
Also working in Central Australia, she found women’s participation in such rituals to be ancillary,
particularly in relation to their role at the boundary of male activities in Arnhem Land (Annette
Grieve and Patricia Grimshaw (eds), *Australian Women: New Feminist Perspectives*, Oxford University
Press, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 69-85, on p. 77). Hamilton finds women’s inclusion into men’s secret
rituals to be other than a ‘privilege’, because it is ‘defined largely in male terms and around male
interests’ and recruits women into a ‘single world view’ (Annette Hamilton, ‘Dual Social Systems:
Technology, Labour and Women’s Secret Rites in the Eastern Western Desert of Australia’, *Oceania*,
51, 1980, pp. 4-19, on p. 17). In other ways women are disadvantaged by male initiation ceremonies:
for example at these times taboos apply to the food which can be eaten by young girls (Gillian
Cowlishaw, ‘Family Planning: A Post-contact Problem’, in Janice Reid (ed.), *Body, Land and Spirit:
Health and Healing in Aboriginal Society*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1982, pp. 31-48, on
p. 37).
30 Bell, *Daughters*, p. 12.
Becoming Aboriginal

I find the elucidation in Bell’s texts of the extent to which she considered herself to be integrated into Aboriginal society unnerving. It almost reads as though she came to consider herself to be an Aboriginal woman, in a rather amazing act of sisterhood.

Bell locates herself as a single mother, who brought her children with her to the field. That social position enabled her to interact with Aboriginal women in ways that would have been impossible for men, married women, or, probably, a childless woman. The presence of the children facilitated her recognition by Aboriginal women and emplacement within their society. The children were ‘two of my greatest fieldwork assets’; ‘my daughter was seen to be nearing the age of marriage and my son approaching initiation’. Is Bell suggesting that she would have permitted her daughter, aged 12, to marry, and her son to be initiated? She apparently took part in serious planning with Aboriginal women for her son’s initiation in 1977; and knew that when she was chosen to be a ‘mother-in-law’ that that relationship involved her in contracting to provide a marriageable daughter to a Aboriginal man. These statements can be read in different ways. Bell may be stating a truth, that she intended to proceed with such ceremonies, with real consequences for both her children and herself; she may have emphasised a kinship identity with Aboriginal people for the purposes of her research about them, in which case the identity could have been seen by Bell as a pretence, but by the women as a commitment; or by both as an academic game. What are the consequences, each way, for her work? These ambiguities are glossed in the text as Bell records the women’s acceptance of her – ‘you are just like us’.

Being ‘just like us’ ‘entailed the emotional and financial independence I enjoyed as a “widow”’ (i.e. a woman without the support of a man) and the social status I enjoyed by virtue of my two children’.

33 *Integration into the kinship system* is a way through which Aboriginal people could interact and converse with outsiders, apparently a method chosen by both non-Aboriginal anthropologists and their Aboriginal subject-matter (*ibid.*, p. 18). The problem is the extent to which Bell came to consider herself to be integrated.

32 *ibid.*, p. 232.
35 Other feminist anthropologists have reflected upon this issue. During her time in the field, Martha Macintyre often ‘pondered just what the adoptive status meant to people on the island. Sometimes I thought it was like a game for them’ (Martha Macintyre, ‘Fictive Kinship or Mistaken Identity? Fieldwork on Tubetube Island, Papua New Guinea’, in Bell et al. (eds) *Gendered Fields*, pp. 44-62, on p. 52).
proud to be a woman’. 38

Bell contrasts herself against other female anthropologists who preceded her into the field: ‘I was trusted with women’s secrets because I was told that, unlike many married white women, I did not deem it necessary to confirm with a man everything I learnt’. 39 In the same way, male anthropologists did not deem it necessary to confirm with Aboriginal women what they learnt from Aboriginal men. When Bell spoke with Aboriginal men, they assumed that the women had not told her of men’s business, or had told her that men had no business, and ‘in a sense they were right’, since men’s business was ‘outside the scope of the interest I displayed in women’s rituals and they did not consider it essential to my understanding of women’s rituals’. 40 All of this suggests that Bell’s knowledge was (just) as useful and singularly focused as that of the male anthropologists whom she had charged with bias. Bell wrote that she was considered ‘safe’ due to her independence from men. Other facts that would have signified her as ‘unsafe’ – the facts that she was white (with the history that that brings with it) and an anthropologist – were apparently immaterial, although she had noted in an earlier text the hostility between Aboriginal and European people at Warrabri when she was there. 41 Gender over-rode race and class – as a radical feminist would expect it to.

Having been integrated into the Aboriginal kinship structure, Bell was ‘taught ... to be a woman in their society’, ‘to be a Nakamarra’. 42 And not just any woman, an Elder. She writes that this is how the women recognised her: ‘when you came here you were young, now you are Nakamarra, my piniri (father’s sister), an old woman’. 43 Bell’s position as a mother-in-law enabled her participation in the male initiation of a boy ‘for whom I had worked [by dancing all night] to transform him into a young man’. 44 Later, Bell (a.k.a. Nakamarra) mediated in a fight between Aboriginal men through her presence and status as a mother-in-law. This enabled her to make an authoritative claim: ‘My experience of the power of the presence of the mother-in-law indicated a much more pro-active role

38 ibid., p. 73.
39 Bell and Nelson, ‘Diane Bell and Topsy Napurrula Nelson’, p. 72. This reference may be to Catherine Berndt, whom Bell identifies elsewhere as ‘the wife of a fellow researcher who was interested in men’s business’, which seems to displace Berndt from having any sort of anthropological authority in her own right (Bell, Daughters, p. 233).
40 Bell, Daughters, p. 34.
41 Diane Bell, ‘Desert Politics: Choices in the “Marriage Market” ’, in Mona Etienne and Eleanore Leacock (eds) Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives, Praeger, New York, 1980, pp. 239-269, p. 242. This contrasts with Bell’s first few months in the field, during which she ‘felt a little uneasy; it was as if I had been accepted because I was a white woman and the Warlpiri had learnt not to argue with whites ... Maybe I was a little like the welfare people’. Maybe she was. She was invited to an ‘unopened’ dreaming, and the price of attendance was a trip to New Zealand. Soon afterwards, Bell abandoned her study of the Warlpiri women, writing that the Kaytej women ‘won’ her (Bell, Daughters, p. 27).
42 Bell, Daughters, pp. 28, 36.
43 ibid., p. 39.
44 Bell, Daughters, 2nd ed., p. 285.
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attached to this so-called “avoidance relationship” [that other anthropologists had
found].45 Here it is Bell’s experience as an Aboriginal woman that forms the basis of her
knowledge about the place of women in such ceremonies.

These discussions of integration into Aboriginal society are disturbingly
unreflective. What is lacking is any sense that Bell’s informants may also have been making
personal and political choices about the representation of their pasts, their contemporary
positions, and futures, in their interaction with her as a white anthropologist. In a study of
the Aboriginal men in the early colonial Native Police Corps, Marie Fels suggests that the
men joined the Corps to share in the power and authority of an invader who was here to
stay.46 Perhaps the women Bell studied as ‘desert sages’ integrated her into their kinship
networks for a similar purpose, to gain newly valued forms of authority and power in 1970s
desert (and the wider Australian) society. This would have made them much more than
anthropological subjects who narrated Aboriginal women’s ‘autonomy’ in both the material
and ritual realm for the purposes of entering white feminist history. It would also have
placed them as women choosing to take part, emphasising a traditional role and status on
their own terms, in an on-going and changing process of negotiation and accommodation
with the descendants of the invader/settlers, some of whom are white feminist
anthropologists.47 To see the women’s work with Bell in this light would have been to
admit them into her fieldwork as agents with their own agendas. Perhaps it placed her in
their fieldwork. Either way, they would have been much more than (feminist)
anthropological subjects, the effect of which, I suggest, was to move them to centre stage
as speaking objects.

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Daughters provides an oddly one-sided view of the social space that Aboriginal women
occupy. The women of whom Bell wrote appear invariably as (innately?) wise,
knowledgeable and good. In relation to her they are ‘patient and perceptive teachers’,
‘friends’, ‘ritual experts’ and ‘desert sages’, full of warmth, humour and wisdom. They ‘cared
for me and taught me’, ‘scolded’ and ‘protected me’, and ‘worked with me in the field’
(Bell’s ‘field’, their home).48 Although Bell is insistent that she views culture as a dynamic

45 ibid., p. 286.
46 Marie Fels, Good Men and True: The Aboriginal Police of the Port Phillip District 1837-1853, Melbourne
University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 3. See also Christopher Anderson, ‘Aborigines and Tin
Mining in Northern Queensland: A Case Study in the Anthropology of Contact History’, Mankind,
47 This seems to have been one effect of their work with Bell, who was of later use to Aboriginal
women in giving expert evidence to buttress women’s land claims. At the time of her residence with
the Kaytej, there were also advantages for the Kaytej women, who valued Bell’s vehicle, her house,
her literacy, the negotiating skills she used on their behalf, and her willingness to be their ‘front guy’
in official interactions with whites (Bell, Daughters, pp. 29, 31).
process, in her work it appears that prior to white contact, the world of Aboriginal women was almost ideal. In it they experienced 'good health, happiness and harmony', within a belief system comprising 'beauty, complexity and sheer poetry'. According to Bell, what the Aboriginal women desired from her research was a recognition of their 'distinctively female contribution to their society', and for that to be accorded the value it had had in the past when it was critical to group survival. The role they wished to see recognised was not one of dependence or subjugation as wives and mothers but a role of independence, responsibility, dignity and authority wherein they were enhanced as women, as members of their society, as daughters of the dreaming.

The Aboriginal women appear as simply there (only there) in the desert/field, anchored to their past from which all goodness flows. Bell found them, in their past, as she always knew they would be – strong, autonomous, and in solidarity with each other. Their past is the radical feminist future. In finding them, Bell made her self.

Bell intended to introduce Aboriginal women into anthropological and feminist discussions as knowing subjects. I think that she is most successful in doing this when she focuses on areas in which the women tell her that they are separate from men, ‘members of an autonomous sex’ in history, a framework in which she is ideologically comfortable. Men are of course a peripheral but necessary presence in her text, if women are to be essentially defined against them, as ‘separate’, different, autonomous. Bell is less successful when women tell her things that it is less ideologically comfortable for her to hear.

Uncomfortable listening

I would like to explore the idea that some feminist studies of ‘other’ women use those women’s experiences as a kind of renewed legitimating device through which the category Woman is reaffirmed. As Sneja Gunew has noted, texts can produce a homogenised group of ‘other’ women who ‘supposedly speak unselfconsciously in the first person’, works that may

50 Bell, Daughters, 2nd ed., p. 6.
51 ibid., pp. 32-3. There are also elements of this looking back to a golden past in Aboriginal women’s life stories, see MacDonald, T(racing) Gender, Chapter 3. However there, the recollection is not of past relationships which were primarily to do with gendered power.
52 Anthropologist Mary Douglas has suggested that the subjects of anthropological enquiry inevitably end up resembling the anthropologists who study them (cited in Moore, A Passion for Difference, p. 130).
53 Bell, Daughters, 2nd ed., p. 3.
54 Bell, ‘Women’s Changing Role,’ p. 223.
function as useful reinforcements for a separatist feminist position in which women are constructed as an unproblematic category and the primacy of women’s oppression is reinstated ... so long as these minority women do not assert their differences too much.  

I will look at Bell’s treatment of two areas in Aboriginal women’s lives that I find to be problematic: first, her constant assertions that Aboriginal women were, in the past, ‘autonomous’ and what this means for her consideration of Aboriginal families; and second, her treatment of (hetero)sexuality.

**Autonomy: Creating Topsy Nelson**

When reading *Daughters* it is difficult not to believe that women occupy almost completely separate spaces within Aboriginal communities to those occupied by men. There is no sense in the work of the extent to which this may be a view with contemporary political salience, both for Bell and her informants. Yet autonomy is far from a position that Aboriginal women, in their life stories for example, claim for themselves. Such a degree of autonomy can only be asserted if a prior move has been made on the part of the asserter, and that is to displace women from close familial relationships, that are then seen as being secondary spheres. The thorough-going radical feminist critique of the family is at work here, illustrated by Bell’s discussion of her friend and chief informant, Topsy Napurrula Nelson.

Bell locates the source of Nelson’s autonomy in the successful avoidance of immediate entanglement in family responsibilities:

because she had borne no children of her own, she had not spent years in the time-consuming and emotionally demanding task of child-rearing.

Consequently, Topsy had been able to devote her time and energy to acquiring knowledge and ritual expertise.

This passage suggests that Nelson could *either* devote herself to child-rearing, *or* to acquiring ritual knowledge. She was also a widow who, according to Bell, had ‘managed to avoid

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56 The concept of autonomy holds a contested position within feminist theorising (see Susan Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 73-81). Some feminists have critiqued the notion of autonomy, linking it to the liberal ideal of ‘rational man’ in Enlightenment thought. As used by Bell, ‘autonomy’ means autonomy-from-men. Her work illustrates that Aboriginal women were and are not autonomous from each other.
57 See MacDonald, *T(racing) Gender*, especially Chapter 3.
58 Bell, ‘Women’s Changing Role,’ p. 221.
59 This is ironic, given Bell’s understanding that the presence of her own children, whom she brought with her to the field, facilitated her placement in Aboriginal society and acquisition of
entering into any permanent marital arrangements after her period of mourning. Marriage is something to ‘avoid’; child-rearing a ‘task’ that keeps women from more important, public realm activities. This is a radical feminist view of the family as the primary site of oppression for women. Again, ‘[A]s women leave behind their mothering roles they move into more prestigious women’s activities and play an increasingly important role in community decision-making’. Leaving behind mothering and gaining importance within the politics of community life are seen as cause and effect. Is it really that simple? Is there no leaching between the two? How does this view fit with the women telling Bell elsewhere that they see their role as ‘nurturers of people, land and relationships’ who ‘grow up’ country and kin? In another passage Bell writes of Aboriginal women’s sympathy for the ‘cross’ borne by white women as wives and mothers: ‘Poor things shut inside all day, like a prisoner’. This is their assessment of white women’s place in families, after Bell has answered their questions about non-Aboriginal society, in what reads like a late-night consciousness-raising session in the desert. The discussion included the issue of rape, the cause of which the women said was ‘alcohol’, to which Bell added ‘but the women also recognized the deeper causes’. All this is clearly informed by radical feminism, which has a particular understanding of the aetiology of rape.

All this is informed by radical feminism, perhaps because it may provide objective proof of women’s oppression as women, in the last resort. Bell used this reading of rape in her later work on intraracial sexual violence. In her texts, the framework is provided by radical feminist theorising about it, including Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will*. In a famous assertion, Brownmiller stated that ‘rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear’ (her italics, cited in Bell, ‘Speaking about Rape’, p. 406).

Bell and Nelson, ‘Diane Bell and Topsy Napurrula Nelson,’ p. 84.
Nelson is also included in Bell’s texts in contradictory ways more generally. She mostly appears as desert sage, a woman ‘in her ritual prime’, a teacher of ‘the law’, with competence in ‘the intricacies of desert life’, in the full flush of her ‘ritual power’. When this aspect of her life is emphasised, she has the effect of giving great authority to Bell’s anthropology. White influences and people (apart from Bell herself) are absent in Bell’s introduction to Nelson’s life in Fighters & Singers, and from Daughters. But Nelson’s words elsewhere place herself differently. When she tells her own story, Nelson does not touch on her ritual life, and she is certainly not a woman living a life separate from men. In her own words, Nelson is a different person. Her life, at times nostalgically recounted, has been one filled with interactions with non-Aboriginal people, and with men of both races, at ration depots, missions and stations. Sexual and racial stereotypes cannot hold up. Nelson remembers some white men and women fondly, as helpful and friendly; some Aboriginal men less happily, as people whom she and her family feared, from whom they needed to run. In domestic service she undertook the usual tasks – cleaning and cooking, and learning to sew. She also worked in a factory, and trained as a dressmaker in Darwin. She did these things as well as travelling and ‘learning the country’. The emphasis in Daughters and elsewhere on things ritual has the effect of removing Nelson from the rest of her life, the bulk of which was spent in the mish mash of daily living with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and in the realm of the thoroughly mundane.

(Hetero)sex
Aboriginal efforts to integrate individual invaders into their social systems has a history, one that has been related to Aboriginal women’s sexuality. Aboriginal writers such as Jackie Huggins, in contrast, see black/white sexual contact at the cultural frontier as always meaning rape and exploitation and Bell, writing in 1980, agreed. She asserted that of the

68 See also Topsy Napurrula Nelson, ‘My Story’, in Scheiner and Bell (eds), This is My Story, pp. 18-27.
69 For example Mr Curtis, Mr Long, ‘the army mob’, and Mrs Cameron (who was, I assumed on first reading, an Aboriginal woman since Nelson placed her in her story as a woman who understood nature in a way in which Aboriginal people are often portrayed) (Bell and Nelson, ‘Diane Bell and Topsy Napurrula Nelson’, pp. 79-80).
70 ibid., pp. 80, 82-3, 76.
71 Bell has also attempted to create Nelson in a certain image elsewhere. At a small conference on epistemological issues in the elicitation and construction of oral histories, Nelson was one of two people who spoke their history, closing the session. In the conference papers which later appeared, Nelson’s oral presentation has been written and moved to begin the proceedings, following Bell’s Introduction which states that Nelson was ‘intent on addressing the issues’ with which the historians grappled on the day (Bell, ‘Introduction’, This is My Story, pp. 1-2). This is how Bell wished Nelson to function. Nelson, however, was intent on telling the audience her own personal history, and on pleading with them for assistance in halting a toxic waste dump in Tennant Creek. Her presentation did not engage with historiographical questions at all.
black/white liaisons that ‘endure’, ‘most are violent’, but went on to link the violence to
gender rather than race, stating that ‘the perception [by men] of women, both European
and Aboriginal [is] solely as sex objects’.73

But it seems that individual women’s self-perceptions were often different from
these blanket dismissals. In *Dreaming*, Bell reports that women told her that their sexual
relationships with white men were a matter of personal choice, for the enjoyment of the
relationship as well as for material rewards. Yet the words Bell uses to relate this
perspective show her abstracting herself from the women’s own views of these
relationships:

> Women suggest that they could go freely to such white men and that they enjoyed both the relationship and the goods they thus procured. They insist it was only with their consent that they entered into such relationships. Aboriginal men on the other hand argue that white men stole their women. There is a degree of pride in each explanation. There is also a tension in these accounts, for while women may have enjoyed the novelty of white men, the long-run effects were devastating.74

Here Bell juxtaposes what the women told her about their own sexuality, with what the men
told her about women’s sexuality, and then inserts her own view over the top of the
women’s experiences: what they enjoyed was the ‘novelty’, the effects of which were
‘devastating’. In other words, Bell for once stands back from what she hears, cross-
references it to men’s assessments, and then trivialises the women’s self-perceptions. Two
aspects of her feminist methodology are at war with each other here, and Bell needed to
choose whether she heard women’s self-perception of their enjoyment in heterosexual
relationships that they chose; or whether she remained entangled in a radical feminist
framework that sees heterosex as a relationship of male dominance over women, even
without the complicating factor of racial colonisation. So what is related to her readers as
knowledge? In *Daughters* Bell chooses to place Aboriginal women here as not (truly)
knowing their desires or where their interests lay.75

Aboriginal women’s experiences of heterosexuality with Aboriginal men became a
focus of Bell’s work in the late 1980s, when she concentrated on the sensitive matter of
sexualised violence, claiming to be ‘breaking the silence’ on intraracial rape within
Aboriginal communities. She charged that Australian anthropologists such as the Berndts
had failed to understand that what they cited as ‘sex relations’ in their work were actually

73 Bell, ‘Desert Politics’, p. 250.
74 Bell, *Daughters*, 2nd ed., p. 69.
75 There is a contrast here to Bell’s earlier work. In an article on ‘marriage’ in Aboriginal communities she disaggregated the different, and changing, kinds of marriages, reporting that women had choices (even if they were more by subverting men’s intentions, rather than anything else) especially in marriages which followed their first, ‘promised’ marriage (Bell, ‘Desert Politics’).
rape, since they did not ‘appear to require a woman’s consent.’ Bell does not want the defence of ‘tradition’ to be used to deter the punishment of men, and links the growth of the violence to women’s decreased power to avert it. The article was published in the US-based feminist *Women’s Studies International Journal (WSIJ)*. In it Bell states that she is attempting to ‘map terrain on which informed discussion may occur’; and that she has ‘known for years that I had to write this paper’, which she dedicates to one ‘courageous Aboriginal woman’, and in which she thanks several radical feminist friends for their ‘critical comments and moral support while I dealt with my anger and wrote’. The article appeared with Topsy Nelson cited as co-author. However I think that Jackie Huggins, with whom I disagree on some points, is right to assert that it is Bell rather than Nelson who is the speaking voice in the texts they are said – by Bell – to have co-authored. The writing style does not reflect in any way Nelson’s few paragraphs, italicised, in the article on rape. Her words in the text are minimal, serving to illustrate one of Bell’s points, and she avoids the word ‘rape’.

Bell writes that ‘after I had finished reading to her [Nelson] my analysis

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76 Bell, ‘Speaking about Rape’, p. 408. ‘Breaking the silence’ is one of radical feminism’s slogans, generally used in speaking about incest and rape against women and girls. Bell believes that ‘if one has a voice one should speak’ (Bell, *Daughters*, 2nd ed., p. 292). I am critical about her choice of forum/audience, the theoretical underpinning of her view (which does not take race into account, although Bell herself refers to racist practices in colonialism), and her use of Nelson as ‘co-author’. However my criticism also begs a question: is speaking about a crime the first step towards change? It may be that Bell’s decision to speak began a more visible process on this issue by Aboriginal women. Since the publication of her article Aboriginal women have written about rape, noticeably in publications designed for an Australian audience.

77 Robyn Rowlands, a radical feminist at Deakin University, Geelong, was the Australian editor. Her latest work appears in Bell’s recent book, co-edited with radical feminist Renate Klein. Klein was previously the European editor for WSIJ. This tightly supportive and self-referential group of radical feminists have power in the publishing world, and know how to get their work across (and sideline that of others, as happened with the Huggins response to Bell’s article on intraracial rape). See Jan Pettman, ‘Gendered Knowledges: Aboriginal Women and the Politics of Feminism’, in Attwood and Arnold (eds), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, pp. 120-131, on p. 128).

78 Bell, ‘Speaking about Rape’, p. 403.

79 Bell has represented as ‘insulting’ some Aboriginal women’s charge that Topsy Nelson, whose education and life have been far different from Bell’s, could not have co-authored the text. In her later publications Bell has argued against those who criticised her decision to speak on the issue of rape, claiming that she and Nelson were speaking ‘to each other and ... out to a wider audience. It was a defiant feminist statement that rape is about power and that silence about rape protects the abusers of power. So we were speaking out, not for other women’ (Bell, ‘Speaking of Things’, pp. 248-9, her emphasis). She denied the validity of the angry response to her article by twelve Aboriginal women who questioned her right to speak. Bell identified those women as ‘well-educated urban Aboriginal women, none of whom in the best of my knowledge, had any in-depth fieldwork experience in the area of which we had written, but they all claimed to speak for Aboriginal women’ (*ibid.*, p. 249). Her right to speak is thus authenticated through reference to her work in the anthropological ‘field’, while denying the authenticity of other Aboriginal women’s speaking positions (see Helen MacDonald, ‘Debating Radical Feminism: Some Questions and a Review’, *Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre Newsletter*, No. 3, 1996, pp. 33-42).

80 Discussions I have had with Aboriginal women in the course of working at one of Melbourne’s Centres Against Sexual Assault reveal that ‘rape’, and even ‘sexual assault’ are not words that
of the apparent increase in the level of sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by Aboriginal men in the Northern Territory of Australia’, Nelson ‘instructed’ Bell to tell the story about the difference in heterosexual relations between the old and new.81

It’s important to show this story, not just for you and me, everyone got to know that one. Start with the old generation and come to the trouble now. Everyone can read that story.82

But by ‘everyone’, who did Nelson mean? What effect did she want the story-telling to have? Perhaps she meant ‘everyone’ to be those who could do something, in a way respectful of Aboriginal communities, to try to change the violence. This is a different audience to the one towards whom the article is actually pitched, predominantly American feminists, which is revealed by the degree to which it is structured within ongoing debates between radical and socialist feminism on the correct aetiology of rape.

When Bell wrote Daughters she knew that there were conventions surrounding the issue of speaking about certain matters, and respected them.83 But breaking the silence on rape within Aboriginal communities was something else again, as Bell knew that it would be. It may be that she did not take fully into account the discursive context of her act of speaking by reflecting on where her speech would go and what it would do there. I think she saw her article as entering feminism for discussion, but I find it hard to understand what she thought (predominantly American) feminists could do with it that would make a real difference in the lives of women in Aboriginal communities.84 The way in which she went about breaking this silence was inept for somebody whose close work with Aboriginal women had alerted her to the many ‘dangers’ (her word, in constant use) of transgressing community mores. She seemed to ignore the history of post-contact claims about Aboriginal men’s bestiality towards Aboriginal women, which to some extent facilitated

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81 Nelson in Bell, ‘Speaking about Rape’, p. 404. Bell’s representation of Nelson’s perspective on issues such as this is further problematised by the fact that the works have to be read back to Nelson, who is apparently unable to read them for herself (see also Bell, ‘Introduction’, in Schreiner and Bell (eds), This is My Story, p. 13). In a later article, reiterating her right to speak, there is constant slippage between an authorial ‘I’ and ‘we’ (Bell, ‘Speaking of Things’).

82 Nelson in ‘Speaking about Rape’, p. 404.

83 Bell, Daughters, 2nd ed., p. 2. See also Diane Bell, Ngarrindjeri Warmawarrin: a World that Is, Was, and Will Be, Spinifex, Melbourne, 1998.

84 I feel sympathy for the angry response to Bell’s article. Criticisms came from a group of Aboriginal women (previously mentioned), as well as anthropologist Jan Larblistier (‘The Politics of Representation: Australian Aboriginal Women and Feminism’, Anthropological Forum, Vol. VI, No. 1, pp. 143-155) and others. For a discussion see Anna Yeatman, ‘Voice and Representation in the Politics of Difference’, in Gunew and Yeatman (eds), Feminism, pp. 228-245; and Pettman, ‘Gendered Knowledges’. More recently, Gunew has cited the article and Bell’s defence of it in terms of an ‘unfortunate example of white feminist gatekeeping’ (Gunew, ‘Feminism and Difference’, p. 41).
the destruction of Aboriginal culture.  

One purpose served by Bell’s texts on intraracial rape was to differentiate her work from that of other anthropologists. Her anthropology, addressing the ‘tough’ issues, builds her credentials within radical feminism. It also reasserts an association between heterosexuality and dominance/submission through a selective use of Aboriginal life experiences – from which reading it had escaped in *Dreaming*, when we heard Aboriginal women defining it differently. In her treatment of Aboriginal women within the family and heterosexuality, Bell’s work has the effect of reiterating the radical feminist view that women are oppressed as women. She homogenises Aboriginal women’s pasts, and contains them within her own frames of reference. Using some Aboriginal women’s memories of the past, as well as selecting ‘traditional’ aspects of their presents, she positions Aboriginal women as being placed so autonomously that they can provide some kind of model for an envisaged radical feminist future. I do not think this representation can be an authenticating move for radical feminism, as I have shown in deconstructing her work and retrieving from it elements of other views.

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Collecting people’s histories is a responsible task. I have argued that the way in which Diane Bell has gone about it in these texts has resulted in a construction of Aboriginal women’s subjectivity that is too neat. In her texts ‘Aboriginal woman’ is woven according to what the writer says is her primary source of identification – gender. We need to stand back from the web and look at its weaver. If we do, we can find alternative readings. It is not that gender relations are absent from Aboriginal societies, but that they may not always mean what the radical feminist wants us to believe that they do: that Aboriginal women are contained by this historical subject position, or that gender is always and everywhere about dominance and submission, power over, a zero sum game. Attempts to classify Aboriginal women in that unilateral way decontextualise them and make them the cultural property of the writer and her texts, where they are ‘bent ... to a new will, to force [their] participation in a different game’.  

Radical feminism, like other perspectives, has its blind spots, and the mental map of the world through which its subject matter is forced facilitates the disappearance of events that it cannot coherently pattern. The attempt to classify people by distilling their lives down to gendered ‘roles’ is a problematic one in which living, breathing human beings never emerge as complex individuals who act in surprising and contradictory ways. Instead, they always appear as if they are really contained by the primary social role the writer has deemed they occupy, from which all else ‘naturally’ flows. It is not that there is a true voice

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85 Hamilton, ‘Aboriginal Women’, p. 167. Bell has argued that in Australia, contrary to the US experience, there has been no fear of black men’s sexuality. That is a problematic statement, as may be illustrated by the hunt mounted in Gippsland in 1846 for a white woman who may or may not have been stolen by an Aboriginal man (Fels, *Good Men and True*).

out there whose experience can be purely represented, but rather that there are different representations, some of which are more critically reflective about the assumptions underlying their methodology than are others.