

*Aboriginal Political  
Histories in New  
South Wales*

*Heidi Norman*

MARANA DYARGALI



**Interviewed By:**

Professor  
Susan Page

Heidi Norman is a Professor at the University of Technology Sydney in Social and Political Sciences. Heidi's research is in the field of Aboriginal Political History, where she has focused increasingly on land and land justice in the context of Aboriginal worlds today.

In this chapter, Heidi shares approaches to research at the interface of community and the academy.

*“As researchers, we walk a fine line in order to feel and realise the integrity of our research. It is often the case that we are serving two masters: one is the intellectual project of the academy and the other is contributing to the knowledge and empowerment of your own communities and the people you work with. Sometimes those two masters are on the same page, but not always”*

Heidi discusses how her work in the Aboriginal history field opens up opportunities for communities to have their efforts and perspectives published and recognised; how research that engages actively with community informants and voices contributes to the history of ideas and can impact public policy.

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#### About Heidi

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Professor Heidi Norman is a leading Australian researcher in the field of Aboriginal political history. Her research sits in the field of history and draws on the cognate disciplines anthropology, political-economy, policy studies and political theory.

Her work includes a political history of Aboriginal land rights in NSW ('What Do We Want?..'), history of the NSW Annual Aboriginal Rugby League Knockout, the interface of settler and Aboriginal economies and media narratives of Aboriginal self-determination. She was awarded the UTS research excellence medal for collaboration (2015), National Teaching Excellence Award (2016), Gough Whitlam Research Fellow (2017-18) and in 2018 she was announced as a 'Top 5' ABC humanities researcher. She is a descendant of the Gomerioi people from North Western NSW, a member of AIATSIS and convener of the 'Indigenous Land and Justice Research Group'.

*SP Can you talk to us about how you have built your research relationships, stakeholder engagement, consultation, negotiation, protocols and anything of that nature?*

**HN** I have focused most of my work in New South Wales and I do that for a few reasons. One is because I have family from New South Wales, so it makes sense to me to do work where I have those familial links. I tend to have a little bit of a bias towards places where I have familial links, and although not in an overt way, there tends to be natural gravitation to understanding more about what happened on Gomeroi lands, on the grasslands country in North-Western NSW. In my research I focus on Aboriginal history. My work is therefore concerned with political movements for change, social justice including recognition, rights, adjustment, and Aboriginal futures. Most of my work is concerned with on the ground approaches and responses to these concerns, along with how the state has responded to the kinds of recognition Aboriginal peoples have insisted upon and the place of Aboriginal people in the polity and economy.

As researchers, we walk a fine line in order to realise a sense of integrity about our research. You can often feel that you are serving two masters: one is the intellectual project of the academy and the other is contributing to the knowledge and empowerment of your own communities and the people you work with. Sometimes those two masters are on the same page, but not always. Most of my research is fieldwork based where I conduct interviews and observation; I love talking to people, or more so, I love listening to the stories. In relation to my current research with Local Aboriginal Land Councils, it's amazing to hear what land councils are doing. Most Land Councils are overstretched and under resourced and yet they are doing the most incredible work.

In my observation, the academy is never in front of big ideas and shifts, but instead the real action is outside the

academy and can be seen in local and on smaller scales, where challenges, for example, race relations, political power, economic futures and the environment are engaged with. Research can be a kind of conduit, if you like, between the kind of activism that significantly contests the ideas I hear in the academy and in the work I hear about through my field research.

For example, in the academy, there have been debates about Aboriginal history. In the 1990s the debate was bifurcated as black armband and white blindfold. There is also a debate over the characterisations of Aboriginal worlds at 1788 that hinge on accepted definitions of hunter-gatherers and farmers. Rarely are the complexity and reality of Aboriginal worlds fully explored in these debates, in fact as Aboriginal people, we are more likely to be treated as observers of these debates, or objects of study. Yet, if we consider the kinds of activities Aboriginal Land Councils are engaged with, we comprehend that these are leading institutions in many towns and communities. Land Councils are sites for gathering and have their own kind of convening power. Across the Land Council network, significant labour is underway in the field of Aboriginal history: consider how Land Council members are looking after old cemeteries, putting interpretation signs up at missions, at former Aboriginal cotton chipping camps; are overseeing the return of their Ancestral Remains from institutions. These few examples hint at a very radical version of what it is to be Aboriginal and what is important and valued Aboriginal history and heritage at the local level.

That is what interests me as a researcher: what people are doing in their local community and how this in turn challenges, or perhaps elaborates, accepted ideas in history and political power. I appreciate that at the community level, there is not always a suspicion of research. There is a real interest in wanting to tell your story and for it to be published. People are keen for others to know what they are doing and why it matters.

*SP How do you build those relationships with the people in the Land Councils? Are they people that you already know from your PhD?*

**HN** It takes time. I have been working in the area of Aboriginal community history for more than 20 years. People are open to meeting with me because they are familiar with the research already produced. I have a few protocols that I follow in my own research. For example, I return work for review, I treat participants in my research as intellectuals, with agency and purpose.

More broadly, doing community level research I am often challenged to ask: what is history? How do we seek to represent our past? Who needs to be included? How do we navigate the different fault lines that have been introduced into our community? How do we navigate the diasporic nature of our community? I see these as challenging concepts that reveal a very sophisticated and complex undertaking at the local level as you negotiate ways to tell your own history.

***SP** I can see that you're really passionate about people and you love hearing the stories. How did you come to develop the research idea and focus on Aboriginal history and specifically Aboriginal land?*

**HN** Land rights was the big political campaign then, always and in different ways, today. The rally cry: What do we want? Land Rights. The relative simplicity of this demand captured something very powerful and complex that went to the heart of colonial power and for an alternate and abiding reality. The interest and willingness of a colonial system to negotiate the pre-condition of its social, economic and political power was sure to disappoint. Having said that, the laws that established recognition of Aboriginal land justice in New South Wales have endured since 1983. It's in this legislative environment where we see continued effort to realise community aspirations for social, political and economic autonomy.

***SP** Would you like to reflect on developing projects, research design, ICIP, ethical guidelines and timeframes?*

**HN** You have to trust and back yourself when you are doing research. If something does not feel right, if you do not feel a sense of authenticity, then listen to that. You want to be sure

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there is community benefit and there is a contribution to the intellectual project that we get paid for by the University. If you want to be a community historian, you could do that as well, however, that is not necessarily the work that takes place in the academy. There is also the task of contributing new knowledge and participation in broader intellectual debates.

There is a certain amount of magic, or perhaps luck, that goes with research. It might be that you stop to chat to a colleague, family member or friend who in the course of the conversation directs you to a vital research making photo, archive or contact. These sort of exchanges happened when I was doing the research on the Knockout and also the political history of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. In the case of the ALRA when I met with the former Members of the NSW Parliament they explained to me that they had been waiting for this moment—for a researcher to come along and proceeded to haul out boxes and boxes of archives—all gold for a researcher like me! They talked for hours into my recorder and shared files only they had copies of. Both of the MPs I refer to here sadly passed away not long after the work was finished.

There is a real responsibility when you do this work and there is quite a bit of anxiety you have with that. In writing up that history of land rights from the late 1970s onwards, it had simply not been documented. This was the case also in the history of the Knockout. There continues to be a lot of historical research needed, however it does make you feel anxious at the prospect of putting this down on paper of getting the story right and honouring the people who so generously spend their time sharing aspects of the story and events. You have to accept that you will miss people out of the story, someone will get offended or someone will feel they were not included. You have to accept that a lot of



this work is 'towards a history', not a definitive history. I called that first study of the Koori Knockout, 'A modern day Corroboree: towards a history of the New South Walks Aboriginal Rugby League Knockout' (Norman, 2006), probably because I was younger and less certain and acutely aware of the process of research and responsibility of writing up that tends to set accounts of the past in stone. There wasn't a risk of inaccuracy because I was drawing on archives and testimonies, however research can also shape people's perception of an event. In that work, I foregrounded the founders of the Knockout, because it was important to see why they formed the Knockout. There remains work to be done on how the Knockout changed over time to enrich that earlier research as well.

*SP How did you go about collecting data?*

**HN** I am working within an anthropology, history and political theory frame. What I do is referred to as ethnography and involves in-depth interviews and participant observation. I try and build into my work creative accounts of my own reflections on being in a place. I did that with the report on 'The Death on the Darling' (Norman 2019) when I wrote about the Darling River. I thought about my own visceral response to this absolute tragedy before my own eyes, of this deep, magnificent river bone dry. It was a deathbed of fish, mollusks and turtles. The essay on the Darling River drew on ethnographic research and included reflecting on my own responses and observations as well as in-depth interviews. You can include your observations of the depth of feeling of other people as well. I thought it was important for the reader to know the absolute grief that was running through people's bodies.

I have explained that my research involves in-depth interviews and observations (and archival research). When it comes to in-depth interviews, in my experience, community members are often keen to have interviews recorded, with audio and video. They like to have edited versions of that material returned to them for their use. They might want to put these up on their website or use them in social media. You are gathering research material, however community also want that research material they can repurpose for their

own work. Out at Wilcannia, they were keen to have those recordings to share with people who come through the roadhouses, so they could tell their stories to travellers. I also draw on archives in my research and have spent many, many years at the New South Wales State Library. Loving the library and its fantastic librarians is critical for this aspect of your research. And returning your work and the materials you collect during field work, as an archive, ensures others who follow and community members can access material.

*SP How do you translate, share and turn your results into action?*

**HN** You can put research into government inquiries, you can share the recordings with community and return that research to them so that they can re-use the material for advocacy. You might make photographic essays for government inquiries and think about inputting your research in broader policy reform.

I have been in the academy for more than two decades, so I've had time to build good links with New South Wales Aboriginal Affairs. I have been on their Research Advisory Committee, which means I have been in a position to contribute to the state's research agenda in relation to some key aspects of reform. I recently worked on a research paper with the AIATSIS for the Federal Government. The research paper on the National Resting Place to care for Ancestral Remains will be used to inform government discussion and announcements. That account will hopefully be used by the Prime Minister and the Aboriginal Affairs

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Minister in the various announcements about a National Resting Place. Your work can be used as background briefing for parliamentarians and their advisors, shaping policy reforms within the New South Wales Government, or it can be shared with the Minister to pique high-level interest. We talked about research that is of use to community, your own community, research that advances new knowledge and then there is research that has impact (say in relation to public policy). Impact is a really good and measurable outcome of doing research.

***SP** You have talked about your career trajectory and your research trajectory. Are there any stories you think might be useful for students about unintended or unforeseen things? Or is there anything else you would like to add?*

**HN** You do your best with research to make sure you honour the people who entrust you with their stories. It is highly likely you won't always agree, or that different versions of events might emerge in your interviews. There are ways you can capture these differences, especially as they reflect the ways that participants came to understand things in certain ways. For researchers starting out, we now have established and familiar pathways through the university research system. My central observation is that becoming a researcher takes time to build confidence and for your reputation too; you need to serve something of an apprenticeship, do plenty of listening and learning. You have to build up respect and credibility amongst your own people and that's also within the academy. I think it is important to quietly go about your work and build up your confidence. In this age of social media, there are a lot of bold comments and positions taken. I am much more inclined to have an appetite for the complexity, the minutiae and appreciation of the complex and contradictory positions often taken by community members. I look at moments such as the approval of Coal Seam Gas in the Pilliga Forest, where my Gomeroi family has enduring connections. On one hand, the presence

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