

Places and Stories:

MAPPING NGAANYATJARRA ART-MAKING PRACTICES

(NINTILU KULIRA PALYARATJAKU

NGAYUKU-LAMPATJU NGURRAWANALU)

VOLUME 1 – DISSERTATION AND LIST OF REFERENCES

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Technology Sydney**

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Volume 1: Dissertation and list of references

Please see **volume 2** for the images and appendix.

Declaration of ethics

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans (1999), the Joint NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007), and the UTS policy and guidelines relating to the ethical conduct of research.

The proposed research received clearance from the University Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee UTS HREC REF NO: 2014000536.

The following points should also be noted in relation to the issue of permissions. I formally sought and was given permission to prepare and submit this thesis, by the traditional owners of the country, through the governing bodies of the Ngaanyatjarra Council who voted unanimously for the research to be undertaken. ■

Certificate of authorship and originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student: _____

Date:

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Abstract

In the past four decades Australian Aboriginal art has achieved national and international recognition, and has come to occupy a significant space in the Australian cultural environment. The success of Aboriginal art has found its counterpart in a wealth of studies, both by academics in diverse disciplines and museum professionals. This literature shows how art production is part of a specific cultural and social context and how it is connected to specific Aboriginal epistemologies. However, references to Aboriginal art's connections to everyday life are scant. This thesis aims to fill this gap, arguing that art-making needs to be located in the fine-grained relational complexities of everyday life, particularly in the material, social, cultural and epistemological specifics of daily life in remote Aboriginal communities. I develop this argument by providing a detailed record based on a rich ethnography of daily life at the Papulankutja Artists art centre.

Papulankutja is a community of approximately 160 residents who are predominantly from the Ngaanyatjarra and Pitjantjatjara language groups, situated between the Western and Victorian Deserts in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands Western Australia. I spent several periods in Papulankutja between July 2011 and February 2016, working at the art centre and forming firm relationships with both artists and the art centre's manager. To illuminate the daily flow of life in the art centre and the associated sites connected to art-making practices, I use ethnographic vignettes that illustrate the social, emplaced and multisensory aspects of art production. I read the art centre through the organising principle of 'place', as a collection of trajectories and stories, through what I call a storied

environment. This thesis adds to our understanding of commercial art production and everyday life in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. My findings demonstrate that art production itself is shown to be fundamentally enmeshed in socio-cultural practices and storied environments. ■

Foreword

Respecting Aboriginal epistemology

Translation is the mechanism by which the social and natural worlds progressively take form. The result is a situation in which certain entities control others. (Callon (1986, p. 19)

Linda McDowell (1992, p. 409) has written that 'we must recognise and take account of our own position, as well as that of our research participants, and write this into our research practice'. As a way of understanding multiple and entangled relationships developed throughout the course of this thesis, when beginning my research I reflected on how I might endorse both Indigenous epistemology and western theoretical discussions. I wished my research encounters with the Ngaanyatjarra artists to be empathetic while also allowing me to focus on both individual representations and collaborative group patterns in the production of empathetic research encounters. To do this I first situate my own experiences. Throughout the thesis I then adopt a reflexive approach (Davies 1999).

I am a white western woman and my values, beliefs, preconceptions and aspirations form a complex lens through which I understand particular social contexts and myself (Ryan 2008). My position infers an obligation to take responsibility for my actions and to consider mixed theoretical discourses as a way of understanding the relationships and dialogue between different ways of knowing. My outsider views and those of academia are merged in this thesis with the voices of the artist participants and Indigenous thinkers. I draw on these outsider views where I believe there is a space to contribute to research. At the same time, I acknowledge the ownership and leadership of Indigenous

colleagues (Quanchi 2004). The research findings were shaped and influenced by insights of both Yarnangu contributors and my own, based on our various experiences and encounters. These contributions were often expressed through the exchange of stories. However, recognition of my positionality or situatedness at Papulankutja and relations of power between us raise important questions as to how I will address this issue (McDowell 1992).

Writing against misinterpretations around Aboriginality, Indigenous scholar Marcia Langton advocates a kind of Aboriginality where there is 'actual dialogue' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In these exchanges, she writes: that 'both the Aboriginal subject and the non-Aboriginal subject are participating' (2012, p. 35). Against this positive discourse, conversely, art historian Terry Smith has stated that a 'superficial analysis' about remote Aboriginal art adversely exposes art writers as too often '[collapsing] into the telling of condescendingly simple 'stories' of the work, alongside a few lines of formalist description' (Smith 2002, p. 152). I question where is the 'actual dialogue' here? I reflected on how we might go about critiquing the art in a meaningful way where the 'politics of speaking positions', or 'translation' transfers the 'actual dialogue' so that art writers and the art's audience can critically engage with the art in a conceptually enriching and informative way. Such an understanding is based on translation.

In thinking this through, and in order to discourage the kind of analysis Smith alludes to, I suggest that the researcher needs to undertake considered and detailed research about the artist, their community, the places and contexts in which the works were generated, within which an account of the individual art pieces can be arrived at (see Johnson 2007; Smith 2002). However, to do this the researcher must draw on ethnographic practice and material and develop sustained relationships and dialogue *with* artists and communities. Thus, by

having conversations with the artists we enact the 'actual dialogue', and then act as translators to provide nuanced explanations of the art from the artists' perspectives.

However, as Laura Fisher notes, 'remote Aboriginal artists are reliant on others to articulate the motivations behind their aesthetic forms within civic discourse and debate' (Fisher 2012, p. 264). Hence, critically, the analytical emphasis is not only on the research subject, but also the researchers themselves. The role of the ethnographer/researcher is thus defined within enactment of a translation strategy.

Consistent with these cautions and in keeping with transcultural theory, I have established a transcultural research practice that brings together a body of theory on place, space and art history with Aboriginal epistemology as encountered at the Papulankutja art centre. To do this I have drawn on the process of *translation* as outlined by Michel Callon (1986). In a volume about new approaches to power, Callon refers to what has become known as the 'sociology of translation', arguing the need for a subtle approach to the messy practices of relationality, as explained by Law 2007 (p. 2). The sociology of translation introduced concepts of power and politics to characterise various network relations. Callon developed the concept of translation from the French philosopher Michel Serres.¹ In drawing on Callon's concept I understand that (1986, p. 19) 'translation is the mechanism by which the social and natural worlds progressively take form'. It can result in a situation in which certain

¹ See discussions on Michel Serres and translation in (Brown) and Michel Serres (Arbor

entities (myself) could be seen to control others. Translation in practice at Papulankutja involves being aware of these difficulties when translating 'local knowledge', and in translating continually between 'two ways of knowing' (Freeman 2009, p. 3). Moreover, in writing about Yarnangu and their art practices, I establish myself as 'spokesperson'. As Callon has argued, to translate is:

to express in one's own language what others say and want, why they act in the way they do and how they associate with each other: it is to establish oneself as a spokesman. (Callon 1986, p 223)

By this account, translation, not only constructs and communicates meaning but, in doing so, defines and redefines the relationships between parties to that communication (Freeman 2009).

With this in mind, my research position can be understood as a process of *translation*, where my viewpoints and stories of art production are based on the mobilisation of artist participants, paintings, knowledges, experiences and more. Through these relations in which I am located, I am performed *in, by* and *through* the relations (Law & Hassard 1999, my italics). This process of translation involves a complex series of negotiations mutually shaping each other, for which John Law coined the terms 'in-hereeness' and 'out-thereeness', (2004). However, translation is also a betrayal. John Law summarises this notion thus:

To translate is to make two words equivalent. But since no two words are equivalent, translation also implies betrayal: 'traduction, trahison'. So translation is both about making equivalent, and about shifting. (Law 2007, p. 5)

My own position is always shifting and changeable. It takes only one translation to fail and the whole web of reality unravels. This became clear to

me when my own situatedness changed from researcher to manager, due to exceptional and unforeseen circumstances, as described in chapter two. Or when my interviews just didn't follow the neat path that I had envisaged and were eventually scrapped in favour of group and personal conversational discussions. So my own stories weave further webs, enacting realities and versions of the better and the worse.

While this research project followed both human and non-human actors (including paintings, *tjukurrpa*² stories and ancestral realms, temporality and more), I do not claim to have a sample that constitutes a complete set of relevant subjects; rather, the actors represent part of a complex web of relations, some of which mediate art production. This web of relations is continually in a state of flux, enrolling new actors, removing others and providing new translations. By additionally taking account of translation I bring together bodies of theories for understanding art production and paintings at Papulankutja, in a reflexive and transcultural practice, and offer insights into the complexity of transcultural realities. I recognise that the interpretations and translations produced are the product of the researcher's (among other actors') positionality (Butler 2001; Haraway 1991; Rose 1997). As I am presenting the final production of a research

² The *tjukurrpa* is a subtle and impalpable Indigenous Australian concept or philosophy that is difficult to translate. Often referred to as 'The Dreaming', it plays a fundamental role in the life world, culture, land tenure system, relationship to country and ritual life of Aboriginal Peoples throughout Australia. It is the fundamental reality that ensures the continuity of the Ngaanyatjarra world. Story often parallels *tjukurrpa* and can mean dream, story, Dreaming, origin period of landscape customs and laws, and the creative period that continues in the present. It also relates to Yarnangu connectedness to land and sacred sites, and to a certain extent, one another. Throughout this thesis I use the term *tjukurrpa* as it is the term used by the local Yarnangu.

interaction between research subjects and researcher, there has not been solid agreement on what or how a particular research story is presented, thereby giving me (the researcher) a powerful position in the translation of the research particulars in question (Ruming 2009).

My research strategy accounts for different kinds of methods, enacting different realities in a complex world filled with ontological difference, in an enmeshed web of interrelations. It is, furthermore, I hope, 'capable of enacting an ontological multiplicity' around art production at Papulankutja, because 'everything is relatively specific, relatively 'local', enacted at particular places on particular occasions' (Law 2004, pp. 137-8), and involves specific groups of people. As Yarnangu being and knowing is different to my own I chart new paths in relation to and alongside Indigenous methodological knowledge systems and offer an alternative route to knowledge. I also understand that this thesis represents a translation. ■

Glossary

APY: APY stands for Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara. This is an Aboriginal local government area in north west South Australia. Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) is incorporated by the 1981 *Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Land Rights Act*, through which the South Australian Parliament gave Aboriginal people title to more than 103,000 square kilometres of arid land in the far northwest of South Australia. All Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara and Ngaanyatjarra people who are traditional owners of any part of the Lands are members of Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara.

business: a generic term for ritual. Known in English as 'Law business', or simply 'business', it is, like the tjukurpa (Dreaming) itself, a multi-dimensional phenomenon, but for the Ngaanyatjarra people its central purpose is bound up with the latent power of the Dreaming.

carpetbaggers: unscrupulous art buyers, agents and dealers

Country: Country is a term that describes a place to which an individual or group of people feel a custodial connection. This place of important cultural significance can be where people or their family have been born or raised. It may also be a place that has held significance within family lineage. Country in this context also refers to a place to which an individual feels a strong and deeply personal affinity. An understanding of one's Country describes an intimate relationship between person and place.

doggers: used to describe a dingo hunter. Doggers often traded dingo scalps for food. In 1912, in an attempt to reduce depredation on livestock, and with the passage of the *Wild Dogs Act*, the government offered a bounty for dingo skins.

dry community: The community of Papulankutja is a dry community. Alcohol is totally banned in this restricted area and it is enforceable. Signage at the entrance of the community advises that the community is an alcohol-protected area.

goanna, also called perentie: refers to a range of carnivorous Australian lizards that have sharp teeth and claws. Two species are common in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands: the common goanna (*Varanus varius*) and the one known colloquially as the perentie lizard (*V. giganteus*). Yarnangu call the former *kurkati* and the latter *ngintaka*, and hunt both species.

humbugging: a term used to refer to making unreasonable demands (usually for money) of family and people and may include harassment

kunmanara: used as a euphemism to avoid addressing someone by a name that sounds like that of a recently deceased person

Indigenous: in this thesis, when capitalised the word Indigenous refers to all indigenous peoples throughout Australia and internationally, including Torres Strait Islander Australians. The term Aboriginal refers more generally to mainland Aboriginal Australians.

maku: bardie or witchetty grub

mamu: evil spirits or ghosts

manguri: a circular pad or carrying ring, usually made of hair string or emu feathers, and used by a woman to balance and cushion laden piti bowls on her head

marlu: red kangaroo

mimi: breast, breast milk

mingkulpa (*Nicotiana excelsior*): A variety of true tobacco that grows wild in the desert and is chewed as a mild narcotic by Yarnangu. Similar to pituri. Often shortened to 'minkle' or 'minkle bar'

money story: money, payment, working for wages

mountain devil lizard: *Moloch horridus*, a small thorny lizard with sharp spines and patches of bright colours covering its body. The lizard changes colour to blend in with its environment. It is harmless and is also called **ngiyari** by Yarnangu.

mulga: the term used to describe the scrub vegetation characterised by the presence of various forms of acacia. This vegetation is extensive throughout the Ngaanyatjarra region.

NPY: stands for Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara. The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Lands span the central desert region of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, covering 350,000 square kilometres and encompassing 26 remote communities and homelands.

perentie: *see goanna*

piti: carrying dish or vessel.

pituri or **pitchuri:** *Duboisia hopwoodii*, also called 'native tobacco', is an important drug. Older Aboriginal men have used it as a stimulant and intoxicant, especially during long ceremonies. In some areas it was used in initiation ceremonies in the making of shamans, where it was used to make the initiate sensitive to the presence of spirits. It was traded over a large area of Australia.

sorry business: vernacular term used for mortuary ritual. Sorry business may last weeks with family and mourners attending sorry camp.

spinifex: *Triodia species*, a pale green spiky grass growing in clumps of varying density throughout the Central and Western Deserts of Australia. Some varieties yield edible seeds and another contains a resin which is used as a general purpose adhesive.

tingari: Ancestral Beings that have made their travels in the desert region and include the carpet snake, eagle, a mythical water snake, crow and others. They are often incorporated into stories and art.

tjanpi: word meaning grass. Tjanpi with a capital T refers to the business enterprise that oversees tjanpi weaving operations throughout both the APY and NPY Lands. It operates under the umbrella of the NPY Women's Council. In 2017 the Tjanpi Director Andrea Mason received the Australian Business Woman of the Year Award.

tjukurrpa: tjukurrpa is often translated in English as the Dreaming. In the Ngaanyatjarra Lands it refers generally to the ancestral period during which the world was shaped by Ancestral Beings, who assumed both human and non-human shapes. They are believed to be responsible for both the contemporary landscape and Ngaanyatjarra social and religious practices. Tjukurrpa is an all-embracing concept that provides rules for living, a moral code, as well as rules for interacting with the natural environment. It provides for a total, integrated way of life. The tjukurrpa is not something that has been consigned to the past but is a lived daily reality. Tjukurrpa is expressed at many levels throughout this thesis.

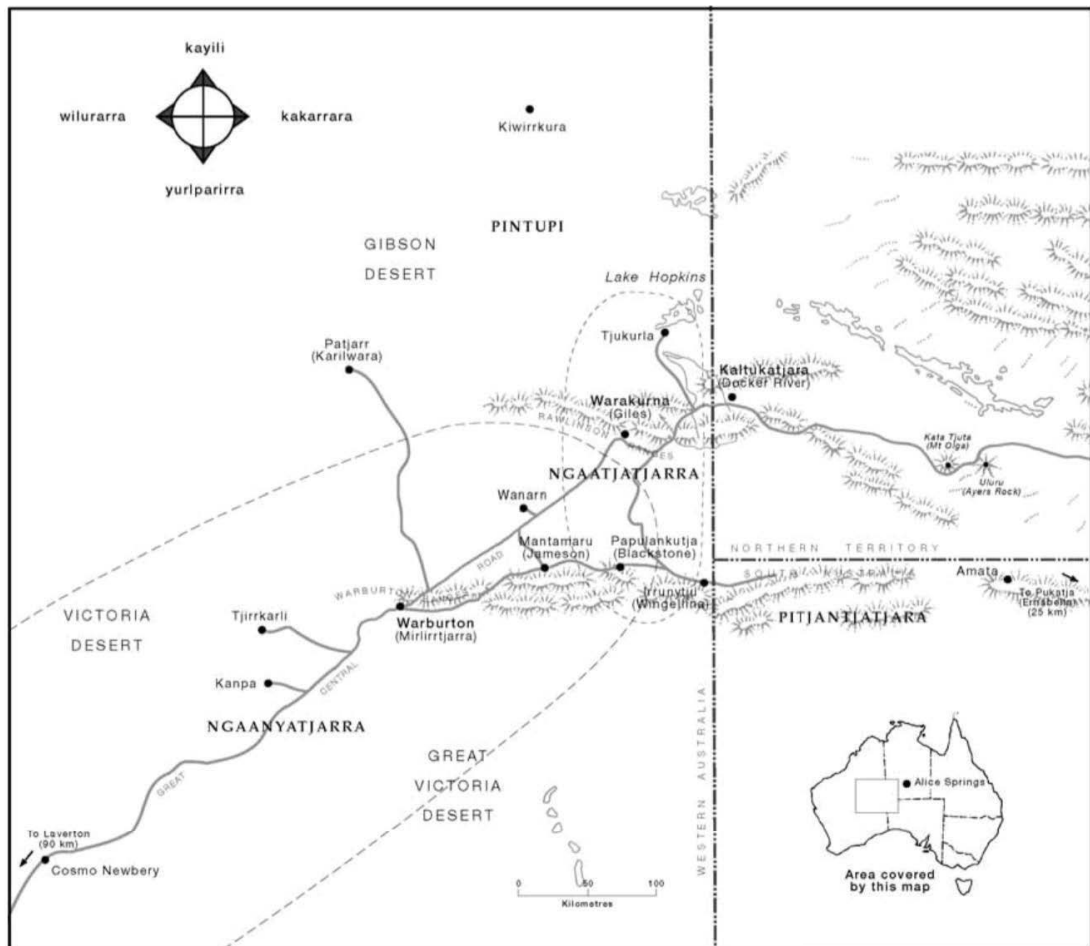
Western Desert: the term Western Desert refers to the contiguous series of deserts to the west of Alice Springs including the Gibson, the Little Sandy and the Great Sandy Deserts. It is now known as the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and covers close to 160,000 square kilometres. As Aboriginal owned land, it is home

to around 2,000 Aboriginal people across 11 communities, of which Papulankutja is one.

wiltja: shade or shelter often constructed of local shrubby branches and foliage

yarnangu (with lower case y): in Ngaanyatjarra language, yarnangu translates as 'person', 'body'.

Yarnangu (with upper case Y): this term has been used in this thesis as a people descriptor as this is what the artists and Papulankutja community call themselves. Other descriptors are western constructs and I wanted to use a term that the Ngaanyatjarra artists were comfortable with. I also note that some Aboriginal groups (NPY Women's Council) also use this term. For Aboriginal people living in the APY Lands the term is Anangu. ■



Map by Brenda Thornley, © The Institute for Aboriginal Development, 2006.

Map showing the Western Desert Region

Source: Brenda Thornley. Copyright: The Institute for Aboriginal Development, 2006

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VOLUME 2 – IMAGES AND APPENDIX

Robyn Williams

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Volume 2: Images and appendix

Please see **volume 1** for the thesis and list of references.

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