

5. Arnhem Land to Adelaide

Deep histories in Aboriginal women's storytelling and historical practice, 'irruptions of Dreaming' across contemporary Australia

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In conducting historical research with Aboriginal women and their families between 1984 and 2007, I became aware of how contemporary manifestations of deep time, as an 'irruption of Dreaming',¹ frequently coursed through their life narratives and storytelling practice. Evidence for this phenomenon is from elders from the Roper River (Ngukurr) region of south-east Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, and from Ngarrindjeri elders of the Coorong and Lower Murray Lakes of south-eastern South Australia who were residing in suburban Adelaide. These were women from widely divergent backgrounds but with a similar way of understanding, structuring and speaking about the past or its lived-ramifications in the present. Permission to reproduce and discuss these stories here has been granted from the women's families, with whom I have ongoing research collaborations and working relationships.

I respectfully borrow the term 'irruptions of Dreaming' from Basil Sansom's influential essay in which he considers how the appearance of Dreamings in outwardly colonised spaces unsettle and challenge assumed paradigms of historical understanding and causality. 'Dreamings,' he contends, 'irrupt into contemporary histories and act in ways that have political significance, contesting whitefella paradigms and re-asserting the world-view of the original Australians.'²

It is important to clarify that 'irruptions' are only viewed as such for 'whitefellas'. For Indigenous people, as the chapters of Diana James and Martin Porr also discuss, they are manifestations of an ever-present reality, an underlying structure that shapes, interprets and continuously creates the world.

A number of Northern Territory elders influenced Sansom's thinking on this matter. Foremost among them was Ngukurr elder Dennis Daniels, who gifted this analytical concept to Sansom as he embarked on his first fieldwork venture in Aboriginal Australia.³ Daniels shared with him a causality story about

1 Sansom 2001: 1.

2 Sansom 2001.

3 Sansom 2001: 18–20.

Cyclone Tracy, the cyclone that destroyed much of Darwin in 1974, attributing this to a clash between ontologies and the intervention of a clever man and clever woman taking the form of two whirly winds or twisters that clashed and then came together, amplifying their power.

On my second visit to Ngukurr in 1984, it was Dennis Daniels who drew my attention to the palpable presence of Dreaming forces underscoring a recent cross-cultural history from the inter-war years that I was researching for the documentary *Pitjiri: The Snake That Will Not Sink*.⁴ At that time, I was accompanied by an elderly Ruth Heathcock, a South Australian nurse and non-Indigenous woman who lived at Roper Bar in the 1930s. Ruth Heathcock was renowned in the community for her covert medical care of leprosy patients on Country at the strong behest of local Roper River women in defiance of Northern Territory public health policy, and for her utmost respect for Aboriginal Law.⁵

A senior *djungaiyi* for the Yabudurawa ceremony at Roper River, Daniels was tall and impressive, with a deep baritone voice.⁶ In the cross-cultural setting of our meeting, he consciously deployed story as an educative tool. He elaborated on the intricate, webbed connections between the foundational travels of Nguru, the ancestral Catfish-hero in Creative times, and a 1937 trip Ruth Heathcock made in the company of local women and elders (including Daniels' grandfather) to the sacred place of Burrunju (also known as Ruined City). This is in the Ngandi Arnhem Land stone country, where leprosy sufferers were hiding at the time, being cared for intermittently by their families. Daniels expertly wove these events – millennia apart – into a singular narrative which spectacularly collapsed time. It harnessed the forces of the Dreaming in the present moment, while simultaneously rendering the recent historical past part of the Dreaming. This temporal juncture was enlivened through kin relationships across human, animal and land forms. It included classificatory-kin such as Ruth Heathcock, who had been incorporated into the Roper River kinship system through her close relationships with the women working with her.⁷ Daniels' rich recount grounded recent history into a broader epistemological context that gave apprehension to the ways in which 'historical' events cohabit the present, the recent past and the deeper history of the Dreaming concurrently. Moreover, as he emphasised how Ruth and the women's travels had lately become incorporated into contemporary performance of the ceremony-business associated with Burrunju, Daniel's telling of this story fused the secular and sacred worlds.⁸

4 Hughes 1986.

5 Hughes 1986, 2005, 2013b.

6 See Elkin 1972.

7 See Rose 1998: 262–264, for a description of what she calls 'species intersubjectivity', and Bell 2002: 18–36, for an expanded understanding of how classificatory kin relations work. See Hughes 2005: 89–96, and Hughes 2013a, for a detailed account of the kin relations between Ruth and the Roper River women.

8 For a fuller account on this see Hughes 2005: 94.

Daniel's rendition offered a philosophical frame for understanding the stories held by the women *djungaiyi* and traditional owners with whom I was about to work over the coming months. We travelled to Burrunju in order to retrace part of this history in Country, and explicitly to 'wake me up' to the history and to 'get the history straight'.

Working with Ngarrindjeri women more than a decade later, in the heavily colonised regions south of Adelaide, it became clear that their stories followed a similar pattern and pedagogy to those of the Ngukurr elders who had a greater access to land.

The Dreaming, '1958' and a moment of now – Dinah Garadji (1921–2006)

The first story is from Dinah Garadji (née Joshua), a Warndarrang-Marra-Yugul elder born in 1921, a published author, successful artist, cultural custodian and church deacon, who divided her time between the larger hub of Ngukurr and her family's homeland Boomerang Lagoon, Malambuybuy, 50 kilometres to the north.⁹ I met Dinah Garadji en route to Burrunju in 1984. With us was her cousin, the Warndarrang elder Rosalind Munur, who was soon to become my classificatory-mother and greatest teacher, and Dawson Daniels, a younger brother to Dennis, employed by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to maintain infrastructure and services to the numerous Roper River outstations. Members of the Joshua family – Dinah, along with her sister Eva Rogers, and her brother Andrew Joshua – invited us to camp at Boomerang Lagoon overnight. They had recently established an outstation on their specific Country¹⁰ where they had erected a number of hand-built living shelters, a neat bough-shaded schoolhouse used daily by the children, and a sturdy cattle-mustering yard.

Old Joshua, their father, was one of the people who had negotiated the establishment of the Roper River Mission on his country in 1908 as a response to the 'killing times' in the Roper River region.¹¹ He also worked as one of the key guides and translators for the anthropologist Donald Thomson in south-east Arnhem Land during the 1930s and early 1940s.¹² In 1948, Old Joshua was thought to have leprosy and was taken to the Channel Island leprosarium where he died in the 1950s. A month before my arrival in June 1984, the Joshua family

9 Garadji 1982.

10 Here I use the Aboriginal English term 'Country' which encompasses home, clan estate, and the powerful complex of spiritual, animate and inanimate forces that bind people and place.

11 Harris 1998: 9–12.

12 Thomson 1983: 30–42.

had participated in a two-week long ceremony to see their father's spirit safely on to 'the next world', as Eva Rogers put it. It had taken them 12 years of protracted negotiations to secure the safe return of his remains from Channel Island, some 30 years after his death.

That evening over supper, Dinah began to explain to me how Boomerang Lagoon/Malambuybuy, the lily-filled lagoon in front of our camp, was created by the ancestral-giant, Ngarkaran. This was the place where Ngarkaran hurled his boomerang when on his celebrated journey to Burrunju to the very first *business for that place*, shaping the features of the landscape as he travelled during the creative period of the Dreaming.¹³ I wondered how big Ngarkaran was – and for comparison, I was mentally invoking the Cyclops from Homer's *Odyssey*.

Dinah paused, thinking deeply before responding. 'I don't know,' she said, 'but when he died in 1958, it took four men to carry his boomerang. It took a long while for his body to decompose. Some people carried his body to a cave near the coast,' she explained, 'and they said his spine was this wide.' Dinah stretched her arms two metres or so apart.¹⁴

Recalibrating time

Stars filled the night sky, almost touching one another as I listened to a story of events that had shaped the land where we sat. Dinah's answer came as a powerful inaugural history lesson, pointing me, as Dennis Daniels' story had earlier, to a remarkably different sense of temporality and indeed of time-space continuum, and subsequently to a more monumental sense of history that confounds and indeed shatters all notions of western historiography. It was not only *munangna* (white people) like Ruth Heathcock who became enveloped in stories told as part of *business* originating in the Creative period, but ancestral beings, millennia old, crossed over into modern times, traversing the post-war world into which I was born.

What became starkly apparent was that 'historical stories', including on occasion those in which white people played a significant role, are not separate from but rather part of the big ceremonial stories, belonging to a temporality far deeper and more intricate than I had hitherto imagined, in which locale and kinship – not only human but interspecies kinship – superseded, or perhaps indeed swallowed or enveloped, ordinary time. Creation accounts, for example, fuse spatial and temporal realms, and render present lived-experiences

¹³ See Capell 1960.

¹⁴ Dinah Garadji, pers. comm., 1984.

coexistent with the Creative past.¹⁵ As anthropologist WEH Stanner eloquently noted: 'Dreamings populate an everywhen – all the instants of being, whether completed or to come.'¹⁶



Figure 5.1: *Devil Devil*, Djambu Burra Burra (1937–2005), 2001.

Source: Synthetic polymer on canvas, collection of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, reproduced with kind permission of the family of Djambu Burra Burra, AIATSIS and the Ngukurr Art Centre.

¹⁵ Westphalen 2011: 13–14.

¹⁶ Stanner 2009 [1966] quoted in Sansom 2001: 2.

The Catfish sisters – Rosalind Munur’s story (1931–2005)

Leaving Boomerang Lagoon, continuing towards Burrunju in the company of Rosalind Munur, a *djungaiyi* for Burrunju, and Dawson Daniels (whose country of Wiyakibu connects to Burrunju along the Catfish Dreaming track), I was further instructed in multiple ways how such richly complex understandings of temporality played out in the landscape and through the family histories of those belonging to it. We drove along rough bush tracks, very often through Country where there was no road at all, yet where the bush navigators were sure of their directions. Burrunju in the stone country of central Arnhem Land is an important place for *Gunabibbi business*. It is a spectacular labyrinth of spiralling sandstone tors covering more than four square kilometres, where a number of big Dreaming stories, including that of the giant Ngarkaran, intersect and meet.¹⁷ Each of the sandstone tors embody a Catfish ancestor.¹⁸ Sam Thompson, the senior *djungaiyi* for Burrunju at that time confirmed that these were extraordinarily ancient rocks, dating to a time before dinosaurs and other mega-fauna walked this Country.¹⁹ As we approached Burrunju through sparse savannah country, Rosalind asked Dawson to stop the vehicle. ‘See those rocks over there,’ she said, drawing my attention to three large rounded sandstone tors that guard the entrance into Burrunju, ‘they are my mother and my two aunts, their names are Ngangigee, Dulban and Mungranjajua – they are all Catfish.’

Ngangigee is Cara Thompson, Rosalind’s mother, a Warndarrang woman born in the 1910s, a *minininggi*, (traditional owner) for Burrunju, and one of the group of women who worked closely with Ruth Heathcock in the 1930s, escorting her to Burrunju in 1937.²⁰ Cara also worked as an assistant nurse on the Roper River Mission. She died there suddenly in the late 1950s. Dulban, Cara’s sister, country-woman and fellow *minininggi*, is the late Hannah Dulban, also Warndarrang, and wife of the notable Alawa land rights activist and medical officer Phillip Roberts.²¹ Hannah Roberts died under tragic circumstances in Katherine in the early 1970s, the result of a violent assault from a non-Indigenous man.²² Mungranjajua, the third sister and fellow *minininggi*, I assumed also to have passed away sometime during the mid-twentieth century.

17 See Capell 1960.

18 Rosalind Munur, pers. comm., September 1984.

19 Sam Thompson, pers. comm., September 1984.

20 Hughes 2005: 89–96.

21 See National Museum of Australia, ‘Phillip Roberts’, *Collaborating for Indigenous Rights*, indigenoustrights.net.au/person.asp?pID=1019; Lockwood 1962: 108–117.

22 Philip Bush, pers. comm., November 2013.



Figure 5.2: Warndarrang elder Rosalind Munur points to the three Catfish tors that guard the entrance to Burrunju, 1984. Also in the photograph is Ngukurr elder Dawson Daniels.

Source: From the documentary *Pitjiri, the snake that will not sink*, directed by the author.



Figure 5.3: Warndarrang elder *Ngangigee*, Cara Thompson, late 1930s.

Source: Collection of Ruth Heathcock, from the film *Pitjiri, the Snake that will not sink*, directed by Karen Hughes, with permission from Cara Thompson's family.

Two decades later, in 2004, I was at Ngukurr, again working under Rosalind Munur's expert guidance, pursuing a project that more deeply traced the biographical trajectories of the Roper River women essential to Ruth Heathcock's covert work with leprosy. Rosalind this time insisted we travel to Mainoru (Bulman) in central Arnhem Land to speak with one of her aunties, Ruth Cook, who I was informed held an important part of this story.²³ Holding a story infers a custodianship, an authority to speak, as well as at times a right to bestow that authority on others.²⁴ To my astonishment, Ruth Cook, a Warndarrang-speaking woman aged in her 80s, was Mungranjajua, the third and still living Catfish sister who protected Burrunju's entrance. As a child of 15, she had also travelled on the 1937 trip with Ruth Heathcock. As I continued to work over many years on varied aspects of this history, I came to realise how these ancient Catfish rocks are not only a vital part of an enormously important ceremonial cycle and matrix of Dreamings, but that they also embody very specific recently departed women ancestors and close living-kin born into the Catfish Dreaming, as in the case of Mungranjajua, Ruth Cook (1922–2009), who took her European name from the nurse Ruth Heathcock (1901–1995).

'The information visible in the landscape', as anthropologist Fred Myers has shown, is not 'sufficient in itself to illuminate the underlying reality'.²⁵ The immanence of the three sisters that Rosalind identified in a totemic landscape – vitalised with knowledge, kin and Dreaming – points to a vastly deeper and broader essence of personhood than is conceived within present academic understanding across fields of history and biography, or even in much of the literature on totemic relationships. It calls for, as historian Minoru Hokari has persuasively argued, an indigenisation of approaches to history and a cross-culturalisation of the discipline itself. This is yet to be taken up in the academy at large.²⁶ Notably, the agency and embodiment of Rosalind's women-kin as sentinels of the Dreaming is an undeniable material, as well as a conceptual element, of personal and family biography that moves through time from its beginnings millennia ago, and resides infinitely in place. The responsibility of these women ancestors as protectors of a matrix of Dreamings in this highly sacred-restricted landscape illuminates, too, the significance of women's crucial role in upholding Law.²⁷ Further, this can be seen to deepen an entwined history and biography of people and place. Crucially, the Aboriginal concept of relationality²⁸ embraces not only people, country, totems and other living things, but also encompasses the multiple dimension of time.²⁹

23 Hughes 2005: 89–98.

24 For amplification of this see Hughes 2013a.

25 Myers in Sansom 2001: 2.

26 Hokari 2011.

27 See Bauman and Bell 1982; Bell 2002.

28 See Moreton-Robinson 2000; Arbon 2007.

29 Victoria Grieves, pers. comm., 2007.



Figure 5.4: Warndarrang elder Ruth Cook, Mungranjajua, Katherine, Northern Territory, 2006.

Source: Photograph by Karen Hughes, collection of the author.

Rupturing and the colonised world, purposeful ghosts – Aunty Hilda Wilson’s story (1911–2007)

The third story arose from a conversation in 2002 with Aunty Hilda Wilson, the revered Ngarrindjeri elder and storyteller, who was an accomplished community historian and genealogist. It took place in the Adelaide home she shared with her youngest son’s family.³⁰ The Ngarrindjeri are a South Australian Aboriginal nation, comprising several peoples with a common language, whose land and waters (*yarluwar-ruwe*) take in the River Murray, Lakes Alexandrina and Albert, the vast Coorong wetlands, and the Southern Ocean coast. While Ngarrindjeri bore the harsh brunt of first wave invasion in the South Australian colony in 1836 (and indeed in the unruly decades that preceded formal colonisation), as a nation they have managed to survive, and today flourish, nurturing strong cultural connections to their land and waters, and to one another.

³⁰ Aunty Hilda Wilson also has Barngarla and Wirringu ancestry through her father Wilfred Varcoe’s lineage. Olive Rankine, her mother, was Ngarrindjeri. Aunty Hilda was born and raised on Ngarrindjeri country at Raukkan.

During the early onslaught of Ngarrindjeri dispossession, when people were left near-starving and decimated from introduced diseases, Hilda's third generation great-grandfather Pulame (c1808–1888), the *rupuli* (the elected leader of the Ngarrindjeri *Tendi*, or parliament), decisively steered his people through the traumatic changes, eventually negotiating a middle-path after the Point McLeay Mission was established at Lake Alexandrina on Ngarrindjeri country in 1859.³¹ Pulame's granddaughter, the accomplished, independent-thinking Ellen Sumner or *Tumpoweri* (1842–1925), played an influential educative role during Hilda's youth. Like other Ngarrindjeri women in her lineage, Ellen Sumner was skilled in *putari* practice (female doctor) and midwifery culture (teaching her 'what to do and what not to do'), on which Hilda herself drew throughout her long life.³² It is these explicit knowledges, passed along through the 'information superhighways' of genealogies such as Aunty Hilda's, and vested in Ngarrindjeri Law, that inform her interpretation and storytelling practice here.

One late winter morning, Aunty Hilda Wilson, together with her countrywomen, Aunty Daisy Rankine and Aunty Daisy's sister, Aunty Emily Webster, and I were recording stories around Hilda's kitchen table.³³ And although I have called this a story, this is really about what happened between stories in a quiet moment when we broke for lunch. Aunty Hilda was reading *The Advertiser*³⁴ when a real estate feature caught her attention. The article concerned a nineteenth-century commercial property for sale in Milang, a historic town founded in the 1850s on the Lake Alexandrina foreshore near the River Murray mouth, in Aunty Hilda's ancestral country. Her grandfather, William Rankine, was born at Milang in 1866, in the country of his grandmother, Kunjawarra, daughter of Pulame.³⁵ The property, a former general store built in 1850, was close to the old ceremonial ground, now the site of a caravan park, where each of the women's grandmothers (Grandmother Ellen Sumner and Grandmother Pinkie Mack) had participated in big ceremonial gatherings at the beginning of the twentieth century, and also very near the site outside the Milang hotel where the noted Aboriginal cricketer Harry Hewitt was killed by another Ngarrindjeri man in a fight in 1907.³⁶ Following Hewitt's death, Ngarrindjeri, observing Law, ritually avoided the site. Although now a predominately settler town, Milang takes its name from the Ngarrindjeri word *milangk*, 'place of sorcery'.

31 Hughes 2013c; Jenkin 1979.

32 Hilda Wilson, pers. comm., 2002; Hughes 2013c.

33 See Hughes 2009.

34 Adelaide's daily newspaper.

35 Kartinyeri and Anderson 2007: 91, 97.

36 Hewitt, a Boandik man, was married to Mary Unaipon, sister of David Unaipon. The Unaipons and Hilda Wilson's family are both descended from Pulame.

Aunty Hilda began to read aloud a passage from the article. It referred to the presence of a ghost, on which the women's attention sharply focused. 'They should *know!*' Hilda proclaimed with an uncharacteristic sternness, ignoring my presence and speaking principally to the other elders. Her tone signalled the significance of the information as important *business*. 'That means they *aren't meant to be there,*' she concluded firmly.

Aunty Daisy and Aunty Emily paid close attention to Aunty Hilda's pronouncement, nodding in solemn agreement. A particularly important aspect of such reflection comes from the knowledge gained through one's *miwi* during this process. *Miwi* for Ngarrindjeri is 'the inner spirit', which is one's sixth sense, and through which important knowledge is gained or verified.³⁷

I later discovered, during fieldwork at Milang, that the property that Aunty Hilda referred to subsequently sold, but that the ensuing commercial venture failed, with illness and divorce simultaneously affecting its new owners within an exceptionally short period. The building itself remained vacant for a long while afterward in what we are reminded was, is and, for Ngarrindjeri, will continue to be (among many other things), a powerful place of sorcery, energised and governed by Dreaming Laws of the Kaldowinyeri (and the lineages connected to these), through which deep time can be experienced as an active force in interactive continuum with the present. Exerting care over country, Aunty Hilda, as the senior-most elder with a direct lineage to this part of Lake Alexandrina, brought a different sense of time, relationality and analysis of the elements that shaped history and behaviour there.³⁸

This collision at the border of differing worldviews reveals how a Law that is violated or disregarded, knowingly or not, can result in formerly healthy places transforming into sickness country, even in places that, like Milang, have been perceived as 'settled' for a century and a half. The imposition of alternate ways of being and understanding arising from the recent European settlement appears as a thin veneer over the enduring Ngarrindjeri world. Sansom notes that when Dreamings intervene in the everyday, the 'message proceeds from a concealed and "inside" place of essential verities into the "outside" space of contingencies and surface appearances that are inherently deceptive'.³⁹ Here, the manifestation of the ghost marks the outward appearance of the property as 'inherently deceptive', alerting to the probability of danger and unfinished business that needs to be appropriately addressed.⁴⁰

37 See Bell 1998: 218–225; Hughes and Trevorrow 2014: 178–180.

38 For an insightful analysis of haunted places in Australia across cultural boundaries see Read 2003.

39 Sansom 2001: 2.

40 Gelder and Jacobs 1999: 179–199.

Hilda Wilson's distinctive reading of this sign of significance in her country throws into sharp relief the ways in which, in places that appear outwardly colonised, Indigenous readings of place and time actively co-exist with what westerners might conceive therein as 'past' and 'present'. It reinforces understanding of the multiple ways in which – through an 'irruption of Dreaming' – deep time punctures the present across the Australian continent. Hilda Wilson's story, too, serves to emphasise the governance system of elders, through the potency and continuity of cultural practice.

Conversations with George – Aunty Inez Jean Birt (1911–2005)

The fourth and final story is from Aunty (Inez) Jean Birt (née Rankine) who, like Aunty Hilda, is descended from Pulame, the Ngarrindjeri *rupulle*, and his granddaughter, the Ngarrindjeri matriarch, Ellen Sumner. Jean is the daughter of Ellen Sumner's son George Rankine (1875–1957) and his non-Aboriginal wife Eva Mugg, who enjoyed a happy and successful inter-cultural marriage, despite the Mugg family's opposition.⁴¹ Jean was born in Adelaide in 1911, the same year as Aunty Hilda, and raised outside Country in the Adelaide seaside suburb of Glenelg. Yet her story is just as firmly rooted in her traditional (Ngarrindjeri) homelands as those of the previous women. When I met Jean in 2002 she was living in an aged-care facility in Adelaide. She described herself emphatically as being 'from the Lake'.⁴² She was also privy to many of Lake Alexandrina's stories of *ngatjis* (totems, or to use Hilda Wilson's translation, *close relations*), traditional basket-weaving, the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ngarrindjeri camps at Milangk and the 'little people' that her father spoke of. These stories had been passed orally through her paternal lineage, especially from the grandmother she shares with Hilda Wilson, her father's mother Tumpoweri (Ellen Sumner), despite Jean being raised in Adelaide.

Because of her direct embodied connection with her family's colonial and pre-colonial past, meeting Aunty Jean Birt gave me a feeling of time-travelling. I had the privilege of travelling to Lake Alexandrina with Jean when she was 91. When we stopped near the Milang jetty, where her father was born in 1875 and where her grandmother traded fish with the white townfolk, Aunty Jean got out of the car and confidently walked to the water's edge on her frame. She knew this was where wurlies once stretched along the foreshore and is the site of the old ceremonial ground. She turned to face the Lake, calling up the Country. There

⁴¹ Jenkin 1979: 207–209, 229, 257–258; Jean Birt, pers. comm., 2002.

⁴² Jean Birt, pers. comm., 2002.

she began to directly address her father as if he were physically present, calling out his name at the place he was born a century and a quarter earlier. She was using her voice as an instrument to ‘open up’ Country and usher in the Dreaming (Kaldowinyeri). This was a conversation across time and generations, but back in place. For Ngarrindjeri the word for body is *ruwar* and for land, *ruwi*; land is the plural of body.⁴³ This is reflective of this indivisible relationship that we saw also expressed in Rosalind Munur’s account of the Catfish sisters.

Such a speech-event addressed to a close family member no longer living is consistent with practices of ritualised mourning and caring for Country practised by older Ngarrindjeri women and men, as well as those with whom I worked at Ngukurr. The ancestors are evoked as a mark of respect and safety. Jean Birt’s potent evocation demonstrates the power of being on Country and connecting across time to those who belong to it. Her father is literally *in* the land and landscape. Through this infoldment of her presence on Country, and observing correct behaviour, she is able to fuse with him at that moment. It is interesting to note that the place this conversation occurred at is less than 150 metres from the haunted property that had independently captured Hilda Wilson’s attention at around the same time. Hilda’s concern and Auntie Jean’s speech act are both practices that keep the visible as well as the unseen dimensions of country healthy.



Figure 5.5: Ngarrindjeri elder Auntie Jean Birt, the Coorong, South Australia, 2002.

Source: Photograph by Karen Hughes, collection of the author.

43 Bell 1998: 262–265.

From this brief story fragment, it is possible to chart how knowledges from the Lake travel *with* the body, and by implication how aspects of Country travel with people who are born of and belong to it. As the Ngarrindjeri historian Doreen Kartinyeri affirms, it is 'our lineage that takes us back to our land'.⁴⁴ In this way the importance of genealogies can be understood as metonymic of a process of narrative circulation across time, giving access to deep historical knowledge that is activated by being on country and through *miwi*.

Connective threads

In all these elders' stories, a deep sense of history is conferred through the mechanisms of Law, which disrupts, and calls into question, the concept of linear time and its relationship to spatiality. Sociologist Anthony Giddens defines 'time-space distancing' (the severing of time from space) as *the* enabling feature of modernity, underpinning the construction of 'the west' and its notions of progress and rationale for colonial domination over 'others'.⁴⁵ Moreover, this temporality is reflected in linear approaches to history and narrative, which effectively erase the presence of the past from space, and from what might be termed 'place-making'.

The women demonstrate that the linear temporality of colonial displacement, assumed to be achieved from the policies that removed Indigenous people from their country as well as often from their kin, is in fact occluded by the living presence of elders and their knowledge. Country and people are interchangeable and indivisible, and the Dreaming is party to this relationship. 'The Dreaming inheres in all things and partakes of all times.'⁴⁶

Genealogies: Superhighways of deep histories and deep time

One important way in which narrative sequences travel in all of these women's stories is through the connective spaces of genealogies, expressed in the reflexive relationship between body and country. This nexus is fundamental to Ngarrindjeri as well as to most other Indigenous Australian people's formulations

⁴⁴ Kartinyeri in Bell 1998: 232.

⁴⁵ Giddens 1990.

⁴⁶ Stanner 2009 [1966], cited in Sansom 2001: 2.

of identity.⁴⁷ Thus genealogies provide highly complex renderings of land, culture and narrative disclosed via memory through the medium of the bodies and voices of the ancestors.

The active persistence of deep time, as embodied in the women's storytelling practices and as a charged underlying force outside colonial systems, is a potent dimension and expression of Aboriginal sovereignty and is purposely used in this way. A combination of carefully chosen dramatic moments and reflexive engagement stitches together teller, listener and narrative, amplifying the lessons of events from the past into the present, widening their sphere of influence. The stories served an educative function as a conduit of complex understanding between cultures, and exhibit an authoritative quality of skilful performance. Deep histories are thus radically decolonising. Used together with spatiality as a dispossessing agent, they resist temporality.

Conclusion: Rethinking historiography

In such diverse places as Adelaide and its regions and remote places within Arnhem Land, individual storytellers purposely deploy representations of deep time as a pedagogy that serves a range of explicit cultural and political purposes. They work to 'undo the prevalent misconception that Aboriginal belief was posited on the notion of a finished universe fashioned by creator Powers who retired into inaction once the age of primary genesis was done'.⁴⁸ They are stories that affirm an ontological sovereignty and governance in that they reassert a deeper history in which the Dreaming reshapes worlds ruptured by colonial intrusion and defined by narrow notions of linear time.

I am always astounded by the way it is possible to touch the deep past in the present, and it is this that has largely inspired me as a historian of Aboriginal history and the contact zone. For Indigenous people, they signal the continuum of an ever-present reality which affirms another way of being in contemporary Australia that pulses in parallel with the 'colonised' world. In this way, performative moments such as these assert a continuity of Aboriginal sovereignty and governance.

47 Bell 1998: 263. Knowledge of country can be thought of as inscribed on the body, and is expressed or transferred in the connective spaces that link the relationships of a person's genealogy. Despite perhaps multiple dispossessions, aspects of 'country' are still able to travel with the body, with people.

48 Sansom 2001: 2.

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