

Towards understanding the renewal  
of ancient song traditions  
through Garrwa video:  
an Indigenous story research study

Exegesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of requirements for award of the degree

Doctor of Creative Arts

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## *Certificate of Original Authorship*

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.

This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

Production Note:  
Signature removed prior to publication.

Jason De Santolo

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## *Statement indicating format of thesis*

This DCA is comprised of the following:

A. Major Creative Work

1. Ngabaya video

Access: <https://vimeo.com/250061831> Password: Ngabaya8

2. Darrbarrwarra video

<https://vimeo.com/250071140> Password: Darrbarrwarra8

B. Exegesis

1. Towards the renewal of ancient song traditions through Garrwa video: an Indigenous story research process

## *Preface*

*“Whitefella got that piece of paper – might be lease or something like that – but Yanyuwa and Garrwa mob they got to have kujika. When whitefella ask them kids how you know this country belongs to you, they can say we got the kujika. Kujika, you know, like that piece of paper.” (Elder Dinny McDinny 2012).*

The Ngabaya is a powerful songline saga that traverses right across the continent from West to East, connecting many different clans and tribes. They hold and enact creational powers that form landscapes and map various interconnections between local peoples of the Gulf region and their homelands. The Ngabaya is often in search of something, homelands, of belonging, of a space and place to resonate with and to live a healthy balanced life. Through various epic encounters and shared journeys eastward the Ngabaya song saga offers profound guidance for life and by their actions allow reflection on the proper way of doing things.

I did not grow up in my Gulf country homelands. I was born on Larrakia lands about thousand kilometres away in a city known as Darwin. As a young baby I was institutionalised and placed in the care of the state and was not returned

to my family. My mother, by adoption, shared with me how she chose me. She said she walked down a long line of black Aboriginal babies housed in an old army barracks in Darwin. I stood out as the only little fair skinned baby. Yet the journey was just beginning for me. On my second birthday, Cyclone Tracy would completely destroy Darwin city forcing all women, children and pets to leave and sending me even further East to Aotearoa New Zealand. Little did I know that this would be the beginnings of a long journey of seeking family and belonging, of searching for my homelands and a sense of peaceful resonance with space and place and a healthy whole life.

I first returned to my family, the Daylights, in the early 90's and eventually reached Borroloola and Garrwa homelands. Connecting with all of my family was a powerful experience for me. Everyone was so strong and resilient and yet it was especially painful to see the harsh conditions of the fourth world that everyone suffered in. The birth of my oldest son would call me back to Aotearoa but not before promising my Elders that I would be back. I was in the middle of my law degree and very idealistic and returned to my studies with even more determination to work towards liberation and self determination for my people. Little did I know that I knew nothing and that I



was embarking on a lifetime journey of rediscovery and learning that would profoundly alter my worldviews.

Returning to family was a hard and painful journey. One that would draw me away from people that loved and cared for me. On graduation I was very lucky to get a job in the world leading Indigenous research centre International Research Institute for Maori and Indigenous Education. My decolonising journey just took on a whole new level in that whanau (family) based hub of transformational research scholarly activism. Adamant that I would uphold my promise to the Elders, I sought and was awarded a scholarship to undertake a Research Masters back in my homelands. On the Elders guidance I spent many years looking into the transformational role of our outstations. This set a new foundation for kin relationships and shifted my values to more of a collective way of seeing the world. But in the eyes of my Elders and community I was still a boy. Many years later, after years of preparation, I would go through our ceremony and finally become a man and take on a more significant role with the family. Within this significant moment I had a series of profound waking dreams that would inspire me to go deeper into this knowledge journey and take up the challenge of this creative doctorate.

My Elders were excited to hear the story of dreams and determined it to be an important affirmation of my chosen role and my knowledge journey. Leading Indigenous Storywork scholar Jo-Ann Archibald highlights the importance of relational connection and reveres dreams as a profound source of wisdom: *"The Trickster stories remind us about the good power of interconnections within the family, community, nation, culture, and land. If we become disconnected, we lose the ability to make meaning from Indigenous stories."* (Archibald 2008). Much like Archibald's storywork, sharing my dream was part of the story research process involved in renewing the Ngabaya song tradition. The video, the writing, the talking, the storying, the reflections. All of these things layer constellations of meaning and locate Garrwa cultural powers in our ancient songs of the land. This dream, like this study, sheds new light to the reverence for song as a way of life, as an ancient Indigenous jurisprudence.

*I slowly woke up from sleep, we all slept under the stars, camped on a low ridge cradled within a mountainous valley that stretched up to the sky. All I could see was a soft glow from above, but I could hear the rhythmic sound of thousands of clapsticks and soft chants. No one else seemed to stir, and as I*

*finally focused on the sky I noticed the full moon shone glowing from behind an almost sparkling cloud near the horizon. Realising the glow was not the moon I looked up and above us was an Elder Ancestor hovering arms outstretched towards us, hands glowing and sending pulsating healing energy down onto all of us. I felt an overwhelming sense of joy and healing and as I sat up I looked to towards the valley. In this profound moment I realised that Ancestors covered the valley, sitting rhythmically using the clapsticks and singing together as one. The glow coming from our Elder Ancestor's hands were also surrounding each singer, connecting the powerful force across all of the valley and into the sky. The feeling of complete peace overwhelmed my body and mind and all I remember was waking up feeling healed, deeply in tune with my breath, healthy and connected.*

This dream has had a transformational effect on my body, mind and spirit. I would later talk and story this up with the Elders and brothers and I would process the meaning by simply saying - it is time to work with all your relations and protect the land. The way to do this was through Yarnbar, jarngkurr, walaba - talk story and song (public).

This was the genesis of the DCA journey of knowledge. It reconnected me with the healing power of my Ancestors and lands and resonated with me in a way that symbolised that I was on the right path. The Ngabaya guided me in my knowledge journey and guided me towards reconnecting to my family, my people and my homelands. As a Wurdaliya (my clan) man Ngabaya is part of the Yigan, the Dreaming, and forms part of how I understand my place in the world and how I enact my responsibilities. This knowledge journey has revealed just how powerful the Yigan is, as a source of life and as a world making notion that determines interconnections and relational ways of being. In orientating ourselves in the world we also look to the teachings from Elders and knowledge holders.

While my whole life story started on Larrakia lands, then across the seas in Aotearoa, I am very proud to feel like I have been woven into the fabric of Garrwa life. At a deeper personal level, I feel awakened to a more profound understanding of my life's journey as part of the reimagining of our songline logic. This is much bigger experience to explore and reflect on with Elders and that is one reason why this study is important to community. It is no coincidence that Elders are now sharing ancient deep knowledge through old processes as well as through innovative ways. At a time of global

environmental and social crisis, the sharing of this knowledge space is manifest by our Elders deep desire to protect mother earth and generations to come. There is no doubt in my mind the solution to this environmental and social crisis lies within relational collaborations and the practices of local Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being. I hope the generous nature of our Elders is reflected in the exegesis. We aimed to create a decolonising family driven approach to creative research collaboration that is fluid and deeply respectful of all peoples and beings. If understanding renewal is about reconnecting relationships in the process of seeking life, then the beauty and resilience of our culture is sure to prevail. I hope this study offers ways for others to make meaning and reconnection with what's important for their families in revitalising culture and seeking healthy peaceful lives in their homes and homelands. Our work continues to enact the strength of our ancestors and the prophetic vision of our Elders.

## *Dedication*

*Dedicated to Marty Adams,  
our solid brother, epic storyteller & filmmaker,  
your stories live on.*

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## *Abstract*

This Doctorate of Creative Arts focuses on understanding the transformative power of ancient song renewal through an Indigenous story research video project. In reflecting upon the profound jurisprudential nature of ancient song traditions, this exegesis maps Indigenous story research and video processes through the decolonising lens of Garrwa Yarnbar Jarngkurr or Garrwa talk~story. The first music video renews the ancient Ngabaya songline with deep relational reverence and the second evokes a re-emergence of the Darrbarrwarra as good warriors fighting for the land. The Ngabaya and Darrbarrwarra videos strategically engage with intent, orientation and relationality in the renewal process and presents cultural powers as aspirational enactments of self determination and homeland liberation.

The scope of this study is inspired and informed by four foundational bodies of work within the Indigenous Research Paradigm (Wilson 2008): Indigenous Storywork (Archibald 2008), Decolonising Methodologies (Smith 1999) (Sherwood 2010), (Pihama 2015), Visual Sovereignty (Raheja 2010) and Indigenous Jurisprudence (Jackson 2017) (Behrendt 2003). In dialogue with Social Semiotic Multimodal Theory (van Leeuwen 2017) this DCA develops multimodal micro video analysis as an analytical tool that affirms the importance of meaning making and truth modalities as elements of a

decolonising framework. Yarnbar Jarngkurr emerges as part of the global resurgence in protecting land, in revitalising languages, in asserting original laws. The study enhances creative research practice and shifts Indigenous video practice into greater resonance with the project of Aural Sovereignty. The exegesis provides context for Yarnbar Jarngkurr talk~story to emerge as a family driven decolonising methodology of creative renewal, with principles and working protocols for revitalising language and shielding Indigenous homelands from extractive industries.