“Going Back to Country with Bosses“: The Yiriman Project, Youth Participation and Walking along with Elders

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Abstract
This paper describes a new approach to youth participation and development used by a youth organization in the West Kimberley region of Western Australia. It offers an account of how people from isolated communities in the north of Australia organize bush trips, or what they call “back to country” trips, to bring together the young, elders, and other community members. Not only is this used as a means to have young people “participate” more fully in the life and experience of their community, but it also leads to a range of other events including young people’s participation in land care, cultural education, fire management, science and economic development. This story offers a rich example of the multiple benefits of combining intergenerational contact, practical activities and the opportunity to "return to country" to practice Indigenous lore and custom and involve young people more fully in the life of their community. It also demonstrates how important land-based activity, traditional culture, walking and other forms of physical animation are to youth participation with Indigenous young people.

Keywords: Aboriginal youth; youth programs; Kimberley Australia; youth participation

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Introduction

While it could be said that work with young people has shifted over time, a consistent theme over the past 20 years has been the idea that the young need to be better “engaged” or to “participate” in their community. In Australia, as in most Western governmental systems, youth engagement and community participation seems to have increased across a broad range of areas, such as health promotion, education, employment, arts and cultural development, recreation and city planning (Matthews 2001; Johns et al. 2001).

Much of the Australian policy talk and practice about youth participation is littered with ideas grounded in Western (particularly liberal) social and political theory, which emphasize the centrality of equality, democracy, reciprocal influence, jointly planned activities, subsidiarity and the rights of the individual citizen. Not so popular in public discussion of youth participation is an exploration of the limits of participatory practice, particularly in relation to how it plays out in the lives of young people from non-Western backgrounds.

This paper focuses on the work of the Yiriman Project, a youth organization in the West Kimberley region of Western Australia that hosts what local people have called “back-to-country trips.” It offers an account of how people from isolated communities in the north of Australia have built an organization that brings together the young, elders and other community members. Not only is the Yiriman model used as a means to have young people “participate” more fully in the life and experience of community, but it also leads to a range of other events, including young people’s participation in land care, cultural education, fire management, science and economic development. This story offers a rich example of the multiple benefits of combining intergenerational contact, practical activities and the opportunity to “return to country” to practice Indigenous lore and custom and involve young people more fully in the life of their community.

Youth Participation and Intergenerational Exchange

Between the late 1970s and the International Youth Year in 1985, many Australian youth organizations promoted the benefits of participation and young people’s involvement in decision-making processes (Maunders 1990; Bessant et al. 1998). The popularity of youth participation waned considerably during the 1990s, but it has re-emerged since the year 2000, this time with active government promotion of young people in civic life, community and governance (Wierenga 2003). This
follows similar trends in other western countries (Matthews 2001). In Australia, as in other parts of the world, the notion of intergenerational exchange has emerged as one way to give substance to aspirations to improve young people’s involvement with older members of their community.

Although ideas about and approaches used to encourage youth participation vary, there are some common features. Most draw upon methods that could generally be described as informed by or falling under the broad rubric of Participatory Learning Analysis (PLA) or Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). These methods are prompted by claims that top-down development or governance has serious shortcomings. The view is that externally imposed and expert-driven forms of policy and community governance have become ineffective, particularly for groups such as young people, who traditionally have poor access to decision-making processes (Cooke and Kothari 2001, 5). The central motivation of adopting participatory methods is to allow the concerns of “the people,” particularly those who otherwise are marginal to decision-making, to become paramount in any attempts to plan and manage matters that affect them. Implicit in this work is the supposition that the knowledge and active involvement of “the people” will transform planning and lead to improved outcomes (Mosse 2001, 16).

Participatory methods are often characterized by liberal and modern ideas about the value of:

- equality, freedom and open fraternity;
- encouraging young people’s unencumbered expression and talk;
- subsidiarity, or that power needs to be exercised from below;
- young people have the right to shape their future;
- reciprocity in the exchange of ideas, power and work;
- young people sharing similar activities with others;
- the open sharing of information between people in a community;
- freedom of access to “public space”; and

Whether couched in terms of leadership, democracy or consultation, the concept of youth participation is considered important to “a process of building relationships of mutual obligation and trust across community sectors” (Johns et al. 2001, 20). The most common forms of formal participation tend to involve youth councils or youth advisory committees, as part of an attempt to get young people’s input into ongoing policy direction (Saggers et al. 2004). Often, participation is seen as the cure for deeply divisive social ills, such as vandalism and concerns about young people’s use of public space (Ackermans 1991; Robins 1996; White 2001).

In response to fears about the unhealthy effects of age segregation, the idea of orchestrating intergenerational exchange has emerged as a popular tool for youth practitioners. This work is perhaps best described by the International Consortium for Intergenerational Programs (established in 2000) as “social vehicles that create purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations” (Kaplan et al. 2002, xi). In a similar fashion, the (United
States) National Council on Aging (NCA) describes intergenerational programs as those interventions that aim to "increase cooperation, interaction or exchange between any two generations" through the "sharing of skills, knowledge or experience between old and young" (National Council on Aging, cited in Duggar 1993, 5). In other words, intergenerational programs are "activities that bring old and young together for their mutual benefit" (Angelis cited in Barton 1999, 625).

The rationale behind most of the work on intergenerational exchange centers on what Allport (1954) calls the "contact hypothesis," which posits that cooperative contact with individual members of an "out-group" – or marginalized population – can lead to a more positive attitude toward the out-group as a whole (see Caspi 1984; Hale 1998; Schwartz and Simmons 2001).

The claimed benefits of intergenerational exchange are many and varied and include the idea that they help instill important civic values in young people (Woffard 1999, 92); strengthen mutual understanding (Berns 1997); rebuild social networks and create inclusive communities (Granville and Hatton-Yeo 2002, 197); increase tolerance, a level of comfort and intimacy between the old and young; and dispel clichés and myths about the aging process (Manheimer, cited in Intergenerational Strategies 2004). Such benefits are attributed in part to the fact that intergenerational work demands that participants build common bonds and discover shared life experiences, challenges and problems (Larkin et al., cited in Intergenerational Strategies 2004).

Although there is a general acceptance of the conceptual benefits of youth participation and intergenerational exchange, they are not uncontested. Walther and colleagues note the existence of “contradictions in the concepts of participation and citizenship” (Walther et al. 2002, 3). There is some doubt about the efficacy of youth participation, and also about the potential for extended control implicit in the practice. Some believe that the practice of youth participation can be problematic and dominated by school leaders (McLaren cited in Sagers et al. 2004), or have a “hidden agenda” about the need to create “good citizens” (Stacey et al. 2002, 45). Concerns about totalitarian echoes in discourses of participation and community development and about the distance between the rhetoric of youth participation and the practices of local government have also surfaced (Palmer cited in Sagers et al. 2004; Bessant 2002 and 2003). Importantly, both youth participation and intergenerational exchange have their roots in western traditions, in the main liberal approaches to modern government. The extent to which they are applicable to work with Indigenous young people remains rather untested.

Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri Country
One example of youth practice that has some of the hallmarks of youth participation and intergenerational exchange is the Yiriman Project. The Yiriman story takes us to the Kimberley region in Australia, specifically the country of the Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri. The Kimberley, one of the many regions in the huge Australian state of Western Australia, itself covers a substantial area approximately twice the size of the Australian state of Victoria, three times the size of England or three-fifths the size of Texas. Although large in geographic size,
it has a relatively small population with just over 30,000 residents living in the region’s six towns (Broome, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Wyndham and Kununurra) and more than one hundred small Indigenous communities. The Kimberley is far removed from Australia’s population centers: the towns of Broome and Kununurra are 2,000 and 3,000 kilometers, respectively, from Perth, the state’s capital city.

Compared to many other regions in southern and central Australia, the Kimberley enjoys a climate of extremes. Temperatures range from close to 0°C at night in the desert to 45°C and humid in the middle of the day in summer. For those who are used to more moderate weather, the heat and humidity can get very uncomfortable (Zell 2003).

More than 40 percent of those who call the Kimberley home are of Indigenous Australian decent. Across the region, there are at least 15 language groups with 30 dialects still being spoken. Many, particularly those still living in the more remote parts of the region, have a fairly recent history of contact with non-Indigenous social and economic systems. Indeed, some parts of the Kimberley were relatively isolated from western influence (apart from the odd missionary, pastoralist or traveling police officer) until after the Second World War (Department of Indigenous Affairs 2005).

Although the history of attempted European conquest of traditional Aboriginal lands stretches back to the 1830s and 1840s, a considerable number of Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri people were able to remain in the country of their ancestors well into the latter half of the twentieth century. This occurred in large measure because of the necessity of Aboriginal labor in the pastoral industry. In return for their work, often for little or no pay, Indigenous people were able to remain in or close to their traditional lands. As a consequence of equal wages legislation in the late 1960s, many Aboriginal people were forced to leave their country and move to town areas. Often, conditions in towns saw Aboriginal people living in dire poverty, with poor health conditions and few opportunities for work and economic development (see Jebb 2003; Hawke 1990; Willis 2004).

Since the late 1970s, Indigenous leaders have sought ways to “return to country.” Over the course of the last 30 years, many Indigenous people have participated in what has been called the “homelands” or “back-to-country” movement. Indeed, the homelands movement, which began in the early to mid 1970s, is continuing to see the movement of family groups from towns and large communities to smaller and more remote areas. Both literally and symbolically, Indigenous people have walked back to country (McMahon 1988; Jebb 2002; Willis 2003; Hawke 1990). This process reflects longstanding cultural practices that link the physical movement of walking (often vast distances) with the process of maintaining spiritual, economic and familial ties to country (Rose et al 2002).

Indeed, in regions such as the West Kimberley, walking on country has never really ceased or diminished in importance. Even during the most intense periods of cultural and social dislocation, when Aboriginal people were forcibly removed from
their traditional country, many were able to maintain considerable connections to it. Indeed, to talk about a complete break away from walking on country is probably a misnomer for many Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri.

However, in recent years the combined effects of better access to traditional country, a keenness to see the “old” knowledge again passed along and concerns about Indigenous young people’s health and well-being has seen a resurgence in the practice of walking as a tool for the care of young people and country.

Enter the Yiriman Project

In many ways, the idea for the Yiriman Project was not particularly new for those involved. Indeed, the practice of removing troubled youth for periods of time, hunting and collecting food, meeting others, going on country with their elders, taking care of country and walking as a means of learning stories, becoming healthy, building their skills and respecting the old people has long been a critical part of life and cultural practice for the Nyikina, Mangala, Karajarri and Walmajarri.

As John Watson, one the authors and founders of Yiriman says, “Walking through country has always been the way our families educate their young, hunt and collect food, meet other groups, travel to and carry out ceremonies, burn areas of land, carry out other land management practices, send messages, communicate, ‘freshen up’ paintings, collect and produce material culture such as tools and other implements, ‘map’ boundaries and collect intelligence and build knowledge” (Watson 2005, personal communication).

In 2001, the Yiriman Project was born. Eager to help young people deal with a range of social troubles or “too much humbug,” a group of senior Aboriginal people turned to organizing trips “back to country” as a way to respond. Those involved were keen to find ways for young people to separate themselves from “negative influences, and reconnect with their culture in remote and culturally significant places” (Yiriman 2004a). The early plan was to establish a “drying out” center, or facility for young people with alcohol and/or drug problems, well away from the goings on of town life and have young people walking on country during their stay. Also important was the notion that young people be encouraged to get more in touch with their cultural heritage and begin to speak out themselves about their future. Indeed, in Nyikina the word “Yiriman” signifies the importance of “bringing out stories in young people.” Initially, the project operated from Jalmadangah, a community about 100 kilometers southeast of Derby. After three years, the Yiriman staff moved to Derby to expand its operations and make back-to-country trips available to a greater number of communities. They have also occasionally supported similar projects in the north and east Kimberley regions.

Typically, a Yiriman trip begins when elders, young people and Yiriman workers meet to start planning. Decisions about the destination of the trip and things to do along the way are shaped by a range of factors including who is available to travel, weather conditions, the needs of local young people, local community events, when a place was last visited, the specific country and opportunities to travel with other groups. Of critical importance at this stage is the direction of the community “bosses” (senior people) who identify where and when to travel, who should go and
the activities to be undertaken. For example, at the beginning of walks on which young people are taught traditional fire management practices, it is customary for Yiriman participants to meet with senior custodians to consider where and when they should carry out the work. Discussions started with elders who passed on their direct knowledge of which areas had not been burnt by Aboriginal fire management for over 30 years.

“Back-to-country” trips can last from a couple of days to a couple of weeks, depending on the area being traveled to, the work being undertaken and the time of year. Anywhere from 12 to almost 100 people participate in the trips. Recently, 14 young men participated in a four-day trip with the Australian Quarantine Service to carry out tests on feral pigs living along the Fitzroy River. In 2003, Aboriginal elders John and Harry Watson led a 24-day trek with eight camels to carry out fire control work at the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. In July 2003, almost one hundred people, from the very youngest to the oldest walked for one week through Walmajarri country.

For those involved in the trips, the physical demands of the walk are usually arduous. The participants, young and old, often walk between 15 and 20 kilometers a day, regularly combining travel with other physically demanding tasks such as digging, hunting and collecting firewood. As the following account from the Walangkarr trek demonstrates, the demands of walking country are wide-ranging:

For several more days we wandered east at ambling pace, burning small patches as we went. Waking up frightfully early one morning it was a silent decision that this would be the day we set out for home. Being some 35kms away the entire camp knew what lay ahead and without a word the camp was packed, water bottles filled ... and silently we left our final camp for home ... [Later that day] as the final throes of sunlight showered the spinifex we stumbled exhausted into Mowla Bluff Station .... With 210 kilometers covered in ten days, all were exhausted beyond belief (Yiriman 2002).

As part of this experience of traveling through country with their elders, young people take up opportunities to participate in a range of practical activities. These practical activities are often associated with taking care of country and reinvigorating Aboriginal lore and culture. Examples of the kind of activities built into Yiriman trips include land management work in Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs), plant harvesting, fish research, quarantine work, fire management, education/training and health campaigns. On other occasions, Yiriman arranges its trips to coincide with large cultural events and meetings, such as the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance Conference and the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Festival.

“Back to Country” and Youth Participation across Generations
Walking and other forms of physical activity have long been a means by which workers with young people have attempted to “engage” their charges. Indeed, since at least the 1880s, much Australian youth work practice has involved young people participating in physical activity. Influenced in large measure by Baden
Powell and the Scout and Guides groups, and the international Outward Bound movement, groups like the YMCA, Try Excelsior and the National Fitness Council have sought to incorporate adventures in rough and dangerous country in an attempt to deal with all manner of youth problems and perceived deficiencies (see Bessant et al. 1998, 79; Irving et al. 1995). Prominent in these traditions have been pseudo-fascist ideas (or at least subtly racist ideas) about the nexus between the maintenance of racial dominance, physical fitness, discipline and marching young people into the wild to tame their wild and primitive urges and tendencies.

Among such groups, the "participation" is in fitness, physical activity, healthy living, learning bush skills and discipline of the body. Much of this work consists of carefully regimented exercises and activities that help produce a self-managing subject who is able to tame nature and the primitive. Traditions of using walking as a device for work with young people also involved preparing European young people to assist in the process of colonial conquest. Bessant et al. (1998, 79) offer a sobering reminder that Baden Powell was prompted to establish the Scout movement because of his observations about the inadequacy of British young men in the arts and physical skills of war.

More recently, "wilderness therapy" has emerged as a way of working with young people. This style of intervention shares much with the European Outward Bound Movement and involves taking young people to isolated settings for personal and social development. According to Crisp (cited in Russell 2001), wilderness therapy is divided into two intervention formats: (1) wilderness base camping, which establishes a base camp with minimal equipment in an isolated environment; and (2) "expeditioning," which consists of small groups moving from place to place in a self-sufficient manner using whatever modes are appropriate and available. The wilderness therapy process is guided by three distinct phases: 1) a cleansing phase, which occurs early on in the program; 2) a personal and social responsibility phase; and 3) a transition and aftercare phase (Russell, Hendee and Phillips-Miller 2000).

The Yiriman Project may share some of these features. However, to see Yiriman walks as simply a reproduction of conventional Outward Bound work is to misinterpret its breadth and complexity. Walking on country with young people is quite different. For a start, Yiriman is not training young people to "participate" in the colonization of territory or the subjugation of the indigene. On the contrary, walking in the Yiriman model is being used as a tool in the Indigenous anti-colonial movement, with young people "participating" in a practice that helps re-establish their families and communities as the legitimate and sovereign stewards of their country.

Walking works as an important device for Yiriman in part because of the significance of country in traditional lore and custom (for example see Langton 1998; Rose 2004; Richards et al. 2002). For Karajarri, Mangala, Nyikina and Walmajarri people, country and community are inseparable. Indeed, in most Aboriginal traditions (traditions often maintained to the present) the practice of walking is literally a way of life and the way one comes to life (Muecke 1997). Rose (2004) says that in the Victoria River area of the Northern Territory, people talk
about how their country gives them body and vice-versa, so that they and the land are embedded within each other.

Also important here is the shared experience of country, particularly one that involves following in the footsteps of those who go before. As a senior Walmajarri man, Ned Cox, says of the importance of the Yiriman walks, “Kids gotta know their country, gotta walk the same way as us” (Binge 2004, 6). Cox can be understood as saying that the opportunity to follow those who have gone before is critical in the healthy incorporation of young people into their community.

**Walking Along Behind (“Back to Country” and Intergenerational Exchange)**

“Back-to-country” trips also work because they offer a means of sharing the experience with elders. This is more profound than at first it may appear. Deborah Bird Rose (2004) observes that the process of walking on country for many Aboriginal people not only involves the young and their living elders “going along together,” but it also demands a shared relationship with elders and ancestors long passed away. She recounts the guidance received from her friend and teacher Jessie Wirrpa, who taught her the practice of calling out to the “old people for country” – those guardians of country who had returned to their country upon dying. Wirrpa taught Rose about the need for those walking on country to be guided by the presence of ancestors who, if respected and asked for guidance, would lead and care for the living walkers. Rose (2004) describes it in this way:

> When she took me walkabout she called out to the ancestors. She told them who we were and what we were doing, and she told them to help us. ‘Give us fish’, she would call out, ‘the children are hungry’. When she was walking through country she was always with a group, and that group included the dead as well as the living (167).

Important here is the conception that the dead are an integral part of the maintenance of Aboriginal life and the education and experience of the young and living. Also important here is that the Aboriginal practice of walking on country implicitly involves communion between the young (the living) and the old (the dead). There is nothing morbid about this. On the contrary, it involves what Muecke (1997, 228) describes as “paying dues” to the ancestors and respecting the cycle of life in death and death in life.

In this way, walking through country becomes a means by which young people can recognize that their place in the world is shaped by the prior existence of other beings. This practice introduces to children and young people the importance of respecting the legacy that has been left by those (both human and the inanimate environment) who came before them (Muecke 2004, 69).

**Cleaning up Country (“Back to Country” and Participating in Land Care)**

Another strength of the “back-to-country” trips for Yiriman is the important part they play in land care. Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri have long considered the act of walking on country as also the act of looking after it. To put it in the reverse, to fail to walk on country is to neglect it. As April Bright, a Mak Mak
woman from the Northern Territory explains, “If you don’t look after country, country won’t look after you” (cited in Rose 2002, 25).

In their recently published book on the history of Worrorra care for the Wanjina, the principal creation figure and iconic symbol of North Kimberley culture depicted in rock art of the region, Blundell and Woolagoodja (2005) describe the Kimberley practice of keeping country “fresh” by visiting, walking and repainting the old Wanjina paintings. Citing Woolagoodja’s father Sam, they describe in poetic detail how in Worrorra traditions, young people would be selected by their elders to accompany them on special walks to visit the sites of Wanjina, repaint these spiritual figures and “freshen-up” country and enliven the Worrorra people. For others involved in Yiriman walking on country, the purpose, particularly when it involves burning and other land care practices such as digging, hunting and harvesting, is to “clean up the country” (see Rose 2002, 22).

The nexus between walking and land care reflect long-established ontological traditions that connect the health of country to the health of persons. Rose (2002, 14) puts it beautifully when she says:

_In Aboriginal English, the word “country” is both a common noun and a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, grieve for country and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, and feels sorry or happy. Country is a living entity with a yesterday, a today and tomorrow, with consciousness, action, and a will toward life. Because of this richness of meaning, country is home and peace; nourishment for body, mind and spirit; and heart’s ease._

**Proper Good Walker (“Back to Country” and Participating in Health Care)**

Walking on country – and the various practices associated with it such as burning, hunting, story telling and painting – not only “cleans up” the land. but it also “cleans up” young people and the culture of their community, keeping alive the traditions by transmitting knowledge and helping to encourage the maintenance of healthy people.

As one elder, Polly Joboy, said, “Good to have ‘im bush here: to show young people for hunting, sugar bag [traditional sweet bush food] and country. Exercise is good, we need it” (cited in Yiriman 2004a). Through Yiriman walks, young people also get a first-hand experience of alternatives to their town-based ways of living. As one young man said, “There’s a lot of bush tucker [food available in the bush] naturally occurring out here. You don’t have to go shopping out here. You can exercise and get your feed for free.” Or as another said, “I learnt about eating the right foods. Eating less sugar and start being healthy by eating bush tucker with less fat on it.” As one young woman reported, “I learnt lots of things about diabetics’ food and I enjoyed hunting for bush food. All the ladies had good fun walking around. They feel much better going bush” (cited in Yiriman 2004a). On the same trip another young woman learned,
You have to be careful at all times about babies and disease. That drugs and smoking can give you a bad future. Whatever you wanted for the future might not be there because of all those things. And to eat lots of fruit and veggies so you eat more natural sugars (cited in Yiriman 2004a).

Of course, walking is also intrinsically helpful in maintaining and improving fitness levels and supporting healthy functioning of the body. This is of particular importance to young people living in the communities in which Yiriman operates. In these areas Indigenous life expectancy is approximately 20 years less than the life expectancy of other Australians (Western Australia Department of Health 2002). In the West Kimberley region, Indigenous people have nearly eight times the mortality rate and over 11 times the hospitalization rate in relation to diabetes, are three times more likely to suffer from circulatory problems and “by almost every [health] indicator, two or three times as poor” as non-Indigenous people (cited in Department of Indigenous Affairs 2005).

**Going along Together (“Back to Country” and Participating in Community)**

Yiriman walks also work to encourage the participation of young people in the lives of their families and communities. Indeed, one of the obvious successes of the Yiriman story is the extent to which it has been led by elders and involves young people being given direct and intimate time with others in their community. While on trips, young people accompany adults, particularly elders, on hunting expeditions; are taught language by the old people; sit around the camp hearing stories of the past; look after those who are less physically able by setting up camp and collecting firewood; take care of younger children and work on other practical projects with members of their community. Quite literally, for the duration of the walks, young people will share food, warmth, stories, language and sleep on the same ground as their elders and others in the community.

As one of the Yiriman workers pointed out, walking or traveling together for a substantial period of time often encourages a deep and meaningful level of interaction among the participants. Hugh Wallace Smith (personal communication), Yiriman’s coordinator, says of the depth of intimacy,

> Often the most intense and powerful relationship building goes on while you are walking ... it brings you into a real closeness ... one of the truly great things about the Yiriman walks is that young people get to spend quality and intense time with other members of the community... communities talk about it for months afterwards.

Indicative of this are the following two comments from young Yiriman leaders who clearly see the trips as an important way to build respectful relationships in their communities. One said, “I want to come on the next Yiriman trip, whereever you go.” Another reflected, “Supporting our elders is the most important issue for young people like myself” (Yiriman Project 2005).
In keeping with traditional walking conventions of going along together, Yiriman works in league with others (often outside the immediate Indigenous community) who share a stake in land care, youth development, Indigenous lore and custom and community work. Indeed, one of the features of Yiriman’s work is that they rarely arrange trips on their own, instead carefully incorporating their plans to fit in with communities and other groups who share similar interests and aims.

For example, Yiriman has worked very closely with the Kimberley Regional Fire Management Project. Indeed, one of the key project developments has been the emergence of the Fire Control Teams. Young people involved in these teams are given the opportunity to contrast western ideas about fire control and danger with Aboriginal use of fire as regenerative and life giving. Johnny Nargoodah from Jimbalakudunj community reports on the work of the fire teams. He said his team

mainly does firebreaks, you need to clear after the wet, which is good and when it’s still green it doesn’t burn real wild ... it won’t jump over the next boundary. Plus it makes green for animals, kangaroo ... bring in more grasshoppers for the turkeys. They (countrymen) know when to light it and when to go hunting and what time for goanna hunting and what time for turkey hunting ... they don’t just go and light a fire (cited in Binge 2004, 8).

An additional positive upshot of the Yiriman experience has been the involvement of scientists, medical practitioners, researchers and other non-Indigenous professionals in the walks. For example, Yiriman trips have been planned to coincide and work together with research concerned with Indigenous Protected Areas (IPS), river care and fish science, fire management, Bilbies, feral animals, native plants and bush medicine. Other groups joining Yiriman walks have included representatives from the Department for Conservation and Land Management (CALM), the Kimberley Land Council, university-based scientists and researchers, Native Title Prescribed Bodies Corporate, the Kimberley Regional Fire Management Project and the Derby Aboriginal Health Service. Yiriman abounds with examples of not only intergenerational but also intercultural and, arguably, interdisciplinary exchange (for a discussion of similar work see Nesbitt et al. 2001, 191-192).

**Yiriman (“Back to Country” and Participating in Story Telling)**

“Back-to-country” trips as a means for refreshing community are closely tied in with encouraging elders to tell their stories to young people. Indeed one of the reasons for establishing the Yiriman Project was to keep the old stories alive and to encourage young people to talk about their lives. On each trip, young people and their elders have many opportunities to share “stories for country.”

For example, during the Oongkoor bush trip, one elder passed on stories about people’s involvement in the pastoral industry: “Station manager give us flour, tea, sugar, tobacco for workin’. We go bush one week, one month. Eat bush tucker too. Not too much ... Walk all over ... even to Broome” (cited in Yiriman 2004b). This experience of story telling, the *raison de entré* for Yiriman, gives elders the chance to have their accounts listened to and young people the chance to learn.
Yiriman’s success can be partly attributed to the fact that walking on country incites the telling of stories about country. It happens in this way: Yiriman walks allow the older people to revisit the haunts of their own youth and to keep their memories and stories alive. They do this by passing them on as they walk and by sharing time with young people in other activities, such as hunting and resting by the fire at night. In this way, the walks give young people an experience of country; it helps them build their own story of country. For many young people, this contrasts sharply with their experience of living in towns. The walks are often the first time they get a direct and situated experience of the country that has featured in many stories they have heard before. They, in turn, can tell the stories to future generations.

For those participating in the Yiriman trips, walking also allows one to enter a temporal zone in which the past, the present and the future are aligned through conversations and stories about the old people’s experience of country. Walking is used as a medium through which the stories of the old people can come alive or have new meaning attached to them. This is because being on country while you talk about country demands the exercising of a range of sensory tools. Not only do young people listen to the accounts of their elders, but they also have their imagination enriched by the opportunity to see, touch, smell and even feel the stories. Solnit (1992) implies that perhaps the rhythm of walking also generates a kind of rhythm of thinking more amenable to poetry and storytelling.

“Back-to-country” trips therefore become a means through which young people can play an active role in the same stories their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents knew. As one field trip report testifies, the wildlife surveys and formal planning discussions the group undertook kept the young people busy but they also provided a forum for “stories” and discussion:

An exciting discussion between several elders about communicating to young people was one of the greatest rewards to come out of the project. … Concerns about how they were treated at home were discussed and the need for more open and friendlier communication to occur (Yiriman 2005, np).

**Stopping Humbug (“Back to Country” and Participating in Respect)**

According to those involved in Yiriman, the act of “walking on country” also presents opportunities for diverting young people away from social problems, trouble or what Aboriginal people often call “humbug.” Many of the funding agencies responsible for providing money to Yiriman also see it as a means of “achieving outcomes” such as “harm minimisation,” “reducing alcohol and substance use,” “addressing the increased incidence of youth suicide” and “a diversion from juvenile crime and anti-social behavior” (Yiriman 2005, np).

From its inception, Yiriman was seen as a way of targeting young people about whom communities were most worried. This reflects the fact that young people in the Kimberley often experience profound and acute social problems. Indeed, a recent review of services to Indigenous communities in the West Kimberley identified young people in the region as amongst the most profoundly affected by
drug and alcohol use and abuse, violence, suicide and criminal activity (Department of Indigenous Affairs 2005).

Following the footsteps of their elders, Yiriman leaders like John and Harry Watson sought to take young offenders away from their lives of trouble, actively traveling to a remote setting to be surrounded by a more healthy influence where they could “dry out” and become rejuvenated. As Nathan Dolby from the Kimberley community Kupartiya concluded, taking young people back to country is important, “Cause a lot of kids have started drinking alcohol and smoking, but I don’t think it’s a good thing. Bring them out here to dry out. They learn hunting and how to make Aboriginal things” (cited in Binge 2004, 6). Important in this regard was the elimination of other unhealthy influences such as sugar, cool drinks and fast foods and exposing young people to conditions that place extra demands on them and extend their repertoire of experience.

At the very least, Yiriman walks take young people away from a number of activities that their elders see as unhealthy. Because of the remoteness of the destinations of Yiriman walks, often hundreds of kilometers away from towns or community life, it is not possible for young people to engage in things such as drinking, drug use, smoking and trouble with the law for the duration of the journey. In particular, those who suffer from family violence are, for the duration of the walks, away from the conditions that put them in the firing line of perilous adults.

Yiriman and Participating in Country

Behind much of the literature concerned with the practice of youth participation is the notion that it involves aspirations for equality, open and free expression and association, subsidiarity, youth self government, young people’s rights to participate in all elements of community life and individual autonomy. However, as Saggers et al. (2004) remind us, in fact there is considerable diversity in the practice of youth participation. There are differences in relation to the philosophy, rationale for participation, methods chosen, targets for intervention, institutional context and levels of involvement. There is also often considerable distance between the claims made for things such as subsidiarity and what people actually do. Indeed, to suggest that there is a single practice in relation to youth participation would be remiss.

Likewise, in no way is it fair to conclude that there exists a unified practice of youth participation with Indigenous Australians. Having said this, it is worth making three observations about Yiriman’s attempts to encourage youth involvement in the life of their community.

The first and perhaps most unique part of Yiriman’s program for youth “participation” is the importance of country. Yiriman’s work happens in distinct physical locations tied to cultural and community ancestry and traditions. The work involves travel “on country” and is called “back-to-country trips.” Much of the activities that occur involve various forms of “land care.” Indeed, the word Yiriman
stands for “bringing out young people’s stories” – an act that involves speaking on country, about country and in relation to country.

Among Aboriginal Australians, talking about and doing “community” is inseparable from country. As Rose (2004, 153) explains, for Aboriginal people, country is multidimensional, consisting of an intimacy among people, animals, plants, knowledge, underground, earth, water, air and food. She suggests that living things associated with country have familial relationships such that “they take care of their own.” Rose (2004) also discusses the temporal dimensions of country, pointing out that it has ancient origins and holds the future as well as carrying the present. Importantly for Yiriman, this means that to participate in country is to follow along in a generational legacy that sees young people taking part in the country of their descendants both living and passed on. To “participate” in any kind of planning, community building or social action is a meaningless undertaking if one is abstracted from country. Work with, on and part of country is literally embodied in Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri culture and life.

Another important observation about Yiriman’s work is that it is not always premised on western and liberal notions of government. Western concepts, such as equality, open decision-making, the pre-eminence of the individual, subsidiarity, sharing involvement in everything, immediate reciprocity and youth rights to complete independence are dominant in Yiriman’s work. At least some of the time, the Yiriman story is a story about senior cultural “bosses” who deciding what groups should do. Often more important for Yiriman is following traditional cultural practices in which selected and culturally appointed people make central decisions about the organization. For example, the premise behind “back-to-country” trips is to return to areas important to senior leaders, often referred to as the “old people.” It demands that young people “walk along behind.” However, this is not to suggest that young people simply follow in an obedient and submissive fashion. Nor is it to suggest that adults lack respect for young people. Rather, the practice demands that those who follow be invited to share in an inheritance with those who have come before. Routinely in Yiriman’s work, young people are encouraged to “stand up” and take on leadership. Indeed, to participate in a Yiriman trip involves taking a great share in decisions, in work, in storytelling and in shaping the collective experience of others on the trip (see Walsh and Mitchell 2002). Perhaps one way to describe this might be to note that Yiriman acknowledges that senior people are “bosses” while young people are encouraged to take on “leadership.”

The Yiriman leadership and organizational structure has been observed in other work with Indigenous young people elsewhere in the world. According to Kaplan and colleagues (2002), cultural resurgence taking place with many Indigenous Hawaiian groups is premised upon a great deal of youth participation and intergenerational contact. However, it is emphasizing traditional cultural heritage and values rather than seeking to provide participants of different age groups with “equal” rights and voices.

The third feature of the style of youth participation found in Yiriman’s work worth mentioning is the importance of walking and animation. In contrast with many of
the conventional approaches used in Australia, “back-to-country trips” see young people active while participating. The standard devices for enlisting youth participation, including youth advisory councils, youth roundtables, youth forums, youth consultations and various youth committees, are quite different from what Yiriman does. Often, these participation devices have young people taking time away from active pursuits and adopting the rather sedentary posture of “sitting” on committees. One danger of relying exclusively on such methods is that they tend to immobilize young people. This is not to imply that good work cannot occur in meetings, that virtual and “real-time” contact has to occur, or even that youth do not benefit from sitting on councils or committees, or even doing nothing for a long time. Indeed, on Yiriman trips, some of the work happens in meetings, sitting around the fire and quietly being still and listening.

As mentioned earlier, much of the power of “back-to-country trips” comes from the fact that young people become physically active. This style of youth practice does not simply rely on verbal, intellectual or symbolic participation abstracted from the operations of the life of the community. Young people not only talk about themselves, their community and the future; they literally embody the work of community. As Hokari (2005) reiterates, in part this is because the art of knowing and paying attention often happens most powerfully when moving or becoming animated. Walking, hunting, burning, driving, collecting and other work on country “fundamentally relates the machinery of the body to a country” (Muecke 1997, 195).

Conclusion

We can trace the etymology of “participation” to its Latin roots. According to the Collins English Dictionary, pars comes from the sixteenth century Latin, meaning “part of,” while capere means “to take.” Pars capere is then to take part in or, perhaps more consistent with its initial use, to become or make oneself a part of something. In this way pars capere involves the act of embodiment.

For those responsible for the future of the Karajarri, Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri, to “participate” or take part in the life of the community necessitates “participating” or taking part in country. To take part is to return to country in an embodied way. In other words, active participation literally and metaphorically involves actively becoming a part of country. To make this possible, young people have to “walk along behind” those who have come before, following the lore and custom of their forebears while they travel and visit the places of importance to their community.

In contrast to many who are adopting the mantra of youth participation, those creating the Yiriman Project have chosen to encourage young people to go “back to country.” Like their parents and grandparents before them, elders are encouraging young people to “go along behind” them. The device of walking and traveling on country has become a means through which young people share time with their community, build respect for elders, maintain culture and language, learn to care for land, stay healthy and start to take a stake in their future. Or as Yiriman staff and youth so clearly put it, trips on country help young people “participate” because
they engage young people in “goin’ the same way as us,” “walkin’ along behind,” “learnin’ to freshen up,” “building stories together” and “stopping humbug.” In this way, walking on country is being used as a way to build young people’s strength in physical and symbolic ways so they can take an active role in leading their communities.

Perhaps Yiriman’s work then provides a reminder that those working with Indigenous young people, particularly those who adopt participation as a rhetorical tool, ought to consider the parts “country,” cultural practice and physical animation play in the future of their community.

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