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## Letting Go of Data in Aboriginal Australia: Ethnography on "Rubber Time"

Sara Stevens Zur  
Queens College, [sara.s.zur@gmail.com](mailto:sara.s.zur@gmail.com)

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## Letting Go of Data in Aboriginal Australia: Ethnography on “Rubber Time”

### Abstract

While attempting to investigate modes of musical transmission among the Yolŋu People in Northeast Arnhem Land Australia, questions regarding the meaning of the word “research” led to the decisive abandonment of data collection. Specifically, the processes of observation, recording, and other typical Western means of generating data seemed to be in direct opposition to the way knowledge was traditionally shared. The author critically examines her multiple attempts at conducting this research, and discusses why eventually giving up on the research led to a more profound understanding.

### Keywords

Indigenous Australian, Aboriginal, Ethnography, Music, Defining “research,” and Knowledge Sharing

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## Letting Go of Data in Aboriginal Australia: Ethnography on “Rubber Time”

Sara Stevens Zur

Queens College, New York, New York

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*While attempting to investigate modes of musical transmission among the Yolŋu People in Northeast Arnhem Land Australia, questions regarding the meaning of the word “research” led to the decisive abandonment of data collection. Specifically, the processes of observation, recording, and other typical Western means of generating data seemed to be in direct opposition to the way knowledge was traditionally shared. The author critically examines her multiple attempts at conducting this research, and discusses why eventually giving up on the research led to a more profound understanding. Key Words: Indigenous Australian, Aboriginal, Ethnography, Music, Defining “research,” and Knowledge Sharing*

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### Introduction: The Clash of Ganma and Data

Under the auspices of the Australian-American Fulbright Commission in Australia, I intended to investigate music transmission in aboriginal communities and compare it with the way music teachers taught indigenous Australian music in schools. As music among indigenous Australians is traditionally inextricable from family, land, ceremony, story-telling, art, and nature (K. Marsh, personal communication, July 11, 2002), my aim was to investigate how music was transmitted in traditional settings, and to determine how classroom teachers might best convey meaningful examples of indigenous music and culture to their students. The significance of this research seemed clear not only to Australian music teachers and indigenous communities, but also to other countries with indigenous communities. As an American music teacher, for example, I continuously faced concerns regarding appropriate representations of Native American music in my classroom.

Learning about the meaning of the word “garma” helped me to redefine “research” as I knew it, and allowed me to find some possible entryways into the stories and discussions in which I wished to engage. A surface definition can be explained as two-way knowledge sharing. The word comes from the Yolŋu (pronounced Yolngu) word, *ganma*, which has to do with the meeting of freshwater and saltwater, or, rather, the coming together of two opposing, balancing forces; like yin and yang (Stubington & Dunbar-Hall, 1994).

On a slightly deeper level, the word *ganma* can also be used to explain the nature of knowledge sharing among Yolŋu people (Stubington & Dunbar-Hall, 1994). *Ganma* can be seen in the cross-hatched patterns of bark paintings (see <http://www.aboriginalartonline.com/regions/topend4.php>) and in the musical fusions of old and new prevalent among several language groups in Northeast Arnhem Land. I realized that the concept of *ganma* could also be used to explore the meaning of music

and musical sharing in communities and schools, just as I had hoped to do. Understanding some of the many levels embedded in *garma* seemed vital to the direction and meaning of my research.

Yet, applying this philosophy to my research methods was not an obvious or straightforward path. I began by attending a one-week event, called “garma,” a festival hosted by Yolŋu people, who invite non-indigenous people, *balandas*<sup>1</sup>, to come together and celebrate their traditional aboriginal culture (see [www.garma.telstra.com](http://www.garma.telstra.com)). I was told that attending this festival would be like diving into an ocean of knowledge. It was at garma that I slowly began to face the fact that the very construct of research was in direct opposition to the study I had planned and hoped to do.

When my plane landed at Gove Airport, a WWII airstrip with a terminal the size of a living room, not one light, house, or road was in sight. After being driven in a 4x4 over a red, dusty dirt road, I arrived in Gulkula, expecting to get something akin to a conference schedule or information packet. I was nervous and slightly annoyed at first, at what seemed to be a lack of any type of schedule to follow. Having planned my research questions and method so carefully, I was eager to learn as much as possible and as quickly as possible. I asked repeatedly when the “walk in the rainforest” or the “basket weaving” would be. Nobody seemed to know, and interestingly, no one seemed to be bothered. I was told to just sit under one of the log huts and perhaps something might happen. How could I begin to understand people in this culture? How was I possibly going to generate data or learn about indigenous Australians by just sitting around?

I did not have a choice, and so I sat. And that is when the first part of my learning, or data generation, began. I was on “rubber time” now. Polychronic time, as I have recently learned, means that events take place as solitary entities, separate from each other, and in no way connected by an ongoing timeline as we know it (Hall, 1983). While on rubber time, I learned to make a basket out of pandanus leaves, took a walk in the rainforest with an aboriginal woman who seemed to know how to find cures for all kinds of illnesses, and I watched women as they sat for hours on end painting cross-hatched patterns on peeled pieces of sticky-gum tree bark.

As I began to think about my project and the investigation that I had planned, I could already foresee several problems. Like the majority of qualitative researchers who seek to shed light on issues surrounding indigenous, or diverse cultures, I was raised as a Westerner<sup>2</sup>, complete with Western ideas and definitions of research, as well as Western perceptions of time, social skills, and motives. I knew that I needed to get a feel for this new way of experiencing time before I could begin. I also knew that such methods as interviews or even story sharing seemed completely out of place in this context.

Another major problem that I faced as a researcher seeking knowledge was based in the very definition of knowledge itself. Whereas physical possessions have been traditionally valueless to Indigenous Australians, knowledge was and is treated as a significant possession. This meant that as a researcher I could not simply sit down and begin asking questions. If I had, I would be exhibiting rudeness severe enough to likely

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<sup>1</sup> “Non-indigenous” is the correct way of discussing someone who is not an Aborigine. Saying “white” is inappropriate because there are a number of white Aborigines, Chinese Aborigines, etc... “Balanda” is an old Makkasan (Ancient Indonesian) word that likely comes from the word “Hollander”—a European intruder.

<sup>2</sup> I use the terms “Westerner” and “Western” in this paper to mean people of American-European descent, recognizing the limits and biases contained in each of these words.

cut my chances of ever getting close. I began to question the word “research” itself in terms of its Euro-centric assumptions regarding knowledge, and began to wonder just how long it would take, how much time I would need to exist in a seemingly timeless culture, before trustful relationships could develop, allowing me to “begin.” Needless to say, the amount of time necessary to build this trust and respect is not, of course, up to the researcher. During my time in Australia, I was frequently told by fellow researchers, and by several indigenous people, that one year would not be enough time for me to form the types of connections with indigenous people that would allow me to gain a deeper understanding.

Kisliuk (1997) explains that sharing an ethnographic experience is an important aspect of explaining “the entryways and the barriers to knowing” and that “being explicit about what one could not come to know, and why, can often be more useful than ostensibly unsullied cultural information” (p. 33). Therefore, this paper will offer a close examination of the process of the ethnographic research that I tried to conduct, allowing for the notion that process itself can be reported as data.

### **The Allure of the “Exotic”**

Ethnomusicologist Moore (2005) speaks of Westerners’ tendency to emphasize the peculiar or exotic nature of cultures that are unfamiliar to us. She claims that we continue to hunger for the “discovery” of a land or people that seem timeless, unaffected by the modern world, and the stresses of the types of lives that most Westerners lead. Somewhere inside us, we crave the knowledge that a place and people exist in idyllic conditions, beyond modern affect. Indeed, why did I choose to begin this paper with a description of my landing into Arnhem Land, as if I were personally traveling back in time?

In telling you a bit of what I learned about, and from, indigenous Australians in Arnhem Land, both from the literature I have read, and simply by watching and listening, I will attempt to share my research journey in a way that deflates, rather than feeds stereotypes. In no way do I claim to be an expert on Aborigines as a whole, let alone on one group of Aborigines, or for that matter, on the life of even one indigenous person. To be certain, a large body of extant literature exists examining, in great depth, each aspect of indigenous life that I briefly mention here. To those who might challenge the lack of indigenous voices or references in this paper, I counter that I did not spend sufficient time to allow me to share indigenous voices and perspectives in a way that I felt comfortable doing. Indeed what I write here is limited to my own perspective, fully aware of the issues of a non-indigenous person attempting to share “knowledge” that I feel I have acquired about indigenous people. Most of these impressions have been gathered in relation to Yolŋu and other language groups of Northeast Arnhem Land. I offer my impressions and understandings as an American-European in Arnhem Land, in hopes that others intending to conduct qualitative research of a similar nature, might begin with a slightly higher awareness of what the word “research” can or cannot mean in this context.

## Where Saltwater Meets Freshwater

### Plan A

Prior to my arrival in Australia, 10 months were spent planning and obtaining letters of permission from several known mainstream indigenous musicians who agreed to allow me to record their music and interview them about indigenous music, culture, and philosophies of education. Contact was made via a series of “gatekeepers” (Weirisma & Jurs, 2005, p. 488); researchers, colleagues, and music teachers, each of whom provided me with several other contacts. The plan was to spend 4 months consulting various experts in the field, and then to spend several additional months making video recordings of four or five contemporary Yolŋu songs. These recordings were to be made as possible components of an educational CD-ROM that I hoped to put together.

### Plan B

Yet sure enough, upon returning to Sydney after the Garma Festival, the manager of the musicians with whom I had planned to work informed me that they were no longer interested in my project. He offered no explanation, but suggested another idea, recording the music of one of the many teenaged indigenous rock bands in the Northern Territory. I had just heard several of these young rock/reggae groups at the Garma Festival, but was not convinced that working with one of them would give me the material I wanted for the CD-ROM. How could a band that only played modern music give me insight into traditional Yolŋu culture?

I became content to focus my energy on finding one of these bands to record, after learning that the words “traditional” and “contemporary” are only words that non-indigenous people have used to describe indigenous music or art created at different periods in time, and have no traditional meaning to Aborigines<sup>3</sup>. This is largely due to the way time is perceived according to the “Dreaming”. Davies (1995) explains aboriginal “Dreaming” time as more of an “Everywhen,” containing both future and past, and purports that Australian Aborigines do not even have a word for time as an abstract concept. Again, I can only offer my perspective on this, and must state that my descriptions here are vastly simplified; the layers of true understanding were too many to uncover during my short stay. The surface understanding that I gained, was that old and new, as well as past and future, are continuously interconnected and *recreated* through song, dance, art, and storytelling. Stubington and Dunbar-Hall (1994) suggest that the concept of *ganma* can be found in some contemporary songs, such as Yothu Yindi’s well known song *Treaty*. For example, the song combines electric guitars and a keyboard with *yidaki* (didgeridoo) and *bilma* (clapping sticks). Traditional Yolŋu singing intensity and repetition of short motives are structured into the western form of alternating verse and chorus. As a cultural statement, the song addresses the fight for land rights that Yolŋu people have been struggling to gain, and its popularity represents a growing awareness of indigenous culture and land rights. Just as saltwater meets freshwater, fusion of old and new music styles can be seen “as an exemplification of this ideology” (Stubington & Dunbar-Hall, 1994, p. 257).

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I continue to use those words, recognizing that they only carry meaning for non-indigenous people.

Through a colleague at the Northern Territory (NT) Music School, I was able to connect with a man who went into the schools in Arnhem Land to teach music. We formed a plan for me to go to two communities to work with the bands in the schools there. I began by calling the principals of the schools, who told me I would need approval from the Northern Territory Department of Education in order to do any research there. The NT Department of Education would not approve my application until I had proof of approval from the Ethics Department at the University of Sydney (my host institution in Australia). The Ethics Committee would not give me approval until I had a letter from the elders of each community. And, like a true catch-22, the elders of each community needed to get to know me and fully understand my project before agreeing to anything.

Not having permission to go, or a place to stay, I did not want to risk going to either of these communities without at least getting an “okay” from someone. I spent the next few months making phone calls, sending faxes and letters, and waiting for responses. I did not yet fully understand the near meaninglessness of these attempts for many of the people with whom I was trying to connect. Personal, face-to-face contact was needed: One month later I was able to meet the principal of one of the indigenous community schools, when he brought the school’s band to perform at a music conference in Canberra.

Though this meeting may have helped, it was not until another 3 months had passed that I finally got permission to go there. The permission was gained when in my frustration, I vented to the secretary at the school, who responded by saying, “Why don’t you just fax your letters to the community council?” No one, in all those months had mentioned the community council before; the official elders’ organization of that community. I had my letter within 2 days! Meanwhile, the University of Sydney Ethics Committee had rejected my CD-ROM plan. They claimed that the CD-ROM would not benefit the indigenous communities, and that I would encounter too much difficulty obtaining the elders’ permission to record their music. Though disappointed by this, I understood their reasoning, and continued with my plan to get there, deciding that a grounded theory approach to learning about Yolŋu culture would be the only way to go.

After submitting all of the necessary ethics-approval forms, I secured accommodation in the community, and bought my ticket to get there via Alice Springs and Darwin. When I got to Alice Springs I received an email from the principal saying that he had changed his mind, and that he did not want me to do research in the school after all. This may have been due to a death in the community, or a political situation, or to the fact that this particular community was one of the few indigenous communities welcoming to *balandas*, and tends to tire of people like me. With no permission to create a CD-ROM or to record their music, I would not have been able to contribute anything to the community once I had left. It was clear that my interest in learning about their culture was not a good enough reason for me to be there; it simply was not valuable to the community. I remembered the concept of *ganma* as equality in knowledge-sharing, as I once again began to rethink my methods.

## Plan C

I decided to remain in Darwin and seek further guidance from my colleague at the Northern Territory School of Music. The principal of another Yolŋu community had invited me for a short visit, but did not want me to be there until March, when the wet season would begin to subside. During my month in Darwin, I arranged to spend time visiting a local elementary school there, where an indigenous teenaged band had formed. The band was made up of 7 boys ages 15-18 from a variety of indigenous backgrounds. During my first visit, I noticed that language issues among the boys were quite varied: I was not sure if they all understood my American accent, or if some of them were just learning to speak English in the first place.

Some of the boys at the school were fluent in their traditional native language, some only spoke “Aboriginal English” (classified as an official Australian language in itself), and some knew close to nothing of their traditional past. The one thing that the boys seemed to have in common, was that music was the only reason why they came to school. After a few more observations, we began to feel more comfortable with each other. They agreed when I offered to record their music so that they would have a promotional video of themselves to use.

It was during this process, and during my time in Darwin that I finally learned to let go of my need to collect data, and of my research plan altogether. Before I continue with *how* I came to let go, and what I learned when I did, let me describe the wet season in the Northern Territory (NT) because I think it had a lot to do with how my interpretation of qualitative, ethnographic research changed.

There are two main seasons in Australia’s “Top End;” wet and dry. During “The Wet,” I was told that it rains a total of *12 meters*. I had arrived in the thick of it. Averaging a temperature of 100° Fahrenheit, at about 99-100% humidity, lizards, geckos, and spiders existed in such abundance that walking down the city street in Darwin there were constantly creatures getting out of my way. Everything was always wet and nothing dried. Ever. There were wet sheets on the bed, wet moldy walls, wet shoes, wet towels; wet everything. It seemed as if my very brain was in danger of molding and dissolving into the surrounding humidity. The soles of my feet blackened as my sweat glands tried to keep up. Stepping into the shower actually gave me a sensation of being drier. At night, as I would fall asleep, the weight of the heat and humidity on my chest would feel like a mighty hand holding me down, trapped. Even with the fan on at the highest speed, it took 2 full weeks for my body to acclimate.

There was a definite, yet unfamiliar beauty to this. The oceans teemed with crocodiles as rivers overflowed into the sea. During one outside venture, between monsoons, I rested my arms against an overlook, and immediately felt a spider trying to weave its web between my arms. On another occasion, I returned to my room to find a lizard on my pillow. While attempting to make phone calls at one of the damp booths with fogged glass, mosquitoes would play in my hair and green ants would trail down the side of the dial. After slipping a 20-cent coin into the ever-moist machine I would have to wait several seconds before inserting the next coin, as the phone, it seemed, registered the fact that I was trying to use it.

I learned to relax and have patience in Darwin. Especially on Sundays, when there were virtually no cars on the road, all the shops and most of the restaurants were closed,



and I had to wait an entire hour for a bus to bring me to Parap, where a small market offered local pottery, indigenous-designed fabrics, and Thai yoghurt drinks for sale. Regarding the slow pace of life, a local woman told me that NT also stands for “Not Today; Not Tomorrow...” Having physically experienced the need to do things slowly, this comment illuminated the impossible nature of the hectic phone calls and faxes I had sent from Sydney, as well as my unreasonable expectations for trying to conduct research in the Northern Territory with only a few months’ time remaining. I myself had lost the drive to return phone calls, and to arrange interviews.

### **Learning to Let Go**

My understanding of the pace of life and of the difference in time perception of most indigenous people was deepened when several of the boys in the band and I were waiting for the city bus, and one of them asked me in Aboriginal English, “What time bus come? [sic]” I looked at the schedule and said, “Two minutes.” He replied, “How long two minutes? [sic]” I thought for a brief moment, and answered, totally inadequately, “120 seconds.” To better commune, I might have said, “That is how long it takes to walk from Ludmilla School to the tuck shop near the footbridge.”

I had briefly experienced rubber time at the Garma Festival 5 months earlier, but now I was beginning to understand it on an experiential level. My previous impatience toward obtaining data clearly seemed out of place. Indigenous singer and songwriter Shelly Morris explained the aboriginal sense of time by giving me an example: If a *balanda* invites an indigenous friend to go fishing, and they agree to meet the next day, the *balanda* will show up, but it is very likely that the indigenous person will not. This is not because of laziness or forgetfulness, but because to an indigenous person, “tomorrow” might mean any time from the next several hours, to sometime next week (S. Morris, personal communication, February 13, 2004).

### **A Community Experience**

Finally, 8 months after beginning my project, I was invited to go to a community in Northeast Arnhem Land called Maningrida. I felt quite prepared to honor silence, spend time sitting with the women hearing their stories, and to witness life on polychronic time. The irony was that my own time as a “researcher” in Australia was coming to an end, and my time in Maningrida was to be only a week in length. Since I had let go of my plan to do any research, I considered my visit to be just a small snapshot of what an indigenous community looked like. I felt at ease with the idea of returning to New York with some knowledge of the issues and difficulties in “researching” indigenous Australians; the process itself had become my data.

Maningrida is an aboriginal community of about 2500 on the Northern coast of Arnhem Land, where the vast areas of flooded rivers and lush rainforests meet the turquoise waters of the Arafura Sea (see <http://www.maningrida.nt.gov.au/>). Comprising several language groups including Yolŋu, Ndjebbana, and Burrara, Maningrida has several houses and a school/community arts center, and is only accessible by road during the dry season.

During my stay, I spent several hours a day at the art gallery, walking among the many bark paintings, shell and seed necklaces, carved Mimih Spirit figures, and large pandanus leaf baskets. I sat on the stoop by the food shop each night, watching the lightening storms and talking with some of the women and children, many of whom stopped to wave hello, even hollering from way across the moonlit field in Aboriginal English, “Hello Miss! You’re America [*sic*]! See you!” I shared photos of my family and told some stories of New York City. I saw many families staying out late laughing, telling stories, and walking in large groups past the stoop on which I sat. As the families, friends, and young children walked past me in the evenings, I thought about the magnificence of these people’s culture, the existence of which anthropologists and historians have now traced back to being “at least 70,000 years old” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, 1998, p. 8), and which had maintained itself so beautifully in Maningrida. Though I felt honored to have learned as much as I had, it was still a mysterious culture to me. I was going home with feelings and impressions rather than reports and transcripts: Could I honestly say that I had conducted research?

Though I was not able to obtain permission to compile video recordings for the production of a CD-ROM, or gain a deep understanding of how music is taught and learned according to Yolŋu people, I believe that the process of trying allowed me to gain significant insight into aboriginal culture. In other words, I propose that the process itself became my data. I needed to let go of my notions of research, and admit to the lack of significance that it likely had in the minds of indigenous people, in order to begin to understand and learn. The non-linear path that my research took forced me to slow down, experience, and question everything around me. Had I been able to follow through with *Plan A* or even with *Plan B*, it is not likely that I would have come away with any real knowledge of what *ganma* means. Just as the wet season in the Northern Territory forced the rivers to flood, creating new streams, estuaries, and waterfalls, and just as the cross-hatched patterns in Yolŋu art contain many different messages, so too did my research twist and turn, gathering voices, meanings, and layers. The very process of doing the research reflected the culture I was attempting to gain insight in.

## Conclusions

Many discussions concerning qualitative research neglect to consider that sometimes being a “researcher” gets in the way of learning aspects of a culture that may be fundamental to the culture being investigated. According to Rice (1997) even using a term as typical as “fieldwork methods” contains within it the assumption that there is a specific technique to conducting field research. Kisliuk’s (1997) discussion of fieldwork as an elusive, nearly fictional construct feels closer to my own experience. Burying myself in the rules and methods of what I thought ethnographic research must comprise, and trying to communicate with people in Arnhem Land via emails, faxes, and phone calls, I was unable to understand the importance of simply being there. Though I had learned of the concept of *ganma* at the Garma Festival, I only really began to understand it after spending time in the Northern Territory, listening, observing, feeling, and living according to the pace of life that existed there. My understanding of *ganma* is what allowed me to move forward in learning about music transmission within aboriginal cultures.

Researchers intending to investigate aspects of other cultures would indeed do well to begin their investigations by reviewing bodies of literature, consulting with experts in the field, and forming a plan according to what they expect to find, but should be prepared to abandon any or all of these preparatory elements in favor of contextual experience. This, of course, requires time. Toward the end of my grant period, I was told that to truly accomplish what I had set out to do, I would have had to have spent a minimum of 5 or 6 years within an aboriginal community. This amount of time is often difficult for people of American-European descent to spare (Honoré, 2004). Differences in how time is experienced can also be, as it was for me, a wall against effective communication (Hall, 1983). The understanding of the way another culture feels time may be essential for researchers to grasp, and yet can often be the most difficult cultural adjustment one has to make (Levine, 1997).

Since qualitative research is concerned with showing what *is*, (Abeles, 1992) it seems imperative that researchers be able to recognize when their methodology does not fit in context. Marsh (2002) agrees with this by saying that ethnocentric research aims can create a form of "neocolonialism," if the researcher attempts to impose West-centric structures and ideas in a completely inappropriate context, which in no way meet the needs of the people who are the focus of study. Marsh, whose research aims entailed an in-depth investigation into aboriginal children's music play writes, "Within a Western tradition of music education research there is an expectation that a research project will have focused aims, regardless of the research paradigms from which it emanates" (p. 4). When confronted with a disparity between a carefully formulated research plan, and the needs of the community within which the research is to be implemented, I, as a researcher, faced quite a dilemma.

Facing this dilemma, I suggest, has more to do with mindfulness than with creating yet another research method. After all, any method of data generating that one chooses contains within it the assumption that one may have the *right* to find or generate data in the first place. It seems that the very idea of investigating a culture or group of people may be simply inappropriate in some contexts or within certain societies. Westerners, who often take great interest in learning about the lives of others (especially the "exotic" as discussed above), may need to first investigate whether or not their desired research would be desirable or beneficial to the people being studied. In the spirit of *ganma*, or equal knowledge sharing, the researcher would do well to enter into such a project ready to offer people an equal glimpse into his or her own life. Therefore, the first step in designing a research project of this nature should be to ask oneself if and how the results of one's research may help the people involved, and how to communicate this effectively and respectfully. Learning to communicate successfully necessitates that the researcher first learn what is meant by "knowledge," and how knowledge is usually shared. Once this is understood, designing a research project that fits with participants' needs may become easier. Most of this learning must be in person and in context, in order to form a true understanding. In particular, understanding the way that time is experienced and how it can shape a research project is most easily understandable if one can spend a significant amount of time within the culture one wishes to work.

Yet, often a research proposal is needed in order to write grants, gain ethical approval, and organize resources to even begin the journey (physically and intellectually) into another culture's way of life. How can we write proposals delineating research needs

and revelations that may only be realized later in the process? Perhaps if we can begin to write proposals that contain a paradigm of mindfulness toward the process, and an openness toward understanding other definitions of “knowledge,” we might slowly open doors that we may never have noticed existed otherwise.

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### Author Note

With a background in music education, Sara conducted research on Aboriginal music as a Fulbright grantee in Australia in 2003. She returned to complete her doctoral degree in music education at Teachers College, Columbia University, focusing on cultural differences of time experience and children's spontaneous music-making. She is

currently teaching at Queens College. Sara Stevens Zur, 66 Overlook Terrace 8G, New York, NY 10040; Telephone: (212) 795-2277; Email: sara.s.zur@gmail.com

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