



SHIMMERING
SCREENS 
MAKING MEDIA
IN AN ABORIGINAL
COMMUNITY

Jennifer Deger



Shimmering Screens

VISIBLE EVIDENCE

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Making Media in
an Aboriginal Community

Jennifer Deger



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*In memory of Bangana Winungmurra
and my mother, Dorothy Deger*

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Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Prologue	xiii
Introduction	xix
1 ▶ Culture and Complicities: An Indigenous Media Research Project	i
2 ▶ (In)Visible Difference: Framing Questions of Culture, Media, and Technology	34
3 ▶ Tuning In: Mediated Imaginaries and Problems of Deafness and Forgetting	60
4 ▶ On the “Mimetic Faculty” and the Refractions of Culture	83
5 ▶ Taking Pictures: Media Technologies and a Yolngu Politics of Presencing	92
6 ▶ Flowers and Photographs: Death, Memory, and Techno Mimetics	117
7 ▶ Technology, <i>Techné</i> , and Yolngu Videomaking	138
8 ▶ Shimmering Verisimilitudes: Making Video, Managing Images, Manifesting Truths	156
9 ▶ Worlding a Yolngu World: Radiant Visions and the Flash of Recognition	185
Conclusion	215
Notes	227

Glossary	247
Bibliography	249
Index	259

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Prologue

Ethnography-writing, becoming-anthropologist, I hang my favorite photograph from fieldwork above my desk.

This is no shot of clay-smeared ceremonial dancers, although I have plenty of them. There is other cultural work going on here. The photo is one of a series of portraits taken as a memento of a trip to Darwin in 1997. In a professional photographic studio in front of an ugly, dappled, colored backdrop, my main informant Bangana and his family posed for the camera. This photo is the final one of several configurations of family reproduced that day, including the couple shot, the nuclear family of mum, dad, and the four kids, and, finally, this one that includes me, the “adopted” anthropologist. In the back row from left to right sit Jacko, Bangana, and Natasha, in the front are Yawulwuy, Susan (Bangana’s wife), Lai’pu, and me—*yapa* (sister) to Bangana, *mukul* (auntie) to his children, *dhuway* (sister-in-law) to Susan. Our smiles are caught as we followed the photographer’s instructions: saying “monkey” together on the count of three.

The studio was the last stop on our week-long visit to Darwin; the final splurge before we began the twelve-hour road trip back down the Stuart and Arnhem highways to the bush community of Gapuwiyak. We’d come to town for a Fulbright symposium on indigenous communications, taking advantage of the transport and accommodation to combine business with pleasure. It was Bangana’s and Susan’s chance to take the family to the city for the first time. So, in between conference sessions, we went to the movies, to McDonalds and Pizza Hut, and wandered the air-conditioned shopping malls. Back at the symposium, the kids contributed with a performance of Culture for Bangana’s paper on Yolngu radio.¹ Painted in clan designs with acrylic paints, they danced a traditional clan *bungul* while their uncle played *yidaki* (didgeridoo) and Bangana sang to the beat of his *bilma* (clapsticks). The performance had been included for

a non-Yolngu audience as an explicit demonstration of the continuities of past. And although some misunderstood the point of the paper, that is, the links between the activities of Ancestral Beings and contemporary Yolngu radio production, there was no mistaking the Culture on display. The flurry of snapping cameras confirmed the success of the spectacle—just as we had expected.

Our trip to the photographic studio entailed another dressing up, another kind of posing, but this time for ourselves. Each of us felt flash in our new, city clothes. Bangana, usually a singlet and shorts kind of bloke, put on the tie I'd found among the endless racks of polyester at K-Mart, chosen in a tentative play with iconicity—the pattern and color could be seen to represent Bangana's clan and moiety. He wore it with a wry enthusiasm, its meanings embellished by the sword pendant that hung around his neck, newly purchased in the Darwin markets to explicitly represent other dimensions of his clan's mythic past.² In fact, there are multiple enthusiasms at play in this photo. That's what enlivens it, enabling a transgression of a photographic genre that this anthropologist has eschewed all her life from a snobbish Bourdieuian-type need to claim herself as distinct from the suburban.

I love this shot for many reasons. It exudes an unruly happiness and self-confidence. Unlike the painfully frozen expressions often evident in the faces and postures of uneasy Balanda (non-Aboriginal) families taken in such moments, this family was glad to have these photos taken.³ And



Figure 1. Family portrait, Darwin, July 1997.

it shows. In my cold office, so distant in time and space, the image evokes a swag of affectionate memories and identifications. Particularly, I am touched by the way Yawul's gaze breaks away from the camera, providing an acknowledgment of my place in the frame and family; it represents an unlikely moment in my own project of "going native." For, make no mistake about it, this image does not document the triumph of assimilationist policies. Bangana and his family are not cowed into the uneasy acquiescence depicted in early shots of mission blacks. Neither have they abandoned their sense of a distinctive cultural identity in order to assume a quintessentially modern pose. On the contrary, the picture makes a powerful statement about contemporary Yolngu being at ease with foreign frames, now taken up as their own. It resonates in a mimetic play of continuity and transformation between the more traditional shots of Yolngu and the family portraits favored by suburban Australia. Playfully defiant of any easy definition, the shot is simultaneously subversive and assertive. Behind the grins one might discern a postcolonial wink, a sly pleasure taken in the appropriation of genres of representation. The photograph makes a clear statement that Yolngu can play with multiple versions of who they are, in a decisive breaking of the bounds of tradition and Culture.

But what continues to draw my eye, what teases my imagination, are the things I cannot see. For there is more going on than a representational frame can expose, or that my affectionate Balanda eye can perceive. To truly grasp the layers of meaningfulness embedded within the shot, it is necessary to examine the particularities of Yolngu perceptions and histories. And so I turn to Bangana's uncle, Old Bill Manydjarri, whose tale (and its translation) I retrieve from my collection of conversations recorded on cassette.

In more familiar accounts of Aboriginal contact and colonization, the frontier is breached by the violence of pastoralists' guns and missionaries' zeal. Yet as Old Bill's story suggests, photography and film have played a significant role in the breaching of cultural boundaries. His words remind me that Bangana's appropriation of foreign frames takes place after only two generations of intensive colonial encounters. Bill's memories go back to a time when Yolngu still lived the nomadic lives of hunter-gatherers, visited occasionally by missionaries and by anthropologists with cameras and movie projectors:

I first saw a movie at a place called Balngu along close to Trial Bay way, one of the films that Dr. Thomson did of the old people and he showed that at that place Balngu.⁴ That's when I saw the first picture [. . .] It was just mainly old people starring in that picture. Naked, old people *mala* [group].⁵ *Bayangu girri* [no clothes on]. They also had pictures about other countries,

showing *wanga mala* [different places]. *Moticar* [cars] and different new things. And at that time they'd also been told by Balanda that if you keep on making films like that for Balanda people, Balanda people might give you something in exchange like a *bala* [house] or a *moticar* or *rrupiya* [money]. Because of the films they were taking. At that time they had examples of *wanga mala* from other countries.

The Balanda told the Yolngu that in the future you will see more of these things coming to you more. Guns, *rrupiya*, everything that Yolngu people never thought of. They were told that these things soon will come this way to you more. You will see more.

At that time the old people weren't really interested in those things. They were too busy with their *galpu* [woomera], *gara* [spears], *bulpul* [baskets], *bathi* [dilly bags]. Making dilly bags. You know they were too busy in their own little world, Yolngu world.

At that time a lot of people were demonstrating to a lot of Balanda people like using paperbarks or mattresses [tree fibers] for cover-ups . . . covering themselves for the Balanda people. (JD: For the movie?) Yo [yes]. But before that time it was all naked, *bayangu girri* . . . [laughter]. So some of the things like *moticar*, the houses, and all that—after watching these first movies it was slowly coming real. Slowly and now today it's all here. And I can see it. So today I have seen that change and it became real now. All the stuff I've seen like in exchange for the films that they were taking before, and the things that the Balanda were talking about. It's all become true now. Today when I look around, I think about that day. All those films that they made of *gara* and *galpu*, the old people and all that [and how] like in exchange all those things have come now. (Bill Manyjarri, Marrangu Clan, aged approximately fifty-seven in 1997. Translated by Bangana Wunungmurra)

In Old Bill's story, two worlds meet via camera and screen. Through his eyes, an exchange of images somehow precipitates the extraordinary material and social transformations experienced by Yolngu over the past decades. The account illustrates the complicated entanglements of images and imaginations. It indicates how Balanda's desire for images of Aborigines, coupled with an indigenous desire to "demonstrate" themselves to the modern world (albeit covered up, both literally and figuratively) has produced a particular kind of self-consciousness in Yolngu. Bill laughs knowingly at both the nakedness and the act of covering up. It would seem from this account that the world of the old people cannot remain real under the impact of a Western gaze and the new cultural horizons offered in the movies. Yet Bill's compelling tale of mimetic technologies and cultural transformations offers no straightforward account of media imperialism and cultural loss, at least not as it is usually told in the West. The story raises questions about what it means to mimetically produce images and what it means to see them from a Yolngu point of view. His story indicates a particular take on the efficacy of photographic technologies and their images, suggesting an almost magical

link between pictures and seeing in a context of colonialism and cultural transformation. It seems that from Bill's point of view early ethnographic film projects paradoxically began the process of changing exactly what they set out to preserve. His words seem to imply that such images have been productive of more than self-consciousness: there appears to be no uncertain connection between *seeing* and the "real." As Bill describes witnessing images of cars and houses becoming real as the spears disappear, I glimpse a worldview in which seeing is not only believing but, in a profound and ontological sense, *seeing entails a becoming*. Or, to put it another way, making something visible has effects.

In the intervening sixty-two years since these encounters between Yolngu and camera technologies, in the subsequent transformation of Yolngu from "old people" to the "new generation" (as most Yolngu refer to themselves now), lies a history of cross-cultural and intergenerational engagements and exchanges mediated by media technologies. Bangana and his family, with their new clothes and wide grins, make a startling contrast to the tentative-looking, naked, old people in Thomson's shot. Stripped of body paint and props such as didgeridoo, spear, or dilly bag, it is difficult to see the "culture" in the Wunungmurra family portrait. The camera cannot reveal the continuities, transformations, and reconfigurations, which enable



Figure 2. The anthropologist Donald Thomson posing with his Yolngu friend Wongo and family in front of his photographic darkroom at Trial Bay, 1995. Photograph by D. F. Thomson. Courtesy of Mrs. D. M. Thomson and Museum Victoria.

the cultural self-confidence that underlies this photo and the conditions of its taking. It is impossible to read from the glossy surface the means by which Bangana and other Yolngu make claims to multiple and even non-traditional identities, all the while asserting an authenticity posited on the Ancestral. Apart from gestures made by Bangana's miniature sword and geometric tie, the photograph offers no clue as to how to perceive the links to kin and country, Ancestral Beings and sacred objects, which the studio portrait might invite a Yolngu viewer to make.

How might one locate and perceive culture in such a frame? What constitutes the Yolngu eye that can find pleasure and meaning in recognizing the links between the "traditional" and the "modern" in such photographs? What might these pleasures, identifications, and understandings be? And how might others learn to appreciate such meanings?