

Aboriginal Story Systems: Remapping the West, Knowing Country, Sharing Space

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PROLOGUE

Aboriginal peoples in Australia are the keepers of the oldest stories and the oldest story systems in the world. Aboriginal story systems and songlines imbue Country¹ with meaning, and to map

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¹ In Aboriginal knowledge systems, everything is alive and everything is in relationships; past, present, and future are one, where both the physical and spiritual worlds of Country interact. The Dreaming is an ongoing celebration and reverence for past events: the creation of the land, the creation of law, and the creation of people. Stories are given to Aboriginal peoples from the Dreaming, everything comes into being through story, and the Dreaming is the ancestors. All things exist eternally in the Dreaming; the Dreaming is alive. The individual is born to Country, not just in



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these is to challenge Western cartographic representations of land in Western Australia. My mother and grandmother always taught me about the importance of stories in understanding and knowing and that it was through stories that we learn the truth about the world. They also taught me that it is not people who are the best storytellers: the birds, the animals, the trees, the rocks, and the land, our mother, have the most important stories to tell us. These stories exist in place, and by “mapping” these story systems we fundamentally alter the way in which we can “know” Country. **JM**

As a design professional I long ago learned the need to understand the deeper indigenous cultural meanings and story narratives within Australian landscapes and how such shared knowledge may inform a future in intercultural land design. This engaged and shared knowledge was conspicuously absent in my formative years of higher education and early practice between the seventies and early eighties, when the Australian design academies and their allied professions had barely entered into a genuinely collaborative, intercultural conversation. The corresponding (dis)figured uncontested ground was typically characterized with an overt sense of cultural avoidance, racism, and middle-class white amnesia-of-place, at best. For many, this disciplinary (and great community) dilemma remains today. My work with Jill Milroy represents an ongoing academic collaboration and personal friendship over the past sixteen years. We have taught together and worked with community together for a long time. Our interwoven ways of being are ethical and conciliatory landscapes in themselves, embedded in shared ceremony and language where the contemporary and deficient ideas of nonindigenous landscapes are challenged and interpreted by a far richer multidimensional concept of indigenous Country. **GR**

EVERYTHING BEGINS WITH STORY

Aboriginal peoples live, learn, and teach by stories, so that is how we will begin, with a story to give us direction. This is a story written by Palyku elder Gladys Milroy and given to guide our thinking.

Crow and Magpie Story

Crow and Magpie were best friends, but in his heart Crow was jealous of Magpie’s beautiful singing voice. Crow would sit in the tree by the waterhole, look at his reflection in the water, and try to sing like Magpie. But no matter what Crow did, his voice was the same harsh, grating cry. Crow started to become obsessed with wanting Magpie’s voice, and he became so upset that the Serpent who guarded the waterhole flew out of the water. “Stop that noise,” he said. “It’s driving me crazy.” “But I want to sound like Magpie,” said Crow. “Here, swallow this white grain of sand and your voice will be just like Magpie’s, but you must promise to go away,” said the Serpent

Country, but from Country, and his or her identity is inextricably and eternally linked to the Dreaming. Nonindigenous scholar Debra Bird Rose suggests, “In Aboriginal English, the word ‘Country’ is both a common noun and a proper noun. People talk about Country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to Country, sing to Country, visit Country, worry about Country, grieve for Country and long for Country. People say that Country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, and feels sorry or happy. Country is a living entity with a yesterday, a today and tomorrow, with consciousness, action, and a will toward life. Because of this richness of meaning, Country is home and peace: nourishment for body, mind and spirit; and heart’s ease.” Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), 7.

crossly. Crow swallowed the grain of sand, and next morning at dawn when he started to sing, he sounded just like Magpie.

Magpie felt so happy for Crow, but when he tried to sing with Crow, nothing came out, not even a sound. Crow felt terrible because Magpie was his best friend. What Crow didn't realize was that he had stolen Magpie's voice, which had been given to Magpie by the Dreaming to wake up the sun. When Crow sang, no matter how beautiful his voice was the sun didn't wake up. The world was in darkness, with no sun to light the way and warm the earth. Crow was very sad but he didn't know how to give Magpie's voice back, and maybe in his heart he didn't want to give up his beautiful new voice just yet. It took Crow a long time to realize what he had done, but only as his friend Magpie began to sicken and grow weak did Crow begin to see that he had lost his best friend. And when Crow looked at Magpie, he began to cry because of what he had done. He cried for a long time, and eventually, as the black tears fell on Magpie, one black tear contained a tiny white grain of sand. Because Crow was truly sorry, Magpie got his voice back. Magpie still calls up the dawn each morning while we sleep, just like the old people keep up the Dreaming.²

In Western Australia the voice of Country, which calls up the Dreaming, has been stolen. Without the Dreaming to light our path we cannot see our way. In the story of Country are you the Magpie or the Crow?

THE STORY OF PLACE

Every water got a song. . . . People got to tell you story to make you happy and safe. Every place got a story.

(Joe Brown, Fitzroy Crossing, 2008)

The colonizer, when gazing on the "new" land, sees the place and the story he wants to make, the colonial fiction he will create: a story about property and value, not land and spirit, about the "nation" to come, not the "Country" that is. The colonial story is usually man made, though women will be complicit, and then active, in the story. The "new" story will be told in a foreign language.

The foundational myth of Western Australia was created by "new" stories in a "new" land. It mirrored the other foundational myths begun by James Cook in 1770 when he took possession of the entire east coast of Australia for the British Crown under the patently false doctrine of *terra nullius* and was embodied and given physicality by Arthur Phillip in 1788 with the "settlement" of Sydney Cove. More than forty years later, in 1829, James Stirling's "Swan River" settlement dispossessed Aboriginal peoples physically and legally, beginning with the Noongar peoples of "Perth" and the surrounding southwest, then spreading to the north and east, a moving violent frontier, with recorded massacres of Aboriginal peoples in the remote north of Western Australia well into the late 1920s.³ Unlike its eastern-states counterparts, Western Australia was not a convict colony but was founded by free settlers induced by free land as grants from the Crown in the first two years of the settlement.⁴

² Gladys Milroy, "Crow and Magpie Story" (unpublished manuscript, 2006).

³ The most documented of these was the 1926 Forrest River massacre in the Kimberley, which was investigated by the Royal Commission.

⁴ Convicts were sent to Swan River for a short period from 1850 but were confined to south of the Murchison districts and were not the reason for the establishment of the colony.

Due to the demand for land and the imminent arrival of settlers, Noongar land, the site of Perth, the capital of Western Australia, had the first grid laid over it in 1829, “simply and quickly . . . the grid pattern running east–west and taking little advantage of the realities of the natural resources—the River and the lakes and wetlands to the north and west of the town.”⁵ The river referred to is officially named the Swan River, but Noongar people refer to it as the Derbarl Yerrigan. It is the track of the Waugal, or Rainbow Serpent: “Noongar people recognise the ‘*Waugal*,’ or ‘Rainbow Serpent,’ as the creator of life. . . . Noongar spirituality is the connection to nature and Country. A river is a spirit home and we go there to visit our ancestors. We throw sand to let them smell us. When someone dies, we go there and sing them home.”⁶

For the next one hundred years, explorers and surveyors were the vanguard of colonization, mapping out the new territory suitable for land-hungry settlers, pastoralists, miners, and speculators. The key was to find water supplies, and the mapping of the Canning Stock Route, which we will consider later, is a prime example of this. As the explorers and colonists moved outward, the English language moved with them, and as Country was “discovered,” it was “named” accordingly. The renaming of Country disguised its nature, obscured its meaning, and stole its voice. New maps showed nothing of the meaning of Country or the ancient stories embedded in it. Aboriginal peoples and Country were enclosed within the fictional boundaries and borders of Western cartography: a fictional place with lots of names copied from other places and people, neither imaginative nor original and mostly in English.⁷

Aboriginal peoples in Western Australia continue to live in this colonized space superimposed on their Country. In the face of this, Aboriginal peoples have struggled to maintain the stories, song cycles, and knowledge systems that sustain Country, which sustains us all, as the Goolarabooloo peoples of the Kimberley assert: “The Goolarabooloo people are still actively engaged in looking after Country, despite living within a western world that would have them sell it, for the greater economic resources of the nation. They believe that connection with Country and culture is the base of one’s true sense of identity, spiritual and physical health, and self-esteem.”⁸

PLACE IS IDENTITY IN PLACE

For Aboriginal peoples in Western Australia place and identity have always been inextricably linked, and belonging to Country is the basis of happiness and well-being. The relationship between Aboriginal people and Country is an intensely intimate and loving one. As Aboriginal people always say, “The Land is our Mother.” Aboriginal cultural identity is land based; it is a relationship with a particular Country as part of a community that has custodianship and responsibility for that Country. Country is more than a source of strength and renewal at a physical,

⁵ “Swan River Stories,” undated, State Library of Western Australia, www.slwa.wa.gov.au/swan_river/living_with_the_land/settling_perth (accessed January 9, 2012).

⁶ See “Kaartdijin Noongar—Sharing Noongar Culture,” undated, South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, www.noongarculture.org.au/Country-and-maps.aspx (accessed January 9, 2012).

⁷ The exception is the southwest of the state, where a number of Noongar place-names were retained. Associate Professor Len Collard, Australian Research Council fellow at Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute, is a leading Nyungar scholar who is currently documenting Nyungar place-names and meanings in the southwest.

⁸ “Goolarabooloo Lurujarri Dreaming Trail,” undated, www.goolarabooloo.org.au/index.html (accessed January 8, 2012).

emotional, and spiritual level; loss of Country, not knowing one's Country, not being recognized and respected in one's Country—all are sources of grief and loss.

Aboriginal children are born into a complex web of connections that begins in, and is communicated through, the telling of story. For Aboriginal children, to be born into place is to be born into the stories of that place, to be nurtured and sustained by them and as adults to take responsibility for keeping place and story connected. It is a primary familial relationship. While the language and stories may be different for each Aboriginal group, the strength and primacy of a child's connection to Country are not. As Jack Dale, a Ngarinyin elder, explains for his Country, "Everything we have, special places, the Wandjina made—all the Wungud places. All our children are born from Wungud. When people ask us what Wungud names are your children, then they know where they come from. We dream those kids from one generation to the next."⁹

SONGLINES AND DREAMINGS

The many Aboriginal peoples, or "nations," of Western Australia are part of complex story systems that are deeply embedded in land, water, and sky. The great songlines, the paths traveled by the Dreaming Ancestors who brought the world into being, crisscross the continent, creating the spiritual bloodlines that link all Aboriginal nations and peoples together.

The story for Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi Country talks about their dreaming as "when the world was soft":

In our Law it is said that in the beginning the sky was very low. When the creation spirits got up from the ground, they lifted the sky and the world out of the sea. The creation spirits are called Marrga. They still live in the rocky mountains and gullies. In the early morning the mist over the water is smoke from their breakfast fires.

It was the Marrga and the Minkala/Mangunbya (Skygod) that named and shaped the Country, then all the birds and animals, and finally the Ngaardangali (Aboriginal people) came from the Marrga themselves. In other places they call this the "dreaming," but here we call it Ngurra Nyujunggamu—"when the world was soft."¹⁰

Aboriginal knowledge and stories live in Country and they must be maintained in place to retain power, meaning, and spirit. It is not simply enough to record stories to keep: stories, Dreaming tracks, and songlines need to be walked. As the Goolarabooloo people of the Kimberley explain:

The Song Cycle is an oral heritage map. Its songs contain codes of behaviour fundamental to sustaining the balance and well-being of the land and its people and are still sung today.

A Song Cycle has a birthplace and an end place, it has physical (landmass) length and width but it is not just a track. It is made up with "sites"—places, grounds, increase sites, ceremonial grounds, seasonal food places, vegetation for ceremonial usage, trees, shrubs, plants, ochre, land and water within the Song Cycle land, providing all that is needed to sustain life both for humans and animals.¹¹

⁹ Jack Dale Mungenen and Neil McLeod, *Jack Dale Mungenen* (Garfield, Victoria: Melbourne Publishing, 2010), 21.

¹⁰ F. Rijavec, *Know the Song, Know the Country: The Ngaardangali Story of Culture and History in Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi Country*, 2nd ed. (Roebourne, WA: Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corp., 2004), 2.

¹¹ See "Song Cycle, Goolarabooloo Lurujarri Dreaming Trail," undated, www.goolarabooloo.org.au/index.html (accessed January 9, 2012).

The Goolarabooloo are waging an epic battle again with the state government of Western Australia to prevent a gas hub in their Country because the development on the proposed site will cut and damage an important songline for the area.¹²

A QUESTION OF BOUNDARIES: MAPPING SOVEREIGNTY

Australian space is not emptiness, a void to be filled, or a neutral place for action. Rather, space is imagined—*called into being*—by individuals, families, and the cultures of which they are a part. Yet we experience a triple spatial jeopardy in Australia, and especially in Perth, which is the site of the most remote city in the world, the oldest intact environment (120,000 years) in the world, and the oldest indigenous culture in the world (60,000+ years). These spatial qualities negate uniformity and featurelessness within Country. They also allow Country to speak for itself. Indigenous peoples *humanize* their environments because of their (nonmaterial) Country relations and their in-built abilities to sense the resources of Country itself.

In 1992, some two hundred years after the invasion of the east coast, the High Court of Australia's *Mabo* decision overturned the application of the doctrine of *terra nullius* to Australia. Almost twenty years since the historic judgment and the subsequent enactment of the Native Title Act (1993), Aboriginal rights to land are still not settled. In Australia, 95 percent of the land potentially claimable as native is in Western Australia, a state where the economy is heavily dependent on resource development. Aboriginal peoples in Western Australia face ongoing legal challenges to claim and retain their land. As part of a complicated and mean-spirited native-title process, Aboriginal peoples have been documenting their claims to Country by telling the stories of Country and painting them as maps. These maps assert not just title to land but also Aboriginal law and a level of knowledge that challenge the way non-Aboriginal Australians conceive of and think about Australia.

Independent of this process, two important attempts to map Aboriginal Australia in a conventional territorial sense as “tribes” or “nations” clearly challenge the foundational myths of Australia as an unoccupied and empty place, a land belonging to no one. In 1974, Norman B. Tindale, an anthropologist and archaeologist working at the South Australian Museum, published a map entitled “Tribal Boundaries of Aboriginal Australia,” the result of more than fifty years’ work and “a crucial document in Australian cultural history; graphic evidence that no part of Australia was *terra nullius*, empty land.”¹³ While an amazing achievement and a landmark in challenging foundational myths and restoring “name” and voice to Country, the map is not widely known in Australia. The other “national” map produced is generally referred to as the Horton Map. It was compiled by David Horton for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra; and “using the published resources available between 1988 and 1994, the map attempts to represent language, tribal or nation groups of Australia's Indigenous peoples.” The Horton Map carries the following “Disclaimer: This map indicates only the general location of larger groupings of people, which may include smaller groups such as clans, dialects or individual languages in a group. The boundaries are not intended to be exact. This map is not suitable for use in native title or other land claims.”¹⁴ While more widely known,

¹² For more information, see “Goolarabooloo Lurujarri Dreaming Trail,” undated, [www.goolarabooloo.org.au/or; www.savethekimberley.com](http://www.goolarabooloo.org.au/or;www.savethekimberley.com) (both accessed January 9, 2012).

¹³ See South Australian Museum, www.samuseum.sa.gov/archives/collections/tribes (accessed January 9, 2012). The full map is available online.

¹⁴ See www.aiatsis.gov.au/aboriginal_studies_press/aboriginal_wall_map/map_page (accessed January 9, 2012).

the map still appears to come as a revelation to many, if not most, Australian university students when used in Aboriginal studies programs each year. It is not a map universally ascribed to by nonindigenous Australians.

RETURNING COUNTRY VOICE: STORY AS ART AS NATIVE TITLE

Although these national maps call into question conventional understanding of Australian state and territorial boundaries, Aboriginal peoples have been painting their stories of Country to assert their claims to traditional ownership of the totality of their Countries. The most iconic of these images are the Ngurrara Canvases, which were painted by over sixty artists from the Great Sandy Desert Kimberley region of Western Australia. In 1997, Ngurrara Canvas 11, a massive 8 by 10 meters, was rolled up and trucked to the nation's capital city, Canberra, and laid out on the ground, where Nyilpirr Spider Snell and his fellow Walmajarri dancers performed the Kurtal dance on the canvas to demonstrate the claim to Country of the traditional owners (fig. 1).

The Ngurrara Canvases were part of a set of exhibitions, originally developed by the South Australian Museum and coordinated by Mangkaja Arts Resource Agency, mapping stories and Country of the Great Sandy Desert of northern Western Australia. This project and a similar project undertaken by the Pila Nguru Spinifex people to document their native title claim demonstrate the cultural importance of gathering and representing place-based indigenous stories through the agency of artful mapmaking. Importantly, it is the cultural protocols and ceremonies of these process-driven research methods that maintain the cultural integrity and retelling of these stories and their ultimate private or public representations and preservations. It is also the indivisible natures of these past, present, and future land-based knowledge systems that in turn fundamentally alter the way in which we can contemporize, know, and manage Country in Western Australia.



Fig. 1. Ngurrara Canvas 11 (1997). Walmajarri dancers dance on “the big Ngurrara painting” in Canberra. It is the largest Aboriginal painting ever done on canvas and was painted as evidence for a native title claim. (Courtesy of Andrew Meares / Fairfax Syndication.)

LISTENING TO COUNTRY: THE STORY OF THE CANNING STOCK ROUTE PROJECT

Initiated in 2006 by Western Australia's FORM (the state's leading art and craft agency), the Canning Stock Route Project (Ngurra kuju walyja) sought to tell the stories associated with the world's longest historic desert stock route, primarily from an Aboriginal point of view. The non-indigenous history of the Canning Stock Route is relatively well known. Surveyor Alfred Canning is considered to be the prime author of the route, along which foreign cattle were driven almost two thousand kilometers across the Kimberleys to the beef markets of the southern Pilbara. Canning set out with his party from the state capital, Perth, in 1906 with a commission to survey and map a potential cattle-driving route as well as identify gold-bearing country. Initially, the key criterion of route selection was finding well sites approximately a day's walk apart that would provide enough water to support the eight hundred head of cattle. In the main, the unforgiving, harsh environments of the Great Sandy, the Little Sandy, and the Gibson Deserts proved too difficult for Canning, and the mapping of a successful stock route can only be truly attributed to the knowledgeable local Aboriginal guides who accompanied Canning—some willing, most not. A detail of the stock route plan is shown below (fig. 2).¹⁵

The Canning Stock Route Project, later to be exhibited as *Yiwarra Kuju—The Canning Stock Route*, is now an incredible Australian story in itself and is best summarized by the curators themselves:

[It] tells the story of the stock route's impact, and the importance of the Country around it, in Aboriginal voices and interpreted through Aboriginal eyes. It is a story of contact, conflict and survival, of exodus and return. Above all, it is a story of family, culture and Country. [It] tells an intercultural and intergenerational story of community, collaboration and reconciliation. Under the direction of Aboriginal stakeholders, *Ngurra Kuju Walyja* grew to become a major interdisciplinary project involving 10 remote Aboriginal community arts and cultural enterprises, a large cross-cultural team of curators, filmmakers and cultural advisors, over 120 Aboriginal artists and contributors, and numerous national partners. In late 2008 the National Museum of Australia permanently acquired the Canning Stock Route Collection—140 artworks curated by the Canning Stock Route Project team over three years—and entered into a partnership with FORM to produce *Yiwarra Kuju—The Canning Stock Route*. This major exhibition of paintings, cultural artefacts, film, new media and photography describes the history of the Canning Stock Route from the perspective of Aboriginal people, told in their own words, and through art. *Yiwarra Kuju* launched at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra in July 2010 and attracted more visitors to the Museum than any other exhibition in its history.¹⁶

¹⁵ In *Ngurra Kuju Walyja—One Country, One People—Stories from the Canning Stock Route* (Melbourne: Macmillan Art Publishing, 2011), end papers.

¹⁶ See www.canningstockrouteproject.com (accessed December 18, 2011).

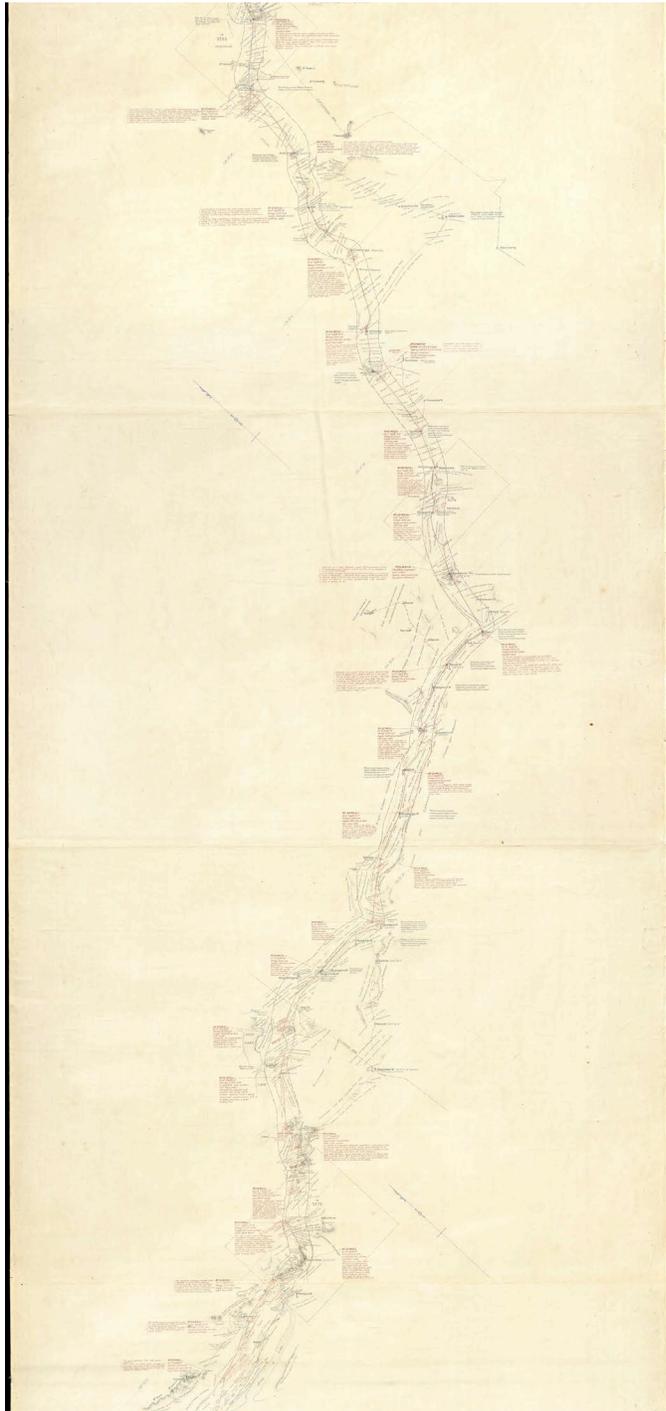


Fig. 2. Alfred Canning's "Plan of Wiluna-Kimberley stock route exploration showing positions of wells constructed 1908-9 and '10" (detail). (Western Australian Land Information Authority [Landgate], courtesy of Landgate.)

Perhaps the most conspicuous feature of the exhibition and accompanying literature, apart from the striking interrelated artwork and high-tech thematic displays of photography, film, and text, was the immense sense of indigenous pride and ownership evident in the project. Its own acknowledged Aboriginal voice proved extremely powerful. Equally important was the project's real commitment to indigenous employment and training throughout the more than five years of the project's participatory incubation, development, and eventual delivery. The stories and sensitive cultural processes associated with the safe and proper approvals, collection, and suitable design and display of the exhibition materials and accompanying literature, and with their digital archiving and eventual repatriation to community, were managed by indigenous peoples for indigenous peoples, first and foremost. This degree of community participation is clearly not common in the conventional production of art exhibitions. As explained by cocurator Monique La Fontaine, "this phase of the approvals process turned out to be pivotal. The cultural issues identified in these final meetings were subtle and significant and their resolution lent a profound integrity to its final outcome."¹⁷

It is worth mentioning that the project's highly experienced nonindigenous cocurators, artists, and administrators were suitably inconspicuous and respectful in their shared cultural presence—both on the ground in the exhibition space and in the representation of the project's high-quality publications. Their skillful intercultural relations provided a welcome background against which cross-cultural reconciliation and indigenous self-determination could be sustained. The combined professional talent in the project also broke new intercultural ground in the creative management of Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP). Here, formal ICIP protocols were developed in order for indigenous peoples to determine which cultural materials were deemed appropriate for public or for private use—which information sets would make it to exhibition, and under what conditions, and which would not. For the unique purposes of this project, this type of property rights included full repatriation of the project's massive archive, ensuring that remote participants, often excluded from direct and easy access to collected materials, have suitable ongoing access through their local art centers.

The practice of these protocols, indeed a mapping practice in itself, is explained by senior project translator and cultural adviser Putuparri Tom Lawford: "What I'm doing on the project really is making sure what you mob say or do is the right way that we feel is culturally appropriate, not the wrong way. Like getting stories from some people, sometimes they don't like telling [certain] stories [publicly]. . . . My job is to make sure that everything is working smooth, following that one line, not turning off in any way."¹⁸

From a visitor's point of view, the exhibition consequently became an acculturated map in its own right, laid out as a truthful set of mindful cartographies and connections to place and family that remain as livable and pertinent today as perhaps they were in the 1900s. In this exhibition the indigenous sensibilities and protocols of telling difficult or not-so-difficult stories, and making art and artifact as maps of the past, present, and future, are as convincing to a wider audience as perhaps they have ever been. La Fontaine continues: "For visitors to whom this Country is a foreign landscape, a kind of virtual knowing is evoked through geographic synesthesia—we hear the Country in paintings, we see Country in the sound of old people's voices, we smell

¹⁷ Monique La Fontaine, "In Living Memory: Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Canning Stock Route Project," in *Ngurra Kuju Walyja—One Country, One People*, 224.

¹⁸ Putuparri Tom Lawford, 2009, in www.canningstockrouteproject.com/aboriginal-knowledge/aboriginal-knowledge (accessed 17 December 2011).

Country in videos that vividly capture fragments of desert life, we touch Country in ideas of family intricately woven into land, and we taste Country through our fingers as we explore the endless bounty it contains.”¹⁹ This geographic synesthesia is beautifully depicted in Tim Acker’s photograph of artist Patrick Tjungurrayi naming the waterholes that became wells in his painting of the stock route (fig. 3).²⁰

The clear difference in the combined exhibition material, though, is that Alfred Canning was trained in the precise Euclidean art of surveying, where straight lines and curvature geographies of longitude and latitude dictated and confirmed one’s exact physical location, eventual territory, and cultural survival. This practice of gridded mapping and of living was his “north star,” his enduring cultural identity, and his means of survival. Kim Mahood explains, “Canning belonged to a world in which the scientific accuracy of mapping represented a means of overcoming the *tabula rasa* of unmapped regions, a tool with which to domesticate the geography of the unknown.”²¹



Fig. 3. Pupunya Tula artist Patrick Tjungurrayi names the waterholes that became wells in his painting Canning Stock Route Country. (Photograph by Tim Acker, 2007, courtesy of FORM, Canning Stock Route Project.)

¹⁹ Monique La Fontaine, “Dreaming the Future: Mirrored Reflections and the Use of Multimedia in the Canning Stock Route Project,” in *Ngurra Kuju Walyja—One Country, One People*, 205.

²⁰ *Ngurra Kuju Walyja—One Country, One People*, 16–17.

²¹ Bill Fox and Kim Mahood, “Conceptualising the Canning: A Conversation between Bill Fox and Kim Mahood,” in *Ngurra Kuju Walyja—One Country, One People*, 389.

As Canning's indigenous guides fought to read, respect, and reciprocate the cultural rights of living Country in nongeometric, ecocentric, and cosmological ways, they would have viewed Canning's anthropocentric way of thinking as confusing and life-threatening. Of course, Canning had no ability to sense the cosmological narrative and moral order of his unfortunate *tabula rasa*. Cultural and exhibition project adviser Ngalangka Nola Taylor sadly notes, "that stock route cut right through Martu people's hearts."²²

Conversely, Aboriginal ways of navigating are specifically place bound, wrapped up in ancient ecologically healthy stories, rules, and protocols actively celebrated in ceremony and in daily practice, respecting both the individual and the collective cultural well-being of indigenous peoples and their respective Countries. Canning Stock Route Project participant Jawurji Mervyn Street recognizes these non-Euclidean aspects of mapping and geographical presence: "Whitefellas just reckon go where the straight line is. In the Martu side there's no straight line. You can't go straight when you got some special thing in the road. You're gonna have to dodge around. The stock road circles round and round, and I been thinking straight away: might be some special place there, and the guides made it clear all the way by going around it."²³

Mahood describes this phenomenon well when she notes: "As 'visual diagrams' the paintings that form a counterpart to Canning's map reflect a very different sensitivity. Language is not written but spoken, and the painted artifact and narrative are indivisible. They describe the known rather than the unknown, which includes not only location but the ancestral genesis of that location. The paintings are diagrams of language, narrative, Country and social structure."²⁴

Interestingly, the Canning-Euclidean way of mapping presence and possible knowing of historical Country seemed to have permeated the exhibition. As a result, a more contemporary Country was artfully mapped by certain participating indigenous artists and their Western collaborators. An example of this type of mapping is the only artwork not purchased by the National Museum of Australia was the piece titled *Paruku* (fig. 4).²⁵

Mahood's influence on the mediated overlapping cultural style and content of the mapped painting seems prevalent, as the overriding goal of this work is related to the quantifying and demarcation of the Country's cultural conservation values as an Indigenous Protected Area. She describes *Paruku* as a

transitional document, bounded by the restrictions of custodianship, anchored in the grid of latitude and longitude, and glimmering with the animation of cross-cultural narratives. . . . It also reveals the weaknesses of Western mapping techniques [noted in the Canning map example], because the lake boundaries are constantly changing depending on the rainfall and the current topographical map is based on boundaries that existed briefly after an excessively big wet season a few years ago. In contrast the paintings of the lake show it in all its phases, wet and dry, each one reflecting the embodied knowledge of the artist.²⁶

²² Carly Davenport, "The Journey Is Everything: Ngurra Kuju Walyja—One Country, One People, the Canning Stock Route Project," in *Ngurra Kuju Walyja—One Country, One People*, 152.

²³ Jawurji Mervyn Street, 2007, in www.canningstockrouteproject.com/history/story-aboriginal-guides (accessed December 18, 2011).

²⁴ Fox and Mahood, "Conceptualising the Canning," 389.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 389–92.

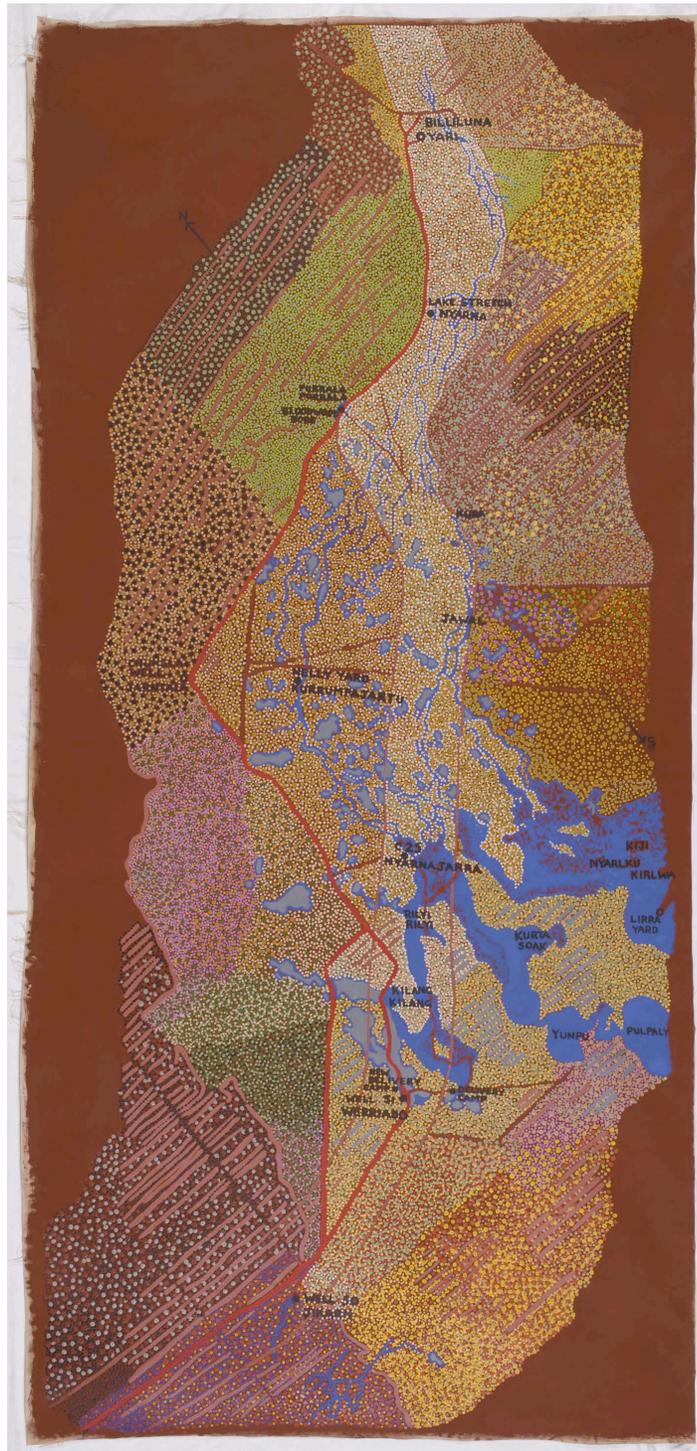


Fig. 4. Paruku (2007), by Veronica Lulu, Anna Johns, Shirley Brown, Lyn Manson, Wendy Wise, Bessie Doonday, Chamia Sammuels, Daisy Kungah, and Kim Mahood. (Courtesy of Collection of Paruku Indigenous Protected Area. Photograph by Jason McCarthy, National Museum of Australia.)

This overlapping style or technique of cross-cultural narrative mapping is perhaps best depicted in an edited version of the original map by Kim Akerman, redrawn under the supervision of Kimberley cultural leaders. This map of the northern end of the Canning Stock Route is overlaid by the Dreaming tracks. The whole map was not included in the exhibition materials, as it was considered “too dense” for public display. Likewise, it is not shown here because it is considered too sensitive for this publication. Nonetheless, it shows the incredible accuracy and intent of Canning’s surveyed and precise narrative of finding water and forage. The songlines crisscross and weave over and around the stock route, clearly illustrating the immense difficulty the indigenous guides would have had negotiating the individual and collective rights of Country. What can be shown in this publication, however, is Martu elder Billy Patch’s sand drawing of the songlines and sites interrupted by the intervention of the stock route (fig. 5).²⁷



Fig. 5. Martu elder Billy Patch’s sand drawing of the songlines and sites interrupted by the Canning Stock Route. (Photograph by John Carty, 2008, courtesy of Australian Research Council Canning Stock Route Project.)

²⁷ Ngurra Kuju Walyja—*One Country, One People*, 68.

What the Canning Stock Route Project has shown remarkably well is the responsiveness of younger generations of Aboriginal peoples to new creative technologies. The remaking and adaptation of ancient stories are highlighted in the films of twenty-one-year-old Marika Biljabu and twenty-two-year-old Curtis Taylor. La Fontaine refers to these young creators as “digital natives” whose “vision of the world is shaped by an extraordinary confluence of culturally traditional and worldly contemporary influences, from which they draw endless inspiration to ‘dream new dreams’ within digital culture.” Curtis Taylor says, “Just like the old people, we are dreaming. We have a new dream with technology. We’re using the newest technology with the oldest culture.”²⁸ Marika Biljabu’s photograph of Kumpaya Girgaba narrating the painting *Kunkun* at the exact site it is named after evokes this powerful juxtaposition and animation of culture and technology (fig. 6).²⁹



Fig. 6. Kumpaya Girgaba tells the story of the painting *Kunkun* at the site it is named after. (Photograph by Marika Biljabu, 2008, courtesy of FORM, Canning Stock Route Project.)

²⁸ Biljabu and Taylor quoted in La Fontaine, “Dreaming the Future,” 198. See also films at www.canningstockrouteproject.com (accessed December 18, 2011).

²⁹ Ngurra Kuju Walyja—*One Country, One People*, 23.

At the time of the writing of this paper, the Canning Stock Route Project continues in its repatriation phase, in which the project's key personnel are returning the cultural materials and the digital archive—around two terabytes of content—to the participating communities and their respective Countries. Community workshops and meetings are being held so “this process ensures that the archive fulfills the original aims and ambitions of contributors and their families: that their lives and legacy can be treasured by future generations, so that the knowledge of Country, Tjukurpa and family continues.”³⁰

All in all, this is truly a remarkable project, one that has reshaped a profound and transformative way of knowing a significant part of Australia in all its untold historical and contemporary importance. Above all, it is an incredible appreciation of the Country's ancient religious schemata, expressed in old and new ways. Accordingly, it has contributed significantly to an intercultural understanding of the deep indigenous meanings of land, water, and sky, and indeed how storytelling and artful embodied mapping constitute a critical and reliable knowledge base for knowing one's own place and responsibilities in the world around us all—*One Country, One People*. The significance of this strong intercultural sharing and documentation of stories in Country, between artists and project staff, is poignantly captured in the photograph by Tim Acker (fig.7).



Fig. 7. Artists from Martumili, Papunya Tula, and Ngarra art centers painting at Kilykily (Well 36). (Photograph by Tim Acker, 2007, courtesy of FORM, Canning Stock Route Project.)

³⁰ Davenport, “The Journey Is Everything,” 153.

The project has, however, revealed that Country can also speak for itself—without the secular foreign materials of paint, canvas, celluloid, glossy print, and silicon chip—if only we are all able and willing to find the collaborative means to listen and take notice. We believe it does this in a powerful, graphical, and *melancholic* sort of way, especially through the project’s factual photography and the voices in the audio displays. We use “melancholic” here in the same way that landscape architect Jackie Bowring theorizes the culture and nuances of such emotions—“sought for its sweetness and ‘intensity.’”³¹ Melancholy, in this context, works as a positive and defining eidetic emotion of landscape “against a trend of thought that seeks to appease anxiety and distress [or strife] through a fixation of the gloss of a preformed happiness.”³² That is, it works against an ill-informed happiness of landscape that, perhaps, does not know the virtues and deeper meanings of Country. A melancholic way-of-being could therefore be argued as an extremely productive emotional state of sensing landscape as Country, for as Bowring further contends, “Melancholy slows things down, allows for percolation, facilitates solitude, and solace and destinations for imagination, an aerial perspective, an overview, a tool for embracing the [potentially intercultural] human condition.”³³

Finally, the greater unwritten subtext of this groundbreaking project lies in the urgent quests for land sovereignty—that the authority of the indigenous “Canning Stock Route Peoples” over their lands is part of Western Australia and Australian law. This means that the deserts are theirs. However, questions remain, beyond the focus of this essay, on how this project—with all its vivid map paintings, innovative displays, and publications—has contributed to the formal protection and managed well-being of indigenous lands. And could this project potentially become a moral and strategic role model for defining such customary land tenure and native title rights and sharing them with greater Australia? These concerns especially agitate the hearts and minds (and multiple agendas) of those corporate sponsors who invested substantially in the project. It is perhaps too easy, and undeniably distrustful, to think that these powerful bureaucrats still want to “fix” Australia’s Aboriginal problems: a strategic “fixing” of indigenous identity in artistic forms, its dangerous, amorphous power “arrested” once again. Nevertheless, these questions remain to be studied in further detail.³⁴

PILA NGURU: THE SPINIFEX PEOPLE

In 2000, after some five years of negotiation, the Pila Nguru Spinifex people and the Federal Court of Australia ratified the Spinifex Native Title Agreement, which concerned approximately 54,315 square kilometers in the Great Victoria Desert. In his media release, the then premier of Western Australia, Richard Court, stated, “The agreement is a victory for commonsense and reflects the fact that the Government has no doubt that these people are the traditional owners for the area.” He added, “The strength of the Spinifex claim was never in doubt, but the big problem

³¹ Quoted in D. Trigg, review of *A Field Guide to Melancholy*, by Jackie Bowring, *Emotion, Space and Society* 2 (2009): 5.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Jackie Bowring, *A Field Guide to Melancholy* (Hertfordshire: Old Castle Books, 2008), 210.

³⁴ This thinking typically follows the questions posited to the environmental design professions and their attempts to improve living conditions in Aboriginal communities and to encourage participatory measures of embodying indigenous identity in the design process. See, e.g., Paul Memmott, *Gunya, Goondie and Wurley: The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2007), 313; and Kim Dovey, *Framing Places* (London: Routledge, 1999).

was to agree on how native title would fit within land and mineral title administration. I am pleased that the State's position has been accepted by the Spinifex claimants."³⁵

In 2002, *Pila Nguru: The Spinifex People* was published by anthropologist Scott Cane. It gives a detailed account of the culture and history of the Spinifex people of the Great Victoria Desert of Western Australia. Cane's work describes the multitude of stories connected to the cosmological world of the Spinifex people and, perhaps for the first time in Australia's published history, annotates and translates the indigenous content and meanings depicted in various artworks and maps. These public works had previously formed the national traveling exhibition entitled *Pila Nguru*. Similar to the Canning Stock Route Project and its exhibition *Yiwarra Kuju*, this artful documentation chose the modern secular mediums of acrylic on canvas to express connections to meaningful Country—but in a way that was not constrained by Spinifex sacred tradition. The more secret-sacred texts were not selected for the exhibition or the publication. Cane notes (and here lies the critical difference from the mapped works contributed to the *Yiwarra Juju* exhibition):

The works are thought of by the Spinifex People as their native title paintings: as such, they are the remarkable product of Aboriginal tradition and English common law, symbolizing contemporary political themes and fundamental Western Desert principles. The symbolism is conveyed through the Spinifex tradition of reciprocity. The paintings are gifts, yet the gifts carry the message of reciprocity, cultural inclusion, tolerance and the recognition of traditional rights and interests. The gift, while generous in its intent, also places a subliminal burden on the observer and on the recipient. The gift—and the act of acceptance—embraces the desirability of reconciliation, confers an acknowledgement of prior occupation and symbolizes the indelibility of Spinifex Law.³⁶

As the gifted paintings destined for public exhibition and publication grew in number, so did the joint commitment to an understanding of Country and traditional ownership. Here the sensibilities (and likely legal burdens) of reciprocity and acceptance, in particular, played a major influential role in both laws—Spinifex law and English law—for the granting of native title and its eventual working framework. *Pila Nguru* contains many fantastic images of the familiar land ownership strategy. Perhaps the most graphic and telling are the explanatory, decoded storyboard maps, including the map of Country birthplaces of the artists linking people and Country (fig. 8).³⁷ The artists eventually created two large canvases—one painted by men, and the other by women—covering the entire land claim area, and both paintings were included and referred to in the written preamble of the Native Title Agreement document.³⁸ *Men Combined, Pukarra* is a complex map of the men's narratives and displays the intense mapped schemata of this specific Country underpinned by the characteristic mesmerizing and harmonious pointillist style of desert art (fig. 9).³⁹ The painting describes multiple stories converging around important places and the contest between men and women woven within the "Seven Sisters Dreaming" story.

³⁵ Government of Western Australia, "State Reaches Native Title Agreement with Spinifex People," October 16, 2000, www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/ArchivedStatements/Pages/CourtCoalitionGovernmentSearch.aspx?ItemId=113596&minister=Court&admin=Court (accessed December 18, 2011).

³⁶ Scott Cane, *Pila Nguru: The Spinifex People* (North Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2002), 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 98–99.

The painting is unusually assisted by the annotated skeletal diagram, which serves as a legend or key for the deciphering of the complex painted map.

The scale map of Spinifex senior Simon Hogan's Country and its associated Tjukurrpa (cosmological narrative) songlines or Dreaming tracks describes the land-based relationships between those who "own" Country and those who have "rights and interests" in the same Country (fig. 10).⁴⁰ Here Simon Hogan's Country is connected to overlapping Country owned by other family members—Roy Underwood, Robert Hogan, Harry Hogan, and Estelle Hogan—and the four major Tjukurrpa songlines for which he is responsible. For Simon Hogan, this map depicts a fantastic level of individual and collective responsibility and obligation to keep the stories and livelihoods of the bush turkey, zebra finch, wild cat, and dingo alive and well and promotes conservation and management of those lands and their biota. These paintings were formally included in the preamble to the Native Title Agreement ratified before the Federal Court in November 2000. Celebrating the success of the land claim process, the Spinifex People bequeathed ten major paintings to the people of Western Australia to be housed at the Western Australian Museum.

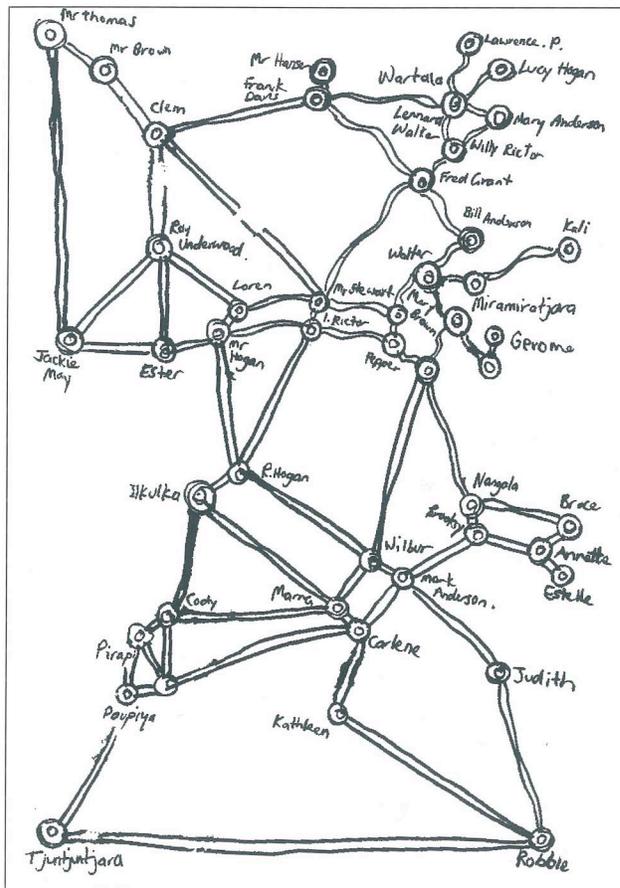


Fig. 8. Preliminary sketch for the Native Title Agreement paintings. (From Pila Ngura: *The Spinifex People*, 2002, courtesy of Scott Cane and Fremantle Arts Centre Press.)

⁴⁰ Ibid., 138.

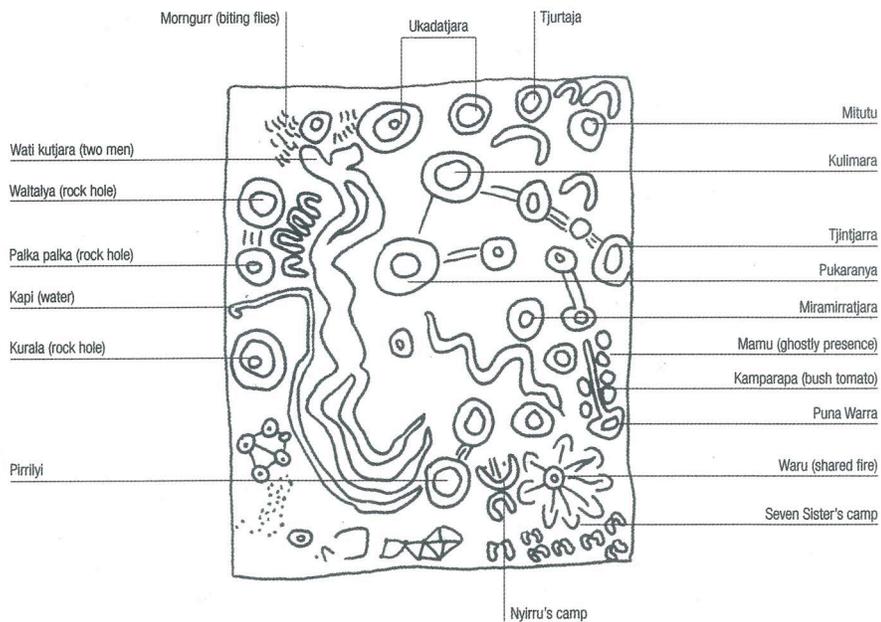
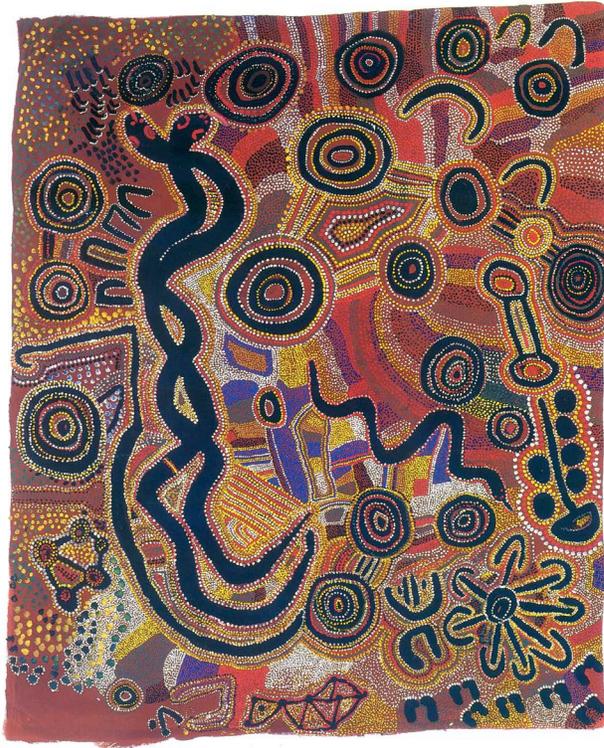


Fig. 9. *Men Combined*, Pukarra, *Painting for the People of Western Australia* (1998). (From *Pila Ngura: The Spinifex People*, 2002, courtesy of Scott Cane and Fremantle Arts Centre Press.)

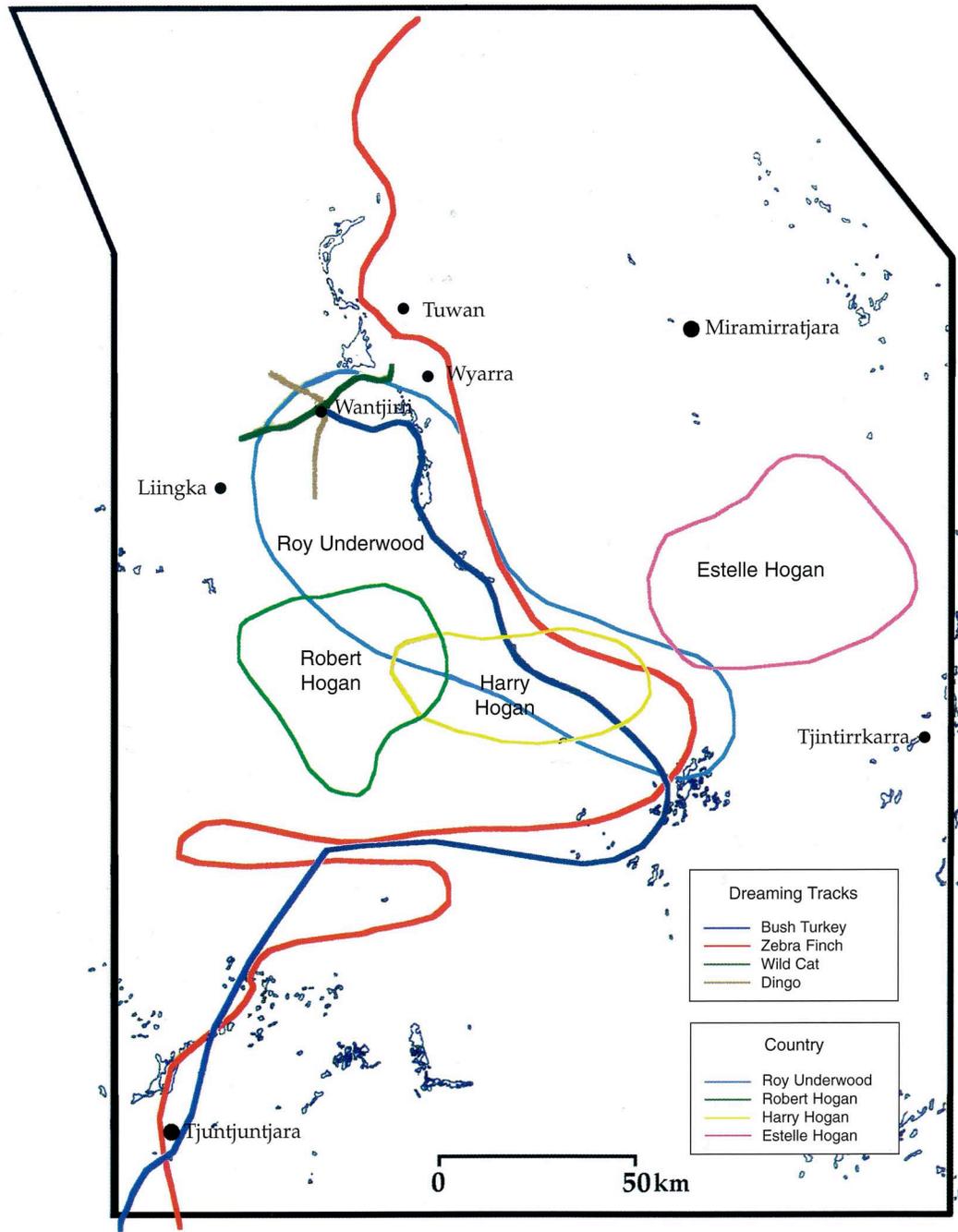


Fig. 10. The shape of Simon Hogan’s Country on the ground and the major Tjukurrpa passing through his Country. (From *Pila Ngura: The Spinifex People*, 2002, courtesy of Scott Cane and Fremantle Arts Centre Press.)

CONCLUSIONS: STORYTELLING AND ITS USEFULNESS IN SHARING SPACE AND ACTIVATING MEANINGFUL CULTURAL DESIGN PROCESSES

The idea of questioning cultural mapping and the corresponding ways of knowing and managing cultural environments is strong enough to bring into question the very role of doing landscape architecture. The authors have challenged this design pedagogy through their shared teaching in a University Design Faculty for over fifteen years now. The Design Studio and a recent course entitled Sharing Space have been the intercultural and interdisciplinary vehicles for these experimentations. It is within these teaching units that we seek the means and methods of finding a worthwhile mediated intellectual “place” to inhabit and explore theoretical discourse as well as practical ways of working with indigenous communities. For the moment, it really remains as simple as that. This position between (ecological) self and lived place demands a rethinking of the paradigms of environment-human relations because it is this very act of mediation (or knowing a place in between) that so often fails us. Hence, once again it would seem clear that the “landscape” paradigm is a tired way of understanding an intercultural spatiality and in turn a (re)making of the so-called Great Southern Land⁴¹ and other places, essentially on the grounds of visual perception alone. This habitual “gaze” disturbingly emphasizes knowing “beauty”—*scenic* beauty to be exact. Intercultural protocols of behaving as a landscape architect remain enmeshed in the limiting paradigms and agencies of making “landscape.” It remains a debilitating lie or impeding fetish for those who seek a deeper, meaningful, and perhaps ecologically productive place-bound comfort, knowing that the inherent indigenous rights of Country are well intact. Australian ecotheorist and sociologist G. Gill suggests landscape is more productive as a social, spiritual, or physical realm when it is gauged as a barometer of strife—that is, a measure of the quality of the relationship between one’s world and one’s earth or environment. Indigenous peoples are often known as good ecologists, not because they are necessarily one with nature, but because they have learned to (re)concile their world/s and their earth/s.⁴² Nonindigenous peoples tend to create and change space objectively, often independently of observing or sensing a spiritual subject or a relational consciousness of place. Indigenous peoples can change their knowings of place by the way they perceive and experience the particularities of place as a deeper emotional fusing of subject and object. A fusing, as noted above, attained perhaps through a more melancholic or eidetic way-of-being.

So if, as Gill suggests, landscape can be considered as an alternative postmodern way of thinking about the “strife” relationships between one’s environment and one’s worldview or cosmology, then perhaps we could extend this viewpoint to consider eminent artist and cultural theorist Jonathan Kimberley’s ideas about the “fact-reality” of “Country” becoming an ex-modern or postlandscape way of “being.”⁴³ Here, as Kimberley suggests, there needs to be no mediation when one embraces Country—where the actual voices of indigenous peoples are

⁴¹ This term is often used with reference to the Latin cartographic title “Terra Australis Incognita,” meaning “the unknown land of the South,” appearing on European maps from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century.

⁴² G. Gill, “Landscape and Remembering,” *Kerb Journal* 10 (2001): 34–37.

⁴³ These thoughts are derived from the innovative visual arts research and practice of Jonathan Kimberley, a recent student at the University of Western Australia. His work is compelling and is derived from a sustained art practice with indigenous colleague Jim Everett in Tasmania, Australia. See Jonathan Kimberley, “Country Unwrapping Landscape” (MFA thesis, University of Western Australia School of Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts, 2010); Jonathan Kimberley, *Unlandscape: Postlandscape (Blue Tier)*, Bett Gallery, Hobart @ 45 Downstairs, Melbourne, 2005; and H. Vivian, “An Unlandscape of Words and Paintings,” *Artlink* 29, no. 2 (2010): 66–69.

heard through direct collaboration so as to potentially allow landscape to be further unpacked of its potentially shared cultural values. As such, to embrace the meanings of Country is simply indigenous fact. And the protocols of intercultural engagement can allow a knowing of Country to be more than “value-added” landscape.⁴⁴

Kimberley’s essentialist postlandscape practice questions our very Western being in Australia. He knows from actual experience that landscape, as a primary visual phenomenon, acts too often as a surfacing agent that imposes itself on and dominates Country. And that “in artistic [and design] terms, Country seems capable of incorporating Landscape as a function of global discourse—however, it remains to be seen whether Landscape is truly capable of such reciprocal openness towards Country.”⁴⁵ Indigenous peoples are recognized as one of the world’s best sustainable collaborators (the discourse of cultural difference and social misunderstanding) of constructing a shared, open-ended cultural ecology of being. Their skills of translating the protocols of intercultural behavior are unsurpassed, to say the very least. Kimberley’s work inspires the Australian landscape architecture discipline to develop well beyond its conventional Anglicized underpinnings of knowing landscape and its environmental interpretations as static consumable objects rather than a set of interrelational and transcultural subjects.

These inclusive thoughts are echoed by Murungkurr Terry Murray, in the Canning Stock Route Project, who contends, “There are two histories. The European and the Aboriginal. Two worlds, two understandings. Canning made his mark and we, as Aboriginal people, got scarred. The land was scarred too. If people wanna know what really happened, they got to catch it, deep, inside, spiritually and emotionally.”⁴⁶

The upshot here is recognizing the actual (non-Western) processes of collaboration and how that is undertaken multidimensionally over considerable time through the ordinariness and inclusiveness of lived experience and fallible relationship—as in the Canning Stock Route Project. With ideas of generative collaboration in mind, Kimberley also brings Heidegger’s “handiness” into line. That is, “when we just look at things theoretically we lack an understanding of handiness”⁴⁷ and perhaps of the overarching readiness and eagerness of landscape architects to be “useful things” (Heidegger). Nonetheless, as a nation dominated by subsequent peoples, we would argue that even as a mob of “useful things” we have not as yet fully learned the necessary skills (or drawn upon the appropriate emotions) to recognize our intercultural misunderstandings and misbehaviors, let alone our ability to collaborate (e.g., through protocol and policy) with traditional indigenous owners and indigenous hosts, *per se*.

Kimberley further suggests that by working *ex-modernly*, he and his indigenous collaborators are not bound or limited by what Heidegger refers to as the productive or useful “horizon-of-being,” which is too caught up in a linear, controlled “Western Landscape” perspective of spatiality, but rather they “are able to move between multiple spatialities in ways we would be unable to comprehend as solo practitioners, resulting in new points of potential which would otherwise be restricted by our respective individual and cultural conceptions of modernity.”⁴⁸ These observations clearly follow the previously described work of Kim Mahood and her col-

⁴⁴ Kimberley, “Country Unwrapping Landscape,” 15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Murungkurr Terry Murray, 2010, in www.canningstockrouteproject.com/history/story-aboriginal-guides (accessed December 17, 2011).

⁴⁷ Kimberley, “Country Unwrapping Landscape,” 27.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

laborators on the painted map of Paruku. Kimberley, like Mahood, enjoys the ex-modern maxims of artist Nigel Lendon, characterized by “site-specificity, ephemerality, (proto) invisibility, performative, phenomenological and/or digital.”⁴⁹ Through our collective experience, we would now add “participation, collaboration, relationality, reciprocity, humility, and transition” (something haptic and peripatetic, with a lot of traveling and movement in it). Here spatial boundaries of stories are implicit in place-bound identities and in the processes of keeping these knowledge sets of fixed but mobile place alive and well. This “habitual spatiotemporal experience” of Aboriginal mapping (and movement associated with land knowledge and storytelling) can be considered a liberating condition that contributes to the ongoing maintenance of an Aboriginal traditional sense of self, family, and community and their respective obligations and responsibilities to Country.

Finally, we have argued that there are multiple cultural transitional narratives and place-bound identities that transform environment into landscape into Country. The Western instinctual modes of making sense of environment are challenged in urban and remote indigenous Country, relying too much on visual codes of safety, prospect, and refuge and not enough on the inherent emotional social being of the land. As explained, Country has an emotional and ancestral language of its own, and we all have a chance to learn it, for Mother Earth is the best storyteller of them all.

Cultural geographer Bill Fox argues that this learning is perhaps justifiably slow, for it is the extreme environments of the desert, for example, where our Western foibles of landscape navigation are most revealed. Here “our visual systems evolved to understand distance and human scale more easily in temperate environments, where we understand the blue shift in landscape as land gets farther away from us. That doesn’t happen as quickly here [Western Australian desert Country], where the air is so dry and the ground so often red.”⁵⁰ Nonetheless, these navigational difficulties are compounded for both nonindigenous and indigenous Western Australians when the overriding nation continues to build and pride itself on its overwhelming land-mining economies and its persistent emending or erasing of the land-texts and stories posed in Country that indigenous peoples have kept alive for so, so long. How we learn to represent Australian place cross-culturally remains a challenge for all Australians, but the affirmative rights of inherent indigenous knowledge of place prevail as our collective sanction. This knowledge supports and reinforces the social narratives of our Mother Earth and her carers, which determine her very existence and eventual well-being—and in turn our collective ability to know, design, and manage lands in old and new sustainable ways. A

⁴⁹ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁰ Fox and Mahood, “Conceptualising the Canning,” 391.