

WHEN TIME'S ARROWS COLLIDE:  
HISTORICAL CRITIQUE IN INDIGENOUS CONTEMPORARY ART

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This dissertation examines the work of four indigenous contemporary artists: Gabriel Maralngurra, George Nuku, Corey Bulpitt and Nonggirnga Marawili. In bringing them together, it reveals a key tendency within recent indigenous art towards a reflexive critique of modern historicism. Rather than merely representing alternative modes of representing the past, this dissertation argues that these artists are engaged in meta-historical attempts to picture the ways in which multiple modes of history making overlap, intersect and collide in our world today. Examining four distinctive case studies, this dissertation explores the ways in which indigenous contemporary artists engage with the institutions of art and ethnography, while exploring the nature of subject-object relations substantiated by these institutions. This dissertation considers the implications of this practice for indigenous self-representation, while considering the role of art in cross-cultural dialogue.



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## **PREFACE**

Above all others, this dissertation is indebted to the support of my wife Lydia Lange. In 2011, when this journey began, I do not think either of us could have predicted the ways in which our lives would change. From the arrival of our two beautiful children, Gabriel and Audrey, through multiple trips around the world, it has been a journey that has benefitted from her endless patience, pragmatism and unwavering love. I would like to also thank my family, especially my parents Drs. Paul and Margaret Skerritt, and my in-laws Kevin and Stacey Lange, who have been a constant source of support and encouragement.

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In October 2015, I first traveled to Charlottesville to visit the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection. I had no idea that it would be the first in what would be a life-changing association with the institution. Then, as now, I am indebted to the staff Dr. Margo Smith AM, Nicole Wade and Lauren Maupin for their wisdom and support.

Lastly, this dissertation could not have been possible without the four extraordinary artists who make up the case studies. To Gabriel, George, Corey and Nonggirnga, I owe my deepest gratitude. Your work has changed the way I look at the world. Thank you for your patience and generosity. I only hope that I am able to do it some small justice to your art in these pages.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Feeling historical can be like a rug pulled out: a gestalt change, perhaps, or a sense of sudden relocation.<sup>1</sup>

JAMES CLIFFORD

I am an art historian. I say this, not to be overly self-reflexive, but because it goes some way to answering the *who*, *what*, *why* and *how* of this dissertation. This dissertation is about art and history. It examines the work of four indigenous artists—Gabriel Maralngurra, George Nuku, Corey Bulpitt and Nonggirnga Marawili. Hailing from different cultures and countries, their practices embody diverse facets of the global indigenous contemporary art movement: a movement whose heterogeneity almost defies definition. In bringing them together, this dissertation reveals a key, and to date scarcely examined, tendency within recent indigenous art towards a reflexive criticism of Western historicism. The history making here is not the dividing of time's arrow which is at the basis of European historiography.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it is a meta-historical attempt to picture the ways in which multiple modes of history making overlap, intersect and collide in our world today.

It has become an academic commonplace to acknowledge that history is no longer singular. Across the humanities, the grand narratives of progress have been decentered: there is no

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<sup>1</sup> James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty First Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Donald R. Kelly, "Ideas of Periodization in the West," in *The Many Faces of Clio: Cross-Cultural Approaches to Historiography*, ed. Q. Edward Wang and Franz L. Fillafer (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007).

longer an accepted, single vantage point from which to write the past, present, or future of humanity. The effect has been to open the historical disciplines to previously neglected perspectives by including once marginalized voices, while paying new attention to unfamiliar idioms and alternative modes of history making (oral accounts, ritual practices, material cultures). And yet, despite the best intentions to forge more global or intercultural approaches to history, the idea persists (from scholars as diverse as Hayden White to Ashis Nandy) that history—as both a scholarly endeavor and a mode of being in the world—is an irrevocably modernist and Western pursuit.<sup>3</sup> It is for this reason that Stephen Muecke adamantly declares: *Why I am not a historian*:

I shall begin by trying to do without the mediation of historical thinking, this being a mode of thought elaborated largely by Western traditions, in which past and present are linked within the rhetoric of an illusory continuity, but which excludes most of the peoples of the world from participation. In the process it often puts these others in a position of weakness or lack and in an historical catch-up position.<sup>4</sup>

I am highly sympathetic to Muecke's concern, and yet, I remain an art historian. Indeed, at my prospectus defense, one of my committee members—Professor Fred Myers—asked a searchingly obvious question: *why stick with the concept of history?* At the time, I had no ready response to that question; merely an intuition that, for some reason *history mattered*. As I reflected on the question, I began realizing that it was because *history* also seemed to matter to the artists I was looking at. In interview and conversation, I have been amazed by the frequency with which Maralngurra, Nuku, Bulpitt and Marawili used the term when referring to their art and culture. In the wake of colonization, history has emerged as a central concern of indigenous

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Hayden White, "The Westernization of World History," in *Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate*, ed. Jörn Rüssen (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002). Ashis Nandy, "History's Forgotten Doubles," *History and Theory* 34, no. 2 (1995).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Muecke, *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 8.

artists globally: from the 19<sup>th</sup> century drawings of Tommy McCrae to the Plains Indian Ledger Books; through to the postmodern imagery of Carl Beam and Robert Campbell Jnr. Indeed, such historical reflexivity might be expected: colonization forced a profound reconsideration of concepts such as “tradition,” “culture,” and of course, “history,” particularly as they relate to the processes of self-representation. The significance of this is far from abstract. The rise of global indigenous movements in the last half-century have been part of a desperate political struggle by indigenous people to assert the persistence of their cultures, their pride in their heritage, and their rights to exist in the present. If this battle has been fought over the right to control one’s history, it is also quite literally, a life or death struggle *to be contemporary*.

Sadly, it is a right that has, historically, been denied to indigenous peoples. Indeed, it is only recently that contemporary art historians have even concerned themselves with indigenous art—and it remains a field of study largely dominated by anthropologists. The discipline of anthropology has gone through its own soul-searching in the last three decades, with critics like Johannes Fabian drawing attention to the discipline’s foundation in an allochronic discourse that denies the coevalness of the anthropologist and their subjects.<sup>5</sup> How then to move beyond this? The answer cannot be a simple flattening of time: the bringing together of everyone into a pluralistic temporal unity. For this is not dissimilar to the universalizing violence perpetuated by the progressive time of modernity upon those deemed “pre-modern” or “primitive”. No, true contemporaneity requires recognizing that there is a multiplicity of ways of “being in time” operative in our world today.

As Terry Smith has noted, the entangled networks of the contemporary condition have brought disjunctive ways of understanding time and space into unprecedented contact and

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<sup>5</sup> See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

conflict.<sup>6</sup> This dissertation not only considers the ways in which different historical practices are played out in contemporary indigenous art, but also shows how four artists consciously and searchingly reflect upon these disjunctive perspectives as sites of constructive tension. These artists are self-reflexive in what might be termed their “historical thinking” about history. Instead of seeing history as a burden, their work views history as a site of emergent possibilities. In many instances, this manifests itself in a conscious reflection upon the historical practices of Othering embodied in the disciplines of anthropology, art history and museology.

I began this introduction by stating that I was an art historian. In their own ways, I have concluded that Maralnguorra, Nuku, Bulpitt and Marawili are also art historians. It is in the spirit of dialogue that this dissertation aims to find ways that these seemingly divergent modes of art historical thought might speak productively to each other.

## 1.1 A BRIEF HISTORICAL DIVERSION

History is a slippery concept. There are few other academic disciplines whose name is so regularly cited in common parlance. The Oxford English Dictionary divides its definitions into two categories:

1. Senses relating to the narration, representation, or study of past events or phenomena;
2. Past events and relates senses.

These two categories broadly delineate the two major uses that would be familiar to most English speakers: one being synonymous with the past, the other referring to the study of the

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<sup>6</sup> Terry Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Nancy Condee, and Okwui Enwezor (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2008); *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009); *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (New York: Pearson, 2011).

past.<sup>7</sup> These categories might be compared to the distinction drawn by Keith Jenkins between the discourse (History) and its object (the past).<sup>8</sup> This double meaning of the word was not present in its original Greek form, ἱστορία (historía), which as R.G. Collingwood notes, meant simply “an investigation or inquiry.”<sup>9</sup> The distinction is crucial to Jenkins: history he argues, is a discourse *about*, but categorically different to the past: “The past and history float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart.”<sup>10</sup>

Jenkins aim is a characteristically postmodern one. History, he argues, is composed of epistemology, methodology, and ideology. Epistemology shows that we can never really know the past: the gap between past and history is an ontological divide that no amount of effort can bridge. Historians have worked to devise methodologies to strive towards objectivity, but these are a recent and partial construction, leading to a contested discourse. In the end, Jenkins concludes, “history is theory and theory is ideological and ideology is just material interests.”<sup>11</sup> In his much quoted essay, “History’s Forgotten Doubles,” Ashis Nandy criticizes Jenkins for failing to take this argument to its logical conclusion. “Keith Jenkins,” argues Nandy, “sharply distinguishes between history and the past, but refuses to take the next logical step—to acknowledge that history might be only one way of constructing the past and other cultures might have explored other ways.”<sup>12</sup> While I agree broadly with Nandy’s argument, I think he is mistaken to see this as a logical step in Jenkin’s argument. Quite the contrary, I would claim it is

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<sup>7</sup> Finn Fuglestad, *The Ambiguities of History: The Problem of Ethnocentrism in Historical Writing (Tid Og Tanke)* (Trondheim: Akademika Publishing, 2005), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 6-9.

<sup>9</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History (Revised Edition with Lectures 1926-28)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 17-19.

<sup>10</sup> Jenkins, 34.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>12</sup> Nandy, 52.

precisely Jenkins' rigid separation of history and the past that prevents him from recognizing that history is, in Nandy's words, "a mode of world construction."

This is not to say that Jenkins does not consider "the past" to be as "notional a concept as "the real world:" Jenkins is certainly conscious of the ways in which discourse forms the objects of which it speaks.<sup>13</sup> The difficulty in this case, is that in forcing a rigid distinction between discourse and object, Jenkins fails to recognize that "history" and "the past" are mutually informing discourses. Finn Fuglestad calls this the central ambiguity of history: "that the very discipline of history does not, cannot exist outside of history; it does not, cannot exist outside its own object of study. History is in fact, the *product* of its own object of study."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, reading Jenkins against the grain, we might find this very fact corroborated in his parting salvo:

What I am suggesting is thus a radical historicisation of history ('always historicise') and I take this as the starting point for a reflexive historian, going on to suggest that, for subsequent historical work, you develop a self-consciously held (and acknowledged) position ... The only choice is between a history that is aware of what it is doing and a history that is not.<sup>15</sup>

But are these really the only choices? Certainly, as Nandy asserts, "Historical consciousness now owns the globe." But this is hardly a given: as he notes, not long ago, historical consciousness had to coexist with other modes of constructing the past; moreover, "millions of people still live outside 'history.'"<sup>16</sup> Fuglestad elaborates, arguing that the concept of history as it is currently understood is framed entirely through the conceptual frames of Western thought. For Fuglestad, it was precisely by defining the conceptual lens through which the past was read, that Western civilization psychically asserted their superiority to other "non-

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<sup>13</sup> Jenkins, 79.

<sup>14</sup> Fuglestad, 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> Jenkins, 82.

<sup>16</sup> Nandy, 46.

historical” societies. In particular, this was linked to the emergence of progress as a central defining component of Western civilization (as epitomized in Hegel’s purposive movement of history, and Ranke’s positivism). The problem then, was not simply that history is tied to a particular view of the past, but that it is also central to definition of Western civilization, which Fuglestad argues, cannot conceive of itself without history: “The point here is that history as we know it was fashioned exclusively by Western civilization, *and* that the practice of historical inquiry contributed in turn to fashion the same civilization, to the point of becoming one of its defining components.”<sup>17</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty notes something similar when he argues, “Europe remains the sovereign subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian,” “Chinese,” “Kenyan,” and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called “the history of Europe.” ... Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge.” Here, the universalizing bind of historical consciousness becomes readily apparent: in reading into European history “an entelechy of universal reason,” the argument follows that *only Europe is theoretically knowable*.<sup>18</sup>

For this reason, it is insufficient to write “alternative histories,” in order to address the “asymmetric ignorance” that marks the historical record (a process Nandy calls an “exercise in self-correction.”)<sup>19</sup> If selective absences from the historical record were the only problem the solution would be relatively easy. What then, are the alternatives? The obvious solution would be to write histories sensitive to the particular ways of conceiving the past present in other, non-

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<sup>17</sup> Fuglestad, 16. Tony Bennett furthers this observation, by noting how historical consciousness was essential to the formation of the modern self. Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 93-96.

<sup>18</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27-29.

<sup>19</sup> Nandy, 50.



Western cultures. And yet, such a process is easier said than done. For Nandy, this would require dismantling the entire historical enterprise:

One thing the historical consciousness cannot do, without dismantling the historian's self-definition and threatening the entire philosophical edifice of modern history: it cannot admit that the historical consciousness can be demystified or unmasked and that an element of self-destructiveness could be introduced into that consciousness ... History has established such a hegemony in our known universe. In that universe, the discipline is no longer merely the best available entry into the past; it now exhausts the idea of the past.<sup>20</sup>

Nandy makes a direct appeal, not for alternative histories, but alternatives *to history*—in which the ahistorical articulate their own realities in their own unique ways. But what these alternatives might look like, and how they might evade the universalizing discourse of history remains largely aspirational. To resolve this quandary, we might look to scholars who have taken up this challenge, or in a more general sense, whose work shares the aim of moving beyond the perfect equivalence of history and the past. Notable examples of this include the work of Tony Swain, Peter Nabokov, Stephen Muecke, and Minoru Hokari.<sup>21</sup>

Broadly speaking, these texts take one of two approaches. The first, which we might call an analytic approach, outlines the particularities of a different conception of time, and then attempts to apply this framework as the basis for considering the ways in which particular groups construct their past. This approach illustrated to productive effect in the work of Nabokov. An alternative, is to reject the entire historical process altogether. Proponents of this position—such as Muecke or Minoru—take a much more radical pose, attempting to shift the discourse to what they term “place based ontologies.” Rather than rejecting the notion that non-Western subjects

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Peter Nabokov, *A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Muecke; Minoru Hokari, *Gurindji Journey: A Japanese Historian in the Outback* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

are “ahistorical,” these scholars embrace the idea, positioning it as the site for radical alternatives.

Sitting between these two positions is a third approach taken up by Tony Swain. Exploring the question of Indigenous temporality, he argues that Indigenous societies did not have any sense of time whatsoever. Rather than being structured on temporal lines, Aboriginal being was structured along the concept of “abiding events.” Swain does not see this in negative terms: like Muecke’s *Ancient and Modern*, his is an attempt to portray Aboriginal cosmology as being as rich and complex as the Western philosophical tradition. It is in the service of a substantially more complex understanding of space that Swain shuns temporality. Swain sets up a clear opposition between Western time and Aboriginal concepts of place (that he terms ubeity). According to Swain, the encounter with European colonists forced Aboriginal Australians to accommodate and change, and that these changes involved the incorporation of cumulative time.<sup>22</sup>

In critiquing Swain’s argument, there is the danger of falling into a semantic debate, hinging on the precise definitions that one gives to time and place. While Western civilization might have defined itself through history in ways that other cultures have appeared ambivalent to, this does not mean they had no interest in the temporal dimension of human existence. Suggesting that other societies have no temporal structure because they do not conform to one culturally specific structure (historical consciousness) has all the churlishness of a child taking their ball home.

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<sup>22</sup> Swain. A similar argument is offered by Fuglestad: “The notion of the past as strictly chronologically ordered time stretching indefinitely backwards from the present seems to have been unknown to a very substantial part of humanity for most of its existence. So also has that notion’s corollary, a future stretching indefinitely forward from the present. The exceptions to the rule, as I see it, were primarily those parts of the world that witnessed the rise to prominence of the so-called revealed religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The central point about revealed religions is that they are “historical”, or chronologically oriented religions and as such operate with the notion of a year one. Hence they have tended to develop a concept of time which we may qualify as unequivocally linear: time flows in one direction, and the flow of time cannot be reversed.” Fuglestad, 27-28.

Nevertheless, Ian Keen is correct in his criticisms that Swain's text tends to use Western conceptions of time and place as the normative basis for analysis. According to Keen, "Swain's translation process here is to take Kantian categories (time, space or place) to be universally applicable, if not universally present, and to test evidence from their presence, absence or relative weight as principles."<sup>23</sup> The problem that Swain runs up against—and that Keen identifies—is precisely that identified by Chakrabarty: that these categories demand a certain universalism that once invoked is unavoidable. Moving beyond this cannot simply mean rejecting these categories outright. As Chakrabarty notes:

The project of provincializing Europe ... cannot be a project of cultural relativism. It cannot originate from the stance that the reason/ science/ universals that help define Europe as the modern are simply "culture specific" and therefore only belong to European cultures. For the point is not the Enlightenment rationalism is always unreasonable in itself, but rather a matter of documenting how—through what historical process—its "reason," which was not always self-evident to everyone, has been made to look far beyond the ground where it originated.<sup>24</sup>

In a sense, Chakrabarty's argument is merely the inverse of Muecke's rejection of history, and Chakrabarty is clear that the anti-historical subject "cannot speak itself as "theory" within the knowledge procedures of the university even when these knowledge procedures acknowledge and "document" its existence." Central to Chakrabarty's argument is the notion that, the competing temporal frames that define the West and its Other have become increasingly entangled. The key issue then becomes how we frame the transition, and its attendant structural inequalities. Despite its flaws, Swain's book is useful in this regard, for it suggests concrete models for the incorporation of metric time, as colonialism introduced identifiable physical and

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<sup>23</sup> Ian Kean, "Ubiquitous Ubiety of Dubious Uniformity," *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 4, no. 2 (1993): 98.

<sup>24</sup> Chakrabarty, 43.

psychic challenges to existing systems of land usage. Another way we might consider this is through Nandy's suggestion that many in the South have "accepted history as a handy language for negotiating the modern world."<sup>25</sup>

The danger in such a claim is that it entrenches the universality of Western historical time, by suggesting, as Dan Thu Nguyen does, that metric time has "conquered" the globe, through its irreversible destruction of other modes of conceiving time.<sup>26</sup> The problem with such a claim is that alternative modes of conceiving time are remarkably persistent. Suggesting that Western time simply sweeps in and conquers, incorrectly describes metric time as a technology rather than a discursive structure, and positions non-Western actors as passive recipients, rather than the instigators of historical processes. More pertinently, it ignores the fact that such transitions were neither smooth, nor non-violent, and elides the impact that the encounter with disjunctive temporalities has had on Western epistemological frames. As Chakrabarty notes, such arguments have the tendency to presume a homogenous and internalized "Europe," forgetting the fact that the West was also shaped by external encounters.<sup>27</sup>

It is in this context that the role of asserting non-Western temporal frames becomes most evident. In the North American Indian context, Peter Nabokov notes that history is central to self-definition, tribal identity and continuity. The difficulty, as Nabokov describes it, is that the practices of articulating history for the Navajo, Tlingit, or Pawnee are not necessarily recognizable as such to Western discourse.<sup>28</sup> James Clifford suggests a role for anthropology by replacing the focus from "history" to "historical practices":

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<sup>25</sup> Nandy, 45.

<sup>26</sup> Dan Thu Nguyen, "The Spatialization of Metric Time: The Conquest of Land and Labour in Europe and the United States," *Time & Society* 1, no. 1 (1992).

<sup>27</sup> Chakrabarty, 45.

<sup>28</sup> Nabokov, 47-57.

I have suggested that “history” belongs, significantly to others. Its discourses and temporal shapes are idiomatic and varied. A concept of “historical practice” can help expand our range of attention, allowing us to take seriously the claims of oral transmission, genealogy, and ritual processes. These embodied, practical ways of representing the past have not been considered fully, realistically, historical by modern ideologies that privilege literacy and chronology. Historical practice can act as a translation tool for rethinking “tradition,” a central process of indigenous survival and renewal.<sup>29</sup>

It is here that I would like to suggest an active role for art history. George Marcus and Fred Myers contend that, “in contemporary cultural life, art has come to occupy a space long associated with anthropology, becoming one of the main sites for tracking, representing, and performing the effects of difference in contemporary life.”<sup>30</sup> As a site that of “embodied historical practices” that are also intercultural in nature, art works offer a profound site of entry into a range of historical understandings, whose aesthetic frame allows consideration beyond positivist or rationalist frames. If this is the role of art, then it also suggests an important critical role for art historians.

## 1.2 INDIGENEITY

Before continuing our discussion of history, it is necessary to discuss the other key term of discussion: indigeneity. While all of the artists in this dissertation would accept that they are “indigenous” artists, it is not necessarily a label that they themselves use. In most cases they prefer more specific affiliations such as Kunwinjku, Māori, Haida or Yolngu.<sup>31</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>29</sup> Clifford, 28.

<sup>30</sup> George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, eds., *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> Following this logic, I have chosen to keep the word “indigenous” in lower case, unless referring to specific groups (such as Indigenous Australians).

I think all four artists recognize a certain level of kinship with other indigenous peoples. Corey Bulpitt offered the following assessment:

I think a lot of people are trying to achieve the same goals, just bringing their traditional styles to the forefront and maybe messages to modern society. In some ways, just to lump everyone together at any time, it can be in some ways detrimental, but in other ways it can be positive. Everyone's got their own individuality as people or tribes or nations. You might not want to be called British, or the Haida might not want to be called Tsimshian. Along those lines, we're all unique in our own way, at the same time, some of us are facing the same struggles or issues. So I don't think it's insulting in other ways to connect us in that way.<sup>32</sup>

The word *indigenous* makes its way into the English language in the seventeenth century from the Latin *indigenus* meaning "born into a country" or "native." For several centuries, *indigenous* was a fairly straightforward descriptor used to indicate regional origin. In 1788, John Walcott uses it in the title of his botanical survey *Flora Britannica Indigena, or, Plates of the Indigenous Plants of Great Britain*, and in 1825 Thomas Campbell rhapsodizes that "real indigenous poetry is a sweet flower," referring simply to the homespun balladry of the Welsh.<sup>33</sup>

In the second half of the twentieth century, *indigenous* assumes a much more complex meaning in the realm of identity politics. In 2006, while attempting to answer the question "Who or what are 'indigenous peoples?'" the anthropologist Alan Barnard is forced to conclude that there can be no nomothetic definition, even if "we all know it [indigeneity] when we see it." Barnard is more certain about what is *not* indigenous: "No one would seriously accept, say, 'the English' as an 'indigenous people.' Being the 'indigenous people' of England is not the same thing as being indigenous to England ... When we call a people 'indigenous' we imply much more."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Corey Bulpitt, interview with the author, April 6, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> John Walcott, *Flora Britannica Indigena, or, Plates of the Indigenous Plants of Great Britain* (Bath: S. Hazard, 1788); Thomas Campbell, "Lectures on Poetry," *The New Monthly Magazine* 13, no. 1 (1825): 2.

<sup>34</sup> Alan Barnard, "Kalahari Revisionism, Vienna and the 'Indigenous Peoples' Debate," *Social Anthropology* 4, no. 1 (2006): 7.

As Barnard's distinction intimates, by the late 1960s, *indigenous* came to refer predominantly to those peoples belonging to a non-Western pre-colonial heritage. In prizing heterogeneity in contrast to the homogenizing tendencies of modernity, the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s brought new attention to the plight of such peoples and communities. At the same time, indigenous peoples around the world were increasingly vocal in asserting their rights to sovereignty, self-representation and territorial ownership. Finding a working definition for *indigeneity* seemed an urgent legal, political and social imperative for the governments of nation states grappling with these demands. Conversely, finding a suitable frame for self-definition was vital for indigenous people, struggling to define themselves against the assimilative tide of modernization.

Defining *indigeneity* was not, however, a new process. In 1986, the historian John McCorquodale would note that in two centuries of white settlement, Australian governments had used no less than 67 different classifications, descriptions or definitions to determine an indigenous person.<sup>35</sup> In the early decades of settlement, these definitions mainly centered on place of habitation (e.g. "the natives of Macquarie Harbour"). As increased settlement resulted in the dispossession and intermixing of indigenous peoples, this criteria was increasingly replaced by definitions based on race and "blood-quotum." By the 1960s, such racialized definitions were both unpalatable and impossible; without written records it was often difficult to establish genealogy, and intermixing meant that indigenous and non-indigenous communities were inexorably entangled. Despite this, almost all legal definitions still require some proof of ancestry or descent, maintaining a racial dimension to the definition of *indigeneity*.

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<sup>35</sup> John McCorquodale, "The Legal Classification of Race in Australia," *Aboriginal History* 10, no. 1 (1986).

In 1972, the United Nations appointed José Martínez Cobo to examine the international plight of indigenous peoples. After analyzing the criteria used by nation states around the world to define indigenous peoples, in 1982 Cobo offered the following working definition:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories. They form at present non-dominant sectors of the society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.<sup>36</sup>

The Cobo report was a significant moment in enshrining *indigenous peoples* as the internationally preferred nomenclature, although not without some resistance, particularly from those favoring the designations ‘first nations’ or ‘aboriginal peoples.’ *Indigenous* was selected for several reasons. Firstly, it was seen as advantageous to *aboriginal*, which had come to be associated specifically with Aboriginal peoples from Australia. Secondly, *aboriginal* was seen to carry a temporal dimension suggestive of primitivism, as indicated in its Latin root *ab origine* meaning “from the beginning.” In contrast, *indigenous* was seen as being indelibly connected to place (as in the OED definition “Born or produced naturally in a land or region; native or belonging naturally to). As such, the designation *indigenous* is necessarily site specific, as opposed to terms like *primitive* that are universal and spatially unmarked. The association with place and connection to land remain essential to the definition of *indigenous*.

In the Cobo definition, this connection to land is expressed in terms of territoriality, as having an original claim to ancestral lands. This definition is much closer to the OED definition of *aboriginal*, which is defined by earliest presence (“Dwelling in the country before the arrival

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<sup>36</sup> José Martínez Cobo, "Study of the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations," (New York: United Nations, 1982).



of later (European) colonists”). In part, Cobo’s definition responds to the concept of *indigeneity* as a form of identification linked to the struggle for political rights. This is clearly manifest in his four-part focus on original-habitation, non-dominance, cultural difference, and self-ascription.

The first three of Cobo’s criteria point to the intersubjective nature of *indigeneity*. Defined in relation to colonization, the category *indigenous* can only exist relative to the presence of later settler societies. Even if the position is assumed for the political aims of identification against colonial annihilation, it remains a term that is imposed by colonizers, and is therefore limited from the beginning by having to assume a subject position made available only by the oppressor. This position often conceals the dynamic differences within and between indigenous communities, while enforcing what Patrick Wolfe terms a “repressive authenticity.”<sup>37</sup> Defined as both within and without the modern nation state, indigenous peoples are relegated to the secondary position of oppressed minorities (as implied in the notion of non-dominance), and in their quest for political rights are forced to affirm imposed Western values of kinship and property ownership.

Nevertheless, as Cobo’s fourth point makes clear, *indigeneity* is also self-ascriptive. Self-identification and community affirmation are central features of most legal definitions, and despite being intersubjective, it is a subject position that indigenous people apply to themselves with a sense of pride in their cultural heritage. As a result, *indigeneity* is a fluid category, open to continual reinvention and rejuvenation. This helps explain why it is such a difficult concept to define, as it is both historically and situationally contingent. It also suggests its value as a site of resistance, for although it cannot be pinned down by a single nomothetic definition, *indigeneity*

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<sup>37</sup> Mathias Gruenther et al., "Discussion: The Concept of Indigeneity," *Social Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (2006). This criticism is echoed by many commentators, including Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Manjusha Nair, "Defining Indigeneity: Situating Transnational Knowledge," *World Society Focus Paper Series* (2006).

is not meaningless. Despite their multiplicity, indigenous peoples maintain vital connections to place and pre-colonial heritage. As the Aboriginal Australian academic Mick Dodson notes, while Aboriginalities are not fixed, “this does not mean that Aboriginalities are without content. Nor does it mean that we are not intimately connected with our past.”<sup>38</sup> The continuity of these associations within the modern nation state challenges the universality of the enlightenment project, pointing towards the fissures within modernity and the many coeval ways of being in the contemporary world. Contrary to social Darwinist beliefs that indigenous cultures were doomed to extinction, Indigenous cultures have not disappeared, and today are undergoing a global resurgence as indigenous peoples assert their presence on the local, national and global stage.<sup>39</sup>

### 1.3 A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

The four case studies in dissertation are each unique. They were chosen because they each represent a different aspect of indigenous engagement with history and contemporary art. To this end, each case study required slightly different approaches. Nevertheless, I have been guided by a series of consistent principles. The first of these was a commitment to the art object. Wherever possible, I have tried to structure my discussions around the works themselves. The artists in this dissertation take their practice seriously, and believe wholeheartedly in the ability of their art to communicate something significant about their cultures. At the same time, this does not alleviate the need for interpretation, as Bulpitt notes:

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Dodson, "The End in the Beginning: Re(De)Finding Aboriginality," in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michelle Grossman (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 39.

<sup>39</sup> See for instance, Jeffrey Sissons, *First Peoples: Indigenous Cultures and Their Futures* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005); Clifford.

You know, they say a picture can say a thousand words. I think it can provoke thought and the stories that we bring forward are stories of our history, of the ways our clans became. It's quite a complex society. In my work, I try to just encourage the viewer to start to wonder even, "what is this?" Just to capture some sort of interest that they might look further into what our art is. To the casual observer who might not know anything about it, hopefully they know it's Haida, or they know it's Northwest Coast. It can just start a conversation or a thought. Or a thought in their mind to find out what they're looking at ... They might not understand the figures or why there's certain figures on it, but it can start the question "what is this?" and then all of a sudden they can see the residential school or they maybe there's a plaque that has some sort of information they can read, and start their search for what they want to know. It's always up to the viewer.<sup>40</sup>

To this end, I consider each of these chapters a "conversation" with the artists and their artworks. Working with living artists I have been extremely fortunate to be able to speak with the subjects of this dissertation. They have each proven extraordinarily generous with their time and insights. I have tried, wherever possible, to include their words. If a point could be made using the artist's words rather than my own, I deliberately opted for theirs. While this cannot completely alleviate the projection of my own interpretive lens—after all, it was I who selected the quotes and asked the questions—I hope that it suggests, in some small way, the dialogic intent to my methodology. At the same time, this is only one portion of the dialogue taking place. I remember vividly reviewing some of my writing with George Nuku, who encouraged me to "translate" what he was doing into the parlance of the contemporary art world. George was particularly pleased that I had brought a range of theoretical sources to bear on his work. He used the metaphor of Māori warriors, who were not afraid to engage on the battlefield; like them, he was not afraid to engage with ideas, wherever they came from. As part of this dialogue then, I have tried to bring my own "history" to table so to speak. Rather than rejecting the European

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<sup>40</sup> Corey Bulpitt, telephone interview with the author, April 6, 2017.

academic tradition, I have tried throughout to bring it into discourse with Kunwinjku, Māori, Haida and Yolngu philosophy.

My aim is not dissimilar to Dipesh Chakrabarty's. As Chakrabarty notes, "the so-called universal ideas that European thinkers produced in the period from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and that have since influenced projects of modernity and modernization all over the world."<sup>41</sup> The task that Chakrabarty sets himself in *Provincializing Europe* is not the total rejection of universals, but rather the turning away from a static and absolute definition of the universal, towards an active process of *universalization*. This is not an attempt to move into a multicultural relativism, but rather a process of critique that brings to bear local and specific knowledges in order to correct, change and transform our vision of the universal. This is a process that can never be complete, but which also offers the potential to submit all categories to transformative critique.<sup>42</sup>

At the beginning of this introduction, I noted that the global indigenous art movement has a heterogeneity that almost defies definition. When I began this dissertation project, I selected my four artist-case studies for very simple reasons. Firstly, I wanted an artist who engaged directly with history painting (Gabriel Maralngurra). Secondly, I wanted an artist who engaged directly with the institutional frames of the museum (George Nuku). Thirdly, I wanted an artist who engaged directly with the history of colonized spaces (Corey Bulpitt). Lastly, I wanted an artist whose work engaged directly with local traditions (Nonggirnga Marawili). While I certainly found four artists who fit each of these descriptions, as I researched their work, I realized that they were each doing so much more. Every one of them was finding ways to express the nature of *being indigenous* in the present. This could not be simplified to a mere

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<sup>41</sup> Chakrabarty, vii.

<sup>42</sup> I am indebted to Randall Halle for drawing my attention to this idea.

historical project, but necessarily moved into deep questions of ontology, subject-object relations, institutionality, and contemporaneity. As I listened to the artists, and delved into their work, I found it was often necessary to leave the limited frames of my inquiry behind, to follow their work where it led me. If this dissertation is about those points where “time’s arrows collide,” the lesson is not merely that we live in a moment when multiple histories are intersecting, but that shaping our future requires considering the ways in which these competing and disjunctive worldviews can be shaped into meaningful connections. Perhaps then, the “histories” played out in the artwork of Maralngurra, Nuku, Bulpitt and Marawili are best seen as entry points to a new dialogue: a coequality that recognizes our many different ways of inhabiting the same time.

## 2.0 GABRIEL MARALNGURRA: MAKING CONTACT

**Henry Skerritt:** So, what made you decide to paint these “contact” stories?

**Gabriel Maralngurra:** It was just my idea. It came from my head, to draw the *balanda* who first came here and bought barks and weavings. I had to look in a book, a history of Oenpelli.<sup>43</sup>

### 2.1 KUNUMELENG

It was Kunumeleng: the pre-monsoonal build-up of late 2002. It is hottest time of the year in northern Australia, when the humidity builds and thick clouds roll in from every direction. The country and its inhabitants groan in expectation, awaiting the cool relief of the coming rains. From the table where he worked, beneath the shelter of the verandah of the Injalak Arts Centre, Gabriel Maralngurra could look out across the Adjumarrllarl wetlands to the ancient monolith after which the art center was named. Adorned with rock art galleries dating back over 40,000 years, Injalak Hill was a source of inspiration to Maralngurra and his fellow Kunwinjku artists at Gunbalanya in Western Arnhem Land. Indeed, it was Maralngurra who had suggested naming the center after the famous rock art site, and like many of the artists at Injalak his preferred motifs were regional spirit figures and animals painted in the style found in rock art shelters.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Gabriel Maralngurra, interview with the author. Gunbalanya, August 17, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> For a history of Injalak Arts and Crafts, see Sally K. May, "Started Down at the Little Shed," in *Twined Together: Kunmadj Ngalehnjaleken*, ed. Louise Hamby (Gunbalanya: Injalak Arts and Crafts, 2005); Lindy Allen, "Greedy for Bakki," in *Twined Together: Kunmadj Njalehnjaleken*, ed. Louise Hamby (Gunbalanya: Injalak Arts and Crafts, 2005); Anthony Murphy, "Feature Art Centre: Injalak Arts and Crafts," *The Arts*

On this day, Maralngurra may well have sat down with a heavy heart. It wasn't just the oppressive heat and humidity; his week had been consumed with the unsettling task of preparing a repatriation case for the return of human remains taken from Gunbalanya during the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL) led by Charles Mountford. Until this time, the Kunwinjku had been unaware that these remains were held in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC. Expediting their return became a major crusade for the community, initiating a decade-long process of frustrating negotiations.<sup>45</sup>

These matters were on Maralngurra's mind this hot November afternoon as he sat down before a large sheet of pre-primed French paper.<sup>46</sup> Dipping his brush into a carefully prepared mixture of charcoal and synthetic binder, he proceeded to outline the contours of the shelter on Injalak Hill, followed by four figures. The figures were not from the ancestral creation time, but from more recent history. The finished work, *Meeting of the Binninj Elders and Balanda Visitors in 1948* shows three Aboriginal men—Elders we are told—and a *balanda* or European visitor.

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*Backbone: Magazine of the Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists* 2, no. 1 (2002); Felicity Wright, *Contemporary Paintings from Western Arnhem Land* (Adelaide: Flinders Art Museum, Flinders University, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> On the success of repatriation efforts, see Lindsay Murdoch, "Spirits Finally Laid to Rest after Return of Bones from Us," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 July 2011; Martin Thomas, "Bones as a Bridge between Worlds: Responding with Ceremony to the Repatriation of Aboriginal Human Remains from the United States to Australia," in *Conciliation on Colonial Frontiers: Conflict, Performance and Commemoration in Australia and the Pacific Rim*, ed. Kate Darian-Smith and Penelope Edmonds (New York and Abingdon: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

<sup>46</sup> The first of Gabriel Maralngurra's contact paintings was produced in November 2002. Entitled *Meeting of the Binninj Elders and Balanda Visitors in 1948*, it was painted while the archaeologist Sally K. May was conducting research at Gunbalanya on the 1948 AASEAL. According to May, Maralngurra produced the work without any promptin after a lengthy discussion on the repatriation of human remains collected during the expedition. Responding to Maralngurra's claim that he "had to look in a book," May speculates: "I suspect the book he is referring to might be the National Geographic Society journal article on the 1948 expedition that I showed him that day. It is the 1949 article and it has a photo of Frank Seltzer posing with the remains on Injalak Hill." Sally K. May, email correspondence with author, September 26, 2012. Maralngurra's painting would later be reproduced alongside a written account of their discussions on repatriation in Sally K. May et al., "'You Write It Down and Bring It Back ... That's What We Want' - Revisiting the 1948 Removal of Human Remains from Kunbarlanja (Oenpelli), Australia," in *Indigenous Archaeologies: Decolonizing Theory and Practice*, ed. Claire Smith and H. Martin Wobst (Oxon: Routledge, 2005). For the result of May's research on AASEAL, see Sally K. May, *Collecting Cultures: Myth, Politics, and Collaboration in the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition* (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2010).

They stand beneath the decorated escarpment of Injalak Hill—between them a cache of human remains. Maralngurra describes the painting:

The painting represents all the human bones that have been taken away from around the Oenpelli area. I've painted three elders from Oenpelli and they are showing this balanda the rock art site and the human bones on Injalak Hill. There are a few remains of humans up there and a lot of rock art. That balanda fella is from the expedition, long time ago, back in 1948 or something. The bones are shown in a cave or a shelter in their proper burial place ... They later came and took those couple of bones, human bones, and they sent them away to America.<sup>47</sup>

The decision to paint colonial subject matter was unusual for Maralngurra: until this time, his art practice had focused almost exclusively on local fauna, spirit figures and Dreaming narratives (or *Djang*) associated with his mother's country at Kudjekbinj, approximately 75 miles east of Gunbalanya. It was not, however, an entirely radical departure: images of boats, guns, horses and airplanes can be found on the rock art shelters throughout Western Arnhem Land, and a number of senior artists from the region had previously turned their hands to such subjects.<sup>48</sup> While such motifs were far from commonplace, their presence was established enough to warrant its own genre designation, being referred to in local parlance as "contact paintings."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> May et al., 127.

<sup>48</sup> These included Paddy Fordham Wainburranga (c.1932-2006), Les Midikuria (c.1943-1995), and Maralngurra's own mentor Thompson Yulidjirri (c.1932-2009). It should be noted that when I mentioned this to Maralngurra, he was unaware that Yulidjirri had produced any works on colonial themes. For examples of paintings on colonial themes by Wainburranga, Midikuria and Yulidjirri, see Margie West, ed. *Transitions: 17 Years of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award* (Darwin: Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, 2000), 58-78.; and Bernard Smith, Terry Smith, and Heathcote, *Australian Painting 1788-2000* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), 508-15. For examples of rock art depicting colonial subject matter, see George Chaloupka, *Journey in Time* (Chatswood: REED, 1993), 191-203.

<sup>49</sup> Contact themes represent a tiny proportion of the artwork produced in Western Arnhem Land. In his thorough 1996 ethnography of Kunwinjku/Kuninjku bark painting, Luke Taylor notes that while representations of horses, cars, boats and guns appear in the rock art of the region, he had not witnessed their depiction in any art of Western Arnhem Land. In 2002, Sally May recorded the subjects of all paintings produced at the Injalak Arts. In her findings, contact paintings accounted for less than half a percent of the paintings produced in the year (11 paintings from a total of 2,371). Luke Taylor, *Seeing the Inside: Bark Paintings in Western Arnhem Land* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 46-7; Sally K. May, "Learning Art, Learning Culture: Art, Education,



When discussing his contact paintings, it is clear that Maralngurra sees them as categorically distinct from the rest of his practice. Visiting Melbourne in 2007, he even confided to me that, despite their critical and commercial success, he was “all done with contact paintings,” implying that they were a diversion from his primary artistic project. Establishing the precise nature of their difference from his regular practice is harder to ascertain. Although the term “contact paintings” suggest a temporal distinction (that is, between events occurring before and after the moment of colonial encounter), this does not directly correspond to a linear chronological sequence. The temporality of Dreaming narratives does not *end* with the arrival of Europeans, nor is it restricted to the distant past. Rather, *Djang* remains as an impression in the present, encompassing times past, present and future.<sup>50</sup> Nor is the distinction one between sacred and profane imagery: while many of Maralngurra’s paintings relate to *Djang*, just as many are concerned with aspects of the mundane world, such as game animals (*mayh*) or medicinal plants.

The distinction is more akin to that drawn by Tom Griffiths between “social history” and the *longue durée* of “deep time.” While “social history” and “deep time” might seem antithetical—“one deals in awesome geological eras, while the other takes its chronological scale from a human lifespan”—for Griffiths, they remain the product of the same historical consciousness. “Deep time,” he argues, “is a concept of our time ... Although it imagines a very ancient, and even non-human world, ‘deep time’ is a concept that is all too human. It is a product of late industrial technology.”<sup>51</sup> The concept of “deep time” might extend, and perhaps

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and the Formation of New Artistic Identities in Arnhem Land, Australia,” in *Archaeologies of Art: Time, Place, Identity*, ed. Ines Domingo Sanz, Danae Fiore, and Sally K. May (Walnut Creek, CA.: Left Coast Press, 2008), 190-91.

<sup>50</sup> See W.E.H Stanner, “The Dreaming,” in *The Dreaming and Other Essays* (Melbourne: Black Inc. Agenda, 2009).

<sup>51</sup> Tom Griffiths, “Traveling in Deep Time: La Longue Durée in Australian History,” *Australian Humanities* 18 (2000); “Social History and Deep Time,” *Public History Review* 8 (2000).

even destabilize the linear temporality of “social history” but it is ultimately embedded in the same temporal logic.

In Griffith’s model, it is “social history” that precedes and enables the conceptualizing of “deep time.” In Maralngurra’s work, this formulation is reversed: the “social history” of Maralngurra’s contact paintings are entrenched in a peculiarly Kunwinjku historical consciousness. Maralngurra might not have been the first Aboriginal Australian artist to explore colonial subject matter, but his contact paintings are one of the most sustained engagements with the complex relationship between this “social history” and indigenous temporal frames. Between 2002 to 2007, Maralngurra would produce around fifteen contact paintings.<sup>52</sup> The majority of these would deal with the visits of the anthropologists Baldwin Spencer, Charles Mountford, and Ronald and Catherine Berndt, who visited Arnhem Land between 1911 and 1952. These anthropologists were the first scholars to document the Aboriginal peoples around Gunbalanya. By depicting them, Maralngurra returns to the moment when the *bininj* first engaged directly with Western discourse and its implicit temporality.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, Spencer, Mountford and the Berndts all played a key role in commissioning, facilitating and promoting Aboriginal art, making them active history makers at the level of both production and reception. It is my argument that dealing with these specific historical actors forces Maralngurra to grapple with the question of how to represent competing histories as they overlap, intersect and collide in the space of cross-cultural

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<sup>52</sup> I say “around” fifteen, because the boundaries of what constitutes a “contact painting” are somewhat open to interpretation. For instance, Maralngurra’s 2006 exhibition of contact paintings, *Making Contact: New Works by Gabriel Maralngurra and Nancy McDinny* (Indigenart, The Mossenson Galleries, Carlton, Victoria, September 26-October 22, 2006), included works such as *Bininj at the Rock Art Shelter* 2006, which technically does not show any sign of colonial incursion. At the same time, Maralngurra’s decision to include the work in the exhibition indicates that he sees it as belonging to same, post-contact temporality as his other contact paintings.

<sup>53</sup> See for instance, Baldwin Spencer, *Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1914); *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1928); Charles P. Mountford, “Exploring Stone Age Arnhem Land,” *National Geographic* 96, no. 6 (1949); *Records of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land: Volume 1: Art, Myth and Symbolism* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1956); Ronald Berndt, *Kunapipi* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1951); Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt, *Man, Land and Myth in North Australia: The Gunwinggu People* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1970).

exchange. By returning to these pivotal moments of encounter, Maralngurra reframes the frontier, not as a space where self and other collide but as a “contact zone”: a constitutive site for identity construction through the negotiation of the boundaries of exchange.<sup>54</sup> I will argue that Maralngurra’s contact paintings grasp these zones as sites of infinite, unfolding possibility, before these moments are segmented, deferred and compartmentalized into a unified system of understanding: before, that is, they become *historical*. The contact zone thus becomes a site for the discovery of worldliness through encountering new forms of life.

## 2.2 THE HISTORICAL ACTORS

### 2.2.1 Gabriel Maralngurra

Gabriel Maralngurra is an Aboriginal artist from the remote community of Gunbalanya, located 150 miles east of Darwin in the Western Arnhem Land region of Australia’s Northern Territory. He was born in 1968, the first of seven children of William and Dolly Maralngurra. William was an important ceremonial manager (or *djungkay*), and also worked as a house painter at Gunbalanya. Gabriel recalls his father teaching him important Dreaming narratives. William and Dolly moved to the mission settlement at Oenpelli (Gunbalanya) in the 1960s, where they were married. Prior to this, they lived at Minjilang (Croker Island) with Dolly’s father, the renowned artist Paddy Compass Namatbara (c.1890-1973). Namatbara painted for Baldwin Spencer in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was responsible for “growing up” many of the young men of the region, initiating them into the traditions of the *bininj*. Amongst these were Jacob Nayinggul and Thompson Yulidjirri, who would become important Elders in the community at

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<sup>54</sup> I use the term “contact zone” in the sense theorized by Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Gunbalanya.<sup>55</sup> The latter would become the principal mentor to many young artists at Injalak, with Maralngurra crediting him as the formative influence in his painting career. Maralngurra has lived his entire life at Gunbalanya, attending the Oenpelli Primary School, before being one of a small number of students at Gunbalanya to complete high-school through the School of the Air radio correspondence education program. He has been a driving force behind the Injalak Arts and Crafts center, founded in 1989 to facilitate and market Aboriginal art from the region.

The township of Gunbalanya is on the traditional lands of the Mengerdji people, but when Baldwin Spencer arrived in 1912 he found members of the neighboring Gagadju, Erre, Wuningak, Amurdak, and Gudjehmi language groups, along with others from much further afield.<sup>56</sup> It is possible that the area was always an important meeting place for the region's population, but this was certainly heightened by the establishment of a frontier outpost at 1906 by Paddy Cahill. The attraction of Western goods, medicine and food enticed visitors from a diverse range of linguistic and social groups. Gunbalanya is now home to around 1,200 people and the *lingua franca* is Kunwinjku, the most populous of the Bininj Gun-wok dialect chain.<sup>57</sup>

### 2.2.2 Baldwin Spencer and Paddy Cahill

Gunbalanya was a pivotal site in the history of cross-cultural relations in Australia. The first white settlement was established in 1906 by Paddy Cahill. Confusing the local name for the

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<sup>55</sup> See Jacob Nayinggul and Ian White, "Nurturing the Sacred in Western Arnhem Land: The Legacy of Shaman, Healer and Mentor, Paddy Compass Namadbara," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2002).

<sup>56</sup> Spencer, 744; George Chaloupka and Pina Giuliani, "Strands of Time," in *Twined Together: Kunmadj Njalehnjaleken*, ed. Louise Hamby (Gunbalanya: Injalak Arts and Crafts, 2005), 4; John Mulvaney, *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2004), 53. See also, the account of Kunwinjku elder Esther Managku: "And people they were there. They're the first people now. They were there before at Oenpelli. And all their language – the language name Urningangk, Mengerr, Mengerdji ... their language Mengerrdi [and] Gagadju they bin mixed together ... that Gagadju language they used to speak at Crossing way [Cahills Crossing]. And [at] the old Red Lily [Lagoon] they [Mengerr] used to live. The people was there. I know all them some." Esther Managku, in Allen, 46.

<sup>57</sup> Nicholas Evans, *Bininj Gun-Wok: A Pan Dialectal Grammar of Mayali, Kunwinjku and Kune* (Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2003).

lagoon with that of the site for his new frontier outpost, Cahill named the place Oenpelli: a nomenclature that persists to this day, with every road sign to the community marked with the unwieldy designation Oenpelli-Gunbalanya-Kunbarlanja.<sup>58</sup> From 1891, Cahill had hunted buffalo in the region, establishing a sympathetic (albeit paternalistic) relationship with the local populace.<sup>59</sup> Although imbued with the prejudices of his age, he attempted to learn the local languages and foster working relationships with the *bininj*. Maralngurra offers a succinct description that closely matches the historical record. “There weren’t many *balanda* back then. Paddy Cahill was a good bloke. He had *bininj* working. They worked as slaves, hunting buffalo and crocodile, drying out buffalo skin. Hard work, six till six. They got paid in rations.”<sup>60</sup>

It was at Cahill’s invitation that in June 1912 the esteemed anthropologist Baldwin Spencer arrived by boat to Oenpelli. Although Mountford was the subject of Maralngurra’s first contact painting, Spencer would be his most persistent muse. Between 2003 to 2007, Maralngurra would paint five versions of the eminent anthropologist, reflecting Spencer’s prominent position in Indigenous memory at Gunbalanya. Spencer was born in Stretford, Lancashire in 1860. Studying biology at Oxford, he was influenced by several important first-generation evolutionary thinkers including T.H. Huxley, James Frazer, E.B. Tylor and Henry Moseley.<sup>61</sup> After graduating in 1884, Spencer served as a demonstrator in Moseley’s laboratory, and the following year was invited to assist Moseley and Tylor in relocating the Pitt-Rivers ethnographic collection from London to Oxford. In 1887, Spencer was appointed foundation professor of biology at Melbourne University, where he was decisive to the introduction of

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<sup>58</sup> Spencer himself noted this confusion of nomenclature when he visited in 1912. See Spencer, 742.

<sup>59</sup> Mulvaney; Keith Cole, *A History of Oenpelli* (Darwin: Nungalinga Publications, 1975).

<sup>60</sup> Gabriel Maralngurra, interview with the author. Gunbalanya, August 17, 2009.

<sup>61</sup> John Mulvaney, “Annexing All I Can Lay Hands On’: Baldwin Spencer as Ethnographic Collector,” in *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, ed. Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen, and Louise Hamby (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008), 80-95.

Darwin's theories to the Australian scientific community, which until this time had been dominated by creationists like Frederick McCoy and Ferdinand Mueller.<sup>62</sup>

In 1895, Spencer was appointed to the board of the National Museum of Victoria, and following McCoy's death in 1899, he became director of the Museum, overseeing its relocation from the grounds of Melbourne University, to its new premises on Swanston Street.<sup>63</sup> Assessing the dearth of ethnographic material in the museum's collection, Spencer set about documenting and recording Aboriginal culture with vigor and diligence.<sup>64</sup> This necessitated several lengthy expeditions into remote and dangerous parts of northern Australia, which he conducted in spite of his wife's antipathy towards his long absences.<sup>65</sup> Spencer was greatly aided in these exploits by several resourceful and self-educated frontiersmen, whose local knowledge facilitated privileged access to Indigenous societies. These included Frank Gillen, Patrick Byrne and Paddy Cahill.<sup>66</sup>

Spencer arrived at Gunbalanya on June 20, 1912, traveling by boat from Darwin up the East Alligator River. He stayed for two months as a guest of Cahill, during which time he documented the local indigenous communities, attending ceremonies and collecting a wide range of ethnographic materials.<sup>67</sup> Between 1912 and 1921, Cahill (under instruction from Spencer) would ship 962 ethnographic objects (including 170 paintings on bark) from Gunbalanya to the National Museum in Melbourne. These would form the basis of one of the most important collections of Aboriginal Australian art and artifacts.

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<sup>62</sup> Tony Bennet cites Spencer's appointment to the National Museum board in 1895 as the "turning point of this anti-evolutionary tide." Bennett, 139-40.

<sup>63</sup> John Mulvaney and J.H Calaby, *'So Much That Is New': Baldwin Spencer, 1860-1929* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1985), 188.

<sup>64</sup> Philip Batty, Lindy Allen, and John Morton, eds., *The Photographs of Baldwin Spencer* (Carlton: Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Publishing, 2005); Mulvaney, "'Annexing All I Can Lay Hands On': Baldwin Spencer as Ethnographic Collector."

<sup>65</sup> Mulvaney and Calaby, 188.

<sup>66</sup> Mulvaney, *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli*, 5.

<sup>67</sup> See Spencer; .

The 170 barks that make up the Baldwin Spencer collection are not the oldest examples of the medium. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a sizable number of bark paintings were collected around Port Essington on the Cobourg Peninsula, and at Field Island near the mouth of the South Alligator River.<sup>68</sup> It is highly likely that Spencer would have been aware of these collections. However, most of these were acquired by dismantling abandoned bark shelters, the inner walls of which were often decorated with figurative images. Spencer's barks represent the first programmatic commission of Aboriginal artworks by a non-indigenous collector. For this reason, Susan Lowish declares Gunbalanya to be "undoubtedly one of the most significant art historical sites in Australia."<sup>69</sup> In framing this as a genesis moment in cross-cultural relations, we must be careful how we ascribe agency within this encounter. It is easy, as Howard Morphy cautions, to write as though the art industry was introduced from the outside, as though Spencer and Cahill were responsible for initiating new patterns of both artistic production and exchange.<sup>70</sup> In reality, the Indigenous inhabitants of Arnhem Land had long been engaged in the production of material culture for exchange, education, identity construction and self-representation.<sup>71</sup>

Spencer was equally keen to ascribe agency for this exchange squarely with the local artists. In *Wanderings in Wild Australia* he describes how an Indigenous artist initiated trade ("This morning a native brought in a little bark-drawing"), before going on to situate bark painting firmly within an established local tradition. Spencer distances himself from a formative

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<sup>68</sup> Paul S.C. Taçon and Susan M. Davies, "Transitional Traditions: 'Port Essington' Bark-Paintings and the European Discovery of Aboriginal Aesthetics," *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 2 (2004).

<sup>69</sup> Susan Lowish, "Setting the Scene: Early Writing on Australian Aboriginal Art," *Journal of Art Historiography* 1, no. 2 (2011): 720.

<sup>70</sup> Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross Cultural Categories* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008), 35.

<sup>71</sup> See Donald Thomson, *Economic Structure and the Ceremonial Exchange Cycle in Arnhem Land* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1949).

role in form, content or aesthetic, noting “the subject matter I left entirely to the artist’s choice.”<sup>72</sup> This was undoubtedly motivated by Spencer’s desire to present bark painting as an “authentic” traditional medium, unsullied by contact with European influence. Ian McLean notes, for Spencer, “Indigenous transculturation spelled the end of Indigenous culture, and he had little sense that his own commissioning practices were modernizing Indigenous art.”<sup>73</sup> Spencer’s analysis of these bark paintings is thus focused upon their internal agency: on what they reveal about “traditional” Aboriginal society, and not their role as objects of transcultural communication. This ethnographic model would continue unabated until the rise of post-colonial discourse in the late-1980s, and persists in many common misconceptions surrounding Aboriginal art.

In reality, the bark paintings produced for Spencer were probably the result of a considerable, if unspoken, series of negotiations between the artists and their new patron. How much this altered their art practice is difficult to ascertain. McLean somewhat hyperbolically asserts, “The result was a whole new type of art (although it did mimic the traditional ‘outsider’ art (*kun-yarlang*) made to assist the education of children and youth.”<sup>74</sup> Luke Taylor also views these works as inaugurating a decisive shift as the artists respond to Spencer’s demands by creating new amalgamations of styles that added a dynamic narrative element to Kunwinjku painting.<sup>75</sup> Sally

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<sup>72</sup> “July 11th – This morning a native brought in a little bark-drawing. They are very fond of drawing both on rocks and the sheets of barks of which their Mia-mias are made ... To-day I found a native who, apparently, had nothing better to do than sit quietly in the camp, evidently enjoying himself, drawing a fish on a piece of stringy-bark about two feet long and a foot broad ... On further acquaintance with them and, after inspecting the paintings with which they had decorated the walls of their wurlies, I found that there was a notable range of ability amongst the artists ... after collecting some from their studios, which meant taking down the slabs on which they were drawn, that formed, incidentally, the walls of their Mia-mias, I commissioned two or three of the best artists to paint me a series of canvases, or rather “barks” ... The subject-matter I left entirely to the artist’s choice. As a result I was able to secure some fifty examples that illustrate the present stage of development of this aspect of art amongst the Kakadu people.” Spencer, 793-4.

<sup>73</sup> Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 96.

<sup>74</sup> “Kuninjku Modernism: New Perspectives on Western Arnhem Land Art,” *Artlink* 25, no. 2 (2005): 50.

<sup>75</sup> Taylor, 24-25. Judith Ryan offers a similar sentiment, arguing that Spencer’s influence introduced patterns of scale and “endorsed a form of iconic representation which has become characteristic of the region.” Judith Ryan, *Spirit in Land: Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1990), 14-15.



May disputes this assertion, arguing that Spencer is often given “too much credit by many researchers and that, in fact, there is a clear narrative element in much recent rock art in Western Arnhem Land.”<sup>76</sup> Irrespective of the artistic effects, however, the engagement between Aboriginal artists and Baldwin Spencer set up a pattern of exchange that would continue over the next half-century, establishing bark painting as the preeminent medium for intercultural communication.<sup>77</sup>

Although he recognized the “notable range of ability amongst the artists,” Spencer did not bother to record the names of any of the artists that he commissioned. Nevertheless, Spencer contributed greatly to the widespread recognition and elevation of Australian Aboriginal art. Despite his evolutionist convictions, he was energetic in creating awareness of the aesthetic value of Aboriginal painting, praising its dynamism, naturalism and anatomical accuracy.<sup>78</sup> More importantly, he exposed non-Indigenous Australians to these previously unseen cultural riches. Fifteen of the barks he collected were reproduced in *Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia* (1914), a selection that was increased by two for *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (1928).<sup>79</sup> Spencer’s barks were also widely exhibited, beginning in 1929 with the exhibition *Aboriginal Art in Australia* held at the National Museum in Melbourne. This was a landmark event: as the first exhibition of Australian Aboriginal art in a public gallery, it represented a turning point in non-Indigenous appreciation and understanding of the genre.<sup>80</sup> Spencer’s barks would be the first to represent Australian Aboriginal

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<sup>76</sup> May, "Learning Art, Learning Culture: Art, Education, and the Formation of New Artistic Identities in Arnhem Land, Australia."

<sup>77</sup> Luke Taylor, "From Rock to Bark: Art from Western Arnhem Land.," in *They Are Meditating: Bark Painting from the Mca's Arnett's Collection*, ed. Djon Mundine (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), 146.

<sup>78</sup> Of a painting of a black kangaroo, Spencer declares: “No artist could have expressed better the relative proportions of the body and limbs,” while another he describes as “full of energy.” This is not inconsistent with the kind of praise lavished on ‘primitive’ arts by contemporary artists, and it should be noted that Spencer was also a supporter of modern art in Australia, having trained at the Manchester School of Art. Spencer, 809-10; Mulvaney and Calaby, 335-59; McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art*, 95-6; Henry Skerritt, "Picturing Alfred Howitt.," *Meanjin* 70, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>79</sup> Spencer, Fig.79-92; , Fig.539-35.

<sup>80</sup> See Lowish; Ian McLean, ed. *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art* (Brisbane and Sydney: Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications, 2011), 23.

artists on the global stage, being included in the exhibition *Art of Australia 1788-1941* which toured the USA and Canada after 1941 under the auspices of the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>81</sup>

While Spencer's collection brought bark painting to wider attention, the market for Aboriginal art remained minor, and following Cahill's departure from Gunbalanya in 1922, the trade steeply diminished.<sup>82</sup> In 1925, control of Oenpelli was transferred to the Anglican Church Missionary Society. The founding missionary, Reverend Alfred Dyer continued to support bark painting, amassing a small but significant collection during his nine-year tenure at the Oenpelli Mission (1925-1934).<sup>83</sup> Subsequent missionaries, however, actively discouraged the production of bark paintings at Gunbalanya on account of its perceived religious associations.<sup>84</sup> It would not be until the late-1940s that art production at Gunbalanya would return in force with the anthropological expeditions of Mountford and the Berndts.

### 2.2.3 Charles Mountford

As Sally May notes, the impact of Charles Mountford's 1948 expedition to Arnhem Land has often been underestimated or devalued by academic critics. In part, this is due to Mountford's

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<sup>81</sup> Reviewing the exhibition, Edward Alden Jewell, art critic for the *New York Times* even had the temerity to reproduce one of Spencer's barks between Surrealist paintings by Salvador Dali and Joan Miro. Howard Morphy, "Aboriginal Australian Art in America," in *Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal Art at the Hood Museum of Art*, ed. Stephen Gilchrist (Hanover, NH.: Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, 2012). See also, Caroline Jordan, "Cultural Exchange in the Midst of Chaos: Theodore Sizer's Exhibition 'Art of Australia 1788—1941'," *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Art* 13 (2013).

<sup>82</sup> It is worth noting, however that as early as 1928 Spencer recognizes an emergent market: "The majority of those [barks] that I collected now hang in the National Museum at Melbourne are regarded as first-rate examples of first-rate artists. The highest price paid was actually fourpence halfpenny but, as the artists are now unfortunately dead, the market value of the "barks" is considerably higher than when they were originally purchased in the Kakadu studios at Oenpelli." Ian McLean notes that Spencer's commission effectively nurtured a new profession in Arnhem Land: "the professional artist." Spencer, 794; McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art*, 96.

<sup>83</sup> Cole, 18-35; May, *Collecting Cultures: Myth, Politics, and Collaboration in the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition*, 155.

<sup>84</sup> Berndt and Berndt, 193.

willingness to utilize popular media, such as film, magazines and non-academic publications.<sup>85</sup> Equally significantly, by the late-1940s, Mountford's espousal of staunchly evolutionist prejudices were beginning to fall out of step with contemporary anthropological thinking. Mountford was not a trained anthropologist, but through a combination of good fortune and skillful self-promotion, in 1948 he found himself leading the largest scientific expedition ever staged in Australia: the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL).<sup>86</sup>

Both A.P. Elkin and the Berndts criticized Mountford for his lack of formal anthropological training, and while some of this was undoubtedly sour-grapes, Mountford's documentation was far from optimal.<sup>87</sup> Although he collected a staggering 484 bark paintings and 71 more works on paper during his short expedition, Taylor notes, "his style of recording the meanings of these paintings often leaves the references undeveloped."<sup>88</sup> He did not record the names of the artists or their clan affiliations, and fails to note important developments revealed by his collection, such as the first appearance of abstract-geometric designs associated with the Mardayin ceremony.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, the impact of Mountford's collecting on popular appreciation of Aboriginal art was profound. "Despite his theoretical deficiencies," Philip Jones concludes, "Mountford achieved more success than any other individual in promoting Aboriginal art in exhibitions in Australia, Europe, and North and South America during the 1950s and

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<sup>85</sup> Sally K. May, "The Art of Collecting: Charles Percy Mountford," in *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, ed. Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen, and Louise Hamby (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008), 465-6.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 449.

<sup>87</sup> *Collecting Cultures: Myth, Politics, and Collaboration in the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition*, 47-48.

<sup>88</sup> Luke Taylor, *Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. Margo Neale, "Charles Mountford and the 'Bastard Barks': A Gift from the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, 1948," in *Brought to Light: Australian Art 1850-1965 from the Queensland Art Gallery Collection*, ed. Julie Ewington and Lynne Sear (South Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1998).

1960s.”<sup>90</sup> Through his espousal of popular media, he was able to impact a much larger number of people than traditional academic texts, and in 1956, each Australian state art gallery received twenty-four of the paintings Mountford had collected.<sup>91</sup> In many cases, these would be the first Indigenous works to enter these prestigious public collections.

#### **2.2.4 Ronald and Catherine Berndt**

Unlike Spencer and Mountford, the Berndts made multiple visits to Gunbalanya. A short initial visit in 1947 was followed by a lengthy stay in 1949-50, followed by shorter trips in 1958, 1961, 1966 and 1968. The Berndts were trained anthropologists, and they used the collection of art as a central component of their ethnographic methodology.<sup>92</sup> If Mountford failed to recognize the sacred ceremonial content that had begun to appear in bark paintings at Gunbalanya, this was at the forefront of the Berndts’ concerns: at Gunbalanya, their primary research interests were the ceremonial and cultural practices of the Kunwinjku.<sup>93</sup> Three decades later, Ronald Berndt would describe the spontaneous manner in which the artist’s proffered their work. Significantly, his description offers the first anthropological recognition of the dialogic role of bark painting as a means of cross-cultural instruction:

In the process of talking about the country and the mythic and spirit beings associated with it, the men with whom I worked – since I always worked with men, while my wife always worked with women, conforming to traditional Aboriginal practice – the men, as I say, depicted what they were talking about as a way of underlining its veracity. As a result, I obtained some wonderful paintings rather similar to those obtained by Spencer in 1912. It is not easy to

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<sup>90</sup> Philip Jones, "Perceptions of Aboriginal Art: A History," in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (New York: Asia Society Galleries and George Braziller, 1988), 172.

<sup>91</sup> May, 465; Taylor, *Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land*, 29; Neale, 210.

<sup>92</sup> Morphy, 51.

<sup>93</sup> Berndt; Berndt and Berndt.

convey to you the excitement of seeing these produced without any stimulus on my behalf.<sup>94</sup>

Discussing Ronald Berndt's fieldwork at Yirrkala in eastern Arnhem Land, Morphy suggests that his methods may have been slightly more prescriptive than this account indicates, with Ronald Berndt offering desirable "themes" for the artists to base their works around.<sup>95</sup> This would certainly explain the increased prevalence of ceremonial content, but it does not explain why such imagery also appears in works collected under the far less systematic collecting of Charles Mountford. Taylor offers the plausible explanation that the increased ceremonial content was a conscious attempt to demonstrate the nature and basis of Kunwinjku authority structures in the face of the repression of these structures by missionaries: "The sympathy for the Kunwinjku's viewpoint shown by the Berndts," he argues, "prompted the development of Kunwinjku bark painting into what could be called a semi-ritual, rather than wholly secular, medium for the expression of cultural knowledge."<sup>96</sup>

While the Berndts' primary research interests lay in religion and ceremony, they were also extraordinarily active in the promotion of Aboriginal art through both exhibitions and publications.<sup>97</sup> In 1950, they co-authored the monograph *Art in Arnhem Land* with A.P. Elkin, and in 1949 assisted Elkin organizing a major exhibition of their works at the David Jones department store gallery in Sydney.<sup>98</sup> In its two-week run, the exhibition attracted around 5000 visitors. While Elkin lamented, "art critics themselves were not prepared to treat it [Aboriginal

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<sup>94</sup> Ronald Berndt, "A Living Aboriginal Art: The Changing inside and Outside Contexts," in *Aboriginal Arts and Crafts and the Market*, ed. Peter Loveday and Peter Cooke (Canberra: North Australia Research Unit, Australian National University, 1983), 30.

<sup>95</sup> Morphy, 51-52.

<sup>96</sup> Taylor, *Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land*, 28-29.

<sup>97</sup> John Stanton, "'I Did Not Set out to Make a Collection': The Ronald and Catherine Berndt Collection at the Berndt Museum of Anthropology," in *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, ed. Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen, and Louise Hamby (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008).

<sup>98</sup> Morphy, 53-54; 22-23.

art] as a work of art,”<sup>99</sup> Berndt later recognized the event as “the turning point in the Australian public’s attitude towards Aboriginal art.”<sup>100</sup>

The most extraordinary feature of Ronald and Catherine Berndt’s art criticism is its fierce rejection of evolutionary schema. The moral force of this conviction is evident throughout *Art of Arnhem Land*, particularly its conclusion: “We are no longer faced with a people whose dying pillow we would smooth. *They are not passing*. We have learnt that the full blood Aborigines need not pass, if we provide for them, as we demand for other born Australians.”<sup>101</sup> For the Berndts, Aboriginal art did not belong to the Stone-Age past, but deserved to “take its place alongside other great schools of art, and be incorporated in our general appreciation of it for its own worth.”<sup>102</sup> Understanding Aboriginal art meant placing it within its cultural context, seeing it as part of a living cultural heritage. Divorced from this context, they argued, the art object is dead, “it is but a shell – beautiful though it be.”<sup>103</sup> Despite the force of this conviction, the Berndts maintained a fairly narrow conception of what constituted “A Living Aboriginal Art.” They remained wedded to the concept of an “authentic” Aboriginal art, unsullied by external influence. As late as 1983, Ronald Berndt would caution against cross-cultural contamination:

There are, however, dangers in innovation when subject and design go beyond the socio-cultural criteria or the artist’s own world – whether or not the work produced is for an internal or external purpose. If Aboriginal art is to retain its unique character, it must be seen to be an Aboriginal work of art, having a distinctive aura of its own.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> A.P. Elkin, quoted in Ian McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art* (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2011), 25.

<sup>100</sup> Jones, 174.

<sup>101</sup> Adolphus Peter Elkin, Catherine Berndt, and Ronald Berndt, *Art in Arnhem Land* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 115.

<sup>102</sup> Ronald and Catherine Berndt, quoted in Stanton, 522.

<sup>103</sup> Elkin, Berndt, and Berndt, 6.

<sup>104</sup> Berndt, 34. For Berndt, these changes were not only the result of the mixing of Aboriginal and European styles (such as the art of assimilation that he decried in Albert Namatjira’s watercolors) but also the mingling of

## 2.3 SPEAKING OF THE OTHER

If the Berndts signaled the end of evolutionist thinking in regards to Aboriginal civilization, the arrival of Baldwin Spencer might be cast as its originary moment. As his biographer John Mulvaney notes, “Spencer’s intellectual baggage on arriving in Australia included social and material Darwinism.”<sup>105</sup> His close associations with Tylor and Moseley, along with the taxonomic lessons learned classifying materials at the Pitt-Rivers museum, exposed Spencer to the dominant evolutionist strand of British anthropology, predisposing his view towards Australia’s Indigenous inhabitants.<sup>106</sup> For Spencer, Indigenous Australians occupied an earlier rung in ladder of human development: “the Australian aborigine,” he argued, “may be regarded as a relic of the early childhood of man left stranded in a part of the world where he has, without the impetus derived from competition, remained in a low condition of savagery.”<sup>107</sup> Aboriginal culture was likened to an archaeological remnant of primeval man; once contact was made with more “advanced” civilizations, it was inevitable that this “primitive” culture would disappear. This led to a sense of urgency on behalf of anthropologists to record and collect ethnographic data for the information it could shed on the development of humanity.<sup>108</sup> Thus, the Australian Aborigine (who had so far

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Aboriginal styles, (that he terms pan-Aboriginality) through which individual cultural perspective and distinctive regional variations would be lost.

<sup>105</sup> Mulvaney, “Baldwin Spencer, Evolution and Melbourne University,” 90.

<sup>106</sup> Angus Nicholls, “Anglo-German Mythologies: The Australian Aborigines and Modern Theories of Myth in the Work of Baldwin Spencer and Carl Strehlow,” *History of the Human Sciences* 20, no. 1 (2007): 92.

<sup>107</sup> Baldwin Spencer, *Guide to the Australian Ethnographic Collection in the National Museum of Victoria* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1901), 11.

<sup>108</sup> This sense of urgency is a common feature of Spencer’s writings. In 1899, he would write to his friend Howard Goulty, “there is no end of pioneer work to be done, and work which, in Anthropology at least, must be done soon if it is to be done at all.” Fifteen years later, in *Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia*, he would further lament, “The more primitive a race is, the more rapidly does it lose or modify its old customs and beliefs, when it comes in contact with a higher civilization, and there are very few parts of Australia now left in which it is possible to study the aboriginal in his natural state . . . One thing is certain and that is that in all parts where they are in contact with outsiders, especially with Asiatics, they are dying out with great rapidity.” Elsewhere, Spencer describes the demise of the Tasmanian Aborigines (that he labels *Homo tasmanianus*) as a loss to science, “They were, in fact, living representatives of palæolithic man, lower in the scale of culture than any human beings now present upon the earth. It is a matter for the deepest regret that they were allowed to

existed *outside* of history, stranded in the Stone-Age past) was brought into the historical narrative in order to act as the stand-in for the very dawn of human civilization.<sup>109</sup>

In *Pasts Beyond Memory*, Tony Bennett argues that this process of historicizing difference by applying Darwinian principles to the genealogy of human civilizations played an essential role in the construction of the modern self. By casting Aboriginal peoples as “evolutionary ground zero,” anthropology denied Indigenous peoples their own history, while bringing them into the historical lineage of Western civilization:

While representations of wild and savage peoples at the world’s edge had long been a part of western constructions of the Other, these did not integrate those Others into the dynamics of western civilizations or the modern self. By contrast, the transformation of peoples distant from Europe into primitives representing moments of prehistory relocated them as ancestors evoking—in a new and distinctive mnemonics—memories of the long distant past but one which still survived as the bottom-most layer in the archaeological make-up of modern man.<sup>110</sup>

It was only modern man who was archeologically stratified in this way, and who had the reflexive capacity to objectively analyze this stratification. The result, argues Bennett, was a self formed through its relation to a non-self or Other that had been folded into the self as an immanent present. By transforming the Other into a concrete memory of the past, anthropology’s concern was not with what colonized peoples were “in themselves” but with what they were for “us.”<sup>111</sup> This version of anthropology, concludes Bennett, “speaks of the Other, but never *to* the Other.”<sup>112</sup>

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become extinct without our gaining anything but the most meager information with regard their customs and organization.” Baldwin Spencer, letter to Howard Goulty, quoted in Mulvaney and Calaby, *‘So Much That is New,’* 187; and Spencer, *Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia*, 41; Spencer, *Guide to the Australian Ethnographic Collection in the National Museum of Victoria*, 8.

<sup>109</sup> Being considered “art” was no panacea for this condition. When Spencer’s barks were included in the *Art of Australia 1788-1941*, the exhibition’s curator Theodor Sizer positioned them at the starting point of his historical trajectory, despite the fact that they were produced in the twentieth century. Just as Aboriginal society was cast out of the narrative of civilization, Aboriginal art remained outside of art history.

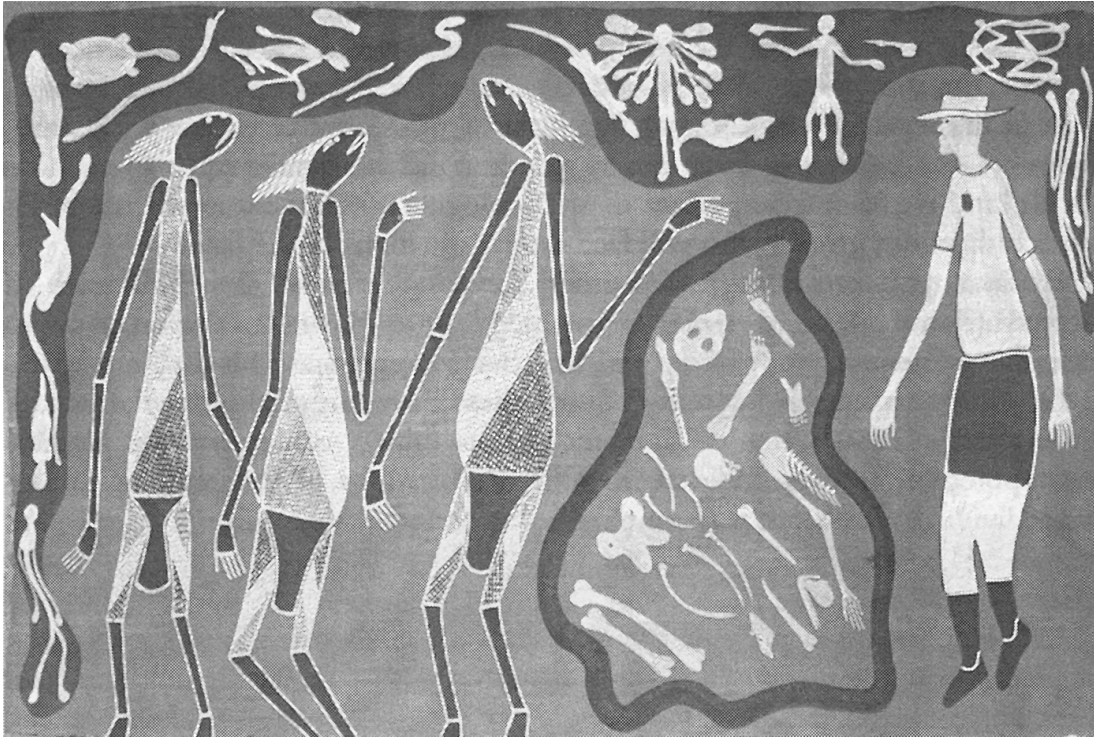
<sup>110</sup> Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory*, 63.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 94-95 and 110.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 95.



### 2.3.1 One Painting/Three Styles



**Figure 2.1.** Gabriel Maralngurra, *Meeting of the Binninj Elders and Balanda Visitors in 1948* 2002. Natural pigments and synthetic binder on paper. 76 x 102 cm. Private collection, Canberra, ACT. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Injalak Arts and Crafts.

It is in this context, that I would like to return to Maralngurra's first contact painting *Meeting of the Binninj Elders and Balanda Visitors in 1948*. Beyond its obvious polemic, there is a subtler negotiation of difference discernible by Maralngurra's use of three distinct styles of painting within *Meeting of the Binninj Elders and Balanda Visitors in 1948*. This stylistic *mélange* is far from accidental. The Kunwinjku think deeply and reflexively about their local art histories.<sup>113</sup>

Artists will often look critically at the work of other artists (both contemporary and ancient) in

<sup>113</sup> See for instance: Luke Taylor, "'They May Say Tourist, May Say Truly Painting': Aesthetic Evaluation and Meaning of Bark Paintings in Western Arnhem Land, Northern Australia," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (2008): 57; Jon Altman and Luke Taylor, "Too Many Dreamings: Diversity and Change in Bark Paintings from West Arnhem Land," in *Indigenous Art at the Australian National University*, ed. Claudette Chubb and Nancy Sever (Melbourne: Macmillan, 2009), 82; Morphy, ix.

order to evaluate its intellectual content and affective qualities.<sup>114</sup> Most importantly, as Luke Taylor notes, the Kunwinjku recognize their own style of painting (“our way of painting”), which “distinguishes their own political and cultural identity from that of language groups who usually paint in a different way.”<sup>115</sup> Maralngurra’s marshalling of a range of styles—from traditional to contemporary, sacred to secular—can be seen as a deliberate attempt to negotiate the challenges of how to represent competing histories as they overlap, intersect and collide in the space of cross-cultural exchange.

**2.3.1.1      *Rock Art Style*** The first style used by Maralngurra in *Meeting of the Bininj Elders and Balanda Visitors in 1948* is intended to mimic the rock art style of Injalak Hill. Across the undulating black overhang, Maralngurra has reproduced several of the motifs found on this renowned site. He explains:

That is the rock art above the burial, mimi, longtom, echidna, barramundi, rock python, long necked turtle, file snake, *Yingana* (the Creation Mother), some stone axes, dilly bags, *Namarrkon* (Lightning Man) and that *daluk* [female] has a digging stick with her.”<sup>116</sup>

Maralngurra depicts these images in a uniform style: a white, silhouetted outline with no infill. In some instances, such as the depiction of *Namarrkon*, this is a fairly faithful rendering. In the majority of cases, however, the rock art on Injalak Hill is considerably more detailed, as a comparison with Maralngurra’s depiction of *Yingana* reveals. This discrepancy is not due to a

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<sup>114</sup> See for instance, Taylor, “‘They May Say Tourist, May Say Truly Painting’: Aesthetic Evaluation and Meaning of Bark Paintings in Western Arnhem Land, Northern Australia,” 865-66; *Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land*, 46. George Chaloupka, “Bardayal ‘Lofty’ Nadjamerrek Ao,” in *Culture Warriors: National Indigenous Triennial*, ed. Brenda Croft (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2007), 26-27.

<sup>115</sup> Luke Taylor, “Seeing the ‘Inside’: Kunwinjku Paintings and the Symbol of the Divided Body,” in *Animals into Art*, ed. Howard Morphy (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 372.

<sup>116</sup> Gabriel Maralngurra, quoted in May et al., 127.

lack of familiarity; Maralngurra knows the art of Injalak Hill intimately.<sup>117</sup> He would also realize that many of the scenes on Injalak Hill are palimpsestic in nature: a chaotic jumble of motifs and styles overlaid in a visual continuum that connects the art of the present with that of the distant past.

Depicting the rock art in a single consistent style serves as a unifying pictorial device that creates a temporal and identificational distinction between rock art and the more contemporary styles of painting used in the work. To appreciate the significance of this gesture, it is worth considering Maralngurra's rendering of rock art in the later work *Bininj at the Rock Art Shelter* 2006.<sup>118</sup> Commenting on this work, he notes: "Rock art lets *Balanda* know that our culture is old. They see it and it helps them understand. Just like when all those first anthropologists must have seen it for the first time."<sup>119</sup> If, on the one hand, this statement suggests a temporal distinction between rock art and the more contemporary styles used in Maralngurra's work, *Bininj at the Rock Art Shelter* is clearly a painting about cultural continuity. Firstly, unlike his early rendition, Maralngurra depicts the rock art in two colors, overlapping the images to reproduce the effect of palimpsest. Secondly, he shows the *Bininj* in the very process of painting, suggesting the synchrony of rock art and contemporary forms of representation.

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<sup>117</sup> For many years, Maralngurra was a senior tour guide at Gunbalanya, taking visitors up Injalak Hill. In 2004 he was also one of nine artists involved in a workshop conducted by printmaker Basil Hall at Injalak Hill, in which the artists translated the imagery of Injalak Hill into a folio of limited edition etchings. The other artists involved were Graham Badari, Gershom Garlmgarr, Glen Namundja, Wesley Ngamjmirra, Wilfred Nawirridj, Bardayal Nadjamerrek, Joey Nganjmirra and Gabriel's brother Roderick Maralngurra. Injalak Arts and Crafts, *Kunwarrde Bim: The Injalak Hill Suite* (Parap, N.T., Injalak Arts and Crafts Association, 2006).

<sup>118</sup> Although not strictly on the contact theme, Maralngurra chose to include this work in the exhibition *Making Contact* at Mossenson Galleries in 2006.

<sup>119</sup> Gabriel Maralngurra, artist statement for *Bininj at the Rock Art Shelter* 2006, courtesy the artist and Injalak Arts and Crafts.



**Figure 2.2.** Gabriel Maralngurra, *Bininj at the Rock Art Shelter* 2006. Earth pigments and synthetic binder on paper. 76 x 102 cm. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Injalak Arts and Crafts.

While it is difficult to date precisely, the rock art tradition of Western Arnhem Land is thought to extend back between 30-50,000 years.<sup>120</sup> George Chaloupka divides it into a chronological sequence of four main periods: the Pre-Estuarine (50,000?-8,000 BP); the Estuarine (8,000-1500 BP); the Freshwater (1500-300 BP); and Contact (300-present).<sup>121</sup> In contrast, in an interview conducted at Gunbalanya in August 2009, the late Kunwinjku/Kundedjnjenghmi authority Kalarriya 'Jimmy' Namarnyilk (c.1940-2012) suggested

<sup>120</sup> Images of extinct megafauna found on rock faces, suggest that painting was a well-established tradition in Arnhem Land by at least 40,000 years ago. Chaloupka, *Journey in Time*; Paul S.C. Taçon, "From the 'Dreamtime' to the Present: The Changing Role of Aboriginal Rock Paintings in Western Arnhem Land, Australia," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 9, no. 2 (1989). Chaloupka and Giuliani.

<sup>121</sup> Chaloupka, *Journey in Time*, 89. Within this sequence he also distinguishes a range of stylistic diversity.

just two categories: “*Bininj* painting rock art way” and “*mimih* painting rock art way.”<sup>122</sup> This is a distinction commonly made by the local population, dividing rock art between that painted by human hand and that made by ancestral beings or *mimih*.<sup>123</sup> While there is a chronological element to this distinction (many of the paintings attributed to *mimih* belong to the older, Pre-Estuarine period), it is important to note that this does not correspond directly to a linear temporal sequence. For the Aboriginal inhabitants of Western Arnhem Land, the spiritual world of the *mimih* and other ancestral beings is not in the distant past, but remains as evidence in the present. Rock art affirms this relationship between human beings and the ancestral realm.<sup>124</sup> It is believed that *mimih* taught the first people to paint; by continuing to paint on the rock art shelters, Aboriginal people connect themselves with this cycle of spiritual and physical existence.<sup>125</sup> In the process, they reaffirm the continuity of past and present, grounding themselves in time and space.<sup>126</sup> As Inés Domingo Sanz concludes:

While for non-Indigenous people it is important to place rock art in time-specific frameworks in order to understand its role in a specific point in time and to identify social changes, for Indigenous people rock art is important as a visual transmitter of ancestral cultural values; its chronology simply reflects the continuity of this tradition in constant cultural transition.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Kalarriya ‘Jimmy’ Namarnyilk, interviewed by the author. Gunbalanya, Northern Territory, Australia, 17 August 2009.

<sup>123</sup> Chaloupka also notes this distinction, arguing that it can also be broken down into five distinct categories, depending on the *specific* type of ancestral being responsible for creating the work. Chaloupka, *Journey in Time*, 87.

<sup>124</sup> Indeed, rock art paintings are often believed to be the physical impression of ancestral beings, which they left on the rock shelters during the creation time. See for instance, Bardayal 'Lofty' Nadjamerrek and Murray Garde, "Barridjangonohmi Bim! Paint It for Me!," in *Crossing Country: The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art*, ed. Hetti Perkins (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004).

<sup>125</sup> Paul S.C. Taçon and Murray Garde, "Kun-Wardde Bim, Rock Art from Western and Central Arnhem Land," in *Rainbow, Sugarbag and Moon, Two Artists of the Stone Country: Bardayal Nadjamerrek and Mick Kubarkku*, ed. Margie West (Darwin: Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, 1995), 33.

<sup>126</sup> Taçon, 334.

<sup>127</sup> Inés Domingo Sanz, "The Rock Art Scenes at Injalak Hill: Alternative Visual Records of Indigenous Social Organisation and Cultural Practices," *Australian Archaeology*, no. 72 (2011): 16.

The antiquity of Kunwinjku culture is not evidenced by a lengthy chronology of change and rupture, but by the sediment of the past in the thickened present.<sup>128</sup> This must be remembered when considering Maralngurra's pedagogical directive that rock art "lets *Balanda* know that our culture is old. They see it and it helps them understand." The purpose of recent rock art is often described as being educative: designed to illustrate stories and teach children about their culture.<sup>129</sup> While these stories are generally secular in nature, they play an important role in acculturating children into the foundations of future ceremonial knowledge.<sup>130</sup>

Kunwinjku describe the successive revelation of knowledge about the ancestral world as a progression from understanding the 'outside' meaning of things, to understanding the restricted 'inside' meaning.<sup>131</sup> This is a dynamic process in which information passes along a continuum from secret to public.<sup>132</sup> Any form of painted representation has the potential to invoke deeper meanings dependent on the authority of the artist and the knowledge of the viewer.<sup>133</sup> The controlled revelation of knowledge is integrated into the child's socialization; secular images like rock art establish the groundwork for interpretation, before one eventually learns to read the metaphoric elements of the artistic system. An initiate being shown a sacred object for the first time will recognize its 'outside' meaning, because they already have familiarity with this artistic system.<sup>134</sup> Morphy describes this system as "identificational," in that the nature of this exchange

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<sup>128</sup> I use the word "sediment" in the sense offered by Glissant (see Introduction). Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 33.

<sup>129</sup> Sally K. May, "Learning Art, Learning Culture: Art, Education, and the Formation of New Artistic Identities in Arnhem Land, Australia," in *Archaeologies of Art: Time Place, Identity*, ed. Ines Domingo Sanz, Danae Fiore, and Sally K. May (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2008), 174. Nadjamerrek and Garde.

<sup>130</sup> Taylor, "Seeing the 'Inside': Kunwinjku Paintings and the Symbol of the Divided Body."

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>132</sup> Jennifer Deger, "Seeing the Invisible: Yolngu Video as Revelatory Ritual," *Visual Anthropology* 20 (2007): 113.

<sup>133</sup> Nigel Lendon, "Visual Evidence: Space, Place, and Innovation in Bark Paintings of Central Arnhem Land," *Australian Journal of Art* 12 (1994-1995): 60.

<sup>134</sup> Taylor, "Seeing the 'Inside': Kunwinjku Paintings and the Symbol of the Divided Body," 383. See also Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* (Chicago: Chicago University

depends upon the viewer's ability to decode the languages employed from part of a controlled knowledge base.<sup>135</sup> This is the pedagogical model depicted in *Bininj at the Rock Art Shelter*: while two men paint on the rock face, their families watch on, pointing and engaging with the artistic process, while becoming acculturated into the wider social and mythic spaces to which the paintings refer.

**2.3.1.2 Yulidjirri Style** There is, however, another level of identification taking place in this picture, indicated by Maralngurra's use of the dynamic figurative style characteristic of contemporary painting at Gunbalanya. In this style, figures are depicted with long, articulated limbs and beak-like mouths, usually displayed in profile, and with their bodies marked with multi-colored bands of cross-hatching (known as *rarrk*) derived from the ceremonial body painting designs of the Mardayin ceremony. Taylor links this style to the family of artists around Barrdjaray Nganjmirra (c.1915-1992).<sup>136</sup> More recently, however, it has become associated with influence of Thompson Yulidjirri (c.1930-2009).<sup>137</sup>

The increased market demand for Aboriginal art that arose in the mid-1980s attracted many young Indigenous men and women to new community arts initiatives like Injalak Arts and

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Press, 1991), 75-99. , 105-10; Ian Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 20-21.

<sup>135</sup> Howard Morphy, "What Circles Look Like," *Canberra Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (1980); referenced in Luke Taylor, "Painted Energy: John Mawurndjul and the Negotiation of Aesthetics in Kuninjku Bark Painting," in *Between Indigenous Australia and Europe: John Mawurndjul*, ed. Claus Volkenandt and Christian Kaufmann (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag GmbH, 2009), 41. Nigel Lendon extends this observation to note: "the situation for *Balanda* (ie. white outsiders, like myself) is not so different to that of any other outsider, who may be excluded from access to sacred meanings through clan, moiety, gender, or level of knowledge." Lendon, 61.

<sup>136</sup> Taylor, *Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land*, 70-101. Altman and Taylor, 74.

<sup>137</sup> May, "Learning Art, Learning Culture: Art, Education, and the Formation of New Artistic Identities in Arnhem Land, Australia." "Started Down at the Little Shed," in *Twined Together: Kunmadj Njalehnjaleken*, ed. Louise Hamby (Gunbalanya: Injalak Arts and Crafts, 2005); Anthony Murphy, "Thompson Yulidjirri (Unpublished Obituary)," (2009).

Crafts.<sup>138</sup> These new ventures raised concerns amongst senior men in the community, who feared that cultural protocols were being broken.<sup>139</sup> Anthony Murphy, former director of Injalak, describes how a group of senior men – including Bardayal ‘Lofty’ Nadjamerrek (c.1920-2009), Peter Nabarlambarl (c.1930-2001) and Kalarriya ‘Jimmy’ Namarnyilk – decided that Yulidjirri should be ‘seconded’ to Injalak “to watch over the place and ensure cultural maintenance.”<sup>140</sup> Yulidjirri became the mentor to a committed younger generation of artists, keen to learn about their art and culture, including Maralngurra, Graham Badari (b.1963), Gershom Garlngarr (b.1963-2014), Joey Nganjmirra (b.1980), Isaiah Nagurgurrba (b.1969), and Wilfred Nawirridj (1961-2012).<sup>141</sup> As Maralngurra testifies, “He taught us. He was always looking after us, anyone. Now we know the right way”<sup>142</sup>

This relationship conforms to the informal systems of artistic apprenticeship described by Taylor.<sup>143</sup> For Kunwinjku, the choice of teacher is not strictly bound by clan or familial relationships: artists are free to form a connection with any senior person willing to act as mentor. As Taylor notes, “the primary feature is that young people must have the will to learn and be willing to defer to older people to them what they do not already know.”<sup>144</sup> These relationships create systems of knowledge transfer that bind the social identity of young artists, delimiting the subjects and styles appropriate for them to paint. Mediated by the teacher-

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<sup>138</sup> Some of the practical motivations for these young men to begin painting are detailed in May, "Learning Art, Learning Culture: Art, Education, and the Formation of New Artistic Identities in Arnhem Land, Australia," 177-80.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>140</sup> Anthony Murphy, "Working with a Giant - a Personal Insight into the Relationship between Bardayal 'Lofty' Nadjamerrek Ao and Injalak Arts," in *Bardayal 'Lofty' Nadjamerrek Ao*, ed. Keith Munro (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010), 101.

<sup>141</sup> Some of the practical motivations for these young men to begin painting are detailed in May, "Learning Art, Learning Culture: Art, Education, and the Formation of New Artistic Identities in Arnhem Land, Australia," 177-80.

<sup>142</sup> Gabriel Maralngurra, quoted in Murphy, "Thompson Yulidjirri (Unpublished Obituary)."

<sup>143</sup> See Taylor, *Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land*, 70-101; "They May Say Tourist, May Say Truly Painting: Aesthetic Evaluation and Meaning of Bark Paintings in Western Arnhem Land, Northern Australia," 870-71; *ibid.*, 58.

<sup>144</sup> *Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land*, 72.



apprentice relationship, painting provides an important space for the construction and renegotiation of individual and group identities.<sup>145</sup> While Kunwinjku painting might not be primarily orientated towards identifying clan affiliations, style remains central to Kunwinjku artists' sense of self-representation and identification. If Maralngurra's allusion to rock art is intended to testify to the antiquity of *Bininj* culture (while speaking to modes of knowledge transfer based on foundational social knowledge), his adherence to the Yulidjirri-style is an embodied self-representation that proclaims his identification with a particular contemporary Kunwinjku group identity. In *Bininj at the Rock Art Shelter* he makes the connection between these two styles explicit, linking them in a dynamic continuum.

**2.3.1.3      *Occidental Style*** This brings us to the final style used in *Meeting of Bininj Elders and Balanda Visitors in 1948*: the awkward manner used to portray the *Balanda* visitor. This "Occidental" style is an attempt to mimic Western naturalism, and serves to visually distinguish the visitor from his *bininj* counterparts. This differentiation reveals a concern with the representation of difference that recurs throughout Maralngurra's contact paintings. This is the central (if somewhat heavy-handed) theme of his third and fourth contact paintings: *Mother and Son, Bininj and Balanda* 2003 and *Two Boys* 2003. If the neat symmetry of *Mother and Son, Bininj and Balanda* suggests a sentimental universalism (or at least relative equivalence), this is much harder to reconcile with *Meeting of Bininj Elders and Balanda Visitors in 1948*. At the core of this painting is a total *failure* to understand: if the *Bininj* elders were hoping that the rock art would help the visitor comprehend the age and values of Aboriginal society, they were sorely let down when the visitors desecrated the graves of their ancestors. In painting this work, I feel

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<sup>145</sup> May, "Learning Art, Learning Culture: Art, Education, and the Formation of New Artistic Identities in Arnhem Land, Australia," 192.

as though Maralngurra was himself trying to come to terms with this betrayal. With his typical magnanimity, he concludes:

Mountford, he's alright, but he probably came and he didn't let those people know that they be right up on that rock by himself maybe on this expedition. He probably sees some of the rock art. He probably saw some of the bones lying there and he probably got some bones with them ... he probably didn't let those different people know.<sup>146</sup>

Rather than reading Mountford's actions as deceitful or villainous, Maralngurra reframes them as a breakdown in communication: "They didn't know what he was saying in English," he continues, "They didn't know what the Balanda were saying."<sup>147</sup> However, the differences articulated in *Meeting of the Bininj Elders and Balanda Visitors in 1948* are far greater than linguistic. In attempting to reconcile these events, I believe that Maralngurra draws attention to the very limits of communication and the boundaries of exchange.

## 2.4 SEEING THROUGH SPENCER

It is in this context that I would like to consider Maralngurra's first depiction of Spencer; a painting that, in many ways, can be seen as a dialectical response to this process of objectifying the Other. *Sir Baldwin Spencer* departs from Kunwinjku artistic convention in one striking way: Maralngurra has chosen to depict Spencer in "x-ray," revealing an iconic outline of the internal organs of the anthropologist's stomach. While the depiction of internal organs is common in Kunwinjku paintings of animals, it almost never used in depictions of the human body. According to Luke Taylor, x-ray is used to distinguish between food species (*mayh*) and those

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<sup>146</sup> Gabriel Maralngurra, in May et al., 119.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 123.

associated with ancestral spirits (*Djang*). The avoidance of x-ray in depictions of human figures is reflective of a respect for the spiritual nature of the human body.<sup>148</sup> Spencer himself noted this distinction in 1928, claiming, “In these mythological drawings, unlike those of animals, very little attempt is made to indicate internal anatomical details. This is because the native does not associate with them such mere animal traits.”<sup>149</sup>



**Figure 2.3.** Gabriel Maralngurra, Sir Baldwin Spencer 2003. Earth pigments and synthetic binder on paper. 62 x 41 cm. Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin. Reproduced courtesy the artist, Injalak Arts and Crafts and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.

<sup>148</sup> Taylor, *Seeing the Inside*, 225, 137-9.

<sup>149</sup> Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, 802.

When questioned about his decision to depict Spencer in x-ray, Maralngurra replied, “He can see right through him that clever man.”<sup>150</sup> There are several ways in which this might be interpreted. The first is to take the claim literally: that the man depicted is a sorcerer with the power of x-ray vision, able to see through Spencer’s material substance. As Peter Sutton notes, “Sorcery beliefs have had great durability in Aboriginal societies.”<sup>151</sup> Maralngurra is no exception, speaking with great conviction about the spirits inhabiting particular ancestral sites, and their capacity to intervene in the present.<sup>152</sup> Like many of his peers, Maralngurra wholeheartedly believes in the ability of “clever” men and women to communicate with these spirits in order to wield otherworldly powers.

The earnest invocation of such supernatural powers seems at odds with Western notions of objective “social history.” It is a tension that, I believe, Maralngurra exploits throughout his contact paintings in order to point to the multiplicity of historical times that Griffiths refers to as “conjunctures of the present.”<sup>153</sup> When I asked Maralngurra his motivations for painting contact imagery, he replied: “It was just my idea. It came from my head, to draw the *balanda* [Europeans] who first came here and bought barks and weavings. I had to look in a book, a history of Oenpelli.”<sup>154</sup> During my visits to the Injalak art center, I observed multiple, well-read copies of recent illustrated history books. However, Maralngurra’s contact paintings are hardly faithful reproductions of the historical record. On a basic level, they contain several historical inaccuracies: in several works Spencer is depicted in the presence of his wife (who never visited Gunbalanya), while in *Baldwin Spencer Buying Artefacts at Oenpelli in 1912* 2003, Spencer is

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<sup>150</sup> Gabriel Maralngurra, quoted by Anthony Murphy, email correspondence with author, August 19, 2009.

<sup>151</sup> Peter Sutton, *The Politics of Suffering* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2009), 142-3.

<sup>152</sup> This is particularly evident when describing his paintings of Kudjekbinj, many of which relate to the *Wurdyaw Djang* (or baby Dreaming): a particular site believed to hold special fertility powers to help women to conceive.

<sup>153</sup> Tom Griffiths, “Traveling in Deep Time.”

<sup>154</sup> Gabriel Maralngurra, interviewed by the author, Gunbalanya, Northern Territory, Australia, August 17, 2009.

shown alongside a car (the first motor vehicle did not arrive at Gunbalanya for over a decade).<sup>155</sup> Most striking is the absence of Spencer's most characteristic visual feature: his handlebar moustache. I do not mention these inaccuracies to make a pedantic point, but rather, because they indicate a different motive behind Maralngurra's claim that he "had to look in a book" for inspiration. While some of his later contact paintings are clearly based on historical photographs,<sup>156</sup> my research has not found any evidence to suggest this is the case for Maralngurra's depictions of Baldwin Spencer. Rather, I believe that Maralngurra's claim is an assertion of equivalence, declaring the synergy of his contact paintings as structural analogues to the Western historical record.<sup>157</sup> If Maralngurra's statement is intended to broadcast a positivist provenance for his images, invoking the magical powers of the clever man sets up an inevitable tension between two seemingly incommensurate models of understanding: a dialectical reversal of the tension that, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, normally characterizes the relationship between the "academic observer-subject and the "superstitious" persons serving as the objects of study."<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> See Keith Cole, *A History of Oenpelli* (Darwin: Nungalinga Publications, 1975), xiii.

<sup>156</sup> See for instance, Gabriel Maralngurra, *Mountford Expedition Camp* 2006, natural pigments and synthetic binder on paper, 76 x 102 cm, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, which is most certainly derived from Howell Walker's photograph *The American-Australian Scientific Expedition, Oenpelli 1948*, 1948 reproduced in Charles Mountford, "Exploring Stone Age Arnhem Land," *National Geographic* 96, no.6 (1949).

<sup>157</sup> Aboriginal Australian artists frequently refer to their paintings within the context of written history. "This one now, history, history book: good for you," declared the late Gaagudju elder Bill Neidjie of the rock art at Ubirr. Not only do many Indigenous artists think deeply and reflexively about their own histories (including art histories), they also show a clear desire to utilize the platforms of academic discourse in order to stake the veracity and significance of these histories. Writers and academics are viewed as useful collaborators in this network of cultural exchange, and pride is taken in the ability to foster these cross-cultural relationships. See for example, Sally K. May, Paul S.C. Taçon, Daryl Wesley, and Meg Travers. "Painting History: Indigenous Observations and Depictions of the 'Other' in Northwestern Arnhem Land, Australia." *Australian Archaeology*, no. 71 (2010): 57-65; Bill Neidjie, quoted in Paul S.C. Taçon, "Art and the Essence of Being: Symbolic and Economic Aspects of Fish among the Peoples of Western Arnhem Land, Australia," in *Animals into Art*, ed. Howard Morphy (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 247.

<sup>158</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 236-7.

For Chakrabarty, modern historical consciousness is predicated upon the practice for anachronism. Historical evidence is “produced by our capacity to see something that is contemporaneous with us—ranging from practices, humans, institutions, and stone-inscriptions to documents—as relics of another time or place ... A particular past thus becomes objectified in the observer’s time.”<sup>159</sup> This requires a separation between the observer and the object of study, in order to deny the lived relationship that the observer has with the object they identify as belonging to a historical time separate from the one they themselves occupy. In order to prevent seeing their own present as discontinuous with itself, the observer must adopt “the idea that the analytical gives us some kind of x-ray vision into the social, that it gives us access to a level of reality somehow deeper than the everyday.”<sup>160</sup>

In *Sir Baldwin Spencer*, it is not Spencer, but the “clever man” who wields this “x-ray vision.” This is an unsubtle jab at the reflexivity of Spencer’s scientific endeavor. Spencer may have thought that he could “see through” Aboriginal Australians to the dawn of civilization, but in reality, he could not escape his own presuppositions, prejudices and pre-understandings, based, as Angus Nicholls notes, on his “largely non-reflexive deployment of a natural sciences paradigm within an anthropological or ethnological context, combined with his inadequate command of [Aboriginal languages] and his theoretical and even scientific-political loyalty to Frazer from 1898 onwards.”<sup>161</sup>

But as a critical reversal, this strategy is relatively unsatisfying: not least because it replays many of the more unsavory elements of Spencer’s prejudices. Maralngurra’s use of x-ray is less openly offensive than Spencer’s literal equation of Aboriginal Australians with local fauna (“Australia is the present home and refuge of creatures, often crude and quaint, that have elsewhere

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>161</sup> Nicholls, “Anglo-German Mythologies: The Australian Aborigines and Modern Theories of Myth in the Work of Baldwin Spencer and Carl Strehlow,” 107.

passed away and given place to higher forms. This applies equally to the Aboriginal as to the platypus and kangaroo”),<sup>162</sup> but the end result is still a de-humanizing objectification of the Other.

## 2.5 RARRK, OPACITY AND SELF-REPRESENTATION



**Figure 2.4.** Gabriel Maralngurra, Baldwin Spencer and Paddy Cahill 2003. Earth pigments and synthetic binder on paper. 76 x 102 cm. Private collection, Melbourne. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Injalak Arts and Crafts.

Notably, Maralngurra does not repeat the strategy of “x-ray” in any of his other contact paintings. In fact, in his second iteration of Spencer, *Baldwin Spencer and Paddy Cahill* 2003, he moves in the exact opposite direction, covering Spencer’s body with the multi-colored cross-

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<sup>162</sup> W.B. Spencer and F.J. Gillen, *The Arunta* (London: MacMillan, 1927), vii.



hatching (known as *rarrk*) derived from the ceremonial body painting designs of the Mardayin ceremony. When I asked Maralngurra about the use of *rarrk* in this painting, he refused to answer, saying that it was secret Mardayin design and he could not talk about it. This begs the obvious question, why use secretive designs in a painting of such secular subject matter? The answer goes to the core of my argument about the role that depicting Spencer played in Maralngurra's consideration of the relational nature of Indigenous self-representation.

*Rarrk* is a term used across Arnhem Land to refer to the fine line infill or crosshatched designs that are painted on the body or upon sacred objects in the Mardayin initiation ceremony. During the ceremony, initiates are taken to a restricted campsite where the designs are painted on their bodies while the elders reveal the meaning of these designs. The initiates are also shown a series of secret-sacred objects whose meaning are similarly revealed. Mardayin ceremony is an important initiation rite for Kunwinjku men. During the ceremony, the men have their bodies painted with *rarrk*. The meaning of these abstract designs is explained to the initiates, who are also shown secret/sacred objects to help them understand the designs. Following the ceremony, all the men return to the public camp, still painted in their *rarrk*. The secrets embedded in abstract *rarrk* designs are not obscured or occluded, but rather access is restricted by ritual hierarchies of learning and revelation. Françoise Dussart puts it well: the secrets are "shown but not shared, presented but not proffered."<sup>163</sup> In other words, the secret information in these paintings *is hidden in plain view*.<sup>164</sup> Rather than suggesting an active foreclosure of meaning, these hierarchies are better thought of as a form of opacity, tracing the boundaries of communication and the limits of translation.

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<sup>163</sup> Françoise Dussart, "Shown but Not Shared, Presented but Not Proffered: Redefining Ritual Identity among Walpiri Ritual Performers, 1990-2000," *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 15, no. 3 (2004): 253-66.

<sup>164</sup> Ian McLean, "Crossing Country: Tribal Modernism and Kuninjkun Bark Painting," *Third Text* 20, no. 5 (September 2006): 599-616.





**Figure 2.5.** Gabriel Maralngurra, *Since Balanda Came* 2006. Natural pigments and synthetic binder on paper. Two panels, 61 x 152 cm each. National Museum of Australia, Canberra, ACT. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Injalak Arts and Crafts.

The political and self-representational power of *rarrk* is stunningly visualized in one of the last and most ambitious of Maralngurra's contact paintings: *Since Balanda Came* 2006. Across two large panels, Maralngurra brings the past into the present, drawing a historical line from the arrival of missionaries in 1925, through to the social dysfunction of contemporary Aboriginal communities. Maralngurra describes how the baked bread, bullocks and agricultural equipment in the top panel signify the industriousness of the mission-era. Like his description of Paddy Cahill, there is a halcyon tint to his reminiscences of the grueling, indentured labor of the

mission-era. Maralngurra does not underplay this hardship, but like many of his kinfolk, views it as preferable to the wasted days of “sit-down money.”<sup>165</sup>

What I thought to myself was once there was no drugs. The young ones didn't smoke. Then came bad things like petrol sniffing, grog, gambling, young people breaking the law. I wanted to paint it for Aboriginal people in the whole of Australia, that they might see this painting and think not to do that. It's a good message. I want to share that story for the whole of Australia ... even *Balanda*.<sup>166</sup>

*Since Balanda Came* is more than just a nostalgic lament for the prelapsarian days before the introduction of alcohol, drugs and consumer goods. By overwriting every piece of Western material culture with *rarrk*, the onus is transported from being an ‘imported’ vice to an Indigenous problem. Television and radio (cultural imperialism's foremost modes of transmission) are blocked, depicted unplugged, symbolically emasculated, their cords dangling limply into space. The television shows nothing by a blaze of *rarrk*. There is a hypnotic quality to this screen: it is a powerful assertion of agency that simultaneously reclaims responsibility for social ills, while pointing to their solution through the revaluing of traditional Aboriginal systems of knowledge.

By the 1990s, *rarrk* had begun to fill an important role as an indicator self-identification for Indigenous artists of Arnhem Land. Just as “dots” had become synonymous with desert art, crosshatching began to fill a similar niche in the public conception of Aboriginal art from the Top End.<sup>167</sup> *Rarrk* is not found on the rock art sites in Western Arnhem Land.<sup>168</sup> When the first collection of bark paintings were assembled by Spencer and Cahill at Gunbalanya between 1912-

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<sup>165</sup> Gabriel Maralngurra, artist statement for *Since Balanda Came* 2006, courtesy the artist and Injalak Arts and Crafts. “Sit-down money” is a commonly used colloquialism in Aboriginal communities to refer to welfare payments.

<sup>166</sup> Gabriel Maralngurra, interviewed by the author. Gunbalanya, Northern Territory, Australia, 17 August 2009.

<sup>167</sup> See for instance Terry Smith, “Black Art: Its Genius Explained,” *The Independent Monthly*, September 1989.

<sup>168</sup> When, in 1997, the senior artist Thompson Yulidjirri was invited to paint an imitation rock art shelter at the Australian Museum in Sydney, despite being a practitioner of cross-hatched *rarrk* he chose to execute the commission in single-line style, in deference to the rock art tradition.

1921, the images conformed closely to the rock-art tradition, consisting mostly of secular depictions of animals in x-ray style, along with a smaller number of paintings depicting spirit figures. It was not until the late 1940s when *rarrk* began to emerge as a distinctive stylistic feature of Western Arnhem Land art. As noted earlier, the first appearance of these designs was in the paintings collected by Charles Mountford in 1948, but they are equally present in the bark collected by Ronald and Catherine Berndt in 1949.<sup>169</sup> The appearance of ceremonial designs was undoubtedly due, in part, to the encouragement of these anthropologists to include more ceremonial content, however, as Taylor notes, it also signified “a conscious attempt to demonstrate to non-Aborigines the nature and basis of Aboriginal authority structures given the repression of these structures that occurred as a result of the European and missionary administration.”<sup>170</sup>

As we noted earlier, the understanding of ceremonial designs is based upon a revelatory system, which requires the initiate’s passage along a continuum of learning. Taylor observes, “The metaphors of sacred Mardayin paintings are thus grounded in the initiates’ personal, sensible, understanding of the world.”<sup>171</sup> This means, as Howard Morphy notes, that the veil of secrecy is thin.<sup>172</sup> Jennifer Deger concludes, “What matters most is that there is a sense in which access to certain information, imagery, and objects remains controlled, while enabling all participants to glean a measure of understanding based on prior knowledge and processes of deduction.”<sup>173</sup> The Kuninjku artist John Mawurndjul succinctly articulates this: “Tell those Balanda that it’s okay, there is no restriction on looking at my paintings. They can enjoy the

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<sup>169</sup> Taylor, *Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land*, 30. Neale.

<sup>170</sup> Taylor, *Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land*, 28.

<sup>171</sup> "Seeing the 'Inside': Kunwinjku Paintings and the Symbol of the Divided Body," 384.

<sup>172</sup> Howard Morphy, "From Dull to Brilliant: The Aesthetics of Spiritual Power among the Yolngu," *Man* 25, no. 1 (1989); *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*.

<sup>173</sup> Deger, 117.

paintings but buried inside are secret meanings they don't need to know."<sup>174</sup> And yet, as Fred Myers has noted for the Pintupi artists of the Western Desert, in the control of such secrets, "lies a potent source of their autonomy and their difference from the dominant Australian majority."<sup>175</sup>

Ian McLean has suggested, "Kuninjku artists have found abstraction an ideal format because it is a foil that keeps the invisible invisible."<sup>176</sup> While I agree broadly with this sentiment, the inflection it places on active concealment does not accurately reflect Kunwinjku processes of ceremonial revelation. As Mawurndjul's statement suggests, the secret information in his paintings is not hidden – or rather, *it is hidden in plain view*. By the late 1990s, the Australian public was well aware of the secret-sacred knowledge systems that underpin Aboriginal society. Rather than using abstraction as a foil, I think that the work of artists like Mawurndjul is designed precisely to draw non-Indigenous viewers' attention to what they cannot see; what they cannot understand; the secrets they will never know. Unlike the attempts of earlier generations of artists to use art to educate anthropologists like Spencer, Mountford and the Berndts, these works are post-dialogic, content to present their own opacity.<sup>177</sup>

As a metaphor for understanding the Other, covering Spencer is *rarrk* has markedly different connotations than the "seeing through" of x-ray. Rather than transparency, it suggests a level of opacity, while drawing attention to the ways in which our understanding of the Other is preconditioned by our own "identificational" projections. In 1908, a year before Paddy Cahill

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<sup>174</sup> John Mawurndjul and Apolline Kohen, "I Never Stop Thinking About My *Rarrk*," in <<*Rarrk*>> - John Mawurndjul: *Journey through Time in Northern Australia*, ed. Christian Kaufmann (Basel: Museum Tinguely, 2005), 27.

<sup>175</sup> Fred Myers, "Emplacement and Displacement: Perceiving the Landscape through Aboriginal Australian Acrylic Painting," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 78, no. 4 (2013): 459-60.

<sup>176</sup> Ian McLean, "Fine Art to the Rescue: Kuninjku Modernism," in *ACUADS 2005 Conference* (<http://www.acuads.com.au/2005>).

<sup>177</sup> I am drawing here on Glissant's theorizing of the political potential of opacity. See Édouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

established the first frontier outpost at Gunbalanya, the sociologist Georg Simmel reasoned that all relations were predicated on a certain level of incompleteness. As we can never entirely know the individuality of another, Simmel argued that we are forced to supplement our observations with preconceived “distortions” based upon our own “identificational” life experiences. Knowledge of the Other, therefore, requires recognition of both their similarity and difference. “We cannot fully represent to ourselves an individuality which deviates from our own,” argued Simmel, but on the other hand, difference is required, “in order to gain distance and objectivity.”<sup>178</sup>

While the use of *rarrk* in *Baldwin Spencer and Paddy Cahill* suggests a much more relational understanding of the Other than *Sir Baldwin Spencer*, it remains a terse image whose focus is on the limits of cross-cultural communication. There is a fraught intensity to the standoff that shuttles between danger and sexual intimacy (perhaps allusion to the commonly held belief at Gunbalanya that Cahill fathered illegitimate Aboriginal children).<sup>179</sup> In a description that bears a remarkable conformity to the written historical record,<sup>180</sup> Maralngurra comments:

They’re not angry, but he [Spencer] still has a gun. They’re thinking maybe they’re going to shoot us, or what? Cahill was a good buffalo shooter. Or maybe take them hostage. They didn’t know that all they wanted was to trade with the *bininj*, so they were nervous, worried, even though they are trading. There weren’t many *balanda* [Europeans] back then.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Georg Simmel, “How is Society Possible (1908),” reprinted in Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald Levine (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971), 9-11.

<sup>179</sup> John Mulvaney, *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2004), 9.

<sup>180</sup> Spencer notes, “We had firearms with us, and the natives knew it; but we never found it necessary to use them, even in threat.” At another point, he recalls, “Two of the older men thought that we wished to take some of their wives away and give them to other men, so that they each sent two of them away into hiding.” Baldwin Spencer, quoted in John Mulvaney, “‘Annexing All I Can Lay Hands On’: Baldwin Spencer as Ethnographic Collector,” in *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, ed. Nicholas Peterson, Lindy Allen, and Louise Hamby (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008), 144. Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, 780.

<sup>181</sup> Gabriel Maralngurra, interviewed by the author. Gunbalanya, Northern Territory, Australia, August 17, 2009

This description conforms remarkably to the historical record. Spencer's account shows that he carried firearms during his dealings with Aboriginal people, and that some *bininj* viewed his motives with suspicion.<sup>182</sup> While Lindy Allen stresses the "transactional" nature of Spencer's exchanges with the Kunwinjku, it must be noted that these transactions took place across markedly asymmetrical positions of power.<sup>183</sup> While Spencer was prepared to negotiate with Indigenous people in regards to fair prices for paintings, artefacts and ethnographic information, he was equally prepared to exert coercion when required to achieve his anthropological objectives.<sup>184</sup>

## 2.6 BEYOND THE FRONTIER

The apprehension of the encounter in *Baldwin Spencer and Paddy Cahill* is in stark contrast to Maralngurra's next depiction of Spencer, *Baldwin Spencer Collecting Artefacts at Oenpelli in 1912*, 2003. Here, the uneasy grimaces of the women have been replaced by beaming smiles. It is a tableau of productive industry as cheerful men and women engage in the process of making paintings, weavings and objects for their enthusiastic patrons. Notably, this is the first painting in which Maralngurra depicts artists producing bark paintings for trade. This reference to the art industry is

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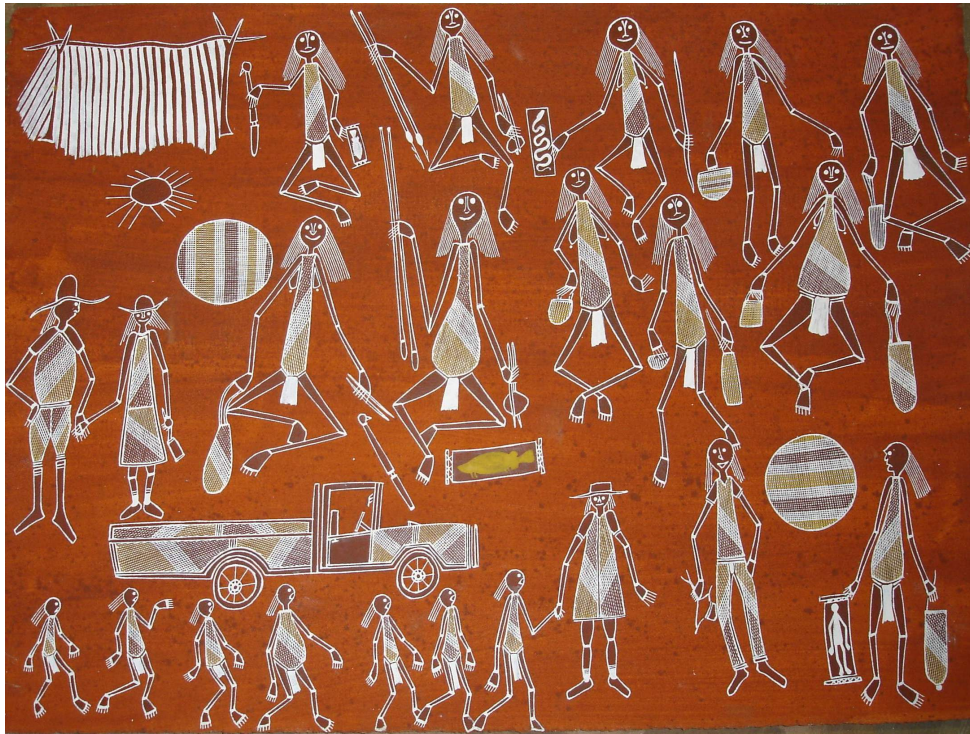
<sup>182</sup> Spencer notes, "We had firearms with us, and the natives knew it; but we never found it necessary to use them, even in threat." At another point, he recalls, "Two of the older men thought that we wished to take some of their wives away and give them to other men, so that they each sent two of them away into hiding." Baldwin Spencer, quoted in Mulvaney, "'Annexing All I Can Lay Hands On': Baldwin Spencer as Ethnographic Collector," 144. Spencer, 780.

<sup>183</sup> Allen notes, "There was a level of Indigenous control over transactions, and Indigenous people controlled entirely what was produced. While Spencer set rats in tobacco to pay for bark paintings and photography, there is an indication that Aboriginal people negotiated for payment in tobacco for specific objects. The former may have been arrived at with consultation. Clearly if the exchange was felt to be inequitable, the matter was taken up directly with Spencer." Allen, 50-51.

<sup>184</sup> Spencer was also prepared to misrepresent his aims when convincing elders to reveal ceremonial secrets. This revelation led to considerable upset when the publication of these secrets was later made apparent. See for instance, Spencer, 780, 831-43. Martin Thomas and Murray Garde offer similar assessments in regards to some of Ronald Berndt's techniques for obtaining information. Martin Thomas, "Taking Them Back: Archival Material in Arnhem Land Today," *Cultural Studies Review* 13, no. 2 (2007): 27; Murray Garde, "The Forbidden Gaze: The 1948 Wubarr Ceremony Performed for the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land," in *Exploring the Legacy of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition*, ed. Martin Thomas and Margo Neale (Canberra: Australian National University E Press, 2011), 415-16.



pointed, for if Spencer's evolutionary anthropology *spoke of the Other, but never too the Other*, the production of art would become the preeminent site for the expression of Indigenous identity across the colonial divide. As noted earlier, Spencer played a pivotal role in the establishment of a market for Aboriginal art, and perhaps the most important legacy of his tenure as director of the National Museum was the remarkable archive of Aboriginal material culture that he amassed.



**Figure 2.6.** Gabriel Maralngurra, Baldwin Spencer Buying Artefacts at Oenpelli in 1912, 2003. Natural pigments and synthetic binder on paper. 76 x 102 cm. Museum Victoria, Melbourne. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Injalak Arts and Crafts.

By reclaiming agency for the sites of encounter between *bininj* and anthropologists, Gabriel Maralngurra's contact paintings present a fluid, cosmopolitan version of the frontier, where cultures merge and overlap in a constitutive process of identity construction. This is demonstrated through Maralngurra's use of multiple styles, and by the different identificational

roles that these styles perform within his paintings. In doing so, Maralngurra's contact paintings assert the intercultural possibilities of Aboriginal art, while pointing to the limits of this dialogic process, the boundaries of communication, and the necessary persistence of difference.

From his very first contact painting, there is an art historical reflexivity in Maralngurra's contact paintings, as he contrasts older and newer styles of painting. We see it in the numerous "paintings within paintings," whether the rock art tableaux in works such as *Meeting of the Bininj Elders and Balanda Visitors in 1948*, or in the carefully recreated examples of older bark painting styles in works like *Baldwin Spencer Collecting Artefacts at Oenpelli in 1912* and *Contact Theme: The Berndts* 2003. By contrasting these older styles with the newer style of painting (Yulidjirri style), Maralngurra references the subsequent stylistic development of painting at Gunbalanya.<sup>185</sup> Coupled with his inclusion of a specific date in the title, there is a clear historical reflexivity at work in *Baldwin Spencer Collecting Artefacts at Oenpelli in 1912*. By asserting local art histories, as well as local social histories, Maralngurra disrupts the temporal Othering characteristic of Western modernity. By returning to this genesis moment of cross-cultural exchange, while explicitly drawing on local art histories, Maralngurra's contact paintings imagine the colonial frontier, not as a line demarcating civilization and savagery, self and Other, but a contact zone, a "poetics of relation" where communication must be achieved using whatever provisional tongues are available.<sup>186</sup>

This Kunwinjku version of art historical reflexivity counters the traditional conception of the frontier as a site of deferral.<sup>187</sup> In framing the frontier as a dividing line between civilization

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<sup>185</sup> As Sally May argues, Maralngurra's use of this contemporary style is itself an expression of his identification with a particular contemporary Kunwinjku group identity. May, "Learning Art, Learning Culture."

<sup>186</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997),

<sup>187</sup> The best known articulation of this is Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 treatise "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." According to Turner, it was the endless space *beyond* the frontier that forged the aspirational nature of the American character. Turner also recognized the frontier as the site of encounter: "the meeting point between savagery and civilization." It was through the hardships and adversity of this encounter that Turner believed that a truly unique identity would emerge: "the outcome is not the old Europe [but] a new product that is



and wilderness, the frontier has tended to be cast as a psychic line demarcating the limits of European identity. While this frontier provided the site for exposure to the other, this demarcation allowed a *beyond* in which the other could be cast as contrary, maintaining the illusory certainty of a stable identity.<sup>188</sup> The way of achieving this *beyond* was temporal.<sup>189</sup> As Rod Macneil notes, “Aboriginality remained defined in terms of colonisation’s temporal frontier, as a signifier of the past upon which the colonial nation was built.”<sup>190</sup> Anthropology played a substantive role in maintaining this temporal frontier, casting indigenous peoples into the Stone-Age past.<sup>191</sup>

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American.” Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 1893, reprinted in *The Frontier in American History*, Frederick Jackson Turner (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 3-4.

<sup>188</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 14-15; Chakrabarty, 16-17.

<sup>189</sup> As Johannes Fabian observes, “there is no knowledge of the Other which is not also a temporal, historical and political act.” Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983; repr., 2002), 1.

<sup>190</sup> Rod Macneil, “Time after Time: Temporal Frontiers and Boundaries in Colonial Images of the Australian Landscape,” in *Colonial Frontiers: Indigenous-European Encounters in Settler Societies*, ed. Lynette Russell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 49.

<sup>191</sup> See for instance Fabian, *Time and the Other*.



**Figure 2.7.** Gabriel Maralngurra, Baldwin Spencer and Paddy Cahill, 2006. Natural pigments and synthetic binder on paper. 76 x 102 cm. National Museum of Australia, Canberra. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Injalak Arts and Crafts.

The effect of Maralngurra's reclamation of the frontier is twofold. On the one hand, there is certainly an element of post-colonial critique, as "the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and 'partial' representation rearticulates; the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence."<sup>192</sup> This is strikingly illustrated in Maralngurra's final representation of *Baldwin Spencer and Paddy Cahill* 2006. Holding his camera impotently, Spencer wears a startled frown, as though it is he who has been caught suddenly by the viewer's gaze. This is a particularly charged gesture in light of Spencer's photographic reproduction of ceremonial performances and objects.<sup>193</sup> Whereas traditional narratives have stressed the agency of Spencer and Cahill in inaugurating the arts industry, in this work, there is a forceful *bininj* agency. As Cahill throws his beleaguered arms in

<sup>192</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 127.

<sup>193</sup> Batty, Allen, and Morton, *The Photographs of Baldwin Spencer*.

the air, he appears almost under siege by the Indigenous figures, pressuring him to accept their objects of trade.

But Maralngurra's contact paintings are about more than simply speaking from "the other side of the frontier." To do so, would only serve to perpetuate the dialectic of colonial domination. In emphasizing the moments when art emerged as a primary mode for dialogic exchange, Maralngurra moves beyond these dichotomies in order to forge a fluid, cosmopolitan version of the frontier, focused upon the site of exchange where cultures merged and overlapped. This is not a relationship in which colonizer and colonized are bound in a mutually dependent dialectic, but rather, a relationship of exchange, open to an unfolding (but always provisional) number of possibilities.

## 2.7 POSTSCRIPT: A FAREWELL TO BALDWIN SPENCER



**Figure 2.8.** Gabriel Maralngurra, *Baldwin Spencer and his Wife* 2007. Earth pigments and synthetic binder on paper. 76 x 102 cm. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Injalak Arts and Crafts.

In late 2007, Maralngurra completed his final “contact painting”: *Baldwin Spencer and his Wife*. It is the first image of Spencer that does not also include Aboriginal interlocutors. It is also the least tense of all Maralngurra’s depictions of the anthropologist. Spencer and his wife are shown holding hands, their bodies covered in shimmering, geometric *rarrk*. As his final “contact painting,” I have often thought of the work as a farewell to Spencer: as he and his wife stare directly at the viewer, there is a sense that the tableau has shifted and we the viewer are now in the position of the “clever man.” But we do not *see through* Spencer; the *rarrk* is dazzling but

impenetrable, and Spencer hovers like a ghost, always slightly out of reach. A relationship has been established here, but difference has not completely been erased.

Produced five years apart—at diametrical ends of his project—*Sir Baldwin Spencer* and *Baldwin Spencer and his Wife*, chart a profound shift in Maralngurra’s thinking. Both are an attempt to grapple with difference—with competing, possibly incommensurate way of being. The difference is one of inflection: it is akin to the distinction drawn by Randall Halle between radical alterity and relational alterity. “Radical alterity,” he argues, ‘is that otherness which we cannot know because it is outside our apparatus of perception. Relational alterity is that otherness which arises in the moment that the subject experiences the boundaries of its own self.’”<sup>194</sup>

*Baldwin Spencer and his Wife* is a deeply human portrait, possessing a sensitivity absent from the earlier portraits. I am reminded of Édouard Glissant’s rallying call for the power of opacity: “I ... am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity to him. To feel in solidarity with him ... it is not necessary to grasp him—it is not necessary to try and become the other (to become other) nor to “make” him in my image.”<sup>195</sup> Spencer may have cast his Indigenous subjects into the stone-age past and objectified them in order to justify colonial domination, but in this final painting Maralngurra offers a reconciling gesture: not *seeing through*, but *speaking to* the Other, not in the hope of perfect communication, but in a move towards recognizing a true contemporaneity based upon our shared humanity.

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<sup>194</sup> Randall Halle, personal communication, March 2, 2016.

<sup>195</sup> Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, 193.

### 3.0 GEORGE NUKU: THE MARAE AND THE MUSEUM

it is feasible that we will enter  
space  
colonise planets call our spacecraft *waka*  
perhaps name them after the first fleet  
erect marae transport carvers renew stories  
with celestial import

ROBERT SULLIVAN, *STAR WAKA* (1999)

### 3.1 LAUNCHING THE WAKA

Curated in 2006 by Rosanna Raymond and Amiria Salmond, *Pasifika Styles* invited thirty-three indigenous artists from Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Pacific Islands to present their work alongside the extensive historical collections of Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA).<sup>196</sup> The approaches of the artists in *Pasifika Styles* varied greatly. For some, such as Lisa Reihana, Ani O'Neill and Tracey Tawhiao, it was an opportunity to incorporate historical objects into their work, creating installations that attempted to literally

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<sup>196</sup> *Pasifika Styles* was held at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology from May 5, 2006 until February 3, 2008. See Rosanna Raymond and Amiria Salmond, eds., *Pasifika Styles: Artists inside the Museum* (Cambridge and Dunedin: University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and Otago University Press, 2008), 73-4; Carine Ayélé Durand, "Indexing (in)Authenticity: Art and Artefact in Ethnography Museums.," *Alternative* 6, no. 3 (2010); Anita Herle, "Relational Objects: Connecting People and Things through Pasifika Styles," *International Journal of Cultural Property* 15, no. 2 (2008); Andrew Moutu, "Pasifika Styles: A Polyphonic Collage at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology," *Anthropology Today* 23, no. 2 (2007); Fanny Wonu Veys, "Art or Artefact: Is That the Question? "Pasifika Styles" at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the Refurbishment of the Michael Rockefeller Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* 56 (2010).

enact indigenous agency over their cultural patrimony. For other, such as Wayne Youle or Jason Hall, the exhibition was a platform for more didactic political statements directed at the imperial mechanisms that underpinned museum collecting.

The work that Māori artist George Nuku produced for *Pasifika Styles* sat somewhere between these two responses. At the entrance to the exhibition, Nuku erected a translucent archway.<sup>197</sup> Carved out of seven two-inch slabs of Polymethyl Methacrylate—the transparent acrylic better known by its trade names Perspex or Plexiglas—it was a space-age declaration of Māori futurity. Nuku titled the work *Outer Space Marae* 2006, referencing the vital open space in front of a carved meeting house around which Māori communities are both physically and psychically formed.<sup>198</sup> The great Māori scholar Hirini Moko Mead has remarked, “Two contrasting institutions in New Zealand are the focus point for Maori art. One is the museum ... and the other is the meeting house. The museum is a Western institution.”<sup>199</sup> In bringing these two institutions together, Nuku announced the indigenization of the museum, transforming the galleries into Māori space and repossessing the objects within.<sup>200</sup>

Not only was *Pasifika Styles* the first major showing of contemporary Pacific art in the UK, but it also marked a watershed moment for the engagement of Pacific artists with historical

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<sup>197</sup> On *Outer Space Marae* 2006, see Garth Cartwright, “The Living and the Dead,” *New Zealand Listener*, February 24 2007; Herle; Matt Cooney, “Carving a New Tradition,” *Idealog* 2006; Raymond and Salmond; Peter Brunt and Nicholas Thomas, *Art in Oceania: A New History* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2013); Durand. Nuku would reprise the concept of *Outer Space Marae* on several occasions, including for the exhibition *Maori: Die Ersten Bewohner Neuseelands* at the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart (April 1—October 14, 2012), as well as exhibitions in the Moaroom, Rue de Malte, Paris in November 2011, and at October Gallery in 2009.

<sup>198</sup> Cleve Barlow explains that traditionally, the *marae* referred only to the open area of land directly in front of the sacred carved house. It was here that sacred rituals were performed. Today, the term is used more broadly to refer to all the buildings associated with a Māori community facility, including the carved meeting house, the dining hall and cooking area, as well as the *marae ātea* or sacred space in front of the meeting house. Cleve Barlow, *Tikanga Whakaaro: Key Concepts in Maori Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 71-4.

<sup>199</sup> S.M. (Hirini) Mead, *Te Toi Whakairo: The Art of Maori Carving* (Auckland: Reed Publishing, 1986), 200.

<sup>200</sup> Herle makes a similar observation: “The exhibition opens with George Nuku’s *Outer Space Marae* (2006), carved from acrylic Perspex and inlaid with *paua* (Haliotis shell). Its positioning at the entrance of the exhibition highlights the transformation of parts of the gallery into Maori space and the connection between ancestors and their contemporary kin.” Herle, 161.

ethnographic collections.<sup>201</sup> In a broader sense, this was indicative of a global phenomenon: by the 1990s, contemporary artists internationally were increasingly being called upon to work with ethnographic institutions, to act as what Haidy Geismar calls, “a palliative to the political problems of collections with roots in nineteenth-century ethnography.”<sup>202</sup> *Pasifika Styles* was the product of extensive community consultation and collaboration, designed to “awaken” the museum’s collections while “heralding a new era of collaborative curatorship in ethnographic museums.”<sup>203</sup> Anita Herle, Senior Curator at MAA, explains, “*Pasifika Styles* was generated from a less proprietorial form of curatorship, which facilitated members of local and diasporic communities to reconnect with their *tāonga* (ancestral treasures) and revitalize the museum’s collections, both physically and spiritually.”<sup>204</sup> Herle’s description is revealing: at the heart of *Pasifika Styles* was a desire to realign the epistemological foundations of the modern museum by activating alternative conceptions of both the value and agency of objects in ethnographic collections. Billie Lythberg, who consulted on the exhibition, notes: “The *Pasifika Styles* artists

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<sup>201</sup> It should be noted, that *Pasifika Styles* was not without precursors—most notably *Te Moemoea no Iotefa, The Dream of Joseph: A Celebration of Pacific Art and Taonga* curated by Rangihira Panaho for the Sarjeant Art Gallery in Wanganui (December 15, 1990-March 3, 1991). Karen Stevenson has argued that *Te Moemoea no Iotefa* “began this important dialogue by demonstrating that contemporary art was an extension of the cultural heritage and traditions of Pacific peoples.” Karen Stevenson, *The Frangipani Is Dead: Contemporary Pacific Art in New Zealand, 1985-2000* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), 42. See also, Nicholas Thomas, “The Dream of Joseph: Practices of Identity in Pacific Art,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 8, no. 2 (1996). Billie Lythberg provides a good account of the history of exhibiting contemporary Pacific art leading up to *Pasifika Styles*. Billie Lythberg, “Pasifika Styles: Where the Bellbird Sings,” in *Pasifika Styles: Artists inside the Museum*, ed. Rosanna Raymond and Amiria Salmond (Cambridge and Dunedin: University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and Otago University Press, 2008).

<sup>202</sup> Haidy Geismar, “The Art of Anthropology: Questioning Contemporary Art in Ethnographic Display,” in *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies: Museum Theory*, ed. Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 185. See also, Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 120-35; Susan Sleeper-Smith, ed. *Contesting Knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Kate Sturge, *Representing Others: Translation, Ethnography and the Museum* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2007). For competing views on the efficacy of these interventions, see Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal: McGill-Queens’s University Press, 2011); Durand.

<sup>203</sup> Raymond and Salmond, 3-20.

<sup>204</sup> Herle, 160.



were charged with breathing new life into the Oceanic collections at MAA, an activity arguably dependent on personal contact with the artefacts held therein.”<sup>205</sup>

In focusing on the work of George Nuku, this chapter moves from the consideration of history as a form of epistemology, to considering how it is substantiated in both institutions and objects. Nuku’s work is deeply invested in these questions, which, as I will argue, strike to the core of how we know and encounter the world. As these questions are played out in the contested institution of the modern museum, they necessarily impinge upon questions of subjectivity—particularly for indigenous peoples, whose subjecthood has often been circumscribed by the temporal frames of evolutionary historicism that were enshrined and materialized in the museum.

Nuku first visited MAA in 2001 with Rosanna Raymond, and was actively involved in the workshops and consultations in the lead up to *Pasifika Styles*. By his own admission, *Pasifika Styles* was the exhibition that launched his international career. Nuku’s work was a logical inclusion in the exhibition: few artist’s practice more clearly embodied the entangled aims of critiquing the museum by asserting alternative models of object-subject relations. In the decade since, Nuku has established himself as a leading figure among a generation of indigenous artists whose work engages directly with ethnographic museums and their collections. Nuku likes to joke that he is the “Brad Pitt of the ethnographic museums.”<sup>206</sup> As with many of his quips, the incongruence of this comparison is pointed, reflecting both his success and his recognition of the limitations of this arena. Since 2006, Nuku has become highly sought after internationally for his Māori carvings, produced in unconventional mediums that include extruded polystyrene foam (Styrofoam) and Polymethyl Methacrylate (PMMA). Nuku’s engagements with ethnographic

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<sup>205</sup> Lythberg, 44.

<sup>206</sup> See for instance, George Nuku in Karen Benbassat Ali to Satellite Gallery Blog, 9 December, 2013, <https://satellitegallery.wordpress.com/2013/07/20/the-sacred-objects-in-conversation-with-george-nuku/#more-1895>.

collections have ranged from subtle interventions—such *Outer Space Marae*—through to elaborate integrated installations, such as *Displays of Power* 2011, in which the Pacific collections of the Museum aan de Stroom (MAS) in Antwerp are recontextualized as components of a grand Perspex carved meeting house or *whare whaikaro*.

Nuku's use of modern materials while adhering to traditional Māori forms deliberately blurs the distinction between traditional and contemporary indigenous practice.<sup>207</sup> This gesture alone serves to disrupt the standard evolutionary narratives of the historical museum. But Nuku's critique is even more pointed when his interventions occur directly upon the mechanisms of display: the Perspex vitrines used to contain and preserve ethnographic objects.<sup>208</sup> For Nuku, the significance of such critiques extends beyond the confines of the institution. A consistent refrain of his statements and interviews has been the desire to engender new relationships between the viewer and the material world.<sup>209</sup> On the eve of *Pasifika Styles*, Nuku spoke with the reporter Matt Cooney in his studio in Auckland's North Shore:

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<sup>207</sup> The significance of this should not be underestimated: Māori art, like many indigenous art forms suffers from a strict bifurcation in what is deemed "contemporary" and "traditional" art forms. An example of this might be seen in Darcy Nicholas's 2006 account of the development of "Māori contemporary art." Nicholas identifies three key "generations" in the contemporary Māori art: the first emerging in the new urban communities of the 1960s (including Selwyn Murupaenga, Cliff Whiting and Sandy Adsett); the second, following the rise of activist art in the 1970s (including June Northcroft Grant, Buck Nin); before culminating in a generation of university educated, intellectual and conceptual artists in the 1990s (including Shane Cotton, Michael Parekowhai, and Lisa Reihana). This kind of narrative has the tendency to separate Māori artists into those deemed "contemporary" by virtue of their adoption of late-modernist, new-media, or post-conceptual practices, and those classified as "customary practitioners." In contrast, I see Nuku's work as belonging to an emergent category of artists who deliberately reject this divide, including artist such Visessio Siasau, Corey Bulpitt, and Yuma Taru. See Darcy Nicholas, "Breath of the Land," in *Manawa: Pacific Heartbeat*, ed. Nigel Reading (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre Ltd., 2006). For a critique of a specific contemporary curatorial separation of "customary" and "contemporary" practices, see Henry Skerritt, "Sakahān: International Indigenous Art [Review]," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 3, no. 2-3 (2014).

<sup>208</sup> See for instance, *Waharoa/Portal: Te Ao Marama—The World of Light* 2013.

<sup>209</sup> This has been a common refrain in Nuku's artist statements and interviews since at least 2006. It has become particularly central to Nuku's most recent practice, particularly his *Bottled Ocean* series (2014-present). See for instance, Cooney; Benbassat Ali; Dominique Godrech, "George Nuku: A Maori Sculptor in Paris," *Indian Country Today Media Network.com*, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2012/08/11/george-nuku-maori-sculptor-paris-127960>; Steven Hooper et al., "Encounters with Polynesia in Britain: Art, Ancestors, Artists, and Curators," *Museum Anthropology* 35, no. 1 (2012); George Nuku and Karen Jacobs, "An Artist's Perspective, 3," *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 21 (2009).

We're living in a plastic world and we cannot continue to have this kind of non-relationship with this material we use constantly. Where does this material come from? What is its genealogy? The role of the art is to initiate these conversations with the people and the medium.<sup>210</sup>

In recent years, Nuku has consciously tried to move beyond the context of ethnographic museums, to more mainstream “contemporary art” venues, recognizing the limitations of ethnographic museum interventions.<sup>211</sup> While exhibitions like *Pasifika Styles* have undoubtedly opened a space for contemporary indigenous artists, they also risk consigning indigenous artists to the very anthropological spaces they had been trying to escape:

I realized that I could continue responding to collections and invitations in ethnographic museums for the rest of my life, but I could be in danger of pigeonholing myself. And I thought, I'll never leave that, I'll always have a foot in there, a broken one if that, but I'll always have one in there. But I wanted to sort of ... I couldn't complain about not being recognized as a contemporary artist if I didn't start going and get actively into that world. And it's not the same world as ethnographic museums. Let's be real. I might be the same person, but they're not the same world.<sup>212</sup>

On the surface, Nuku's installations in contemporary art spaces—such as his installation *Bottled Ocean 2114* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei—appear less outwardly engaged in museum critique, replacing it with an overt environmentalism.<sup>213</sup> And yet, there is a remarkable consistency in the way in which Nuku speaks about these seemingly divergent

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<sup>210</sup> George Nuku, in Cooney.

<sup>211</sup> These include exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (2014-5); the Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Surfers Paradise (2015); the Pataka Art Museum, Porirua City (2016).

<sup>212</sup> George Nuku, interview with the author, May 27, 2016.

<sup>213</sup> *Bottled Ocean 2114*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Taiwan (November 15, 2014—January 4, 2015). Nuku has reprised the *Bottled Ocean* on several occasions, including at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle de Rouen, France (April 25, 2015—January 31, 2016); the Pataka Art Museum, Porirua City, New Zealand (February 21—May 15, 2016); the Centre Culturel Tjibaou, Nouvelle-Calédonie, New Caledonia (August 19, 2016—April 6, 2017) and the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle de La Rochelle, Rochelle, France (October 29, 2016—January 22, 2017).

practices. Compare, for instance, Nuku's previously quoted statement for *Outer Space Marae*, with the following description of *Bottled Ocean 2114*:

This artwork attempts to capture this possible near future scenario in order to point out to audiences just how close we really are to this.<sup>[L]<sub>SEP</sub></sup> The key component to this idea is the plastic drinking bottle—transformed into works of art and cultural treasure. I believe by doing this, we create divinity and genealogical connectivity to the plastic and the plastic to us.<sup>214</sup>

It would be a mistake, I believe, to overemphasize the distinction between Nuku's work in ethnographic museums and his more recent forays into contemporary art museums. This would be to misjudge the very nature of Nuku's critique. Nuku is not interested in engaging with the museum solely on its own epistemological terms, but rather, his aim is to destabilize the foundations of the institution by foregrounding seemingly incommensurate ways of relating to the objects held within the museum. This critique hinges on much larger questions of subjectivity, identity and indigeneity, as they are manifest both within and without the context of museum display. Thus, as I will argue, Nuku's institutional critique is as much ontological as it is epistemological.

### 3.2 INDIGENIZING THE MUSEUM

Despite its transparency, *Outer Space Marae*, with its imposing bulk of plastic, makes its presence felt on the threshold of the galleries. In titling the work a *marae*, Nuku deliberately leaves the nature of this presence open-ended. What exactly is this floating Perspex portal? One interpretation, is that it is a *waharoa*: the gateway opening onto a Māori community. Or is it the facade of *whare whakairo* or carved meeting house? The distinction is a significant one—and

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<sup>214</sup> George Nuku, Artist Statement, *Bottled Ocean 2114*, Pulima Arts Award, Museum of Contemporary Art Taipei, November 15, 2014—May 15, 2015.

one that Nuku keeps ambiguous.<sup>215</sup> Instead, Nuku draws attention to the open space of the *marae*: using the object of the portal to make a psychic claim upon the spaces around it. The transformation of the space of the museum into a *marae* is a pointed one: traditionally the area in which sacred rituals were performed, the open space of the *marae* remains the pivotal site of Māori political and economic negotiation.<sup>216</sup> Mead describes it as “a cultural haven,” while Ngahuia Te Awekotuku declares, “It is a place that pulsates with the *mauri*, the essential spirit of metaphysical sense of being part of the community and of the land.”<sup>217</sup> Jade Tangiahua Baker takes this further, arguing, “Marae are places where convergences of ideas are central to the construction and affirmation of social selves, a *hapū* or common community identity, and perhaps a consensual position reached on an issue.”<sup>218</sup> For his own part, Nuku describes his own Omahu *marae* as “The only place where every molecule of my being belongs.”<sup>219</sup>

Although central to Māori identity, it is worth stressing that the *marae* is not a site of consensus, but one of vigorous debate. Roger Neich notes, the “*marae* outside is often referred to as the domain of Tūmataunga, the god of war, reflecting the hostilities of debate on the *marae*, in contrast to the interior of the meeting house which is the domain of Rongo, the god of agriculture and peaceful pursuits, who calms the people and ensures peace within the intimacy of the house.”<sup>220</sup> The declaration of the museum space as a *marae*, signaled Nuku’s desire to reframe the museum as a site of negotiation or exchange. This was not to suggest any resolution, but quite the opposite. By

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<sup>215</sup> To this end, it is worth noting that Nuku titled his work as a *marae*, and not as a carved house (*whare whakairo*), gateway (*waharoa*) or even by its constituent parts (*koruru*, *maihi* and *amo*). For a description of the constituent parts of a *whare whakairo* and their symbolism, see S.M. (Hirini) Mead, *The Art of Maori Carving* (Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1961), 21-24.

<sup>216</sup> Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, “Maori People and Culture,” in *Maori Art and Culture*, ed. D.C. Starzecka (Chicago: Art Media Resources, Ltd., 1996), 35.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Jade Tangiahua Baker, “Te Pahitaua: Border Negotiators,” *International Journal of Cultural Property* 15, no. 2 (2008): 145.

<sup>219</sup> George Nuku, interview with the author, New York, July 14, 2016.

<sup>220</sup> Roger Neich, “Wood Carving,” (Chicago: Art Media Resources, Ltd., 1996), 106.

erecting a threshold, Nuku was enacting the dangerous liminal space between two states of existence. As Neich continues, “The threshold is a dangerous place where one should not linger.”<sup>221</sup>

As a dangerous but sacred space, the threshold demands engagement. As Nuku has observed:

With these portals you are obliged and bound to have openings and closings, entering and returning in ritual and ceremony, in psychic shifts and moments. The cold skin of death and the warm skin of life touching and rubbing. Movement is felt throughout, all this coursing, this humming vibration and harmonic flow. The patterns in the carving are all saying this. The engagements in the museums are intense. Confronted face to face with the ancestors, feeling intent and mastery in the *taonga* or treasures, feeling deep urgent things, an acceptance of the Maori measure of life, of *mana*, and *tapu*-cores of existence.<sup>222</sup>

Nuku’s statement makes clear that he does not see the museum as a site of monolithic structural power, but that it could be reframed to give agency to both indigenous *peoples* and indigenous *objects*. In his classic 1972 structuralist analysis of Māori art, Michael Jackson argues that all of the drama and tension in Māori society is expressed and resolved in the carvings of the meeting house.<sup>223</sup> Nowhere is this clearer, he argues, than in the *pare* or lintel: the sacred threshold between the *marae* and the *whare whakairo*. Presaging Nuku’s comments, Jackson notes, “the *pare* demonstrates two alternating or reciprocating principles: one (unfolding and conjoining and making whole) is *tupu*, the second (waning, weakening, breaking up) is *mate*.”<sup>224</sup> The aim was to symbolize the passage from individual to group identity. The unity of the house was thus contrasted to the actual or perceived disunity outside the house. The passing across the threshold involved a passage between two social lives: “Outside the house a person was involved in economic cooperation with members of other *whanau* or *hapu* while inside the house the solidarity

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> George Nuku, "Perspicacité: The Art of George Nuku," *World Art* 1, no. 1 (2011): 71.

<sup>223</sup> Michael Jackson, "Aspects of Symbolism and Composition in Maori Art," *Bijdragen tot de Taal, Land- en Volkenkunde* 128, no. 1 (1972).

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 58.

and the identity of the *whanau* itself was most important ... The *pare* was a kind of isomorphic symbol, giving ‘an outward and visible form to an inward and conceptual process.’”<sup>225</sup>

It is little wonder that such spaces were viewed with both respect and caution. As Homi Bhabha has noted, “the fragile border between coherence and disintegration is a space marked by deep anxiety.”<sup>226</sup> And yet, as Ulf Hannerz counters, the threshold is also a lively, lucid space, where there is scope for a renewed agency and performativity in the handling of culture.<sup>227</sup> *Outer Space Marae* does not attempt the resolution or synthesis suggested by Jackson, but rather, is an attempt to activate this “lively space” and keep these possibilities in play.

While largely agreeing with Jackson’s analysis of traditional Māori forms, Nicholas Thomas has suggested that much contemporary Pacific art resists the type of synthesis described by Jackson. In contrast, Thomas argues, many contemporary Pacific artists picture oppositional relationships rather than attempting to reconcile them, in order to point to the inherent binarism of contemporary New Zealand society (Māori/Pākehā) and the asymmetries of colonial exchange.<sup>228</sup> My conversations with Nuku have made it clear to me that he does not see the world in such binary terms: “I’m of more than one world,” he argues, noting his mixed Māori and European heritages, and making light of the “multitudinal Georges” in a play on the French version of his given-name.<sup>229</sup> In bounding the liminal space of *Outer Space Marae*, Nuku actively resists resolution in order to keep the site of encounter open and multiple. *Outer Space Marae* is a façade: Nuku erects the threshold, but never the house: opening instead into the contested terrain

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Anxious Nations, Nervous States,” in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1994), 207.

<sup>227</sup> Ulf Hannerz, *Flows, Boundaries and Hybrids: Keywords in Transnational Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>228</sup> Nicholas Thomas, “A Second Reflection: Presence and Opposition in Contemporary Maori Art,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1, no. 1 (1995). Thomas’s argument is particularly focused on the work of Māori sculptor Robert Jahnke.

<sup>229</sup> George Nuku, interview with the author, May 27, 2016.

of the museum. In doing so, Nuku does not resolve difference, but keeps it in play as an essential component of engagement. We would do well to remember Simmel's dictum, cited in Chapter Two, that difference is a necessary predicate of all relations.<sup>230</sup> This, I would argue, is a fundamentally contemporary response, reflecting Terry Smith's characterization of contemporaneity as consisting "precisely in the acceleration, ubiquity, and constancy of radical disjunctures of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world."<sup>231</sup> In positioning the museum as *marae*, Nuku attempts to set up a reciprocal relationship between the viewer and the object, in which each "confront the other" in a dialogic exchange.

People are not prepared to accept the fact that by looking you are looked at. That's what happens when you look; like when I'm looking at you, you're looking at me, because that is how it is when you look. I'm determined to show that there is no such thing as an observer, that by being in that space and time you become what that thing is.<sup>232</sup>

This quote provides a succinct articulation of the central problem around which Nuku's artistic project has revolved: how do we relate to the object world. At the same time, the challenge posed by *Outer Space Marae* cannot be divorced from its context in the space of the museum. As Nuku notes, the portal binds and obliges visitors in the physical sense (of having to walk beneath it), while laying down a certain challenge to view the objects within the museum as "looking back."

In Chapter Two, I noted Dipesh Chakrabarty's assertion that modern historical consciousness is predicated upon the practice of anachronism.<sup>233</sup> Historical evidence, argues Chakrabarty, is "produced by our capacity to see something that is contemporaneous with us—ranging from practices, humans, institutions, and stone-inscriptions to documents—as relics of

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<sup>230</sup> Georg Simmel, "How Is Society Possible? (1908)," in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald Levine (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971), 9-11.

<sup>231</sup> Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," 9.

<sup>232</sup> Nuku and Jacobs, 150.

<sup>233</sup> Chakrabarty, 238-45.



another time or place . . . A particular past thus becomes objectified in the observer's time."<sup>234</sup> Nowhere did this idea find clearer substantiation than in the advent of the modern museum. According to Tony Bennett, the museum did not merely *represent* this new ordering of modern temporality, but played a decisive role in "the operations through which the historical sciences measured and partitioned time, and distributed human and non-human actors across it."<sup>235</sup> This "distribution" of actors across time served to define early conceptions of indigeneity, through its materialization of the discourse of evolutionary time, particularly as it related to concepts of the "pre-modern" and "primitive."<sup>236</sup> It is unsurprising that the modern museum has become both the target and fertile terrain of critique by indigenous contemporary artists globally.<sup>237</sup>

Chapter Two examined the work of Gabriel Maralngurra, an artist whose paintings visualized the intersection of modern temporal frames with Kunwinjku modes of history making. In depicting anthropologists like Baldwin Spencer, I argued that Maralngurra was deliberately returning to decisive moments of cross-cultural contact (itself something of a psychic "threshold"), in order to reimagine the colonial frontier as a site of exchange where cultures merged and overlapped. When I first encountered the work of George Nuku in July 2013 at the Museum of Anthropology of the University of British Columbia, I was impressed by how directly it appeared to critique the "technologies of vision" (to use Bennett's term) that condition the temporal and historical understanding of "ethnographic" objects.<sup>238</sup> The more time I have spent thinking about Nuku's practice, and benefitting from discussing it with the artist himself, the more I have come to

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>235</sup> Bennett, 64; *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995); "The Exhibitionary Complex," *New Formations*, no. 4 (1988).

<sup>236</sup> Rodney Harrison, Sarah Byrne, and Anne Clarke, eds., *Reassembling the Collection: Ethnographic Museums and Indigenous Agency* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2013), 8-11.

<sup>237</sup> See for instance, Phillips; Raymond and Salmond; Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

<sup>238</sup> I noted these initial impressions in August 2013 on my blog: See <https://henryfskerritt.com/2013/08/27/george-nuku-waharoportal-te-ao-marama-the-world-of-light/>

realize that, much like Maralngurra, Nuku's work does not set itself in dialectical opposition to the museum, but rather, seeks to reframe the museum as a space of engagement. Vital to this process is Nuku's desire to change human relationships to the material world: to see the object-subject relations within the museum not in terms of a rigid dualism, but a dialogic exchange. For Nuku, the museum is not simply an instantiation of social power, but also of material agency.

During an interview, I asked Nuku about working in the context of museums. He recalled his first experience, as a Māori guide at the Auckland City Gallery during the landmark exhibition *Te Maori* in 1987:

It was kind of a creepy experience for me being amongst all the treasures and being that age, and I wasn't really sure what I was doing compared to now. Now, I can walk into any museum on the planet and be comfortable. Objects! At the end of the day, you can turn off the lights and you'll be in a dark museum with some ancestors.<sup>239</sup>

These remarks are notable for two reasons: firstly, they clearly demonstrate Nuku's view that the locus of a museum's power is not its role as a setter of epistemological agendas, but rather, power also resides in its material elements: the objects that it contains. Secondly, it shows Nuku's adherence to the widespread Māori conviction that Māori treasures—or *taonga*—are embodiments of the ancestors.<sup>240</sup> Curator Carol Mayer, who commissioned Nuku to produce the work *Waharoa/Portal: Te Ao Marama—The World of Light* 2013 at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, has made a similar observation.<sup>241</sup> She

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<sup>239</sup> George Nuku, interview with the author, New York, July 14, 2016.

<sup>240</sup> For discussions of the significance of *taonga*, see Conal McCarthy, *Exhibiting Maori: A History of Colonial Cultures of Display* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007); Amiria Henare, *Museums, Anthropology and Imperial Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Hooper et al; D.C. Starzecka, ed. *Maori Art and Culture* (Chicago: Art Media Resources, Ltd., 1996); S.M. (Hirini) Mead, ed. *Te Maori: Maori Art from New Zealand Collections* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1984).

<sup>241</sup> *Waharoa/Portal: Te Ao Marama—The World of Light* 2013 was commissioned by Mayer for the exhibition *Paradise Lost? Contemporary Works from the Pacific*, Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, July 24 - September 29, 2013.

argues that while Nuku was certainly thinking of *Waharoa* as being “site-specific,” his understanding of the site (the Great Hall of the museum) was conditional less by its spatiality than the objects within it.

Museums look at Plexiglas cases as “inside”: where objects are trapped, imprisoned, untouchable. George wanted to turn it around, to make it about protection and guardian figures of the ancestors. There was some thought of including repatriated objects into the designs, speaking into the multiverse. So, to some extent, it was not about thinking about space, but the objects within it.”<sup>242</sup>

Maia Jessop confirms this interpretation, describing Nuku’s first response to visiting the Museum of Archeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge in 2006:

Seeing all these *taonga* in plexiglass cabinets he said: “Wow, this is like the most amazing organ bank!” He wasn’t being irreverent, but was making a clear and immediate statement that for him as an artist this was a containment facility; each of these bright, luminous, state-of-the-art cases contained something vital and active.”<sup>243</sup>

Taken together these statements reveal that while Nuku is acutely aware of the social power structures substantiated by the “containment facilities” of modern museums, this social context does not completely override the objects contained within. As I will argue, taking this position allows him to conceptually sidestep some of the problems that have plagued artists engaged in more traditional forms of institutional critique by reframing the museum as an assemblage of social, cultural, semiotic and material flows. According to Rodney Harrison, “Seeing museums as assemblages moves away from monolithic power model, allows us to identify relationships of flow and friction—not as functions of the whole, but as narratives of

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<sup>242</sup> Carol Mayer, interview with the author, Vancouver, Canada, August 22, 2014.

<sup>243</sup> Maia Jessop, quoted in Hooper et al., 15. Nuku notes that this comment was made in “direct reaction to the permanent display at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Art of lord & lady Sainsbury’s collection of world artefacts in the central space of the Norman Foster designed building which to me resembles a giant toaster. The space is very clean to the point of sterility and it lent itself towards a ‘medical’ feel of a modern clinic.” Nuku, personal correspondence, June 24, 2017.

relation.”<sup>244</sup> This is hardly a unique conclusion on Nuku’s behalf, and his practice can certainly be situated within larger trends to attribute agency to both indigenous people and indigenous objects in museum collections.<sup>245</sup> More significantly, it allows Nuku to avoid setting his critique in dialectical opposition to the museum, but rather, uses material engagement in an attempt to reframe object-subject relations. Like Maralngurra’s frontier, the aim of this process is to figure the museum as a productive site of exchange, while recognizing a multiplicity of approaches to valuing and relating to the objects within them.

### 3.3 WHAKAPAPA AND THE GENEALOGY OF OBJECTS

Nuku is obsessed with questions of history: few conversations with the artist are not punctuated with historical anecdotes whether they be accounts of Māori ancestors, medieval monarchs or his own family history. In discussions of his work, he speaks often of his desire to forge a “genealogical” relationship with modern materials. We should be careful, however, in conflating this genealogy and historicism. The “genealogy” to which Nuku alludes is the Māori concept of *whakapapa*. *Whakapapa* is the core of traditional Māori knowledge or *mātauranga*, and describes the descent of all living things from the gods to the present.<sup>246</sup> Māori scholar Rāwiri Taonui describes it this way:

Whakapapa is a taxonomic framework that links all animate and inanimate, known and unknown phenomena in the terrestrial and spiritual worlds. Whakapapa therefore binds all things. It maps relationships so that mythology,

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<sup>244</sup> Harrison, Byrne, and Clarke, 29.

<sup>245</sup> See for instance, *ibid.*; Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, DC.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture*; Phillips.

<sup>246</sup> Barlow, 173-4.

legend, history, knowledge, tikanga (custom), philosophies and spiritualities are organised, preserved and transmitted from one generation to the next.<sup>247</sup>

As a form of knowledge, *whakapapa* is relational in two key senses. Firstly, *whakapapa* describes a world of unity and coherence. As A.T. Hakiwai explains: “People, the universe, stars, mountains, rivers, rocks and fish are all connected through genealogy, demonstrating the intimate relationship between the Māori and the world around us.” But genealogy is also relational, inasmuch as it describes from a subjective point the *specific* relations between individuals and the world in which they inhabit.<sup>248</sup> As James Clifford argues:

Genealogical histories confirm and explain a present: how we got here from somewhere different; what from the past defines us now. And while there is a direction to history, it is one that keeps us who we are, as we change. Genealogy is thus not a story of abandoning the past for a whole new future: Westernized, Christian, capitalist or modern.<sup>249</sup>

In his seminal 1954 ethnography Jørgen Prytz-Johnsen argues that, far from being objective, Māori genealogies are often created “only from the experience of solidarity.”<sup>250</sup> Through genealogy, the ancestors “appear in the living as history emerges and is actualized.”<sup>251</sup>

History is the form of life, the elementary possibilities of life are realized in it, now in anonymous customs, now in great situations. The life which the ancestors lived forth in history is the same as that active in the living ... It may justly be said that the Maori finds himself in history; but we may with equal justice look at the matter from the opposite side and say that his nature and character are

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<sup>247</sup> Rāwiri Taonui, 'Whakapapa – genealogy - What is whakapapa?', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/whakapapa-genealogy/page-1> (accessed 11 December 2016)

<sup>248</sup> In this respect, *whakapapa* has some similarities to Foucault's version of genealogy as the effective history of the “relationship of forces” that does not seek an originary unity, but rather describes the “history of the present.” See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

<sup>249</sup> Clifford, 34.

<sup>250</sup> Jørgen Prytz-Johansen, *The Maori and His Religion in Its Non-Ritualistic Aspects [1954]* (Manchester: HAU Classics of Ethnographic Theory Series, 2012), 138.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

determined by the events of history. For that matter, this applies not only to man, but to the whole universe and its furniture.<sup>252</sup>

The historical model of *whakapapa* is not based upon anachronism, but rather, a process of sedimentation (like that described by Glissant).<sup>253</sup> We find this in the etymology of the term, which is derived from the noun *papa* which refers to anything broad, flat and hard (such as a slab of wood or rock), with the prefix *whaka*, which transforms this into a verb meaning *to place in layers*. *Whakapapa* is thus described as the accumulation of layers from the past into the present and future.<sup>254</sup> Although it has strong roots in the ancestral past, *whakapapa* is more concerned with the actualization of this past in the present. The past is never finished, but remains as a sediment in the thickened present. This is what I take Nuku to mean when he says: “the past is in front of us and the future we remember.”<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 152-3.

<sup>253</sup> Glissant contrasts this process of sedimentation to the modernity of Walter Benjamin’s “lightning flashes” of knowledge: “We no longer reveal totality within ourselves by lightning flashes. We approach it through the accumulation of sediments. The poetics of duration (another leitmotiv), one of the first principles of the sacred, founding books of the community, reappears to take up the relay from the poetics of moment. Lightning flashes are the shivers of one who desires of a totality that is impossible or yet to come; duration urges on those who attempt to live this totality, when dawn shows through the linked histories of peoples.” Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, 33.

<sup>254</sup> This is noted by both Prytz-Johansen and Hakiwai. “Even if the “primeval time” has left particularly deep traces in man’s nature, creation is not yet over; later history also contributes to shaping man; only this is not a question of mankind (i.e. the Maori) in general; there every kinship group obtains its particular character.” Prytz-Johansen, 154. “Genealogy is the common thread or principle if the Maori world by which people, events and history are linked, and the reason why Maori people behave as they do ... For the Maori the past is an important and pervasive dimension of the present and future ... Our past is not conceived as something long ago and done with, known only as an historical fact with no contemporary relevance or meaning. In the words of a respected Maori elder: “the present is a combination of the ancestors and ‘their living faces’ or genetic inheritors, that is the present generations. Our past is as much the face of our present and future. They live in us ... we live in them.” A.T. Hakiwai, “Maori Society Today: Welcome to Our World,” in *Maori Art and Culture*, ed. D.C. Starzecka (Chicago: Art Media Resources, Ltd., 1996), 53.

<sup>255</sup> George Nuku, artist statement, *Waharoa/Portal: Te Ao Marama—The World of Light*, 2013. Nuku expanded on this idea in an interview, saying: “Like I said, the past is in front of us. Constantly, we’re looking back at the past in front of us as it folds to reveal the present reality as it’s folding like that. In the present reality, with your eyes are fixed on the past, folding this thing in front of you.” George Nuku, interview with the author, New York, May 27, 2016. Māori curator Arapata Tamati Hakiwai describes it this way: “The Maori word for ‘the front of’ is *mua* and this is used as a term to describe the past, that is, *Ngā wā o mua* or the time in front of us. Likewise, the word for the back is *muri* which is a term that is used for the future. Thus the past is in front of us, it is known; the future is behind us, unknown. The point of this is that our ancestors always had their backs to the future with their eyes firmly on the past.” 53.

This concept of genealogy has particular relevance when considering Māori art objects. Since the nineteenth century, commentators have noted the close relationship between Māori art and commemoration.<sup>256</sup> The curator and historian Roger Neich has described Māori art as “carved histories” while the foundational Māori artist and academic Hirini Moko Mead calls it “*te toi whaikaro*” or genealogical knowledge.<sup>257</sup> As *whakapapa* describes more than simply a line of descent—but rather, draws the entire universe into a series of relations—this has a profound impact for the nature of subject-object relations. Maori treasures—or *taonga*—are regarded as having a genealogy, and therefore a *mauri* or life-force.<sup>258</sup> Many Māori, Nuku included, speak of *taonga* as living embodiments of the ancestors, connecting the past with the present and the living with the dead.<sup>259</sup> As Conal McCarthy notes:

*Taonga* are said not only to collapse spatial and temporal boundaries but to blur the Western separation of the material and immaterial world. Māori people respond to *taonga* as living rather than inanimate things – carvings do not just represent ancestors, they *are* those ancestors.<sup>260</sup>

Anne Salmond calls *taonga* the anchor points in entire complex of Māori knowledge and the focus point for ancestral power: “Taonga captured history and showed it to the living, and they echoed patterns of the past from first creation to the present.”<sup>261</sup> This reveals itself formally in

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<sup>256</sup> In 1896, Augustus Hamilton noted that Māori carvings were “often regarded as a memorial of some great event in the history of the tribe, such as the birth of an heir to the principal chief, or of a special assembly of the tribes to discuss questions of war and peace.” In 1958, Gilbert Archey would note, “sculpture and house-building are linked in the one act of commemoration and personification.” See Augustus Hamilton, *The Art of Workmanship of the Maori Race in New Zealand* (Wellington: The New Zealand Institute, 1896), 79; Gilbert Archey, “Tiki and Pou: Free Sculpture Applied,” *Records of the Auckland Museum and Institute* 5 (1958): 98. Both are quoted in Jackson, 37-8.

<sup>257</sup> Roger Neich, *Carved Histories: Rotorua Ngati Tarawhai Woodcarving* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001); Mead, *Te Toi Whakairo: The Art of Maori Carving*; McCarthy, 14.

<sup>258</sup> Hakiwai, 53.

<sup>259</sup> See for instance, Hooper et al., 12.

<sup>260</sup> McCarthy, 29.

<sup>261</sup> Anne Salmond, “Nga Huarahi O Te Ao Maori: Pathways in the Maori World,” in *Te Maori: Maori Art from New Zealand Collections*, ed. S.M. (Hirini) Mead (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1984), 118.

Māori carving by its fundamental interest in relations. As Neich notes, “Maori carving is a conceptual art which does not necessarily represent things, but makes statements about relationships between things and between people.”<sup>262</sup> Maori depictions of the ancestors are metonymical rather than representational, designed to make statements about their relationship to their descendants. As a result, Māori carving continually recreates the timeless, ever-present world of the ancestors.

The Maori carver set out not so much to deny time as rather to create time as a continuous duration ... All his ancestors were stylized to a constant ‘ageless’ age. Since this artistic time intrinsic to the texture of the art object is purposely ‘timeless,’ there was no conflict in traditional Maori carving between ‘the time of contemplation and the intrinsic time of the work.’<sup>263</sup>

The importance of this for our discussion is twofold: firstly, it suggests that there are other ways than anachronism for considering how art objects manifest the past the present. Put differently, anachronism is only one possible way in which objects can embody heterochronicity.<sup>264</sup> Secondly, contra to Chakrabarty, anachronism is not the singular basis for historical consciousness. As Prytz-Johansen concludes, the Māori “thinks history because he lives history.”<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Neich, *Carved Histories: Rotorua Ngati Tarawhai Woodcarving*.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-7.

<sup>264</sup> This runs counter to the current fashion for anachronism in contemporary art criticism, which I would argue is based on a fundamentally modernist view of how objects substantiate time. An object is only anachronistic if it disrupts the temporal circumstances of its creation (as in the Greek etymology *aná*: up against, and *khrónos*: time). Despite this, anachronism has been held by a great many scholars, notably Keith Moxey, as a model for the disruptive ways in which art can substantiate heterochronicity, I would argue that this ignores the way in which anachronism requires a particular model of historical consciousness (that is, a singular time that is disrupted by anachronistic objects). As this sets historical time as the *a priori*, it should not be uncritically adopted as a universal value of objects. On anachronism, see Keith Moxey, *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>265</sup> Prytz-Johansen, 172.



### 3.4 GEORGE NUKU IN HISTORY

George Nuku was born in 1964 in Hastings on Te Ika-a-Māui, the north island of Aotearoa/New Zealand. His mother was Māori; his father Pākehā (non-Māori). Nuku's parents separated when he was four years-old, leaving the young George to be raised by his maternal grandmother, Pareputiputi Hapuku Te Nahu, in the village of Omahu, before moving with his mother and brother to the city of Napier, where he attended highschool. Nuku's maternal grandmother was a high-ranking woman of the Ngāti Kahungunu: the *iwi* (Māori tribe) centered on the Hawkes Bay region on the eastern coast of the North Island.<sup>266</sup> Nuku recalls growing up at the “tail end of the old world.”<sup>267</sup> His grandmother had strong connections to her Māori heritage, particularly knowledge of traditional Māori medicine and healing techniques. She would take the young boy with her on regular errands to clean the graves of their ancestors, a time that Nuku describes as “his other education.”<sup>268</sup>

I was able to ask her many things about our culture. Particularly, who are these people? How are we related to these people? It was like a seminary. And somehow all those things went into me, and I slowly started drawing Māori things.<sup>269</sup>

Nuku remembers his childhood in Omahu as being before the modern resurgence of Māori pride. This recollection is largely supported by the historical record, although the rumblings of the nascent movement would likely have been present.<sup>270</sup> Language and culture

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<sup>266</sup> Nuku's grandfather, Te Heuheu, hailed from the Ngāti Tūwharetoa: the *iwi* of the central North Island region around Lake Taupō. George Nuku, personal correspondence, June 25, 2017.

<sup>267</sup> George Nuku, interview with the author, New York, May 27, 2016.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> See James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), Part 5. As Belich's history reveals, Nuku lived across a period of extraordinary transition in New Zealand society. “In 1960, New Zealand was a tight society, in which the four harmonies still ruled. It was homogenous, conformist, masculist, egalitarian and monocultural, subject to heavy

movements were slowly gathering steam as new urbanized Māori communities came into their own as the locus for a renewed identity politics. Living in rural Omaha, the young Nuku might not have been fully cognizant of these stirring political undercurrents, however, by the age of ten he had begun incorporating Māori themes into his own drawings. With a small group of peers, he began carving in the early 1980s. Carving “was a way for us to express being Māori. That was a way we felt closer to our ancestors.”<sup>271</sup> At age 16, Nuku was invited to study at the Māori Arts and Crafts Institute in Rotorua, but was denied the opportunity by his mother, who could not see a future for her son in the Māori arts and crafts industry.<sup>272</sup> Instead, Nuku attended Massey University, where he studied history and Māori studies, before taking a job as a carver in a jade factory in Auckland.

Nuku quickly became respected as a carver of customary Māori artworks. In 1987, he was invited to participate as a cultural representative and guide for the landmark exhibition *Te Maori* in the final stop of its tour, at Auckland City Art Gallery. It is difficult to overstate the significance of *Te Maori*. Consisting of 174 works drawn predominantly from public collections in Aotearoa/New Zealand, it was the most comprehensive survey of Māori cultural heritage ever staged. Starting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in September 1984, the

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formal and informal regulation ... By the year 2000, New Zealand, for better or worse, was one of the least regulated societies in the world, economically even more than socially ... In 1960, even though their great urban migration was under way, Maori were still not seen or heard very much [assimilationist policy still reigned]. Today, Maori are culturally and politically though not yet economically resurgent. There are three times as many of them as there were in 1960, and their centrality in public discourse has increased massively ... In 1960, most Pakeha ... had little doubt who they were. They were Better Britons ... By 2000, an identity crisis had emerged among Pakeha. While Maori were becoming increasingly assertive ... some people are hard put to say what Pakeha culture is, or even if there is any ... A domestic process of decolonization created the great changes of the period 1960-2000. It interacted very closely with external decolonization: the disconnection from Britain and the opening up to the world.” As Conal McCarthy has documented, this was also a time of critical realignment in regards to attitudes towards Māori art and the museum. See McCarthy.

<sup>271</sup> George Nuku, interview with the author, New York, May 27, 2016.

<sup>272</sup> Founded in 1927, the Māori Arts and Crafts Institute played a pivotal role in the revival of Māori arts and Crafts, and the positioning of art as a key indicator of Māori identity. At the same time, it was also instrumental in instituting a level of orthodoxy in Māori customary carving practices. Considering his willingness to experiment, it is notable that Nuku’s practice developed outside of this network. On the Māori Arts and Crafts Institute, see McCarthy, 82-3; Neich, “Wood Carving,” 112-3; Mead, *The Art of Maori Carving*, 25-6.

exhibition toured the US before returning to New Zealand for stops in Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin and Auckland.

*Te Maori* was significant for several reasons: it was the first major attempt to reposition Māori works as art and not artifacts. The validation of Māori art on the world stage had a profound impact on the positioning of Māori culture in New Zealand society. More significantly, *Te Maori* was authorized by Māori people and at every stage Māori protocols were foregrounded and respected.<sup>273</sup> The Māori organizing committee insisted that the exhibition be accompanied by ceremonies, oratory and prayers. Nuku recalls that they set up a *marae* in the gallery, where different tribes could hold authority for the *taonga* in the exhibition.<sup>274</sup> Conal McCarthy argues that the historical significance of *Te Maori* lies in the way in which the project overlapped with critical indigenous discourse. He tracks this in the writings of one of the key organizers, Hirini Moko Mead, which shift from seeing museum display as an anthropological problem, through to sensing its possibilities as a foundational tool for strengthening Māori identity.<sup>275</sup> A key component of this shift was institutionally enshrining the concept of *taonga*, and thus emphasising the sacred nature of the works on display.<sup>276</sup> Rather than the *taonga* being transformed into art, there was a sense that these two categories were operating simultaneously: in the words of Mina McKenzie, one of the management committee, that “Energy was flowing between the two concepts.”<sup>277</sup> That Nuku’s first involvement with a museum came via *Te Maori* is revealing: from the onset, he experienced museums as a context in which Māori voices were

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<sup>273</sup> See McCarthy, 135-9; Nicholas Thomas, "From Exhibit to Exhibitionism: Recent Polynesian Presentations of "Otherness"," *The Contemporary Pacific* 8, no. 2 (1996); Mead, *Te Maori: Maori Art from New Zealand Collections*.

<sup>274</sup> George Nuku, interview with the author, New York, July 14, 2016.

<sup>275</sup> McCarthy, 135. See also Mead, *The Art of Maori Carving*; *Te Maori: Maori Art from New Zealand Collections*.

<sup>276</sup> Henare, 272-3.

<sup>277</sup> Mina McKenzie, quoted in McCarthy, 141. This might be compared to Howard Morphy’s assertions regarding the transferral of Yolngu aesthetic values into the museum setting. See Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross Cultural Strategies* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008), 173-86.

respected (albeit unevenly), and as a stage in which the politics of Māori pride and identity could be played out.

At the same time, *Te Maori* was not without its detractors: the principal criticism being that the exhibition's focus on historical objects ignored the lived experiences of contemporary Māori. As the anthropologist Ranginui Walker declared, "If *taonga* are not be reduced to mere "museum pieces" then ways and means must be devised of relating them to the living."<sup>278</sup> The tension between traditionalization and innovation would become an animating force in Nuku's work, leading him to relocate to Europe in 2006 to escape the perceived pressures of orthodoxy in the Māori customary arts community. We should not forget that the homogenizing pressures of globalization can be felt from both within and outside of cultures.

And yet, *Te Maori* did open some opportunities for contemporary practitioners (including Nuku). A number of complementary exhibitions were staged in Aotearoa/New Zealand to capitalize on the newfound interest in Māori art and culture.<sup>279</sup> Nuku himself was selected for inclusion in one of these: the exhibition *Te Ohongo: The Awakening* at the Auckland War Memorial Museum. Organized by the legendary carver Paki Harrison, it was Nuku's first exhibition in a public institution. Like *Te Maori*, it was a clear example of Māori taking control of the museum.

Following *Te Ohongo*, Nuku continued working in the small world of customary practitioners in Aotearoa, refining his skill and increasing his reputation. The 1990s saw a rapid

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<sup>278</sup> Ranginui Walker, in Henare, 273.

<sup>279</sup> During *Te Maori*, the Auckland War Memorial Museum staged three exhibitions: *Te Aho Tapu*: an exhibition of traditional Maori cloaks intended to offset the bias of *Te Maori* towards carving; and two contemporary shows were also presented: *Maori Art Today* (a touring exhibition organized by the Maori and South Pacific Arts Council/MASPAC), and *Te Ohongo*: a show of contemporary adherents of traditional carving. *Te Ohongo* was organized by the Carvers Committee of MASPAC. The impact of these exhibitions—and the interest aroused by *Te Maori* was immense. In their annual report, the education department of the Auckland War Memorial Museum reported that "attendance for Maori studies at the museum increased from 5,400 in 1986 to 18,200 in 1987." [Annual report, 27]

expansion of the New Zealand film industry, with a number of Hollywood films and television series being produced in the country. Nuku supplemented his artistic earnings with work as a stage-hand, and later working in the art departments making props and sets. Working on the set of the Stephen King sci-fi adaptation *Tommyknockers* (dir. John Powers, 1993), Nuku was introduced to carving PMMA and polystyrene foam. Nuku had always been something of a medium polymath, working in bone, ivory, pearl shell, wood, stone and *pounamu* (jade): the new materials slipped easily into his repertoire. Polystyrene foam proved a particularly convenient and portable medium: one that could be converted for use in Māori festivals, where Nuku would supply large, but easily transportable edifices for cultural events.<sup>280</sup> But like stage sets, there was a level of deception to these facades, with Nuku painting the foam to give the appearance of more traditional mediums, such as wood or stone:

My view of the Styrofoam was different to what it is now. I was using the Styrofoam to be something else. It wasn't until I got to the United Kingdom that I changed my view about Styrofoam, and I carved Styrofoam to be Styrofoam. Whatever I do with it has to honor the foam. I don't like to paint it: it's white, and you can see it's obviously Styrofoam. And I'm forcing the audience to honor it, to accept it as a medium.<sup>281</sup>

In the commercial materials of plastic and styrofoam, Nuku found mediums with the resonance to speak directly to modern relations to the material world. From this realization, Nuku would find an increasingly fertile ground for critiquing the modern museum.

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<sup>280</sup> In 2006, Nuku would create a similar type of structure outside of the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, as part of outdoor festivities accompanying the exhibition *Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia 1760-1860* (May 21-August 13, 2006). Titled *Whare Moana*, the work was carved entirely out of unpainted Styrofoam.

<sup>281</sup> George Nuku, interview with the author, New York, May 27, 2016.

### 3.5 INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

From the onset, I would like to distinguish Nuku's practice from other forms of non-indigenous institutional critique. By the end of the 1960s, contemporary artists in Europe and America were increasingly concerned with interrogating the ideologies and epistemological frames of the institutions of art.<sup>282</sup> In 1970, the artist Daniel Buren famously declared, "The Museum is the frame and the effective support upon which the work is inscribed/composed. It is at once the center in which the action takes place and the single (topographical and cultural) viewpoint for the work."<sup>283</sup> Much like Nuku, artists such as Buren were concerned to expose these "supports" which Buren argued served to camouflage the "prevalent bourgeois ideology."<sup>284</sup>

By the mid-1980s, the work of Buren, along with diverse contemporaries such as Marcel Broothaers, Hans Haacke, and Michael Asher had been grouped under the broad banner of "institutional critique."<sup>285</sup> By the mid-1980s, a number of Feminist, African-American, indigenous and post-colonial artists had begun to formulate their own modes of institutional critique. These included Guerilla Girls, Fred Wilson, James Luna, Rasheed Araeen, Coco Fusco, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña.

That indigenous and post-colonial artists would be drawn to institutional critique is not surprising: the emergence of the modern museum was, after all, closely linked with the imperial

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<sup>282</sup> See Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009); Paul O'Neil, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2012), Ch.3; Smith, Ch.3.

<sup>283</sup> Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Museum (1970)," in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 102.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 105. Nuku has similarly described the role of artists as representing "the antidote to the globalization of mediocrity in the name of money." Nuku in Godrech.

<sup>285</sup> In her 2005 essay "From the Critique of Institutions to the Institution of Critique," the artist Andrea Fisher suggests that she may have unwittingly coined the term "institutional critique" in a 1985 essay on the artist Loise Lawler. Anthony Alberro cites Mel Ramsden's 1975 essay "On Practice" as the first appearance of the term in print. See Andrea Fisher, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (2005); Alberro and Stimson.

project.<sup>286</sup> And yet, a subtle difference can be discerned between these artists and their EuroAmerican counterparts. From its advent, EuroAmerican institutional critique was overburdened by its own complicity in the institutions it sought to challenge.<sup>287</sup> By 2005, the artist Andrea Fisher would concede that institutional critique was not so much about the organizations *per se*, but the internalized subjectivity that informed them. The institution of art, she argued, is not only “institutionalized” in organizations like museums and objectified in art objects, it is also internalized and embodied in people:

It is internalized in the competencies, conceptual modes, and modes of perception that allow us to produce, write about and understand art, or simply to recognize art as at, whether as artists, critics, curators, art historians, dealers, collectors, or museum visitors ... the institution is inside of us, and we can't get outside of ourselves.<sup>288</sup>

Alexander Alberro argues that the first wave of institutional critique artists were not antithetical to the museum, but “ultimately championed and advocate for the institution,” aiming to reform and realign the practices of the museum in line with its most enlightened ideals.<sup>289</sup> Likewise for Fisher, the aim of institutional critique was an expanding of the institution’s parameters: “It’s not a question of being against the institution,” she concluded, “It’s a question of what type of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalize.”<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> See for instance, Henare; Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism*; Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth B. Phillips., eds., *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006).

<sup>287</sup> This complicity is clearly articulated in the writings of Buren, as well as those of Ramsden and Fisher. See Buren; Fisher; Mel Ramsden, "On Practice (1975)," in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>288</sup> Fisher.

<sup>289</sup> Alberro and Stimson, 8.

<sup>290</sup> Fisher. Terry Smith has noted the limiting nature of this refrain when taken literally, and while I agree with his argument that there is an “uninstitutionalizable” quality to the best institutional critique (including Fisher’s), the recognition of complicity cannot be denied amongst institutional critique artists. See Smith, 26-7.

In contrast, the emergence of indigenous and post-colonial institutional critique (alongside those of feminist, African American, Latino and other previously maligned voices) in the 1980s was predicated on a history of exclusion, challenging both enlightenment notions of display, knowledge and objecthood. In the 1980s, I do not think many indigenous artists would have related to Fisher's suggestion that *they* were the institution. For the most part, indigenous contemporary artists were struggling for any visibility at all: it is hard to reform an institution when you can't get your foot in the door. While being largely excluded from contemporary art museums, indigenous people found their cultures consigned to ethnographic settings. A case in point, the Payómkawichum (Luiseño) and Mexican-American performance artist James Luna's best known work—*Artifact Piece* 1987—was not performed in a contemporary art museum, but in an ethnographic museum: the San Diego Museum of Man. For this performance, Luna installed himself in a display case, using his body as a metaphor of the objectification of indigenous peoples in the museum. Alongside his prone form, Luna displayed "evidence" of his living subjecthood: his favorite records, legal papers, as well as contemporary ceremonial objects. Luna's intervention was designed to draw attention to the structures of display that ossified indigenous cultures, despite all evidence to the contrary. As Elizabeth Hawley notes, "*The Artifact Piece* stresses the lived presence and physical present-ness of a contemporary Native American through the stereotypical staging methods of the museum, which are usually used to stress the historical past-ness of the cultures on display. Luna asserts Native agency by parodying the typical lack thereof in the institutional context."<sup>291</sup> And yet, if Luna's installation

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<sup>291</sup> Elizabeth S. Hawley, "James Luna and the Paradoxically Present Vanishing Indian," *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (2016): 20-21. See also Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Rebecca Belmore and James Luna on Location at Venice: The Allegorical Indian Redux," *Art History* 29, no. 4 (2006); Jane Blocker, "Ambivalent Entertainments: James Luna, Performance, and the Archive," *Grey Room* 37 (2009).



was designed to point to the living nature of Native American subjectivity—to “rupture this archival assumption of past-ness”<sup>292</sup>—the artist remained silent.

In his seminal essay, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” Tony Bennett argues that while the rise of the modern museum occurred at the same time as the disciplinary complexes of the modern prison, asylum and school, the museum was unique in that it was not a site of confinement. Rather, as institutions open to the general public, the museum was designed to mold subjects: “to become subjects rather than the objects of knowledge.”<sup>293</sup> The success of this project is clearly (albeit unintentionally) articulated in Fisher’s claims of the “internalized” nature of the institution. And yet, as Luna’s *Artifact Piece* parodies, this was not a universal condition. Indeed, there is a subtle but significant difference between Bennett’s description of museums as “technologies of display” versus Nuku’s “ultimate containment technology.” For indigenous peoples, the museum remained very much a site of confinement: containers in which indigenous cultures (and even indigenous bodies) were objectified for the viewing pleasure of the modern subject.

If interventions like Luna’s revealed the starkly contrasting relationship between indigenous subjects and the institution, interventions within ethnographic collections revealed profoundly different attitudes and values towards the objects within these collections.<sup>294</sup> As EuroAmerican modernism found itself usurped by a range of dematerialized art practices (such as performance art, conceptualism, land art), contemporary artists and critics increasingly characterized art objects as the quintessential fetish items of bourgeois capital. And yet, while this makes considerable sense in a post-Warholian contemporary art world in which art and commodity

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<sup>292</sup> Hawley, 20.

<sup>293</sup> Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” 76.

<sup>294</sup> Tony Bennett acknowledges a similar phenomenon in his discussion of the inclusion of ethnographic displays (and particularly the inclusion of indigenous bodies) in World Fairs. Likewise, Conal McCarthy identifies competing motivations behind Māori involvement in similar fairs, expositions and cultural events. See McCarthy. Bennett.

were increasingly entangled, it should not be considered a universal cultural value.<sup>295</sup> Indigenous peoples maintain a diversity of attitudes towards art and material objects which do not necessarily conform to the subject/object dualism that is a prerequisite of both neoliberal subjecthood and commodity capitalism. It is inappropriate and misleading to project this subjecthood uncritically onto indigenous peoples. Suggesting that objects have a role to play in mediating human relations does not necessarily equate to an endorsement of commodity capitalism.<sup>296</sup>

In 2016, Nuku was invited to participate in a group show at Ora Gallery in New York City with fellow Pacific artists Visessio Siasau and Serene Hai Thang Whakatau Tay. After much deliberation, the three chose to name the exhibition *Living as Form*. Although unaware of the precursor, their title echoed precisely that of Nato Thompson's 2011 exhibition.<sup>297</sup> Thompson's exhibition surveyed the emergence of a new stream of contemporary art that he termed "socially engaged practice." For Thompson, "socially engaged practice" eschewed the traditional studio arts of sculpture, film, painting, and video, in favor of direct engagement with the social and political sphere. Socially engaged practice, he argued, was not a new art movement (like Futurism, Constructivism or Dada), but represented a new social order: "*new forms of living*."<sup>298</sup>

For Thompson, the emergence of socially engaged practice was indelibly linked to the contemporary epoch. Socially engaged practice, he argued, was a rejection of the hegemony of neoliberalism, the commodification of the art object and the separation of art and life. It is easy

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<sup>295</sup> On the deep entanglement of contemporary art and capitalism, see Pamela Lee, *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); David Geers, "Neo-Modern," *October* 139 (2012). For a counter on the persistence of other modes of value, see Clifford; Henry Skeritt, "A Stitch in Time: How Aboriginal Australian Artists Are Reweaving Our World.," in *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, ed. Stephen Gilchrist (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>296</sup> At the same time, I remain sympathetic to the charges leveled at advocates of new-materialism and object-oriented-ontology, that the focus on the vibrancy of objects does replay the "mystical character" of commodity fetishism identified by Marx. However, as Marx notes, commodity fetishism works to obscure relations rather than bring relations to the fore. See for instance, Andrew Cole, "Those Obscure Objects of Desire," *Artforum* (2015).

<sup>297</sup> Nato Thompson, ed. *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2012).

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

to see parallels between the rise of socially engaged practice and the indigenous art movements that came to prominence at around the same time.<sup>299</sup> Across the world, indigenous artists also sought to challenge neoliberalism by offering alternative ways of being in the present. But the lesson of *taonga* is not simply to suggest that *living could be form*, but also that *form could be living*. Put differently, eschewing form (as in dematerialized social practice) does not negate the power that objects have in our world. This is something that, I think, Nuku has always intuitively understood: it has certainly been a dominant feature of his work for over a decade. Where the artists in Thompson's *Living as Form* responded to the separation of art and life by rejecting the art object in favor of a dematerialized practice, Nuku aims for a much greater philosophical readjustment. Nuku's work does not merely attempt to occupy the opposite of a dialectic position between art and life, but rather, presents the two as intrinsically linked.

As a “new form of living,” this idea has decidedly ancient roots. We should remember that the Māori language did not originally have a word for “art,” but rather, a selection of words that united artistic practices with the social, political and religious realms.<sup>300</sup> The idea that art and life were separate was an introduced concept that Pacific artists had persisted perfectly well without for centuries. As Siasau notes, “There is no art—there is only life.”<sup>301</sup> By this logic, art dies precisely the moment when it is removed from life, when it becomes the *object* of reification in the museum cabinet.

While this would appear to align Nuku's work with current tendencies in global contemporary art and theory, this should not necessarily be seen in terms of EuroAmerican influence. Quite the opposite: following the collapse of modernism (and what Peter Osborne

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<sup>299</sup> See for instance Sissons.

<sup>300</sup> See Neich, *Carved Histories: Rotorua Ngati Tarawhai Woodcarving*, 123-45.

<sup>301</sup> Visessio Siasau, interview with the author, New York, July 14, 2016.

calls the “pyrrhic victory” of dematerialized and conceptual art practices<sup>302</sup>), it has been EuroAmerican contemporary art and theory that have begun to adopt parallel concerns to those that indigenous artists have long championed.<sup>303</sup> Whether this represents a victory for indigenous cultures or a further act of epistemological appropriation is debatable.<sup>304</sup> What is not debatable is the comfort with which artists like Nuku have worked both within and across the discourses of institutional critique and indigeneity. Artists of Nuku’s generation have certainly benefitted from the victories of their predecessors in opening a space for indigenous cultures in the museum context.<sup>305</sup> But the ease with which artists like Nuku have engaged with ethnographic collections is also indicative of their differing relationship to the museum as an institution and more specifically, to the objects of ethnographic collections.

### 3.6 REPATRIATION, HERITABILITY AND EXCHANGE

Far from revealing a consensus, *Pasifika Styles* showed that there was no single attitude among Pacific artists to ethnographic museums and the objects they contain. Reviewing the exhibition, anthropologist Andrew Moutu described it as a “polyphonic collage,”<sup>306</sup> while Deidre Brown noted a marked philosophical divide between those “who believe that their treasures should be

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<sup>302</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 50.

<sup>303</sup> See McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, 333-42. This is equally evident in the philosophical tendency to look to “pre-modern” and indigenous modes of thought as a corrective to the dominance of Enlightenment epistemology. See for instance, Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011); Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2010). A similar tendency can be seen in a populist guise in Wade Davis, *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2009).

<sup>304</sup> See for instance, Ian McLean, “Surviving ‘the Contemporary’: What Indigenous Artists Want, and How to Get It,” *Contemporary Visual Art + Culture Broadsheet* 42, no. 3 (2013); “What’s Contemporary About Aboriginal Contemporary Art?,” in *The World Is Not a Foreign Land*, ed. Quentin Sprague (Parkville: Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2014).

<sup>305</sup> See Phillips.

<sup>306</sup> Moutu.

repatriated and those who think they can achieve life in foreign locations and collections.”<sup>307</sup> This was hardly a new debate: it was one that Mead foregrounded in his introduction to *Te Maori*: “Thanks to the Western practice of collecting “quaint” works of art and to modern conservation techniques, the art treasures of a nation can now be likened to a range of mountains.”<sup>308</sup> Mead had long been in favor of repatriation, but following *Te Maori*, his view of the role of the museum was somewhat tempered: “Yet although our people are critical of museums the fact is that they serve a very useful purpose in conserving and presenting examples of Maori art. Witout them we would have lost many valuable pieces of art to dry rot or to the axe.”<sup>309</sup>

McCarthy attributes Mead’s shift to an awakening to the political power of art as tool of social identification.<sup>310</sup> Now more politicized, Mead saw the role that a foundation in tradition could play in uniting contemporary Māori. In this instance, the dual aims of Māori heritage and museum preservation seemed to align. As Amiria Henare notes, objects enact relations through time, and are therefore the material pivot of “heritable communities.”<sup>311</sup> *Taonga* had long symbolised the common heritage and unity of the community, and were used by Māori to display power (or *mana*).<sup>312</sup> The question was what happened when this display occurred in the space of the museum? Would Māori ideals be subsumed to the institution, or would they be able to transform it?

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<sup>307</sup> Deidre Brown, “Islands of Opportunity: *Pasifika Styles* and the Museum,” in *Pasifika Styles: Artists inside the Museum*, ed. Rosanna Raymond and Amiria Salmond (Cambridge and Dunedin: Univeristy of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and Otago University Press, 2008), 23-24.

<sup>308</sup> Mead, *Te Maori: Maori Art from New Zealand Collections*.

<sup>309</sup> *Te Toi Whakairo: The Art of Maori Carving*, 200-1. It should be noted that in the same essay, Mead reaffirmed his belief that “a large portion of the British Museum collections should be returned to New Zealand without any fuss and without asking for their return.”

<sup>310</sup> McCarthy, 138.

<sup>311</sup> Henare, 8.

<sup>312</sup> Jackson, 38.

An equally pressing challenge was how to resist the fetishization of tradition. As Thomas notes, exhibitions of *taonga* tend to privilege an “un-contaminated” view of pre-colonial culture.<sup>313</sup> This often serves to deny the coequality of contemporary Māori culture.<sup>314</sup> Neich argues that modernity was responsible for introducing a pronounced orthodoxy to Māori art practice, which had traditionally celebrated innovation.<sup>315</sup> Paradoxically, at the moment innovation was being lauded in Western modernism, Māori artists were asked to adhere to the past by patrons looking for “authentic” examples of Māori art. McCarthy makes a similar point, noting that the rise of museums as patrons of Māori art in the early 20th century, prescribed an orthodoxy that briefly coincided with Māori desires for cultural preservation, leading to a “self-conscious indigenous historicism.”<sup>316</sup> This tension between communal identification and innovation runs throughout Nuku’s work. In some ways, he is something of a traditionalist: adhering to a relatively customary range of forms and themes. In other ways—not only his adoption of modern materials, but also his willingness to incorporate both personal and pan-Pacific motifs and themes (see for instance, *Display of Power*, in which Nuku incorporates “archetypes” of multiple Pacific cultures)—Nuku is the model of an experimentalist.

Nuku does not advocate for repatriation, although he expresses frustration at the separation of *taonga* from lived experience.

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<sup>313</sup> Thomas, “From Exhibit to Exhibitionism: Recent Polynesian Presentations of ‘Otherness’.”

<sup>314</sup> Henare, 252.

<sup>315</sup> Neich, *Carved Histories: Rotorua Ngati Tarawhai Woodcarving*.

<sup>316</sup> For McCarthy, heritage itself was a modern idea: recognizing the the past as past, but recycling it as a regenerative resource: “Pakeha and Māori approaches to preservation converged around related values of heritage. By collaborating with the sanctioned revival of tradition, the indigenous people celebrated the past as heritage and thereby signalled that they too were modern.” At the same time, we should be careful of overstating this appearance of alignment, as McCarthy concludes, “Māori were plainly capable of distinguishing between the preservation of the past and the romantic Pakeha notion of living in the past, which stifled their own development.” McCarthy, 44-59.

As much as there's taonga in a museum, the reasons our ancestors made them isn't in the museum. So we should just carry on making, and stop crying about what we don't have and how that's stopping us from living—stop groveling to the big guys in the big house so we can have our stuff back.

I feel sorry that the taonga aren't breathing like they would out in the garden or wherever, getting damaged and getting sweaty Maori hands fondling them and snot and tears all over them and being kissed and stuff. But come on man, do you honestly think a lock and key and maybe a reinforced door is going to contain the power that those things represent? It's like trying to bottle air mate, it's impossible!<sup>317</sup>

Nuku's comment makes clear the relationship between his views on the agency of objects and his views on the agency of museums: He does not wish to reify the museum, and thereby inscribe the institutional power attributed by Bennett. Rather, he wants to reframe it as a site in which objects speak back. Nicholas Thomas notes that in Pacific cultures, treasures to have a dual function: On the one hand, they can be displayed for prestige; on the other, they can also be used for circulation and exchange, to create bonds between groups in a process of reciprocity.<sup>318</sup> Baker takes this up further:

Sometimes, on *marae* and other designated places, *taonga* have a crucial role to play in the unfolding of negotiations, in guiding action or reaction. In particular, a *tuku taonga*, a *prestation* (ceremonial presentation) from one party to another or an exchange of *taonga*, repositions both parties' relationship. Through *tīpuna* association and *whakapāpā* (genealogy) the merit of a *taonga* is conferred and some are invested with a role as a border negotiator, moving from one context of possession to another. A *tuku taonga* or *tuku rangatira* is a representative of the ability of a *rangatira* to express the wealth of a *hapū* and convey their esteem to the recipient."<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> George Nuku, artist statement, *Outer Space Marae* 2006.

<sup>318</sup> Nicholas Thomas, "Pacific Dualities: Bottled Ocean in Wellington and Auckland," *Art New Zealand*, no. 74 (1995): 46.

<sup>319</sup> Baker, 147.

For the Māori, the display and exchange of *taonga* played a role in political relationships. This exchange continued with the arrival of Europeans, and as Conal McCarthy notes, there is “abundant evidence that things were freely exchanged in networks of trade and commerce from the first contact between Māori and Europeans.”<sup>320</sup> Nuku is keen to maintain the agency of these exchanges: “This is my response because firstly, I’m of more than one world, and secondly, I don’t think that all the efforts that my Maori ancestors made in the name of human engagement should ever be disregarded.”<sup>321</sup>

*Outer Space Marae* was not Nuku’s only intervention into MAA during *Pasifika Styles*. In the Māori cabinet of MAA’s permanent galleries, Nuku installed a Perspex Māori short club or *patu*, which he later donated to the museum. The label for the work included the following statement from the artist:

After returning with Captain Cook from the Pacific in 1771, the naturalist Joseph Banks commissioned a set of bronze *patu* (hand clubs) bearing his coat-of-arms, cast from a Maori *patu onewa*. His purpose was to take them on Cook’s second voyage to use to impress the locals. This work is an echo of those earlier works. By bringing this *Patu* to England, I am returning the favour.

Nuku’s *Patoo Patoo Pasifika* 2006 performs a neat inversion of the asymmetry of colonial exchange. Nuku’s gesture of “returning the favour,” speaks closely to his view of the power of indigenous objects to provincialize the institutions in which they are displayed. The presence of *taonga* in museums presents a clear antinomy that forces the recognition of multiple ways of relating to objects, the persistence of indigenous ways of being, and the power of colonized peoples (and objects) to resist colonial objectification. It is here that Nuku’s elision of the

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<sup>320</sup> McCarthy, 29. See also,

<sup>321</sup> George Nuku, interview with the author, New York, May 27, 2016. See also, Chantal Knowles, “Artifacts in Waiting: Altered Agency of Museum Objects,” in *Reassembling the Collection: Ethnographic Museums and Indigenous Agency*, ed. Rodney Harrison, Sarah Byrne, and Anne Clarke (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2013), 235-8.



structure power of museums becomes most clear: for in opposing the repatriation of *taonga*, Nuku seeks to deny the museum's power by making the *taonga* themselves the symbols of a reverse colonization.<sup>322</sup> In doing so, Nuku recognizes (while simultaneously attempting to defang) the dialectic of colonization that casts the colonizer and colonized into a mutually dependent relationship. It is worth considering Nuku's comments at length:

Artists who criticize the 'being British' need to investigate that further, because perhaps they are still at the stage of feeling victimized and oppressed, and it requires more investigation on their part to see that that is actually the biggest service that we can do to our ancestors, not to cry on about how mean the British were to us. Because that means that we are saying that they are stronger than us, and I'm saying no, we are equal, equal to each other, equal to each person that comes into this institution and has a look at what I am doing. That is also why I don't demand that the ancestors are returned to us.

The last thing they [the ancestors] want us to be is victims, and if we are victims they will treat us like victims, both the colonial powers and the ancestors. What happens if you take the ancestors away from here? Then you are left with a blank space. You create another void. You know it is just going to be ongoing consequences of loss, and I don't want that. I would rather have the ancestors stay here. They command so much power and respect here in the context that they are in. They enjoy a tremendous amount of attention, and they are the subject of continuous debate and study. Once they go back, it undermines our position and our relationship with the empire. If they stay here, they are a reminder of our relationship with the empire and a reminder to be treated equally ... Ultimately, the ancestors serve their best purpose by being this living leverage.<sup>323</sup>

The key for Nuku is making objects the subjects of a lived engagement, rather than a dead/reified one: hence his feeling "sorry that the *taonga* aren't breathing like they would

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<sup>322</sup> Nuku is not alone in this view, take for instance the Yolngu artist Wukun Wanambi's assertion, "My history is alive today. My history keeps on building up. My identity is stronger. It is not dying. The more I share, the stronger I get. The more power I get. That's why, when we put a *larrakitj* as a piece in a museum, it has got the power." Wukun Wanambi, quoted in *Unsettled: Stories Within*, [http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/unsettled/wukun\\_wanambi](http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/unsettled/wukun_wanambi) (accessed 11 December 2016)

<sup>323</sup> Nuku and Jacobs, 145-6..

outside.”<sup>324</sup> Chantal Knowles has described this as a process of “active participatory engagement,” involving people, cultures and objects.<sup>325</sup>

At this point, it is worth returning to our earlier discussion of *taonga* to make two important points. The first, is the obvious point that no object is automatically a *taonga*. Rather, to become a *taonga*, an object needs to be transformed. As Mead notes: “Over time an object becomes invested with interesting talk ... A lump of wood of little or no great significance is thus transformed through the art process, by building words (*korero*) into it and by contrast with people, into a thing Maoris class as a *taonga*, or in full, *he taonga tuku iho*.”<sup>326</sup> Nuku describes the process as a bringing to life of objects: thus making them subjects: “my role as a *tohunga* is to make those statues walk. I have to make them walk, talk, sing, dance, breath, kill, love, everything, give birth. That is the role I must play. To make these objects—as you call them—to make them subjects.”<sup>327</sup> The second important point to make, is that the power of *taonga* is not free of semiosis. Indeed, it is almost possible to see a level of logocentrism in Mead’s description of “building words” into *taonga*. And yet, the relationship between *korero* and *taonga* is somewhat more complex, as Nuku notes:

Maori say that the treasures are nothing without their attendant *korero* or narratives, and the words without the tangibility of the *taonga* means they are only words on their own with no evidence or outcome. The opening ceremonies for exhibitions serve to galvanize and focus the attendant forces into a scenario where literally the past is again present. It unlocks deep desire and yearning to be with our forebears, to force and control time this way.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> George Nuku, artist statement, *Outer Space Marae* 2006.

<sup>325</sup> Knowles.

<sup>326</sup> Mead, *Te Maori: Maori Art from New Zealand Collections*, 21.

<sup>327</sup> Nuku and Jacobs, 147.

<sup>328</sup> George Nuku, in Hooper et al., 12.

Amongst contemporary theorists interested in object and material based analysis, there has been a tendency to preference sensory perception over epistemology.<sup>329</sup> Fred Myers has been critical of this tendency in regards to paintings from the Western Desert of Australia, arguing that it ignores the learned element of perception as a semiosis acquired in social relations with the other.<sup>330</sup> The point here is that material engagement need not cede the terrain of epistemology entirely. The role of *taonga* as described by Nuku above is precisely to mediate between these realms—to provide the kind of “two-directional” movement between the social and phenomenal worlds. While, as Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal notes, “nature is the ultimate teacher about life,”<sup>331</sup> the role of *tohunga* in interpreting, manifesting and mediating the power of the natural world cannot be ignored. As Roger Neich notes, these *tohunga* were appointed by the gods to “manifest them in the natural world by signs of power.”<sup>332</sup> Awekotuku notes, “Management of the potent energies of *manu* and *tapu* required adepts trained in a specialized system of knowledge, skilled in the complexities of rituals and the protocols of mediating between the

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<sup>329</sup> See for instance Bennett; Bryant.

<sup>330</sup> Myers, 459-60. This is particularly evident in Myers’ discussion of the role of Dreaming in mediating Pintupi relationships to place: “The Dreaming is not simply experienced, despite the present tense of Ingold’s insistence on hunter-gatherer engagement with place; it is learned, a semiosis acquired in social relations with others. The ephemera of songs, imagination, remembered movements, stories, and the like – the rhythms and sounds that attune them – allow people to reconstitute senses of place, and they offer the possibility (at least) of a two-directional movement. When young men return to their country from town, they may hear the songs and engage the relationships indicated through them. They can do so precisely because of the availability of ‘culture’ – historically transmitted – and of a sociality which are ignored in much phenomenological discourse about sensuous experience and walking on the land. They travel not alone but with the memories, songs, stories, and names of those who went before.”

<sup>331</sup> This relates closely to role of *whakapapa* in identity. Not for instance, Royal’s assertion: “Humans are born of the earth and achieve fulfilment when the earth speaks through the human community. True tangata whenua (people of the land) can speak authoritatively about the world they inhabit – the animals, plants, weather patterns and natural rhythms of life. Tangata whenua are descendants of other tangata whenua, and know the histories of their forebears and how life spoke through them. According to this world view, when people are asked about their identity, they do not mention themselves directly. They refer to their mountain, their river, and their esteemed ancestor. Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, ‘Te Ao Mārama – the natural world - The importance of the land’, *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/te-ao-marama-the-natural-world/page-4> (accessed 14 September 2016).

<sup>332</sup> Neich, *Carved Histories: Rotorua Ngati Tarawhai Woodcarving*, 124-5.

realms of spirit and humankind.”<sup>333</sup> Likewise, *Whakapapa* is a knowledge: and a highly prized one; not merely a state of observation. While all things have genealogy, recognizing this relation is specialized and learned skill, the realization of which contributes to the achieving of a completeness of being. This shows an enormous respect for both the power of art and the artist to mediate between realms and substantiate new subjectivities.

### 3.7 A PORTAL ON THE WORLD

By acknowledgement and recognition of plastic as sacred and divine. To see and revere the nature it reveals—the nature of light and water. To name the micro particles of plastic in the ocean into divinity itself, by naming the *Tangaroa* invoking their sacred aspect in the chant—*Tangaroa* above, *Tangaroa* below, *Tangaroa* afar, *Tangaroa* near.<sup>334</sup>

For Nuku, plastic occupies a unique sensory position: it is both ubiquitous and unseen. This applies to both the plastic of museum vitrines (the “invisible” technologies of display), as well as to the ever-proliferating islands of disposable plastic bottles that pollute the oceans. Nuku’s aim is to transform these invisible objects into art, and therefore “create divinity and genealogical connectivity to the plastic and the plastic to us.” What is the nature of this divinity? It is, perhaps, tempting to read this a statement of medium specificity, as though Nuku was attempting to reveal the essence of the materiality of plastic. And yet, Nuku’s practice tends to work against the essence of the materials with which he works. This is particularly evident in his use of acrylics—a medium better suited to casting than carving. Acrylic does not polish in the manner of wood or stone, and thus Nuku’s works often have jagged edges, which gives them a charged sense of danger. This also distinguishes them from the exceptionally smooth edges of traditional Māori

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<sup>333</sup> Te Awakotuku, 32.

<sup>334</sup> George Nuku, *Bottled Ocean 2116*, artist statement. Centre Culturel Tjibaou, Nouvelle-Calédonie, New Caledonia.

carvings. Nuku himself speaks of the important of the “resistance” of the mediums he uses: whether the obstinate rigidity of PMMA or the fragility of polystyrene foam, which requires such an extremely light touch that Nuku describes it as like “carving clouds.” The resistant materiality of PMMA and polystyrene foam keeps the tension between tradition and modernity on the surface of all Nuku’s works.

I once asked Nuku if he had ever considered casting his works, to which he joked, “Nah, when they made George, they broke the mold.”<sup>335</sup> By refusing to do so, Nuku rejects the possible reading of his works as mass-produced. The mark of the carver’s hand remains present, and the activating role of the *tohunga* intact. Nuku even compares plastic to the qualities of *pounamu* (jade), rather than foregrounding its associations with mass-production. This distinguishes Nuku’s work contemporaries like Wayne Youle, who use plastic to point to the commodification of Māori kitsch.<sup>336</sup> For his part, Nuku avidly disavows any connection between his work and kitsch, commodity or pop culture.

There is a level of traditionalism to Nuku’s attitude to medium. Neich notes, that while materials are assigned special symbolic significance in Māori art, it is fundamentally a “conceptual art dealing with configurations of symbols in the mind.”<sup>337</sup> Considerations of form are secondary: once selected, the figures are imposed upon the material, regardless of splits, knots or imperfections that showed up during the work. “In this respect,” argues Neich, “the

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<sup>335</sup> The only occasion when Nuku has cast in acrylic was for the work *Te Tūhono* at the National Museum in Scotland. In 2009, Nuku was invited by curator Chantal Knowles to restore a hybrid 19<sup>th</sup> century *waka taua* (war canoe). In order to meet the conservation requirements of the project, some sections of the restored *waka* were cast from Nuku’s original carvings. See Charles Stable, “Maximum Intervention: Renewal of a Māori *Waka* by George Nuku and the National Museums Scotland,” *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* 10, no. 1 (2012); Knowles; Mike Wade, “‘Exquisite’ Fusion of Modern Maori Art and Ancient Canoe Is a First for Museum,” *The Times*, October 26 2009.

<sup>336</sup> Kim Knight, “What’s Wrong with a Tacky Tiki?,” *The Sunday Star-Times*, June 5 2005; Tom Fitzsimons, “Plastic Fanstastic,” *Dominion Post*, March 11 2009.

<sup>337</sup> Neich, *Carved Histories: Rotorua Ngati Tarawhai Woodcarving*, 146-9.

Maori carver was a formalist, never making use of *objets trouvés* features.”<sup>338</sup> Neich means a formalist in the sense of having a strict adherence to prescribed forms rather than any sense of medium specificity: a distinction that applies well to Nuku. What then to make of Nuku’s claim to bring out the essence or divinity of his materials? Nuku is clearly not talking about getting to something inherent in the material, but rather, initiating a version of relation to it: a making vibrant of the material by giving it a subjectivity. This is a transformative process that occurs through art. If we recall the role of the *tohunga*, as described by Nuku, is to make *objects* into *subjects*: the implication being that subjectivity is something activated by virtue of relation (for the *taonga* this means being brought into an “active participatory relationship” rather than a reified state of objecthood).

It is worth briefly considering the role of aesthetics and ornament in Māori art. Discussing the absence of the word “art” in Māori language, Neich notes, that the for traditional Māori carvers, little distinction was drawn between figure and ornament.<sup>339</sup> As Jackson observes, form and style were united in total symbolic system, “the connections and interrelationships of which involve our attention at more than the conscious or manifest levels... Art is patterning not merely of the seen, the images of the contemporary external world; it is also a patterning of the unseen.”<sup>340</sup> In a particularly revealing passage, Nuku discusses the role of visibility in his practice:

Standing next to and amongst the treasures with my new creations has certainly given me perspective regarding many aspects of my life. I have spent my days shaping this manifesto in perspex: a manifesto grounded in the light and the shadows; the borders and the edges. Perspicacity—an acuteness of perception. Saliency—a state of visibility or prominence. This desire, this gift (or is it

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 123-45.

<sup>340</sup> Jackson, 41.

perhaps a curse?) to see things clearly, to ascertain their core in order to engineer situations where truth is open to change, organic growth and evolution. Something deep is happening to me with the material. It's like I'm attempting to see all sides at once: the front and back, the sides and inside/out. The plastic allows that.<sup>341</sup>

The idea of “seeing all sides” emerges in Nuku’s discourse around 2011, when he first begins working with the form of cubes, which would become a recurring theme in his practice.<sup>342</sup> For Nuku, the cubic form takes on a profound significance that is closely related to concepts of divinity (or *Atua*). He says that the cube “represents the world of the universe. I place *Atua* on all sides of the cube, and through their structural composition, I show connectiveness through their genealogical relationship to both each other and to us.”<sup>343</sup> At the same time, speaking on installing his cube in the Chapelle du Calvaire, Nuku comments: “the cube is something I am happy to have outside of me and in the chapel with Jesus, Mary and God ... I can let them imbue it with meaning. For me, it’s an accumula of the best of life contained in a very precise space projecting it in a very sacred and geometric way to the world.”<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Nuku, 71.

<sup>342</sup> In 2012, Nuku carved a large “floating” Styrofoam cube for an installation at the Chapelle du Calvaire in Paris; in 2013 he collaborated with the Haida artist Cory Douglas on a Styrofoam cube titled *Universal Cube: Box of Promises*; in 2014 he installed a dozen Styrofoam cubes in the Omahu marae; and in 2016, he produced a collaborative cube with the Tongan artist Visessio Siasau titled *Taputapu Atea*.

<sup>343</sup> George Nuku, “Atua Inspired,” in *Atua: Sacred Gods from Polynesia*, ed. Michael Gunn (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2014), 217.

<sup>344</sup> George Nuku, in Joff Rae, “Te Ao, Amazing Maori Art Exhibition in Paris,” The Big Idea, <https://www.thebigidea.nz/connect/media-releases/2012/jul/119727-te-ao-amazing-maori-art-exhibition-in-paris>.



**Figure 3.1.** George Nuku and Cory Douglas, *Universal Cube: Box of Promises 2014*, installed at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Reproduced courtesy of the artists and the Museum of Anthropology, UBC.

In the cube, Nuku finds both a projected and contained space: on the one hand, these large, floating objects occupy space in a room; on the other hand, their four sides delineate an internal space. By perforating every side, the permeability and interdependence of both spaces is made apparent. Nuku describes the cube as representing the “universal relationship of Atua-Tupunua-Tangata: Gods-Ancestors-People,” and yet, while aspiring to universalization, the revolving cube remains an image of multiplicity. Nuku continues: “The multifaceted aspect of the cube’s sides reveals that quality in the *Atua* and that in ourselves—the revolving allows our multitudinality to be seen and felt in a given moment.”<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Nuku, “Atua Inspired,” 217.



As a concept of divinity, *Atua* has numerous manifestations. It is said to be present in all living things, but it can also inhabit inanimate objects (such as *taonga*) by virtue of their animation. Michal Gunn notes that, “the animation of the *atua* was in the mind of the person standing in front of the object. An animated object could interact with the person through elicited emotions.”<sup>346</sup> Thus, while the presence of the ancestor is imminent in *taonga*, it is not inherent. The ancestors exist independently of their representation: they both preceed and exceed representation. How, then, do we reconcile this version of divinity with Nuku’s aim to “to see things clearly, to ascertain their core”? We might find an answer in Kant’s transcendental object X that allows empirical concepts to provide relation to objective reality:

All our representations are, it is true, referred by the understanding to some object; and since appearances are nothing but representations, the understanding refers them to a something, as the object of sensible intuition. But this something, thus conceived, is only the transcendental object; and by that is meant a something = X, of which we know, and with the present constitution of our understanding can know, nothing whatsoever, but which, as a correlate of the unity of apperception, can serve only for the unity of the manifold in sensible intuition. By means of this unity the understanding combines the manifold into the concept of an object. This transcendental object cannot be separated from the sense data, for nothing is then left through which it might be thought.<sup>347</sup>

It is this transcendental concept of the object that makes experience possible. Rex Butler points out that this object X is transcendental not simply in that it is outside of experience, but in that it is the limit that allows for experience: *the experience of experience as limited*.<sup>348</sup> The multitudinality of Nuku’s cubes—with their intersecting and revolving planes that are simultaneously visible and invisible to the viewer—do not suggest the transcendentalism of an

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<sup>346</sup> Michael Gunn, *Atua: Sacred Gods from Polynesia* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2014), 12-13.

<sup>347</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan and Co., 1929), 268 [A/51].

<sup>348</sup> Rex Butler, *A Secret History of Australian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 2002), 144-45.

unknowable realm beyond our reach, but rather, point to the necessary intersection of the transcendent and the real: of *Atua* and the object. This in no way decenters the human subject: the artist as *tohunga* remains the pivot in this universalization. Note Nuku's claim that "It is here that I reveal myself not only as the creator of this idea but also as the *axis mundi*—the pivot that is required to facilitate this movement and its momentum and to maintain the equilibrium of this."<sup>349</sup>



**Figure 3.2.** George Nuku, *Waharoa/Portal: Te Ao Marama—The World of Light* 2013, installed at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Photograph by Henry Skerritt. Reproduced courtesy the artist.

It is not, I believe, coincidental that at around this time Nuku begins to include self-portraits in his work. Rather than being self-centric, Nuku's self-portraits are a further attempt to get to the bottom of the nature of subject-object relations. It is also here that his institutional critique finds its fullest expression. Take for instance, his 2013 work *Waharoa/Portal: Te Ao*

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<sup>349</sup> Nuku, "Atua Inspired," 217.

*Marama—The World of Light*, created for the exhibition *Paradise Lost?* at the Museum of Anthropology (MoA) at the University of British Columbia.<sup>350</sup> *Waharoa* consists of seven Perspex display cases, which had previously been used in exhibitions at MoA. The seven cases are divided into three sections: on each side were two stacks of three vitrines. Mounted above and between these was a single case, which was affixed to the architecture of MoA by a steel support, in order to appear to “float” in space. This middle case has been incised with an image of Nuku’s face, replete with his distinctive *moko* or facial tattoos. On the left and right sides, the top vitrine has been incised with a figure shown in full, wielding a club. On the cases below, Nuku has carved another single face, however, unlike his self-portrait, in these cases he has bisected the case, so that half the face is carved on the front of the case, and the other half on the back. When viewed from directly in front, these two images form a single face, but from other angles, the image becomes distorted. Beneath these cases, two smaller cases act as a base: these are carved with multiple ancestral figures in a characteristic Māori style. The work’s title indicates that these figures relate to the ancestral narrative of Ranginui and Papatuanuku—the sky father and earth mother—whose primordial embrace kept the world in darkness, until being forcefully separated by their children, initiating the world of light (*Te Ao Marama*).

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<sup>350</sup> *Paradise Lost? Contemporary Works from the Pacific*, Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, July 24 - September 29, 2013.



**Figure 3.3.** George Nuku, *Waharoa/Portal: Te Ao Marama—The World of Light* [detail] 2013, installed at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Photograph by Henry Skerritt. Reproduced courtesy the artist.

Initially, Nuku had considered incorporating items from MoA’s Pacific collections into *Waharoa*, but decided against it. Instead, he opted to focus on the vitrines themselves, in order to draw attention to their objecthood: in his words, to “make nothing into something.”

[Y]ou have this containment device here [the museum vitrine], the ultimate containment device. So you have to start telling yourself that this case does not exist. But it does exist and it doesn’t allow you to have a relationship with those

objects ... I am making nothing into something. Because emptiness is acceptance of the possibility that the sky is the limit.<sup>351</sup>

By inscribing the surface of the vitrine, Nuku is making visible the technologies of display. For Nuku, the naturalizing of these technologies of vision is inherently linked to their role in the separation of indigenous practices from the present. This is Nuku's concession to the structural power of the museum: acknowledging Foucault's observation that power conceals itself by visualizing itself, one can only see what power lets one see, what it makes visible.<sup>352</sup> In Foucault's terms, there is a history then, not of what is seen, but what *can* be seen.<sup>353</sup> As John Rajchman summarizes:

In short, visibility is a matter of a positive, material, anonymous body of practice. Its existence shows that we are much less free in what we can see than we think, for we do not see the constraints of thought in what we can see. But it also shows that we are much more free than we think, since the element of visibility is also something that opens seeing to historical change or transformation. That is the problem of *evidence*.<sup>354</sup>

The question becomes how to expose these unseen *évidences* that conceal power? In this respect, Nuku's dual aims of *perspicacity* and *saliency* are not dissimilar to Foucault's "art of seeing." By "making visible" the museum vitrines, Nuku suggests a material element to vision, where visibility is not self-evident observation, but it conditioned by material, spatial and social conditions. The act of exposing the unseen, is not merely a sensible one, but one that involves the meeting of sense and discourse.<sup>355</sup> As Rajchman points out, this requires a thinking "outside"

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<sup>351</sup> George Nuku, in Benbassat Ali.

<sup>352</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

<sup>353</sup> John Rajchman, "Foucault's Art of Seeing," *October* 44 (1988): 105.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>355</sup> Although one should be cautious of suggesting too direct a correlation between Foucault's model of genealogy and that of *whakapapa*, it is worth noting that Foucault also saw genealogy as a way of exposing the contingency of historical developments. See Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History."



ourselves: “Not to look within to a true or authentic self; not to master one’s time by holding it in one’s thoughts; not to find a place for oneself within society or state, but to look out from oneself, to open one’s time to what has not yet been seen, to transform or displace one’s instituted, assigned identity at a time and place.”<sup>356</sup>



**Figure 3.4.** George Nuku, *Waharoa/Portal: Te Ao Marama—The World of Light* [Self-portrait detail] 2013, installed at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Photograph courtesy Museum of Anthropology, UBC. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Museum of Anthropology, UBC.

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<sup>356</sup> Rajchman, 117.

What then, to make of Nuku's inclusion of self-portrait in *Waharoa*? As a self-portrait, the image in *Waharoa* is hardly naturalistic: rather, it is a two-dimensional rendering of Nuku's *moko* or facial tattoos. In Māori culture, *moko* are more than just surface designs; they reveal much about a person's identity, lineage and connection to place. In other words, they do not just cover the surface of the body (like Western make-up), but reveal something essential from within. We might read this in Nuku's assertion that, after having his face tattooed in 2003: "through doing this I felt closer to myself, freer than ever before. There was no longer anywhere to hide – I literally had to face the light."<sup>357</sup> Nuku continues:

It is about time and spatial displacement, because it's there always, and you can't just take it out of the cabinet and put it back. And it is ours to talk about; how it can be about hurt and loss, and separation and death ... As a Māori who has made this decision to put this on my face, it proclaims something about my relationship with the world. With the trees, with the sky, with those elemental forces, as I wear nature on my face, and I believe that is what *moko* does. It is a way of instantly, constantly communing with nature, and of peeling back the layers of society and approval and status.<sup>358</sup>

And yet, the connection between *moko* and identity is not straightforward. *Moko* were not purely heraldic (as in a Scottish tartan or Yolngu *miny'tji*), as some early commentators misinterpreted. Chiefs would commission distinguished artists from across the islands in a display of both trust and prestige.<sup>359</sup> Likewise, *moko* was not drawn from a rigid iconographic "language," but rather was open to innovation and change.<sup>360</sup> The agency of *moko* was thus

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<sup>357</sup> Nuku, "Perspicacité: The Art of George Nuku," 68. Nuku's *moko* were done in 2003 by Haiki Williams of Ngāti Tūwharetoa descent. See Adrienne L. Kaeppler, *The Pacific Arts of Polynesia and Micronesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 95.

<sup>358</sup> George Nuku, in Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, *Mau Moko: The World of Maori Tattoo* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 150.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>360</sup> See *ibid.*; Linda Waimarie Nikora, Mohi Rua, and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, "Wearing Moko: Maori Facial Markings in Today's World," in *Tattoo: Bodies, Art and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*, ed. Nicholas Thomas, Anna Cole, and Bronwen Douglas (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2005).

dispersed between the artist and wearer. Nevertheless, once completed, *moko* were regarded as an indivisible part of the wearer's identity. Nuku notes, "The *moko* is our signature ... It is what our ancestors signed their documents with."<sup>361</sup> *Moko* is testament to the complex connection between interior and exterior worlds. According to Jackson, *moko* mediates between the natural realm of decay and the human realm of continuity, linking the individual with their heritage, and providing resolution between the natural and cultural person.<sup>362</sup>

In carving his *moko* onto the transparent museum vitrines of *Waharoa*, Nuku makes a complex statement on the nature of subjectivity. It is worth considering Žižek's assertion that "subject is not a substance which withdraws/appears; subject is appearance (appearing-to-itself) which autonomizes itself and becomes an agent against its own substantiality."<sup>363</sup> In *Waharoa* Nuku offers surface as the space in which subject is made visible to the other (how it resists its substantiality). At the same time, this surface is transparent. So, Nuku's vitrines are both seeable and invisible—like the famous duck-rabbit puzzle—they cannot be both at once. One cannot see surface and through at the same time. It is, as Žižek continues, the division between appearance and the void in the core of the subject's being. And yet, to return to Simmel, this is also the limit that allows for us to encounter the other.<sup>364</sup>

The question of how do we know the world, overlaps then, with the question of how do we know the other. Both are played out in the museum: the site of modernity's *materialization of otherness*. If the museum was the site where the modern subject was made ("to become subjects rather than the objects of knowledge")—by drawing attention to the antinomies of ethnographic

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<sup>361</sup> George Nuku, in Godrech.

<sup>362</sup> Jackson, 69.

<sup>363</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Afterword: Objects, Objects Everywhere: A Critique of Object Oriented Ontology," in *Slavoj Žižek and Dialectical Materialism*, ed. Agon Hamza and Frank Ruda (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>364</sup> Simmel, 9-11.



display, Nuku posits a subjectivity that both retreats and presents: that only becomes apparent in its crossing over. In animating objects with subjectivity, Nuku opens the impossible-possibility of subjects which only become apparent in relation; a divinity that is only revealed in its activation; a knowledge of the world and the other that is possible only in the recognition of its own incompleteness. At the top of this portal of light, astride the entire narrative of *Te Ao Marama*, Nuku places his own image: the signature surface of his tattooed skin. In doing so, he casts his own identity in a state of constant anticipation, at the horizon darkness and light, never fully actualized, but always in a process of becoming.

According to Nuku, *Waharoa* was intended to be site-specific: installed at the focal point of MoA's Great Hall.<sup>365</sup> Visitors descend into the Great Hall, which is flanked on every side by monumental works from the Northwest Coast nations: enormous totem poles, house posts and carved figures, mostly dating from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The hall culminates in a series of fifteen-meter high north facing windows, designed to dissolve the barrier between the museum's interior and exterior, where a reflection pool can be seen, along whose banks is a model Haida house constructed by Bill Reid and Doug Cramer between 1959-1963.<sup>366</sup> Nuku's *Waharoa* was placed in the very center of these windows, at the focal point of the space, serving to frame an exterior doorway not used in daily operations. Despite its prominent placement, Nuku's work is a subtle intervention in the space. On the one hand, it is substantially smaller than the monumental poles that flank it, and secondly, it is transparent: open to the outside world, and the changing light of day.

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<sup>365</sup> MoA was built in 1976, designed by the renowned Canadian modernist architect Arthur C. Erickson. Erickson's design was inspired by the longhouses of the local Haida nation.

<sup>366</sup> Although Erickson and the site's landscape architect Cornelia Hahn Oberlander had included the reflection pool on their original designs, it was not installed until 2010.

If *Waharoa* is about encountering the limits of our own subjectivity—that otherness which arises in the moment that the subject experiences the boundaries of its own self—it is also about how these limits condition our understanding of the world. In its transparency, *Waharoa* does not proffer a single, overarching world-view, but many shifting, disparate and mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world. By splitting the planes of vision, Nuku opens to this multiplicity, while recognizing the impossibility of a complete encounter with the other. From one vantage point, the split planes are incoherent, but move to another point, and they come together to produce an image: an image produced from the meeting of distinct and separate planes (see Figure 11).<sup>367</sup> We might think back to Jackson’s description of the *pare* as embodying the “alternating rhythm of fission and fusion. The forms are engaged in a kind of perpetual motion, breaking up and building up from the disengaged chaos of the bas relief areas [exhibiting] the double function of both combining and separating ... Creation and dissolution are at the same time present.”<sup>368</sup> Opening onto the world of light—the world, literally just beyond the windows of MoA—*Waharoa* is an image of how our subjectivity connects us to the world: never complete, but always searching for unity. Before it, we are faced with the constant paradox: we see through the portal and then we see the world, or we see the portal and we don’t see the world. Here the world is both phenomenal and noumenal, and it is only in the limits that our existence becomes fully realized.

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<sup>367</sup> Nuku would repeat this strategy in a number of floating, Perspex cubes included in *Bottled Ocean 2114* that he termed “atolls.”

<sup>368</sup> Jackson, 45.

### 3.8 POSTSCRIPT: BOTTLED OCEAN

It is perhaps ironic that the exhibition that most clearly marked Nuku's determination to move away from ethnographic museum interventions was titled *Bottled Ocean*. Nuku borrowed the title from the influential 1994 exhibition curated by renowned Rarotongan artist and curator Jim Vivieaere.<sup>369</sup> If Nuku's *Bottled Ocean* was designed to signal his move away from the critique of museum display, Vivieaere's exhibiton was a curious choice to reference, itself being centrally concerned with the question of institutional display. Tasked in 1994 with presenting a survey of contemporary Pacific arts, Vivieaere chose to subvert insitutional expectations of what constitutes "Pacific arts." Karen Stevenson has argued that *Bottled Ocean* was "infused with the paradox of identity."<sup>370</sup> On the one hand, Vivieaere was concerned with the shared experiences and communality of Pacific artists; on the other hand, he was accutely aware of the limitations of the "modern tribal art market," which both ghettoized and primitivized indigenous artists.

With exhibitions of this sort one wonders how Pacific cultural origins and traditions can be made a source of creative possibilities rather than constraints. Some works refer to the past, or express themes of transition and current entrapments. The artists are exploring their uneasiness with their blurred identity. Conflict exists between their assumed heritage and their urban experience.

These artists have a commonality. They feel the same tidal pull from the Pacific which is their provenance. They also have a need to position themselves against and within the modern tribal art market. What they have in common is heightened by the pure sound of the PACIFIC OCEAN.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Commissioned by the City Gallery Wellington in 1994, *Bottled Ocean* toured to Auckland Art Gallery, Waikato Art Gallery, the Manawatu Art Gallery, and the McDougall Art Annex throughout 1994 and 1995. Vivieaere changed the display of the exhibition for each location.

<sup>370</sup> Stevenson, 46.

<sup>371</sup> Jim Vivieaere, *Bottled Ocean* exhibition statement, quoted in Thomas, "From Exhibit to Exhibitionism: Recent Polynesian Presentations of "Otherness", " 319.

According to Nicholas Thomas, *Bottled Ocean* was “not simply a public projection of difference but also a meditation on cultural identity and on the audiences’ interests in exoticism and difference.”<sup>372</sup> Like Nuku, Vivieaere was concerned to make visible the mechanisms of display, often in highly disruptive ways such as the obtrusive inclusion of mirrors, Perspex sheets, and packing crates. By dwelling on the “paradox” of identity as both identification and projection, Thomas argues that *Bottled Ocean* challenged cultural voyeurism not only by drawing deliberate attention to its character as display, but also by “looking back.”<sup>373</sup>

Reviewing the exhibition, Wendy Waigro noted that *Bottled Ocean* kept something “real” at its core: “the circulating currents of the Pacific Ocean, which both separates and connects its islands.”<sup>374</sup> Perhaps this is what attracted Nuku to appropriate the title. As Epeli Hau’ofa, the great philosopher of Oceania, notes, the ocean is both a empirical reality and pathway to the Other. In its vastness and majesty, the ocean is also a metaphor for both the possibilities and challenges of the future.

Just as the sea is an open and ever-flowing reality, so should our oceanic identity transcend all forms of insularity, to become one that is openly searching, inventive and welcoming. In a metaphorical sense, the ocean that has been our waterway to each other should also be our route to the rest of the world.<sup>375</sup>

Much like Glissant’s archipelagic thought, Hau’ofa’s Ocean does not displace territorial identity entirely, but refrains it in outward looking terms. Ocean allows for a unique vision of globality—one open to relation and errantry—but a vision that always begins from one’s island home.<sup>376</sup> The ocean diffracts, but it is also the concrete reality that allows for relation. Thus,

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> "Pacific Dualities: Bottled Ocean in Wellington and Auckland."

<sup>374</sup> Wendy Vaigro, "'Bottled Ocean': Shape Shifting," *Art and Asia Pacific* 2, no. 4 (1995): 34.

<sup>375</sup> Epeli Hau’ofa, *We Are the Ocean* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), 55.

<sup>376</sup> Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, 33-34.

Ocean is not merely an answer to the paradox of identity, but also to the question of how we imagine our connectivity to the real world.

Having been invited to exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art Taipei, Nuku's original plan was to develop an exhibition around notions of migration and return, linking the Māori to their Austronesian ancestry in Taiwan. The centerpiece of *Bottled Ocean 2114* was a shimmering plastic *waka*: dubbed by Nuku *Wakapounamu* (combining the Māori words for canoe and jade)—echoing the form of the twin-hulled vessels believed to have been used in the great Austronesian migration from Taiwan. The *hiwi* (or hulls) of Nuku's *waka* were made up of eight large water-cooler tanks, while the prows (*tauihu*) and sternposts (*taurapa*) were carved in the traditional manner of Māori war canoes (*waka taua*). Atop this hull, Nuku placed an elaborate Perplex *whare waikaro* (carved meeting house), depicting key moments in Māori genealogy.

Nuku describes the *Wakapounamu* and the associated plastic “atolls” that make up the *Bottled Ocean* installation as representing “islands” of communities surviving into the future. And yet, there are a number of temporal disruptions in *Bottled Ocean*. In placing a *whare* upon a *waka*, Nuku appears to draw attention to the fact that, where once the *waka* was the locus of Māori artistic practice, by the late-19th century this shifted to the carved meeting house. Jeffrey Sissons has argued that this reflected a period of rapid political change during which the carved meeting house emerged as a potent symbol of Māori identification against the forces of colonization.

The carved meeting house is, then, a traditionalised object with a genalogy in both Foucauldian and Maori senses. Foucauldian, because its genealogy traces links between new forms of power/knowledge associated with cultural, commodification and colonial state-formation; Maori because, in symbolising

ancestral connections, it embodies a kind of kin-based engagement with these new forms of power.<sup>377</sup>

Rather than an “invention of tradition,” McCarthy argues that this “traditionalization” is better understood as the construction of a future: “while as artefacts they are *retrospective*, as political gestures they are *prospective*—they express the promise of the future.”<sup>378</sup> This is a better model for the “hybrid” object that is Nuku’s *Wakapounamu*. Partly inspired by the post-apocalyptic sci-fi epic *Waterworld* (dir. Kevin Costner, 1995), it does not imagine the future as the straight arrow of the march of progress. Rather, it is a bricolage of contingency, strung together in the name of survival. Onto the ocean is cast the *waka* of the past, present and future, in an endless cycle of evolutions and returns.

While *Bottled Ocean* appears to envisage an apocalyptic future—the all too present scenario of environmental catastrophe—it is not without hope. For despite its clear warning against the proliferation of plastic bottles, it also suggests redemption and the promise of change made possible by altering our relationship to the object world. This is the role of the artist: what Nuku calls the “antidote to the globalization of mediocrity in the name of money.”

So the role of artists is to remember this, and the divine communication of human nature with nature. Our role is to keep this communication healthy. We, the artists, have to travel all the time: between the inside and the outside, the living and the dead, the sacred and the profane, the night and day, men and women. This in-between space is where the artist must be.<sup>379</sup>

When art is alive, it mediates (between the past, present and future, the living and the dead, form and living), and in doing so *substantiates* new forms of existence. The role of the

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<sup>377</sup> Jeffrey Sissons, “The Traditionalisation of the Maori Meeting House,” *Oceania* 69, no. 1 (1998). See also Henare, 252-7.

<sup>378</sup> McCarthy, 85.

<sup>379</sup> George Nuku, in Godrech.

artist then, is to mediate between planes of existence, and in doing so, to create new modes of understanding the world. Thus, Nuku's environmentalism and institutional critique find their convergence. Neither are attempts to erase the distinction between the material and mental worlds. Rather, both emerge from a desire to refigure this distinction from a dialectical opposition (mental/material; self/other), to a relationality that arises when the subject experiences the boundary of its own self in continuity with the material world. *Whakapapa* in this sense is not a return to the past, but the picturing of a new trajectory, in which the sediments of the past (whether tradition or trash) are cast as the forebears of a more certain future.

With ceremony we will express our spirit of life and death, to this nature around us and within us. The plastic begins to reflect, to refract the light and reveal to the people both themselves and the world we live in.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> George Nuku, *Bottled Ocean 2116*, artist statement. Centre Culturel Tjibaou, Nouvelle-Calédonie, New Caledonia.

## **4.0 COREY BULPITT: OLD SCHOOL/NEW SCHOOL**

It's kind of amazing that the potlatch/native culture was banned in 1884 yet our people are still raising totem poles, carving, singing, dancing even learning to speak our languages or are speaking them already, and we are proud of our culture and feel strong connections to our places of origin. I'd say it is proof we will never give up on our ancestors, our land and our future generations no matter who or what tries to get in the way of the connection we have to our people, land and culture—we will not assimilate—we will continue on. I am proud of our resilience to those people thinking they can decide what is right for us and our future generations, or trying to say our ways are wrong. We have proved we are strong and continue to gather strength despite the atrocities we have faced. Overall I just want to say it is all worth it, culture and art will continue and that gives me all the strength I need.

COREY BULPITT

### **4.1 KEEPING IT OLD SCHOOL**

It's an ordinary day in the city. Cars bustle along the busy arterial of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue that cuts beneath the Granville Bridge: the current incarnation of a structure that has connected the southern neighborhoods of Vancouver, Canada, with the downtown since 1899. As drivers speed along their way, focused on the road ahead or perhaps humming along to the latest hit-song on the radio, some might notice a pair of spray-painted murals that decorate the inauspicious concrete walls that flank the underpass, forming the central supports for the bridge. East bound travelers might take note of a striking red and black depiction of the epic Haida creation story of the Raven, whose misadventures brought light into the world; while those heading west pass a gentler, winding tableau of grey and black which erupts into a hovering climax of color: a



rainbow emerging after a rainy afternoon. From the window of a speeding car they are but a brief interlude in the visual pastiche of the city: a minor distraction as commuters zoom onto their final destination.



**Figure 4.1.** Corey Bulpitt with assistance from Larissa Healey Billy St. Jean and Aime Milot, *The Raven* 2008, Granville Bridge, Vancouver, Canada. Photograph August 2013 by Henry Skerritt.

On this warm August afternoon, however, I had sought them out. Approaching up the hill from the Granville Island Markets—a popular Vancouver tourist precinct—I was first greeted by *The Raven* 2008. It is a work of heraldic intensity, cast in the classic tri-color of Northwest Coast Native Art. In the five years since it was painted, *The Raven* has borne the brunt of the elements, with watermarks staining its once pristine white ground. On the day I visited, its companion *The Storm* 2013, was partly obscured by piles of rubble and other debris of recent construction work and in several places large holes had been drilled into its surface. And yet, rather than detracting

from the integrity of these murals, the weathering only served to make them more poignant. It was as though these images had always been here: an irrepressible essence emanating from within the urban fabric.



**Figure 4.2.** Corey Bulpitt with assistance from Larissa Healey, *The Storm* 2011, Granville Bridge, Vancouver, Canada. Photograph August 2013 by Henry Skerrett.

The murals are the work of Haida artist Corey Bulpitt. I had first encountered the artist's work a few months earlier, when I traveled to Ottawa to see the exhibition *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art* curated by Greg Hill, Candice Hopkins and Christine Lalonde for the National Gallery of Canada.<sup>381</sup> Bulpitt was one of seventy-seven indigenous artists from sixteen countries invited to participate in the exhibition. Working with his frequent collaborator, the Ojibwe artist Larissa Healey, Bulpitt's contribution was a snaking 113-foot

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<sup>381</sup> Greg Hill, Christine Lalonde, and Candice Hopkins, *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2013).

long mural tracking the life-cycle of the salmon from roe to its final skeletal remains. *Salmon Cycle—The Spirit Within* 2013 was a remarkable work: Its block red figures made up of stylized ovoids marked it clearly within the Haida visual heritage, and yet it was a work that also made conspicuous use of the specific properties of the medium of aerosol spray-paint. Swimming alongside the principal figures (the red salmon), Bulpitt cast a series of ghostly black figures emerging out of the black ground. Loose streaks of thinly applied spray-paint cast a gradient haze across the principal forms. The effect of Bulpitt's use of spray-paint was twofold: Firstly, it served to foreground the aesthetic fusion taking place between Haida design and Hip-Hop culture. In a statement for the exhibition, Bulpitt exclaimed, "H'aawaa creator for blessing me with a gift that enables me to share Haida and Hip-Hop culture with the world."<sup>382</sup> Secondly, the use of spray-paint imbued the mural with a palpable sense of movement (of both the current and the fish swimming upstream), encouraging the viewer to passage along the work, thus activating the subjectivity of the viewer. This is a different to classical Haida design, which tends to preference symmetry and the even distribution of weight and balance, resulting in works that are boldly frontal, encouraging the eye to move around the design rather than across it.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Corey Bulpitt, quoted in <https://www.fazakasgallery.com/the-national-gallery-stages-sakahan-international-indigenous-art/>. Accessed April 11, 2017.

<sup>383</sup> See Bill Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), 67-91.



**Figure 4.3.** Corey Bulpitt, assisted by Larissa Healey, *Salmon Cycle – The Spirit Within*, 2013, spray paint on 3M film, 438.5 × 3452.5 cm, site-specific installation at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Bulpitt’s inclusion of spectral figures also served a narrative and political function. In interview he describes the use of black paint in the work as giving the salmon both a sense of “uncertainty” and “fluidity.”<sup>384</sup> In Haida mythology, the salmon were believed to be ancestors who lived an eternal life beneath the sea. In Spring, they would put on salmon disguises and feed the people, who would in turn, ritually return their complete skeletons to the water, so that the cycle could begin again the following year. In Bulpitt’s mural, the figures of the ancestors are pictured both within the principal figures, as well as in spectral form swimming alongside. The presence of these ancestral companions adds the necessary element of return: the *circularity* to

<sup>384</sup> Corey Bulpitt, quoted in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPvoDLEhxQ0>. Accessed April 11, 2017.

the life-cycle. In the broader history of Northwest Coast Native art, I read it as an assertion of unerasable continuity: *You might outlaw our culture, you might repress our imagery, but like the salmon we will return against the tide: our traditions are permanent.* And yet, there is a more complex “uncertainty” taking place in *Salmon Cycle – The Spirit Within*. At the end of the mural, Bulpitt poses the ominous statement-question: “Every year the salmon come back...?” According to Bulpitt, the aim of the mural was to bring consciousness to the salmon” in the face of environmental carnage:

... to bring awareness to the people in Ottawa—the main government of Canada—that this is something that matters to us. To them, they don’t see the salmon or even care. Where for us, it’s sustenance, it’s life, it’s a deep connection that goes back thousands of years. To them, it’s like we’ll put this LNG thing right on the mouth of the river where the salmon run because we don’t even care. It doesn’t matter if scientists tell them it’s not OK, they just go ahead and do it because it’s in the name of money.<sup>385</sup>

As a symbol of political resistance, the salmon has a long history in the Northwest. When European colonists first arrived, Native people actively resisted selling them salmon for fear that the new arrivals would be unaware of their ritual obligations, and thus cause the cycle to be broken (adding the question mark to Bulpitt’s eternal sequence). Rather than representing the trans-culturalism that is so often associated with contemporary art, *Salmon Cycle – The Spirit Within* alludes to the very limits of cross-cultural dialogue. To me, the work was one of the most affecting pieces in *Sakahàn*. Reviewing the exhibition, I noted that many of the exhibition’s highlights were staged outside the museum. My reasoning was that working beyond the confines of the institution allowed artists such as Bulpitt, Nicholas Galanin and others to resist some of the demands of institutional contemporaneity and the dominant representation apparatus of the museum.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Corey Bulpitt, interview with the author, April 6, 2017.

<sup>386</sup> Skerritt, "Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art [Review]," 398.

In the previous two chapters, we examined two artists—Gabriel Maralngurra and George Nuku—who deliberately reframed the Artworld as a site of exchange: a contact zone in which a multiplicity of approaches to valuing and relating to objects could be played out. In turning to Bulpitt’s practice, I would like to consider the spatial and epistemological implications of an artist working largely *outside* of the Artworld. On the one hand, this requires taking into account how Bulpitt’s work engages with the specific spatial histories of colonized lands, along with the representation of indigenous people in the public sphere. These are matters of major consequence for indigenous artists working in the context of continuing colonial subjugation. But I also want to consider the possibilities that Bulpitt’s practice raises to work outside the hegemonic institutional constraints that shape the reception of indigenous art within the Artworld. After all, the institutional network of art outlined in Arthur Danto’s famous description of the Artworld was more than simply spatial. As the provider of the operational theory that defined “art” from “non-art,” the Artworld is distributed across a broad network that encompasses museums, commercial galleries, publishers, art schools and universities, all of which contribute to a pervasive understanding of what constitutes “art.”<sup>387</sup> I have written elsewhere on the profound ambivalence of many remote Aboriginal Australian artists to the art market, and yet, it is impossible to ignore what Fred Myers dubs the competing “regimes of value” that shape Aboriginal art’s production and reception.<sup>388</sup> At the same time, as Terry Smith reminds us, while many indigenous people remain subject to the uneven distribution of power that characterizes contemporary globalization, “in certain circumstances, times and places, some, sometimes many, are *not* subject, in practice or imagination ... They originate their own structures of same and

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<sup>387</sup> Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964).

<sup>388</sup> Skerritt, "A Stitch in Time: How Aboriginal Australian Artists Are Reweaving Our World.," 40-41; Fred Myers, ed. *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2002).



other, produce their own relations of distinction and difference, and then choose or not to act ‘in between’ the cultures.”<sup>389</sup>

I hope that the self-evidence of Smith’s claim is played out in all the case studies in this dissertation. However, it is particularly pertinent in relation to the work of Corey Bulpitt, because the frames of reference for Bulpitt’s work are decidedly less reliant on its relation to the Artworld. While the other artists in this dissertation have made conscious and tactical decisions to engage the Artworld, Bulpitt sees himself as operating in a largely separate domain:

I don’t know if I’d ever call myself a contemporary artist. I get how I could fit in that realm, but at the same time, I may not call myself a traditional artist either. Traditionally, Haidas, we didn’t even have a word for “art.” We made things. We made things that represented our clans, our crests, our histories and it wasn’t necessarily “art” in the same way that a European might look at art. It was created for different reasons. And even then, I believe myself, I’m not creating it for art *per se*. I don’t even know if I would consider my pieces “art” in a sense. I mean, they are art in a broad term, but in a way it also serves a function. Even a panel that sits on a wall serves a function, the same as say a chief’s house front might be painted to tell a story, the same as my panels.<sup>390</sup>

I do not think Bulpitt is being disingenuous when he says that he would not call himself a contemporary artist: his work operates differently from his institutional peers and predecessors precisely because it does not privilege the demands of the Artworld. What struck me most about *Salmon Cycle – The Spirit Within* was how effortlessly it traversed two distinct traditions: the formline style characteristic of Northwest Coast Native art, and the more recent aesthetic modes associated with the subculture of Hip-Hop. The challenge here, is to think beyond facile notions of “hybridity” that preference the modernization of indigenous cultures as though the desires of indigenous peoples necessarily align with those of the dominant culture. While it has become

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<sup>389</sup> Terry Smith, *Transformations in Australian Art: Volume 2: The Twentieth Century—Modernism and Aboriginality* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 2002), 148. James Clifford makes a similar point in Clifford, 30-2.

<sup>390</sup> Corey Bulpitt, interview with the author, April 6, 2017.

blindingly obvious to most observers that many indigenous peoples hold radically different values and aspirations to those of globalized neoliberalism, discussions of art are often predicated on the assumption that indigenous artists share concerns that are, if not identical, at least comparable to their non-indigenous peers. Take for instance Ian McLean's assertion:

There is nothing mysterious about what indigenous artists want. They want the same thing as most people: a fair slice of the pie. How to get it, is a much more difficult question to answer. To even land a seat at the table, indigenous art has to first be accepted as contemporary art. This has been its defining struggle in the modern era.<sup>391</sup>

Broadly speaking, McLean is correct: gaining acceptance *has* been a defining struggle among artists working within the frames of the Artworld. This is certainly the case for most of the artists in *Sakahàn*, and equally true of those Northwest Coast Artists who have gained the most substantial foothold in the contemporary art world (such as Brian Jungen, Luke Parnell or Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun).<sup>392</sup> The success that these artists have achieved is, in no small part, due to their ability to operate within the paradigms of institutional contemporaneity. The same could be said of their predecessors: pioneering artists such as Bill Reid, Robert Davidson and Don Yeomans, whose work is regularly characterized as providing a “bridge” between Native art and modernism.<sup>393</sup> And yet, Bulpitt's work seems less to me like “bridging” incommensurate worlds, than sustaining plural, non-contradictory ones.<sup>394</sup> The distinction here is

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<sup>391</sup> McLean, "Surviving 'the Contemporary': What Indigenous Artists Want, and How to Get It," 167.

<sup>392</sup> See for instance, Solange de Boer, Zoë Gray, and Nicolaus Schafhausen, eds., *Brian Jungen* (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2006); Eugenia Kisin, "Terms of Revision: Contemporary Complicities and the Art of Collaboration," *Collaborative Anthropologies* 7, no. 2 (2015); Karen Duffek and Tania Willard, eds., *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Unceded Territories* (Vancouver: Figure 1 Publishing, 2016).

<sup>393</sup> See for instance, Doris Shadbolt, *Bill Reid* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998); Barbara Brotherton, Sheila Farr, and John Haworth, eds., *Robert Davidson: Abstract Impulse* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 2013); Ian M. Thom, *Challenging Traditions: Contemporary First Nations Art of the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver and Seattle: Douglas & McIntyre and University of Washington Press, 2009).

<sup>394</sup> This formulation is borrowed from José Rabasa, *Without History: Subaltern Studies, the Zapatista Insurgency, and the Specter of History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 68.



subtle but significant. For, at the heart of many of these “bridging” narratives is a discourse of modernization that, in the words of Chaseten Remillard, reinforces “long-standing assumptions about the anachronistic nature of lived Native culture” while assuming the “universality of Western aesthetics.”<sup>395</sup> This is, perhaps, unsurprising. As Tony Bennett has shown, the advent of the modern museum was instrumental in institutionalising the temporal frames of modernity.<sup>396</sup>

The effortlessness of Bulpitt’s work comes precisely from how *naturally* it expresses a contemporary urban indigeneity: there is no sense of needing to traverse disjunctive worlds, it simply *is what it is*. In part, this reflects how integral Hip-Hop culture has become to indigenous youth cultures, as opposed to the continuing barriers to indigenous participation erected by the high-art culture industry. And yet, while Hip-Hop has proved more easily indigenized than the modern museum, credit must also be given to Bulpitt for the skill with which his work reflexively engages with the historical trajectories of both graffiti and Haida design.

In Chapter Three, I argued that despite his use of modern materials, George Nuku was essentially a traditionalist in his approach to Māori carving. The same can be said of Bulpitt. Like Nuku, Bulpitt also runs parallel practices: alongside his graffiti murals, Bulpitt also produces traditional carvings such as totem poles, crest panels, ceremonial masks and bentwood boxes. Recently, he has also revived the traditional Haida practice of hand-poked tattooing. In interview, Bulpitt speaks earnestly of his responsibilities, respect for traditions and desire to “keep things proper.” This extends to the technical, formal and cultural elements of his practice. But what is most striking is how this discourse of “respect” infuses Bulpitt’s approach to both Haida design *and* graffiti art: “You know,” says Bulpitt, “I’m keeping it old school in both my

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<sup>395</sup> Chaseten Remillard, “Framing Reid: Agency, Discourse, and the Meaning of Bill Reid’s Artistic Identity and Works,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 45, no. 2 (2011): 168.

<sup>396</sup> See Bennett; *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism*.

graffiti as well as my Haida art. So with the graffiti, it's kind of a double responsibility for me: to keep graffiti going the way it was supposed to be done, as well as Haida art.”<sup>397</sup>

The nature of this “traditionalism” is clearly laid out in Bulpitt’s work on canvas *Old School/New School* 2014. The work is an unusual one for Bulpitt, in that it incorporates stenciling as well as his characteristic free-hand spray-painting. The title of the work is a multi-layered pun. Across the ground of the canvas is stenciled a “school” of formline-style salmon. While formline is clearly an “old school” style, the use of stenciling belongs to a “new school” of graffiti practice. On top of the stenciled fish, Bulpitt applies crashing waves of free-hand lines, redolent of “old school” graffiti practices. By offsetting these two styles, Bulpitt is referencing the multiple historical trajectories of contemporary graffiti and street art practices:

In some ways, with my spray-paint work I use different processes because I come from an older generation of graffiti artists ... When I was like fourteen or fifteen, if you got caught taping a line or anything like that, you’d pretty much get beat up. Where nowadays everyone uses tape, projectors, stencils, anything they can use. And I mean, stencil art is OK, but back in the day, you wouldn’t do it on your actual graffiti piece. Because it is its own form of art. So for me, process matters, and for the graffiti especially, it’s part of the process. It’s being able to walk up and create an eighty-foot by fifty-foot-high piece hanging off a ladder or whatever.<sup>398</sup>

The first point to be made, is that “street art” is not a homogenous field. As Martine Irvine notes, it is “defined more by real-time practice than by any sense of unified theory, movement or message.”<sup>399</sup> Indeed, the very term “street art” indicates the division between graffiti practitioners and those more deliberately aligning themselves with the legitimating aesthetic discourse of “Art.” Bulpitt does not refer to his work as “street art,” and indeed, the

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<sup>397</sup> Corey Bulpitt, interview with the author, April 6, 2017.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> Martin Irvine, “The Work on the Street: Street Art and Visual Culture,” in *The Handbook of Visual Culture*, ed. Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell (London and New York: Berg, 2012), 235.

graffiti historian Jack Stewart contends that even the term “graffiti artist” was imposed by the critical establishment, and only later adopted by practitioners—who more commonly referred to themselves as “writers.”<sup>400</sup> This reflected the fact that graffiti generally revolves around typography and the “tag”. Describing the emergence of graffiti in New York during the 1970s, Stewart notes:

This new graffiti started to appear on the walls of buildings, at playgrounds, in subway stations, on commercial vehicles, and even inside subway cars. Unpopular with subway riders, beginners’ crude scribbles were helter-skelter, invading the public’s space with what appeared to be no more than vandalism. However, as the writers became more inventive, graffiti developed and matured as quickly as it was produced.<sup>401</sup>

While Bulpitt labels stencil art as “new-school,” it also has a lineage that stretches back to the 1960s. While the precise origins of this history are highly contested, in most cases its advent is credited less to Hip-Hop graffiti writers than to artists aligned with the contemporary Artworld such as John Fekner and Ernest Pignon-Ernest.<sup>402</sup> The key point to be made here, is not simply that graffiti writers and street artists see themselves as categorically different, but also that these practices (while often overlapping) have different epistemic foundations. It is not necessarily the case, as Martin Irvine argues, that street artists “‘graduated’ from simple graffiti as name or slogan writing to a focused practice involving many kinds of image and graphic techniques.”<sup>403</sup> But rather, graffiti and street art might be seen as two parallel dispositions played

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<sup>400</sup> Jack Stewart, *Graffiti Kings: New York Transit Art of the 1970s* (New York: Abrams, 2009). Cedar Lewisohn makes a similar point when he notes, “When art-historians talk about ‘graffiti artists’, they are usually referring to a small number of artists associated with street art and graffiti from the 1980s including Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kenny Scharf, who would never have considered themselves ‘graffiti artists,’ and would certainly not be considered as ‘graffiti writers’ by genuine graffiti writers of that period.” Cedar Lewisohn, *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution* (New York: Abrams, 2008), 18.

<sup>401</sup> Stewart, 19-20.

<sup>402</sup> Lewisohn, 15-19.

<sup>403</sup> Irvine, 6.

out in same visual arena. As Cedar Lewisohn argues “Street art and graffiti writing may be very similar pastimes, both stemming from a similar place with some congruous ideas and cross pollination, but they are different in terms of form, function and most importantly, intention.” According to Lewisohn, one of the key differences is that street art appeals to the discourse of aesthetics in order to legitimize itself in mainstream culture. In contrast, he argues, graffiti writing is an “aesthetic code [that] exists in such an internalised language that the main group of people who can fully appreciate it are other graffiti writers. This language that no-one else understands is then used for destroying or defacing cities.”<sup>404</sup> Lewisohn quotes the Brooklyn based street-artists FAILE:

Graffiti isn’t so much about connecting with the masses: it’s about connecting with different crews, it’s an internal language, it’s a secret language. Most graffiti you can’t even read, so it’s really contained within the culture that understands and does it. Street art is much more open.<sup>405</sup>

Street art might work outside of the museum, but it does not exist outside of the operational theory of Art. One need look no further than the institutional validation of artists such as Banksy, Barry McGee or Shepard Fairey (in contrast to the limited success of even the most famous graffiti writers such as Cope2 or Seen) to realize that street-art has become an accepted part of broader contemporary art discourse.<sup>406</sup> This disjunction is lampooned in Bulpitt’s work *This is Not Art*, 2014. Over a period of time, Bulpitt invited his friends to “tag” a large black canvas. As the tags accumulate, the overlapping tangle of lettering becomes indecipherable, like a spray-painted version of a Jackson Pollock painting. Above this mélange,

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<sup>404</sup> Lewisohn, 19.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>406</sup> Indeed, this is celebrated by champions of street art: see for instance, Michael Irvine’s claim that “The street artists who have been defining the practice since the 1990s are now a major part of the larger story of contemporary art and visual culture.” Irvine, 235.

Bulpitt stencils the word “ART” in large, white block letters: “my own whimsical joke on “art” or what people consider art, or even what people consider “not-art.”

My whole graffiti career started tagging with my friends and I wanted to pay tribute to that beginning so I had the canvas tagged up with some friends. We were working on the canvas in my yard when my gardener was working. He asked what it was and when I said it was my art piece, he replied with vigor “This. This is not art!” He was rather adamant about it. In an alley off Hastings me and 2 others put the art lettering over the tags in white. This is speaking about the white institutionalized gallery walls in stark comparison to the completely covered walls we paint in the streets.<sup>407</sup>

*This is Not Art* is far less subtle than works like *Salmon Cycle—The Spirit Within* or *Old School/New School*. Nevertheless, it is a clear assertion of Bulpitt’s roots as a graffiti writer and his recognition of the outsider status of that tradition in relation to the Artworld. At the same time, it suggests the possibility of producing visual objects outside of the institutional framework of art. While the canvas may be labelled “ART,” the gardener’s response suggests that the tradition has remained somewhat resilient to mainstream acceptance. *This salmon is not for sale*.

*This is Not Art* performs what Žižek calls a parallax view: rather than synthesizing two competing positions (“art” and “not-art”) he occupies both and neither, denying the power of the dialectic.<sup>408</sup> This is a powerful position, for it elides the dominant struggle for acceptance that defines the transcultural drives of indigenous contemporary art. Instead, it suggests a realm of autonomy in which indigenous cultural practices are not defined in relation to the dominant culture.

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<sup>407</sup> Corey Bulpitt, artist statement, *This is not Art*, 2014. Bulpitt further describes the work: “That was my own whimsical joke on “art” or what people consider art, or even what people consider “not-art.” For me, that was also talking about some of my roots, which was in vandalism: so that piece was all tags which people don’t consider art, but then you see those tags become a piece, which becomes a production, which becomes things that are in museums, like graffiti artists such as Seen and Cope, and all these different graph writers that have now become bigger in the artworld, whereas thirty years ago when they were starting they were seen as criminals.” Corey Bulpitt, interview with the author, April 6, 2017.

<sup>408</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parrallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

Lauren Jessica Amsterdam has argued that Hip-Hop allows the space for the expression of an indigeneity that is unsanctioned by the colonial “policing of tradition,” and in which new “cartographies of continuity” can be mapped “over stolen lands and constricted latitudes of existence.”<sup>409</sup> The success of works like *Salmon Cycle—The Spirit Within* or *Old School/New School* is not the way that they picture disjunctive worldviews, but rather that they come together into a seamless unity: itself a “new school” of indigenous practice embodied by collective movements like Beat Nation and Shop Wrong of which Bulpitt is an active figure.<sup>410</sup> This seamlessness is a product of the commitment that Bulpitt has to both Haida and graffiti styles. By deliberately preferencing these plural “old schools,” Bulpitt avoids the suggestion that he is “modernizing” Haida design, and instead, situates himself in a space of contemporaneity in which multiple historical discourses are played out in the present.

## 4.2 COREY BULPITT IN HISTORY

Corey Bulpitt was born in 1978 in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. His Haida name is T’aak’eit G’aaya, meaning “gifted carver.” Part of the Yahgulaanaas Raven clan, Bulpitt hails from a great lineage of Haida artists. His great-great grandparents included the renowned carvers Charles Edenshaw and Louis Collison; his mother Maxine Edgars is an accomplished weaver, and his father Monte Stewart-Burton is a carver of gold and silver. Bulpitt recalls that he “grew up creating,” working with hands making clay sculptures and drawings. As a teenager, he attended Langley Fine Arts Schools in Fort Langley, British Columbia, where he began “tagging” with spray-paints around

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<sup>409</sup> Lauren Jessica Amsterdam, “All the Eagles and the Ravens in the House Say Yeah: (Ab)Original Hip Hop, Heritage, and Love,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 37, no. 2 (2013): 54-5.

<sup>410</sup> See Kathleen Ritter and Tania Willard, *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery in collaboration with Grunt Gallery, 2012).

the age of 14. It was at this time that he developed his own tag—AKOS, an acronym standing for “Another Korruption of Society—with which he is still associated. By 17, Bulpitt was spray-painting professionally, producing murals for various businesses and local municipalities.

Much like George Nuku, Bulpitt gravitated towards his cultural heritage in his teenage years. He recalls tentatively experimenting with the inclusion of Haida motifs in his graffiti practice around the age of 15, but by his own admission “I didn’t really know much about my culture.” Anxious to explore his roots, at age 19 he traveled to Haida Gwaii to apprentice under his uncle, the master carver Christian White. For the next three years, Bulpitt immersed himself in his heritage: “I studied a lot of older pieces and became more fluent in a more traditional style of design,” he explains. “It’s a continually growing process to try and master the space and form.”<sup>411</sup> Working with White, Bulpitt learned the grammar of Haida design, producing small works for the market, as well as assisting his uncle on a long house in Old Massett. Bulpitt recalls a conversation with his uncle in which they compared the properties of graffiti and Haida art. After completing the long house, he returned to Vancouver to further his career. Undertaking further training under the mentorship of another uncle and master carver, James Hart, Chief 7IDANsuu, Bulpitt established himself as a scion of the rich Haida carving tradition, producing an important body of work including several monumental totem poles for public spaces across the Northwest of Canada.<sup>412</sup> Having mastered the Haida forms, as well as immersing himself in the oral traditions, song and dance of his peoples, Bulpitt returned to his graffiti practice. Armed with a knowledge of the past, Bulpitt felt ready to create something new.

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<sup>411</sup> Corey Bulpitt, quoted in Yasmine Shemesh, “Corey Bulpitt: Haida Meets Hip Hop,” *Beatroute*, Monday December 8 2014.

<sup>412</sup> These include a twenty-foot yellow cedar totem pole commissioned by Scouts Canada and erected at Camp McLean in Langley; a seventeen-foot totem pole for Queen Charlotte Lodge in Haida Gwaii; and a fourteen-foot mortuary post for the Namgis Burial Ground at Alert Bay, carved in memory of his Haida ancestors who died during the smallpox epidemic of 1862.

### 4.3 DIFFERENT STROKES: FORMLINE BATTLES HIP-HOP

Bulpitt's first major graffiti work in the Haida style was *The Raven*. The mural was sponsored by the City of Vancouver Graffiti Management Plan. As with most of his murals, Bulpitt used assistants: in this instance Larissa Healey, Billy St. Jean and Aime Milot. While the mural was Bulpitt's design, the names of all four artists were given equal standing on the lower right corner of the work. Bulpitt notes that *The Raven* was the only of his Haida-style murals in which his collaborators also did line work.

Ever since that piece [*The Raven*] I've done all the lines. I've had other people assist in filling in-between the lines. Every other piece you've seen would have been all my line-work at least. In some ways, I want to perpetuate the people I work with forward too. I mean, they're accomplished in their own rites, or I wouldn't choose them as help. But at the same time, they aren't Haida. They're well developed in their Northern-style designing. Just to keep it as proper as I could keep it, I preferred to do the line work myself.<sup>413</sup>

There is an obvious precedent to this collaborative mural practice in the erection of traditional long-houses and totem poles, which would be designed and attributed to a master carver who would work in conjunction with numerous assistants and apprentices. Nor is this the only parallel between the practices. Bulpitt himself notes the formal, technical and ideological similarities between graffiti and Haida art.

The principles of Northwest Coast Native art were first described in the late nineteenth century by Franz Boas, but it was the writings of Bill Holm that most eloquently codified its formal properties.<sup>414</sup> In his seminal 1965 text *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form*, Holm coined the term “formline” to describe the organizing principles of Northwest Coast

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<sup>413</sup> Corey Bulpitt, interview with the author, April 6, 2017.

<sup>414</sup> See Franz Boas, *A Wealth of Thought: Franz Boas on Native American Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press 1995).



design. “A formline,” argued Holm, “is the characteristic swelling and diminishing linelike figure delineating units. These formlines merge and divide to make a continuous flowing grid over the whole decorated area, establishing the principal forms of the design.”<sup>415</sup> Most compositions contain two formlines: a primary formline (usually rendered in black) and a secondary formline (which is usually red). Holm further identified the principal building blocks of formline compositions as the ovoid and the U-shape.

According to Holm, the formline style is calligraphic in principle, with the organization of forms following a strict grammar that determines the meaning of a given design.<sup>416</sup> Holm’s description of this grammar was backed by a painstaking analysis of the development and formal properties of Northwest Coast art over a period of roughly 2,000 years. If the aims of Holm’s study were largely art historical, it is doubtful that he could have predicted the active cultural role that his text would play. Holm’s text established a vocabulary for talking about Northwest Coast design which focused on the formal features as though they were linguistic units. The lasting impact of this can be found in Bulpitt’s own description: “we’ve been given an alphabet or words to use to create these infinite stories, say with the design elements of the Northwest Coast, we don’t have to stretch them or change them to create infinite amounts of designs.”<sup>417</sup>

Holm’s “grammar” arrived serendipitously at the very moment when a younger generation of artists, spearheaded by Bill Reid, were attempting to revitalize local artistic traditions. While Reid would become undoubtedly the best known Northwest Coast artist, he came to art relatively late in life. Robert Bringhurst describes the process that brought Reid to art as a “sorting out” of his own personal histories (both Haida and European):

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<sup>415</sup> Holm, 35.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> Corey Bulpitt, interview with the author, April 6, 2017.

Bill knew many Haida words, but English was his only spoken language. He was superbly polylingual with his hands. What is called the art “style” of the Northwest Coast is not in fact, a style; it is a language, with a grammar and a lexicon of idioms and elemental forms. “Style” is what distinguishes one artist from another when both are fluent in the language. Reid began to learn this visual language late, and at a time when no one spoke it well. He came late also to the languages of European art. This did not prevent him from having things to say of finding ways to say them in, in whichever of these languages he chose. In time, he was fluent and eloquent in the extreme.<sup>418</sup>

Reid was a diligent student, carefully working through the lessons of his artistic predecessors. Nevertheless, by his own admission, Holm’s book provided an invaluable guide, most importantly in defining the vocabulary and sharpening attitudes towards the grammar of Northwest Coast art. Reid has said, “I learned a lot from Bill Holm ... He got to know the inner workings of the designs ... and set the standards for adherence to the old ways without becoming a copyist.”<sup>419</sup> Reid adopted many of Holms’ descriptive terms—including “formline”—using them as a departure point for his own theories on the form and content of Haida art. In 1975, the pair would collaborate on a book *Form and Freedom: A Dialogue on Northwest Coast Indian Art*.<sup>420</sup>

One notable theoretic advance offered by Reid was to propose two additional essential components to formline compositions. Whereas Holm identified the ovoid and U-shape as the two defining elements of formline compositions, Reid suggested two further necessary components, that he termed the “connective” and the “extension.” According to Reid, Holm’s single-minded attention to the analysis of form in Northwest Coast art had missed these devices. Reid argued that formline was not simply a principle for the arrangement of discrete elements,

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<sup>418</sup> Robert Bringhurst, “Introduction,” in *Solitary Raven: The Selected Writings of Bill Reid*, ed. Robert Bringhurst (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000), 23.

<sup>419</sup> Bill Reid, quoted in Lloyd J. Averill, *A Man from Roundup: The Life and Times of Bill Holm*, (Seattle: Burke Museum, 2003), <http://www.burkemuseum.org/sites/default/files/man-from-roundup-biography-averill.pdf>. 44.

<sup>420</sup> Bill Holm and William Reid, *Form and Freedom: A Dialogue on Northwest Coast Indian Art* (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1975).

but a method for suggesting their harmonious unity.<sup>421</sup> This organizing principle of the connection of discrete elements into a harmonious whole is not dissimilar to the guiding principles of the classical styles graffiti art. There is an obvious material reason for this similarity: aerosol paints work best for continuous lines and block color.<sup>422</sup> It is worth comparing the similarity between Bulpitt's description of spray-painting murals:

Each medium can, in some senses dictate the work: let's say spray-paint—it comes out so fast, that I have to keep moving; you can't stop. You can between cans—but once you start pressing, you've got to keep the line. Your whole body gets into it, because usually it's on a large scale, so your whole arm and body gets into it.<sup>423</sup>

Versus Holm's account of carving:

I, myself, have derived a certain physical satisfaction from the muscle activity involved in producing the characteristic line movement of this art, and there can be little doubt that this was true also for the Indian artist. To say that there may be a kinesthetic relationship between this movement and dance movement is not to say that there is any visual or spatial similarity, although there may be, but to a lesser degree.<sup>424</sup>

Haida art and graffiti also share a strict adherence to stylistic rules. “There are a lot of rules that apply to Haida art, but also a lot of freedoms ... There's a lot of strictness within it. Nowadays there's a lot of contemporary artists who don't really learn the basics which for me is the vital thing” notes Bulpitt.<sup>425</sup> “I truly admire the patience of the inventors of this intricate style

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<sup>421</sup> Bill Reid, *Solitary Raven: The Selected Writings of Bill Reid* (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000), 173-77.

<sup>422</sup> It is also worth noting that much traditional Haida painting was done free-hand. See Bill McLennan and Karen Dufflek, *The Transforming Image: Painted Arts of the Northwest Coast First Nations* (Toronto and Seattle: University of British Columbia Press and University of Washington Press, 2000), 99.

<sup>423</sup> Corey Bulpitt, interview with the author, April 6, 2017.

<sup>424</sup> Holm, 92-3.

<sup>425</sup> Corey Bulpitt, quoted in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPvoDLEhxQ0>. Accessed April 11, 2017.

which leaves its practitioners such an array of thought and invention with what seems like a limited amount of forms.”<sup>426</sup>

It would, however, be facile to read too much into these formal similarities. Indeed both graffiti and Haida artists reject purely formal readings, putting significant emphasis on the connection between formal and conceptual properties.<sup>427</sup> As Remillard points out, Holm’s emphasis on form removed the objects of his inquiry from the indexicality of lived culture and assumed a universal capacity for aesthetic appreciation.”<sup>428</sup> As many scholars have noted, Holm’s formal art history and Reid’s discourse of modernist revival, encouraged the view that the great era of Haida art had passed, only to be reborn through the modernist genius of artists such as Reid. Holm would praise Reid in precisely these terms, arguing, “Bill found the dry bones of a great art and—shamanlike—shook off the layers of museum dust and brought it back to life.”<sup>429</sup> Claude Lévi Strauss would offer an equally breathless assessment: “our debt to Bill Reid, an incomparable artist, is that he has tended and revived a flame that was so close to dying. That is not all; for Reid by his example and his teachings has given rise to a prodigious artistic flowering.”<sup>430</sup> And yet, as Aldona Jonaitis argues, this standard narrative of the Northwest Coast Renaissance of the 1960s, is both partial and inaccurate, adhering to ethnographic tropes that “mourn the lost golden age of authenticity and the irreparable damage done to cultures accommodating to modernity.”<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> Corey Bulpitt, quoted in <https://www.instagram.com/p/7Lun3EogDh/>. Accessed April 11, 2017.

<sup>427</sup> Lisa Gottlieb, *Graffiti Art Styles: A Classification System and Theoretical Analysis* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008).

<sup>428</sup> Remillard, 166.

<sup>429</sup> Bill Holm, quoted in Karen Duffek, *Bill Reid: Beyond the Essential Form* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986), 6.

<sup>430</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, quoted in Wilson Duff, *Bill Reid: A Retrospective* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1974).

<sup>431</sup> Aldona Jonaitis, "Reconsidering the Northwest Coast Renaissance," in *Bill Reid and Beyond: Expanding on Modern Native Art*, ed. Karen Duffek and Charlotte Townsend-Gault (Vancouver, Toronto and Seattle: Douglas & McIntyre and University of Washington Press, 2004), 157.

Rather than a narrative of death and rebirth, Jonaitis argues for close attention to both the continuities of Northwest Coast art, as well as the historical contexts in which the events of the 1960s took place. On the first hand, the so called “degeneracy” of Haida art in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century can be reframed in a more sympathetic light if viewed beyond the stigma of “tourist art.” Aaron Glass notes that “the production and circulation of decorated objects was a primary means of mediating social and spiritual relations, both within kin groups and across geographical, linguistic or cultural boundaries.”<sup>432</sup> Tourist arts were often highly inventive modes designed to work within the new conditions of capital. From the late-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Haida artists like Charles Edenshaw were experimenting with new materials and visual signifiers—whether indigenous or imported in origin.<sup>433</sup>

On the other hand, the revival of Northwest Coast art in the 1960s might be cast within a broader historical narrative linked to the declining hegemony of late Modernism. In this context, the global revival of indigenous cultures—of which Reid’s art was merely one of many examples occurring around the globe—can be recast as specific and contemporary response to changing historical circumstances. Whether in Canada, New Zealand or Australia, the rise of neo-traditional indigenous art movements was motivated by a desire to assert political agency against the mechanisms of colonial modernity.

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<sup>432</sup> Aaron Glass, ed. *Objects of Exchange: Social and Material Transformation on the Late Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast* (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2010), 8.

<sup>433</sup> See Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse, “Eagles and Elephants: Cross-Cultural Influences in the Time of Charles Edenshaw,” in *Charles Edenshaw*, ed. Dana Augaitis and Robin K. Wright (Vancouver and London: Vancouver Art Gallery and Black Dog Publishing, 2013). When discussing his own innovations, Bulpitt similarly refers to his great-great grandfather: “I always use Charles Edenshaw as an example of using different mediums. Argillite wasn’t used a lot, but then it became a desired trade item and there became hundreds of argillite carvers. Or even bracelets became more pronounced. So, I think it’s ok.” Corey Bulpitt, interview with the author, April 6, 2017.

## 4.4 GOING GLOCAL

I do not believe that it is coincidental that the revival of formline and the emergence of Hip-Hop culture (of which graffiti is a central element), occurred roughly contemporaneously. In their emergent modes, modern formline and early Hip-Hop culture were both vernacular modernisms. In contrast to Indigenous art, whose nature as a response to changing global circumstances has only recently come into focus, the global spread of Hip-Hop has been the subject of a large, albeit uneven critical discourse. As the global reach of Hip-Hop has extended well beyond the reach of the New York boroughs where it was spawned, it has become defined by a series of stylistic rather than cultural markers. For most commentators these consist of five key expressive elements—DJ-ing, breakdancing, rapping, beatboxing and graffiti—which work together to create a unified cultural practice.<sup>434</sup> Tony Mitchell notes, much of the discourse around Hip-Hop has consisted of “uncritical posturings [and] enthusiastic embraces of rap and Hip-Hop as forms of urban, postmodern vernacular expression—almost to the extent that writing about Hip-Hop has become synonymous with academic hipness.”<sup>435</sup> These have tended to be written by admirers of the genre, who have uncritically embraced its claims to political activism. This is particularly acute in discussions of indigenous Hip-Hop, which have tended to replay colonial tropes in which Indigeneity is cast into an immobile subject position in opposition to the dominant regime. Carrie Sheffield offers one such assessment, praising Hip-Hop as “a vehicle through which the indigenous voice can be heard. It [Hip-Hop] becomes an act of political resistance allowing

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<sup>434</sup> As George Stavrias notes, the precise number of key elements does vary between commentators, with some limiting the essential elements to only three: rapping, breakdancing and graffiti. “The prevalence of each of these individual elements can also vary depending on the local context. Notably, from an anthropological level these definitions ignore speech patterns and dress, although with further research I feel that a strong case could be made for unified patterns across both fields.” George Stavrias, “Droppin’ Conscious Beats and Flows: Aboriginal Hip Hop and Youth Identity,” *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 2 (2005): 45-46.

<sup>435</sup> Tony Mitchell, “Australian Hip Hop as “Glocal” Subculture,” in *Ultimo Series Seminar* (University of Technology, Sydney 1998).

indigenous issues to become public in ways they never could before.”<sup>436</sup> In their least sophisticated guise, such critical positions veer towards essentialisms, suggesting that Hip-Hop taps into a pre-formed essence of “black transnationalism.” In its slightly more sophisticated forms, this argument stresses hip-hop’s ability to adapt to pre-existing local forms. The Aboriginal Australian rapper Local Knowledge argues that Hip-Hop taps into pre-colonial forms of communication:

In our communities, storytelling, music, dance, creative arts are the only form of communication, it’s the way we’ve passed on our knowledge, and that’s one of the big reasons hip hop is huge in Aboriginal communities. There isn’t one Aboriginal kid who doesn’t like hip hop because it’s that oral communication that we’ve been used to for over thousands and thousands of years.<sup>437</sup>

Despite the confidence of this assertion, the reality is that in contemporary society, pop culture provides a central locus of identification for youth. A more convincing argument might be made that it is not that traditional knowledge that brings indigenous youth to Hip-Hop, but Hip-Hop which brings them to value their indigenous heritage. This certainly accords with Bulpitt’s experience, who notes, “Once I found my Haida culture, I really understood why I was [so] connected to hip hop.”<sup>438</sup> Bulpitt speaks earnestly of using graffiti to draw young people’s attention to the contemporary relevance of indigenous designs. George Morgan and Andrew Warren argue that Hip-Hop mentors like Bulpitt are engaged in the constitutive practices of “identity work” by foregrounding indigenous identification and thereby reproducing communal solidarities and particular orientations towards post-colonial politics.<sup>439</sup> While Morgan and Warren conclude that participation in Hip-Hop foregrounds Aboriginality as both the principle

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<sup>436</sup> Carrie Louise Sheffield, “Native American Hip-Hop and Historical Trauma,” *American Indian Literatures* 23, no. 3 (2011): 99.

<sup>437</sup> Local Knowledge, quoted in Tony Mitchell, “Blackfellas Rapping, Breaking and Writing: A Short History of Aboriginal Hip Hop,” *Aboriginal History* 30 (2006): 131.

<sup>438</sup> Corey Bulpitt, quoted in Shemesh.

<sup>439</sup> George Morgan and Andrew Warren, “Aboriginal Youth, Hip Hop and the Politics of Identification,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 6 (2011): 929.

plank of identity while offering an account of social marginalization, they do not see this as “the expression of an essential or intrinsic Aboriginality.”<sup>440</sup> Rather, Hip-Hop paradoxically acts as an imported pedagogical and expressive framework that encourages the expression of localism.

George Stavrias argues that “glocalisation” (a state of being simultaneously global and local) is written into Hip-Hop through its internal logic of *sampling*, *representin* and *flow*. These three characteristics, which he argues are common across all of Hip-Hop’s manifestation, make it highly adaptable and give a transnational form to its local roots and flavors.<sup>441</sup> Following a similar logic, Ian Maxwell suggests that Hip-Hop is a series of artistic practices that operate to mimetically represent its own cultural essence:

In their own terms, to *rap*, to *write* (graffiti), to *break* (dance) is ‘to represent’ this ‘community.’ Effective ‘representing’ is said to be ‘true to the ideals of the Hip Hop culture.’ [...] The logic of representation here imputes a thing that exists, necessarily preceding the representation: a different culture. [...] Therefore, the key practices of the Hip Hop scene are productive of, rather than derivative of, a sense of culture [...] these practices, which are claimed to ‘represent’ a cultural essence, actually produce the possibility of this essence. In other words, the idea of the Hip Hop community is sustained less by an explicit ‘ideology’ than by the *idea* of a sustaining ideology, which is worked through in the careful labour of producing and evaluating the key artistic practices.<sup>442</sup>

This helps explain why Hip-Hop can, and is, so routinely and successfully “indigenized.” As an already hybrid form, premised on the construction of group affiliation and identification, Hip-Hop becomes a platform for instrumentalizing the process of *traditionalization*. If this has the potential to deterritorialize the colonized cultural landscape, it also explains how it is regularly reabsorbed (reterritorialized) into the realm of essentialized ethnic or masculinist

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 929.

<sup>441</sup> Stavrias, 46-7.

<sup>442</sup> Ian Maxwell, “Hip Hop Aesthetics and the Will to Culture,” *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 8, no. 1 (1997): 53-64.



paradigms of identity construction.<sup>443</sup> This has significant implications for our understanding of Bulpitt's mural practice. According to *Beat Nation* curator Tania Willard, Bulpitt's practice should be understood as a form of territorial marking: "Branding the cityscape with spray-bombed indigenous culture resonates with the idea of territory and reclaiming space in a city whose indigenous roots are often hidden or disguised in a province of unceded [*sic*] indigenous territories."<sup>444</sup> This is certainly a seductive claim, but it falls short of capturing the cross-cultural complexity of Bulpitt's practice. Firstly, the Granville street murals are not "outlaw" graffiti works: they are clearly legitimized council projects which prominently thank the city in the "tags." This outlaw element is further reduced when the murals are included in the rarified museum setting, as in the *Beat Nation* exhibition. Moreover, as Maxwell notes, the aim of tagging not necessarily to mark out territory, but to be seen as often and as far afield as possible: hence the initial attraction of spray painting trains.<sup>445</sup>

Such readings focus too heavily on the form (graffiti), without taking into account how it is transformed through the process of indigenization. To this end, it is worth returning to the most obvious Haida antecedent to Bulpitt and Healey's murals: the monumental house paintings of the Northwest Coast tradition. Edward Malin argues that house paintings represent the root of the entire formline tradition. Importantly, whether painted on interior or exterior panels, they were intended to project familial identity *within* tribes (inside the extended familial "house" system). House panels were rarely traded and existed largely in the private realm.<sup>446</sup> At the same time, they were important tools of self-representation, what Malin calls "rallying points for community sentiment, identity and

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<sup>443</sup> See for instance, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange*, Second ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 63.

<sup>444</sup> Tania Willard, "Beat Nation Curatorial Statement." *Beat Nation*. <http://www.beatnation.org/curatorial-statements.html> Accessed December 2, 2014.

<sup>445</sup> Maxwell, 56.

<sup>446</sup> Edward Malin, *Northwest Coast Indian Painting: House Fronts and Interior Screens* (Portland, OR: Timber Press, 1999), 31-48.

self-worth.”<sup>447</sup> Such designs, which often related directly to family totems and insignia, were forcefully variable and vigorously inventive. Elements of skill and creativity combined to project pride and honor, in much the same ways in which *props* and *respect* are the goals of skilled Hip-Hop practitioners.<sup>448</sup> At the same time, house paintings were connectors to ancestral lineage, uniting the past with the present. Malin concludes that such imagery, “pervaded the lives and consciousness of the people, and was at the heart of their metaphysical value system.”<sup>449</sup>

The effect of moving these images of self-identification from the semi-private realm into the public domain of the mural is pointed—particularly when they are relocated to such a symbolically loaded location as “under the bridge.” Traditionally the home of the *homeless*, under the bridge is a marginal space associated with the outcast: those both *in* and *out* of place. This correlates to the indigenous body, which as Bonar Buffam argues, is both temporally and spatially immobilized by colonial imposition. On the one hand, colonialism rigidly circumscribed the spaces in which indigenous bodies were legally allocated (via the reservation), while on the other, primitivism cast indigenous people “out of time.”<sup>450</sup>

## 4.5 RETERRITORIALIZING NON-SPACES

In her influential 1990 essay, “An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall and Television,” Margaret Morse argued that freeways were the locus of an attenuated “fiction

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<sup>447</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>448</sup> To this end, it is worth noting the support and encouragement given to Bulpitt by senior members of the Haida community such as Chief 7IDANsuu Jim Hart. As Skeena Reece notes, Bulpitt and his crew are “revered and shown respect for the language they are creating and the cultural signifiers that contribute to the enrichment and meaning that they build on our cultural landscapes.” Skeena Reece, “Curatorial Statement: Purple Turtle Speaks and Breaks,” *Beat Nation*. <http://www.beatnation.org/curatorial-statements.html>, accessed December 2, 2014.

<sup>449</sup> Malin, 40.

<sup>450</sup> Bonar Buffam, “Can’t Hold Us Back! Hip-Hop and the Racial Motility of Aboriginal Bodies in Urban Spaces,” *Social Identities* 17, no. 2 (2011).

effect,” a partial loss of touch with the here and now that she dubbed “distraction.” For Morse, this condition of distraction was symptomatic of the growing dominance of a “differently constituted kind of space, a *non-space* of both experience and representation, an *elsewhere* which inhabits the everyday.”<sup>451</sup> If, following Willard, we consider Bulpitt and Healey’s murals to be a form of “territorial marking,” we might then concede that they are re-territorializing a *non-space*: the effect of which is not so much to inhabit an occupied territory, but to reveal the *incompleteness* of this occupation. Two years later, Marc Augé addressed a similar concern, citing the proliferation of what he termed *non-places*. For Augé:

If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity will be non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places, and which [...] do not integrate the earlier places: instead, these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of ‘places of memory.’<sup>452</sup>

What I would like to suggest, is that there is a complex doubling at play in Bulpitt’s occupation of this non-place. On the one hand, the appearance of indigenous subjecthood clearly conforms to Rancière’s definition of the political: “transforming the space of ‘moving along’, of circulation, into a space for the appearance of a subject.”<sup>453</sup> At the same time, it would be entirely disingenuous to say that the indigenous subject is absent from the area around the Granville Bridge. Granville Island is one of Vancouver’s most popular tourist centers: its many markets contain a veritable superabundance of formline artworks, postcards,

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<sup>451</sup> Margaret Morse, "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall, and Television," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 195.

<sup>452</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe, Second ed. (London: Verso, 2008), 63.

<sup>453</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 37.

t-shirts, and other tourist items. It is in this context that the *urbanity* of Bulpitt and Healey's murals becomes most apparent. Natalie Baloy has noted the paradoxical position of indigenous presence in Vancouver. "Indigeneity in Vancouver is simultaneously pushed to the margins and front and center, hidden from view and in plain sight. Spectacle and spectrality operate as the primary regimes of (in)visibility in settler coloniality."<sup>454</sup> Baloy cites the prominent sculptures of artists such as Bill Reid and Susan Point as examples of spectacle, creating a social relationship with viewers who are able to view the spectacle as distinct from everyday life.<sup>455</sup> Remillard is similarly critical of Reid's public sculptures and the "sanitized version of intercultural communication" that allows them to fit safely within the public discourse of Canadian multiculturalism.<sup>456</sup>

Bulpitt's murals are a decidedly different beast. Their ragged edges, and clear association with Hip-Hop culture distinguish them from other forms of sanctioned indigenous representation. They are neither tourist art, nor high-art: occupying a position that appears to elide the intersubjective and transcultural demands of either. Rather than occupying the over-saturated, rigidly inter-subjective and dialectical subject position of the "primitive," by inserting themselves into the vacuum of the non-place (the "space which cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity") Bulpitt avoids having his identity circumscribed in opposition to the dominant colonial regime.

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<sup>454</sup> Natilie J.K. Baloy, "Spectacles and Spectres: Settler Colonial Space in Vancouver," *Settler Colonial Studies* 6, no. 3 (2016): 210.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 211-12.

<sup>456</sup> Remillard, 170.

## 4.6 POSTSCRIPT: THE EAGLE LANDED

Beneath the Granville Bridge *Raven* mural are written the words "... and the raven brought the light into the world." The line refers to the Haida legend, of how the ancestral raven stole light from an old man who kept it locked in a box in his house. It is an epic tale of transformation and trickery. In returning to these transformative moments of creation time—when Ravens turned into girls, or men became sea wolves and shaped the physical world, Bulpitt opens the present to the space of creative possibilities. As Janet Berlo and Ruth Phillips note, "It sets before us two key aspects of Northwest Coast worldview and art: a strong sense of the paradoxical nature of the human condition, and an acute awareness of the possibilities for transformation within the mundane."<sup>457</sup> Hip-Hop here becomes the transformative space in which indigeneity can be played out as a platform for group identification in an active process of *traditionalization*. According to Derrida, this is the essence of heritage: a "double injunction" that both allows and constrains agency.

It is necessary first of all to know and to know how to reaffirm what comes 'before us,' which we therefore receive even before choosing, and to behave in this respect as a free subject. [...] What does it mean to reaffirm? It means not simply accepting this heritage but relaunching it otherwise and keeping it alive. Not choosing it (since what characterizes a heritage is first of all that one does not choose it; it is what violently elects us), but choosing to keep it alive.<sup>458</sup>

Such a version of indigeneity is necessarily future oriented: drawing from the past to build a shared future. Bulpitt relocates cultural continuity into the space of Hip-Hop, inserting

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<sup>457</sup> Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, Second ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 205.

<sup>458</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Choosing One's Heritage," in *For What Tomorrow: A Dialogue*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Elizabeth Roudinesco (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 3.

indigeneity into the urban realm, while simultaneously inserting urbanity into the grammar of indigenous identification.

In the Summer of 2013, Bulpitt constructed an “urban” totem pole by perching a carving of an eagle to the top of a salvaged telephone pole. Taking to the streets, he placed the pole in various locations around East Vancouver. A depressed urban neighborhood, home to many First Nations peoples, the pole was a weather-beaten testament to persistence. To his surprise, residents responded immediately: “There were people weeping, telling me it was a life changing thing,” says Bulpitt. “You know, just to remember where they came from sitting there in that bleak environment. They see the eagle and they say ‘oh yeah, we come from this.’”<sup>459</sup> Residents began attaching messages to the pole: affirmations of identity, recollections of the trauma of residential schooling, statements of love, loss and connection. One person wrote simply, “As is the eagle, so are we.” I saw *The Eagle Landed* 2013 in the Bill Reid Gallery in 2013. It was still festooned with messages and buttons, but it looked out of place in the museum. It belonged on the streets. In the urban setting of East Vancouver, the pole had communicated something essential: as connective as the telephone lines it had once held. Here, it was silent: a brooding presence, like a caged animal, testament to life beyond the realms of the museum, beyond the mundane realities of the modern world. *As is the eagle, so are we.*

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<sup>459</sup> Corey Bulpitt, quoted in John Thomson, “Beat Nation Artist Takes It to the Street,” *DZine Trip* (2013), <http://dzinetrip.com/beat-nation-artist-takes-it-to-the-streets/>.

## 5.0 NONGGIRRNGA MARAWILI: AN ORDINARY FIRE

This Yirritja painting I'm doing is coming from the heart and mind, but it's not sacred Maḍarrpa painting. It's just an ordinary fire, not the Maḍarrpa fire. Tongues of fire. Fire burning backwards ... This is just my thinking. No one told me to do this pattern. I did this on my own. When the elders see it they will let me know what they think<sup>460</sup>

NONGGIRRNGA MARAWILI

### 5.1 A PAINTING IS BORN

*Tuesday, May 19, 2015:* It was hot as hell. It was only May—*Dhaarratharramirri*: the start of the Dry Season—but the preceding Wet had been a poor one. The local Yolngu had already started the process of burning off, so the air was thick with smoke and the scent of eucalyptus. At 830am Nonggirnga Marawili arrived at the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka art center. Located in the remote Aboriginal community of Yirrkala in Northeastern Arnhem Land, Buku-Larrnggay is one of the most successful Aboriginal-owned art centers in Australia. Although one of the older artists working at the center, Nonggirnga had only recently emerged as a prominent figure on the center's roster of established artists. In 2015 her star was definitely on the rise: successful solo exhibitions at Alcaston Gallery in Melbourne in 2013 and 2014, as well as commanding showings at the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards in the same

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<sup>460</sup> Nonggirnga Marawili, quoted in "Yirrkala Drawings: Nonggirnga Marawili," Art Gallery of New South Wales, published December 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h88w1dyVIPE>

years meant that Nonggirnga was quickly becoming recognized by both institutions and collectors as a figure of singular importance.<sup>461</sup> But this warm Tuesday morning was just another workday.



**Figure 5.1.** Nonggirnga Marawili priming the surface of the bark painting Baratjula [4776S] 2015. May 19, 2015. In the background can be seen the larrakitj [4767G] which she completed while the surface of her bark was drying. Photograph by Henry Skerrett.

Nonggirnga had been expecting me, and she greeted me warmly. After enthusiastically flipping through some photographs of my son and pregnant wife, it was down to work. The art center was beginning to hum with activity as the senior artist settled into her workspace.

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<sup>461</sup> Writing in the *Australian* newspaper, journalist Nicolas Rothwell had already declared, “Hers is not the story of a new talent, but of a missing master, of the monumental bark-painting tradition suddenly revived.” Nicolas Rothwell, “Patient Master Rises in Bark,” *The Australian*, April 4 2013. In August 2015, Nonggirnga would be awarded the barking prize in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, as well as being invited to participate in the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. See Clotilde Bullen and Carly Lane, eds., *Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2015* (Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 2015); Will Stubbs, *Nonggirnga Marawili: And I Am Still Here* (Melbourne: Alcaston Gallery, 2013).



Nonggirnga worked in the sheltered courtyard of the art center, alongside a small number of older women, including Nyapanyapa Yunupingu and Mulkan Wirrpanda. Within moments, Nonggirnga was attended by D.J. Marika, a young arts-worker, who offered her a piece of pre-cut eucalyptus bark. Inspecting it closely, Nonggirnga directed for a cracked portion to be cut off, to which D.J. wordlessly obliged with the use of a commercial box-cutter. The off-cut was tossed casually aside in the courtyard. Pointing at me, Nonggirnga instructed me to sand the bark down, which I dutifully did, until the surface was deemed workably smooth.<sup>462</sup>

With the sanded bark before her, Nonggirnga proceeded to cover the entire surface with an undercoat of polyvinyl acetate (PVA) or wood glue. While she was doing this, the arts-coordinator Kade McDonald came out to ask what priming color she would like. D.J. returned to crush Nonggirnga a medium-sized tub of white pigment, which she mixed with PVA before priming the surface of the bark.<sup>463</sup> This priming was done relatively quickly, in just a few broad strokes so that the passage of the brush could still be seen on the surface. The task complete, the bark was set aside to dry while Nonggirnga returned to painting a *larrakitj* (or memorial pole) that she had started earlier.

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<sup>462</sup> I was later told that this was “cheeky”: while older artists like Nonggirnga are provided with pre-cut bark, they are encouraged to prepare their own surfaces, giving the work of older artists a “rouger” character. A few days later, I saw Nonggirnga had found another rube: a wealthy collector from Melbourne, dressed crisply in Polo Ralph Lauren casuals, was down on his knees sanding away!

<sup>463</sup> For an analysis of the pigments used by artists at Yirrkala, see Narayan Khandekar, Georgina Rayner, and Daniel P. Kirby, “Pigments and Binders in Traditional Aboriginal Bark Paintings,” in *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, ed. Stephen Gilchrist (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Art Museums, 2016).



**Figure 5.2.** Nonggirnga Marawili painting *Baratjula* [4776S] 2015. May 19, 2015. In the foreground can be seen the “off-cut” trimmed from the original sheet of bark. Photograph by Henry Skerrett.

In my journal, I mused on whether this gave her time to consider the composition; to ponder her first mark. Once the ground layer was dry, Nonggirnga sanded the surface again, before setting the bark aside to dry some more. Once the surface was dry, Nonggirnga started painting without hesitation, drawing a large, irregular black square about two-thirds of the way up the bark. Using a broad-brush, she methodically filled the square, before using a smaller brush to outline the edge, smoothing it out.<sup>464</sup> Once completed, she pointed to the square and exclaimed: “Baratjula”—a name that would come to have much more significance to me over the next few days.

<sup>464</sup> This process has some parallels to the ways in which traditional clan-designs are painted. See Andrew Blake, "Of Hollowness and Substance," in *Larrakitj: Kerry Stokes Collection*, ed. Anne Marie Brody (West Perth: Australian Capital Equity, 2011), 57.



**Figure 5.3.** Nonggirnga Marawili painting *Baratjula* [4776S] 2015. May 19, 2015. Photographs by Henry Skerritt.

Again, the bark was set aside to dry. By now, the day was warming up, and Nonggirnga took the opportunity to have a little lie-down in the courtyard, resting through the midday heat. After three-quarters of an hour or so, she resumed her work, hitting the bark with a cloth to remove excess dust. Next she ground a mustard-colored stone on a wet cinder-block, mixing the loosened pigment with PVA. Taking a brush made of human hair, known in Yolngu-matha as a *marwat*, she began to carefully paint a series of grouped, parallel lines running from the edge of the bark towards the black square. Where the lines met the square, she meticulously applied trails of white dots. As she worked, Nonggirnga rotated the bark, allowing herself to approach the square from different angled. Each time, she would pause, viewing the work in contemplative

silence, before recommencing the delicate task of filling out the canvas. Around 330pm Nonggirnga stopped for the day.



**Figure 5.4.** Nonggirnga Marawili recommencing work on *Baratjula* [4776S] 2015. May 20, 2015. Photograph by Henry Skerritt.

The next day—Wednesday May 20—Nonggirnga returned. After a few moments spent pondering over her previous day’s work, she selected a black stone and began to grind it on the cinder block. Again, she carefully painted grouped series of intersecting parallel lines edging towards the black square. After a while, Nonggirnga deliberately took the mustard stone and ground it into the same area on the cinder block that she had just used to prepare her black pigment. This gave the lines in the lower left quadrant of the bark a slightly lighter hue—but as she moves around the bark, she returns to the black stone, darkening the mixture.



What I remember most clearly is watching Nonggirnga finish. After carefully painting two straight lines—one on the top of the bark, the other on the base—she pushes it away with a flourish. “Done!” she announced with a satisfied nonchalance.



**Figure 5.5.** (Left) Nonggirnga Marawili, “Done!” May 20, 2015. Photograph by Henry Skerritt.

**Figure 5.6.** (Right) Nonggirnga Marawili, Baratjula [4776S] 2015. Photograph by Henry Skerritt. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.

Like every good painting, *Baratjula [4776S]* is something of a mystery.<sup>465</sup> My aim in describing its creation is to give some insight into just one of the contexts in which such a

<sup>465</sup> The titling of Nonggirnga’s paintings is generally done after their completion, usually at the moment when they are purchased and catalogued by the art center. This is usually a fairly perfunctory practice. As Paul Carter notes, the process of “titling” paintings adapts Aboriginal artworks to marketplace conventions of Western art, creating a powerful tool for classification. In the case of Nonggirnga’s paintings, these titles have a certain slipperiness, and in some instances paintings changed titles, or been exhibited under alternate titles. Considering this, and the fact that many of her paintings share the same title, I have endeavored where possible to include the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka catalogue number along with title for each work. See Paul Carter, *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 128-9.

work comes to exist. As a “historical” discipline, art historians are usually more accustomed to considering completed works—once they have already entered into “historical” time—rather than watching art history as it comes into being. Not that this makes Nonggirnga’s painting any less mysterious. Will Stubbs, director of the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, has recently argued, “The art which Nonggirnga makes is not time dependent. It is not a reaction to a fashion or a moment. It is as it would have been in millennia past. Independent of the Western narrative of progress.”<sup>466</sup> There is certainly an elemental energy to Nonggirnga’s work, with its constant invocations of fire, lighting and rock. And, as I will show, her work has not followed a strictly teleological narrative. But is it correct to say it is “not time dependent?” In contrast, speaking on the work of Nyapanyapa Yunupingu, who works alongside Nonggirnga at Buku-Larrnggay, the art historian Ian McLean has asked, “Is this a sign of the final secularization and modernization of Indigenous art?”<sup>467</sup> And yet, neither a timelessness, nor “final modernization” seem entirely apt descriptors of Marawili’s work. Watching *Baratjula* [4776S] emerge from nothingness, I was struck by a different kind of “timeliness” than that described by either Stubbs or McLean. As much as this painting could ever make “sense” to me—an outsider to Yolngu culture—I could make a certain sense out of this painting that was decidedly *time dependent*. This was not because the work signaled a “modernization,” but because it was a painting built on careful allusions to both the long history of Yolngu art making, and also to Nonggirnga’s most recent oeuvre. From this recent oeuvre had emerged a lexicon of forms—a visual shorthand so to speak—from which the artist could play out her

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<sup>466</sup> Will Stubbs, 2017, quoted on Alcaston Gallery website. [<http://alcastongallery.com.au/melbourne-gallery/upcoming/1630-nonggirnga-marawili-progression-2017?gallery=gallery>]. Accessed, March 30, 2017.

<sup>467</sup> McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art*, 206.

own relation to Yolngu artistic traditions. If artists make history, is it not also conceivable that they make *time*?<sup>468</sup>

## 5.2 A SEA-CHANGE: TESTING THE COURSE OF TIME

In the preceding chapters I have examined the work of three male indigenous artists born after 1960. Despite hailing from different geographic locations and cultural backgrounds, I have argued that all three artists share a common concern in critiquing the project of historicism. In the works of Gabriel Maralngurra, George Nuku and Corey Bulpitt, I have tried to show not only how alternative historical practices are played out in indigenous contemporary art, but also how these artists consciously deploy what Peter Aronsson calls the “tenacious” and “productive dilemmas of history” in order to picture intersecting historical perspectives as sites of constructive tension.<sup>469</sup> As Terry Smith argues, the entangled networks of the contemporary condition have brought competing ways of understanding time and space into unprecedented contact and conflict: “Multiple temporalities are the rule these days, and their conceptions of deep historical development move in multifarious directions.”<sup>470</sup> As a rule then, it should not be surprising that these three artists embody the tenor of their time, coming to age after the social and artistic upheavals of the 1960s and 70s, as well as the global rise of postcolonialism and decolonization movements.<sup>471</sup> Working both within and across stylistic, temporal and epistemological borders, I have argued that work of Marlangurra, Nuku and Bulpitt strives to

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<sup>468</sup> I am conscious of contemporary theorizing on the nature of “art time,” most notably in the work of Keith Moxey. As I argued in Chapter Three, however, my interest is less in arts necessary anachronism, than its ability to picture multiple, coeval temporalities. See Moxey.

<sup>469</sup> Peter Aronsson, “The Productive Dilemmas of History,” in *Rethinking Time*, ed. Hans Ruin and Andrus Ers (Huddinge: Sodertorn, 2011).

<sup>470</sup> Smith, “Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question,” 5. See also *What Is Contemporary Art; Contemporary Art: World Currents*.

<sup>471</sup> See for instance Sissons, *First Peoples: Indigenous Cultures and Their Futures*.

picture a coequality of differences: a relational alterity that occurs in the moment that the subject experiences the boundaries of its own self.

In this chapter, I would like to change tack slightly and examine the work of an older Yolngu woman: Nonggirnga Marawili. Born around 1939 on the beach at Darrpirra, north of Djarrakpi (Cape Shield) in remote Northeastern Arnhem Land, Nonggirnga was born in the formative years of contact between the Yolngu and European colonists. Although there had been sporadic encounters with the invaders since at least 1874, it was not until the 1930s that this contact gained pace in Central and Eastern Arnhem Land with the founding of missions at Groote Eylandt (1921), Milingimbi (1926) and Yirrkala (1935). These mission settlements created the locus of new, more sedentary communities, altering the traditional nomadic lifestyles of the Yolngu.<sup>472</sup> Writing in 1954, the anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt describe the 1930s and 40s as a moment of profound transition when the contact with Europeans that had commenced in the nineteenth century was intensified with devastating effect.<sup>473</sup> Nonggirnga's childhood witnessed this rapid superimposition of settler modernity on to the traditional lifestyle of her people. And yet, while the Berndts were quick to diagnose the "collapse" of traditional Yolngu codes of culture and contact in the face of European colonialism, Yolngu culture has proved remarkably resilient. Nonggirnga's paintings are exemplars of a contemporary renaissance born out of the continuing defiance of Yolngu artists against colonial subjugation.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> As Howard Morphy notes, "Prior to the establishment of mission stations, Yolngu clans were dispersed widely throughout Northeast Arnhem Land." Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 40.

<sup>473</sup> Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt, *Arnhem Land, Its History and Its People* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1954), 195.

<sup>474</sup> See for instance Galarrwuy Yunupingu, "The Black/White Conflict," in *Windows on the Dreaming*, ed. Wally Caruana (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1989); Djon Mundine, "Saltwater," in *Saltwater: Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country*, ed. Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre (Yirrkala: Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre in association with Jennifer Isaacs Publishing, 1999); Djambawa Marawili, "The Land and the Sea Can't Talk, We Have to Talk for Them," *Artlink* 36, no. 2 (2016); Will Stubbs, "A Short History of Yolngu Activist Art," *ibid.*



In turning to examine the work of Nonggirnga Marawili, my aim is to test whether a similar process of historical critique might be found in such an assertively different cultural context. More often than not, the work of remote artists like Nonggirnga is characterized by what Ian McLean has described as the “perceived cultural fundamentalism of indigenism, which seems at odds with the transcultural tenor of our times and modernity more generally.”<sup>475</sup> To some extent, this reflects the ways in which many remote Aboriginal artists speak about their work, which tends to prioritize the continuity of traditional law and culture as opposed to what are seen as “surface” artistic changes.<sup>476</sup> If there has been a tendency among both the critics and champions of Aboriginal art to elide the complexity of this relationship between immutability and innovation, my argument is that this necessitates an even more nuanced consideration of the ways in which artists like Nonggirnga picture their own unique and reflexive ways of thinking about the past. This claim can be read in both a “hard” and “soft” sense. In the “soft” sense, we might consider Nonggirnga’s work as illustrating the type of “historical understanding” identified by conceptual artist Ian Burn as being a precondition of artistic practice.<sup>477</sup> No art is produced in a vacuum; artists necessarily plunder from the past, recasting it for their own

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<sup>475</sup> Ian McLean, ed. *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 2.

<sup>476</sup> See for instance, Djambawa Marawili’s assertion “Some people are saying that now the culture is different. The law and the country are different. Or the sea is different. But in those areas along the coast of Arnhem Land and the Northern Territory the patterns are there, and the stories and songs are there, where they were laid by the ancestral beings.” Marawili, 28. Howard and Frances Morphy similarly note, “Yolngu acknowledge that change happens on the surface—indeed as we have suggested, they often embrace it imaginatively and productively. But they view the principles and laws laid down by the creator ancestral beings as an eternal template that underpins their stewardship of their country” Howard Morphy and Frances Morphy, “The Blue Mud Bay Case: Refractions through Saltwater Country,” *Dialogue: The Journal of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia* 28, no. 1 (2009): 18-19. See also Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 292-3. Nor is this “ideology of continuity” restricted to the Yolngu, as scholars working nationally have argued, most notably Eric Michaels, *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media, and Technological Horizons* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 145-6; Fred Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place, and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines* (Washington, DC.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986), 240-3; “Emplacement and Displacement: Perceiving the Landscape through Aboriginal Australian Acrylic Painting,” 441.

<sup>477</sup> Ian Burn, “Is Art History Any Use to Artists? [1985],” in *Dialogue: Writings in Art History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991).

specific purposes. Historical sensibility, concludes Burn, is a bridge between the individual and the world: a “tacit acknowledgment of community [and] the collective dimension of individual practice.”<sup>478</sup> Indeed, as Morphy notes, “The Yolngu artistic system ... exists in a state of creative tension. Yolngu art mediates between the ideology of immutable forms and order originating in the ancestral past, and the reality of sociocultural change and political process.”<sup>479</sup>

In Chapter Three, I described the role of *taonga* in Māori culture as mediating between the social and phenomenal worlds. There, as elsewhere, I argued that this mediating function is one of the essential features of art.<sup>480</sup> In turning to the “hard” sense of historical reflexivity, I would like to bridge this notion of art’s mediating function with the questions of art historical reflexivity raised in our discussions of the work of Maralngurra and Bulpitt. The task here is to draw explicit attention to the connection between art and temporality in mediating our perception and understanding of the world. As Hans Ruin has argued, identifying the central role of time in relation to being was one of the most important insights of the work of Martin Heidegger. In the Western tradition since Heidegger, the basic experience of the temporal has been understood in terms of an *ek-stasis*: “a dislocation and dispersion [that] leads us beyond an understanding of subjectivity as interiority, towards the phenomenon of an intersubjective bond between the living and the dead, and to the constitution of tradition as both active memory and social coercion.”<sup>481</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>479</sup> Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 300.

<sup>480</sup> See for instance Henry Skerritt, ed. *Marking the Infinite: Contemporary Women Artists from Aboriginal Australia* (Reno and Munich: Nevada Museum of Art and Prestel Publishing, 2016), 16.

<sup>481</sup> Hans Ruin, “Time as Ek-Stasis and the Trace of the Other,” in *Rethinking Time*, ed. Hans Ruin and Andrus Ers (Huddinge: Sodertorn, 2011), 52-3. For an analysis of the implications of this *ek-stasis* for contemporary art, see Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund, *The Contemporary Condition: Introductory Thoughts on Contemporaneity and Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

Time in this sense does not constitute an underlying stratum of existence, but rather, “time is what gives and enables being, out of which being comes to be.”<sup>482</sup>

The challenge ... lies in the attempt to think time as an “ek-static event”, something located neither in the subject nor in nature, but constituting instead a kind of crack, fissure, or even wound in the self-identical through which it transcends itself in the direction of otherness, exposing itself to the arrival of the new, as promise or as threat, and as the trace of another.<sup>483</sup>

Rather than seeing time in the cosmological sense of a universal order of things, we might then, begin to see time (in all its contemporary variants) as a mode by which different cultures give shape to their worlds—a socially motivated construction through which “all great civilizations have sought to adapt themselves culturally to observed regularities in nature.”<sup>484</sup>

The point of this chapter is not simply to argue that the paintings of Nonggirnga Marawili are complex meditations on the nature of time and being. Such a claim could productively be applied to most contemporary Yolngu artists.<sup>485</sup> If Nonggirnga is being used here as something of a “test” case, it is because of the exemplary ways in which her work

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<sup>482</sup> Ruin, 57. Ruin goes on to note, “Human existence does not exist *in* time. Rather, in and through its existence, it “temporalizes” [*zeitigt*].” Here he is drawing on Heidegger’s observation that “*Temporality is the primordial ‘outside-of-itself’ in and for itself*. We therefore call the phenomena of the future, the character of having been, and the Present, the “*ecstases*” of temporality. Temporality is not, prior to this, an entity which first emerges from *itself*; its essence is a process of temporalizing in the unity of the ecstases.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1962), 377.

<sup>483</sup> Ruin, 58.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 55. To this end, while scholars such as Tony Swain have argued strongly that traditional Aboriginal societies had no sense of time in the autonomous senses of modern chronology, even he would not deny that there are temporal frames to the place-based ontologies of Aboriginal peoples (frames that he casts in terms such as “rhythmed” or “abiding events.” The role of these temporal registers in Pintupi ontology is described by Fred Myers in terms that precisely link them to the shape of being: “The Pintupi understandings of the historical process are not totally static ... but the concept of The Dreaming organizes experience so that it *appears* to be continuous and permanent. For the Pintupi, the dynamic, processual aspect of history seems to exist as one of discovering, uncovering, or even reenacting elements of The Dreaming ... Time—in this sense as an abstracted dimension detached from subjectivity—is captive to the cultural constructions of continuity. A similar structure underlies the Pintupi ordering of space.” Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place, and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*, 52-54. See also Swain, esp. 1-36.

<sup>485</sup> Indeed, anyone who has ever met a Yolngu artist will be well aware of high degree of philosophical reflection that goes on around Yolngu art and culture more generally.

balances competing discourses both within Yolngu art history and the wider world in which it now exists.

To return to Ruin's formula, the question becomes one of mapping the particular relationship between "active memory" and "social coercion" in the construction of contemporary Yolngu art. In Yolngu culture, argues Morphy, "The paintings themselves provide a constraint, for they have considerable continuity over time and provide a continuing reference point for interpretations."<sup>486</sup> As paintings are considered to arise out of the events of the ancestral past, their recreation in the present becomes part of a "network of connectedness" through which ancestral meaning is linked to the present.<sup>487</sup> Nancy Williams has noted, "Yolngu, then, assume that a great deal of information exists in symbolic forms and at different levels of reality; they speak of meanings "multiplying."<sup>488</sup> However, as Craig Elliot rightly notes, meaningful cultural interpretations are never entirely open-ended, but cured and referenced by a range of social contexts.<sup>489</sup> Likewise for art, Morphy argues that the "grammar" of Yolngu art is not an abstract system of potentials, but is a system structured through its use in particular contexts.

Contemporary Yolngu art is produced for, and circulates in, multiple critical contexts, of which the contemporary art world is merely one.<sup>490</sup> In this chapter, I would like to consider how Nonggirnga's work both mediates and moderates these contexts. It is in this provisional space (creating new contexts out of old) that I believe Nonggirnga's paintings become not only historically reflexive, but can also be seen to wield this historicism to their own political

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<sup>486</sup> Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 242.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*, 189-90.

<sup>488</sup> Nancy Williams, *The Yolngu and Their Land* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 24.

<sup>489</sup> Craig Elliott, "Conceptual Dynamism and Ambiguity in Marrangu Djinang Cosmology, North-Central Arnhem Land," in *Strings of Connectedness: Essays in Honour of Ian Keen*, ed. P.G. Toner (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2015), 102.

<sup>490</sup> This point has been a common refrain in the work of Howard Morphy, see for instance, Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 202; , 44.

advantage (in both the local and transcultural realms). This is not to suggest that Nonggirnga's work is some kind of "hybrid" form—caught between the indigenous and the modern—but rather, that it pictures the coexistence of (often asymmetrical) temporalities that resist assimilation.<sup>491</sup> Precisely the brilliance of Nonggirnga's work is its ability to balance these competing discourses in order to produce works that speak both within and across worlds: to present the viewer, regardless of his or her cultural background, with the conundrum of glimpsing one world while occupying another.

### 5.3 NONGGIRRNGA MARAWILI IN HISTORY

North of the promontory Djarrakpi (renamed Cape Shield in 1803 by the navigator Matthew Flinders), facing outwards to the Gulf of Carpentaria is the beach of Darrpirra. It was here that Nonggirnga Marawili was born. A little further north is a small bay named Baratjula, immortalized in many of Nonggirnga's most recent works. Nonggirnga recalls a highly mobile childhood spent camping throughout the region, at Yilpara, Yithuwa, Gudaguda, Gurrumburra, Garrapara, as well as frequent trips in canoe to Groote Eylandt and Guwangarripa (Woodah Island). In 2013, the journalist Nicolas Rothwell recorded the surprise of Nonggirnga's daughter Marrnyula Mununggurr as her mother recounted the extent of her youthful travels.<sup>492</sup>

Nonggirnga's father was Mundukul (c.1890-1950), a renowned warrior of the Madarrpa clan, who had painted for Donald Thompson in the early 1940s.<sup>493</sup> Mundukul had numerous wives of the Marrakulu, Dhudi-Djapu and Gälpu clans: Nonggirnga's mother Balungguwuy was

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<sup>491</sup> Harry Harootunian, "Remembering the Historical Present," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007): 477.

<sup>492</sup> Rothwell.

<sup>493</sup> See Lindy Allen, *Ancestral Power and the Aesthetic: Arnhem Land Paintings and Objects from the Donald Thomson Collection* (Melbourne: Museum Victoria, 2010).

one of four Gälpu wives.<sup>494</sup> Mundukul died around 1950, and it was about this time that Nonggirnga moved to Yirrkala with a number of other women from the family. The Methodist Overseas Mission had established a station at Yirrkala in 1935, but Nonggirnga did not attend school at the mission. Instead, she was betrothed to Djutadjuta Mununggurr, one of the sons of the great Djapu statesman Wonggu (c.1880-1959).<sup>495</sup> Djutadjuta's birthdate is usually given as being around 1935, but it is possible that he was born slightly earlier as accounts indicate that he moved from Wandawuy to Yirrkala during the Second World War, where he helped build the military airstrip. Nonggirnga and Djutadjuta would have six children, three of whom were born at the newly built Yirrkala hospital: a building that now forms part of the art center where she works. As the homelands movement gained momentum in the 1970s, the family returned to Wandawuy, which was reestablished as a base for the Djapu people.

In the 1990s, Djutadjuta—and by extension Nonggirnga—would play an integral role in the revitalized art making tradition in Northeastern Arnhem Land. Since the 1930s, Yirrkala had been the epicenter of extraordinary innovation and development in Yolngu art.<sup>496</sup> From Wonggu

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<sup>494</sup> Stubbs, *Nonggirnga Marawili: And I Am Still Here*, 2.

<sup>495</sup> On Wonggu and his role in the inter-cultural relations in Northeastern Arnhem Land, see Ted Egan, *Justice All Their Own: The Caledon Bay and Woodah Island Killings 1932-33* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996); Donald Thomson, *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land* (Melbourne: Gordon & Gotch, 1983).

<sup>496</sup> During his tenure (1935-1939), the founding missionary Wilbur Chaseling encouraged Yolngu art and craft production, sending works to collections in Australia and Europe. Around the same time, the anthropologist Donald Thomson amassed an extraordinary trove of cultural material, including 69 major paintings on bark by Yolngu artists including both Wonggu and Mundukul. Although rarely seen until after Thomson's death in 1971, these works set a high benchmark for their elaboration of *mardayin miny'iji* (sacred clan designs). During the 1940s and 50s, further collections were assembled by anthropologists such as Charles Mountford and the Berndts, as well as collectors such as Karel Kupka. Alongside these collections, two other significant instances of localized art production at Yirrkala should also be mentioned. The first, was the production in 1962-3 of what have become known as the *Yirrkala Church Panels*; the second was the *Yirrkala Bark Petition* presented to the Australian parliament in 1963 to protest plans to build a bauxite mine on the nearby Gove Peninsula. plans to build a bauxite mine on the nearby Gove Peninsula. In their own ways, both the *Church Panels* and the *Bark Petition* represented attempts by the Yolngu to use art as a means of asserting their sovereignty and rights to ancestral lands. See Morphy, 32-3; *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 14-15. Luke Taylor, "Transformations of Bark Painting since the Nineteenth Century," in *Cambridge Companion to Australian Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 146. Chaseling also produced an amateur ethnography of the Yolngu, Wilbur Chaseling, *Yulengor: Nomads of Arnhem Land* (London: Epworth Press, 1957); Morphy, 33; Allen. Mountford; Stanton; Karel Kupka, *Dawn of Art* (New York:

and Mundukul, through artists such as Narritjin Maymuru (c.1922-81), Mithinari Gurruwiwi (c.1929-1976) and Wanjuduk Marika (c.1930-1987), the Yolngu artists of Yirrkala were some of the leading figures in Aboriginal Australian art in the decades prior to 1980. By the mid-1980s, however, this status had begun to wane, with much of the work becoming repetitive, produced largely to satisfy the tourist market.<sup>497</sup> (It should, however, be noted that culture remained strong, and paintings continued to be produced—so we should not think of this as a discontinuity—more an ember that needed to be fanned). The frustrations of artists and their supporters were no doubt accentuated as the rise of Western Desert acrylic paintings began to eclipse bark painting as the most supposedly “contemporary” mode of Aboriginal art.<sup>498</sup>

The arrival in 1993 of the ambitious young art-coordinator Andrew Blake marked a turning point in art production at Yirrkala. Buku-Larrnggay Mulka was founded in 1975 to fill the gap left by the closure of the church missionary store: an “act of self-determination in the post Mission era.”<sup>499</sup> As director, Blake oversaw two developments that would have significant impacts on artistic production at Yirrkala. The first was the establishment in 1995 of a dedicated print space at the art center.<sup>500</sup> The second, was revival of “big barks.”<sup>501</sup> While larger bark paintings had been produced with some frequency since the time of Donald Thomson—most

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Viking Press, 1965); Cara Pinchbeck, ed. *Yirrkala Drawings* (Sydney and Munich: Art Gallery of New South Wales and Prestel Publishing, 2014).

<sup>497</sup> Morphy writes of the frustrations of trying to sell Yolngu fine arts in the 1970s in Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 10-13.

<sup>498</sup> See for instance McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*.

<sup>499</sup> Annie Studd, Dindirrk Mununggurr, Mawang Gumana, Yululu Marika, quoted in Annie Studd, ed. *Balnhdurr—a Lasting Impression* (Yirrkala: Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, 2015), 10.

<sup>500</sup> Two decades later, the Yirrkala Print Space remains one of the few printing studios based in a remote Aboriginal community, and has produced over 800 editions by over 135 artists. See *ibid.*

<sup>501</sup> See Rothwell; Elina Spilia, "Shark People: Djapu Painting and the Miny'tji Buku Larrnggay Collection," *Art Bulletin of Victoria* 47 (2007); Margaret Smith Boles, "Introduction: The Kluge-Ruhe Collection of Australian Aboriginal Art," in *Art from the Land: Dialogues with the Kluge-Ruhe Collection of Australian Aboriginal Art* ed. Margaret Smith Boles and Howard Morphy (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, 1999), 10-14.

notably those commissioned by Tony Tuckson and Stuart Scougall in 1959—by the 1980s, without much of a market for large paintings, production gravitated towards small, cheap, easily transported “suit-case” barks, more attractive to the tourist market.<sup>502</sup>

The 1990s saw a revived interest in the art of Arnhem Land, spurred on by revitalized bark painting traditions across the region, particularly at Maningrida and Ramingining. Blake would undoubtedly have been aware of the major works being commissioned at Ramingining and Maningrida under the respective direction of art-coordinators Djon Mundine and Diane Moon.<sup>503</sup> Blake was determined to encourage the artists at Yirrkala to work on a grander scale, producing works to rival the monumental statements of their forebears; he found an eager collaborator in Djutadjuta. Following Yolngu protocol for bringing outsiders into kinship relations, Blake had been adopted into Djutadjuta’s family, sharing a father-son connection.<sup>504</sup> The pair began a transcultural partnership: the kind of “cultural brokering” that has come to characterize many of the great moments in Aboriginal Australian art history.<sup>505</sup> Cutting a monumental sheet of bark—nearly two and half meters tall—Blake encouraged Djutadjuta to tackle this epic canvas whole rather than cutting into smaller pieces.

Although Djutadjuta had painted sporadically since the 1970s, he had never attempted a work on such a grand scale. According to Elina Spilia, Djutadjuta found himself frustrated by the limits of his own abilities and marshalled his wife and daughters, Marrnyula and Rerrkirrwanga

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<sup>502</sup> See Ryan, 17; Taylor, *Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land*, 41.

<sup>503</sup> See for instance, Djon Mundine and Bernice Murphy, eds., *The Native Born: Objects and Representations from Ramingining, Arnhem Land* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996); Jon Altman, "Brokering Kuninjku Art: Artists Institutions and the Market," in *Crossing Country: The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art*, ed. Hetti Perkins (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004).

<sup>504</sup> See Spilia, 8.

<sup>505</sup> I borrow the term “culture broker” from Fred Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 147. For further analysis of the complexities of such cross-cultural relationships, see Quentin Sprague, "Collaborators: Third Party Transactions in Indigenous Contemporary Art," in *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art*, ed. Ian McLean (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).



Mununggurr to assist him.<sup>506</sup> The result was a heroic rendering of the classic Djapu story of *Mäna*, the ancestral shark.<sup>507</sup> Djutadjuta's painting inspired considerable interest in the community, leading to requests from a number of artists for "big barks." Commissions were immediately sought, first by the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), which acquired 25 major paintings produced in 1994, and then by the American collector John Kluge, whose 1996 commission generated 29 bark paintings and one *larrakitj* (memorial pole) now held in the collection of the University of Virginia.<sup>508</sup>

While assisting her husband on his works, Nonggirnga also began to paint in her own right. During the 1994 NGV commission, she produced her own "big bark"—*Banumbirr, Morning Star* 1994—an almost three-meter rendering of participants engaged in the Morning Star exchange ceremony.<sup>509</sup> Unlike Djutadjuta's paintings of the time—which Nonggirnga assisted on—*Banumbirr, Morning Star* does not include *miny'tji* (clan designs). Instead, Nonggirnga fills the background with a generic and undifferentiated cross-hatching. Although the painting deals with the *Banumbirr* ceremony, overall the style can be classified as *wakinngu* (decorative/mundane) or what are colloquially referred to as "hunting stories."<sup>510</sup> While the painting is pleasant, and its composition balanced, it lacks the gravity of Djutadjuta's austere renderings of the sacred Djapu clan designs.<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> Spilia, 10.

<sup>507</sup> Djutadjuta Mununggurr, *Mäna*, 1994. Earth pigments on bark 246.6 x 60.7 cm (irreg.) National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Alcoa of Australia Limited, Governor, 1994 (O.76-1994)

<sup>508</sup> Smith Boles, 10-14.

<sup>509</sup> Nonggirnga Marawili, *Banumbirr, Morning star* 1994. Earth pigments on bark, 278.4 x 84.0 cm National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. For three very similar visual renderings of this narrative, see Mäw Mununggurr, *Banumbirr (Morning Star ceremony)* 1948. Earth pigments on bark, 120.6 x 64.2 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Mäw Mununggurr, *Bänumbirr, the morning star*, 1976. Earth pigments on bark, 111.6 x 62.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; and Mathaman Marika, *Morning Star Ceremony* c.1960. Earth pigments on bark, 48.3 x 25.4 cm, Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

<sup>510</sup> See Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 197-209; , 50.

<sup>511</sup> It is worth noting, that in 1994, Djutadjuta and Nonggirnga's daughter Rerrkirrwanga also produced a "big bark" painting for the NGV commission in the Djapu clan designs of her father. See Rerrkirrwanga Mununggurr, *Mäna ga Nadiwuykuy* 1994. Earth pigments on bark, 237.2 x 100.8 cm. National Gallery of Victoria.

*Banumbirr*, *Morning Star* stands in stark contrast to Nonggirnga's next major work: *Djapu, Gälpu Ties* 1996 produced for the John Kluge commission.<sup>512</sup> Working photographs by Andrew Blake reveal that the work was completed as something of split composition, with Rerrkirrwanga working on the top section, Marrnyula completing the middle part, and Nonggirnga the lower panel.<sup>513</sup> While the three women worked independently on their individual sections—and their distinct hands can clearly be registered on the surface of the finished work—the painting has both a visual and conceptual coherency that suggests a considerable level of pre-planning.

As its title suggests, *Djapu, Gälpu Ties* is a painting about the connection between clans: in this case, the Djapu clan inherited by Rerrkirrwanga and Marrnyula from their father (and Nonggirnga's husband), and the Gälpu clan of their mother's mother (Nonggirnga's mother). The top and bottom sections of the painting reference Bol'ngu, the Thunderman, whose ancestral narrative is shared between the Djapu and Gälpu clans. The middle section references Djukurr, the liver of Mäna the ancestral shark. The icon of the shark's liver is a significant recurring motif in Yolngu painting, connoting the kinship relationship between mother and child. The liver represents the unborn young, symbolizing life across generations. This relationship—of *Yothu/Yindi*—is also a reminder of the connection between the two distinct moieties: children born of Dhuwa mothers will be Yirritja, and vice versa. Thus, the painting plays out two distinct series of connections: the first, connoted in the shark's liver, between the moieties of mother and child; and the second, between the Djapu and Gälpu clans, which exist in the relationship of *märi* (mother's mother) and *gutharra* (daughters' daughter) relationship. Nancy Williams notes, "Yolngu symbolize the *märi-gutharra*

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<sup>512</sup> Nonggirnga Marawili, *Djapu, Gälpu Ties* 1996. Earth pigments on bark, 308 x 122 cm. Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

<sup>513</sup> These photographs are now held in the archives of the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia.

relation as a matrilineal relationship that joins non-contiguous groups ... The *märi-gutharra* relationship is the backbone of Yolngu society, and Yolngu refer to it that way.”<sup>514</sup> While the distinct sections allow for the separation of the constituent parts, there is also a visual continuity that alludes to the interdependent network of Yolngu clan relations. Bol’ngu’s appearance at the top of the bark, and subsequent “eruption” at the base provides a neat visual allegory for ancestral beings’ ability to connect non-contiguous areas. The accompanying documentation for the work notes, “The bottom panel has Bol’ngu represented manifestly as a waterspout that marks the freshwater spring at Ngaypinga—Gälpu country ... There is a confusion in the field of cross hatching as compared to the Djapu designs above it. This was designed to create motion of agitation and swirl, that of a water spout that does not discriminate between fresh and salt water.”<sup>515</sup>

## 5.4 A TARTAN OVER COUNTRY

Before continuing, it is necessary to briefly discuss the significance of clan designs in Yolngu art. Clan designs are the unique geometric designs owned by clans and used in ceremonial context. These designs are said to originate in the ancestral past as a sign of the ancestral creativity in the land. Howard Morphy has evocatively described the effect as “cloaking” the country with a tartan of clan designs.<sup>516</sup> As early as the 1930s, Donald Thomson noted the value contained in the ownership of these designs: “all share the fundamental belief that the *mintji* [sic] are derived directly from the totemic ancestor, and that the designs used today are the *malli*, the

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<sup>514</sup> Williams, 38, see also 52-3.

<sup>515</sup> Buku-Larrnggay Mulka, explanatory documentation accompanying the painting, Nonggirnga Marawili, *Djapu, Gälpu Ties* 1996. Earth pigments on bark, 308 x 122 cm. Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

<sup>516</sup> Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 171.

shade of the *mintji* that exist on the *wangarr-likan*.”<sup>517</sup> In a ceremonial context, painting *miny'tji* is said to act as a manifestation of ancestral power.<sup>518</sup> An enormous amount of sociological meaning is embedded in clan designs. Painting the *miny'tji* is an assertion of one's knowledge, ownership, and identification with particular clan estates.

Howard Morphy has described at great lengths both the categories of Yolngu paintings and their changing contexts over time.<sup>519</sup> Put simply, Morphy describes a sliding continuum of designs ranging from restricted (*ngaarrapuy*) through intermediate (*likanbuy*) to unrestricted/open (*wakinngu*). The first two categories encompass the ceremonial and sacra: clan designs painted on ceremonial objects and the bodies of initiates. The latter category encompasses the decorative or mundane: paintings that are often described as “hunting stories” or the more pejorative “anyhow” paintings. Morphy further breaks down the spectrum of works produced for the market into “clan-owned” designs and “innovative” ones, to which he assigns six categories:

1. Paintings that were once restricted *likunbuy*-type paintings
2. Paintings based on *garma* (open) paintings
3. Modified *likanbuy*-type paintings
4. Paintings representing “public” stories, myths
5. Hunting stories

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<sup>517</sup> Donald Thomson, "Two Painted Skulls from Arnhem Land, with Notes on the Totemic Significance of the Design," *Man* 39 (1939): 2.

<sup>518</sup> Howard Morphy, "From Dull to Brilliant: The Aesthetics of Spiritual Power among the Yolngu," *ibid.* 24, no. 1 (1989). This was also noted in Thomson, *Economic Structure and the Ceremonial Exchange Cycle in Arnhem Land*, 46-7.

<sup>519</sup> Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*; .

6. Innovated paintings with no mythological reference.<sup>520</sup>

These categories are not hard-and-fast descriptors: there is considerable movement across the fields. In describing this spectrum, Morphy is at pains to note that the “mask of secrecy” that guards restricted knowledge is both a shifting and contextual one. What was once restricted may be deemed suitable for open display, while what was once revealed may in time be deemed restricted.<sup>521</sup> Such decisions can be based on a range of historical contingencies, from the personalities of particular custodial authorities, through to current political circumstances.<sup>522</sup>

While visiting the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia in October 2015, I had the opportunity to examine the works from the 1996 John Kluge commission with Nonggirnga’s classificatory brother Djambawa Marawili. Marawili had also produced paintings for both the 1994 and 96 commissions. While examining the works at the Kluge-Ruhe, Djambawa commented on the prevalence of paintings such as Nonggirnga’s, that contained multiple clan designs.<sup>523</sup> In contrast, Djambawa pointed out, his painting from the commission *Maḍarrpa Miny’tji* 1996 contained exclusively designs from his own Maḍarrpa clan.<sup>524</sup> According to Djambawa, he had actively discouraged the practice of including multiple clan designs when it came time to produce works for the *Saltwater* project: a large-scale exhibition and publication spearheaded by Djambawa in protest against illegal barramundi

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<sup>520</sup> *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 202.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-5.

<sup>522</sup> Morphy notes this explicitly in regards to the question of Native Title: “The tension of the system caused by the apparent contradictions between ancestral inheritance and sociopolitical realities has if anything increased since it has become a matter of debate in European courts of law. Some things that were masked by their restriction to the inside have had to be brought, at least temporarily, into the open and made more explicit than perhaps they once were.” *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>523</sup> Another example of this can be seen in the painting *Märi-gutharra* 1996 by Datjirri Wunungmurra, which depicts the relationship between his own Dharlwangu clan and the Maḍarrpa clan.

<sup>524</sup> Djambawa Marawili, *Maḍarrpa Miny’tji* 1996. Earth pigments on bark, 322 x 99 cm, Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

fishing around the shores of Blue Mud Bay.<sup>525</sup> Djambawa's argument was both political and ontological:

I have songs, I have names, I have patterns and designs for this Country ... I turned it around and put the message into art with the Saltwater project. The art was coming from those individual bays—from the important places. The bays have patterns and designs and stories—in the bay and on the sea and the land—those designs are titles for Country. We got together with all the clans and put the patterns and designs on the art, because I knew they were a document of those countries for individual clan groups ... You know that was one of the big things we did with Saltwater. To put our souls out in public. To share our patterns and designs—our souls.<sup>526</sup>

Djambawa's statement is significant to our discussion for two key reasons: firstly, it illustrates the link between clan designs and ontology. Secondly, it offers an astute articulation of role of ontological expression in the political arena. The relevance of these two points will become clear as we return to Nonggirnga's late works. For the *Saltwater* project, Nonggirnga produced her first major work in her own Maḍarrpa clan designs: *Bāru at Baraltja* 1998.<sup>527</sup> Featuring the strings of open-ended diamonds that characterize the Maḍarrpa *miny'tj*, the work is a classic rendering of the two central narratives in Maḍarrpa law: *Bāru* (the crocodile) and *Burrut'tji* (also known as *Mundukul*), the Lightning Snake.

It is hard to gauge the accuracy of Djambawa's claims regarding single/mixed clan designs. Paintings with mixed clan designs were not all that common prior to *Saltwater*, and usually such paintings were designed to depict the affinity between related clans. That said, almost all of the paintings in *Saltwater* restrict themselves to the designs of a single clan, with the notable exception of the work *Djarrwark ga Dhalwangu* by the senior artist Gawirrin

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<sup>525</sup> See Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, *Saltwater: Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country* (Yirrkala: Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre in association with Jennifer Isaacs Publishing, 1999).

<sup>526</sup> Marawili, 30.

<sup>527</sup> Nonggirnga Marawili, *Bāru at Baraltja* 1998. Earth pigments on bark, 190 x 50 cm. Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney.

Gumana (c.1935-2015). This work is particularly notable for its inclusion of *miny'tji* from two clans of opposite moieties: the Djarrwarrk (Dhuwa moiety) and the Dhalwangu (Yirritja moiety).<sup>528</sup> As one of the most senior figures in the community, Gawirrin would certainly have painted from a position of almost unchallengeable authority. Nevertheless, amongst contemporary artists working at Yirrkala today, single-clan design paintings dominate. This should, however, be qualified with a further observation. Since the *Saltwater* project, the majority of paintings produced at Yirrkala have become increasingly abstract. In one sense, this vindicates Djambawa's claim that *Saltwater* marked a turning point for putting the "soul" of clan designs into the public realm. On the other hand, single clan designs also lend themselves well to the type of "all-over" abstraction that has become a hallmark of contemporary bark painting across Arnhem Land. My point here is not to dismiss any single motive: but to point to the multiple contexts in which these stylistic developments have occurred.

## 5.5 TRACKING THE WORK OF NONGGIRRNGA MARAWILI

Before returning to the questions of clan design, ontology and temporal context, I would like to closely analyze Nonggirnga's oeuvre in order to provide detailed context for the discussion at hand.

Although Nonggirnga produced major works as part of the three major Buku-Larrnggay Mulka projects between 1994-96, it was only in 2005 that she became a regular artist at the center. Around this time, the art-coordinator Will Stubbs recalls offering her some medium-sized barks and encouraging Nonggirnga to paint more regularly.<sup>529</sup> The resulting paintings, such as *Wititj [2677] 2005* and *Untitled [2696I] 2005* clearly show Nonggirnga's eccentric talents. In

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<sup>528</sup> Gawirrin Gumana, *Djarrwark ga Dhalwangu* 1998. Earth pigments on bark, 153 x 83 cm. Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney.

<sup>529</sup> Will Stubbs, personal communication with author, May 25, 2015.

contrast to the rigid structure of much Yolngu paintings, Nonggirnga's works from around 2005 are distinguished by their rhythmic energy. Both works are Dhuwa paintings: *Wititj* is a Gälpu story, and Nonggirnga's use of dots across the snake are highly reminiscent of the works of the great Gälpu innovator Mithinari Gurruwiwi. That said, neither works can be said to adhere strictly to clan designs: the artist has modified the designs substantially, while holding strong allusions.



**Figure 5.7. (Left)** Nonggirnga Marawili, *Wititj* [2677] 2005. Earth pigments on bark. Dimensions and location unknown.

**Figure 5.8. (Right)** Nonggirnga Marawili, *Untitled* [2677] 2005. Earth pigments on bark. 119 x 46 cm. Private collection, Charlottesville, VA. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.

Nonggirnga was an infrequent painter prior to 2005, however, she produced a substantial body of prints after the opening of the Yirrkala Print Space in 1995. Between 1998 and 2015, Nonggirnga produced 21 prints at the art center. These included screen-prints, etchings and



woodblock prints.<sup>530</sup> The introduction of the print medium created a new contextual quandary for the production of Yolngu designs: what to do in the face of mechanical reproduction? Quentin Sprague notes, “Ceremonial leader Gawirrin Gumana provided guidance for future Yolngu printmakers and their collaborators by way of a succinct statement, ‘if you’re going to paint the land, you use the land’”<sup>531</sup> Elina Spilia notes, that this guidance was formalized in 1998 by the Elders Council of the art center, who declared that sacred designs—*madayin miny’tji*—were not to be used in prints: “in order to protect and maintain a core Yolngu tradition, the *miny’tji* designs will only be allowed to be produced by hand on bark, rather than by machine.”<sup>532</sup>

Again, however, it should be noted that this should be considered in degrees—many prints allude closely to clan designs, revealing that this is a continuum more than a fixed division. In an illuminating passage, Marrnyula and Mundul Wunungmurra Mununggurr describe some of the complexity of this predicament:

Every lino print [still] has to be the design of the artist’s own clan or connecting clans. The design has to be done very carefully so as not to mix them up, and to understand their story. We have to talk about it with other people in that clan, so when the design is printed there is no problem. It’s a similar idea to the traditional designs used in the bark paintings and the wood carving, but in printmaking we get the direction from our elders to design the image of the outside story only.<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>530</sup> Nonggirnga continues to make prints, and has produced a number of new works since I conducted my research at Yirrkala.

<sup>531</sup> Quentin Sprague, “Yolngu Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Stamm* (2012), <http://stamm.com.au/yolngu-art-in-the-age-of-mechanical-reproduction/>.

<sup>532</sup> Elina Spilia, “A World in a Turtle Egg,” *Meanjin* 65, no. 1 (2006): 158.

<sup>533</sup> Marrnyula Mununggurr and Mundul Wunungmurra Mununggurr, quoted in *ibid.*



**Figure 5.9.** Nonggirnga Marawili, *Bäru* [24C] 1999. Screen-print, 55 x 37 cm. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.

Nonggirnga's first print, *Garrangali* [24A] 1998 is a classic "hunting scene." Two crocodiles float on a plain ground, surrounded by ten small fish. The presence of the crocodiles, *Bäru*, suggests that this is a Maḍarrpa painting, but as the accompanying documentation reveals: "The Yolngu paint this design on bark, the special inside story. The print is the outside hunting story."<sup>534</sup> Nonggirnga's third print, *Bäru* [24C] 1999 is more interesting. Here she covers the crocodile with diamonds, similar to the classic Maḍarrpa *miny'tji*, but slightly modified. In its classical depiction—such as in Nonggirnga's 1998 bark painting for *Saltwater*—the strings of diamonds are distinct, like flowing ribbons. In Nonggirnga's print they are depicted in a more irregular grid-like manner. Nonggirnga repeats this technique in her next print on the theme, *Bäru ga Guya* [24E] 2001.<sup>535</sup> In these two prints, Nonggirnga can be seen to be testing the ground for what would, I believe, become a dominant

<sup>534</sup> Buku-Larrnggay Mulka, explanatory documentation accompanying the screenprint, Nonggirnga Marawili, *Garrangali* [24A], 1998. Screenprint, 48 x 48 cm.

<sup>535</sup> Nonggirnga Marawili, *Bäru ga Guya* [24E] 2001. Screenprint, 55 x 39 cm.

strategy in her works after 2011: a strategy that both maintains the allusion of clan designs, while providing the launching pad for increasingly creative departures from these templates.

In this context, it is worth returning to Morphy's assertion that the "grammar" of Yolngu art is not an abstract system of potentials, but is a system structured through its use in particular contexts. In the Yolngu context, abstract designs are valued precisely for their multivalence and ability to relate complex (and often ambiguous) connections. As Morphy notes: "Geometric elements at a particular loci encode relationships between landforms and the mythological events that took place there, without giving priority to any one meaning .... Geometric art, through its multivalency and its encoding of relationships rather than things, establishes relationships between objects and events that at other levels seem unconnected."<sup>536</sup> To offer a very simple example: all Yirritja *miny'tji* contain a variant on diamonds, thus expressing their underlying moiety connection—with similar geometric forms relating to interconnected spaces. While in ceremonial use, the format of these designs remains relatively static, in the commercial domain there is some flexibility for variation within this schema. The key, as Morphy stresses, is not cross-cutting the schema for representing other categories of things.<sup>537</sup> This is the tight-rope that I believe Nonggirnga walks with dramatic effect.

As Nonggirnga began painting more regularly at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka after 2011, "hunting stories" became an increasingly significant part of her oeuvre. Many of these were highly inventive and original. One particularly unique transcultural motif that began appearing in her works was "tea-cups." After first appearing as a minor motif in the work [4049A] 2011, "teacups" would quickly become a regular and distinctive feature in many of Nonggirnga's paintings. By November 2011, she had begun to include them as the sole motif in allover compositions—the first being the work *Teacups* [4119A] 2011.

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<sup>536</sup> Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 295.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid.

In 2012, Nonggirnga joined the stable of artists at Alcaston Gallery in Melbourne. With a solo exhibition scheduled for March 2013, she began work on a series of larger barks. The exhibition *And I am Still Here*, featured fifteen paintings and four *larrakitj* (memorial poles). Six of these works featured “hunting” themes of teacups, teapots, and dilly-bags. A larger proportion of works—nine in total—were given over to grand renderings of the Djapu clan designs that Nonggirnga had inherited from her husband. While Nonggirnga’s style was certainly more “organic” than her Djutadjuta’s, works such as *Water at Wandawuy* [4172F] 2012 or *Thunderman Raining Down* [4193Y] are clearly recognizable as representations within the Djapu clan tradition.<sup>538</sup>



**Figure 5.10.** Nonggirnga Marawili, *Yathikpa Mungurru* [4259G] 2012. Earth pigments on bark, 140 x 85 cm. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.

<sup>538</sup> Nonggirnga Marawili, *Frigate Birds on the Horizon* [4206F] 2012, Earth pigments on bark, 49 x 176 cm, private collection, Perth; *Water at Wandawuy* [4172F] 2012. Earth pigments on bark, 245 x 90 cm; *Water at Wandawuy* [4172F] 2012. Earth pigments on bark, 188 x 63 cm, National Gallery of Victoria.

In hindsight, it was the remaining three works in the exhibition that signaled the most decisive shift in Nonggirnga's practice. *Frigate Birds on the Horizon* [4206F] 2012 (Figure 33), *Yathikpa Munggurru* [4259G] 2012 (Figure 26) and *Yathikpa Munggurru* [4296P] 2012 saw a return to Maḍarrpa subject matter that would quickly come to dominate Nonggirnga's practice. And yet, in these three works, the allusions are subtly made. Munggurru is the powerful Yirritja moiety current that flows into Blue Mud Bay. This current takes water from the outflow of the tidal creek, Baraltja, and the Maḍarrpa coastal sea of Yathikpa to the open ocean, Munggurru. It is here on the horizon that the waters from other Yirritja clans, the Dhalwangu, Manggalili and Munyuku merge and mingle.<sup>539</sup> Munggurru is indicated in these three works through the use of wavy parallel lines. The allusion to Yathikpa is rendered in the use of cascading diamonds—notably in the top section of *Yathikpa Munggurru* [4259G] 2012. Normally depicted as an open-ended string of diamonds, Yathikpa is the site where Bäru, the ancestral crocodile, was burnt after a fight with his wife Dhamilingu. Having been scarred in the fire, Bäru dove into the waters at Yathikpa, leaving the trace of fire in the waters to this day. In *Yathikpa Munggurru* [4259G]—as with her earlier print depictions of Bäru—Nonggirnga does not use the classic string of diamonds, but instead, improvises with a range of “diamond-esque” shapes.

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<sup>539</sup> Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, documentation for the painting *Frigate Birds on the Horizon* [4206F] 2012.



**Figure 5.11.** Nonggirnga Marawili, *Yathikpa [4310C]* 2012. Earth pigments on bark. 41 x 16 cm. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.

In February 2013, Nonggirnga produced a small, but delicate painting that would signal the start of an increasingly bold series of experiments around the theme of *Yathikpa*. In *Yathikpa [4310C]* 2012, the abstract mesh that had occupied a small portion of *Yathikpa Munggurru [4259G]* was released to become the principle design feature of the work. Soon Nonggirnga would cover the entire bark in this undulating mesh, creating works that create a dynamic sense of motion evocative of the sea.

In October 2016, I pulled out an image of one of these works—*Yathikpa [4389K]* 2013—from the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.<sup>540</sup> First I showed the work to Nonggirnga's daughter Marrnyula. Her initial response was, "Who did that one?" Immediately followed by, "It's a Yirritja one; saltwater painting." I told her it was by her mother, who was sitting adjacent to us. The image was handed to Nonggirnga, who responded affirmatively: "Yo, Yathikpa!" I mention this for two reasons: firstly, it shows that, to a Yolngu observer, the work was clearly Yirritja, as evidenced by the presence of the diamond shapes. On the other hand, the precise location depicted was not self-evident, as it would be in more "classical" depictions of the same site. Nevertheless, Nonggirnga's response indicates that to her, these paintings were clearly related to the named site.

Nonggirnga's next significant formal breakthrough was the increased use of negative space. Following from the work *Yathikpa [4458I]* 2013, Nonggirnga begins a highly fruitful exploration of the theme of "lightning." Written across a largely exposed ground, the artist creates a cascade of diamonds, produced from the intersections of streams of parallel lines. It is worth noting however, that Nonggirnga continues to associate these paintings with Yathikpa—something I confirmed with her in relation to the painting *Lightning and the Rock [4536G]* 2014.<sup>541</sup> One reason that this is noteworthy, is that the diamond designs associated with Yathikpa are more generally associated with fire than lightning. The Madarrpa diamonds associated with lightning tend to relate to the estuarine estate of Baraltja, where the lightning snake Burrut'tji (also named Mundukul) is aroused by the monsoonal overflow of fresh-water into the brackish

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<sup>540</sup> Nonggirnga Marawili, *Yathikpa* 2013. Earth pigments on bark, 112 x 85 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

<sup>541</sup> Nonggirnga Marawili, *Lightning and the Rock*, 2014. Earth pigments on bark, 223 x 85 cm. Collection of Debra and Dennis Scholl, Miami.

water that builds up at Baraltja during the dry season. Sensing the mix of salt and fresh water, Mundukul rises on his tail and spits lightning into the sky.



**Figure 5.12.** Nonggirnga Marawili, *Mundukul* [4548O] 2014. Earth pigments on bark, 244 x 92 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.

Sure enough, the image of the snake soon appears in Nonggirnga's lightning works: first as a ghostly shadow in the work *Untitled* [4520D] 2014, before getting its first proper articulation in the work *Mundukul* [4548O] 2014.<sup>542</sup> In *Mundukul* [4548O] the body of the snake is covered in the meshwork diamonds used previously in works like *Yathikpa* [4389K] 2013, while the snake's tongue is cast as a trail of dots. Nonggirnga repeats this dotting technique in a

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<sup>542</sup> Nonggirnga Marawili, *Mundukul* [4548O] 2014. Earth pigments on bark, 244.0 x 94.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria.



series of subsequent images of Mundukul [4551K], [4552V], [4555X], produced around the same time. The significance of this becomes apparent as Nonggirnga's focus shifts to the depiction of the Madarrpa clan estate of Baratjula.



**Figure 5.13.** Nonggirnga Marawili, *Yurr'yun* [4560A] 2014. Earth pigments on bark, 190 x 79 cm. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.

In the painting *Yurr'yun* [4560A] 2014, Nonggirnga introduces two key elements that would come to define her paintings of Baratjula. The first is the inclusion of “rocks”: in this instance, two black rectangular shapes; the second is her use of trails of dots. Nonggirnga has variously described these dots as *dungunganing* (barnacles that “dress up” the rocks), bubbles

and sea-spray, recalling Narritjin Maymuru's dictum, "One small dot, too many meanings."<sup>543</sup> Often, these dots are used as a dissipating trail from the ends of Nonggirnga's "lightning" motifs: recalling their use as the tongue of Mundukul (see for instance *Lightning and the Rock* [4598T] 2015).<sup>544</sup> Although Mundukul is most closely associated with Baraltja, like most ancestral beings the snake traveled, appearing in narratives across Arnhem Land.<sup>545</sup> Although associated a particular ancestral being, Mundukul is evidenced in the natural world through acts of weather: lightning and extreme storms are seen as signs of Mundukul, who is said to "spit" (*guykthun*) lightning. Thunder and lightning are thus the phenomenal signs of ancestral presence. Ronald Berndt observes both the highly erotic undercurrents of this narrative, as well as its role in connecting the opposite moieties as the Lightning snake moves across country.<sup>546</sup> As Morphy and Morphy conclude, "In this myth complex, the properties of water, as it behaves through the seasonal cycle, are taken up and elaborated metaphorically to reflect on processes of regeneration, and on the nature of knowledge, how it is communicated, and how it serves to connect people to each other."<sup>547</sup>

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<sup>543</sup> Narritjin Maymuru, quoted in Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 143.

<sup>544</sup> Nonggirnga Marawili, *Lightning and the Rock* [4598T] 2015. Earth pigments on bark, 165 x 97 cm. Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia.

<sup>545</sup> Beyond Northeastern Arnhem Land, images of Mundukul appear frequently in works from further West as well: See for instance Djimbarrdjimbarwuy Garawirrtja, *Mundukul* 1961. Earth pigments on bark, 87.6 x 37.5 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; and Tom Djawa, *Mundukul* 1950, Earth pigments on bark, 44.5 x 27.5 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

<sup>546</sup> "With the spreading of the clouds, comes the storm, with thunder and lightning caused by the Lightning Snake who lives (or moves) among them. The snake—like other creatures before him—also claims credit for bringing the storm ... There is erotic symbolism here. The Lightning Snake ejaculates from its 'tongue' a flash of lightning which impels the clouds to shed rain—just as ... the men's penes (=snakes) ejaculate semen (=flash of lightning) into the girls, breaking the bone and thus releasing their menstrual flow (=breaking of the cloud, with subsequent rain." The storm, with the Lightning Snake, sweeps overland to Caledon Bay. In this way, the *dua* moiety concept becomes linked with its counterpart in the Rose River cycle, the Lightning Snake of the *jiridja* moiety." Ronald Berndt, *Love Songs of Arnhem Land* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 67.

<sup>547</sup> See Morphy and Morphy.



**Figure 5.14.** Nonggirnga Marawili, *Lightning and the Rock* [4545H] 2014, Earth pigments on bark, 206 x 58 cm, Collection of Debra and Dennis Scholl, Miami. (Identified by the artist as depicting Yathikpa). Reproduced courtesy the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.

**Figure 5.15.** Nonggirnga Marawili, *Lightning and the Rock* [4610J] 2014 Earth pigments on bark, 821/2 x 235/8 in. 209 x 60 cm, Collection of Debra and Dennis Scholl, Miami. (Identified by the artist as depicting Baratjula). Reproduced courtesy the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.

The inclusion of “rocks” in Nonggirnga’s paintings coincided with her move from depicting the site Yathikpa to representing the bay of Baratjula. Nonggirnga made this distinction clear to me when we discussed two works side by side. Both works were produced around the same time, and both bore the same title: *Lightning and the Rock*.<sup>548</sup> However, according to Nonggirnga, the presence of the rock shape at the base of the latter work, clearly associated it with the site of Baratjula. This move is significant for two reasons. By shifting

<sup>548</sup> Nonggirnga Marawili, *Lightning and the Rock* [4545H] 2014, Earth pigments on bark, 206 x 58 cm, Collection of Debra and Dennis Scholl, Miami; and Nonggirnga Marawili, *Lightning and the Rock* [4610J] 2014 Earth pigments on bark, 821/2 x 235/8 in. 209 x 60 cm, Collection of Debra and Dennis Scholl, Miami.

her narrative from Baraltja to Baratjula, Nonggirnga removes one level of specificity—distancing her depictions of Mundukul from the major ancestral narrative. While Baratjula is a Madarrpa clan estate, it is not considered of the same ceremonial order as Yathikpa of Baraltja. In contrast to the ways in which these “high order” sites are discussed, Nonggirnga’s discussions of this site tend to be personal, relating to her childhood, when she camped here with her father and extended family. My theory is that this allows a certain iconographic flexibility in depicting the site, while maintaining a connection to the essence of Madarrpa *being*. Likewise, relocating Mundukul from Baraltja to Baratjula—from the specific narrative to a more generalized evocation as “weather”—gives Nonggirnga the ability to produce works that remain connected to the larger corpus of Madarrpa cosmology, while freeing themselves from the more rigid strictures of clan-design. In this context, the fact that Baratjula was a also site of intense trade between the Yolngu and Macasssan fishermen from at least the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, makes it a poignant choice for works that so adroitly work across worlds.<sup>549</sup>

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<sup>549</sup> See Berndt and Berndt, *Arnhem Land, Its History and Its People*, 40-48.



**Figure 5.16.** Nonggirnga Marawili, *Lightning in the Rock*, 2015. Earth pigments on bark, 1043/8 x 357/16 in. (265 x 90 cm). Reproduced courtesy the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.

The move to depicting Baratjula unleashed an iconographic freedom in Nonggirnga's work. In August 2015, she would win the bark painting prize at the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards with a painting distinguished by both its gravity and profound minimalism. In *Lightning in the Rock [NC]* 2015 two white rocks float upon a black ground, connected by trails of multicolored dots. The lightning motif, so dominant in early depictions of the site, are restricted to a few brief flashes hidden beneath the sea-spray. The references here are oblique in the extreme.<sup>550</sup> And yet, if as I suggested earlier, this painting is a

<sup>550</sup> This point is also noted by Elina Spilia, "Nonggirnga Marawili: Fire, Water, Lightning, Rock," in *Marking the Infinite: Contemporary Women Artists from Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Henry Skeritt (Reno and Munich: Nevada Museum of Art and Prestel Publishing, 2016), 38.

“mystery,” it also has a legibility that comes from the web of allusions and associations that Nonggirnga has methodically developed throughout her oeuvre. This perhaps goes some way to explaining the non-teleological nature of Nonggirnga’s practice—jumping back and forth between styles, sites and visual references. This is a process of push-and-pull: a constant doubling back to reaffirm the continuity of allusions, allegories and referents. Even at their most abstract, these allusions tether Nonggirnga’s paintings to her ancestral country and identity. In this light, Nonggirnga’s late works might be seen as a provisional assemblages of associations, carefully manicured in dialogue with tradition, shifting in each new work to address the conceptual concerns of the moment.

## 5.6 THE COUNTRY SPEAKING THROUGH HER

If he my brother Djambawa will see this. If he will follow me, for him he holds the inside foundation, for my brother. And for me, it is of the surface area, for me his sister, right. I will not go into the depth of his foundations. I will do mine from the outside bit ... and I will go along that. Just for him, for Djambawa is of the deep foundations, sacred sites, him alone. I will not take away from them, from the men’s thoughts. I’ve got my own ideas, just the water forms of the outside part. The deep foundations are for the men, and this is just the water, my own ideas. If my two brothers will see this, Gumbaniya and Djambawa. If they will agree with this, they will agree with it.<sup>551</sup>

A narrative has emerged to explain Nonggirnga’s paintings. It situates her as part of a localized movement towards secularization amongst Yolngu painters at Yirrkala, that includes the work of artists such as Gulumbu Yunupingu (c.1943-2012), Nyapanyapa Yunupingu (born c.1945), Mulkan Wirrpanda (born 1947) and Djirrirra Wunungmurra (born 1968).<sup>552</sup> The essence of this

<sup>551</sup> Nonggirnga Marawili, interview with Will Stubbs, Dennis Scholl and Henry Skerritt, Yirrkala, Northern Territory, August 11, 2014.

<sup>552</sup> See for instance, Hetti Perkins, ed. *Earth and Sky: John Mawurndjul and Gulumbu Yunupingu* (Healesville, Victoria: TarraWarra Museum of Art, 2015); Will Stubbs, "Soft Power," in *Earth and Sky: John Mawurndjul*

narrative is that these artists have each found expressive ways to depart from painting *miny'tji*, while remaining faithful to the core values of Yolngu cosmology.<sup>553</sup> This narrative is repeated in texts, as well as by the Yolngu themselves. Yinimala Gumana, the Chairman of Buku-Larrnggay Mulka, put it to me this way: "These paintings are about heart. These women are putting their hearts into their marks. They are thinking to do things differently. It's a different idea, but it's the same story."<sup>554</sup>

Yinimala's analysis appears to reveal a shift in Yolngu attitudes towards creativity and originality. While I was at Yirrkala, numerous Yolngu extolled the virtues of Nonggirnga's paintings in strikingly similar terms, pointing to their "new ideas" while stressing their inalienable connection to the ancestral countries they evoke. This stands in contrast to the attitudes among Yolngu artists recorded by Morphy during his fieldwork in the 1970s. At that time, he noted the wholesale dismissal of creativity by the Yolngu, quoting Narritjin:

We can't follow a new way—the new way I cannot do that—I go backward in order to work. I can't do anything new because otherwise I might be making up a story—my own thoughts you see—and people over there, wise people, would look at my work and say, 'Ah! That's only been made up by him.'<sup>555</sup>

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*and Gulumbu Yunupingu*, ed. Hetti Perkins (Healesville, Victoria: TarraWarra Museum of Art, 2015); Howard Morphy, "Gulumbu Yunupingu: "As One Like the Stars"," in *Marking the Infinite: Contemporary Women Artists from Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Henry Skerritt (Reno and Munich: Nevada Museum of Art and Prestel Publishing, 2016); Elina Spilia, "Nonggirnga Marawili: Fire, Water, Lightning, Rock," *ibid.*; "Gulumbu Yunupingu: Into the Light," *Art and Australia* 47, no. 1 (2010); Quentin Sprague, "White Lines: The Recent Work of Nyapanyapa Yunupingu," *Discipline* 3 (2013); Bullen and Lane.

<sup>553</sup> In a more general sense, it also matches the core critical approaches towards contemporary indigeneity forwarded by theorists such as James Clifford. See for instance, Clifford's assertion, "To grasp the specific dialectics of innovation and constraint in these [indigenous] countercultures, a Gramscian analysis of changing hegemonies and struggles for relative power is far more historically concrete than before-after narratives of cultural loss, social assimilation, or inevitable economic subsumption. Hegemony is not domination, but rather a historical process: unfinished struggles, contingent alliances, and accommodations in an evolving field of unequal forces." Clifford, 32.

<sup>554</sup> Yinimala Gumana, personal communication with the author, May 20, 2015.

<sup>555</sup> Narritjin Maymuru, quoted in Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 215.

As Narritjin's statements make clear, the Yolngu clearly recognize the potential for change and innovation in art, it was simply that such change was considered of little value. The pejorative description offered by Munggurruwuy Yunupingu of early paintings made for the missionaries as "anyhow" paintings makes this distinction clear.<sup>556</sup> While I don't believe that Nonggirnga's innovative paintings are held in the same esteem as *madayin miny'tji*, neither are they dismissed as "anyhow" paintings. Rather, I think they are seen as a contemporary expression of the core tenets of Yolngu *being* within the transcultural space of the art market.

Is it possible to reconcile Nonggirnga's claim that her paintings are "coming from the heart and mind" with Narritjin's seemingly antithetical desire not to be seen to be "making up a story"? Morphy and Morphy note, "Yolngu acknowledge that change happens on the surface—indeed, as we have suggested, they often embrace it imaginatively and productively. But they view the principles and laws laid down by the ancestral beings as an eternal template that underpins their stewardship of their country."<sup>557</sup> It is here that we might begin to see the significance of Nonggirnga's repeated assertions that her work is "of the surface." For the Yolngu, all things are imbued with "inside" (*djinawa*) and "outside" (*warrangul*) meanings. These terms refer to a continuum of knowledge involving degrees of restrictedness.<sup>558</sup> While great value is put on the restricted "inside" meaning of things, this is not to say that the "outside" meanings are worthless. Harking back to our earlier discussion of Mundukul, we might remember that the surface expressions of the world—the experience of phenomenon such as thunder and lightning—are seen as tangible expressions of ancestral revelation. It is in this light that I think we can read Nonggirnga's paintings, which proclaim to present the

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<sup>556</sup> , 48-9.

<sup>557</sup> Morphy and Morphy, 18.

<sup>558</sup> For an extended discussion of the concept of "inside" and "outside" see Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 78-81.



surface/phenomenal aspects of place, while paying deliberate allusion to its spiritual/noumenal undercurrents (via their evocation of *miny'tji*).

Following Nonggirnga's instruction, I asked Djambawa what he thought of her paintings, with their uncanny echoes of Maḍarrpa clan designs. To illustrate his answer, Djambawa took me into the gallery at the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka center. There, along two opposing walls, hung a series of paintings by Djambawa, and a series by Nonggirnga, both depicting the saltwater estate of Yathikpa. Standing before one of his paintings, Djambawa ran his fingers down the characteristic strings of diamonds of the Maḍarrpa *miny'tji*. Then he turned to Nonggirnga's work, drawing my attention to the zigzaggy mesh of diamonds that crashed like lightning down her bark. "If you stand back," said Djambawa, "you can see the pattern [of the Maḍarrpa *miny'tji*]. They are not the patterns, but the country is still speaking through her."<sup>559</sup>

Here we return to the complex ontological questions raised earlier: for Djambawa was trying to explain to me the complex relationship between Yolngu clan designs and the natural world. His point—like Narritjin's—was that the *miny'tji* were not "made up." The patterns were laid down in the land from the beginning of time. But the country is mute, and so the role of the Yolngu is to speak its names, sing its songs, and paint its patterns.<sup>560</sup> Painting the *miny'tji* is an assertion of one's knowledge, ownership, and identification with particular clan estates: thus, Djambawa describes them as like "title deeds" to ancestral lands.<sup>561</sup> And yet, as the model of land tenure described here is markedly different from Western property law. As all identity is derived from the land, the rights enshrined in these paintings cannot be transferred as they come

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<sup>559</sup> Djambawa Marawili, interview with the author, Yirrkala, Northern Territory, Australia, May 22, 2015.

<sup>560</sup> Djambawa expands on this concept in Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, 14-15.

<sup>561</sup> Djambawa Marawili, "On Homelands and Caring for Indigenous Knowledge," *ANKAAA Arts Backbone* 14, no. 2 (2014). Nancy Williams has explored the Yolngu concept of land ownership in depth, while Marcus Barber has further extended this into the important realm of sea rights. See Williams; Marcus Barber, "Coastal Conflicts and Reciprocal Relations: Encounters between Yolngu People and Commercial Fishermen in Blue Mud Bay, North-East Arnhem Land," *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2010).

with a reciprocal sense of also *belonging to the land*.<sup>562</sup> By painting the *miny'tji* Djambawa declares his embodied right to speak *as part of his land*.<sup>563</sup> “These paintings say “This is who I am.” To fully understand them, Djambawa told me, I would have to *become him*, and literally get “inside his heart.” Notably, early “open” paintings or “hunting scenes” were never contained locational referents.<sup>564</sup> By Djambawa’s reasoning, in painting specific sites such as Yathikpa or Baratjula, while Nonggirnga might assiduously try and avoid painting sacred designs, these patterns would always be there, like a background hum by virtue of her inalienable connection to the places she paints. Whatever she did, the country would find a way to speak through her.

While Djambawa’s metaphysics might sound esoteric to Western ears, in essence he is grappling with a series of questions that are as sticky for Yolngu philosophers as they are for Continental ones. How do we know the world? What is the relationship between the world and our perception of it? What is the connection between representation and reality, between images and the world we inhabit? When asking these questions, it is easy to get caught in a feedback loop: Are Nonggirnga’s paintings evidence of the country speaking through her? Or are they a sign that *miny'tji* are so embedded in the Yolngu understanding of country and kinship that they inherently condition the way in which she comprehends (and thus pictures) her world? In *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig argues that it is through mimesis that we create a sensuous link to the world: we copy the world in order to comprehend it through our bodies. But if making symbolic marks is one method through which we forge a physical link between the

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<sup>562</sup> Fred Myers has noted a very similar situation for the Pintupi of the Western Desert, noting that this model of understanding the land “conceives of the relationship between persons and places as embedded in identity forming (and embodied) exchange: they share substance.” Myers, “Emplacement and Displacement: Perceiving the Landscape through Aboriginal Australian Acrylic Painting.”

<sup>563</sup> Djambawa makes this connection explicit when he notes, “Our inherited patterns and designs are our identity, and also—a weapon, title deed, ‘talking stick’ and means of economic empowerment.” Marawili, “On Homelands and Caring for Indigenous Knowledge,” 2.

<sup>564</sup> Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 205-07.

world and ourselves, then it is also how we shape the world, or, in other words, how we make our imaginaries real. This in turn impacts how we see the world, “plunging us into the plane where the object world and the visual copy merge.”<sup>565</sup>

Further complexity is added when one considers that, for the Yolngu, the entire world is mimetic of ancestral activity. In 1976, W.E.H Stanner argued that this logic was self-authenticating: “the very existence of the clans or clan-like groups, the physical features of the countryside, the world of animate and inanimate things, were held to make the truth, as received, visible.”<sup>566</sup> And yet, the Yolngu understanding of place is not purely phenomenological. As early as 1958, Lloyd Warner noted that “The possession of all land is made absolute and final ... by the statements of the myth which describe certain behavior of the totems which took place on that land, and which identify the clan and the land as one.”<sup>567</sup> The *miny'tji* then both precede and exceed their representation. As Morphy makes clear in his description of the diamond patterns associated with Yathikpa:

As far as the myth is concerned, the diamond-shaped clan design is the main component of the painting that is iconically motivated. The design is not said to be derived from pre-existing markings on the crocodile's back, but to be the product of the mythological events leading to the creation of the form of *wangarr* crocodile: and it signifies this transformation.

Thus, these designs perform a complex mediation between the social and phenomenal realms: between the immutability of the ancestral *wangarr*, and the subjective experience of the object world. Like the Māori *taonga*, the *miny'tji* they exist between these worlds, structuring the relationship between subjects and the object world; the living and the dead; the spiritual and physical realms; *time and being*. As Morphy notes:

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<sup>565</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 20-35.

<sup>566</sup> W.E.H Stanner, "Some Aspects of Aboriginal Religion," *Colloquium* 9, no. 1 (1976): 19; Williams, 17-18.

<sup>567</sup> W.L Warner, *A Black Civilization: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe* (New York: Harper, 1958), 391.

The ordered, frozen world of the ancestral past becomes part of the subjective experience of the individual, through the acquisition of knowledge of the ancestral past as he or she moves through the world. But this individually acquired knowledge attaches the person in a particular way to a structure of places and the significance of those places which exist outside the human world. This structure is where the human world and the ancestral world meet, but it is part of neither.<sup>568</sup>

## 5.7 FEMINIST SHADOW-BOXING

Up until this point, we have largely avoided discussing the issue of gender in Nonggirnga's art practice. In 1938, taking a somewhat patronizing note, the missionary T.T. Webb noted "There is certainly room for a Feminist Movement in Arnhem Land."<sup>569</sup> Nonggirnga would certainly not describe herself as a feminist: indeed, her statements are characterized by an extreme level of deference to the patriarchal structure of Yolngu society. And yet, we should be cautious of overlaying Western notions of gender bias onto Aboriginal societies. The separation of the sexes in Aboriginal societies has its own histories and unique enunciation. As Diane Bell has argued, there is a need for "theories which allow that Aboriginal women create their own social reality."<sup>570</sup> This demand takes on further meaning when we consider the mediating ontological role that we have been considering in relation to Yolngu art. Is it not possible that Aboriginal women's art represents its own culturally specific form of feminist critique?

Morphy and Williams have both written extensively on the role of Yolngu women in ceremonial life.<sup>571</sup> Both note that while women's access to ceremonial knowledge is more restricted than men's, this has some levels of flexibility. This is in keeping with the general rule

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<sup>568</sup> Howard Morphy, "Landscape and the Reproduction of the Ancestral Past," in *The Anthropology of Landscape*, ed. Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 189.

<sup>569</sup> T.T. Webb, *From Spears to Spades* (Melbourne: The Book Depot; repr., 1944), 32.

<sup>570</sup> Diane Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming* (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1983; repr., 2002), 241.

<sup>571</sup> Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*; Williams, 45.

that there is no fixed boundary separating the sacred and the secular. Morphy in particular notes the “uneven” but “continuous” opening of restrictions in relation to both women’s access to ceremonial information and the right to paint ceremonial designs.<sup>572</sup> One of the central points raised by both Morphy and Williams, is that women—particularly older women—are often well-versed in ceremonial content.<sup>573</sup> However, there is a difference between the right to *know* and the right to *reveal* sacred content. The right to reveal sacred information is closely guarded. As John von Sturmer has noted, for the Yolngu, “Every painting carries with it the claim or the assertion: *I am entitled to paint this.*”<sup>574</sup> Nonggirnga herself has extolled the dramatic consequences for transgressing these rights: “I’m going through the outside part on my own for this. I don’t want to borrow from the men. They would think of me and say, “She’s in control, a female,” and will kill me.”<sup>575</sup> Nonggirnga’s claims are consistent with those described by Donald Thomson in 1939: “The right to use any *mintji* .... is guarded with the greatest jealousy. Any infringement would be regarded in these groups (and avenged) in the same way as an act of violence against one of its members, and I have actual instances in which *miringo* or avenging expeditions have been organized following such an infringement.”<sup>576</sup>

The volume and frequency of Nonggirnga’s statements that she is not painting *miny’tji* in deference to men cannot be ignored. And yet, it is also somewhat paradoxical. As a respected and knowledgeable older woman, Nonggirnga could claim a certain authority to paint Madarrpa clan designs. Moreover, in the past Nonggirnga *has* painted these designs, as we have seen in

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<sup>572</sup> Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 198.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid. This is something I have also documented among the Yolngu at Milingimbi, see Henry Skerritt, "Choosing Who Will Keep the Stories Strong," *Artlink* 29, no. 3 (2009).

<sup>574</sup> John von Sturmer, "A Limping World: Works in the Arnott’s Collection – Some Conceptual Underpinnings," in *They Are Meditating: Barks from the Mca’s Arnott’s Collection*, ed. Djon Mundine (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), 50.

<sup>575</sup> Nonggirnga Marawili, interview with Will Stubbs, Dennis Scholl and Henry Skerritt, Yirrkala, Northern Territory, August 11, 2014.

<sup>576</sup> Thomson, "Two Painted Skulls from Arnhem Land, with Notes on the Totemic Significance of the Design," 2.

the work *Bäru at Baraltja* 1998, not to mention the large oeuvre of works she has produced her husband's Djapu *miny'tji*. Elina Spilia has suggested that the reasons for Nonggirnga's current preference for invented "outside designs": "likely stem from her age, the circumstances of her life, and her regard for the 'old law.'"<sup>577</sup> While I am sure there is an element of truth to this, I wonder whether this professed avoidance might not itself conceal deeper motives. Morphy argues that the abstraction of *miny'tji* is itself a means of maintaining secrecy.<sup>578</sup>

Yolngu art is a system of encoding meaning articulates within the system of restricted knowledge ... As a person follows along this continuum, he moves from a position where meanings are defined for him to one in which he in turn influences the way things are presented to others; he moves to a position of potential creativity.<sup>579</sup>

Is it possible that Nonggirnga is playing a complex double-game: by expertly avoiding *miny'tji* while maintaining the allusion to these designs, is she not showing both her clear and precise knowledge of the boundaries while loudly professing her non-transgression of these same limits? In her deference, Nonggirnga opens a space for innovation—a surface space in which she can express both her deep connection to Maḍarrpa country and law, while exploiting the possibilities opened by the art market. Michiel Dolk has theorized for the work of Gija artist Paddy Bedford, "By avoiding restricted designs, painting creates a space freed from symbolic restrictions of law ... Technically a law-abiding form of 'law-avoidance' (beyond the reach of law), painting opens onto a realm of flux and indeterminacy premised on exchange with the outsiders."<sup>580</sup> At the same time, the painting of *miny'tji* is an expression of both prestige and identification with the clan

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<sup>577</sup> Spilia, "Nonggirnga Marawili: Fire, Water, Lightning, Rock," 40.

<sup>578</sup> Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 190.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>580</sup> Michiel Dolk, "Are We Strangers in This Place?," in *Paddy Bedford*, ed. Russell Storer (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 25.

group: something that balances both autonomy and interconnectedness.<sup>581</sup> The allusion to *miny'tji* in Nonggirnga's work holds onto this prestige (as an outward expression of veiled knowledge and identity), while allowing her to capitalize on the different type of prestige that comes from being an innovative and celebrated "contemporary" artist. In one sense, Nonggirnga might be seen as complying with the patriarchy by not painting *miny'tji*. In another, she is finding her own expression of power by working adjacent to this tradition in the space opened by the market.

I asked Djambawa how he saw the gendered divide between his and his sister's paintings. He drew an analogy between the differing ceremonial roles of men and women—between the *manikay* (ceremonial song cycles) sung by men, and the *milkari* (crying-songs) performed by women. "Men sing for the land, women cry for it. My paintings sing for the land, her paintings cry for the land."<sup>582</sup> Fiona Magowan notes that possession of crying-songs is solely the domain of senior, knowledgeable and respected women. In a revealing passage on these songs, which resonates strongly with Nonggirnga's painterly practice, Magowan writes:

Yolngu women's crying songs, *ngäthi-manikay*, create a shadow-dance of making meaning between performers and listeners, variously twisting and turning around a performative nexus of music making, recording, and the writing of music ... shadow-dancing suggests an ever-mobile revelation of meaning between performers and listeners where images grow longer and fuller as they are sung, like a shadow stretching out from a person as they move in relation to the sun's rays. Just as shadows change shape depending on the position of the person and their movements to the light, so too, do the songs change until one fades and the next begins.<sup>583</sup>

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<sup>581</sup> As Craig Eliot has noted, "The high value placed upon knowledge and ownership of [sacra] property (designs, sand sculpture, ceremonies and songs) means that these exchanges are an important expression of both *mala* autonomy and *baparru* interconnectedness." Elliott, 106.

<sup>582</sup> Djambawa Marawili, interview with the author, Yirrkala, Northern Territory, Australia, May 22, 2015.

<sup>583</sup> Fiona Magowan, "Shadows of Song: Exploring Research and Performance Strategies in Yolngu Women's Crying-Songs," *Oceania* 72, no. 2 (2001): 90.

How better to consider the provisional push-and-pull of Nonggirnga's paintings, which continually double-back into allusion before veiling these further in abstraction? For Nonggirnga's abstraction is not a move into non-objectivity or even the kind of "meaninglessness" (*mayilmiriw*) that Nyapanyapa Yunupingu has used to describe her own work. Rather, it functions along time-honored Yolngu principles of power, demonstrated through its control over the domain of the secret. Meaning is encoded in such a way that the paintings cannot readily be interpreted. In this way, control is maintained by those already possessing information. It is here that the political power of her allusions—her building of a complex web of associations and references—becomes most apparent. Nonggirnga abstracts away any suggestion that she is encroaching on the authority of others, while revealing a deeper ontological link to the power of her land. A knowledge held within herself, which only she controls, *the country speaking through her*.

## 5.8 POSTSCRIPT: BARATJULA



**Figure 5.17.** Nonggirnga Marawili, *Frigate Birds on the Horizon* [4206F] 2012, Earth pigments on bark, 49 x 176 cm, private collection, Perth. Reproduced courtesy the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.

In concluding this chapter, let us return briefly to the painting that signaled the start of Nonggirnga Marawili's period of most profound innovation: *Frigate Birds on the Horizon*



[4206F] 2012. Four birds—*getkit*—float on the horizon, tossed by the breeze. They are frozen in time, above the undulating parallel waves of Mungurru. Mungurru is the current that takes the tidal waters from Baraltja and Yathikpa out to the open ocean. It is here, on the very edge of the horizon, that the waters of the Yirritja clans mix: the Maḍarrpa, Dhalwangu, Manggalili and Munyuku clans.

For Edmund Husserl, the horizon presented a limit, but not a boundary. It was, he argued, “a determinable, but never fully determinable indeterminateness.”<sup>584</sup> The horizon is always experienced as a *beyond*: something which we can sense, but which is always receding, always beyond reach. And yet, as Marcus Barber makes clear, the Yolngu “claim to ownership out to ‘where the clouds stand’ is not an ambit claim to the horizon; rather, it asserts the existence of an integrated system of identifiable and territorialized flows of water across land and sea country in three dimensions: flows that constitute, express and reaffirm local and regional [...] identities.”<sup>585</sup> It is, as Epeli Hau’ofa describes, both a physical reality and the path to the Other.<sup>586</sup>

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<sup>584</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague, Boston and Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publisher, 1983), 52.

<sup>585</sup> Barber, 310-11.

<sup>586</sup> Epeli Hau’ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, ed. Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu, and Epeli Hau’ofa (Suva, Fiji: School of Social and Economic Development, The University of the South Pacific in association with Beake House, 1993), 55.



**Figure 5.18.** Baratjula, May 2015. Photograph by Henry Skerritt.

A few days after I sat and watched her paint *Baratjula* [4776S], I had the chance to visit the site with Nonggirnga and her family. It was not an easy place to get to—located about 100 miles south of Yirrkala, it is rarely visited by the Yolngu today. To make matters worse, a recent tropical cyclone had meant that the rough bush track was frequently blocked by fallen debris. We arrived just as the sun was setting, and camped on the beach. In the light of morning, we headed to the “rocks.” And there they were. It was impossible for me not to see them through the lens of Nonggirnga’s painting: their *dungunganing* “dressing them up;” the salty sea spray spitting at their edges; the gentle lapping of the waves shimmering like the white lines on her bark paintings. There was not a cloud in the sky, but still my imagination raced to thoughts of the lightning crashing down, striking these primordial monoliths as Mundukul raised his head to the

sky. I was in the space described by Taussig, where the object world and the visual copy merge. It was an uncanny feeling. I remember thinking how I, as an outsider, would never know this place in the way that Nonggirnga did. And yet, I knew it in a different way: a way that was entirely predetermined by Nonggirnga's paintings. Being in this place—seeing the light reflect on the waters, feeling the sand beneath my toes, the taste of brine on my lips—I was seeing how Nonggirnga's paintings *came to be* in a totally different way. For Nonggirnga's paintings *are* a response to this place—but our affective responses are neither purely phenomenal nor unmediated by tradition.

According to Jacques Rancière, “Politics is not made up of power relationships; it is made up of relationships between worlds.” The role of political art is not to break down the borders between people, places, or consciousnesses, but rather to bring them into play, and in doing so to “provide a measure of what is incommensurable between two orders: between the order of the inegalitarian distribution of social bodies in a partition of the perceptible and the order of the equal capacity of speaking beings in general.”<sup>587</sup> Equality in this sense does not mean a homogenized leveling of the playing field, but rather a sense of coequality that recognizes the myriad ways of inhabiting the present. That was what I sensed on the beach at Baratjula—and what I have come to see in the paintings of Nonggirnga Marawili: the picturing of an alternative system of seeing, valuing and understanding the same world, while resisting objectification into the discursive frames of the Other.

After breakfast, the men in our party—Yalpi Yunupingu, his son Djilil, Kade McDonald and I—went to hunt stingray and mud-crabs for lunch. Once we were out of sight, Nonggirnga and the other women went to the rocks at Baratjula. There, Nonggirnga performed the *milkari*,

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<sup>587</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 42.

crying one more time for her country. She was an old woman, aware that she might not return here in her mortal life; perhaps not until her spirit made its final journey home. I did not hear Nonggirnga's cry. But as we returned to the camp, the old woman was silent, a tear in her eye.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

In describing the “risks of dialogue,” Arjun Appadurai warns, “there can be no negotiation with the other without a parallel negotiation with the self.”<sup>588</sup> Each of the artists in this dissertation are engaged in precisely this risky venture. In describing the development of Māori art in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Conal McCarthy argues that the desire of art patrons for “authentic” Māori art briefly converged with Māori ideals of cultural preservation, leading to a “self-conscious indigenous historicism.”<sup>589</sup> We might see this as early evidence of indigenous artists’ recognition of the multiplicity of the present they inhabited. David Christian has famously claimed that “time” is the medium of history.<sup>590</sup> We might then also remember the central insight of Martin Heidegger, that “time is what gives and enables being, out of which being comes to be.”<sup>591</sup> For in engaging with questions of history and time, the artists in this dissertation are also asking what it means to *be* in our shared present.

In contemporary art, questions of time have become central. In part, this reflects the growing critical awareness that the contemporary is defined by the presence of mismatching, seemingly incommensurate ways of being in the present.<sup>592</sup> This is the very definition of “contemporary,” which means to share one’s time with others.

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<sup>588</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “The Risks of Dialogue,” *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* 10 (2008): 24.

<sup>589</sup> McCarthy, 44-59.

<sup>590</sup> David Christian, “History and Time,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 57, no. 3 (2011): 535.

<sup>591</sup> Ruin, 57.

<sup>592</sup> See Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art*; Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995); Giorgio Agamben, “What Is the

It is this desire to picture time's multiplicity that has led to what Christine Ross calls the "temporal turn" in contemporary art. In the work of EuroAmerican artists such as Tacita Dean, Stan Douglas, and Nancy Davenport, Ross sees attempts to transform modernity by dislodging the hegemony of progressive time.<sup>593</sup> Cast this way, the temporal turn is a reaction to modern temporalization, which denies coevality by creating a developmental hierarchy between the modern and the primitive. Contemporary artists, argues Ross, seek to free the categories of time (past, present, and future), in order to complicate their connections, and to activate the past in the present to condition the future. This definition could be productively applied to any of the artists in this dissertation. And yet, if Ross is correct to identify the temporal turn in contemporary art, her view is Eurocentric in that it fails to recognize that it was precisely the encounter with the non-West—with alternative ways of thinking about time and space—that caused this disruption in the first place. The work of Maralngurra, Nuku, Bulpitt and Marawili does not represent, to use Ross's words, "a reconsideration of modernity's progress," but instead, the forceful articulation of an alternative to modernity: an alternative way of being contemporary.

Which brings me to the central conclusion of this dissertation. For in grappling with the concept of history—or more correctly, the ways in which multiple histories are played out in the present—Gabriel Maralngurra, George Nuku, Corey Bulpitt and Nonggirnga Marawili are each responding to the complexity of the contemporary world in which we live and making an ethical claim for the rights of indigenous peoples to occupy coeval but parallel worlds. The point here, is not to break down the borders between people, places, or consciousnesses, but rather to bring them into play. In the context of Jacques Rancière's political theory, it is to bring into

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Contemporary? (2007)," in *What Is an Apparatus?* and Other Essays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>593</sup> Christine Ross, *The Past Is the Present. It's the Future Too: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art* (New York: Continuum International, 2013).

relationship two unconnected things—in this case, indigenous and Western concepts of being—and in doing so to “provide a measure of what is incommensurable between two orders: between the order of the inequalitarian distribution of social bodies in a partition of the perceptible and the order of the equal capacity of speaking beings in general.” This reconfiguration produces new political inscriptions of equality, leading Rancière to conclude, “Politics is not made up of power relationships; it is made up of relationships between worlds.”<sup>594</sup> Equality in this sense does not mean a homogenized leveling of the playing field, but rather a sense of coequality that recognizes the myriad ways of inhabiting the present.

Part of the brilliance of these four artists is their ability to balance competing discourses in order to produce works that speak both within and across worlds. They present the viewer, regardless of his or her background, with the conundrum of glimpsing one world, while occupying another. We can see this in Gabriel Maralngurra’s paintings of first contact: in which he utilizes a range of different styles in order to draw attention to the contingent nature of encountering the other. Or we can see it in George Nuku’s installations in which he draws attention to the competing ways of valuing objects in the modern museum. Or we can see it in Corey Bulpitt’s graffiti murals, that insert indigeneity into the urban realm, while simultaneously inserting urbanity into the grammar of indigenous identification. Or, lastly, we see it in the paintings of Nonggirnga Marawili, which resonate with tradition, while working tangential to these traditions in a space opened up by the market. In each case we see artists mediating across seemingly incommensurate worlds. This is the essence of coequality—picturing a world comprised of different ways of inhabiting a shared time. It is what unties these four artists, and what connects them with the most important contemporary artists working the world today.

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<sup>594</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 42.

Here, times arrow does not cut seamlessly forward, but is open to all the vicissitudes and inconsistencies of our diverse present.



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