

**NARRATIVE, MYTH AND CULTURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN WADEYE,
NORTHERN TERRITORY, AUSTRALIA: A PRELIMINARY STUDY**

by

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Abstract

Cultural resource management is an effort to revitalize culture in the present, and the aim of such endeavours is to provide stability for future generations in navigating culture. This theme runs throughout my preliminary fieldwork in Wadeye, as I sought to collect traditional narratives of the mythic “Dreaming” song cycles. One of the goals of my volunteering and fieldwork in this region was to help make history relevant to future generations of Aboriginal Australians by providing them with resources from the local Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum. In this thesis, I explore how culture as presented in traditional myths and narratives becomes intertwined in the daily lives of Aboriginal Australians. The thesis delves heavily into the process of fieldwork as a way of engendering empathy for the social analysis of myths. The experience of the field, entering into another way of life, is central in forming an understanding for how myth and narrative play vital roles in Aboriginal Australian culture. The fieldwork here is largely from the vein of applied anthropology in seeking answers relating to the loss of narratives in the region. The drive here is to find a framework for the successful revitalization of lost stories by visiting cultural sites and reconnecting to experiences of the land. I also explore notions of ethno-poetry as a possible way of tapping into the creative potential of the Aboriginal Australian “Dreamtime.” The aim is thus to engender larger discussion in cultural resource management by centering the community in deciding its own responses and adaptation strategies in dealing with story revitalization efforts.

Preface

This research required an ethics approval, which was provided by the UBC Okanagan Behavioural Research Ethics Board, certificate number: H12-03637.

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Dedication

To the elders of Wadeye. Through your continued guidance and love, it is my hope that each generation of Aboriginal Australians may find its way in the world.

Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis focuses on the topic of cultural resource management, a theme that runs through my preliminary fieldwork experience, as well as the larger task of collecting local clan narratives in a remote, indigenous community in Australia, the Wadeye Township. In this context, the term cultural resource management refers to tasks set out by local organizations such as the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum that relate to the ongoing preservation of Aboriginal Australian culture in the historical and living record in the Thamarrurr region of Wadeye and its Aboriginal residents. The primary objective of this thesis is to facilitate an understanding of how both traditional and contemporary stories in Aboriginal Australia inform the day-to-day rhythms of people's contemporary lifeways in the Wadeye region that I observed and experienced during my fieldwork period. The central aim of cultural resource management is to deal with the loss of narrative traditions that readily define the structures of life by finding ways of recouping culture in the present. This record of my preliminary findings in the Wadeye region gives a picture of what cultural resource management might look like for fieldworkers, as well as the challenges in practically and ethically negotiating the task of preserving a longstanding heritage across generations of Aboriginal Australians. The thesis deals with the struggle of working in situations where cultural decay has affected the transmission of culture and stands as a way of engaging cultural revitalization by identifying states of cultural resilience or decay as they appear during fieldwork and as a way of initiating discussions of how fieldworkers might go about formulating an ethnographic project that incorporates the community in cultural revitalization.

The illustrations of first-hand experiences go a long way in shaping notions of what life is like in the remote indigenous community. I want to show the difficulty that pervaded my time in

the field in collecting local narratives. During this time, I worked with the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum as it dealt with the reality of loss that pervades these communities in their ongoing struggle to represent their cultural identity. There is a large amount of energy and work needed to properly mount a successful movement of cultural revitalization in a township such as Wadeye. The work there becomes important in providing the Aboriginal Australian residents of the Thamarrurr region with a renewed sense of their history by instituting older traditions in the present repertory of cultural activity. The work to revisit older stories of the “Dreaming,” which itself is a traditional cosmology based in Aboriginal Australian thought that speaks of “a sacred, heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be as they are” (Stanner 1979:23) then and now, provides a cultural connection to the land by clarifying people’s association to it through their clan repertories. The “Dreaming” is a mythic charter (Malinowski 1922), a worldview, a creation story and the stories that I am working with in the reclamation project are part of the “Dreaming” which are associated with the creation of both land and sacred geography. Thus, it is helpful to go onto the land to revisit these stories. The ethnographic work in this thesis looks at finding a place for the near-lost stories that characterize expressions of cultural decay in the region. Cultural revitalization creates a mindset of both resilience, diversity and opportunity for Aboriginal Australians.

The work of cultural resource management was taken from the framework of getting involved with the community in Wadeye. I had devised a way of participating and observing the local culture through the framework of anthropological fieldwork. Participant observation, the immersion in the lifeblood of the community, made sense in getting to know the Aboriginal Australian residents through volunteering my time to help document the local clan stories that were important to the people and the Thamarrurr region. The bulk of the work depended on my

getting a sense for the quality of life and the rhythms of activity that took place in Wadeye. I wanted to see how traditional culture continued to make a difference to Aboriginal Australians being interconnected with how old stories made sense in the present moments of contemporary life.

Getting There

I started my graduate program in September 2012 with the promise of doing research aboard in my early proposal to the University of British Columbia, and I wanted to do innovative research in another country, namely Australia. I had taken the task of preparing for such a jump across continents, and I had the expert advice of a seasoned anthropologist, Dr. Naomi McPherson, to help me prepare for the rigours of academics and fieldwork. Those initial pre-contact weeks were rather surreal to me, drawn into the backdrop of my early graduate life back home in my own country, Canada—the days then were spent in planning and anticipation of something altogether different. I could only imagine how time abroad would seep into me and take an effect in bringing about change within me, a measure of growth. My first experience of fieldwork in Australia began in the hot, dry month of June 2013, and it culminated in a way of testing my sensibilities in finding an anchor as a necessary first step in becoming a fieldworker. I had contacted the local Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum's cultural coordinator, Mark Crocombe, earlier that year via email and letter regarding the possibility of fieldwork in Wadeye. Little words could capture my sentiment; I was overjoyed at the simple recognition of interest in my proposal.



Figure 1.1. A Map of the settlement geography of the Thamarrurr region; Wadeye is included as one of the major townships. © Bowden McCormack Lawyers and Advisors and Thamarrurr Regional Council Incorporated, 2014.

The Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum was engaged in various projects at the time and Mark suggested that we should look into the fieldwork conducted by one of Australia's national poets, Roland Robinson, who had spent time in the Wadeye region collecting indigenous stories. Mark's words gave me a sense of purpose—that I would be able to provide a valuable service to the community by offering to track and manage local cultural resources. The aim of this initiative was largely constructed for the benefit of Aboriginal Australian youth, the younger generations, in the Wadeye Township. This promise of service and fieldwork was the context that granted me access to a remote

indigenous community in the Northern Territory of Australia.

Each passing moment into this setting, this journey, became a point of reflection for me and I did not know what to expect when I first ventured into that country, the community, as I recount in my early field notes. I later went back to those same notes to expand on the experience in seeing how those first moments of culture affected me as an anthropologist:

Swells of heat, the pressure of air, nearing ... that first indication of something ominous dawning upon the senses, a slight of sun slid down my skin, where I could feel it thick and brazen. The light had its own gravity. I took some time to gather where I was. Waking, perhaps, then and there, I readily felt the breeze as it toiled across my face.

Fragments captured in Darwin after an endless shuffle, an eye for detail amid the motions of a local airport station; the way a long journey has a definite power over a person's initial intake of experiences. The rustling of leaves and a smooth scent penetrated my being, leaving an impression. I arrived in Australia that day. The last connecting flight tomorrow would bring me to Wadeye. I made a final reservation, the last edge.

I took rest in the town.

*

I made it back to the airport earlier than needed, not wanting to spend much time in Darwin proper. So close to the field, my wandering character was set into motion. I could feel the eagerness to see what I would venture upon that summer and the full stress of it all coming to fruition. Not that I was startled, that was not something I would wager as being immediate in my thoughts—just action.

I exited my taxi in front of the Murin Travel Services. The check-in was quick. I had plenty of time to relax in this new setting. I remained perched in a seat, sleuthing through a book that I had brought with me. Some anthologized verses of Roland Robinson, a poet who had worked with Murrinh-Patha speakers, long ago yet still fresh. The pages—a shade less white from age, crisply tanged—began to percolate with imagination, giving me sight to another world; they brought a haunt of familiarity, the way that poetry marks frontiers of how people muster depth and reflection. I paused a little, glancing, to consider the scene.

The motifs of mythic figures ran about the walls, animated in my mind's eye, seeing a possible dash of activity. Mysteries cryptic and coloured that I wondered about. ... A few people darted in and out of the door. A stranger, a boy, a man—and then a woman. A frantic score of passengers to be. I was not sure of the scurry, clashing words, as the utterances of another dialect of English dropped mixed upon my ears.

Flutters and streams, here and there, of another language in the waiting room came as an interesting, cluttered sense of sounds. And these indigenous fellows, all of them there, waiting peacefully, just as I and another man still yet. These were people, real to the drop like any others and I could see their faces, that humanity deep within their motions about and between themselves. An exchange of a few passing words between an adolescent and me, while the other non-indigenous passenger was keen to keep to himself.

I started talking with an older man, perhaps a local of Wadeye. He was all too happy to ease himself in conversation. He explained the circumstances of why he was returning to the township. The tension rises as the police enter into the waiting. They make the situation all the more awkward, searching all the indigenous folk with scrutiny—even the dog was channelled with an expectation of where to find the contraband. The attention and the glances never so much came upon me and the other man. The police were at odds. One of the indigenous men was almost sent home. ...

The flight continued, as we boarded a small chartered plane to Wadeye. The sting of the day's drama momentarily forgotten as the mechanics of flight took hold.

*

The first descent always leaves the greatest impression, that moment when you find a point of breath in coming to a journey's end ... or it's beginning, as I peered

through a small window high above the Australian country. I could see a barrage of green land close to the shores and the winding waterways. I could make out a pattern of settlement—many thoughts clustered in my head. Micro-narratives obscured, coming into being, of how my months might be spent from such a distanced sighting. Soon to be altered.

The final, closing descent was a physical reminder of reality. An impact. I could see people from the township rushing to greet some of the other passengers. I did not really understand the gravity of what was to follow—how it would remain in me, that image. The older man, who I talked with at the flight station, was stricken with grief and that emotion fell out of him, became visible, as soon as it plundered and unravelled him. There was a motion to console him and then the thick flurry of a fist, wrecking upon the steel frame of a vehicle—repeating and repeating.

That blow, I imagine, which grief calls in the depth of humanity as it feels the weight of everything that it has and will ever love, and crashes with impact. That raw beauty even in a storm of imperfect distress hammered full inside me, a song—the reverberations clear to me in reflection as that fist, such that it was and could always then repeat its action, still long after I left the field. I could only dream of this love as it crashes inside us all ... that swift blow calling out to me.

These reckonings of poetry, living testaments, I caught muddled about in the details of life; I was drawn in, as they hooked magic to my senses like a second skin, breaking my expectations. I believe that fieldwork has these kinds of moments, which flawlessly arrest you into seeing the world differently. I have become accustomed to such challenging contexts—that I feel deeply for those moments that poetry resonates from intricate experiences. The field has its own kind of magic and poetry that I was keen on investigating during my stay in Wadeye.

Wadeye Field Relations and Multi-sited Settings

The Kardu Diminin people are the traditional owners of the land upon which the Wadeye settlement is located in the Northern Territory of Australia. The first town hub was started in 1935 as a Roman Catholic Mission named Port Keats. By the 1950s, many of the Aboriginal clans from the coastal and Moyle River areas, moved voluntarily to reside in the Mission. This colonial past lasted until the Mission was abandoned in 1975, when the near complete secularization of the town and populace ushered in a period of native reclamation, as well as self-

governance. The township was reconstructed as a new Aboriginal hub and renamed Wadeye, bringing together many different regional clans and groups under one site (Mansfield 2013).

The Wadeye region is inhabited today by a diverse and resilient Aboriginal Australian demographic and it is one of the largest indigenous townships in the country. Some of the most recent estimates cite a population of 2111, about 91 per cent of whom are aboriginal (Australian Census 2011). The town lies ecologically within the limits of the coastal mangroves between Darwin and the Kimberleys¹ and it is only accessible by road during the dry seasons. It is a central hub for many of the outstations, both near and far, within the township. The infrastructure of this key locality provides services such as food, transportation, medical, as well as governmental, administrative and recreational outlets to the local inhabitants.

There are five languages and four different dialects spoken in the Wadeye Township; Murrinh-Patha is the most common of the languages and the *lingua franca* of the area (Blythe 2012). In addition to Murrinh-Patha speakers, there are other, less pervasive groups of languages used for daily communication whose “linguistic affiliations are to the Marri Tjevin, Marri Amu, Marri Ngarr, Makati Ke and Jaminjung languages (none of which are being acquired by children)” (Blythe 2012: para 1). The character of Wadeye, in terms of languages, has always been complex and multilingual but that complexity is diminishing as these lesser languages are being replaced with the bilingual predominance of English and Murrinh-Patha for younger generations. The social organization of Wadeye rests upon both traditional and modern ties of kinship and descent. Kinship has deep implications for a person’s connection to social organization in Aboriginal Australian life. All facets of life—traditional or otherwise—are tied

¹ The Kimberleys is a northernmost region of Western Australia by the Indian Ocean and the Timor Sea.

into kinship within the Creative ‘Lawtime,’² including relations to Ancestor Beings, sites and sacred geography. Kinship and affiliation are most often determined by the language identity of a given group member but, as a general rule, the structure reflects local variations within people’s regional clans, moieties and subsections. Wadeye itself is gender segregated, which relates to the patterns of Men’s Business and Women’s Business that codify social etiquette and demarcate gender boundaries. The predominant group-based social affiliations within the Wadeye region are the Ancestor Being totems, which connect Aboriginal Australians to a confluence of family and land groupings within the clans and estates of the Northern Territory.

The surrounding area rests within land held by various traditional owners. There are about twenty-five clan estates within the Wadeye Township. An estate is a tract of land representing a traditional area owned by an Aboriginal Australian clan. This area is the country that defines the borders between major family groups. Each area is where that family has presided for many generations as Traditional Owners, living off the land, preserving the ecology and connecting to their “Dreaming” Ancestors through the maintenance of important cultural sites. Each of these domestic estates typically relates to a local totem and Ancestor Being for which that specific site and its sacred geographic locations are known. Aboriginal Australians make multiple and lasting connections between Wadeye and the various clan estates held by traditional owners. Thus, the ethnic character of the Wadeye region is multi-sited (Marcus 1995).

The contemporary redefining of totems and traditional religious belief patterns has made possible new connections and modes of social interaction, especially with the township’s current

² The Creative ‘Lawtime’ is a synonymous to the “Dreaming” or the “Dreamtime,” which is the system of traditional belief in Aboriginal Australian society that centres on the connection to Ancestor Beings and the formation of the world according to that cosmology.

identification with metal musicians as new and viable totem groupings (Mansfield 2013). This is a relatively distinct social phenomenon. Both men and women from younger generations, the youth and young adult age sets of Wadeye are forming new social affiliations and allegiances to Western heavy metal bands such as Evil Warriors and Judas Priest. The allegiances demarcate a common relatedness or kinship among members who pledge to a similar heavy metal band.

The Wadeye region is guided by four predominant socio-political organizations, including the

- Victoria Daly Shire Council,
- Thamarrurr Development Corporation,
- Thamarrurr Regional Aboriginal Advisory Council (TRAAC) and,
- Wadeye Aboriginal Languages Centre.

The longstanding move toward a more indigenous and sustainable model of governance has recently replaced the Victoria Daly Shire Council as the one of the Northern Territory's administrative adjuncts. The council itself resides over local issues in facilitating the authority and values of the Australian state via Aboriginal Australian hands. Some of the local clans in the Wadeye region have banded together to form the Thamarrurr Development Corporation and TRAAC, which have been commissioned to take care of core economic, political and human resource issues that the Victoria Daly Shire Council has allotted to them as their partner in the Northern Territory. TRAAC has become the main controlling organization that governs the rest of these entities, funded by money from the Australian state. The Wadeye Aboriginal Language Centre is run from the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala Museum and the local Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education inside the township and serves as a cultural resource for Aboriginal Australians of the Wadeye region. In conjunction with federal authorities, these three

organizations work to facilitate the growing societal, economic and cultural needs of the population in its fluidity and connection to the Australian landscape.

The research in this thesis is of an interdisciplinary nature as it draws from socio-cultural anthropology, specifically, participant-observation fieldwork and how myth builds into an expression of a culture's worldview; literary criticism as I look at the textual and oral reproduction of myths; creative writing to explore how poetry and culture come together in expressing myth. By combining these approaches, the existing situation of cultural resource management in the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum is thus understood as a process of story revitalization within the setting of Wadeye. I was able to participate in the museum's effort to preserve its historical record and cultural repositories through a TRAAC-led initiative to connect Aboriginal Australian generations to culture and country. The service I provided the museum, along with the reflections on the current state of cultural resource management in the Wadeye region, is only the beginning of a much longer discussion surrounding Aboriginal Australian affairs and cultural autonomy in the Northern Territory. This thesis contributes to the subject, creating a discourse from a practical position of working "on site" in a remote indigenous community. The bulk of this community-based research has to be responsible and accountable to the local people who might benefit from the emerging recommendations. The fieldwork, as an attempt at applied anthropology, is an initial reflection that aims to galvanize support for greater action in terms of the merits that story and narrative play in Aboriginal Australian society. Story revitalization is necessary in Wadeye because elders (those 50+ years of age) in the region are passing away at an alarming rate.

Additionally, there has been a significant decline in the younger generation's ability to fully understand, even process, texts from older Murrinh-Patha speakers. This variation points to

a possible dearth in the local transmission of traditional narratives in their more complex forms. The narrative cultures within Wadeye are changing, progressing along a new standard; thus, one of the primary tasks of cultural resource management from the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum becomes not only demonstrating the importance of how narrative and story—through an understanding of living myth—translate into people’s daily lives, helping make sense of the world but also in preserving the continuity of traditional and modern myths in grounding a shared Aboriginal Australian sense of history. I will delve further into this topic in my findings.

Structure of the Thesis

The chapters in this thesis are divided along a continuum into related aspects of the study. This chapter has provided the background information necessary for the context of the fieldwork in Wadeye, to set the stage for talking about applied narrative work as well as story revitalization. Chapter two contains a literature review that briefly surveys the history of ethnography as well as the anthropology of myth. Chapter three contains information regarding methods, including my research design, the study area (the township of Wadeye and its surrounding region), how I obtained my data during my fieldwork and limitations of the study. Chapter four addresses narrative work and story collection in terms of an applied and practical anthropology for the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum—then transits into a discussion of how the codes of living mythology translate into the daily lives of the residents of Wadeye. The primary goals are to look at the practice of properly documenting story-work in order to realize how story pervades life in becoming a practical measure for navigating being and, second, to reclaim history by connecting people with the Ancestor Beings of the past with the present. This findings chapter will also look

at the concepts of ethno-poetry³ and story revitalization in an effort to find a ground for integrating the traditions of narrative and story in the region, as well as engaging the act of telling lost stories from the existing cultural poetics of the Wadeye region. Chapter five comprises the conclusion to my thesis, which includes a rendering of how myth is understood and used by contemporary Aboriginal Australians.

³ Ethno-poetics was first coined by Jerome Rothenberg in the 1960's. See Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred*. See also anthropologist Dennis Tedlock (1972) and Dell Hymes (1981).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The Australian continent presents a unique opportunity for case studies in myth and storytelling. There is a wide sampling of comparable indigenous religious systems with a common socio-cultural descent as far back as 50,000 to 40,000 years (Bowler et al. 2003; Tonkinson 1991). Since then, Aboriginal Australia has spiritually claimed the whole of the continent within “the Dreamtime” and “Dreaming” territories (Charlesworth et al. 2005; Berndt 1994; Tonkinson 1991; Stanner 1979), which comprise traditional indigenous countries and their sacred sites. The consensus among Aboriginals is that both myth and ritual play an indispensable role within the local belief systems of the continent.

The Australian tradition of ethnography began with Francis Gillen and Baldwin Spencer (1899) in the late nineteenth century but, in the mid twentieth century one of the most notable contributions was W.E.H Stanner’s work with the Murrinh-Patha in the Northern Territory. Stanner’s articles, *On Aboriginal Religion* (1963, 1961a, 1961b, 1960a, 1960b, 1959), make strides in supporting an Aboriginal Australian religion⁴ *sui generis* (‘of its own kind/genius’)—and the internal validity of all ritual/religious practices. Stanner’s breakthrough as an anthropologist comes from his study of Murrinh-Patha culture, specifically on its own terms, as well as from an emic perspective that effectively seeks to capture how culture operates in that region for indigenous locals. Framing voice and knowledge production gave a new credence to actually understanding myth and narrative in terms of its internal sets of symbols and cultural meanings. Furthermore, Stanner’s work exhibits a genuine attempt to capture a non-Western

⁴ Stanner set out to define Aboriginal Australian belief as a religion, which is a system of symbols that formulates a pervasive set of customs that formulate a conception of the order of existence in a realistic manner according to the moods and sentiments of the group (Geertz 1977:87-125).

worldview within a symbolic/programmatic rigour and encyclopaedism, which opens the possibility of a “foreign” mindset and ritual complex as a distinct cultural entity and voice within the Australian continent (Keen 2005:61-78; Stanner 1963, 1961a, 1961b, 1960a, 1960b, 1959). Stanner’s fieldwork and analysis are invaluable, as the Murrinh-Patha dataset provides an excellent summative view of what an Aboriginal Australian religion *is*. The bulk of his work in *On Aboriginal Religion* acts to contradict ruling anthropological positions of the time that Aboriginal ritual is void of religion (and, by subsequent afterthought, ‘savage’). Stanner achieves this feat by laying out a systematic and formative mapping of statements into gestalt awareness, a worldview, for the Murrinh-Patha people. The ethnographic writing in Stanner’s fieldwork, especially throughout *White Man Got No Dreaming* (1979), describes what such a cultural system might be like to live and experience by assuming the intellectual and imaginative capacities of the locals. Stanner’s trick is to humanize Aboriginal Australian culture by showing what it has in common with other world cultures—‘the metaphysical gift,’ for instance, is the ability to be self-reflexive about one’s existence in finding a principle to explain human experience (1979: 31). His insights placed value on the idea of transactional and transitory culture where, in finding a position, people negotiate meanings about the world: the situations of life are not guaranteed but sorted out by each individual, not a set religious thesis, “to what men evidently have to be because the terms of life are cast” (Stanner 1979: 32).

Another standard for ethnography and cultural story-work was set by Catherine Berndt and Ronald Berndt. Their joint publication, *The Speaking Land* (1994), was a landmark in terms of producing a cross-Australian anthology of Aboriginal myths and stories. The Berndts were particularly good at documenting stories given that they spent nearly fifty years working among the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. One of the main features of Aboriginal Australian myth as a

whole is that it conveys “conflict as a normal feature of social living, a familiar natural environment never quite harnessed to the service of human beings and a countryside that could on occasion become terrifying” (Berndt and Berndt 1994:3). The mythic world of Aboriginal Australians was complex in that the good and the bad co-existed in everything and myth never emphasized human morality nor was it directly censorious. One of the central ideas that the Berndts sought to translate was the idea that all myths are considered to be ‘living myths.’ The idea is that myths “embody ‘truth,’ purporting to depict what actually happened” (Berndt and Berndt 1994:4). According to the Berndts, the myths speak of events that have “everlasting effect on human beings. These myths are regarded as having an eternal quality” (Berndt and Berndt 1994:4) relevant to people from all times—past, present and future. The codes of myth are constantly being reinterpreted to the present moment of life. The Berndts explain that Aboriginal Australian myths provide explanations for how social and natural phenomena came about in the world. The statements made in myth were considered to be valid for all time. Myth is vital to Aboriginal Australian society because it provides “a charter for contemporary land-ownership: a set of statements identifying and locating people and groups who are assumed to have been descended from or otherwise associated with, the particular mythic beings who made these pronouncements in the beginning” (5-6). In this regard, the Berndts emphasized the importance that myth plays in understanding Aboriginal Australian connections to the land, their sacred geographies.

The discipline of ethnography in Australia continued in light of many other key figures, such as Robert Tonkinson, with his foundational and classic fieldwork in 1963, which gives a well-rounded and fully documented account of an Aboriginal Australian cosmology and the phases of male rites for initiation in Mardu society. Tonkinson’s work solidified the Mardu

people of Australia's Western desert as a representative population for that region's anthropology (Tonkinson 1991). His Australian benchmark, *The Mardu Aborigines, a tour de force* of the region's ethnological practices and revitalizations is particularly skilled at handling the context of 'the Law'⁵ and its power to *be* and *persist* as a viable socio-cultural complex, cosmology and culture within Australia (1991:19). Yet other accounts, such as Francesca Merlan's *Caging the Rainbow* (1998), deal with modernity, urbanization and the effects of the neo-colonial *present* upon Aboriginal Australian relations, especially in terms of life within the Katherine township in the Northern Territory. Despite the volumes of work in Australian anthropology, ethnologists and specialists are only beginning to understand the complexity of this living cultural tradition, especially in relation to the implications of Western contact upon Aboriginal cosmology and the Creative 'Lawtime.'

The Dreamtime

The study of Aboriginal Australian belief systems by early ethnographers in the late nineteenth century led to Spencer and Gillen coining the term "Dreamtime" to describe in English the worldview inherent in the Arrernte word, *Altyerrengge* (also rendered in English sometimes as *Alchuringa*). The term, like many other aboriginal languages modelling a continental religious conception, refers to the process of having a dream—literally "to see Altyerre [dreams]" (Morton 2005: 197). The terms "Dreamtime" and "the "Dreaming" became common terminology when describing basic conceptions of Aboriginal Australian belief but the term itself has less to do with actual dreams and dreaming and more to do with telling a story about the "ongoing creation of the world and all that it contains" (Morton 2005:197). The stories of the "Dreamings"

⁵ The 'Law' governs all of creation and without it nothing would exist. Each "Dreaming" is ruled by the 'Law' or sets of metaphysical rules for how the universe operates.

highlight a common indigenous worldview concerning ancestral spirit beings and the formation of geological sites. The “Dreaming” narrates a sacred, heroic time when both nature and humanity became created and practiced as they are—yet, it is beyond what Westerners think of as time and history, as it is and was an “everywhen,” an all-encompassing phenomenon (Stanner 1979). Tonkinson writes that the “Dreamings” are aboriginal cosmologies, which

not only account for the origins and form of their world but also bind them closely to one another, to the land and all living things, and to the realm of the spiritual beings who are believed to control the power on which life itself depends. The Aborigines perceive the totality of these bonds as a logically unified order in which all will be well, provided that they live according to the rules laid down by the spiritual beings who created the universe (1991:19).

These conceptions of the “Dreaming” speak of coming to terms with a living narrative, a world system at play, which should be understood as ‘the Law.’ The Law is said to take precedence, wherein each “Dreaming,” through series of stories, instils a specific set of laws and rituals to be practiced by regional Aboriginal Australian clans. This gives rise to the synonym of the Creative “Lawtime” for the “Dreaming.” This rerouting of focus and attention to the contents of these stories is important in that ‘the Law’ “governs the world of all Creation. It encompasses not only the rules and regulations by which people live, but also the laws of nature. Without the Law, nothing would exist or persist” (Morton 2005:197). The “Dreaming” narratives present a series of affiliations with Ancestor Beings who are related to the clan in being past ancestors as well as advocates of spiritual law. The “Dreamings” speak to an intense spiritual bond with these ancestors who took on the form of animals and plants in discovering the shape and character of the world. These ritual and religious relationships (re)categorize the world along the lines of being immersed in a sacred geography or, rather, a psychoscape, which highlights humanity’s spiritual connection with the material world (Langton 2005). The narratives of the “Dreaming” are

intensely complicated given the immense symbolic encodings and rituals that drive this living mythology in Australia.

A systematic look at myth or mythography in Australian studies is relatively rudimentary and new, as the bulk of energies have been devoted to cataloguing story sets. Roland Berndt and Catherine Berndt produced one of the most voluminous inventories with *The Speaking Land: Myth and Story in Aboriginal Australia* (1994). Beyond this, the specialized study of myth, both integratively and anthropologically, even to this day, hovers on the fringe of scholarship. There are a few texts that codify the art-form by providing an initial history of discourses on myth and narrative, such as Doty's *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (2000) and Robert Segal's *The Myth and Ritual Theory: An Anthology* (1998). The aim of these baseline and critical texts is to formalize myth studies into a discipline or sub-discipline by giving critical definitions, identifying key schools of thought and formulating a rudimentary methodology for the acquisition and study of myths in a range of relevant fields. Mythography, as a modern ethnological practice in any region of the world, is then largely a topic of special interest and the critical mass of scholarly activity has never reached equal disciplinary footing with its possible sister fields of, say, theology, anthropology or even literature. That present gap within Australian and other world locales ruptured by colonialism, cries for a solid narrative reworking of the constituents of culture, to recover story in that very visceral need to "decolonize" repertoires connected to a lost Being (*das Sein*)—a scar (Heidegger 1927).

The practice of myth studies and the telling of stories is a project of cultural expression and practical hope. The very deep need to reclaim the living poetry of a cultural area is one the sole aims of an ethnographer situated in narrative studies or, narratology, a discipline that seeks to explicate how a cultural group is bound within a socializing (trans)historical narrative. A myth

can then be thought of as an element of narrative, a story, which comes to define, perhaps in part, the worldview of a people:

Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of life; that is, which has organizing value for experience. A mythology is more or less an articulated body of such images ... Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of [humanity] in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend (Murray 1968:355-356).

Myths work within images that are poetic and sensory; elders teach valuable lessons to future generations about how the world works through creative devices and, as such, the traditions of myth transmit the patterns of socialization that underpin society, that of “the Dreamings” and “the Law” (Morphy 2005). There have been significant efforts by Australian Aboriginals to preserve and honour the wisdom of their myth, stories that speak of how the original Ancestor Beings and culture heroes oriented themselves within local landscapes and in the formation of sacred sites and geographies. Yet, myth is often misunderstood by the outside world, as it is deeply interconnected within the complexity and expression of often foreign life-ways.⁶ Sam Gill’s *Storytracking: Texts, Stories and Histories in Central Australia* (1998) offers a method for analyzing narratives by tracking the reliability of studies in myth with particular emphasis on Aboriginal and Central Australian peoples. His work looks at how the images of myth become distorted as simulacra—in losing context with the fieldwork by secondary theoreticians; he proposes a simple method of comparing source materials with reports, in order to verify the academic bridgework of the reality upon which the subject is built. The struggle of new myth studies and even a pursuit like mythography, is to establish itself as a genuine research venture and discipline.

⁶ A life-way is a person’s individual worldview constructed from personal experience and the adaptation of culture.

Within the last century, the work of Lévi-Strauss (e.g. 1955, 1978) has been a promising point of development in the anthropological study of myth, especially when conceptualizing myth as a way to engage structural meanings within the human mind. The encoding of myth takes a more complex function within linguistic expressions; it becomes immersed within the process of creativity and artistic acts and the narratives themselves serve as lesser fractals of the greater cultural system. A living myth expresses the idea that myths inform people's behaviour and actions in the real world—myths are charters for determining culturally appropriate pathways of being. They manifest repetition of the symbolic codes within myth become expressed in everyday life as people ratify the world in terms of myth. Each narrative contains a series of units or mythemes⁷ such as the dying god, the hero's quest or the shapeshifter, which define a living myth through the storyteller's recognition of how mythemes work together to sanctify a particular worldview. According to Lévi-Strauss (1978), the mythmaker assembles these units into meaningful wholes that relate to structures readily available and embedded within the cultural framework of the time. These configurations are experienced as a succession of wholes, having their own harmonies and dissonances in completing a composition of myth. The mythmaker is able to elucidate a particular cultural expression of a worldview by working through the sets of binary oppositions that signify a culture's identity and its primary philosophical struggles. The operations of myth are a way for Lévi-Strauss to identify the limitations of the human mind in expressing systems of thought. Perhaps, when departing

⁷ A mytheme is an essential kernel of a myth; it forms a basis for meaning and variation dependent on these recurring elements that are common to all stories and mythologies. A mytheme, in other words, represents the smallest contrastive unit which may bring about a change of meaning in a myth, and clusters of mythemes combine together in forming the surface representations of a myth. For example, Baldur, Osiris, and Adonis are representations of the mytheme of the dying god. Each myth presents a different concrete manifestation of the same central plot event or motif, but each story is unique in the combination of other mythemes that come to comprise each of these cases.

theoretically from Lévi-Strauss, it is best to keep in mind that these units of myth—rather than being fixed to given structures—are based in experiences of the world and that the local content of myth *matters* in terms of the value and effect that myth has upon the human mind. The scripting of social worlds occurs from cultural actors following the codes of myth that are grounded in living manifestations of core possibilities and phenomena—in essence, myth is whatever culture conceives as a possibility. For that reason, it is easy to see how the structures that Lévi-Strauss implements in his theorizing of myths are often imposed—instead of discovered—elements, mere justifications. Lévi-Strauss does not sufficiently take into account how other qualities of myth aside from structure might come to influence its nature.

Victor Turner (1974) makes a case for situating myth beyond reductions of structure (given his orientation towards process); he argues that myth emplaces the individual within a field of existence, where their “root paradigm” or patterns of images and ideas, propels them along modes of behaviour in navigating their environments and indwelling conflicts. Myth is then constructed primarily through human experience and these root paradigms are not so much subject to the limitations of a cognitive set of structures as Lévi-Strauss believed. The metaphors and paradigms within actors’ heads, according to Turner (1974), come from a complex set of interactions known as *communitas*, a bond uniting people over and above any formal social bonds. The experience of *communitas* is the symbolic place of culture in which the social dramas, the myths, of an individual community are forged in light of how humanity struggles within its ritual endeavours. *Communitas* provides an opportunity to experience and formulate the rules of conduct that govern humanity’s fields of existence; it creates a narrative of being that works with a community’s spirit.

Other trends in the anthropology of myth have moved away from either of these approaches—often due to the fact that they have a habit of equating orality with “primitive society” (see Jack Goody 2010; Anne MacKay 1999). Rather than viewing myth in any of the previously defined ways, Jack Goody’s work (2010) assesses myth on the basis of the actor’s coordinates in narrative—such as their imaginativeness, contexts of performance, modes of transmission and individual creativity. In his view, indigenous traditions of myth are highly creative, following patterns and rules inherent to cultures of orality and performance—there is a free-floating form of creativity that defines myth and the use of humanity’s creative imagination to forge deep understandings of the world as a dynamic and magical entity. For Jack Goody, there is little need to be as insistent on the fixity of structure as is Lévi-Strauss, given that myth is an ever evolving performance. The anthropology of myth, if anything, seeks to provide insight into how cultural agents situate processes of making meaning that translate into living acts within the community setting in which they provide the theatre of myth.

I am interested, then, in investigating how the cultural resource management of Wadeye’s Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum affects community wellbeing in terms of its narrative traditions. The museum encourages local creativity in finding, preserving and situating indigenous story production or, *mythogenesis*. The term “mythogenesis” may be further unpacked as *mytho-* or “myth” and *-genesis* “creation,” to signify the artistic act of storytelling, along with the sets of meanings or cognitive patterns of expressive thought that animate live mythological and cultural worldviews. According to Richard Slotkin (2000:7-8), *mythogenesis* is a creative act that defines a given narrative (as well as its subsequent narrative world), shaping its complete form by drawing heavily on the psychological aspects of the human condition in rendering values for the story and mediating words into a world. Indigenous storytellers are often aware of how stories

resonate through their social worlds and become indicators of how particular individuals engaged in the project of constructing a meaning, an order. No greater affirmation of this surety has ever been stated quite like Thomas King, who revealed that, “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2003:92), thus turning the word into a world. The connection between these world-ordering parts of self and narrative is not cerebral but necessary; as Ben Okri says, “we live by stories. We also live in them ... if we change the stories that we live by, quite possibly we change our lives” (1997:46). And, under such good authority as this, any researcher must be obliged to include stories in any systematic understanding of what it means to be human, as exclusion would not only be negligent but also a profound detriment upon a complete awareness of the totality of human existence. The Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum provides an avenue for understanding how the residents of Wadeye have come to collectively define the way in which stories speak to a shaping and maintenance of indigenous identity.

The goal of this study is to gain a greater appreciation for how the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum has explicitly and institutionally come to terms with managing, collecting and revitalizing community repositories of story. This clarity will be useful to verify the value that the Wadeye community has placed on its own stories, given that myth underlies a complicated history of social relations, as well as academic theorizing. This context will provide a strong indicator of an expanded and practical definition of what myth *is*. Above that, the value of such a term supersedes any given language that finds a referent for it, but the earliest uses of myth in the (written) record comes from the Greeks—*muthos*, a true story that, according to early philosophers, is a nonfalsifiable discourse (Brisson 1994:137). Moreover, myth as a nonfalsifiable discourse speaks to a world that engages and animates this one. Myths are total phenomena (as they resonate with everything in forming the basis of culture). The term, “total

phenomenon,” was first coined in 1925, by prominent French social scientist, Marcel Mauss (2001), with respect to his work with the gift and reciprocity. The parallels are clear here for, as far as myth is concerned, everything is complementary and presumes co-operation between units of meaning in culture, that meaning therein cooperates with the world mediated in myth and ritual. Myth is *inextricably* part of the social and cultural fabric; it translates into ritualistic action when it encompasses the totality of human experience by intersecting almost every aspect of human and collective life (2001:45-49).

The idea of narrative as reality is quite salient and cognitive studies express it succinctly in their own right. A psychologist notes that, all narrative communities and cultures display “a ‘local’ capacity for accruing stories ... [into a] structure that permits a continuity ... in short, to construct a history, a tradition, a legal system, instruments assuring historical continuity if not legitimacy” of its domains of influence (Bruner 1991:20). This variability is made possible through what cognitive studies demonstrates in examining culturally resonant narratives that are prone to grow and accumulate “as a process of perception: human beings literally order experience in terms of narrative—a narrative that grows and changes as elements are added, fundamentally altering the whole as it is written” (Wallin 2007:63). The flow of what is written is determined by storytellers and artists and the performance permits and justifies a foundation: “socially elaborated and sanctioned stories are the cognitive structures that hold a culture together” (Kintsch 1998:18). The discovery of the narrative basis of a reality that mediates culture was clearly confirmed a decade ago. A shift started with a collection of essays from psychologists, anthropologists and literary critics in Mitchell’s *On Narrative* (1981), when academics “became alive to the possibility of narrative as a form not only of representing but of constituting [a complete] reality” (Bruner 1991:5). This level of complexity moves myth from a

simple story to that of worldview. The museum's role in working with the breadth of community narratives becomes crucial in formulating a basis for culture in Wadeye—a common picture of relatedness.

The framework for how these myths get constituted as a basis for cultural reality is relevant to the work of an anthropological tradition and the way those sets of ideas have become applied in the fieldwork situation direct the kinds of larger discussions led by the museum's practical need to orient local story-work.

Perhaps one of the most long-standing authorities on myth in anthropology is Bronislaw Malinowski. His fieldwork in Melanesia brought to light the idea of myth as a charter for culture, wherein “the main social force governing all ... life could be described as the inertia of custom, the love of uniformity of behaviour” (1992: 326). The relevance to Malinowski's anthropological perspective is that myth has the normative power to alter custom, validate behaviour and give legitimacy to institutions in establishing a meaningful coherence to life. The benefit of engaging myth through the museum along these lines gives a greater view of the continuum from which custom is constituted as culture in Wadeye. The project of myth is about the authoring of identity in communities. Van Heekeren (2012) understands this well in furthering the salient idea that myth constitutes a mode of being, a *Dasein*; she confirms this practice by reproducing Leenhardt's (1979) and Young's (1983) construct of a *living mythology*. Like most native phenomenological studies, Van Heekeren proposes that the Vula and other cultures, ritualize and embody a set of myth-making practices to constitute local essences (or identities) but also to put these essences back into their communities by generating a set of lived protocol via their communal *Being*. Van Heekeren looks at the process of cosmological authentication to describe how stories create the essences that belong to and fill up a community's *Being*—that myth

preserves the core of society. This participation in myth helps reveal a community's spirit, demonstrating facts about how a cultural world and its traditions affect people's lives. Thus, the story-work at the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum is a platform for the residents of Wadeye to engage in local expressions of identity. This connectedness to story enables a greater sense of reclaiming a cultural legacy that is revitalized by the past, engaged with the present and aware of the future.

One of my key resources is W.E.H. Stanner's work (Keen 2005) for plotting out a method for isolating the Murrinh-Patha worldview as a structural system in terms of the museum's work in maintaining continuity with its history. Other texts (e.g. Marcia Langton 2005) have provided invaluable scholarship in Australian Studies regarding the core cosmological concepts that populate these systems. The patterns for the creative acts and rituals, which validate the universal beliefs of a "Dreaming" worldview, have been recorded and constituted in textual form via fieldnotes by ethnologists (e.g. Allan Marett 2005). Elements such as these components then work with the collection of narrative databases from fieldworkers such as Berndt and Berndt (1994), in postulating how stories might reinforce these customs and lived configurations within Australian Aboriginal cultures. In working from this historic research climate, I explore the pragmatic side of how the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum becomes a site for cultural resource management under both Mark Crocombe and Thamarrurr Regional Aboriginal Advisory Council in their efforts to revitalize story traditions.

Chapter Three: Methods and Investigation of the Research Problem

My research seeks to define and rejuvenate notions of how the scaffolding of mythic narratives exists in communities that have been documented and charted by the local Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum, as stories arise to empower and delineate the many lived patterns that connect people to culture. This study has the definite purpose of addressing the practices of cultural resource management in developing an applied scholarship for dealing with narrative work within the Wadeye region. The goal is to provide a foundation for ongoing story-work, such that it might anchor the researcher and community informants within a solid investigation of relationships between traditional myths of Wadeye's "Dreamings" and people's lives. The focus of this study, then, will question these structures, so as to fully synchronize the functionality and content of mythic processing as people live out myth in the Wadeye region by letting it inform their actions and choices. This perspective will highlight the mechanisms for understanding how existing stories of the Creative Lawtime can become a construct for further revitalization of cultural traditions in the region.

By following the efforts of the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum in documenting local history, my purpose here as an anthropologist is not so much to generate an argumentative framework for story-work but, rather, to establish a practical way of telling a lost story—reclaiming cultural ground—to experience a story-world and, where possible, to note the difficulty of traversing such topics as they are constituted today. The following types of questions informed my research in gaining an understanding of Wadeye:

- What function does narrative play in the representation of key repositories or sequences of stories? How are myths transmitted as culture in the community?

- How do traditional myths—or even modernized myths—of the Creative Lawtime influence the contemporary lives of Aboriginal Australians in the Wadeye region?
- How do the cultural poetics of the Wadeye region, the immersive details of life, inform practices of story revitalization? What makes a “Dreaming” story?

I saw these guiding questions with an eye for how perception and cognition might play into the permutations of the project’s field records, to think through the details. These questions provided a distinct form for how I set out to foster myth scholarship within the context of the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum.

The concepts that help formulate positive investigation of myth and creativity are very complex in their interconnectedness to cultured subjectivities. The main task is to find a way to insert a level of understanding and a point of inquiry within a grounded basis of lived experience within the Wadeye region—to come to a comprehension of the way people’s daily experiences, or happenings, are culturally constituted within a framework of life. The study seeks validation first through properly constructing a sense of who the inhabitants of the township *are* as Aboriginal Australians, with a distinct identity and set of societal practices in terms of familial, gendered and kinship norms. The people of the Wadeye region have a relationship with their own history and home, their own traditional lands and totem countries in the Northern Territory. That connection is an integral part in the development of how these emplaced peoples evolved their regional languages, out of which each of their cultural dialects arose as a living artefact and a means of assuring identity to time and place. By embracing the meaning of *being in* this place, this grounded foundation, the narratives that have been collected for this study can then be properly situated in the matrices of social organization, namely that of the Creative Lawtime, via the artistic media and sets of expressions upon which myth and narrative thrive as frameworks

for understanding the world. These traditions become formulated as key symbolic systems: they manifest into featured moods and motivations—world pictures, *weltanschauung*—within groups (and their individuals) by conceptualizing an “order” within existence and maintaining the factuality of that order, such that these moods and motivations appear entirely, singularly, realistic (Geertz 1977). This thesis situates the living texts of the Wadeye region within a pattern or model for story-work, which engenders understandings that are accessible among the relationships of myth, meaning and culture in the community.

As storied networks become clarified into a complete practice, the primary working definitions of this applied study are then the waypoints from which I arrive at findings in challenging my research to situate the field of story revitalization and its happenings. The hope here is that myth can be thought of as an active integration of symbolic projects, nested perspectives, conceived and contained through narratives and the human mind in giving a deeper understanding to lived meanings within the cultural mapping of world(s). This guide becomes sanctified as myth in allowing people to investigate the experience of culture in terms of how they might resolve their own cosmos as a surety. This connection grants myth a living aspect, and it provides me with a crucial insight into how these sureties—the very concreteness of these cognitive points—inform people’s daily activities (Young 1983). The negotiation of how these systems of myth become ingrained within the lives of the Wadeye elders and artists defines cultural poetics, the rhythmic transmission of flows of meaning and detail within the context of an ethnographic setting. The exact expression and movement of meaning within the Creative Lawtime or the Wadeye region over time, creates a definitive constellation, a repository, by which the land and people conform in character so as to embody an identity. The distinctiveness of this identity filters into the community through its own traditions, even more sharply by its

worldview or *weltanschauung*. The active rendering of myth within the daily pastimes of Wadeye, constitutes a simulation of these symbolic systems in the field. This study has enabled me to obtain an initial field record that opens up the possibility of applying my own insight on stories to the traditions of storytelling in Wadeye.

Ethnography and Studies of Culture

To engage in any meaningful disciplinary pursuit or knowledge-making practice, the primary participants and the researcher must themselves have a clear idea as to what the given task *is* and how they might embark upon it, so that their plural efforts will ultimately be constituted not only as a method or academic process but also as a fine-tuned apparatus of *knowing how*, leading everyone to effectively substantiate a particular finding over another. Everyone who takes on the mantle of the culture hunter is surely in some way accountable for the definitions of ethnography as well as mythography. The standard definition would be to define ethnography as the field techniques and transcriptions in the reproduction of culture, the sets of behaviours and ideas that creatively and fundamentally determine how the world functions *in-out-and-between* socialized mind(s) towards a given phenomenology for all those emplaced, sentient individuals; and, by that, ethnography becomes an intelligible event and process. The most practical answer by far, in this context, would be that ethnographic research centres itself on (1) creating valid and venerable descriptors for the narrative traditions within the Wadeye region of Northern Australia; and, on (2) the idea of the mytheme, an intelligible core unit of myth that relates back to the living culture of creation. As proposed by Lévi-Strauss (1955), this sustains an endless exercise of *knowledge* and *knowing* within pluralistic methodologies integrating aspects of anthropology, literature and psychology.

The reality—and perhaps the challenge, as well as the insanity—is that, ethnography focuses on an entire cultural group with a shared sense of identity and practices, which have evolved over time, both *by* and *through* long-standing interactions with one another. As an informative modality of writing, ethnography challenges researchers to commit to periods of observation and immersion through various participant-observation and record-keeping strategies to define (as nearly as possible) what it means to be a member of such a culture-sharing group from the perspective(s) of the lived, situated individual (Creswell 2007:68). The entire breadth of ethnography or, in this instance, mythography, depends on a multitude of data-gathering methods that are primarily placed in qualitative practices. The largest signifier of what ethnography *is* centres on the methodology of *fieldwork*, where a researcher spends a significant amount of time at a specific site to determine how the researcher might enculturate him or herself as a community member to speak with, for and on behalf of a culture and its people, succinctly and accurately.

There is a longstanding tradition, practice and expectation started by people like Clifford Geertz (1977) with his concept of “thick description.”⁸ However, ethnography is more than just descriptions of social worlds as the following makes clear:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including footnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things [either objects or subjects] in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln 2005:3).

⁸ Thick description in anthropology is an account of human behaviour that explains not just the behaviour, but the fuller context so that the given activity becomes more globally meaningful to an outsider. The idea is to saturate descriptions with detail in order to arrive at meanings for that behaviour.

Thus, the methods throughout my ethnographic endeavour produce a system of representation and notations for talking about and enlivening issues of myth, poetics and identity within the Wadeye region. I am interested in the lived, qualitative and technical aspects of narrative. The majority of this kind of information is invaluable for story revitalization as a pattern unfolds for understanding the nature of regional narratives. Ethnographic research, at its core and best, captures and articulates the totality of myth in ritual-bound practice in *meaning* something to people, especially as it is expressed in the inner realities of the conscious mind in encapsulating a specific mode of being (Van Heekeren 2012).

Research Methods Overview

My data collection methods for studying the cultural poetics of myth, in revitalizing stories from the Wadeye region, are varied in nature. As mentioned, this study embraces a philosophy of field reciprocity by democratizing the “research processes through the inclusion of the local stakeholders as core researchers” (Greenwood and Levin 1998:3; see Linda T. Smith 2002). Given the holistic nature of myth, an interdisciplinary approach produces favourable results, which is why I favour notions of flexibility from the integrative act of borrowing and synthesizing thinking patterns as Klein suggests within mixed methods orientations of creating knowledge (1990:64-65; Creswell 2003:208). As subtle epistemological systems pop up, an eye towards these integrative moments of knowledge creation is necessary in knowing that these positions are parts of a standpoint or community (Alcoff and Potter 1993). Where these constituent standpoints might fit in, as far as individual-to-cultural ranges of understandings, each standpoint enables pictured comprehensive dynamics for understanding how meaning is constituted in societal groupings (De Munck 2000; Strauss and Quinn 1997). These elements and sensitivities guided my integrative, applied study of the Wadeye region and its peoples, whose

knowledge is critically and creatively situated in its proper position as a category of emplaced knowing (Rumsey and Weiner 2001).

The predominant mode of applied research in this interdisciplinary study centres on *participant observation* techniques that capture “the ways in which people interact and relate to one another within given sites or spaces” (Gray 2003:82) placed upon the sets of narratives that enliven mythic experiences within the Wadeye region. I spent time volunteering in the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum, as well in the community and region, to construct a proper strategy for the cultural revitalization of stories. The museum is, thus, the main affiliation that supported my gathering of field notes documenting what life in Wadeye was like from the vantage point of a community worker. I observed and participated in the local culture, as well as aided in the story-work that Mark Crocombe conducted through the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum. The tasks on the ground had me job shadowing the cultural coordinator of the museum in conducting cultural resource management by organizing archival materials and organizing new research expeditions by surveying local elders who took us ‘out bush’ to talk about and “see” the stories in their settings. Participation in story-work often had us trying to generate recordings of stories for the museum. The very overlap between myth and everyday life within Wadeye and its Shire Council comes from the ability of elders to draw upon the perspectives and life-ways contained within narratives at key junctures. All behaviour is then said to be in relation to the Law and elders are most genuine when they honour such traditions in enacting the scripts of myth. By recording and presenting information in which pertinent details within life and stories can co-relate by informing each other helps create a means to encourage narrative growth in the community. In managing for the best possible research outcomes, I relied heavily on the

participant-as-observer style of community research in getting at a deep sense of lived activity. I was able to do that through my service work at the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum.

Thus, I entered Wadeye and the region as both an active volunteer and a researcher. Observation-participation worked well for the subtleties of the field, even more so as I became less of an outsider: observation-participation facilitated understanding by allowing information to flow into inquirers from their on-site proximity, wherein this “thick” knowledge of life was translated into a system of note-taking in working to relate those experiences to a conception of culture (Geertz 1977:3-30). The work to capture a ‘thick’ account of the cultural reproductions of story facilitates the tracing back to the original context of the Creative Lawtime. Direct participation, along with some analytical distance at times, also permits greater emphasis on the meanings inherent in narratives, for understanding how individual myth, as a total way of relating to the world, moves cultural meaning towards lived and symbolic expressions of consciousness. This observation-participation method was, of course, the main focal point for generating data in conjunction with other embedded techniques so as to supplement any existing sets of notes and queries.

The observation-participation role allowed as well for the creation of inter-subjective spaces in communicating culture. I would listen for periods of time trying to understand the main points of the lessons that my informants were willing to teach me about narratives and their lives in Wadeye. I would make sure that all of this information was recorded. I would then turn the table on them by asking questions about these experiences so that I could properly rearticulate the core components of what they were trying to teach me within our inter-cultural dialogue. I remember my experience in talking notes for the Knowledge Tree expedition that carried over time and understanding with the creation of inter-subjective spaces. I employed this technique

throughout my time in Australia as packets of cultural information flowed from my informants, to me and then back at them in reconfirmation. I began to understand more in relation to what was being said and I felt like I had a chance at conveying the experience properly to an outside audience unfamiliar with the rich cultural setting of Wadeye.

I obtained data from Wadeye elders, who are able to supply cultural data and insights into their own lives and traditions in explicating the regional traditions of myth. My relationship or rapport with these on-site individuals was crucial in obtaining an accurate understanding. Consequently, considerations of ethics, trust and friendship cannot be ignored in shaping proper interactions. I realized during my fieldwork that a “good ethnographer, [takes] any opportunity to listen and ask questions of individuals and groups whilst participating and observing” (O’Reilly 2005:115). The aim, as I discovered, is to create a free flowing dialogue, a spirit of learning.

The majority of direct data collection from on-site respondents, mostly men older than forty years, was contained within an *interviewing* format. The ideal was to conduct ethnographic interviews (in English) in an open-ended, free-flowing conversational exchange, where the interviewer has a principle guideline and a list of topics to address in the interview (O’Reilly 2005:116). These applied interviews gave a more personal and reflective tone to the fieldwork in providing insights to how key respondents, the elders, participate within the mythic traditions of Wadeye. The questions helped facilitate sharing of more specific information when topics arise that complement the political and ritual dimensions of life—or, perhaps, spark further discussions in the field in relation to the cultural management of myths. I recorded the interviews through written notes and audio documentation. The type of interview record was decided by both the investigator and the respondents. For this study, the following is a sample list of viable interview questions:

- What is your experience with stories?
- Can you describe day-to-day life within the Wadeye region?
- Are stories needed to perform certain activities?
- What is a story? What is your understanding of stories?
- How are stories important for leaders and leadership?
- Can you share with me a story that has had an impact on your life?
- Can a story become part of the way people think and act? How so?
- Could you draw a map of your ground and mark the story locations?

These questions provided a way of gauging indigenous Wadeye definitions and experiences of myth. Such questioning and observations worked to put my research in greater touch with the respondents; however, this method often had to be adapted or abandoned with a mind to gathering whatever information I could solicit in dialogue with the Wadeye elders. The format of informal conversations about life and stories began to make up the bulk of this data type. This method helped to reveal how an elder's knowledge of myth maps onto lived experiences within the community. Each detail marked a point of entry into a perspective of life, which conveyed with the mythic in providing a means for living in the world. The interview sessions often coincided with bush trips to a particular site, such as Yederr, and the increased proximity to the elders and indigenous residents gave rise to a more one-on-one flow of information. As key informants (those most well-versed in their culture) and gatekeepers (those who protect cultural knowledge), the elders were vital to understanding the Wadeye region via their direct input in matters of communal practices of story revitalization and the cultural resource management of myth.

I supplemented these understandings with still photography of the multi-sited research locations to explain and visualize certain concepts, contexts and spatiotemporal relations and identities, which add, for me as the cultural learner, value and meaning to the lived experiences of the Wadeye elders and the community as they gave them to me. These elements are media-related aids, since “the process of visual recordings as a sort of facts-collecting activity, made

[into] visual research” (Davies 1999:118) imparts a fuller and more complete sensory experience of what is explored in the selective framing of experience. This aspect, when permissible for both the researcher and the subjects, speaks to another, fuller layer of engagement in getting readers connected to what it means to experience diversity and diverse worlds within Australia.

Data Organization, Analysis and Results

The data collected for this study is contained in a collage of field notes, interview sessions and discussion transcriptions in either text or audio, accompanied with sets of still images. All the data after their use and on-site creation have been stored under lock and key or digitally encrypted in my custody. The Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum also retains a copy of this thesis and its supporting research.

The majority of the data is contained in field notes, along with interview and discussion transcriptions. The field notes have four different forms: jottings, scratch notes; diaries, pure reflections; logs, accounted time; field notes, cultural behaviour records (Bernard 2002:365-373). Field notes, interviews and discussions have three distinct and complementing formats that are either jotted down during the on-site transcription or added from memory later. These notes are taken for the value and efficiency of data gathering, descriptive notes that define the happenings with fieldwork and analytical notes used for eliciting understood meanings within culture concerning a topic of investigation (Bernard 2002:373-377). The bulk of my analysis has situated all data as a kind of text or narrative in which a nested worldview exists as part of its creation and encoding—thus, it becomes a marker of identity.

My analysis of the Wadeye data seeks to identify semantic units embedded in the data and, from there, to express a common worldview to direct the creativity needed in implementing a program of story revitalization for the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum. The analysis presents a

journey by documenting my experience of doing story-work with Mark Crocombe, while striving to give that documentation a narrative format. The story-tracking in this thesis consequently works to show the connections of myth to everyday life. As such, story-tracking becomes crucial for the development of recommendations for story revitalization in the region. To reiterate, this task is key to the study for, once the data becomes arranged into essential units of information, I can discover an apt picture of an epistemological frame. This frame presents a singular account, as the last two chapters of this thesis, by applying a standard of living myth to a continuing process and possibility of story revitalization; it relates sets of information by sorting through cultural data in characterizing the storied practices that I encountered in the Wadeye region. My work with the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum gave something unique back to the community by discovering how the articulate details of stories grew to form a communal way of mapping representations of knowledge (Longino 1993:112-113). The collected images herein add an immersive layer to the local climate and experience by creating a narrative that is reflective of the community. These elements are crucial in reproducing and simulating the Creative Lawtime as it is commonly expressed in everyday life. From here, analytical perspectives can be properly implemented in working with local knowledge to construct story revitalization practices that are individually suited for Wadeye and its regional communities. Supporting materials are useful in forming an analytical understanding that relates back to the core of the study.

Media within the thesis adds multiple dimensions to this ethnography of the Wadeye region. These pieces of data will address possible gaps or inconsistencies that may arise from selecting a limited set of data gathering modes and strategies within this study. Also, the inclusion of both text and image within the thesis helps create an accurate and believable

account, a poetic narrative from the field, which creatively and critically engages the reader/viewer in imagining other cultured worlds. These sensory experiences personalize expressions of myth and story revitalization by giving a human feeling to the faces of Wadeye and the people who steward this region.

With this direction, the intent is not only to determine how myths influence life patterns but also to see how storytellers transmit myths given that familiarity with narratives make people more capable as storytellers and denote gradations of awareness indicative of creativity, cleverness and consciousness. This task is possible through the management and analysis of cultural and narrative data in a complete narrative account. My intent is to provide a practical model for story-work and revitalization for the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum.

Limitations

Given the preliminary nature of this fieldwork visit, a factoring of both time and trust affected the depth of my data collection. The cultural and community work could itself not get too deep, given that a greater amount of rapport with local informants would have to be gained over time. I had a limited timeframe to build such relationships. Also, the concept of a direct question-and-answer interview is not common (or even appropriate) in the region. Many of the Aboriginal Australian residents did not feel comfortable with conducting this kind of research process—so I had to alter my interviewing process to an unscripted conversational practice. I feel that with more time, I could have avoided the central limitation of rapport that plagued this study because a larger number of residents of Wadeye would have had the time to accept me as both a volunteer and a researcher in their community.

The following thesis may seem a bit light on the analysis of traditional “Dreaming” stories because, as I went to do an analysis, I moved more to an understanding of why fieldwork

and stories are important. The following work is a summation of what I have learned as an anthropologist, a beginning—or rather, a place to go into the data. The knowledge of what the field was like for me became a crucial realization in situating my prime valuation for the depth and complexity of Aboriginal Australia and its narrative traditions. The hope of this preliminary thesis is to fuel a greater interest in the subject by seeing how chaotic and ardent the day-to-day tasks of the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum in securing local history and art.

Chapter Four: Findings and Explorations

The Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum was the main facility and organization from which I was able to conduct my 2013 fieldwork in Wadeye. I spent two-and-a-half months there volunteering, researching and assisting Mark Crocombe, the cultural coordinator, with a range of tasks that



Figure 4.2. The entrance of the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum.

were conducive to the maintenance of long-term historical records. The museum itself is not a large facility but it managed to serve the community with three office spaces and two storage

rooms—along with a main entrance and display room, and a break room to talk over the details of the day with a shared pot of tea. Much of the physical records of the museum were, at the time, being converted into a digital archive. The arrays of CDs, DVDs, tapes and old hard drives made finding particular source materials tricky at times. The Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum was in a state of change and transition during my dry season visit, as the archiving of the many years of cultural resource management needed to be more accessible and modernized. Nonetheless, there was an ambient charm to the rustic and cluttered nature of the museum amid that red iconic Australian dust that infiltrated every resting place.

I was living next to the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum and the Batchelor Institute, which deals with providing extra and employable levels of education beyond secondary training to the residents of Wadeye. I recall the many early morning walks around the bend in getting to the museum. The crisp morning light gave a durable quality to these moments as life picked up slowly into its form. The streets were sometimes traversed by a few passing individuals. Groups of children would wander around together—sometimes questioning who I was and where I was going that day. The museum was in front of a grassy area shaded by a few trees and home to a small park apparatus. In the distance, people gathered together, sitting in a circle talking or casually playing cards. I often met an elder, named Claver, walking around this area ‘making talk,’ asking for a small favour here and there. This man, a speaker of a few endangered languages in the region, was keen to offer his services to the museum or to any researchers. There was a sense that the museum, keen to inform regional groups about Wadeye local history, was a hub of activity with occasional visitors by the door.

There were other researchers and outside people helping to make the museum more in tune with current archival practices. One of the largest groups that worked with the museum was the linguists usually associated with the Wadeye Aboriginal Language Centre. This centre was formed as a joint project of the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum and the Batchelor Institute. One of the earlier projects I worked on in order to gain more rapport with the local residents was the Murrinh-Patha Phrasebook. I was taking cues from linguist John Mansfield, helping to document Murrinh-Patha phrases for an outside audience, to aid an outside, non-indigenous audience to speak the language in the township. The project was hosted on a community website where non-indigenous residents could access and hear recordings of the language. This kind of secondary activity became important to me as an avenue for building relationships with some of the

younger local men. The main barrier here was the maintenance of networks of trust, which would come into play later in my fieldwork or possible future visits. The need to secure a strong relationship was one of the most difficult aspects of my fieldwork, given that relations between Aboriginal residents and outsiders is negatively coloured through a history of colonialism and a local indifference to strangers due to such historical relations as they continued in the post-colonial setting.

I was given alternating advice on how to conduct my fieldwork in Wadeye. There has been a long-standing precedence for non-indigenous outsiders to come in and out of the community for short periods of time. This reality has created some uncomfortable situations of data mining of Aboriginal Australian informants; that is, non-indigenous people coming into remote communities to ask deeply personal questions, only to leave that place. The transient nature of white workers on Australia's cultural frontier has, sadly, led to a guarded response and indifference to outsiders (Mahood 2012). The preliminary nature of my fieldwork visit necessitated that I work with existing structures of research, rather than creating my own apparatus. I was told by another linguist that I would have to be proactive in making research connections happen in Wadeye. One of the elders of the Shire Council instructed that I take a level of caution in getting involved in the family struggles within the community. There have been many cases, I was told, in which researchers have been used as a resource by families.

The collection of narratives during my fieldwork was facilitated through my connection to Mark Crocombe as the cultural coordinator for the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum. This community-based research is largely dependent on managing to engage people in narrative work. The hardest part was the time vested in convincing people to commit to the work, as well as getting them on-site to do recordings. The biggest draw pulling people away was that many had

responsibilities to their respective families units—as well as other economic concerns dividing up their daily schedule, some of which consisted of local card playing in re-distributing communal wealth (see Goodale 1987). The local households often had many youth dependents for the older residents to look after and take care of, which usually meant that it was harder to get individual people to do story collections, especially if work in the bush or a site visit was required. This state of affairs required a lot of patience and perseverance in getting people to do story-work. The expectation was that plans were very fluid and thus easily delayed or pushed to another day. The flow of time in Wadeye is different from my own experience at home, with a far greater push to a slower rhythm of time—the remote township had a distinct charm in its apparent easygoing attitude.

One of the harder aspects was making that first connection with someone in the township. I once had an opportunity to spend some time with Boniface, the senior-most elder and main “boss man” for the area, as he is the head traditional owner in Wadeye. He runs the local shop for the township and he is a local Catholic priest. Boniface was born in the time of Father Docherty, who established Wadeye—Port Keats, then—as a mission in 1935. I was sitting next to him after one of his shifts at the store. He seemed friendly and good natured and was keen to talk about the older mission times. He relayed stories to me, one of them about how some of his local fellows had been sent to the holy land in Israel. Boniface often laughed at the smallest humorous turn, while relating stories in a fragmented dialect of English. I got the impression there was a great sense of justice in him. He talked about how there was little money in the township in the past; yet, people would send money back from working on the stations or in the army. He was keen on teaching me a few Murrinh-Patha words and expected that I would be able to remember those terms. There was a genuine way in which Boniface connected with me. The

main point here is that cultural fieldwork takes time, proximity and willingness to connect with people. These moments build and culminate as human relationships form over time through sharing stories and life.

Once a connection was made with someone to document their narratives, accessing archived information in story collection became an important task at the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum. The maintenance of the digital record from the past recordings was a central activity that drove research as we relied on previous recordings to direct current research in terms of finding gaps in the story collection and improving existing recordings with new versions. The decision was always a negotiation, as far as what to collect, worked out by Mark Crocombe who had years of experience working with people in Wadeye. The stories themselves were versions that were accessible and public. The museum also gave attention to the old field notes of Roland Robinson's earlier research in the area and had notes on past story traditions that Mark wanted to work on reviving in the community, by translating the stories into template versions and visiting the bush areas from which these narrative may have originated. Robinson has some of these narratives in anthology form such as *Aboriginal Myths and Legends* (1966). However, the information was locked away and we could not get permission in time, from the literary estate, for me to obtain a copy of Robinson's field notes.

There is a trend toward the privatization and restriction of indigenous knowledge in Australia. A similar situation to the Roland Robinson materials arose when trying to access the field notes of W.E.H. Stanner for the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum. Many of the local indigenous people and the museum staff did not think that keeping this knowledge from its original source was entirely ethical, despite the copyright standard and library protocols. In fact, the withholding of such information was in direct violation with UN articles declaring the rights

of indigenous peoples to their own intellectual property and heritage. Nonetheless, the use of other less restricted secondary materials has helped to organize story collection sessions.

When the recording sessions took place, it was vital to ensure that the elders were relaxed enough to have the energy to finish a session. We would often take an initial break in the tea room before starting. The flow of recording was slow—often to give each storyteller adequate time to consider their words carefully. Sometimes, before a session, we would play older and complete recordings of stories to jog their memory. We knew that this would influence the sessions, but the recordings often got the storyteller in the mood to start along a given narrative. These recordings usually went over well and, at times, there were spots of laughter as the indigenous storyteller would recollect an important moment in the narrative. Another key aspect to doing story work was making sure that the storyteller had enough energy and food to work. Thus, the fridge in the museum was well stocked to help with the storyteller's ability to work through the day. The main aim of doing story collection was to respect the needs of the storyteller, to make sure that they had a comfortable environment in which to work for the museum, whether in the township or out in the bush.

The Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum did not seem to run on a particular schedule but, rather, operated with the discretion and management of Mark Crocombe in facilitating the current needs of varying community entities and requests. One of the main mandates of the museum was to facilitate the preservation of the local Aboriginal Australian languages. The museum was, in spirit, founded to service local Aboriginal demand for story documentation and revitalization efforts. The museum had an extensive back record of recordings and it averaged, of late, about three new recordings of stories a month. The choice to do story-work had to be managed properly as well, in order not to upset local clan politics. Whenever new work—or even

a major project, like a book—was to be undertaken, Mark had to consider the request along egalitarian criteria for selection and rotation among different clan peoples. The idea was to not discriminate against any clan in receiving representation in the museum’s archive or wages for working as a cultural consultant or informant.

The details and recordings would lead to further work by going “out bush.” This method’s objective was to facilitate story-work. Mark would often ask about key narratives from his own known repository of “Dreaming” stories but it was left up to the local storytellers to select a story version that they felt comfortable committing to a record. The exact story was often then a negotiation, rather than a direct request for a specific oral text and sometimes the recordings would be something radically different and new. However, Mark was keen on furthering story-work by having more than one storyteller, as well as going out bush to bolster the success of the story being remembered and articulated in the context of the environment from where any given story may have originated in being attached to a cultural site. The Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum’s main role, as far as a methodology for story-work, consisted of documenting stories and maintaining an archive. The museum relied on the flux of outside researchers and linguists to conduct the critical scholarship and ethnographic work needed to supplement the archive in providing a more complete knowledge of Wadeye’s history.

The need for continuing along the lines of story-work and language revitalization is pertinent to the local endeavour of cultural resource management. The picture for Australia in terms of language diversity is drawn out pretty morbidly by some scholars:

The worst case, however, is Australia, with 90 per cent of its estimated 250 Aboriginal languages near extinction. ... There is no Aboriginal [Australian] language that is used in all arenas of everyday life by members of a sizeable community. It is possible that only two or three languages will survive into the next century. (Nettle and Romaine 2000:9)

The Wadeye Township has its own problems. Some of the linguists mentioned that languages besides English and Murrinh-Patha, such as Jaminjung, are in a moribund state and are not being acquired by the children in the township. Nettle and Romaine argue that the marginalization of minority language groups is the main cause of language death in communities like Wadeye (158). The issue is complex, and there are no simple solutions. The tragedy here is that the reduction or loss of languages “reduces the sum total of our knowledge about the world” (199). The preservation of languages in the Wadeye region and the work of the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum provide opportunities for choices in the future as to how Aboriginal Australians might want to construct a mode of life. Variety prevents a unitary system from overriding the cultural diversity and identity of this region. Mithun argues further to this point, by stating that language diversity needs to be preserved in order to maintain a heritage of thinking—a way of eliciting the full creative capacity of the human mind (1998:189-191). Speakers of endangered languages need to maintain a public presence, a level of awareness in the community, in order to prevent language loss or death: the main point being that languages will progress if there is an effort to give prestige and representation to suffering languages in the educational system (Crystal 2000:136). The situation in Wadeye therefore becomes difficult for languages outside English and Murrinh-Patha are prone to more loss as they are not represented or promoted in the bilingual township. The local linguists have been trying to combat this by preserving the essential elements or grammars of these endangered languages. Story-work is connected to language preservation as many of the interesting texts and family stories of the “Dreaming” sites were told in these other languages.

Applied Anthropology and Living Myth

Mark often had personal insights into the nature and character of the “Dreaming” stories collected by the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum. The documenting of these stories can lead to an understanding of how narratives and myths play a crucial role in people’s lives. The words of Malinowski give an insight into this statement when thinking of myth.

It [myth] is not the nature of fiction, such as we read today in a novel, but it is a living reality, believed to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies. (1954:100)

The recurrence of the mythic shows the patterns of life, gives life a structure. The search for story is the search for structure and meaning in life. The main point of this reasoning is that, “mythic thought and knowledge are *embodied*, both literally and figuratively” (Young 1983:14). The transference between lived sets of realities occurs with a socio-mythic embodiment of an emotional reality. The structural patterning of emotions and perspectives on life that direct human behaviour is what continues in repetition through a knowledge of myth. Young articulates this view that,

myths are more than practical charters for ritual acts, property rights or mundane privileges; they are constituents of selfhood, which affect a person’s psychological stance and thereby his social behaviour. (1983:19)

The prevailing idea is that story conveys aspects of the self, such as a configuration of emotions that come to influence and define a person’s viewpoint or, their emotional vista, the totality of emotions and thoughts that drive a representation of their environment. Each of these standpoints relate to how an enculturated individual carries out actions in the world. Myth preserves the overall continuum of emotion and identity that is central to maintaining a particular cultural worldview. The story collections and databases of the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum constitute selfhood and generate patterns of emotion for each generation of Aboriginal Australians by

revealing a sense of the land's sacred geography, as well as the identity in of the Ancestor Beings the old "Dreaming" stories. These markers of identity are important in identifying the way in which local events come to structurally shape the way life is narrated in Wadeye.

There were a few moments in my fieldwork when I was touched by the narrative of life embedded in the township of Wadeye. There is something powerful about how communities come together, that you can feel a sort of energy alive in the air as I describe in my field journal:

Today, the Wadeye community and family celebrated the funeral of Valentine. It is not custom to show images of the deceased. Family members stop saying their names as well. Often things that were associated with that person will become out of practice. Songs are taken out of the repertoire ... sometimes traditional lands will be off limits for a year's time or more. Yet, the people often come back to these things sooner than prescribed. I met Mark at the church at 10:30. Everything was to start at 11:00, Port Keats time.

This was my first time inside the local Catholic Church in Wadeye. The syncretic nature to the place became apparent very quickly. The use of native artwork was central on the Christian relief motifs. Only the main figure of Christ on the Cross was apparent. The church filled up after 11:00. One of the regional priests was flown into the area specifically for the funeral rites. The people rushed in with flowers and custom clothing with "Dreaming" and regional symbols on them. The church had an open space with a central pulpit.

Many of the people gathered sitting on the ground. There seemed to be a blend of burial practices. People would come in, supported by a friend, intensely grieving. Some people had an intense connection with the casket—often touching it—while wailing and raging. People's outward emotional reactions varied from quiet and respectful, to engrossed and emotional. Banners depicting the "Dreamings" or "Ancestor Beings" of the deceased and their traditional countries held central stage. The family also presented other banners important to the identity of the deceased member. The events of the funeral progressed in a linear fashion. There were shouts of grieving that broke up the normal activity.

Funerals were one of the greatest expenses and events of the township. There appeared to be only a few whitefellows in attendance—mostly a local affair. Children sometimes ran about during the service. Dogs would interrupt and walk around but got shooed away. The music was both local and traditional Christian songs. The service was bilingual. The funeral had native song and dance. At one point, everyone covered the coffin with flowers. Then some common Catholic service events, like sign of peace and communion. I met Boniface there.

What was particularly striking was the show of communal support, as well as the emotions on people's faces. I was intrigued by the man sitting next to me, an elder. The mass was followed by a procession to the cemetery. This part seemed most reflective in the act of walking together. The experience moved and shrouded over the entire

township, colouring the geography with a living energy. I could even feel a definite sense towards the invisible—imagining a connection with the area’s psychoscapes, the spiritual plains; the way things were looked at felt very differently; the world appeared otherwise. People were walking. Others were watching in support. Most of them, at the time, were wearing the custom clothing of the “Dreamings.” The way that the senses hanged freely, creating an ambience, while watching the leaves fall from the branches, caught me by a silent rhythm. There seemed to be something mythical in the air. (Fieldnotes: *Day Eighteen - July 12th, 2013, the funeral, 10:00am to 2:00pm.*)

The power of myth becomes more apparent in these intense moments of life, where an emotional reality takes hold of the situation. The funeral was an instance where the sentiment of the mythic past interceded with the present in providing a custom and mechanism for grieving.



Figure 4.3. A cross at the Wadey Cemetery.

The story of the Rainbow-Serpent Kunmanggur and the bat Tjinimin deals with the theme of death. This myth is set in a time called, ‘Kardoorair,’ which means, ‘at first all forms of life were men.’ The

events in this narrative lead to the end of this era. The narrative begins with Tjinimin seeking a wrong kin-relationship with the two daughters of Kunmanggur. The two girls run away from the man and use magic to elude him. They sing up sandflies to torment him and the tide in the river to frustrate him. The mountain, from which Tjinimin falls, has been made steep from the singing of the two girls. All these troubling events lead to the spearing of their father, Kunmanggur, while he is resting after a ritual. The violent spearing causes a fatal wound and the members of the ritual transform into their totemic spirit-being forms. The dying Kunmanggur commences his

journey to the river to become the Rainbow-Serpent. As he moves towards the river, Kunmanggur creates sacred sites and leaves behind ritual objects. At the start of the river, Kunmanggur attempts to rid the world of all fire, which marks where the time period of 'at first all forms of life where men' ends. He enters the water, taking the fire-stick with him. One of his sons, Billeirin, rescues the fire-stick before Kunmanggur becomes the Rainbow-Serpent and submerges the world into darkness.

The symmetry between the funeral and Kunmanggur's story comes from how the soon-to-be-extinguished fire is rescued by his son before it could become extinguished by the waters. Billeirin's act of rescuing the flame is similar to how watchful members of the funeral prevented grieving individuals from taking themselves under with the casket:

The cemetery ground seemed to be small. The people gathered near the burial site, filling along rows of access to the coffin. The wailing continued more than ever. The people seemed more distressed here than in the church. The final farewell was, more than anything, looming in the current moment. The coffin was slowly carried out of the vehicle and placed near the burial site. People's emotions seemed to build rapidly from here. I cannot say that I have witnessed a greater public in terms of this funeral and its grieving process. People were completely stricken with anger, grief and a sense of loss. The coffin seemed to be attacked by those who were affected most. People were throwing themselves against it.

The most arresting was an elderly lady, totally taken by the event. She was haggard with despair. She was very vocal, could barely walk and was always going to pick up a rock to throw at people standing by the coffin or to strike herself with it. People near her were quick to stop her from doing any damage. People were engrossed watching her. She was constant in her efforts. Most people stood and watched the final moments of the funeral. A car sounded its siren. People continued to wail. Some had a hard time walking; they would fall over with grief. Some would act in anger, throw physical objects. Everyone sought support from another. People offered dirt and flowers to the burial site, before taking leave. (Fieldnotes: *Day Eighteen - July 12th, 2013, the funeral, 10:00am to 2:00pm.*)

The funeral here deals with an intense emotional connection of saving life and, symbolically, fire, before its destruction continues to throw the world into darkness. The cosmic drama of the loss of the Rainbow-Serpent repeats itself by playing out at each funeral to signify the

importance of how life functions and needs to be saved from death—that fire and life are conducive to survival of the cultural ideal of wellness and continuity in the wilds of the world.

Cycles of living myth are more than just the continuance of mythic structures in the present moments of daily life. Narrative and myth become living by their ability to take precedence in the activities of life. I was reminded of this when working with one of the local elders, Robert Mollinjin. The narratives are in themselves repeated through their ritual structure. Robert and I had agreed to visit an important cultural site, the Knowledge Tree.

I was able to catch up with Robert Mollinjin. We set out to go on a hike to visit a sacred site passed on to him from his maternal grandmother. We began at his residence and made a three hour walk to the site. Some breaks in between. We first passed a small creek behind his place. Then he stopped to make a quick prayer. We were accompanied by three of Robert's small sons who came along for the adventure. We walked along a back road. Robert proceeded to talk about the ethics and importance of listening (to old people). We needed to wait for the story to come to him. The teachings were for the benefit of the younger generations. Each person was able to walk at their own pace.

The trip was a good chance to get one-on-one time with a local elder. We traveled along the roadway until we arrived at a path in the forest. We were headed into the traditional lands of his grandmother. The peace of the woods gave a new tone to the meditation of walking and connecting to the local psychoscapes here. Robert was eager to instruct on the importance of just being with the land. The immersion in the process of walking and connectedness gives a sort of “litany” time to reflect on the nature of the region's belief system and its sacred connection with life in bush and in the urban environments of the indigenous township of this Northern Territory. The way that the land moved and rustled about, helped connect to the sense of sacred geography.

The temperament with which Robert enjoyed his ‘being’ there and the liveliness in nature was extraordinary and welcome. The idea of ‘sanctuary’ comes to mind, as far as describing his connection to this sacred site. The greatest pleasure it seems, comes from the ability to share that feeling, as well as to pass it along to the younger generations. The knowledge of the land Robert displayed as a keen sense for seasonal change and variation. He was able to navigate well and spot out the places that gave rise to environmental features. A flower particular to that place. The immersion into place was also the silence and natural songs of the forest. The boys sang along the procession to the Knowledge Tree site. The background singing at key places along the walkabout gave rise to how people want to connect and reconnect with the land.

The site itself had taken some wear and the Knowledge Tree had fallen down after serving the people well. The tree had been damaged by fire when it was older, weakened, causing it to collapse. The remains of it still constituted a sacred object. The spot was held in high regard by all the people of the region—a meeting place. The tree would give knowledge, insight and direction. The tree was connected to the land and it was important

to the animals as well. The Knowledge Tree mediated the “Law” for the area and it was able to bring things together and make important connections and decisions. People from all over respected the tree and sought its council.

Robert had plans to replant the tree. Robert visits this site, his sanctuary, to obtain special knowledge when helping out matters in sharing wisdom with people and governments. The tree is special and it protects life. (Fieldnotes: *Day Twenty – July 14th, 201, the Knowledge Tree, 9:30am – 1:30pm.*)

The inclusion of ritual presents another method in which myth becomes enacted in people’s daily lives. Robert’s ritual in consulting the Knowledge Tree enacts an older set of narrative truths that still have an effect on how life is structured by older stories.

Ethno-poetry and Story Revitalization

As part of my fieldwork and volunteering at the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum, I was able to experience a great deal within Wadeye. I imagine that these opportunities will stay with me for a very long time. The way that the senses were merged with another world, the way the physical world becomes blurred or rather, becomes one with the imaginative world of the mind—that powerful synthesis reminds me of my first fieldwork poem that I wrote after an evening run:

Ngkatum, moments to capture:
A fierce Australian sunset
Ringing dusk, beating life about;
Shadows at my heart,
Bellowing white sands at my feet;
Vibrant textures greener,
Potent by serene light freed.

I am alone amidst these senses,
Wintering wisdom visible.
As harmony perches resplendently—
Its pearl-soft bird harrows!
Motion cedes upon dry throats
Fallen aside by time-cut ecstasy.
Memories of a lost requiem.

I am watched, yet watching...

With eyes still to the night lands.

— Ngugumingki (Dreaming Place)

The detail of these candid moments creates a kind of cultural poetics in my mind. The way in which my artistic sensibility connects to the rhythms embedded in daily activities gives a visionary characteristic to a lived expression of poetry. I was immersed in another continent, another culture and the heightened moments of sense and detail spoke to me in capturing reflective moments that had a feeling of creativity.

The simplest of things sometimes inspired a flash of poetry, the culmination of a sense of intensity and vibrancy in the world. Once, returning in the evening from the bush with Mark, we pulled up to a house. The scene was alive with detail. The night was in full force. The house was dimly lit—a group of older women were playing cards in the house. Mark was unloading a freshly shot wallaby from his truck as a gift to the house. There was rubbish around the front and the yard. The real detail came with the way in which the youth were running around at night, the way they carried flashlights. That pace and that play-world of the Murrinh-Patha children; the intensity as they moved in the bush, like fireflies, making haste of a brilliant night-world. Their shrieks to each other etched out to me—calling me to another childhood that I never knew. I was taken to another kind of perspective, in trying to imagine what playing on that field before the house must have been like for the children. That special translation of what sense *is*, expresses a particular vista within a cultural poetry.

The first time I met Mark, I was able to visit the bush site, Memarl, a waterhole that was safe to swim in at that time of the year. Mark was ecstatic about some of the spearhead rocks that his son had found at the site. The scene was lively with activity:

The journey to the bush camp was good. There are different camp systems in the wet and dry seasons. Granted that many of the dry season ones are inaccessible in the wet

season—bogged down with water and mud. Mark was talking about and spotting some of the locations from one of the “Dreaming” stories from Lawrence. A few of them only about five kilometers from the road that we were traveling that day.

Many of the Dreamtime stories are taken from a sense of real life events as well as an understanding of how the land becomes formed. The stories have a connection with their environment and they speak of a hunter and gatherer ethos.

There were a lot of conversations in the car—most of which I cannot fully remember. Mark mentioned a few things about predators and snakes—a few deaths. People lost in the wild looking for Darwin city. He had made it clear that the use of radio was the best means of distanced communication, a standard. Then he went on about how Steve got lost looking for this particular bush camp. Steve was a good fellow, walking through the bush area, found the highway back to Wadeye.

Mark had me get on spot with a rigged flashlight in search for wild game or wallabies. The correct sighting of the rifle had to be precise. The way in which Mark keeps himself and his gear was very organized and particular. Mark has been an outsider, who has integrated through both marriage and fathering. We talked about a few people who lived “out bush” permanently. We left later, close to the fall of night.

We encountered a broken-down car near one of Wadeye’s subdivisions. Mark was keen to help them. There seemed to be a problem with one of the tires. We filled up the truck beyond normal seat capacity with new passengers. We passed a police car. The kids were having a good time—playful as well as talking to each other in the back. We used a combination of back roads and main roads. We passed some white water fowl.

The camp itself was nice. Maybe a total of five main tents. There were two main fires going. Also, there was the presence of the Wadeye dogs. Mark was going up to exchange some supplies, drop off some people and look at some spearheads that his son had found in the area. There seemed to be a division of people and genders between the two fires. One of the leading elders, Cowboy, was there. You could see some of Cowboy’s chest scarring. He was a very friendly man.

The camp was joyous. Children playing—the very young ones free from clothing. Many of the kids were swimming in the fresh waterhole. There was good swimming and diving. The group wanted to have some photos taken of all of them. One of the fires was cooking a caught fish. In the distance, a wallaby was being carried off. It would have been interesting to know what kind of activities they engaged in besides general camping—being together. I gathered it was a good time to share stories. The camp intimacy and proximity seemed good. The night was approaching and I finally noticed the stars in the area. I had until then typically avoided staying out later in the day. Coming back to town was good. Many of the local houses had a fire going in their front yard. The effects of bush culture on sedentary life patterns, perhaps. I also noticed the stars from my place. A little more magic. (Fieldnotes: *Day Eight – July 2nd, the bush camp, 4:00pm and onward.*)

The intent of ethno-poetry is to immerse an audience in descriptions of what cultural life looks like, but also how cultural life feels—the way it unfolds in time. The difference perhaps, is the

mode of depth and intensity that ethno-poetry engages in when making a cultural imagining real to an audience. The aim is to make field notes more poetic or to look at them in terms of an unfolding poetry to be discovered by the audience. This first visit to Memarl captures the first representation of what bush life appeared to be for me during my fieldwork. There was a bright freshness to it all and I could start empathizing with how people used and lived with the land as it was then—the sense of it made real and manifest in their activities. The idea being that, ethno-poetry exists within ethnographic descriptions but that it needs the right framing to unlock the inherent poetry embedded in everyday experiences.

There are other moments in the throes of life that are captured as poetry—the way that ‘being’ can be exhilarated through fieldwork. The main point of ethno-poetry is to get accustomed to the specific ways in which detail manifests in the world according to a cultural framework that renders sense and experience palatable. The task of fieldwork challenges that notion as the anthropologist looks for a way to translate the poetry of the senses from one cultural world to another. The sense and insight of what cultural poetics *is* does not come from a particular place but emerges from the meaningful experiences that map onto one another. I was confronted, on a boating trip, by the sheer joy of wonder that comes from living in a remote setting connected to nature:

This day I went of a boat trip with Mark, PJ, his granddaughter, an older woman and three young boys. The trip began close to town, not far from the edge of Wadeye and from a boat landing that was near the water. There was a family unit making a campfire on the concrete. Some people were fishing along the water’s edge. I woke up with a mass of sandfly (midge) bites all along my lower legs—some on arms and hands. Very uncomfortable to deal with at present. The day itself was not too warm. I made sure to wear sun protection. We left at midday.

The tides were better. The experience of being connected to land increased. The wonder of going about the area. The sun was very bright! We passed along quite a few of the close-by areas. We were able to see a few other boats on the water as well. The use of GPS and navigation helped PJ, the new driver, with the difficulty of learning and steering in the wind. We were able to come across a few of the creek crossings. Some of the

people would cross the waters by swimming and venturing to the other side. People have also been attacked and killed by crocodiles during these dangerous times. The perils of boating—some accidents in the area from people falling off boats or engines crashing.

We passed the old mission landing area. We came to the creek area where Cowboy and his people were camping. The people were waiting along the landing area, spotting us before we got there. People were engaged in some fishing activities as well. There was a small camping area and house inland. This place was special to Father Docherty. There was a special tree that was cut in his honour.

The boat ride continued then, some change of passengers. We were able to go further down the river area, getting closer to the original landing. We chanced along a mob of bats nesting in the area. It was a great sight to see at that time. I later wrote some verses about this moment, capturing its poetry:

The boat sliced the river waters
Silently, creeping as a swift foot.
We remained there—mostly hush
In anticipation of something.
An ominous sense ... those first words,
Become ready in the clear,
To cut into clarity, that dawning suspense
At what we had entered then.

I felt a shaky vibration, and then a rush;
The echoes of the flying foxes,
The sheer weight,
Building and climbing
That anticipation
Crippling and crushing
The awe of ages...
Flourishing as
The bats took flight—
Ruling the skies as
A sovereign roost of wings

—Tjinimin's Cry

A very large and natural mob was close to us. The bats at first were unnoticed, then spotted, scared and roused to activity by our presence. They made a ruckus flying about. The scene was awe-inspiring. It reflected the connection people have for the land



Figure 4.4. A natural roost of bats flying along the river.

itself. The entrance into the region's living power and psychoscapes. The fragments of narrative circulating within the mind itself, have access to these stories about the local land and its "Dreaming" phenomenon. This natural display would surely have connections to the Bat and Rainbow story.

The moment was filled with people trying to tap into and connect with the experience of viewing

nature at work. Everyone was trying to capture a good "bat" photo. The event created a sense of what fieldwork *is* as well as an appreciation for what the rangers do in the region in terms of natural conservation work. There is a sort of prosperity in keeping a sense of the natural resources alive—its management and science a key to the power of the local dreaming ritual and practices. The hope is to provide the youth with the same wonder for the natural environment as is present in many of the hunter-gatherer traditions of old.

There was also a sentiment to go out and hunt the fruit bats for their sweet meat. We were able to return to the site of Cowboy's camp. I was welcomed to view the camp and the special tree that was cut. We went back on the boat and got a few good sightings of the islands within the local region. (Fieldnotes: *Day Twenty Six – July 20th, 2013, boat trip.*)

The ability to understand what is significant in daily life helps define the character of a place as it becomes ethno-poetry. The uncovering of the nesting bats became a high point in uncovering the majestic way in which the landscape could, at a moment's notice, seize the senses in learning the variable forms of the region. Such details, coupled with an immersion in the field, help ground one in the land and recognize what animates its story and myth.

Ethno-poetry, the understanding of how lived detail supports creativity, is the foundation for standardizing story revitalization. The varied rhythms of everyday life are important—critical—to framing narrative and myth as these relate to a culture. These details provide the

missing link in telling lost stories. The idea is to become immersed in a cultural world, along with its ethno-poetry, in fostering links of creativity that might work to revive or retranslate a narrative. The need for such work became apparent at the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum, given that many of the older stories in the region are becoming lost. Mark and I decided to make a bush trip with the Scorpion mob⁹ to look at one of their stories.

Stories, especially the old stories of the “Dreaming,” are grounded in the land. The folding of myth onto space and space onto myth centres the relationship that geography plays in traditional Aboriginal Australian culture, one that speaks of a sacred connection. The specific organization of the world along these lines enables Aboriginal Australians to better navigate their surroundings and connection to a sacred geography centered in a mythic notion of being:

But think, for the moment, of a whole world covered by apparently localized people, a world in which, whether they had maps or not, the folks were always living in two kinds of space. In other words, to make any kind of sense of their home terrain they would have to take account of its limits and boundaries, and therefore of what lay beyond them. But if the terrain they knew best provided their whole familiarity with space, they would always be plotting the distant and the cosmological down on the local, and the local upon the distant and the cosmological. The shape of space itself, as well as of the human experiencing of that space, would be epicentric in the very fundamental sense. (Wagner 2001:72)

These experiences of space, those akin to the great “Dreaming” stories, speak to the encoding of myth upon the land as it becomes synonymous with the spiritual. The dimensions of space and place become charged with the cosmological as Aboriginal Australians make sense and meaning out of the terrains that comprise their home and universe in order to understand themselves better and merge myth with being. The grafting of mythic content upon the land itself creates a set of definitive landscapes that become familiarized as home and self and, from this spatial practice, Aboriginal Australians understood that, “the intimate features of locality formed a kind of prism

⁹ A “mob” translates as a group of people, not necessarily troublesome, in the Australian English dialect.

through which the global facts of existence might be described” (Wagner 2001:73). The spiritual immersion into the landscape brought a new world system of self-awareness and connection. The purpose was to “saturate the perceived landscape with values and meanings that provide a rich material network of associations for identity constructions, from the personal to the emotional to the social and politico-legal” (Stewart and Strathern 2001:80). Stories are immersed in the landscape as it provides a sense of belonging, continuity and self to Aboriginal Australians.

The journey into Redcliff and Yederr to conduct work on the Scorpion mob stories was a much-appreciated venture. I was looking forward to getting out on the land:

Day Forty Five to Forty Eight – August 9th-12th, 2013, Yederr trip.

The trip didn’t happen until later that first night.

The night was rough and adjusting to sleeping on the bare land took its toll. The splintered sleep likely triggered more remembrance of my own dreams. There even seemed to be a connection to the land itself via dreaming—as if the place’s psychoscape was trying to communicate something to me and grasp my presence there.

The sun rose from the east side of the camp. You could hear the morning howls of the wild dingoes. The movement of a lone frog. The beat and flutter of a black bird. The song of the morning as bird chimes came to me. The presence of a swift-footed wallaby by the camp. Mark had gone off early in the morning for a walk and a hunt. I could hear the firing of the rifle. The morning fire was the first thing.

Then early morning bush cooking followed and the wallaby was carried away by Bernadine. The very visceral details and senses of the camp, especially the cooking, made the day come alive. The way the details get inside the hands after carrying the bloodied wallaby. The blood made me reflect on the dimensions of reality and realness.

We made a round out to the country to quickly survey the area before the others were to arrive at camp. Earlier, Mark had found some stone objects there.

We helped the Scorpion mob set up camp at the site. The evening played out well with the family enjoying its time and company. They mostly spoke to themselves in their native language. There was a kind of “hyper energy” to the family unit. There were the normal curious questions about myself and my identity.

There was a rush to check out the other camp as there was news of a whitefellow who might not have permission from one of the traditional owners.

The camp provided a new level of social proximity and getting to know people. A very good way to forge social connections. I was able to get to know David a lot better this day.



Figure 4.5. The Moyle River within the Yederr region.

The next day there was no luck with the hunting. There was early dew and mist. I was able to wake much earlier. There was talk in the camp. It seemed that traditional knowledge was still practiced but in decline. There were fewer people who were expert in it; much of it had been documented for revival later. We visited the stone objects that Mark had found earlier. We talked

about old bush life stories—people stealing sacred stones and yam resources that caused tribal wars and massacres.

People make “Dreaming” songs from real life happenings. They create intersections to creatively insert themselves into the narrative mythscapes of the region. I was talking with David and he mentioned that “freedom is out bush,” solidifying that the connections to culture have to be forged on the land. This conceptual framework provides a cultural practice in getting people more engaged in the art of telling stories as a normal event in people’s daily lives. The day then shifted towards the hunt for the “Dreaming” site, not far from David’s Redcliff camping spot in the Yederr region.

The drive brought us close to the roadside. There were stories of birds living in the dirt piles along the road’s shoulder. There is a story about someone looking for the Scorpion “Dreaming” site in one of those bird holes and that person was stung by a live scorpion. We drove off the road and we took a quick survey of the land—one of the most serene moments—as if we had entered a completely different domain. The people of the Scorpion “Dreaming” were calling out to their ancestors to re-establish a connection. Yelling with happiness as if coming back home that exact moment. A complex of emotions and memories flooding those who had visited the sight. Powerful. They were looking for the stone arrangement site, thought to be patterned like a scorpion constellation.

The last time anyone was there was twenty years ago. There was a real concern to find and re-connect with these sites. We engaged the area of the “Dreaming.” Yet, we were unable to find the exact spot. The moment created a sense of being lost in one’s own country; a silent moment of knowing. The Scorpion mob drew a map in the sand to try and help find the site, said to have been found by an earlier anthropologist, Kim Barber.

Nowadays, sites can be privately documented via GPS technology. The co-ordinates are kept with the museum and the later registered with the Sacred Sites Act to protect areas from development and mining activities.

We were able to go back to the camp to record the story from David but he had a hard time telling the story through, from A to B. A problem was that many of the stronger story- and song-men have passed away. The burden of responsibility then falls on people

less skilled in the craft. The drive here is to create a stronger culture for the youth. As an elder, David expressed he wanted his children to be confident in their own country, the necessary bush skills, craft and lore needed to navigate these areas. There is the sentiment that they do not want to completely lose the traditional belief systems and knowledge of the land.

We got back to Wadeye and next day we shifted to trying to work more on the Scorpion “Dreaming” story. We were able to get another female elder who knew more pieces of the “Dreaming” story. David was only able to give an outline of the story but the actual plot of the story, the happenings, were not there. The older woman was shy to speak. The performance was best in its original orality before recording. The older woman had her own troubles remembering the exact phrasing. The recording had less of the story. Mark was able to help draw out more of the story in English afterwards.

There were some discussions after, with Mark, about the state of stories and narratives. The older traditions are resting on fragments. The goal is to capture what elements are left and work with the record as a puzzle. We also made some plans to do further story-work via the Library and the Knowledge Centre. The goal was to get the actual story mapped out in terms of its specific sites.

The energy that it takes to track stories like the Scorpion “Dreaming” can take a lot of planning and resources to accomplish. Mark Crocombe said this kind of grind was typical when doing story-work, to take many attempts to finalize just one version of a story. The insight from the field trip into the bush gave me a sense of the difficulties of doing cultural resource management for the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum.

The text of the Scorpion “Dreaming” is something that still needs to be worked on to have a full plot. Right now, the kernel of the story gives an outline of the Ancestor Beings and their locations in the landscape:

Scorpion “Dreaming” Story - At the place known as Tadiwulili

The centipede and scorpion had a fight at Tadiwulili and then the centipede went off to live at Paynay. The scorpion stayed at Tadiwulili. The golden tree snake stays at Therrnga and two women stay at the jungle place known as Danga. The Seagull lives at the place called Ngupidirr. The Walamun is one of our totems and has gone somewhere. Our totem, the dolphin, lives at Therrimeri. The very tall skinny man, Bayamutju, guards the edge of the plain and he keeps out intruders and his weapon is a goanna tail and this is near the place known as Mardiman. The hammerhead shark lives at Yelnguk. The little Bat lives in a cave at Yederr. The big golden tree snake was fighting with the smaller golden tree snake. Ku kalinhkayerak is one of our totems. The sun is also one of our ‘Dreamings.’ This is the red cliff at sunset. The Kookaburra lives in a cave on the hill.

The small creeper bird is another totem and they are in the place known as Yonbun where there is a jungle. There is also living at Yonbun a WidJuk (white bellied, cuckoo shrike). The jungle fowl lives at Budhatdhat. The [Leree] 'Dreaming' is another dreaming of ours. The crocodile came and lived at the place called Wudanthawidal on the river. Mugindirr lives in the river. The sun comes from Nirrpr, and it brightens the hills called Wudimantiperr.

This provides a template for defining a possible story. The story itself needs to come from the local Scorpion mob, as they are the owners of that country and its wildlife. The situation underlies the context of story revitalization work at the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum. The move towards more aggressive cultural resource management strategies may prove vital in making headway in the bringing about of stronger cultural ties with traditional belief systems and knowledge.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The resurgence of culture helps support the growing need for grassroots, indigenous cultural revitalization. The aim is to further support Aboriginal Australians in their efforts to decolonize their traditional lands. The ideal of decolonization is to “reclaim traditions, in addition to moving forward in the complex social, political and economic realities colonization brought ” (Jacob 2014:202) to indigenous peoples. The township of Wadeye and the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum need to come to terms with the local level of involvement in securing that those ties to the old stories remain a part of the cultural fabric. There seems to be a set of measures that could help embody that goal in identifying where the eldership stands in teaching the new generations of Aboriginal Australians. The existing power structures in Wadeye—i.e., Thamarrurr Regional Aboriginal Advisory Council (TRAAC)—could benefit from these guidelines adapted from Jacob’s work on revitalization (2014:2438-2445):

1. Recognizing the importance of respectful partnerships that work to promote the awareness of culture and story traditions. Supporting local storytellers.
2. Dedicating staff, faculty, programmatic and curricular resources to outreach, implementation and, maintenance of partnerships with cultural initiatives that support the growth of local storytelling in the region.
3. Committing to ongoing involvement and visible support for these initiatives by both TRAAC and the Australian government.
4. Sharing power with individual family partners, with the focus on applied and relevant knowledge production that benefits the township.
5. Hiring and supporting culturally competent personnel through the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum to implement these initiatives.

The resurgence of such stories works to give a proper cultural basis for Wadeye as a unique and valued Aboriginal Australian community. The ability to reclaim story heritage places people in greater connection within their traditional lands as well as with their ancestors. The stories provide a central way of understanding the world and reinterpreting those stories in terms of a modern framework of culture and belief.

The state of aboriginal storytelling is in transition as more modern forms of storytelling take place in light of the traditional storytelling. The efforts of story revitalization are to see that these types of stories get told hand-in-hand with the “Dreaming” stories. The idea is to foster an exchange of storytelling skills over time such that, the craft of storytelling remains strong in the region. The other aim is to facilitate the elders in being able to document such stories with the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum.

The fieldwork that I conducted in Wadeye during the dry season of 2013 from June to September gave a first introduction—a privileged, momentary vista—to the way in which myths and stories operated in that community. The time spent functioned more on a premise of a future possibility, to garner the trust and respect of the people in the township. I was invited to spend time in a remote indigenous community, an experience entirely new to me. The life and continuing struggles of these Aboriginal Australian residents, these rare people, is something far braver than I could have imagined. The words of anthropologist, Bill Ivory, struck me as he told me that the Murrinh-Patha speakers were a “hard and relentless” people. I wondered what he had meant by that phrase just before I left Wadeye. The admission struck deeply with me wherever I went, in seeing the sort of chaotic but beautiful way life was organized in the township. I could remember the walks I had traversing the land, seeing people active amid the rubbish and heat of the day. There was an interesting composure to people’s faces. They were often silent and reflective, perhaps long gone somewhere in thought, caught by their own imaginative worlds, I would have guessed. The composure of their facial expressions gave a real sense of something fierce and passionate that forged the character of each Murrinh-Patha speaker. Then there was that recognition by Maree Klesch, a member of the Batchelor Institute and the Wadeye Aboriginal Language Centre, to look for the humanity of each of these people, to see them for

who they are in terms of a fuller humanity. I understood the importance of portrayal all too well as a writer. I could remember those moments with people when I felt I had gained a connection with them in being present, attuning myself to the way in which people coloured the world with actions and emotions. I can remember the way in which Majella Chula smiled and laughed in the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum and the sheer excitement of Luke Parmbuk as we reconnected on the streets. Fieldwork taught me to look for these signs.

There is a difficulty and complexity to doing ethnographic work. The success or failure of these endeavours is not simply related to the merits of the fieldworker or the cleverness of a research design but, rather, to a host of concerns. Ethnographic work is a pursuit of and by the community and it is subject to the particularities of each community. One of the first barriers I had in doing my work was that I was from outside the community, a stranger. I had to rely on Mark Crocombe and the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum to establish a connection with Wadeye. The work moved at a slow pace given all the organizational stress it takes to rally people to work. The younger adults were hard to interact with given that they were often shy around English speakers. The story-work itself was something that detracted from participants' daily activities; people had many family responsibilities that took a large share of their schedules. The participants often were only able to commit a few hours a day to a given project or recording.

The hardest part was first getting people to show up at the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum. Often people would make a promise to show up on a given day but in actuality they would show up on another. The recordings took multiple versions to get it right, as storytellers often had trouble performing on the spot. Often storytellers would only know parts of a story. They would need a few days to think it over as well as have accompanying materials available to jog their memories. A single story often required input of multiple people to complete. The

versions that were obtained often did not contain a full plot but rather, an outline of a story. The content of these stories were often omitted or censored, depending ... individual participants only had rights to tell certain stories or versions of those stories. The actual work it took to finalize a single story was rather arduous and required the permissions of multiple levels of authority. The books that were produced by the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum took many months of hard work. All of these things made story-work in Wadeye a particular challenge for me and the payoff would likely only ever come after investing years of research and volunteering in that community for something seminal to be produced.

One of the goals of this study from the start has been to gain a more precise knowledge and appreciation for how the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum has come to terms with the task of cultural resource management. The overall project of my preliminary fieldwork in Wadeye and the Thamarrurr region presents an apt model for how the museum has gone about its work in the region. The process of cultural preservation itself is tied to the willingness of the community to divulge its collective memory of heritage to cultural workers. The current program of cultural resource management is too passive to fully incorporate a stance of cultural revitalization. The mere collection and recording of local stories by the museum is not enough to ensure the maintenance of this region's culture. The Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum's current collection of narratives is only the first step in ensuring that the stories live on in the ensuing generations of Aboriginal Australians from Wadeye. The museum has to work hard to ensure that the stories are accessible to future generations given the shifting trends in language acquisition: the bilingual state of affairs has rendered many of the stories from older generations as well as languages other than English and Murrinh-Patha as less linguistically comprehensible to the youth in the Wadeye Township. The current practices of cultural resource management by the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala

museum have to be reassessed for success. There needs to be a shift to a more confident and proactive case for cultural resource management that is supported by both TRAAC and the people of Wadeye. The museum has to become a more active component in the community if it wants to ensure that its current database of stories is tangible, operational and functional in meeting the needs of each Aboriginal resident in Wadeye.

The real question lies in what kind of cultural heritage the residents of Wadeye want for their children. There should in time be a more collective discussion from the community regarding cultural diversity and revitalization efforts. The Traditional Owners within the Wadeye region would benefit from having more Thamarrurr Regional Aboriginal Advisory Council (TRAAC) meetings on this matter. A strategy for cultivating possible futures should be orchestrated in light of a possible agenda of cultural revitalization. The efforts must speak to an agreement with future fieldworkers to conduct the kind of cultural work that the Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum might facilitate in bolstering its ability to prevent cultural and language loss. There should first be a collective understanding of the nature and the rate of culture loss occurring in Wadeye. The support has to come from a cross-generational movement of elders working with the youth to maintain the unique identity of Wadeye as an Aboriginal Australian community. The community needs to verify this by implementing a survey to determine the kinds of short-term and long-term tasks to be carried out, if an agenda of cultural revitalization is to be successful. The kind of preservation has to be decided, ranging from the implementation of a multicultural system of divergent symbolic and regional heritages in equality, to a full-scale independent presence of multiculturalism within Wadeye Township. The current trend is to favour a bicultural model of Wadeye, having both English and Murrinh-Patha as dominant cultural modes. The linguists have been working together in this region and some of the other

languages have been documented enough to preserve their basic structure; it would be up to current generations of Aboriginal Australians to learn these languages and cultures and, with time, to regenerate the complexity of these systems with continued use and language adaptation. The purpose of this would be to respect the heritage that has adapted itself to a unique co-existence with the Wadeye region as an ecosystem, a cultural sphere and a living tradition.

The importance of this work highlights the creativity needed to conduct cultural resource management. I have aligned myself to an ethnopoetic stance because I believe that the solutions for revitalization and preservation of culture will likely come from a point of remembrance that fuels a creative mindset shared by community members and fieldworkers. The challenge of fieldwork encourages the anthropologist to look for a way to translate the poetry of the senses from one cultural world to another. Ethno-poetry immerses an audience in descriptions of what cultural life looks like, but also how cultural life feels. The creativity here is about reconnection with the mode of living, which has been predominant in humanity's history, that of the "Dreaming" stories. These stories are unique to the continent of Australia and these stories are lived in the land. The flux of creative fieldworkers emphasizes these features, as newcomers are sensitive to the unique character of the land and its people. Yet, without the deep knowledge of the elders, there is little promise for that kind of connection fostering into a successful endeavour. The magic about doing fieldwork should be about exchanging a dialogue with the community, one that transfers both skill and insight back into the hands of the traditional owners, who should recognize both the immense difficulty and importance of cultural revitalization within their community. The Kanamkek-Yile Ngala museum has always been a hub to reflect on the possible futures that Wadeye might cultivate for posterity. The exciting part is that, cultural

revitalization brings with it the hope of greater self-autonomy from remote indigenous communities like Wadeye.

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