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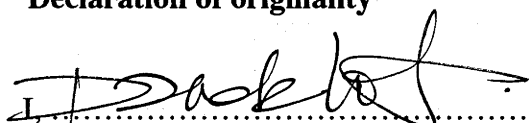
Abstract

A necessary nomadism: re-thinking a place in the sun

This research investigates ideas around nomadism, narrative and ethics as a personal and cultural imperative in response to Australian place. The study engages with notions of belonging and displacement, expressed in the studio works as a subjective response to lived experience and memory of the desert. The Sub-thesis undertakes an exploration and enactment of storytelling and its relationship to representation of Australian place and considers how a re-thinking of colonial narratives might emerge from a philosophy of ethics and responsibility.

A study taking the form of an exhibition of sculpture, photographs and video exhibited at the School of Art Gallery from 28 February to 9 March, 2007, which comprises the outcome of the Studio Practice component (66%), the Report, which documents the nature of the course of study undertaken, plus the Sub thesis (33%).

Declaration of originality

I,  (9/11/2007) hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project I have undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations or paraphrases attributable to other authors.

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To Aboriginal readers of this paper.

Although the images in this paper have already been published, I would like to respectfully advise that a number of people who are mentioned and whose photographs appear in this document have now passed away.

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For the memories themselves are not important. Only when they have changed into our very blood, into stance and gesture and are nameless, no longer to be distinguished from ourselves – only then can it happen that in some very rare hour, the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them.

Rainer Maria Rilke

A necessary nomadism: re-thinking a place in the sun

Introduction

This paper is about story and place and the relationship between the two. It focuses on the importance of story (narrative) and movement (nomadism) to the understanding and representation of Australian place. It is written in the nature of a response.

The title of this paper is in part a reference to my own peripatetic experience, but it also recognises a ‘nomadic consciousness’ as a cultural imperative – a way of being – in this ‘sunburnt country’.¹ I refer to Emmanuel Levinas’s use of Pascal’s quote “My place in the sun marks the beginning of all usurpation”² to suggest redefining the narratives of colonialism and thereby moving towards a philosophy of ethics and obligation.

My premise is that storytelling is a site of cross-cultural exchange – a ‘contact zone’ – and by participating in the contact zone a particular connection with place emerges. I suggest that this connectivity is centred on recognition of value in the nomadic sensibility of Aboriginal culture. I argue that this leads to the possibility of an ethical understanding of Australian place and, by extension, a new type of representation through artistic practice – a mode of representation that does not operate within the framework of the inherited conventions of Western art. In a postcolonial context it is important to envisage other stories and histories of place so that a new politics and poetics of place (or art of place) are possible – not to forget ‘We are on Aboriginal land’. How can non-Indigenous artists express a meaningful relationship to Australian place?

I begin by examining the film *Ten Canoes* as an example of how storytelling is used to present an Aboriginal worldview and thereby demonstrate an encounter with the contact zone as a shared space of transformative potential.

¹ From the poem “My Country” by Dorothea Mackellar.

² Committee of Public Safety, “My Place in the Sun”: *Reflections on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas*, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/diacritics/v026/26.1committee.html> [6/2/07]

I then speculate how it might be possible through this encounter to dwell and think differently in this country. I propose that by paying attention to (all) stories of difference, an in-between space is opened up as one that answers the call to challenge the hegemony of the dominant culture. I cite my own connection with a group of Aboriginal women in the Great Sandy Desert, Western Australia as a further example of this engagement, and consider, through the work of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose, the notion of an ethical response.

I move on to examine notions of place, its constitution and the differing perceptions of it by Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. I point out that notions of *terra nullius* still linger in the wider Australian consciousness and continue to affect the representation of place by non-Indigenous artists.

I discuss Edward F. Casey's assertion that places 'happen' as events and therefore lend themselves to story. This resonates with an Indigenous understanding of Australian place as a 'storied' place and one that is embodied (not external), sentient and nomadic. I draw on the philosophers Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and feminist writer Rosi Braidotti to investigate concepts of the nomadic and 'nomadic consciousness' and I speculate, as Stephen Muecke has done, that this is a way of thinking (and being) that is more suited, or 'at home', in Australian place than the inherited European sedentary modes of being.

The prolific outpourings of contemporary Aboriginal art over the last twenty years from the Central and Western Desert artists, demonstrates this nomadic consciousness ('a necessary nomadism') as one that honours the importance of the sharing of stories and connection to place. I look at the paintings from Wirrimanu (Balgo) in the Great Sandy Desert and then briefly discuss the difference in non-Indigenous representation of place, particularly the desert, as an unknown, commodified and external 'landscape'.

An Aboriginal worldview encompasses the notion of reciprocity. For thousands of years the country has been known and understood through an ethics of care and responsibility

– the sharing and delegation of stories as people moved around it. This leads me to explore the notion of ‘story’ as a ‘gift’ and again I consider Levinas’s and Rose’s ideas of obligation to the other, in order to suggest that there is an ethics in terms of relationship to place and therefore is implicated in the representation of it.

In the last part of this paper I draw on many years of personal experience working and travelling with Aboriginal people, in particular two women in the Great Sandy Desert, Tjama Napanangka and Patricia Lee Napangarti. This paper is presented as a response to those experiences as well as events that occurred during my research. I adopt an experimental approach in the writing, redeploying my diary as narrative. This intervention of storytelling is an attempt to perform the ideas I discuss in this paper. There are different voices, fragments, gaps and sometimes apparent contradictions – it is necessarily nomadic.

Mostly the great desert myths are fragmented. Also they are meandering in style, often almost elusive: in them is a compulsive and vitally necessary mobility, of characters wandering from site to site, disappearing, “turning into” something else and usually reappearing. Further, many of them are almost prosaic...with their reiteration of routine happenings and ritual acts. However their structure is consistent.³

³ R. M. Berndt, “Traditional Morality as Expressed through the Medium of Australian Aboriginal Religion”, *Religion in Aboriginal Australia: An anthology*, eds. Max Charlesworth, Howard Morphy, Diane Bell and Kenneth Maddock (University of Queensland Press, 1986), p.195.

Prologue

Why do we listen to the stories of others, if not to hear? And having heard would we not desire to respond? Simply to listen is to be drawn into a world of ethical encounter: to hear is to witness; to witness is to become entangled.¹

The film *Ten Canoes* demonstrates the social, ethical and political importance of art and story. Actor David Gulpilil Ridjimiraril Dalaithngu begins his narration, “bout time I tell you a story eh? Then I’ll tell you one of ours...” and so he and director Rolf de Heer do, weaving two fictions together; a cautionary tale in the mode of a traditional Dreaming story, with a ‘real life’ story. It is a work where time and place slip and slide over each other. It gives a rare glimpse into an Aboriginal worldview through the story itself, and through the art of storytelling. *Ten Canoes* is a collaborative landmark work of art that enacts cultural knowledge and representation and thus engages with contemporary discourse on national identity. In deploying two narratives that we not only listen to, but also look at, the film creates an empathetic space for the viewer as witness, and therefore, as Deborah Rose says, having heard we ‘become entangled’.

In this section I want to discuss the role and power of storytelling and speculate how it can give rise to new ways of understanding or re-thinking Australian place. I am looking at *Ten Canoes* in its capacity to demonstrate the notion of a ‘contact zone’ where, through engagement, ethics and commitment, such a re-thinking is possible.

In *Ten Canoes* it is not only the stories that are important, but *how* they are told, to *whom* and *why*. They are told primarily to a non-Indigenous audience and I argue that it creates ‘a contact zone’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. As anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt notes, a ‘contact zone’ is one where various practices like storytelling, oral histories and collaborations are encountered.² Through a journey narrative we, the audience, enter this space and place. The film is, to use an architectural metaphor, a ‘threshold’ and the concept of ‘threshold’ as Edward F. Casey tells us, is

¹ Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation*, (UNSW Press, 2004), p.213.

² Jacqueline Millner, “The Contact Zone”, *Broadsheet, Contemporary Visual Arts + Culture*, Vol.35. No.3 (2006), p.153.

where movement from one place to another is effected, being “a place of important transition”.³ The canoe itself becomes a literal and littoral (the zone between high and low tide) metaphor. Canoes are ‘places’ of transition. They are ‘in-between’ and they move in pathways between places and things. In this sense, their use in the film creates a zone of connectivity between black and white – an invitation to a new way of thinking.



Fig. 1

This in-between space is described by social ecologist Judy Pinn as a ‘liminal zone’, a space of transformation – one where different voices, and voices that have been silenced, can be heard.

This space in between opens up new positions from which to speak differently, rather than being stuck in predetermined paradigms and mindsets... a space where marginalised stories of place, self and community can be told so that they intersect with more dominant stories is a highly political act, imbued with issues of power’.⁴

³ Edward F. Casey, “How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time: Phenomenological Prolegomena”, in *Senses of Place*, eds. S. Feld and K. Basso (School of American Research Press, 1996), p.41.

⁴ Judy Pinn, “Restor(y)ing a Sense of Place, Self and Community”, in *Changing Places re imagining Australia*, ed. John Cameron (Longueville Books, Double Bay, 2003), p.43.

The impetus for *Ten Canoes* came from David Gulpilil, who draws on his traditional oral culture, and reclaims and re-appropriates a photograph of ten canoeists on a goose-egg hunting expedition taken by the anthropologist Dr Donald Thomson, who worked in Arnhem Land in the 1930s.⁵ The parallel stories in *Ten Canoes* are mundane, yet the socio-political layers are multiple and complex. As Gulpilil says, the story is like this, “the young fella, has a wrong love, so the old man tell him a story...a story of the ancient ones, them wild and crazy ancestors who come after the spirit time, after the flood that covered the whole land”. Visually referencing Thomson’s photographs, the film seeks to re-visit the times of the ancestors, yet it locates them in an indeterminate time before white contact. Shot in the manner of a documentary it is very much what the Aboriginal community wanted, a movie to show their children their culture and also one that “people everywhere would want to see”.⁶

In traditional Aboriginal society stories are always used to teach. What *Ten Canoes* teaches us (particularly non-Indigenous Australians) is about our country, about relationship to place, about Aboriginal perceptions of the world. It is the *manner* of the storytelling that is significant here too. It is a meandering journey into the place we live and share: a place that is historically and culturally relevant yet still largely unknown to most Australians. Historically most of ‘our’ knowledge of Aboriginal culture and our interaction with it comes not only second-hand via anthropologists, historians and the media but is also mediated by the requirements of the dominant culture and institutions.

As an initiative of and collaboration between the Indigenous community and the non-Indigenous filmmaker *Ten Canoes* avoids that trap. It is a collaborative project that involves enormous risk and enormous trust and this in itself opens up a ‘contact zone’ – a shared space. It is filmed on the Arafura Swamp, Gulpilil’s traditional lands, and considers many cultural conventions in its process and production. (For example, the actors’ kinship ties to the people identified in the Thompson photographs, research into material culture and use of the local language.)

⁵ Ten Canoes [website] available from <http://www.tencanoes.com.au/tencanoes/pdf/Background.pdf> accessed 14/10/06.

⁶ *ibid.*

The making of the film ‘underscores a coexistence’ in *place*, as Susan Best observes in her discussions on the practice of bi-cultural collaborations. She says that the “most successful ‘cultivated’ places are a collective effort: they are somehow spun out of the specificity of the lives that inhabit them”.⁷ *Ten Canoes* achieves this by employing members of the Ramingining community as actors. It is in one of the local languages, primarily Ganalbingu, with English subtitles and narration (so that it reaches the mainstream audience).

Apart from being the first film to solely use an Aboriginal language as dialogue, it is also unique in that it does not position Aboriginality against the dominant culture, with its legacy of colonial history, as do other recent films, such as *Tracker* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*. There are no whitefellas in it.⁸

The pacing of the film quietly insists on the rhythm of the oral tradition. The value of the journey is emphasised as a spatio-temporal vehicle for the delivery of the story. In using this device, directors Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr hint at the character of Australian place – as one that exists (long before a European/white foot was set upon it) in the past, present and future simultaneously – and, further, that identity and sense of place are formed from it. Storytelling and journeys are fundamental to Aboriginal knowledge and survival and thus fundamental in constituting place.

What we see in the film is that stories have a long history, that Australian place is and, importantly, continues to be, a storied place. As Gulpilil says, stories are at the heart of the matter:

That story is never finished that Ten Canoes story, it goes on forever because it is a true story of our people, it is the heart of the land and people and nature.⁹

⁷ Susan Best. “Emplacement and Infinity”, *Uncertain Ground: Essays Between Art +Nature*, ed. Martin Thomas, Art Gallery of NSW, Perspecta Catalogue, 1997.

⁸ Stephen Muecke, “A Landscape of Variability” *Uncertain Ground: Essays Between Art +Nature*, Perspecta Catalogue, 1997. (Backroads with Gary Foley is the only other film I am aware of where there has been Indigenous collaboration and participation), p.53.

⁹ David Gulpilil November, 2005 *Ten Canoes* [website] available from <http://www.tencanoes.com.au/tencanoes/pdf/Background.pdf>, accessed 14/10/06.

If we look behind the scenes, we see that the stories and their telling signal to non-Indigenous Australians a different way of being and becoming in Australian place. It is this relationship to place that I will examine in my paper.

So in the making of movies we have to consider not just the narrative *in* the production, the story-line, but the narratives *about* production (what "we" think we are doing).¹⁰

The filmmakers have created the in-between space, the 'contact zone', where storytelling can be expressed and where the potential of storytelling is realized. Marcia Langton (via Homi Bhabba) has described a similar state of 'being in-between' as "potent with subversive agency".¹¹ The film was made with the Aboriginal audience in mind and has already had a ripple effect in the local community, spawning an increasing number of cultural and educational projects.¹² Yet it is also one that encourages the wider audience to think differently in respect of Australian place.

It is also a work where the artists, by whom I mean the directors, the writers, the actors, the cinematographers and editors, have assumed (or begun a process that engages with) a responsibility as agents for change. Marcia Langton sees evidence of change as a rejection of the colonialist stories, the fiction of *terra nullius* by artists and writers, and cites a "transformation in the paradigm of perceptions, the boundaries of what is permitted to be represented, resulting in a rich hybridization of experience, perception, theory and practice."¹³

Ten Canoes is the kind of story that Stephen Muecke speaks of as one that has the power to change lives and thinking.

If Australia is to be *changed*...then the kinds of stories we tell about Australia will have to change. Stories, after all, are a mechanism for focusing our desires to belong in a community. In a curious way they lead us to say what we are or what we want to be,

¹⁰ Stephen Muecke, "Narrative and Intervention in Aboriginal Filmmaking and Policy", *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture*, Vol 8. No. 1, (1994).

¹¹ Marcia Langton, "The Others", *Terra Alterius: and of Another*. (Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW, COFA. [Exhibition Catalogue], 2004), p.29.

¹² "The aftermath of *Ten Canoes* is proof that stories, in their telling, can change lives. Post-*Ten Canoes*, the creation of community-based projects *Eleven Canoes*, *Twelve Canoes* and so on up to *Eighteen Canoes* is testament to the power of storytelling". (Reviewed by Tinzar Lwyn)

<http://www20.sbs.com.au/movieshow/index.php?action=review&id=10001>, accessed 19/11/06.

¹³ *ibid.* Marcia Langton, "The Others", *Terra Alterius*, p.27.

they intertwine personal and public identities, making Australians of us, Australian women, Australian men, Aboriginal Australians and so on. So identity seems to be both internal and external, subjective and objective, in the domain of the cultural where artists might have a responsibility to shape national destiny, where they create that strange unquantifiable thing, symbolic value.¹⁴

As Margaret Somerville, in her research into place and storytelling with Tony Perkins of the Yarrowarra Aboriginal Corporation, also observes “storytelling [and listening] participates in broader debates about national identity”. Storytelling provides opportunities for multiple stories about place – ones that reconfigure the narratives of colonialism. She concludes poetically, in an echo of Gulpilil and Muecke, saying:

We need to learn to sing this country differently. We need to make songs that are sad and painful, a requiem for what has happened in the past; songs that are joyous, that celebrate survival and re-birth; and songs that beat with the rhythm of our hearts in this country.¹⁵

Ten Canoes tells us that there are other ‘songs’. Its particular strength is that it is a joyous song that can harmonise with other narratives that speak about contemporary Australian place from a different perspective. Marcia Langton envisions the ‘potential’ created by such an engagement, saying: “Art demands an audience. It is facile therefore to refuse the possibility that a non-Indigenous person will respond with intelligence and ethics”.¹⁶

And if ethics are to be involved there is a case, or perhaps even an obligation as suggested by Muecke, from non-Indigenous artists, for *other* representations of the place/land we share: representations that would remember and include the forgotten, omitted or neglected histories and ones that come from connectivity to place.

¹⁴ Stephen Muecke, *No Road (bitumen all the way)*. (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, WA. 1997), p.220

¹⁵ Margaret Somerville, *Re)membering in the Contact Zone: Telling, and Listening to, a Massacre Story*, University of New England, and Tony Perkins, Yarrowarra Aboriginal Corporation, Altitude [Website], accessed 10/11/06, available from, <http://www.api-network.com/altitude/pdf/6/5.pdf>

¹⁶ *ibid.* Langton, “The Others”, *Terra Alterius – Land of Another*, p.29.

Deborah Bird Rose in her bid for ‘decolonisation’¹⁷ draws on Levinas’s ethics of a ‘moral duty to bear witness’¹⁸ and she suggests further that “memory and witnessing attest not only to the past and to harm but to the good in the present moment”. She identifies the Aboriginal sharing of stories as an invitation or summons to respond in an ethical way; that bearing witness is an encounter – a connection that entails responsibility and commitment. She articulates this as a need to ‘actualise connection’ or, as I understand it, simply to take action.

Here I re-visit the introductory quote, where to ‘witness’ and become ‘entangled’ is to embrace the possibility of engagement with new thinking so that to “air fresh and provocative views on the history, culture and presence of a shared alternative Australia, is crucial to our discourse”.¹⁹

Such a response could find its expression, too, in what Veronica Brady hopes for “a renewal of imagination, a transformation of the way we see the world”,²⁰ and thus the way artists might image it.

It is the nexus between story, change and artistic practice that I am interested in, and how they are linked, as Stephen Muecke and Deborah Bird Rose indicate, to an ethical responsibility where the potential of such a transformation is possible. It is this potential that I explore in this paper.

¹⁷ *ibid.* Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*, p.31

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Nick Waterlow, *Terra Alterius: Land of Another*. (Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW, COFA. [Exhibition Catalogue], 2004), Foreword.

²⁰ David Tacey, Quoted in *The Edge of the Sacred* (Harper Collins Publishers Pty. Ltd. 1995), Preface.

Telling stories

In what is to follow I will speculate how it might be possible, through an ethical encounter, to dwell and think differently in this country. I will be considering possibilities for a different understanding of place that can emerge through the telling of and listening to stories, and how this might inform new responses to representations of place in post-colonial Australia.

Stories go back to “the time before time began” as Mary Albert, a Bardi woman and storyteller from Broome, once said to me. Stories require a listener, a witness, and, as Deborah Bird Rose says, an ‘ethical encounter’, to which I would add, an encounter that entails an act of reciprocity (or response).

In the previous section I looked at aspects of *Ten Canoes* as a contemporary example of the power of storytelling to express the notion of a ‘contact zone’. I have outlined how it could be seen to have transformative potential in terms of new ways of thinking about and representing Australian place.

I referred to Margaret Somerville who speaks of the collision of place and story as a ‘contact zone’, a term initially used by anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt, who describes it as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict”.¹

Yet the contact zone, as we have seen if one treads lightly, can also be one of exchange and sharing, a place or space of transformative potential. Somerville goes on to say that the multiple stories of both ‘exploitation and care’ intersect in places and that it is there, as I understand it and in fact encounter it, where it becomes possible to ‘re-imagine

¹ *ibid.* Millner, “The Contact Zone”, *Broadsheet, Contemporary Visual Arts + Culture*, p.152.

familiar country'.² The site of the contact zone is one “marked by pain and incomprehension – discomfort, anxiety and confusion – [that] are necessary for learning about others”.³ And in learning about others there is revelation and discovery.

Stories have long been a major part of my life and work. As an artist, children’s book illustrator and oral history researcher with Aboriginal custodians, I have been in the ‘contact zone’, which has meant moving into the in-between space of uncertainty. It has, at times, been a challenge, but unquestionably an extraordinary privilege. “The transformative possibilities of the contact zone begin with local storytelling.”⁴

Stories bridge cultural gaps and begin to open a space for dialogue, understanding and change. Sharing histories is fundamental to the human condition. “Humans have a natural talent for stories...in part because they need experience, their own and others, to be processed into a consultable form...Stories are potent...they can rouse normally indolent people to action...”⁵ and, as we have seen with the example of *Ten Canoes*, storytelling offers a creative way of expressing cultural difference and another worldview. Stories create identity and enhance bonding with place, as I will demonstrate later in more detail.

My own connection to and perception of place developed through relationships, for many years, with some remarkable Aboriginal people, particularly a small group of women in the Great Sandy Desert, Western Australia. It is important to note that I did not have the *kind* of agenda an ethnographer or anthropologist might have. The agenda set by the women was to record their stories. My relationship with the women, therefore, was grounded in a sharing of stories, and my understanding of connectivity to place

² Margaret Somerville, *(Re)membering in the Contact Zone: Telling, and Listening to, a Massacre Story*, <http://www.api-network.com/altitude/pdf/6/5.pdf>

“According to Sinclair, contradictory ‘stories and histories of connection, exploitation and care continue to converge within public and personal spheres’, opening up possibilities for cultural transformation ‘when individuals find the words and images that enable people to reimagine familiar country’”

³ *ibid.* Millner, *The Contact Zone*, *Broadsheet Contemporary Visual Arts + Culture*, p.152..

⁴ *ibid.*, Somerville.

⁵ Inga Clendinnen, “The History Question”, *Quarterly Essay 23* (Black Inc., 2006), p.38/41.

grew through travelling with them in their country. As an artist I was in a position to be open to what I will refer to as a ‘being with’ them in their place and on their terms.

For the purpose of this paper, I narrow the focus to recent events which I present later as fragments of a personal narrative, principally involving two of the women – a Kukatja/Ngardi woman, Tjama [Freda] Napanangka, and a Warlpiri woman, Patricia Lee Napangarti. Sadly, both of these women died unexpectedly during the course of my research and so their lives and deaths have taken on increased significance, not only personally, but also in a sense as examples of – or having made real – the issues I explore in this paper.

The women’s deaths (along with others I have previously experienced) signalled an ethical issue, which I could not ignore. Drawing on the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Deborah Bird Rose recalls his ethical assertion in relation to “an intersubjectivity in which each of us is always, already, responsible for others...Life with others is inherently entangled in responsibility”.⁶ This resonates with Aboriginal epistemologies and sensibilities, where one has a responsibility to kin and country. Those responsibilities encompass the event of death.

The notion of the ‘gift’, which I have referred to earlier, is further elaborated by Rose, who, again following Levinas, identifies death as a ‘gift’ that calls for some sort of response – the ‘obligation’ from those who remain.

What is important about a death narrative is that one’s own passing away becomes a gift for those who follow, as well as an address to them. Death narratives are vocative; they call to one’s survivors for some mode of response.⁷

My response, therefore, was to reflect on what this time spent with these women meant. Working, travelling and storytelling with these women was a ‘gift’. It exposed me to their culture – their way of being in the world. ‘Exposure’ to a nomadic and oral culture is called ‘teaching’ and listening or paying attention is called ‘learning’. Everything is

⁶ *ibid.* Rose, *Report from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation*, p.13.

⁷ *ibid.* Rose, (Hatley 2000:212) p.165.

spoken, or danced or sung or gestured. Repetition, example, mistakes, more repetition is the way things are taught and learnt and, more importantly, embodied. Paying attention is crucial. Stories that contain vital information are told ‘all over the place’, no chronology, and sometimes no apparent connection. Their “discourse moved as they moved about the desert”.⁸ It would be necessary to suspend Western concepts in order to really learn and understand a different view of life and different values. Stephen Muecke comments that the analysis of the researcher, “which invades that *critical distance* called objectivity is thus a limitation as far as Aboriginal epistemological practice is concerned”.⁹

To circumvent those limitations I attempt an experiment where my own narrative intervenes here and there to acknowledge the personal journey of some of my times with the women. The words have been edited and rewritten from my own diary and in some parts embellished from memory. They serve as a point of intersection with other stories that connect to place.

The narrative also alludes to my appreciation of ‘place’ as inseparable from the people and events that unfolded during my visits to ‘country’ (the desert) with the women – from the mundane activities of everyday life to the inevitable event of death.

It makes sense to respond in the manner of storytelling, which after all is the vernacular of the desert. To engage with the oral tradition is not an attempt at replicating an Indigenous sensibility. I cannot claim to have the same connection to or perception of place, or sense of belonging, as Aboriginal people, yet travelling with the women in the desert and the infusion of the various bodily experiences alters my perceptions and gives me some insight into another worldview. A ‘being with’ becomes an understanding, as anthropologist Michael Jackson notes in his studies of the Warlpiri, where he says, “knowledge is seen as a form of worldly immanence, a being-with others, and

⁸ Michael Jackson, *At Home in the World* (Duke University Press, 1995), p.86.

⁹ Stephen Muecke (personal communication, Feb. 06).

understanding”.¹⁰ One becomes ‘re-made’.

Adopting a phenomenological approach, I explore the essence of my lived experience. I set out to describe and perform an ‘in-between’ space. It is a physical and psychological space for me that exists between stillness and movement, here and there, city and desert, black and white, text and image, language and story. It is a window on to lives of ‘another’, lived in this country. It is of course through my window so I have maintained the personal voice. The place from which I speak/write is that of a white Western woman, a *kartiya* – whitefella.

My research methodology is a ‘grazing’ from a variety of sources – my own experience, anthropology, history, cultural studies, art history and philosophy. The narrative is a device to create a sense of place on the page and, through the activity of movement across the words, a space is opened up for the participation of the reader. As Stephen Muecke observes from his own experience in writing, “This kind of writing, in the encounter with other cultures, was one which also left spaces, sometimes literally in the text as indications of the unsaid or the not-yet-understood.”¹¹

I employ aspects of ‘nomadism’ as a way to loosely weave together threads of theory and lived experience. Deleuze and Guattari describe the ‘nomadic’ as ‘rhizomic’ (as is the yam itself – a spreading plant see *Fig.3*). Stephen Muecke assigns nomadism (nomadology) a non-linear and fragmentary character – it writes itself. In practice I see it as a sort of textual hunting and gathering in the way of the ‘Desert Women’ I worked and travelled with. They wander here and there looking for yams, searching for the telltale cracks in the ground, then digging ... digging... digging, and then there would be the yam – or not!

It is not a general theory, a summary of observations. It is rather a way of looking which is specific to a place...a way of representing things (in discontinuous fragments, stopping and starting). It is an aesthetic/political stance and is constantly in flight from ideas or

¹⁰ *ibid.* Jackson, *At home in the World* p.164.

¹¹ Stephen Muecke, “Visiting Aboriginal Australia”, extracted from *The Institute of Postcolonial Studies* Vol.2, Issue 1, 1999.

practices associated with the singular, the original, the uniform, the central authority, the hierarchy...without for all that ascribing to any form of anarchy.¹²

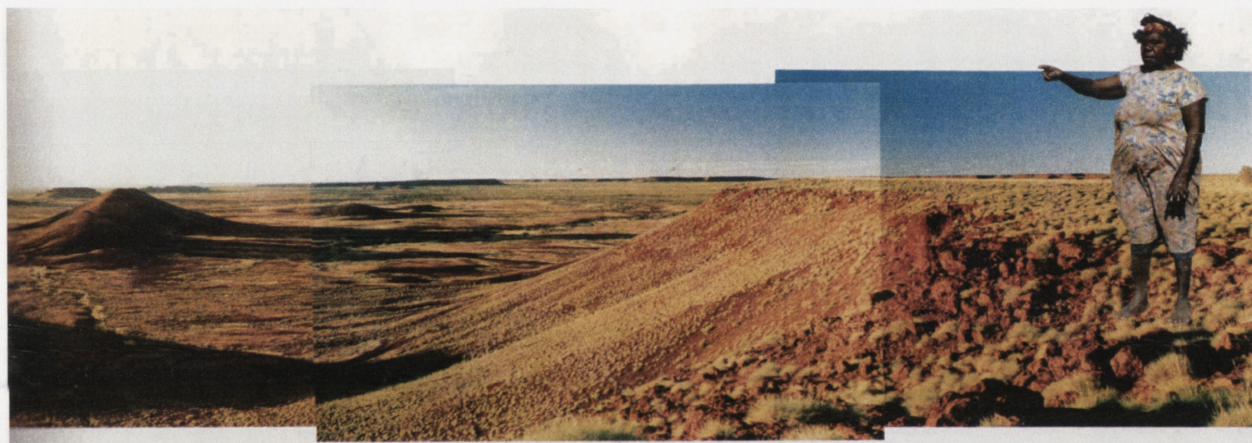


Fig.2

¹² Stephen Muecke, Krim Bentrak, Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984). p.15.

Australia – a storied place

Any discussion of sense of place in Australia must take Aboriginal sense of place as a vital factor (something which was not recognised to be true thirty years ago).¹

The question of place is a big one, especially in postcolonial Australia. It is contested and comes with issues of belonging, identity, attachment and displacement.

The early European settlers' cultural attitudes of cultivation and ownership produced (and arguably continue to enforce) the concept of *terra nullius* (land of no-one) and brought about the subsequent displacement of many Aboriginal people. The denial that obscured the violence of that sorry history is what anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner calls "the great Australian Silence"² – or perhaps, as it is more aptly called by Tom Griffiths, the "white noise"³ of colonialism also rendered the intruders deaf to an Aboriginal sense of place. Australian place was mythologised as 'empty', waiting to be gridded, up for grabs, grazed and gouged.

In an effort to 'tame' what they thought of as an immense and dreadful desert of a place, the early explorers busily went about (re)naming everything in their own image (or often their own disenchantment) and, by that act, claiming place. Thereby, as Paul Carter asserts, "by the act of place naming, space is transformed symbolically into place, that is, a space with a history".⁴ The legacy of that history rests with the majority of non-Indigenous people as a notion of place firmly anchored in ownership and economic rationalism.

Of course, *terra nullius* was a fiction. People lived there. These places were not empty, they already had names and, perhaps more importantly, they had their own stories –

¹ John Cameron, *Changing Places, re-imagining Australia* (Longueville Books, Double Bay, 2003), p.5.

² W.E.H. Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming, Essays 1938-1973*, (Australian National University Press, 1979), p.216.

³ Tom Griffiths, "A Haunted Country", *Land and Identity* (Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1988), p.8.

⁴ "Spatial History", *Postcolonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (Routledge, UK.), p.377.

ancient stories that gave the Indigenous inhabitants title to the land through a reciprocal state of belonging. Edward F. Casey maintains that place, far from being empty, has “an already plenary presence permeated with culturally constituted institutions and practices”.⁵

The idea of ‘space’ as an empty category waiting for something/someone to make it ‘placeful’ Casey sees as problematic, as this assumes there is a priority of space over place.⁶ Nevertheless, in Aboriginal ontology perhaps space *was* first but became ‘place’ through the activities of the ancestral beings who moved around doing their own bit of naming and placing in the creation time – the Dreaming (as it has become known in the English language, somewhat inadequately for such a complex concept). Places were not only made by the activities that occurred during those ancestral travels, they acquired stories as they were created. As Christine Nicholls put it, “the narratives are literally planted in the ground”.⁷ Deborah Bird Rose confirms too that the Dreaming locates everything in place, saying, “Everything that exists owes its existence to Dreaming...everything is located”.⁸ The ‘things’ that are located, that have a place, are not only the geographical features but also people and events. Stories.

It is this interrelationship between movement, story and place, mutually constituting each other, that this paper seeks to explore in relation to ways of thinking and being. Narratives, I suggest are fundamental to a connectivity to, and consciousness of, Australian place and therefore, as I will discuss later, its representation in art.

Conceptually (and ethically), the nomadic movement of the Aboriginal ancestors constitute Australian place, rather than the straight lines and boundaries imposed by the sedentary settler culture. These borders and divisions in fact were “intended to erase

⁵ Edward F. Casey “How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time: Phenomenological prolegomena” in *Senses of Place*, eds. S. Feld and K. Basso, (School of American Research Press, 1996), p.46.

⁶ *ibid.* Casey, p.16.

⁷ Christine Nicholls, *Yilpini – Love, Art and Ceremony* (Craftsman House, 2006), p.47.

⁸ Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*. (Australian Heritage Commission, Commonwealth of Australia, 1996), p.57.

both the natural order and any evidence of Indigenous occupation”,⁹ so that ownership by the invading settlers could be ‘legitimised’. Place and the vastly differing perceptions of it were instrumental in shaping the tensions and misunderstandings (that still exist) between the cultures of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

The mix of belonging and not belonging underlies so much of Australian art and culture and accounts for much of its fraught energy. Orphaned from Mother England and without the birthright entitlements of the Indigenous people, we have to make do with a synthetic identity. Only in the act of making art, art as a combination of belonging and not belonging, can we make up Australia.¹⁰

From the time of colonisation, place was ‘seen’ and perceived differently. The European settlers privileged ‘seeing’ while the nomadic Indigenous people ‘understood’ and ‘lived’ place through the dimension of the Dreaming. The anthropologist Ronald M. Berndt describes the complex mechanics of the Dreaming in a multi-faceted way but primarily as *a relationship* between people and place, inclusive of all sentient beings (in fact the land is regarded as sentient – “the land is always alive”),¹¹ where “people are regarded as *part* of nature” and therefore inseparable from place. The Dreaming is “a way of talking, of seeing, of knowing which is...as mysterious and as beautiful as any poetry...it depends on people living in the country, travelling through it and naming it, constantly making new stories and songs”.¹² The Dreaming knowledge is held in the land by stories. A poetics of place.

This is clearly different from the European perception of the land – as a commodity for exploitation, rather than something with which to be in a symbiotic relationship.

An Aboriginal worldview, therefore, is one based on relationship to a storied place constituted by an ethics of care and responsibility. This is enacted by movement – the nomadic – as a way of being, of connecting and, equally importantly, as a way of *thinking*.

⁹ Roslynn D. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.54

¹⁰ George Alexander, “Post Natura Nature: Rosemary Laing”, *Artlink*, Vol.21, No.4, pp.18-23, 2001.

¹¹ Central Land Council, *The Land is Always Alive: The Story of the Central Land Council*, compiled by Peter McEvoy and Pamela Lyon (Central Land Council, 1994). Title page.

¹² *ibid.*..Stephen Muecke, *Reading the Country*, p.14.

Moving and making sense of place

The Indigenous people moved in order to survive. It was also movement that brought the settlers to Australia. It is movement that many people adopt as their way of life. It is possible to imagine or to know, if you are Aboriginal, that the land *asserts* this force. The country itself generates movement. Ngarinyin lawman and visionary David Mowaljarlai told me the country is like a battery that needs to be ‘charged’ through the movement and repeated rituals of its custodians.¹³ Movement also ensured that resources in a fragile land would not be depleted. It is possible that movement itself is a *response* to the land – that the land imposes a particular way of thinking on its inhabitants. The nomadic, therefore, can be seen as “an appropriate way of responding to the place we live in, to the place we call Australia”,¹⁴ and this will be discussed later.

Place becomes so, via movement, bodies and naming. Place, therefore, could be characterised not as a static thing – a bit of ground with rocks and sand – but, as Edward Casey concludes, as something indefinite and eluding categorisation, an ‘event’, something dynamic and variable – a ‘shifting ground’ – for which we have to “discover or invent new forms of understanding”.¹⁵

Understanding can seep through the senses. Casey’s phenomenological approach, as one that honours lived experience, leads him to suspect that ‘perception’ is *primary* and place is perceived through the senses of the *lived body*, together with the infusion of cultural and social events. Thus, knowledge of place becomes embodied and, conversely, place becomes a ‘gathering’ of bodies, experiences, events and therefore, he concludes, stories.

Rather than being one definite sort of thing – for example, physical, spiritual, cultural, social – a given place takes on the qualities of its occupants, reflecting these qualities in its own constitution ... expressing them as an event. Places not only *are*, they *happen* (and it is because they happen they lend themselves so well to narration, whether as history or story).¹⁶

¹³ David Mowaljarlai, (pers.com.).

¹⁴ *ibid.* Stephen Muecke, *Reading the Country*, p.232.

¹⁵ *ibid.* Casey, *How to get from Space to Place*, p.26.

¹⁶ *ibid.* Casey, p.27.

And so, as place is made so too are histories and stories. There is no place without a history. Here is a convergence. Casey's thoughts on place are similar to what senior Aboriginal Law-woman Tjama Napanangka meant when she proclaimed, "You got story – you got country!"¹⁷ For Aboriginal people, their nomadic movement effects connectivity to place. Casey also assigns movement a crucial role in the perception of place and I will turn to that now.

Movement is integral to the body's immediate environment: "the living – moving body is essential to the process of emplacement: lived bodies belong to places and help constitute them".¹⁸ Casey cites various forms of bodily movement: from the small movements inevitable when 'staying in place', 'getting into place' and the one most relevant to my project 'moving between places',¹⁹ which I suggest are the conceptual and physical journeys of the kind practised by nomadic peoples. The nomadic body therefore constitutes (and embodies) place, as it goes.

Traditionally, on the physical plane, embodiment happened through walking and a re-visiting of place. To re-visit is to revitalise memory; to re-enact the journeys of the ancestors and, inevitably, adding the accretion of stories held by a place. For the women of the Great Sandy Desert, walking was an imperative for survival. As children they would have walked some twenty kilometres a day in their search for food, all the time connecting with and caring for country.

We bin little kids walking long way. No motorcar. Same road we followem today, where them two *wati kutjarra* from *Tjukurrpa* bin go...Still we come back today – women as pensioners now to look around country.²⁰

There are 30 entries relating to 'walk' in the Kukatja Dictionary (I have only put in the English translations):

walk, walk bandy-legged, walk crooked, walk favouring one leg, walk holding hands, walk improperly, walk in clumsy fashion, walk in one's sleep, walk on, walk on tip toes, walk or run quickly, (able to), walk slowly, walk slowly with the foot inverted, walk to one side, walk well, walk with curvature of spine, walk with feet spread outwards, walk

¹⁷ Tjama Napanangka, (pers. com. circa 1996).

¹⁸ *ibid* Casey, p.23/24.

¹⁹ *ibid*. Casey, p.44..

²⁰ *ibid*. Tjama Napanangka, *Yarrtji – Six Women's Stories from the Great Sandy Desert*, p.24.

with legs apart, walk with person, walking without leaving footprints, walkabout, walking along side of feet, walking bandy-legged, walking feebly, walking like a pregnant woman, walking on fore-legs, walking with twisted feet or bandy-legs, walking with twisted feet or stiff knee joints²¹

Artist and researcher Victoria King speaks of the (Aboriginal) embodiment of country through walking, by repeated and collective visits to place and the movement between places along established 'pathways'. She identifies this with the inseparability of people and place...

Movement is made across the land in paths that are continually 're-grooved'... the land is in continual variation; there is no 'out there' or separation between place and person. Perspective is not a vanishing point or a distant horizon. Space becomes place as an affective body memory and experience, an embodied perception of communally experienced 'narrated' points in space...country is sung up...in a mapping of place and experience.²²

This country was and is known and understood not only through the movement of bodies, but also through fluidity in ideas – adaptability. This occurs conceptually, as we will see later, in the act of certain Aboriginal artists' painting. Place is continually narrated (and 'mapped') through movement.

All sentient beings are 'place-bound'. Human beings "are never without perception" and "never without emplaced experiences".²³ Edward Casey also suggests that places are constituted by our continual 'immersion', a 'being *in* place'. It seems that a place requires a (any) body to invest it with meaning, and a body requires the place to hold the qualities it has 'gathered'. Indeterminate and symbiotic. People and place are mutually constituted and transformative. In *Reading the Country* Stephen Muecke also observes that "there is a circularity between people and place, they make place and place is made by them".²⁴

²¹ Hilaire Valiquette. ed. *A Basic Kukatja to English Dictionary, Wirrimanu*, Fr. Antony Peile. (Luurnpa Catholic School, Balgo. 1993).

²² Victoria King, "Embodied perceptions: Aboriginal expressions of place". *Changing Places: Re-imagining Australia*, ed. John Cameron. (Longueville Books, Double Bay, N.S.W. 2003), p.289.

²³ *ibid.* Casey, "How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time" in *Senses of Place*, p.19.

²⁴ Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke, Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984), p.34.

The lived body is the subject of a perception that constitutes place, through the senses of sight, smell, touch, sound, taste and intuition. “As place is sensed, senses are placed, as places make sense, senses make place”.²⁵ So through a sensory perception of place, we can be affected by place. Place(s) can ‘get under your skin’. Perhaps it is through a kind of osmosis that we become connected to place and place therefore becomes embodied. Deborah Bird Rose says, “Such permeability opens persons not only to place, but to the substance and history of the place”. This she describes as an “embodied connectivity” with the Aboriginal histories and stories of a place. Further, this connectivity entails ethical “reciprocities of being, becoming, and dying”.²⁶ Minoru Hokari, in his studies with the Gurinji, also acknowledges an ethical dimension in terms of their movement and connectivity to place.

Such an ‘ethics of spatial movement’ is not only in ritual practice, but is applied in everyday activities as well...it is essential to move around the country in order to relate and connect yourself to the places. It is your movement that connects you and the world, and its moral history.²⁷

This ethical connectivity extends to non-Indigenous people as well. Moving...walking, one foot after the other, brings us, to investigate the figure of the nomad and the concept of ‘nomadic consciousness’. Pauses and intervals are a necessary part of moving, so I halt here to briefly bring my own experience of walking in the desert into the picture and, from there, to speculate on the nature of a ‘nomadic consciousness’.

Walking insists on phenomenology, requires a suspension of theory and an open ended trust in ‘being-there’.²⁸

In the desert I walk. It is an almost unconscious impulse – an imperative – to walk as my own ritualising perhaps. I walk to be in place. To make place (and space). To meander. To smell, to touch, to glean. To map place through the body and through the senses. A way of embodying place. To connect an act of body and place. It is also about ‘shape-

²⁵ *ibid.* Casey, *How to get from space to Place*, quoting Feld, p.19.

²⁶ Deborah Bird Rose, “The Ecological Humanities in Action: An Invitation by Deborah Bird Rose”, *Australian Humanities Review*, Issue 31-32, April 2004 available from <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-April-2004/home.html>, cited, 28/1/07.

²⁷ Minoru Hokari, “Gurindji Perspectives on History: Body, Place, Memory, and Mobility” (IV. Movement: Its Function and Ethics) available from http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/___data/assets/pdf_file/5715/HOKARI.pdf. Cited, 24/1/07.

²⁸ Pete Hay, “Writing Place” *Changing Places, re imagining Australia*, ed J. Cameron, (Longueville Books, Double Bay, 2003). p. 274/5.

shifting', morphing consciousness from 'striated' to 'smooth' space, from the verticality of my sedentary culture to the horizontality of the land. Slow down groundspeed. To pay attention. To listen, to feel the ground beneath my feet, to peer at the calligraphy of grasses and tracks. To read the country. To get a sense of place.

While there is no chance, nor am I suggesting a desire, to reinstate or attempt to replicate traditional Aboriginal nomadism, the act of moving in this way changes the way one thinks. There is value in exploring 'nomadic thinking', in contrast to the 'sedentary thinking' that has been inherited – and is seen as universal – from the European settlers, particularly in terms of understanding and, thus, representing Australian place.

Humans have walked this land for thousands of years. Mobility, of not only a physical but also a conceptual kind, makes sense as a way of *being*. The nomads of Australia set in place a way of being and thinking that is arguably, as Muecke has suggested, simply best suited to this country.

Nomadism is not endemic to race, it is embodied in the way of life of a people and this way of life is a culturally acquired thing. It is the existence that is most suited to the country, to smooth spaces like deserts, steppes and the sea.²⁹

This way of thinking has been theorised as 'Nomadology' (the study and philosophy of nomadism), a practice of thinking and being as articulated by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Writer and feminist Rosi Braidotti refers to it as a way of thinking that engages feminism as well, to become 'nomadic consciousness', and describes it as follows.

The nomad's relationship to the earth is one of transitory attachment and cyclical frequentation...the nomad gathers, reaps and exchanges but does not exploit...it is a form of resisting assimilation into dominant ways of representing the self...not taking any kind of identity permanent...a transgressive identity... the reason s/he can make connections³⁰

²⁹ *ibid.*, Muecke et. al. *Reading the Country*, p. 223.

³⁰ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects, Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (Columbia University Press, New York, Chichester, West Sussex, 1994), p.25/33/35.

A “nomadic consciousness”, therefore, is one that is activated by physical and conceptual movement – or what I define as a ‘necessary nomadism’ – where a new way of being in this country is opened up – the interstice. In this space exists the possibility for transformation, to ignite creative energy, to think differently and to challenge “predetermined paradigms and mindsets”.³¹ This is particularly relevant for artists, who could discover and access possibilities for new representations (or expressions) of place.

A necessary nomadism

It is useful at this point to distinguish between nomadism and nomadology. The anthropological definition of ‘nomadism’ is, briefly, the behaviour of a group of people for whom movement is a way of life – who do not stay in one place. (Indigenous Australians fit this description.) This definition is in opposition to sedentary or agrarian cultures or peoples. ‘Nomadism’ in an Australian context only exists in opposition. Pre-settlement, Aboriginal people had no cause to define themselves as such. Everybody moved about so identification was (and is) linked to the places where people moved, for example – ‘Desert people’ or ‘Saltwater people’³² – not in opposition to people who live in houses. In other words it was the Europeans who called the locals ‘nomads’.

Nomadology, the study of nomadism is a physiological state of becoming. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari speak of it as a philosophy that employs characteristics of movement but significantly perceive it as a strategy to challenge the stasis of Western sedentary thought as one that values notions of borders and boundaries. As Muecke says, nomadology is a “practice and a knowledge potentially present in relation to any event, potentially effective in relation to *any* struggle for survival”.³³

As a strategy, nomadology can be mobilised as such in thinking, writing, creating, ‘becoming’. The nomadic is not hierarchical. Deleuze and Guattari characterise it using

³¹ Judy Pinn, “Restor(y)ing a Sense of Place, Self and Community”, *Changing Place,s re-imagining Australia*, ed. John Cameron, (Longueville Books, Double Bay, 2003), p.43.

³² David Mowaljarlai (pers com). Mowaljarlai would describe different Aboriginal people in this way.

³³ *ibid.* Stephen Muecke et al., *Reading the Country*, p.217.

the plant metaphor of the ‘rhizome’, which operates in a non-linear way, spreading in all directions, meandering horizontally to new locations – like the nomads themselves.

They articulate a relationship between the nomad and place by saying:

The nomads inhabit these places; they remain in them and they themselves make them grow, for it has been established that the nomads make the desert no less than they are made by it.³⁴

This is in contrast to the Western trope of the ‘tree of knowledge’³⁵ (or family tree) and a verticality of thought (and power structures) and the “grand narratives of modernist, capitalist thought”,³⁶ which by definition is hierarchical. (It is interesting to note that the yam, a much sought after staple food for the desert women with whom I travelled, is a rhizome. The rhizome also relates strongly to the structure of certain Indigenous kinship systems.³⁷)



Fig.3

While there has been little explanation of how nomads think,³⁸ Rosi Braidotti emphasises embodiment and talks about the notion of ‘nomadic subjects’ as being informed by a perception of her own as well as literal nomads’ existential experience,

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *One Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987), p.382.

³⁵ *ibid.*, Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p.23.

³⁶ Jae Emerling, *Theory for Art History*, p.123.

³⁷ *ibid.*, Stephen Muecke, *Reading the Country*, p.220.

³⁸ *ibid.*, Muecke et al. *Reading the Country*, p.15.

which is one of movement. Her ‘nomadism’ is one of a critical consciousness that “resists settling into socially coded modes of [hegemonic] thought and behaviour”.³⁹ Her use of the word ‘settling’ is instructive here, in terms of a particular way of being and thinking and indicates for me the difference in worldview between European (settled), and Aboriginal (nomadic) ways of being. ‘Settling’ implies stasis and fixity, whereas the project of ‘nomadic thought’ is one of flux and fluidity – movement – movement that activates and politicises an in-between space. Braidotti further elaborates, saying, “the ability to flow from one set of experiences to another is a quality of interconnectedness”.⁴⁰ In her deliberations on Deleuze’s ideas on ‘nomadic becoming’, she speaks of ‘nomadic subjectivity’ as a politicised and creative force, by “one who moves in the margins or the in-between and accesses a voice when it is not constrained by western hegemonic systems of thought”. She describes a “critical nomadic consciousness” as one that opens up “new possibilities for life and thought” and is “a multiple and constant process of transformation”.⁴¹

I relate this ‘moving in the margins’ or the in-between to the ‘zone of contact’ discussed earlier, as a space for transformative potential where empathy, responsibility and commitment can be nurtured and where there is the possibility of a different worldview – to “think differently, to invent new frameworks, new modes of thought”.⁴²

And so to bring art back into the picture – there is potential for the creation of new *images* of place that would get away from ‘landscape’ and the colonial legacy of representation, or romanticised idealisation and appropriations of Aboriginal culture, and tap into something that is at the *core* of the country – seeing the same thing differently in words and images – an art that reflects the ethics of place – where histories and stories of difference are heard.

³⁹ *ibid.* Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p.5.

⁴⁰ *ibid.* Braidotti, p.5.

⁴¹ *ibid.* Braidotti, p.8 /111.

⁴² *ibid.* Braidotti, p.1.

These in-between spaces with political potential for challenging hegemonic power are a 'way of being' practised (expressed) by the nomad. It is the in-between space of 'becoming', a constant state of movement that disrupts a static state of being and fixed ideas.⁴³ Historically, Europeans have been suspicious of a nomadic way of being and have demonstrated their incapacity to recognise or value it.⁴⁴

The distinction between nomadic and settled aligned 'nomadic' with 'primitive', and 'static' and 'settled' with 'civilized', 'progressive' and 'advanced' in an ironic contradiction of terms. This conviction held by dominant settler/colonising cultures justified policies of dispossession and re-location of nomadic peoples, particularly so in the case of Aboriginal hunter-gatherers of Australia. Aboriginal activist and anthropologist Marcia Langton speaks of the "theoretical gymnastics of the colonial thinkers", who had the idea that a nomadic life was so simple that there were "no systems of property",⁴⁵ thereby conveniently making 'legal' the dispossession of Aboriginal lands. (Only as recently as 1992 the Mabo decision overturned the fiction of *terra nullius* and recognised native title.)

The land of this continent was formed, as Aboriginal people continue to tell us, and as anthropologist Nancy Munn observes, by "perpetual motion" – the greatest of travels and journeys – journeys of the Aboriginal ancestors who criss-crossed the continent, carving rivers and piling up mountains and flattening plains. It was the *force* of the ancestral beings that created country, people and animals – "whole lot"⁴⁶ as artist and custodian Emily Kngwarreye was fond of saying. They left their mark and their stories (the Dreaming) everywhere on the land, and at the sites they went into and became.

⁴³ Jae Emerling, "Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari", *Theory for Art History*, p.124.

⁴⁴ It is interesting to note that the word 'traveller', with its roots in the dubiously heroic exploits of male explorers, and a term more recently tagged to tourism, is a term sanctioned by the values of the (sedentary) Western culture.

⁴⁵ *ibid.* Marcia Langton, "The Others", *Terra Alterius; Land of another*. p. 27.

⁴⁶ Margo Neale, *Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Alhalkere—Paintings from Utopia*, ed. Jenny Zimmer, (Queensland Art Gallery, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1998). p.33.

The ancestors continually move from place to place...until they go in forever. A kind of perpetual motion is remedied by images of permanence – the ancestors transformed into hills or rockholes.⁴⁷

The people who came after followed those tracks for more than 45,000⁴⁸ years. It is *movement* that is fundamental to maintaining the Dreaming – keeping “everything standing up alive”.⁴⁹ The Dreaming entails reciprocity (as Tjama Napanangka often told me, saying “We have to look after that country”) through following the tracks of the ancestors and communicating with them through stories, songs and dances. In recent times this movement and connectivity manifests through painting the stories and journeys on canvas. At the most mundane level, nomadism was and still is about survival.

Movement is the origin of the world, the history of the world, and the morality of the world. After all, it does not always matter what the purpose of one’s movement is. Rather, the process (i.e. movement itself) is the reason why they are nomadic.⁵⁰

A nomadic sensibility still prevails amongst those Aboriginal people living for example in ‘remote’ Australia, although we are told Warri and his wife Yatungka, of the Mandildjara people, who lived a traditional life in the desert, were the *Last of the Nomads*.⁵¹

The contemporary Aboriginal nomad makes the most of resources wherever (or whoever) they happen to be. S/he drives a Toyota or a Kingswood or other cars in the \$3,000 range, has satellite TV and phones (mobile and sat phone too). Although they are now ‘housed’ in ‘settlements’ like Wirrimanu (Balgo), for example, in an effort by the state to bring order (control) to their unpredictable and unnerving nomadism and its apparent chaos, Aboriginal people stick to their wandering ways and thumb their noses at the stasis of Western conventions. They have, with discerning opportunism and adaptability typical of the nomad, switched on to all the available technology to travel

⁴⁷ Nancy D. Munn. *Walbiri iconography: graphic representation and cultural symbolism in a central Australian Society* (Ithaca, N.Y. Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 48.

⁴⁸ R. Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, Second Edition, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1994, p.9.

(Carbon-dated human remains at Lake Mungo provide evidence of 45,000 years of Aboriginal occupation)

⁴⁹ David Mowaljarlai, Utta Malnic, *Yorro Yorro – Spirit of the Kimberley* (Magabala Books, Broome, 1993). Title page.

⁵⁰ Minoru Hokari, “Gurindji Perspectives on History: Body, Place, Memory, and Mobility”, available from http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/5715/HOKARI.pdf (cited 24/1/07).

⁵¹ W. J. Peasley, *The Last of the Nomads* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1983).

huge distances physically and digitally, regularly across the country, and – at the drop of an Akubra – overseas. The Yuendumu band *No Fixed Address* loudly exemplifies the new nomad – choosing a name for their band that identifies, performs and celebrates their ‘vagrant’ mobility.

Movement is more important to Aboriginal modes of being than territoriality, and lines (or pathways of movement) more than boundaries, as I have argued before on the basis of ‘nomadic’ rather than settled civic life.⁵²

Coming and going

To redeploy the word ‘nomadic’ to my own ends – or beginnings, as one must start somewhere – nomadism, for me is, amongst other things about a periodic coming and going from a place I call ‘home’ (Alice Springs) to other places I feel at ‘home’ (cities and the Australian ‘desert’). The places where I find myself, where connections between people and places have evolved, are the cities, the ‘centre’ and the ‘in-between’. My own ‘kind of nomadism’ embraces what happens in-between *here* and *there*, whether that is geographical, cultural, perceptual, temporal or conceptual. It is between here and there where things happen, where movement, narrative, place and cultures overlap.

So where does this contemporary nomadism take us? Sudden shifts and turns are part of the journey. As we have seen, movement and storytelling are fundamental to connectivity to place so I now move the words here to begin a story. It is to introduce my own narrative as an actual representation of place (an embodiment of nomadic consciousness through narrative). I will then look at how Australian place has been represented by both the European culture and by the practitioners of nomadism – the Indigenous artists.

Nomadic shifts designate therefore, a creating sort of becoming, a performative metaphor for the otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction of experience and knowledge.⁵³

⁵² Stephen Muecke, “Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy” (University of New South Wales Press Ltd., University of New South Wales, Sydney. 2004), p.16.

⁵³ *ibid*, Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p.6.

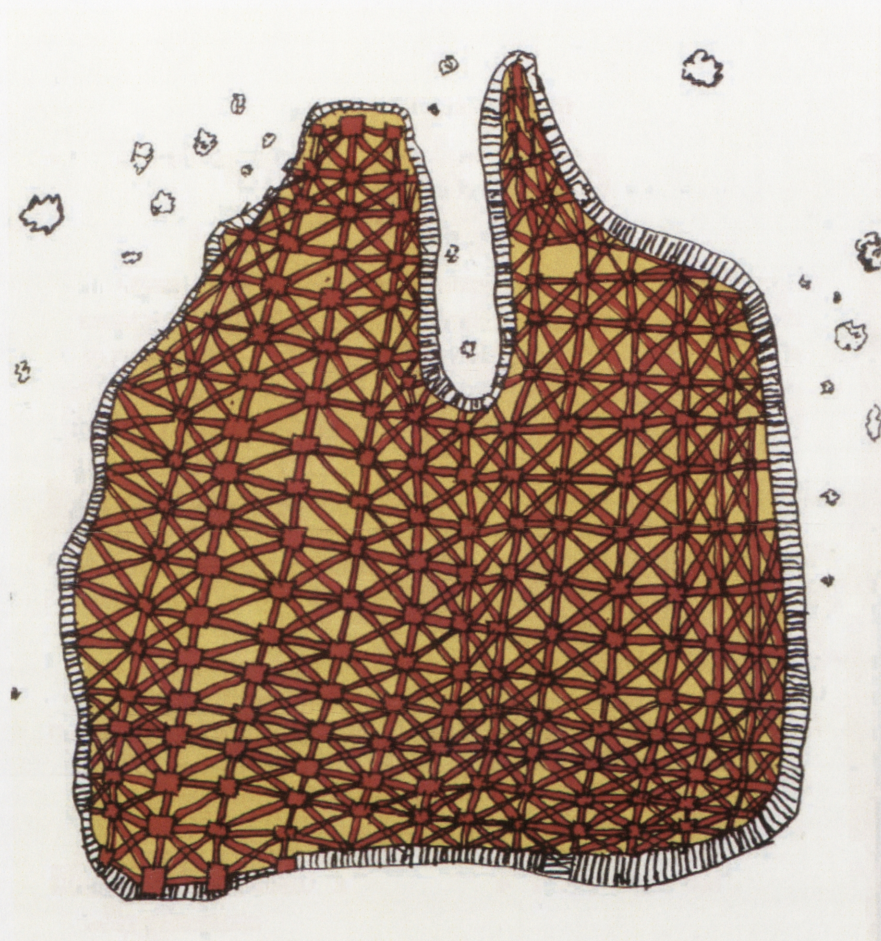


Fig.4

Somewhere in the air 2003

I am flying back from Berlin to Alice and in a couple of months I will be in Balgo.

Below the country slips by, gradually turning from wheat yellow to lakes, flat and almost metallic grey and embroidered at the edges with lacy white salt. The red of the desert seeps into view, puckered here and there by quiet creases and folds of almost green. The country is a canvas of dots and shadow smudges. The lakes have now dried to soft salt and pool into the county like spilt milk. Then, there are the bony ribs of the ranges around Alice (Mowaljarlai called them eyebrows of the land) and the nodes of Pine Gap growing out of the ground – like a cancer – and I am home.

Balgo Winter 2003

My feet are cold, glaring white in the morning winter sun that spears through the Spinifex and lashes out a long shadow shaped like me. The wind freezes my hands as I hold the camera. I video my feet moving painfully across the cold rocks to the edge of the pound. Cold white feet with nail polish, red like blood, on each toe.

Later I visit Tjama. She and Pipita have new glasses for 'no good eye'. Age and dust! A couple of half-finished paintings lie on the ground. A dog pisses on one of them. Tjama picks it up and whacks the dog with it. I ask her what it is. "Yam Dreaming", she says. "Kartiya like yam Dreaming." Patricia has just driven through the night from Katherine and she talks about child custody, land claims and court cases. Her husband arrives and is drunk and shouts and swears and Patricia quickly barricades herself in the Women's Centre. Frustrated, he turns on us, spitting: fucking white cunts stealing off Aboriginal culture, taking things... Tjama says, just leave him, leave him, and turns her back on him and winks at us. He rants till a white man, wearing a hat that says 'NIFTY' above the duck bill, arrives to squirt the dogs with some chemical that probably kills

just about everything. Tjampitjinpa is not inclined to continue his tirade with white men around and disappears in a lopsided troopie. Patricia comes out and tries to fix the lock on the door with a hefty crowbar and Tjama's dog 'Choclat' has a fit (from the chemicals?). She shouts at the 'NIFTY' man, 'What for you bin do that to that dog.' Choclat swerves about on wobbly legs and she throws a bucket of water over him. Later she says 'That dog always has fits.'

You have just read a bit of a story and you are/were momentarily there. Place is where you are. Story is what happens. An event. You have been put into place. Connected.

From the air Wirrimanu (Balgo) is a cluster of dwellings, scattered like a handful of confetti in an empty car park. It is perched on the edge of a spectacular breakaway known locally as 'the pound'. The site of *Lurrnpa* the Kingfisher Dreaming drops away from the plateau in giddy swirls of Spinifex and purple gibbers. Two mesa shaped hills are *Wati Kutjarra – Two Men Dreaming*, one of the great ancestral travel stories of two brothers from the south whose exploits shaped the land and made (and named) places. The surrounding country is red sand, Spinifex and stones.

Yet for its awesome setting, I have long thought of Balgo as a war zone, where survivors of colonisation thrash out their lives in a complex mix of pleasure and pain. The art, trips to country, and cultural events, music, football and videos are the pleasure – the pain is poor health, substance abuse (alcohol and petrol sniffing) and the inevitable violence and too frequent and unnecessary deaths. The effects of the last two hundred years are punishingly visited on the people there. This place is not most of the inhabitant's traditional land. They have been displaced and live like refugees.

Out of this mix comes art, predominantly in the form of painting, that has turned the contemporary art world on its head. Sotheby's report Aboriginal art is its second highest seller. It seems the power of place – country – not only survives, but also flourishes, through paintings, in a way that seems at odds with the reality of people's lives. Writer and art critic Robert Hughes has gone so far as to announce Australian Aboriginal art as

“the world's last great art movement”.⁵⁴ So what is it that underpins this extraordinary phenomenon?

Not painting, walking: Indigenous representations of place – ‘Country’

Ever since I first saw a handful of photographs of paintings from Balgo, it must have been the early eighties (the Papunya paintings were already making their mark on the contemporary art scene), it set me wondering why the Indigenous art of place (particularly the art from the Western Desert) was so different to non-Indigenous art of place. These paintings are not ‘landscape’ as we know it. And this is the point – we do not *know* it. The country, with its palimpsest of stories, is as esoteric as the paintings of it. It is this that gives the paintings their power. The power of something withheld. Christine Nicholls elaborates on the complexity and layers of meaning in Western Desert paintings:

Central and Western Desert art works, and the narratives in which they are embedded, comprise high levels of information about the environment, site-specific ‘deep ecology’, interactions between species, as well as offering templates for human interactions, and ethical moral guidance.⁵⁵

The paintings contain a plethora of information of a place that is known. They act as visual mnemonics to social memory and a body of knowledge. As such non-Indigenous perceptions of these works, while aesthetically affective, would always be limited. As Muecke says of Indigenous artists, “their conceptual, narrative and spiritual link with the sites they depict falls outside the horizontal perspective of the imperial gaze”.⁵⁶

What I continue to marvel at, as each year passes, is the diversity in the outpouring of Western desert art, particularly from Balgo. The reasons behind this, while including a sort of a reverse diaspora (dispersed language groups moving to one place), are too many to elaborate here but, clearly, as Howard Morphy implies, change and adaptability, which give rise to this diversity, are a necessary part of a nomadic Aboriginal life.

⁵⁴ Sue McCulloch, *Contemporary Aboriginal Art: A Guide to the Rebirth of an Ancient Culture* (Allen & Unwin, 2001), p.10.

⁵⁵ Victoria King (quoting Nicholls, 2002, pp. 65-66), “Embodied Perceptions: Aboriginal Expressions of Place”, in *Changing Places*, p.288.

⁵⁶ *ibid.* Stephen Muecke, “A landscape of variability”, *Uncertain Ground*, p.46.

Sources of inspiration and artistic traditions and vocabularies differ regionally, and nowhere are the traditions static. Each region has many ways in which the relationship between mythology, people and land can be represented, and Aboriginal artists are always inventing new ways of depicting that relationship.⁵⁷

The art market no doubt drives the production but the content is another story. *Why* these artists paint is for economic, political and cultural reasons, and all are symbiotic. *What* do people paint? They paint their country – their stories. Place, which as we have seen is storied, and thus representation of place or ‘country’ is also story. Quite simply, as Michael Nelson Jagamara says, “Without story, the painting is nothing”.⁵⁸ Tjumpo Tjapanangka⁵⁹, one of the senior Balgo artists, confirms his passion for painting, its instructive potential for survival, the connection to significant sites and the Dreaming story – the travels of the ancestors. Country, vital knowledge, movement and myth are all linked and signified through narrative.

All the time painting, all the time painting; hard work that painting...I try to teach my grandchildren the culture about Wirrimanu, this creek here, big river, where the Luurnpa (ancestral kingfisher) in the Tjukurpa (Dreaming) made this big rockhole (Ngarmalu) and the creek. The Luurnpa made these soakwater for the people to drink. Where this art centre is now, is where the Luurnpa travelled and made those creeks close by. This is a special place.⁶⁰

(Even the site of the art centre has been accorded particular status through its history and incorporation into the contemporary story of painting.)

Wirrimanu (Balgo) is on the traditional lands of Walmajarri, “a spot chosen by God” according to the Pallotine missionaries who went out to the Great Sandy Desert in the late 1930s with a few sheep and much idealistic vision. Balgo was set up “with nothing but native knowledge and a rough map”⁶¹ as a buffer to stop exploitation of Aboriginal people by pastoralists. People drifted in over the years – times were tough in the desert and, after all, the missionaries would say things like, “Hey, I got soup soup for you ...

⁵⁷ Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (Phaidon Press Limited, 1998), p.142.

⁵⁸ George Alexander, *Balgo 4-04, New Paintings from the Kutjungka Region*, 2004 (quoting Michael Nelson Jagamara). p.7.

⁵⁹ A few weeks before finishing this paper, I was told Tjapanangka passed away – another major loss to the Balgo community, Australia and the art world.

⁶⁰ *ibid.* Tjumpo Tjapanangka, *Balgo 4-04*, p.iv.

⁶¹ *Kutjungka Parish* [website], available from <http://www.users.bigpond.com/kutjungka/balgo.htm>, accessed 12/1/07.

and oranges”,⁶² and so, one by one, families joined each other. Many of these semi-nomadic people were forced to leave their traditional lands, their ‘home’, and settle in places with which they had little spiritual connection. It was not long before there was a diverse community of about four or five hundred people, *Warlpiri*, *Ngardi*, *Kukatja*, *Walmajarri*, *Wankatjunka* some *Pintupi* language groups becoming *Kutjunka* – ‘all together in one place’.

Although ‘home’ is country that most of the artists no longer experience bodily and on a daily basis, by walking as their ancestors did in their traditional nomadic life, they connect to their country through painting. Poet and theorist Trinh Minh-ha says of writers in exile, “For a number of writers in exile, the true home is to be found not in houses, but in writing”.⁶³ It could be equally applied to these artists as well.

Home *ngurra*⁶⁴ is ‘country’ inherited through the kinship system, incumbent with obligations to care for it. One of the senior Balgo artists, Brandy Tjungurrayi, expresses the connection and obligation of care by saying, “We put these stories on canvas to hold them for country. From long way, hold them there”.⁶⁵ The Balgo artists of course did not begin to paint on canvas until they became settled. It is reasonable to think that within the paradox of being ‘settled’ nomads, they would still find a way to ‘move’. I think how they sit in the air-conditioned Warlayirti arts centre or on the ground in their windswept camps, away from their country, and paint. They often sing the country as they sit and paint. Yet while they *sit* they are *moving*. They are immersed in, and walking over, their country – ‘writing’ and ‘re-writing’ their country – and the stories. Painting is a continual re-telling, re-animating and passing on of story.

⁶² *ibid.* Napanangka et. al., *Yarrtji*, p.98 and pers com circa 1996.

⁶³ Trinh Minh-ha, “Other than Myself/My Other Self”, in Robertson, George et al. (eds.) *Travellers’ Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). p16.

⁶⁴ Christine Watson, *Piercing the Ground: Balgo Women’s image making and relationship to Country*. (Fremante Arts Centre Press, W.A., 2003). (“*Ngurra* is camp, site, Dreaming place, country ...and more and ‘country’ is a place you move around”). p.98.

⁶⁵ Brandy Tjungurrayi, *Balgo 4-04* (Catalogue), 2004. Front page.

The relationship of walking and journeys (as repeated performative acts) to contemporary Aboriginal art and ‘representation’ of country is also highlighted by Stephen Muecke.

to know this country is to walk around it, along tracks put down by the ancestors, participating in ceremony, for the arts are performed, repeated arts, not unique creations.⁶⁶

Tjama Napanangka, Kuninyi Nampitjin and Payi Payi Napangarti’s collaborative painting of one of the many journeys to their country⁶⁷ we made together, began as a sand drawing, with a gentle sweep of the hand over the ground, clearing the red sand. Clearing a space of enunciation. Circles (rockholes) were inscribed and each one named. Then lines were scored gently to connect the circles. (The three women did the actual painting on canvas, showing their footprints even though we had driven, after our journey.) Tjama describes the process thus:

Every soakwater, they dig and dig in the Dreamtime, dig and dig and do painting. White painting, red ochre and black. That’s really important one. Straight and good long as all bin from Tjukurpa...We bin tell story. We bin puttem right every soakwater where twofella Nangala bin dancing and camp, painting all the way...⁶⁸



Fig. 5

⁶⁶ Stephen Muecke, “Textual Spaces, Appropriation of post-colonial Renaissance”. *Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* (New South Wales University Press Ltd, 1992). p.169.

⁶⁷ During our work on the book *Yarrtji-Six Women’s Stories from the Great Sandy Desert – 1988-1997*.

⁶⁸ *ibid.* Napanangka, et.al. *Yarrtji – Six Women’s Stories from the Great Sandy Desert*, p.198.

The 'map' was to show that this is how and where one travels. Between places. Following the Dreaming paths. Telling and re-telling stories. The women, it seemed, were patiently illustrating Deleuze and Guattari. Then, of course, they would know that...

the water point is reached only in order to be left behind; every point is relay and only relay. A path is always between two points, but the inbetween has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both autonomy and a direction of its own.⁶⁹

It would appear, therefore, to be essential for people to paint, not only for economic reasons but also as a way of being in country – to be home. To be connected through story. The consequences of not doing it would be dire, as expressed by some one hundred traditional owners from Utopia...

We can't leave our country behind. If we go away bad things will happen. Somebody might get killed if we go somewhere else. We can't leave this country. We have to hold this land. It has our Dreamings and sacred places.⁷⁰

Herein, lies the difference in consciousness of country. That it is not empty. It is not static, that there is no separation between people and place and that it (place) holds stories. The late Wenten Rubuntja, who interestingly painted in the realist Namatjira style, expressed the difference eloquently and affirmed the importance of story as knowledge of place.

We're not like whitefella who can take a photograph and say what pretty country it is; we've got the song to sing for that country. The country has got sacred sites, that stone, that mountain has got Dreaming. We sing that one; we've got the song.⁷¹

The characteristics of much Western Desert painting, as identified by Christine Nicholls, in an article on Warlpiri artist Dorothy Napangardi, come from an embodied sense of place. There is no single fixed vantage point; spatial information is transposed in a way that suggests 'maps' of country that express not just abstracted geographical features, but include journeys, Dreamings, narratives, and "are imbued with numerous levels of meaning, including the sacred". She continues, also citing some of the major Balgo artists I have mentioned, whose early bush life impacts on their art.

⁶⁹ *ibid.* Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.380.

⁷⁰ *The Land is Always Alive*, Extract from letter from traditional owners in Utopia (Central Land Council 1994), p.19.

⁷¹ Alison French, *Seeing the Centre, The Art of Albert Namatjira 1902-1959*, (National Gallery of Australia, 2002).

The primary subject matter of their artworks is the natural environment and specific cultural landscape which was the site of their early, primary socialization and with which they have a deep sense of filiation, because they experienced the conditions firsthand.

In other words it is their relationship (kinship) to their country and their lived experience of it that translates, as seen in the work of Dorothy Napangardi, to “an illusionary sensation of movement across ‘country’.”⁷² I have one of Dorothy’s paintings on my bedroom wall. It moves. And it moves me. It ‘takes’ me to the salt lakes of the desert.

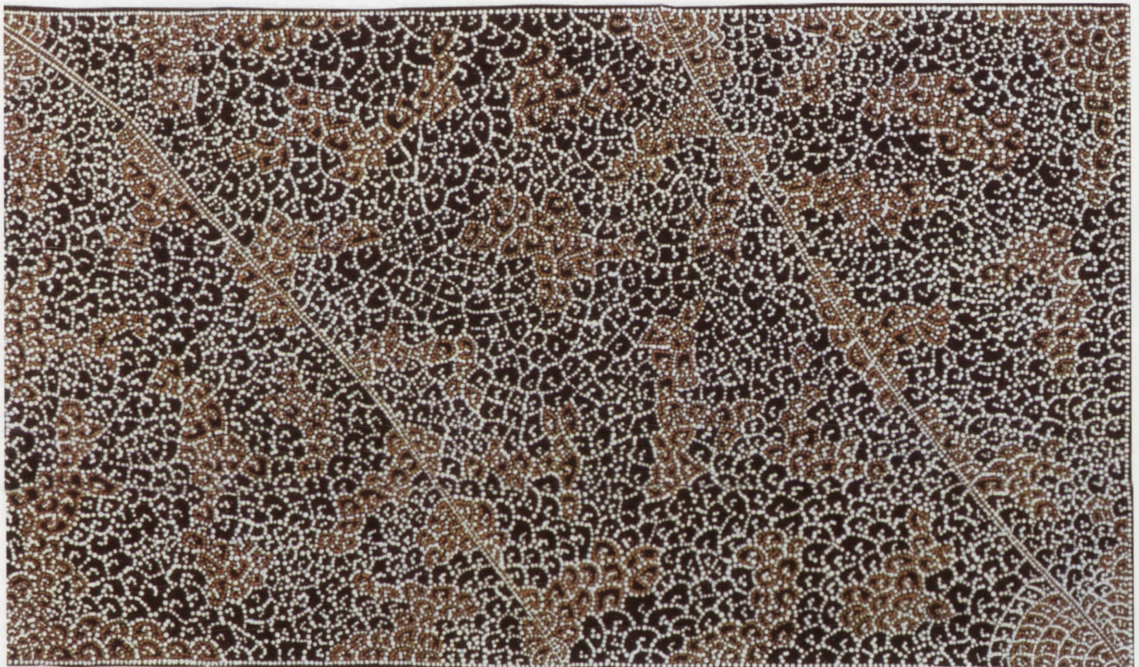


Fig. 6

Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings, knowledges, experiences and thus ‘representations’ of place could not have been further apart.

⁷² Christine Nicholls, “Thinking Big: Spatial conception in the art of Dorothy Napangardi”, *Artlink*, Vol 23, No.3, 2003, p.46-48.

Seeing, not believing: non-Indigenous representations of place – Landscape

There is still in the Australian ethos, as I have mentioned, evidence of a lingering belief in the notion of *terra nullius*, that the land belonged to no-one and therefore was ‘empty space’, waiting to be colonised, cultivated and ‘owned’. In fact, without this pervasive ‘rationale’ there would be no justification for the way in which the dominant settler culture staked claim over land and represented it. They came, they ‘saw’, and they painted what they saw – vast areas of uninhabited and terrifying ‘landscape’. This perception was largely shaped by the trials of patriarchal explorers. The colonial artists came with their imported conventions of landscape painting: boxed in a frame, perspective with horizon firmly in place and privileging sight. Convinced of the concept of *terra nullius*, these artists (mis)representations of the place in which they found themselves proliferated as topography. There was no knowledge of, or concern for, the layers of stories that are deeply inscribed in the ‘country’.

Over 200 years and whitefellas are still struggling to mediate the country, to read it understand it (and map it suitably)...but as sure as God made pink people, colonial knowledge has generally begun by denying Indigenous knowledge⁷³

Australia was a place of the ‘unheimlich’, unhomely, and in an endeavour to make it ‘familiar’ to a European consciousness and aesthetic, artists initially painted ‘the wide brown land’ in ways to create a familiarity with mother England.

Aboriginal people figured initially as primitive curiosities but all too soon the landscape, particularly the desert, becomes objectified and empty – a void – the “hideous blank”.⁷⁴ Panoramic representations of the land sought to validate the coloniser’s imperial cultural values, particularly of ownership, so ‘unoccupied’ land was convenient for this purpose. Landscape therefore becomes a commodity like the land itself, as a “document of the colonial process”.⁷⁵ In an interesting turn of the tables, Aboriginal paintings of country and story have been recognised as ‘documents’ and are presented by traditional owners

⁷³ *ibid.* Alexander, *Balgo 4-04*, Catalogue essay.

⁷⁴ *ibid.* Roslynn Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, p.14.

⁷⁵ Max Delaney, “Fabrication and Frame, Narelle Jubelin and the Colonial Panorama”, *Colonial – Post Colonial* (Museum of Modern Art at Heide, 1996). p.12.

as evidence in land claims.⁷⁶

Representations of the desert continued, and changed, going through various phases ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous ... doing an about face, as Roslynn Haynes says, from a feared empty space to “enviable asset”. The featureless ‘sunburnt country’ so difficult to locate within the aesthetics of European art, was a disappointing subject and languished for a time as the ‘dead heart’, a hostile place to be tamed. It was revived and re-imagined as the ‘Red Heart’ and ultimately located for tourism as the ‘Red Centre’. Landscape, particularly the enigmatic desert, has been a persistent theme in Australian art. Prior to the advent of the Papunya artists in the early seventies, and the subsequent success of Western Desert Art, the lists of artists who engaged with the desert were mostly European and male. In recent times the list has extended to include more women. Nevertheless the majority still seem to be white men, and with the exception of a few, do not really spend a lot of time ‘out there’.

Artists like Russell Drysdale, who were looking for a new idiom, began peopling the desert with some angst-ridden scrawny and struggling types. Sidney Nolan flew over the desert and, at a distance, was agog with the view, the light and heat. He painted what he hoped would be ‘the true nature’ of the desert. Abstraction and colour was what Fred Williams saw in the desert and he too was influenced by the apparent aerial (planar) perspective of Aboriginal painting. He began his detached landscapes of open space onto which he daubed his lines and dots of colour. In recent times others began spending more time there, getting closer to the ground. John Wolseley, who has been cast as a cross between a 19th century naturalist, explorer and nomad, walks, maps, draws and paints vignettes of the desert terrain’s flora and fauna in detail. He is an artist who takes into account the ‘events’ (geological and spiritual) in the layers of the land.⁷⁷ Rosemary Laing (in collaboration with Stephen Birch – *Between a rock and a place with no fish*), not surprisingly, has become more airborne in her response to the desert. She chose ten

⁷⁶ Barunga Statement. <http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/treaty/contents.htm>, accessed 11/1/07.

In 1988 at the Barunga Festival, an annual community sporting and cultural event, the then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, who was attending the Festival, was presented with two paintings [on bark] and text calling for Indigenous rights. This has become known as the Barunga Statement. In his speech Bob Hawke said there would be a treaty within the life of the current Parliament.

⁷⁷ *ibid.* Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*. p.257.

days in Balgo. On the edge of the ‘pound’, as it is locally known, assisted by some of the local whitefellas, she threw casts of her friends’ heads in the air and photographed them. This intervention of the human encounter – ‘white goods’ – with the desert has historical and cultural as well as personal references.⁷⁸

As Laing’s and others’ works attest, the interior, that large arid zone of the continent (about seventy per cent of the land mass) called the desert, has been inspiration for artists (and storytellers, writers and filmmakers). It has to a large degree resisted settlement and is therefore falsely still perceived as ‘empty’ space. As non-Indigenous artists endeavour to come to terms with its vastness, what is often missing is an acknowledgement of it as a storied place, and, as Roslynn Haynes comments, it is still largely unknown.

The desert – simultaneously alluring and repellent – has a hypnotic presence in Australian culture. The ‘Centre’ is distant and unknown to most Australians, yet has become a symbol of the country...⁷⁹

Put simply, the country is storied, and we can never know the stories it holds. What is important is the investment of the countless stories that constitute this country, its places and therefore its history. The desert is still often depicted as ‘landscape’, a superficial topography. The lack of ‘the marks’ or signs of human activity could possibly hint at an act of conscious erasure (a forgetting) of the Aboriginal inhabitants and, thus, their stories from the conventional and accepted history of Australia. As Ross Gibson points out erasure or ‘forgetting’ holds little sway.

Forgetting simply does not work. Wishful amnesia is no protection against the memories of actual, lived experience. The events of the past rarely pass. They leave marks in documents, in bodies, in communities and places, in buildings, streets and landscape.⁸⁰

And the country defiantly keeps its stories for all time and in all places as explained by the late Wenten Rubuntja.

⁷⁸ Wayne Tunnicliffe, *One dozen unnatural disasters in the Australian landscape*. Catalogue essay. Rosemary Laing – collaboration with Stephen Birch (GrantPirrie Project 2003).

⁷⁹ *ibid.* Roslynn D. Haynes, Introduction.

⁸⁰ Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2002), p.179.

When the English people found our country and Aboriginal people, they put their cities and their culture all over our country. But underneath this, all the time, Aboriginal culture and laws stay alive.⁸¹

Little wonder then that the paintings of the Aboriginal artists of the desert present a depiction of ‘country’ that is *not* a framed landscape viewed from a single external perspective, of something foreign and unknown. These are canvases filled to bursting with the iconography of sentient beings and complex narratives. And clearly this kind of, I hesitate to call it, ‘representation’ resonates with a deeper human need – connection and re-connection to place, to country through embodied story – not separation through the chronology of history.

White Australia is a product of the Renaissance mentality that is predicated on the notion of an environment other than and external to the individual ego.⁸²

People like Tjama Napanangka and Patricia Napangarti not only lived *in* this ‘landscape’ but, as we have seen, *are* that country, and their stories are there in the palimpsest. There was a moment (in the long history of time) where my story intersected with theirs, a convergence that marked a ‘sharing’ of time and place and stories. I became a privileged witness to ways of being in this/their country. For many, including myself, the pull to the desert was, and remains, irresistible. I live in Alice Springs to be in close proximity to it. There is a sense of connection to people and place, yet not one of ‘belonging’. I am always a *kartiya* – whitefella. My relationship to these desert places is necessary, ambivalent and provisional. A shifting ground.

i am drawn to these places
and pushed away
i have listened to the songs and silences that sometimes fill these spaces
each trip the country works its magic
slithering under my skin with a shiver
of
anxiety and desire⁸³

⁸¹ Wenten Rubuntja (dcd), *The Land is Always Alive – The Story of the Central Land Council* (Central Land Council, 1994). p. 67.

⁸² Ross Gibson, *South of the West, Postcolonialism and the Narrative construction of Australia* (Indiana University Press, 1992), p.8.

⁸³ Pamela Lofts, Extract from text, “anxiety + desire”, *Coming to terms with the past*. 1999. Survey Exhibition, (Araluen Gallery, Alice Springs, NT.)

The Desert Women – a place in the sun

In 1988 a friend, Sonja Peter, and I began a collaboration with Tjama Napanangka, Patricia Napangarti and five other women⁸⁴ who had asked us to record their life and *Tjukurrpa* (Dreaming) stories. They were all senior Law-women (custodians, storytellers, dancers, traditional healers) who were born in the bush and had seen Europeans (*kartiya*) for the first time as children. During their lives they suffered, endured and sometimes enjoyed the incursions of the missions and pastoral industry. In their later years they had become cultural brokers, world-travellers and successful artists. After nine years *Yarrtji – Six Women's Stories from the Great Sandy Desert* was published, an extraordinary (and locally prized) document which, through the transcription of personal oral histories and *Tjukurrpa*, celebrates the strength and humour of this particular (yet typical of many) group of women whose challenges were far greater than those of the many failed 'heroes' so lauded in our Australian history.

Some people – they don't know! Somefella, they don't understand – that sort of story, from Dreamtime, from travelling you know. They got to think, 'Aaah, that Aboriginal woman, desert woman, they got lot of thing – culture and countryside.'⁸⁵

As we have seen, places, as events, harbour memories, collect and hold stories, as well as create new ones. Places 'happen', so a good way to talk about place is through narrative:

Stories reshape the way we see events. And each event, like remembering, overlays those which went before, just as successive phases of occupation become strata in a midden. This palimpsest of moments in time may also be conceived spatially. Every story told is a break in a journey.⁸⁶

Here is more of the journey – here is more of the place and more of the story. "Where one person's story ends another takes off."⁸⁷ This story takes place in the Great Sandy Desert. Where I begin is the end of the story or the end of that part of the story. It is the end of two lives.

⁸⁴ All of the women except Payi Payi Napangarti have since passed away: Tjama Freda Napanangka, Marti Mudgedel Napanangka, Nanyuma Rosi Napurrula, Millie Skeen Nampitjin, Kuninyi Rita Nampitjin.

⁸⁵ Napanangka et al., *Yarrtji – Six Women's Stories*. p.8.

⁸⁶ *ibid.* Jackson, *At Home in the World*, p.157.

⁸⁷ *ibid.* Muecke, *Reading the Country* p.15.

follows her around). Nyami will come back in a week (with the pig?) and we'll go bush. To walk around. Look at country. Patricia has a small list of things she wants us to bring back from Balgo and Mulan: a picture of Holy Mary, tablets for blood pressure and a puppy that Tjama got from someone.

I remember when I first met Tjama, at Balgo. Terry-towelling hat and wrap-around sunglasses and legs like burnt sticks poking into the ground. Heading off to some meeting. "For culture." Or to the council to discuss the latest mining exploration. Or was it court to advise on traditional punishment for boys who had stolen a car? Always busy with something. And her sister Marti, who sat me down and rubbed ochre into my belly. "Bush medicine! Palya – good one!" I never could wash the deep orange out of my skirt.

This was one of many trips to Balgo. The cross-cultural interface is always challenging yet there is a familiarity. It is always a privilege yet not always easy. One's cultural values are constantly being challenged and the harsher realities of Aboriginal community life are difficult to know how to negotiate. What is clear is the women's extraordinary ability to negotiate and adapt to the ever-changing landscape of their lives, and to accommodate the 'strangeness' that has been foisted upon them. But then this is probably inevitable in a nomadic life and a nomadic way of thinking.

Like living things, cultures survive by adaptation. Adaptation is not simply the triumph of the strongest: it is a subtle strategy of resistance and accommodation to competitors in new environments. In the case of cultures, threatened practices survive if they can integrate with the dominant habitus – either by finding a niche or a more central role. Cultures survive when they have something valued by others and a mechanism of trade or communication with which to exchange it.⁸⁹

What never changes, what is certain, is their sense of belonging. By contrast, our Western European culture is one that does not endorse our belonging here. Veronica Brady describes our displacement and attributes it to the history of violence and lack of spiritual connection to the land.

⁸⁹ Ian McLean, "Tradition as resistance – Fine art to the rescue: Kuninjku modernism"[website], <http://www.acuads.com.au/conf2005/papers/mclean.pdf>, cited 29/12/06.

We no longer belong in the place from which our ancestors came to this land, but we do not quite belong here either because the events of the last two hundred years have created a gap between us and the people of the land who lived so intimately with it and still holds its secrets. Partly this gap comes from the rivers of blood and tears which have flowed between us, but partly too it comes from our loss of the sense of the sacred which is of the essence of Aboriginal cultures and of their relations with the land.⁹⁰

Our economy 'says' land belongs to us but what is the currency for our belonging to it?

As my long time friend David Mowaljarlai said,

I don't own the land, but the land owns me. That is the strong thing in Aborigine law and culture. It's about the land. I'm only a servant, we all Aborigines are servants, we serve nature. That's why it's so important for us, because the land owns us.⁹¹

Bullocks Head Lake 1999

Time and place stretch out here. Elastic infinite things. Weeks and days have no relationship to calendar or clock, only to the moon. I sleep in a sandy hollow full of flints and grinding stones. It feels like no one has been here since the people who made them moved on. The place is so fragile – too fragile for footfalls. The horizon is all around and I feel happy to be in line with it again. The sense of space and distance looking out to something promised but always unknowable, defined by a circle that looks like a line _____ held in check by the dome of sky.

Since country endures, is always already there, place becomes the horizon of temporality against which human finitude finds a rhythm. Country can hold several moments simultaneously, just as an Ancestor may be present at many places simultaneously.⁹²

Mangkurrupa (Mongrel Downs) Tanami Downs 2001

Yesterday thirteen of us and my dog cram into one Toyota to go digging for yams. The kids have a great time out bush. Patricia thinks, though, that when they grow up they'll just watch videos. Meanwhile there is lots of scraping and digging, the women are wandering around looking for sand frogs. Margaret tells

⁹⁰ Veronica Brady, "The Ambiguities of Place", in *Belonging – Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership*. By Peter Read (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.18.

⁹¹ David Mowaljarlai, *The Law Report*, ABC [website].

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/lawrpt/lstories/lr311001.htm>, 31st October 1995, cited 13 /11/2005.

⁹² *ibid.* Muecke, *Ancient and Modern*, p.16–17.

me words my lazy tongue can't get around and I forget most of them. Patricia says she bought a microwave and so I ask her what setting you would use for sand frogs and then contemplate a gruesome image of them bursting and splattering against the glass window. She reckons I'd prefer Red Rooster. Back at the outstation Peggy shows us her new washing machine. It hops around on the veranda in a puddle. Nearby a group of whiskered old men chip away at boomerangs to sell.

the women who live here prefer a Toyota
 except when looking for yams
 then their feet tread lightly on the hot ground
 leaving weaving faint tracks
 as they look for tiny cracks made
 by the sucking thirst of deep tubers
 their crowbars scrape a rhythm in the earth
 to a thin song sung
 the country listens
 till at the bottom of a deep hole
 the yam⁹³

Wirrimanu (Balgo) 2003

Tjama looks thin. Everyone is playing cards. A beautiful little boy squats down next to me. I admire his long black lashes and he squeezes out a caramel coloured turd.

The old Nampitjins (Tjama's mothers) are lying crumpled up in their blankets. It's hard to tell where they stop and the blankets begin. Occasionally a bony hand reaches out and searches for a tobacco tin. Three hairless dogs guard a flour drum cooking on the fire; a hairy bullock hoof sticks out of a fatty grey brew.

⁹³ *ibid.* Pamela Lofts, *anxiety + desire*, 1999.

We go hunting for sand frogs. Out on the two sand hills road. Ngalikutjarra. We dig and dig and get about sixty. We sit in the middle of the road with a small fire. The sizzling, squirming frogs transfix me. Marti crunches and sucks them when they are done. Offers me one. I can only consider the liver. The rest is a charred mass of glistening gizzards. Tjama assures me they are good for 'coldsick'.

It's a respite out here for Tjama and Marti away from Balgo. Last night some boys stole the nurses' car and trashed it, then broke into the store and stole \$700. "Sniffers!" rasps Tjama. Someone else got run over. "Half- caste got no respect for Aboriginal people," says Tjama. The driver was punished later by all the relatives. "Hit with a nulla-nulla everywhere from the feet to the head. Not the head," corrects Tjama. "He was cripple after. Couldn't walk. Policeman took him away."

the women here worry for us
and petrol sniffing boys
with burnt out brains throw rocks on roofs
and steal
some took a Polaroid camera from the store
leaving dumb photos of themselves
later the aunties beat them with nulla-nullas
'won't stop them anyway'
cultures collide
leaving wrecks of houses cars and
young lives

We drive on long stretches of red sandy road, through wattle and grevillia, honey grevillia dripping nectar that you can suck. Too much makes you heady and a bit drunk.

driving along red road
stop quickly ... *kumpupatja!*
and everyone is out of the car running to a plant with

velvet leaves and purple
 lace flowers
 hands carefully plucking
 the bush tomato
 from its spiky claws
 'only eat this one, other one cheeky one'
 it tastes like soap⁹⁴

On these trips the women were simply 'teaching' us. About the country, about bushtucker, about 'culture'. A 'being with' is a way of learning how to 'be in' country. This is what David Mowaljarlai said of his own learning from the old people, when he was a boy,

We walked together over many places and areas, travelled long distances around. Every day we were learning. We got closer and we were understanding it more – the country. It came out to us. Di-di-di-di-di – that's travelling across large spaces, talking, listening, all that. That's learning to understand.⁹⁵

The women were also demonstrating their own knowledge and understanding of the peculiarities and frailties of *kartiya* (whitefella) culture. We were kept an eye on. At one stage in the fifty plus degree heat, they insisted my friend and I have a bath in a half 44-gallon drum to 'cool off'. "You have holiday," they said, offering us freshly made damper (while) "we go hunting for pussy cat." They did. Successfully. This success, the demonstration of their hunting skills as 'grannies', in searing heat, their own antics running barefoot after the cat, their aim with a rock at the cat up a tree ("yowie – poor thing" they would say with no hint of compassion), and the quickness of my friend's dog (well, after all, Kutju had started life as a camp dog) became a great story to tell each other every time we met.

Our story went a bit differently as we panted under the scant shade of a tarpaulin and played Scrabble and ate damper and jam, the making of which was also to demonstrate pride in their skills learnt as 'cookies' and drovers on the Canning stock route. Whole

⁹⁴ Pamela Lofts, *anxiety + desire*, 1999.

⁹⁵ *ibid.* Mowaljarlai, *Yorro Yorro*, p xiii.

histories in a bit of flour and water. Later, after the cat had been cooked, one of the women, Kuninyi, carefully stowed its charred leg and shoulder in her pink handbag as a snack for later.

The re-telling of the stories always enjoyed a bit of embellishment for the sake of a good laugh or because that's what always happens to stories in an oral culture. As Nancy Munn says of sand stories, "no retelling is likely to reproduce the exact arrangements and scene cycles again". She goes on to say that this itself reinforces a binding of the graphic construction to the act of narration.⁹⁶

The Desert Women rarely travelled alone and cycles of walking and travelling (as one) would feature in just about every story, whether it was *Tjukurrpa* or 'really one' (life story). Walking (and these days driving) acts as a mnemonic to revitalise the stories of place. Circularity and connectedness links life and land. Movement/body/country/story. Same thing. "Same same", as the women would say.



Fig.8

Through these travels and simple stories I am connected to that place and my memory of those events is as vivid as then. Through the telling and interweaving of the Dreaming stories, even though I have a poor memory for them, means that I can no longer look at

⁹⁶ *ibid.* Munn, *Walbiri Iconography*, p.73.

country without an appreciation that it is constantly being storied. A work in progress. Inscribed yet unknowable.

It is in the gap between horizon and surface, in the domain of mirage, memory and metaphor, that a number of writers and artists choose to work, attempting to particularise what otherwise remains abstract. In doing this we are constantly confronted by the evidence that the spaces we live in and travel through are already deeply inscribed and particularised by an Indigenous presence.⁹⁷

Mangkururrrpa (Lake Ruth) 2003

It's 4 o'clock and feels like midday. The sun belts down and it's midwinter. In summer you'd be a dead duck like the one preserved in the salty fringes of the lake. This time its surface is a whitish-grey of cracked dried mud. When the lake was full to brimming a couple of years ago, it pooled up through the paper barks, dissolving huge termite mounds, stranding ruins of a macro metropolis. The shadowed sand is soft and cool. Samphire has sprung up making a juicy pastel carpet. Some kind of pink fuzz and lacy grasses feather the place. Clumps of delicate pale violet flowers persist. The lake draws you in to its circularity like a story. There is nowhere else to go. So I walk around it. A hot pulse shimmers on the horizon. I step onto the snowy surface. The glare bites my eyes. I hear buzzing, the sawing sounds of bees or wasps. The ground beneath my feet is peppered with small holes. Hundreds of them. I prefer to think they are bees (rather than wasps) burrowing and balling the sand. Underneath must be a labyrinth alive.

Just before sunset I find a kangaroo skeleton. A big red. It is eerily human in scale and lying peacefully on its side.

Although my senses are alive, my physical experience of this place tells me I am not built for this environment. I recall the explorers and wonder at their madness in thinking they could 'conquer' the desert. But for the women their experience and knowledge is embodied, not acting *on* their bodies. As well as knowing where the two big pythons ('husband and wife one') are and digging them up out of their hole for dinner or

⁹⁷ Kim Mahood, Transforming Space into Place. Unpublished paper, 2004.

sauntering off with billycans to excavate sand frogs, or knowing where the *kumpupatja* (bush tomato) grow, for the women the lake is a site – a monument to events. I have a recollection of their telling the story of budgerigar men, a fight and spears and blood spilt here – *Tjukurrpa* time. And of course, there is the evidence. If you dig through a few layers of the lake bed, there is the spilt blood of ancestors, becoming the red earth. There is the blood. There is the story. Held forever by the place.

Wirrimanu (Balgo) Winter 2004

I don't take any photos at Balgo this time. Probably the first time since I have been coming here since 1988. We check in at the Arts Centre and there are all the gorgeous colour drenched paintings, mad and wild on the walls.

I find Tjama. She is in the Frail Aged Care place, a house with a sunny veranda facing the shop. She is inside on a bed, small and stick-like under blankets. I see that she has plastic tubing in her nose and realize that the humming noise is a big white machine next to her bed and that's where the plastic tubing goes. "Hullo Napanangka, yowie (poor thing) you got anything for your sister?" she says. Her voice is still strong and defiant. "You got any Jupurrulas (promised husbands) for me?" "I brought a couple," I say. "One for you, one for me, but maybe you'd like both?" "Wara!" she says. "Too many." The day she stops asking me about Jupurrulas I know she will have given up.

I have bought her a great big fluffy blanket with dolphins on it – "Might be I go fishing," she says – and some Sustagen "to make you fat", I add. "Yuwai (yes) what time that going to be?" she asks. She slips me one of her quizzical looks and laughs and breaks into a wracking cough.

We talk for a while about this and that, the petrol-sniffing nephew who set alight a pile of blankets and burnt down Eubena's house. "She sick now," she tells me. "In the guts. From that worry." Later I see Eubena at the Arts Centre. She is

looking worried and a bit 'grey', but as resilient as ever, completely absorbed in her country – another painting.

Some time during my visit Tjama has taken the tube out of her nose and is propped up on her elbow. Her jumper slips over one very bony shoulder and a white crucifix swings from her neck. She is suddenly old like the Nampitjins. Folded like a camp chair. I notice her right eye has drooped. She asks me to get her one of those "Mary mats, like a blanket, to hang on the wall."

In the air between Alice Springs and Canberra 2004

I am now in another space between, not there – not here but being with memories of travelling this country with the women I worked for. In the in-between space of travel the stories seep back to prickle under my skin. The stories of our times together roll out like a film. A road movie without a road. The countless stories.

The shared stories, in Tjama's culture, give me 'some' connection to this place. "You proper desert woman now," she would often say, I suspect with a touch of irony, after some small hunting success or learned desert skill. One such 'event' that 'emplaced' me was this: Kutju, my friend's dog, had brought down a small kangaroo, so I had to smash its head against a rock to kill it, and we had taken it back for the old people to cook. Our reputation was reinforced the next day when the dogs dug up a small sand goanna, which we also took back to the pensioners.

On that last visit we talked about the time Japangarti shot the tyre of our car at Yaka Yaka and we were all terrified. The men, some of them anyway, were probably jealous of the women having a Toyota to take them on trips to country. We had come back from a place where the women had painted up for dancing – Women's business. Seven Sisters dreaming place, Nakarra Nakarra. They had sung the songs and danced and at night told stories long after I had stretched out

under the stars on my swag. I drifted to sleep on a tide of language and ripples of laughter and fragments of the Seven Sisters story floated into my dreams.⁹⁸

i am seduced by gentle curves of mesas swelling
 from purple gibber plains
 i have heard the rasping breath of lizards running
 over baked rocks
 i have slept under pigment
 black nights of stars tricking
 with impossible brightness
 falling from the sky like ripe fruit⁹⁹

But now Tjama says, "I bin finish for that place then. He gowan gowan. Mad bugger. He too jealous, that watermelon arse." Yaka Yaka is her country, her father's country. (Yaka Yaka means 'quiet place'). She talked about when next time I come, going there for a visit, back to the hills of Nkarra Nkarra and the 'two twins' at Yayarr, in my Toyota. "When I'm more better," she said.

Canberra 16 August 2004

I have a meeting with my supervisor for my paper. I tell him about Tjama. She is very sick, I say, probably dying. Later I find that she died on this day.

Tjama, tonight in the city, I listened to a man play piano – Rachmaninoff – and the whole time I thought of that country that you walked your whole life and the places I went with you and I looked at the backs of other people's heads in the audience and they were enjoying the music as I was but the images in my head were of the desert and the sky and the rocks and the Spinifex and the rockholes and flowers and sandhills and long tyre roads through red sand and grevillea

⁹⁸ Orion is Wati Nyiru, a lusty man who chases seven young women (the Pleiades) across the night sky. Before the seven sisters ascended to the sky they traversed the deserts from Western Australia to Pitjantjatjara country in South Australia Kungkarangkalpa. Available from <http://www.kitezh.com/sevensisters/7sisters.htm>, accessed 10/11/05.

⁹⁹ *ibid.* Pamela Lofts, *anxiety + desire*, 1999.

and bough-shades and windbreaks and driving across gibber and salt plain and hunting and digging digging and holding up big fat goannas "for photograph" and stories, stories ... stories all the time, stories of country and your life and laughter and song are in my head now...with Rachmaninoff

Canberra 27 September 2004

Tjama, today is your funeral.

I was told you said you didn't want to go to "fucking Derby hospital" and that you had gone to (yet another) meeting at Kurrurrungku but without your oxygen machine and that you didn't drink any water and came back very tired and that your daughter (not your blood daughter because you had been pregnant once in your drinking days in Halls Creek and someone had hit you in the belly with a stick and you lost the baby and didn't ever have any more) stole your pension money and you didn't get any food except the meals on wheels and you vomited that up anyway and you were cold to the touch and still refusing to go to the clinic but you went finally and the nurses couldn't find any blood pressure and that you were still cold even though you didn't feel it and that you kept trying to pull the catheter out and you still had that cheeky look and that they got the flying doctor and you even walked up the steps into the plane yourself – your bare feet leaving the Balgo earth on Friday and by Monday you had gone.

Balgo 11 November 2004

Tjama, I couldn't get to Balgo for your funeral. I got trapped in the grid of my white-world calendar and the things I thought I needed to do and Balgo was too far. So far from the concrete and circles of Canberra. If I had, my car would have broken down as it turned out. So, perhaps it was better, although doubly sad to come a month later for Patricia's funeral.

Wild and wonderful Patricia, who, when she phoned us in Alice from Balgo, always asked if we'd bring a bottle of rum. We never did. It was the rum that killed her now. Driving back into the community after a bit of a party on the

roadside the car slipped out of control in the soft red sand and, with most likely a dull thud on the swales, Patricia hit the ground. She died on impact. The others were OK. Her husband was driving.

But you know nothing of this.

And now here I am at your grave after Patricia's funeral.

We had driven up again past the mine and stopped to pick desert roses for her grave when the car hissed and gurgled and bubbled and we limped back to the mine. Suddenly we were in an altered landscape, great metal structures gouging (Patricia's) ground for gold, trucks, six wagons long labeled

BULKHAUL BULKHAUL BULKHAUL BULKHAUL BULKHAUL BULKHAUL¹⁰⁰

grinding past, man-made mountains of earth dug from holes one kilometre deep and dark as forever. The mining people thought we were the 'Toe sucking Cowboys,' a singing duo who were coming to entertain the miners that night. We unloaded our swags, food and some clothes and ditched the roses. They were teeming with ants and I could hear Patricia saying, "What for you want so many ants Napanangka". Got a lift to Balgo with Jim and Stacey from the station.

At sorry camp we pick our way between thirty or forty women – a morass of clay and ash covered bodies, blankets and handbags. Hugging each one and shaking hands. And wailing, everyone is wailing. Margaret, Patricia's mother, taller than all the others by a head, smaller now, sitting slumped. Red eyed and shorn of her hair. The depth of loss in her eyes is infinite.

Later at church. There is the priest in Birkenstocks and cream cassock, the hem piped with red sand. The coffin. Young boys with electric guitars and Nike hats

¹⁰⁰ Mining on Aboriginal land contributes more than a billion dollars a year to the Northern Territory economy and accounts for eighty per cent of the Territory's income derived from mining. Much of the mining activity occurs west of Alice Springs in the Tanami Desert where eight mines are in operation and thousands of square kilometers of land are under exploration. Central Land Council, website, <http://www.clc.org.au/OurLand/mining.asp>, cited 31/10/06.

strummed chords and sang a song about 'my real Aunty'; faxes were read out; relatives talk about how honest Patricia was, that she was a good Christian woman who had taken Jesus into her life. But!...she had strayed...the grog! An Assembly of God man warned that alcoholics don't go to heaven...and how kind and good Patricia was and never argued with anyone...

(and I smile, remembering driving once to the outstation with Patricia five hours through the night. Patricia, with a great bleeding gash in her head from a fight with a 'bloody half-caste' woman who had called her a black crow. Star pickets and a good solid lump of wood can do a bit of damage. I told her I'd never call her a black crow!

She told stories for the whole five hours, like the one about the man who got drunk in Yaka Yaka and he had his bottom lip cut off. "People tried to find it but they couldn't. That dog, he was called Whitey, he ate it, that lip," and she cracked up with laughter. Or the time she went to Perth with Tjama mob, and they were all scared of the escalators and just stood there in David Jones holding up a line of prim women wanting to get on...

She didn't wash the blood off for two days and it lurked like evidence caking dark and black over her Bob Marley t-shirt...¹⁰¹

I snap back to the church as the priest intones, "the blood of Christ"... the body of Patricia. I watch cattle ticks crawl across the floor and kids bounce a pink balloon along the crowded pews, dogs scratch and run in and out of the church. The soporific fans are futile in this heat and the priest looks nervously at the coffin and says something about speeding things up.

¹⁰¹ Jackson, *At Home in the World*, p.162.

"For Warlpiri, scars borne on the body from initiation, accidents, fights, bereavement, child-bearing and the vicissitudes of life are part and parcel of who one is"

Finally a cavalcade, a kilometre long of troopies of whitefellas and windowless sedans of relatives, crawls to the cemetery on the edge of the mesa.¹⁰² We stand for a long time in the sun and I crimp my toes back into the scant cover of my sandals so they wont go pink with burning. Patricia's relatives lie on top of the coffin in turn except her only daughter who stands stone still, clutching a large wreath. The coffin is lowered into the ground; we file past and flick water from a coolamon onto it with eucalypt leaves. Later, I notice Marti's daughter's bare feet on the leaves she recycled as a mat. The ground is a hot plate. The air like from a furnace. The Priest refills the coolamon from a red plastic container with a cross and hastily lettered words (in permanent marker) confirming the contents as 'HOLY WATER'. After the country and western singers twang a duet and we have all tossed some red sand from a plastic garbage bin on the coffin, the Assembly of God man, in black pants and tie, white shirt and wrap-around Ray Bans, fires up the Bobcat and buckets dirt into the grave. The wind suddenly picks up and we are all momentarily erased in clouds of red dust.

Tragically, Patricia has become another statistic. The events pile up on top of one another and in this one day ... two hundred years of history of colonisation is played out in a series of almost surreal vignettes, yet this is real. Driving through the desert, the mine, the cattle station, the Catholic church, the Sorry Business, the funeral, the cars, the plastic flowers, the ceremony, the wailing.... I remember what one old man said to me once. "Grog, he can kill you one day."

Later everyone goes back to sorry camp. Patricia's husband is there on the veranda. People file up to him and shake his hand. Finally he hauls himself up on his walking stick and slowly drags himself to where the women are sitting. Piles of blankets have accumulated, gifts for the mother and relatives of Patricia. The fluffy acrylic faces of tigers and dolphins peer out of the sweaty plastic bag.

¹⁰² The cemetery in Balgo is on top of the escarpment, near where Rosemary Laing photographed her *One dozen unnatural disasters in the Australian landscape*.

The men have formed a circle and are pressing a small supermarket bag between their chests. I am told it contains hair. It is passed around, to find out why Patricia died. Suddenly I feel out of place, and aware that this has nothing to do with my sadness or me so I go back to the car for a drink of water and think about Tjama.

Tjama was one of the last of a generation of people to be born out bush. She was also one of the last speakers of the Ngardi language. Her life experience was one that spanned the full spectrum of change, cultural, social, political, technological. From being born in the bush, to dying in a hospital in Derby. No doubt her early traditional nomadic life gave her the resources she needed to live with humour and dignity to a reasonable age. Patricia, too, was an exceptionally strong and knowledgeable woman, yet she was caught in the crossfire as she tried to dodge and weave her way through the complex terrain of two cultures with their respective demands and contradictions.

Tjama, I had put one bunch of fake flowers from Mad Harry's on Patricia's grave and then I came to yours. In Derby hospital (so far from your country and your language) you sang before you passed away, lying under the white sheets in the green glow of the fluorescent lights. Was it a song for your country? To take you back? To Nakarra Nakarra. To Yayarr. Toyota wiya! – no Toyota – song this time?¹⁰³

Your grave is next to your sister's. Two mounds of red earth covered in plastic flowers. Marti's plaited red, yellow and black headband is still there but the flowers have faded after two years of desert sun, as has the inscription. Your inscription is in permanent marker on a rough cross at the end.

¹⁰³ “The safe return of their spirit is imperative to the well being of the place so that it may continue as an enduring life source and again be the site from where life will continue to emerge.” Stephen Muecke, *Ancient and Modern*, p.16.

*“Tjama Freda Napanangka.
Wife of....Jupurrula,
sister ofNapanangka...”
it becomes blurred.*

I poke my flowers in the hot red earth next to the cross you wore around your neck and say “No more Jupurrulas, Tjama. See you. Nyamu.”¹⁰⁴



Fig.9

¹⁰⁴ *Nyamu*, meaning ‘finish’ in Kukatja, was how Tjama and the women would end each recording of their stories for *Yarrtji*. It was also said when we got up to go somewhere or leave somewhere.

Epilogue

If every event which occurred could be given a name, there would be no need for stories. As things are here, life outstrips our vocabulary.¹

My friendship with Aboriginal people has given me a story. It is a shared story. Because it is a shared story, it is an insight into the place where we live – Aboriginal Australia. By telling and listening to the stories of this place in whatever way, there is the possibility for a renegotiation of ‘country’ and place to chip away at persistent colonial attitudes and the lingering notions (despite increased interest in Aboriginal history, culture, art and spirituality) of *terra nullius*. A renegotiation that truly recognises the value of Aboriginal culture.

This sub thesis set out to explore the power/importance of storytelling and its role in relation to representation of Australian place. I have attempted to demonstrate that by listening and paying attention to (all) stories of difference we participate in or enter into a contact zone. I have identified this as an ‘in-between’ space where the potential for transformation exists and where the paradigms of the dominant culture can be challenged and new forms of understanding are possible – leading to alternative ways of thinking creatively about Australian place and, hence, new ways of representing it in the arts.

By drawing on my personal experience of ‘being-with’ Aboriginal people and their perception of place, I have explored the nature of Australian place. I suggested a quite simple premise – that ‘movement’ made the land, and that movement, ‘a necessary nomadism’ of both a physical and conceptual kind, manifests events. Places ‘happen’ through events and thus places become a ‘gathering’ of events. As place is made, so are stories. And so, too, place is ‘storied’.

¹ *ibid.* Michael Jackson, *At Home in the World*, quoting John Berger, p.5.

I proposed, therefore, that movement and a ‘nomadic consciousness’ emerge as an appropriate way of being and thinking, and that stories are an (ethical) way of knowing and understanding Australian place – a way of perceiving that makes sense in relation to the culture, history, politics, environment and representation of this country.

Gurindji people demonstrated to me how to know the world by simply being still and paying attention. The art of knowing is not always the way of searching, but often the way of paying attention. In fact, this way of using your senses is not only when you are sitting, but also while making your body move. Paying attention to the world happens even more strongly while moving around the country.²

It has been said that “we are not Australian till we have faced the desert”.³ Others have said ‘we’ will never belong.⁴ Art critic John McDonald echoes Tacey, saying that we cannot be Australian till we have been in the desert.⁵ If this is true, then it is possible to face and even to ‘be’ in the desert through art and story and thereby begin a process of connectivity.

I have been lucky enough to ‘face the desert’ and although I do not belong I am connected through shared stories. While words can never do justice to experience, my narrative attempts to enact or perform ‘place’, and thereby acknowledges the importance of sharing stories as something that connects people to place. Narrative is fundamental to an embodied consciousness of place.

It may be that narrative is the method through which the reason of connectivity will find its most powerful voice. This method offers the profound possibility of telling stories that communicate, invoke, and invigorate connections.⁶

² Minoru Hokari. “Gurindji Perspectives on History: Body, Place, Memory, and Mobility”. Available from [website] <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/rsrch/conf2001/PAPERS/HOKARI.pdf>. Cited 6/2/05.

³ *ibid.* David Tacey, *the Edge of the Sacred*, p.14.

⁴ Manning Clark, in *Belonging – Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership*, Peter Read, p.13.

“I wonder whether I belong...I am ready, and so are others, to understand the Aboriginal view that no human being can ever know heart’s ease in a foreign land, because in a foreign land there live foreign ancestral spirits. The conqueror has become the eternal outsider, the eternal alien. We must either become assimilated or live the empty life of a people exiled from their spiritual strength.”

⁵ John McDonald. *Seeing the Desert* – Forum, The National Museum of Australia, 13 March, 2005.

⁶ Issue 31-32, April 2004. *The Ecological Humanities in Action: An Invitation* by Deborah Bird Rose and Libby Robin. Available from, <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-April-2004/rose.html> cited 29/1/07.

David Mowaljarlai expressed the notion of a shared space of belonging and offered it as a gift to non-Indigenous people.

What we see is, all the white people that were born in this country and they are missing the things that came from us mob, and we want to try and share it. And the people were born in this country, in the law country, from all these sacred places in the earth. And they were born on top of that. And that, we call 'wungud' very precious. That is where their spirit come from. That's why we can't divide one another, we want to share our gift, that everybody is belonging, we want to share together in the future for other generations to live on. You know? That's why it's very important.⁷

The 'gift' that Aboriginal people have given, and continue to share finds a voice in the embodied stories they tell of this country. Stories that are realised through the visual and performing arts, particularly my example of Western Desert painting, prescribe a contact zone – an invitation to perceive and think differently. It is also a call to respond. I suggest such paintings hold an obligation of reciprocity, as the country 'holds' the stories.

I have examined the importance of story through a discussion of Central and Western Desert art, the film *Ten Canoes* and my own experience. My aim was to demonstrate how storytelling operates as a contact zone, which can lead to an embodied perception of place. This is a gift.

To honour such a gift requires a commitment. To live ethically in this country, perhaps to have a real sense of belonging, there must be a true recognition of Aboriginal history and Aboriginal peoples lives, not only the big human and land rights achievements like Mabo or glamorous sports success stories like Cathy Freeman, but the smaller ones like Tjama's and Patricia's. This is what happens (is happening) 'out there' in contemporary Australia. For most people this knowledge is not likely to come from first-hand experience so it has to come in other ways – stories.

⁷ Law Report, ABC [website] available from <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/lawrpt/lstories/lr311001.htm>, Tuesday, 31st October 1995, cited 13/11/05

Storytelling and listening in specific local places provide us with the opportunity to explore multiple stories about place and the power relationships between them. This contact zone where multiple stories collide has been noted as a space of transformative potential...[it] is in this in-between space of tension and struggle that new possibilities lie.⁸

In this space, unlearning the values of the dominant culture and becoming attentive to others is a process of dissolving priorities and hierarchies. This process offers the potential for new images and more potent forms of cultural representation.

Many voices have expressed the need for new views and new discourse in relation to a “shared alternative Australia” and see this happening through artistic practice. Historian Tom Griffiths talks of a shared space as one of “positive creative tension” that is a “great opportunity” for both black and white Australians. He urges that this opportunity be seized so that the new stories can redefine the discourse of this place we share “otherwise our stories will be ones of anguish and despair”.⁹ Art historian and theorist Nick Waterlow says “art has always proved ways of understanding others that other means cannot attain” and he reiterates the importance of Indigenous art as “underpinning the visual culture of Australia”.¹⁰

Curator and writer Dr. Vivien Johnson also maintains, “Indigenous art is the mainstream of Australian contemporary art. Not only in the eyes of overseas audiences for whom Indigenous artists have the only distinctively Australian voices, but for the Australian art world itself. What is at stake for non-Indigenous artists nowadays is how to get some kind of *foothold* in this new reality”.¹¹

⁸ Margaret Somerville, (Re)membering in the Contact Zone: Telling, and Listening to, a Massacre Story, *Altitude* vol. 6, 2005. <http://www.api-network.com/altitude/pdf/6/5.pdf>.

⁹ Tom Griffiths, “A haunted Country”, *Land and Identity* (Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1998), p.11. Also Australian Humanities Review [website] available from <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/emuse/wik/griffiths2.html>, cited 11/2/07.

¹⁰ Nick Waterlow, *Terra Alterius: Land of Another*, Foreword p.2.

¹¹ Vivien Johnson, “Thinking beyond Abstraction”, *Talking about Abstraction* (Ivan Dougherty, June 2005), [Website] available from <http://www.cofa.unsw.edu.au/galleries/idg/exhibitions/talkingaboutabstraction/index.html> Also Sydney Morning Herald, Spectrum, June 19/20, 2004.

If what is at stake is ‘a distinctly Australian voice’ I suggest non-Indigenous artists who are trying to ‘come to terms’ with or work with, the stuff of the land may gain a ‘foothold in this new reality’ by wandering into the contact zone and listening to stories of difference. Ways of thinking other than “possession and identity may have to be found...an ethical solution. A poetic effect with an ethical direction”.¹²

My search for an ethical direction is the reason I have insisted on the lengthy description of the rituals and deaths of my friends and teachers. It is a way of expressing a personal loss, as well as a national one. More importantly, as Muecke says, “cultures attribute power to the dead... The myths of the dead tells us where we come from, who we are and how we behave towards each other”.¹³

The end of a life is the beginning of a memory, which now becomes part of who we are. In respect of Tjama and Patricia, each one was a life lived and now past and to remember them is to know that they are (part of) the land on which we walk.¹⁴ From time to time I travelled with them and so there is an obligation to do what I do arising out of a commitment and deep respect for them. This is my small footprint of a friend. “A friend must leave a footprint”¹⁵ and because I had followed in my friends’ footprints that *changed* how I dwell in (this) ‘country’.

In the Aboriginal science of tracking, following someone’s footsteps means to “know” the person.¹⁶

¹² *ibid.* Stephen Muecke, *Ancient and Modern*, p. 85.

¹³ Stephen Muecke, *No Road – Bitumen all the Way* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1997), p. 227.

¹⁴ It is a telling indictment that there are no memorials to Aboriginal people on Anzac Parade in the national capital. While in Canberra I lived parallel to this street, and the absence, the ‘erasure’, is reinforced daily as I drive past the monuments to ‘our’ heroic dead or those who served ‘their’ country. There is a small plaque at the rear of the War Memorial on a rock in the bush, a private initiative that honours the Aboriginal servicemen. Yet despite the obliteration of hundreds of Aboriginal languages, and deaths of thousands of people caused by policies and attitudes of the invaders, this has not been deemed a ‘war’ by the dominant culture and therefore no memorials have been built to those who ‘fought’ (and died) for their land.

¹⁵ *ibid.* Muecke, “Textual Spaces”, *Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* (NSW University Press, 1992), quoting David Uniapon.

¹⁶ *ibid.* Jackson, *At Home in the World*, p 164.

On the wall of the room in which I write are Tjama's footprints. It is a linocut print based on a painting she did. In it her two feet stand firmly on a swirling ground of ochre lines. Her feet face the twin lakes of Yayarr, the place she wanted to go in my Toyota when she "got more better". She has depicted part of the *Wati Kutjarra Tjukurrpa* – Two Men Dreaming. Tjama has placed herself there in the painting; she is the story – the Dreaming – the country.¹⁷



Fig.9

It is not a space to be confronted. Rather it is a space to be remembered, a space in which to orient oneself because you have always been part of it and visa versa¹⁸

¹⁷ "The central shapes are the two brothers sleeping by their fire in country called Yayarr. The *Wati Kutjarra Tjukurrpa* is an immensely significant story for a number of Indigenous Australian groups." For more information on this work see Christine Nicholls, *Yilpinji: Love Art and Ceremony* (Craftsman House, 2006), p.64–85.

¹⁸ Ross Gibson, *South of the West, Post colonialism and the Narrative construction of Australia* (Indiana University Press, 1992), p.8.

By writing my narrative I attempt a demonstration of the role of storytelling. Here on the page is a glimpse into the complexities of contemporary Aboriginal life. Lives like those of Tjama's and Patricia's make the history of this place and, as such, have a place in the national narrative and discourse.

Their stories, their gifts, are in some respects as ordinary (and extraordinary) as the stories intertwined in *Ten Canoes*. Their stories, too, are interwoven with the Dreaming, and there they become poetry. Ian MacLean describes the Dreaming as follows:

If I had two words to describe Dreaming they would be 'poetic logos'. Logos because Dreaming is an ordering principle; 'poetic' because this principle is not an abstract equation but a living force or energy that, like all life, is rhythmic and cyclic and must be nurtured, cultivated and attended to. This is why art and ceremony have such agency...are such valuable gifts.¹⁹

Through Aboriginal art we can see how another worldview produces works about place that are extraordinarily powerful. I have attempted to show how this comes from an embodied perception and connectivity to place, gifted to us through stories that invite us to experience what the artist feels and, more, to hear what the artist is saying.

But, then, what is philosophy today – philosophical activity, I mean – if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist if not in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?²⁰

And having listened what then do we do with the stories? The answer is in thinking, and thinking differently – seeing the same thing 'differently', in words and images – through art that reflects a more ethical, full and inclusive concept of place – a transformation.

In the introduction to *Yarrtji*, Tjama, the artist, the visionary and philosopher, expresses the potential for change, through the sharing of the six women's stories. She used the

¹⁹ Ian MacLean, "Dreaming Painting – Shane Picket's Gift", *LINO*, Issue No. 15, 2006, p.90.

²⁰ *ibid.* Jackson, *At Home in the World*, quoting Michel Foucault. Epigraph.

word ‘idea’ in the sense that it might ‘dawn’ on people – this “other way” of being, of knowing place. I suspect she also saw this as an important political strategy in a country that was unavoidably shared with people whose culture is dominant.

I leave the last word to Tjama, with deepest thanks for the privilege of her teaching, who with a note of optimism and generosity includes *kartiya* (whitefellas), if they pay attention, as being capable of such a transformation.

Kartiya and Aboriginal woman and Aboriginal man they *know*, if they readem’ all the way in book, might be they *think!* If they look, they mightbe they get something....idea ...thinking...you know. Might be they think, ‘it’s good country and good story’. They can worrying²¹ other way – for country.²²



Fig.10

²¹ ‘Worrying’ in Aboriginal English, in this context, means looking after, caring for, keeping clean and strong, observing rituals, visiting, hunting – preserving culture.

²² *ibid.* Tjama Napanangka, *Yarrtji – Six Women’s stories from the Great Sandy Desert*. p.8.

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