Chapter 1

Learning how to know people and places through interaction

‘Having a good look around’: experiencing an entangled place

What makes a place ‘entangled’? How do you recognise this quality in a place? The first part of this chapter describes my introduction to one such place in the western Simpson Desert, northern South Australia. I trace the five threads I find implicated in its entanglement, and discuss what constitutes them. In the second part of the chapter I explore why recognition of the processes that generate such entanglement is important; how it brings to the foreground histories of intercultural interactions of people in place.

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We are at Smiths Yards. It is a cloudy Sunday in November 1997, and the muted light brings out the contrasting colours of the weathered gray stockyards against the orange sand. The yards were built from whole coolibah branches,
their Y-shaped joints cut with cross-saws and axes, drilled with augers and ‘twitched’ together with wire. They were first constructed for the cattle which were herded into the lower reaches of the Finke River in the 1870s, here where the channel of the Finke turns a corner to run out into the red dunes of the western Simpson Desert. We are about 250km south-east of the geographic centre of Australia (map 1.1, 1.2, fig 1.3 - 1.5).

**The contemporary context for people’s engagement**

The first thread to trace in thinking about the entangled, ‘many-in-one’ quality of Smiths Yards is the contemporary context in which I experience it, the background of those who are showing it to me, and their relations to it. Being at Smiths Yards with people who know it opens up stories of three generations of named individuals and their relations to the place. This introduces a specificity that kindles the life that is immanent in the place. It goes from being a silent, decaying structure entirely of the past to a place vibrating with re-enacted past sounds and action, and current relevance.

We are visiting Smiths Yards because it is the birthplace of Harry Taylor, son of Dick Taylor, who kept cattle on a smallholding here, and worked maintaining bores in the region in the early twentieth century. Harry Taylor is a member of the Irrwanyere Aboriginal Corporation. This is an association of people descended from Lower Southern Arrernte, Wankanguru and Arabunna language groups, formally incorporated in 1989. They speak for this country in official fora, such as Native Title proceedings and the Witjera Board of Management. Their Native Title rights were recognised in 2008. They have a joint management agreement with the Department of Environment and Heritage of the South Australian Government for Witjera National Park.

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1 By Jack Smith, Bobby Smith’s father, who in turn was the father of Boof Smith, who currently runs the nearby New Crown Station and ‘speaks lingo’ as Bingey Lowe reported (Macfarlane field notebook 28 September 1997: 86). Descriptions of yards Macfarlane field notebook 16 November 1997: 43-53.


3 http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/parks/sanpr/witjira/park.html accessed 19/9/09; Smyth 2001: 75-6, 81. This was a pioneering land management arrangement, negotiated in 1995 in recognition of the claims to the area by Irrwanyere members. Under this agreement, the land remains state park, but is leased to the Irrwanyere Aboriginal Corporation and jointly managed by them and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (S.A.), with a separate commercial lease at the Mt Dare Homestead.
Fig 1.3: Smiths Yards, September 1997

Fig 1.4: Smiths Yards (construction detail), September 1997
Fig 1.5: Plan showing method of construction and dimensions of stockyards at Smiths Yards. Craig Westell field notes, November 1997.
Witjera National Park was declared in 1985, mainly to protect the large mound springs that are a distinctive feature of the region, together with the areas at the terminal reaches of the Finke River. The boundaries of the park follow those of the former Mt Dare cattle station, which in turn were the result of amalgamations of smaller pastoral leases. These leases were taken up on the tail of the surveying and building of the Overland Telegraph Line, completed in 1872. The boundaries of the national park, and of my study area, incorporate this succession of land divisions and uses.

Harry Taylor was one of a self-selected sub-group of Irrwanyere members interested and able, in the late 1990s, to spend time in the country now incorporated in the Witjera National Park, sharing and finessing their knowledge of its people and places, and ‘having a good look around’.

‘Having a good look around’ was a phrase my Irrwanyere teachers used repeatedly, referring to both a practical and a conceptual approach to being in country. It reflects an active, monitoring concern for, and vigilance in, the landscape. This landscape knowledge is not fixed; it is kept up-to-date by habitually travelling from one place to another, awake to the dynamics of passing rainstorms, of animals and the tracks and sounds of other people’s movements.

These Irrwanyere members were employed as rangers in the Witjera National Park. They agreed to take on the job of teaching me, a student in need of instruction, and integrate that with visiting places and re-telling the histories of people in place (fig 1.6). This was an inter-generational transfer of knowledge.

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4 Davey 1985; Management Plan 1995; Ponder and Zeidler 1989. The characteristics of these distinctive landscapes are described in chapter 2 below.

5 Harry Taylor, Bingey Lowe and Dean Ah Chee were rangers. Marilyn Stuart was an Irrwanyere member but not a ranger. At other times I also worked with Geoffrey Ah Chee, Raylene Hudson, Ian Hodgson, Charlie Hudson, Rossie Finn, Kay Finn, Elaine Bohning. Other Irrwanyere members who have knowledge and concern for the area did not elect to engage in this history project. Tensions, discontentments and disputes existed between groups with different interests within the Irrwanyere membership, but these did not impact on this history recording project. My work was insulated from these conflicts; I was repeatedly told to ‘just ignore that family business and get on with your work’.

Fig 1.6: Irrwanyere members Bingey Lowe, Harry Taylor, Marilyn Hull-Stuart, Dean Ah Chee having smoko under the trees where the cookies’ camp used to be at Smiths Yards, September 1997.

‘Cookie says, “Right, dinner time you boys”, so we come around and have a feed, salt meat, damper, all kinds. Two cookies for 20 men mustering and horse tailers. 3-400 in this yard and the calves. Stockman camp over there on slope on clear ground there where the sunshine is. This the cookies camp. Room so can walk around doing the cooking.’ Binge Lowe 28/9/1997 videotape.
(see below for further discussion), with all the obligations of responsible teaching and learning that that implies, as well as an inter-cultural one.

In return, I had archaeological skills to offer: impact surveys were requested by some of the Witjera Board of Management in selected areas that were to be developed for tourists. Also, I could show how archaeologists work as part of the ranger training program then in operation. Archaeology generates accounts of an officially recognised, authoritative past. Irrwanyere’s agreement to assist in official archaeological work in Witjera National Park gave ethical and political weight to them as park co-managers and to the archaeology practiced. I also had a vehicle and funds for the fieldwork to offer. All those involved shared a willingness to share our understandings of the past and our various ways into it.

As it turned out, our different starting points, the differences in our understandings of our relations to the past, were as influential a teaching for me as the overt content of the accounts that they passed on to me. It led to a disciplinary shift in my work from archaeology to history, which I discuss further below.

As a part of this program of instruction, we were revisiting Harry Taylor’s birthplace, Smiths Yards. There was a plan to build him a house there, so he could live back in his own country after a lifetime of hard work on cattle stations across northern South Australia and the Northern Territory. Harry was taken away as a child from Mt Dare to Colebrook Home in Quorn, and so lost his early connection to his birth language and the stories of his country. Return is important, and carries hopes of renewal. ‘The country is lonely without people there’.

Two ‘homelands’ or living areas had already been established by 1997, with pre-fabricated houses brought in to Oasis and Anniversary Bores on the Finke floodout. Their locations were selected because of their value to Irrwanyere

6 AIATSIS Grant number G96/5214. Ranger training was organised in the late 1990s by the Department for Environment, Heritage and Aboriginal Affairs and Irrwanyere Aboriginal Corporation with Gary Richardson.
7 Macfarlane field notebook 28 September 1997: 90.
8 An attendee at a public meeting about establishing and funding homelands made this comment, Oodnadatta 2 September 1997, Macfarlane field notebook 1-2 September 1997: 13-17.
members, with multiple associations that inspired them to return to live there and to establish ‘a local future,’ with ambitions to grow veggies and have camel rides for tourists (fig 1.7, 1.8). (See chapter 4 for further discussion of the cluster of associations that led to Bingey Lowe’s selection of the Anniversary Bore location for his house).

The program of revisiting places was a work of recollection. It reanimated and reinforced connections to the place and the histories that made it. Through revisiting, associations of people and place were brought into currency again. It was also a work of record. It fed into a National Estate Grants Program of recording places in Witjera National Park.

My principal teacher was Mr Bingey Lowe, former head stockman on Mt Dare station, Irrwanyere elder and, in the late 1990s, park ranger. Uncle Alex Kruger said he was called ‘Bingey’ because when he was a small kid taken from Mataranka in the Northern Territory, he had a sticking-out stomach, for which the word is ‘bingey’ in general Aboriginal English. He was taken away from his country of birth, and brought south to Mt Dare station as a child, in the late 1930s or early 1940s, by the Mt Dare station owner, Ted Lowe, and his son Rex, who also owned properties in the Territory, where Bingey’s father Brandy worked for them. So, although Bingey was born Tyingili from around Mataranka, he was taught the Mt Dare country and its detailed stories, songs, connections and proprie- ties as a child and young man in mustering camps, or out the back of the main Mt Dare homestead near Abminga Creek, as he worked on the station with Lower Southern Arrernte and Wankanguru Old People, or elders, who lived and worked around the station. He explained to me:

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9 Byrne 2008: 163-5.
10 This was the first time a park in South Australia made provision for such living areas, under the joint management agreement. http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/parks/sanpr/witjira/park.html accessed 19/9/09.
Macfarlane field notebook 29 October 1996.
11 See also Beck and Somerville 2005; Gill, Paterson and Kennedy 2001; Harrison 2004; Byrne and Nugent 2004; Byrne 2008.
12 In addition to this thesis - a meta-record of the work - copies of field notebooks, photographs and audio tapes are held in the AIATSIS library. I prepared books of photographs documenting our work in 1996 and 1997 and copies of archival materials for the Irrwanyere Aboriginal Corporation. I gave these to the members I worked with most closely, with distribution and access to them at their discretion.
14 Luise Hercus says he was born in 1928 (Hercus and Potezny 1996: 2). He was more than 10 years old when he went south to Mt Dare, which puts his arrival at Mt Dare in the late 1930s (B. Lowe Tape transcript Track 1 Tape 2, 7 October 1997).
Fig 1.7: Bingey Lowe outside the new house at Anniversary Bore, 1996.

Fig 1.8: Preparation for vegetable garden and lawn, irrigated with bore water at Oasis Bore. ‘Two houses, grape, fig, passion fruit and gum saplings planted. Lawn under shade cloth at front of the house. Fence not finished, generator not here yet.’ (Macfarlane field notebook 9/7/96).
Old Rex Lowe I was his boy, just like I was his son, he brought me up, learn me everything, you know. … Lively kid I was, like to do things, never standing looking at ’em, I jump in to ’em, I was one of those, I like to learn. After I was in Mt Dare for long time before I was old enough to go mustering.

… see that little tableland, on the hill, that side from Mt Dare, from the house, the old people used to camp along there with the humpies could see them from the house. The camp used to be there. I used to go down there. Never missed, I always go to the old mans, them old fellas used to like me, ‘He’s a good boy this fella’. I grew up and I was a good boy and they pass on the stories, knew I was going to do the right thing, used to sit like old crows, ‘Why don’t you come over here’, with old fellas, they tell good stories, I used to go down … Aranda, I started talking lingo with them, that was the first lingo I learned.

When I am grown up, had beard, I was a big fell a then, mustering around the desert country, with the old people chasing wild cattle, chasing brumbies, I was a real cowboy then.  

Bingey Lowe designed our program of visits with applied energy, thought and time, drawing deeply on his stores of experience to pass them on as responsibly as he had absorbed them. So the second thread to attend to as it winds through, entangling this place, is that of the direct stories of it that are told in place.

Direct stories told in place

Bingey Lowe was a gifted raconteur and historian. As active interlocutor, he explicated the historical world of people and ancestral beings in the places they animate in the western Simpson area to those who could actively listen, including Irrwanyere members, and the professional linguists, anthropologists and archaeologists who worked with him. He knew the country in several overlapping ways. He was born elsewhere, but was ‘like a son’ of the station-owner boss; he knew the country as a working stockman; as a trusted and capable holder of Lower Southern Arrernte traditions; and in the late 1990s as a

15 B. Lowe Tape transcript Track 1 Tape 2, 7 October 1997. Bingey Lowe was loyal to the Lowes, and fondly recalled playing with their daughters when they were all children. This is despite external evidence that Rex Lowe was capable of ruthless brutality towards men working for him at around this time. In December 1945 he was tried in Oodnadatta for assault on six men who had been assigned to work at Mt Dare from Port Augusta ‘under arrangement with the police’ (Times 19/12/45; Melbourne Herald 19/12/45; cuttings in AA A431 1946/182). The fact that they were strangers to the country and to the local workers may have exacerbated the situation.
park ranger who drew on all these knowledges to provide advice to the Board of Management.\textsuperscript{16}

Bingey Lowe was an accomplished teacher of the Ancestral stories of the area. But he rapidly picked up on the idea that my interest was primarily in the traces and stories of human historical action, and warmed to the possibilities of this as a project. He was interested and proud to pass on the pastoral history in places that he knew so well. When we met other members of the community, in answer to their questions about what we were doing, he spoke up for us after our first day out saying ‘I’m showing them those places where the cattle was, where we used to be, how we used to do it with them cattle, with Old Mr Lowe’.\textsuperscript{17} Telling how to dig a bore with pick and shovel or build a hard mulga wood stockyard with hand tools; the knowledge of ‘the pastoral era’ – as an interpretative sign labels the Crispe Bore yards, to Bingey’s amusement, as he was one of those who built them in the 1960s (fig 1.9). His experiences and knowledge provided accounts of what was otherwise a rapidly contracting store of stockman’s lore and practices.

Pointing with arms and face and body, re-enacting the events he describes, Bingey performed for us the way the bronco rail in the centre of the yards was used to handle the cattle, to ‘tie ‘em, brand ‘em, cut ‘em and ear mark them cleanskins’.\textsuperscript{18} Smiths Yards was ‘a good strong yard’ when he first came, he used to break horses there.\textsuperscript{19} He pointed out the location of the night camp for nightwatching the cattle, and the cookie’s camp under trees. He performed private histories in their proper places, evoking the everyday actions and experiences that cumulatively shaped the workers and the country.

‘Don’t talk while I remember’

Bingey was concerned about proof and veracity, how to ensure responsible story telling and re-telling. Reflecting on his own practice and role from the comfort of the sitting room of his house at Anniversary Bore, he said ‘You gotta

\textsuperscript{16} This is not an uncommon life circumstance for Aboriginal pastoral workers. See for example Rowse 1987: 82-3; Kruger and Waterford 2007; Beckett 1993.

\textsuperscript{17} Bingey Lowe pers comm. Mt Dare, S.A. 8 July 1996.

\textsuperscript{18} Macfarlane field notebook 3 October 1997: 106.

\textsuperscript{19} Macfarlane field notebook 5 October 1997: 10.
have your memories, speak out proper, think all the time. Just listen, don’t talk while I remember’. ‘Gotta have good ears and good memory’.20

As Deborah Bird Rose says, ‘If we know anything orally, we know because someone chose to tell us’.21 Bingey had decided I was capable of appreciating the import of his stories, a responsible listener, but he could see that I needed paper to remember – ‘Get out that paper’ he would say. So he was conscious of this not being a simple matter of transfer of a composed narrative to a listener but a translation from an oral composition to a written one, with all the attendant ethical obligations of veracity and attention to tone. ‘There is a story in everything. It’ll come out, maybe with the girls [referring to me and Marilyn Stuart], maybe with old Bingey Lowe, the story telling, the talking ringer from the Top End’.22 In learning how to hear, to recognise and not to obstruct a good story, I was learning how to learn.23

Anthropologist Francesca Merlan makes an important distinction between two modes of learning. There are relationships in which a knowledgeable person, for example an elder, explicitly ‘teaches’ another person. Here ‘the content could be somewhat independent of its mode of transmission’. In contrast are those teaching relationships where important understandings are ‘passed on through the same kind of embodied experience’ that fostered the original absorption of the content, such as travelling through the country.24

In this way, for Bingey, place, being there, was proof of the veracity of the story. He was against fictions. It was clear to him that an external observer’s job – my job – was ‘not lying’. He told me: ‘You should take lots of pictures, not just of the yards, to show them what it’s like, to prove them you’ve been there’. I argued with him, saying that stories would be good ways to show and to prove, but he insisted that photos are better.25 Indeed, he requested a gift of a Polaroid camera to take pictures of the waterholes we visited for himself (fig 1.10, see also chapter 4).

20 Macfarlane field notebook 5 October 1997: 7, 10.
21 Rose 2003a: 123.
22 Macfarlane field notebook 5 October 1997.
23 Rose 2007.
24 Merlan 2005: 172, both quotes, emphasis in original.
Fig 1.9: Interpretive sign the ‘pastoral era’ at Mt Dare. Crispe Bore stockyard, built in the 1950s, near Christmas Creek, 1996
Anthropologist Deborah Rose similarly found that place was an important criterion of proof for stories.\(^{26}\) It also indicated the legitimacy of who can tell them. She emphasised two other criteria of reliability – those of presence – being an eyewitness to an event, and genealogy. If the teller had not been there themselves, their account is accompanied by a statement of who originally told the story, and whether or not they were an eyewitness. This accords with Bingey’s strongly asserted sense of those stories which bear weight, that are proper, and ‘good’. My own academic concerns with ‘proof’ were covered in my attention to recording the specificities of dates, names, and relationships in my notes, photographs and tapes, and in my working across diverse sources relevant to a given place (see below).

Conscious, engaged story telling was a defining aspect of being taught the country. It was a recurring element of our work together. It integrated the transmission of Ancestral stories, historical accounts of former lives and personal histories. In performances such as Bingey Lowe’s, private history became public. As public history, the stories were then available, even for people who might never have been to Smiths Yards. In this way the place of the story retains its specifics, but is simultaneously stretched into an expanded network of social and historical connections.

In being taught the country this way, Bingey Lowe gave me a considered perspective based on his own experience. It was one person’s account but it was not a personal account. There were no life details, nor was it his story alone. Rather, his stories contained those of many other people. They never referred to his own intimate life history; only at the end of our work together did he even mention his father. His stories were about being a stockman in country, the people he worked with and the stories he heard about previous generations. His stories generated a landscape of the pastoral industry.

\(^{26}\) Rose 2003a. Similarly, anthropologist Jeremy Beckett recounts how stories’ ‘truth was attested for [Walter Newton] by the features of the country where he had lived all but a few years of his life’ (1993: 689).
Fig 1.10: Bingey Lowe at Eternity Waterhole with his Polaroid camera in his lap.
When pastoral stories were the ones called for in the context of our history recording project, they were the ones evoked. When language and the Ancestral stories were the focus in his work with linguist Luise Hercus and surveyor Vlad Potezny, the landscape was reanimated through them.²⁷ The emphasis was shaped by the job we were engaged in at the time, but the different aspects of the places were simultaneously present. Pull on the thread of one story, and the others associated with that place would be drawn up too. But in the teaching and the telling, in a particular circumstance, there was judgment in the matter of emphasis, and Bingey was highly attuned to the balancing involved. His orientation was very much an integration of his stockman’s pride and lore, his historian’s interest in the actions of past people, and his responsible custodianship of Ancestral Law.

There has been a body of historical writing about the pastoral industry as an Aboriginal domain of labour and lore, based in the far north of Northern Territory,²⁸ the Kimberley and Western Australia,²⁹ Queensland,³⁰ and New South Wales.³¹ Distinct climatic and environmental conditions obtain in northern Australia, particularly the influence of the wet season on work practices (see chapter 3). There are few accounts based in southern Northern Territory and the north of South Australia. Alec Kruger has written a memoir of his early removal from his family and harsh life on cattle stations in Central Australia.³² Historian Peggy Brock has examined the organisation of Aboriginal labour in pastoral stations, particularly in the Flinders Ranges, as a dependable local casual pool of workers, and the ‘minimalist’ approach to training and provision of services by their employers.³³ Robert Foster documents the importance of station owners having control of rationing in northern South Australia as a way of retaining crucial Indigenous labour.³⁴ Historical archaeologist Alistair Patterson has written the only study based closely on a northern South Australian station, Strangways Springs. This station was also located on the Overland Telegraph Line, further south near Lake Eyre, so it was

²⁸ Stevens 1974; Berndt and Berndt 1987; McGrath 1987;
³² Kruger and Waterford 2007.
³³ Brock 1995.
established earlier, in the 1860s, on Arabana and Kujani land. Paterson draws on archaeological excavation, documentary and oral evidence to trace European and Aboriginal practices in the operation of the sheep station.\textsuperscript{35}

The status of oral history in understanding the historical contributions and circumstances of Aboriginal people’s work and life in the pastoral industry was a focus of debate following the publication of both Berndt and Berndt’s End of an Era and McGrath’s Born on the Cattle in 1987.\textsuperscript{36} McGrath aimed to draw out the experience of Aboriginal people in the changing conditions of the early cattle industry of the far north, with an emphasis on gender relations, and drew heavily on interviews as well as documentary evidence. The Berndt’s report, published 40 years after their field study, focused on demographic and economic externally observed factors in a circumstance which they understood as clearly ‘acculturated’. This difference in starting position opened up discrepancies in the interpretations of the conditions of early 20\textsuperscript{th} century pastoral life, as a ‘golden age’, or as a time of poor conditions, disease and malnutrition. Reviewing the problematics of these different interpretations, Minoru Hokari points out that involvement in the cattle industry was only a part of wider continued involvement in life in country. There were possibilities for the integration of the two which generated pride and pleasure in cattle work and identification with it, which could only be picked up in interviews.\textsuperscript{37} Importantly, Hokari also points out comparative differences in conditions under the regime of one cattle station’s manager/owner/operator compared to that of another. Generalisations cannot be assumed to apply.\textsuperscript{38} This reinforces the significance of locally grounded studies which juxtapose various available forms of historical evidence.

\textbf{Colonial texts encoding cryptic traces of Indigenous actions}

The third thread that contributes to an entangled place is that of the texts that are generated by white explorers, surveyors, scientists, and official visitors to the place.

\textsuperscript{35} Paterson 2005, 2008.
\textsuperscript{36} Berndt and Berndt 1987; McGrath 1987, 1988; Rowse 1988a, 1988b; Attwood 1988; Hokari 2002.
\textsuperscript{37} Hokari 2002: 25-7.
\textsuperscript{38} Hokari 2002: 23-4.
They are recovered from unpublished archival journals, reports, images and maps.\textsuperscript{39} The representations of places that they contain were generated by the activities of these diverse visitors there. They are part of the place. They are extensions of it beyond its specific physical locale. A focus on the place generates fresh questions about it which lead to the recovery of further texts, an expanding field of stories which unfold through their association with the place.

In contrast to archaeological evidences, these textual sources have the potential to name a specific person in a specific place at a specific time, though it is rare for Indigenous individuals to be so named.

In these sources I could read ‘countersigns’ which lie beyond the primary intentions of their authors. Pacific historian Bronwyn Douglas provides a lively consideration of the difficulties and possibilities involved in developing the necessary ‘critical ethnohistorical exploitation of colonial texts’. In postcolonial-informed work using missionary texts, she demonstrates how the very language and content of colonial representations not only register indigenous countersigns, but are significantly, if ambiguously shaped by indigenous agency and presence. That is, colonial texts encode cryptic traces of indigenous actions, desires and patterns of social and gender relations which, in unintended, muffled, but sometimes profound ways, helped formulate colonial experiences, strategies, actions and representations.\textsuperscript{40}

In this way Indigenous histories can be teased out from within better known histories, such as those of explorers, of the Overland Telegraph Line, or the accounts of the area by notable anthropologists Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen. These latter sources are so dominant, both quantitatively and in their influence, that it is easy to get caught in their pull and find oneself reproducing their preoccupations and emphases, their voice. As Dipesh Chakrabarty says ‘in telling minority histories, there is a way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called ‘the history of Europe’’.\textsuperscript{41} Importantly, a resistant grit that counters this slippage arises when

\textsuperscript{39} These are held in the South Australian Museum Archives, the State Library of South Australia, State Records of South Australia, Australian Archives in Canberra, Adelaide and Darwin, The National Library of Australia, the Oodnadatta Museum and the Alice Springs Public Library.
\textsuperscript{40} Douglas 2001: 42.
\textsuperscript{41} Chakrabarty 2000: 27.
these sources are used in conjunction with non-textual sources and the stories they tell.

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Smiths Yards were old in the 1940s when Bingey first knew them. They are documented on a map drawn by government surveyor EH Lees dated 10/3/1885, (fig 1.11). They are also documented as the departure point chosen by David Lindsay for his exploration of the sandridge desert in 1886.42

Close by on the old map Neringneringa Well is marked,43 showing that the Lower Southern Arrernte language name was in general use at the time.’ Bingey Lowe took us to Neringneringa Well to teach us the stories associated with it. He was vexed by the stands of young coolibah saplings and lignum that had grown up. He said the country was open in the 1940s and 50s when they rode through it, mustering, but on this occasion we had to push through them to get there.

Neringneringa was an important waterhole in the landscape before it was taken over by the cattle. Its importance continued, but the availability of the water was affected when a well, also known as Smiths Well, was sunk into the same water source. The only physical traces left of the well that we saw on our visit were two shallow depressions, now in-filled with sediment, one with four wooden posts still bordering it.

The enduring presence of the creator Ancestors

The fourth thread to follow in this place is the enduring presence of the creator Ancestors. Landforms, waterholes, trees, and rocks mark and testify to the actions of the Ancestors in the Dreaming, and stories recall chains of connection with other places associated with these. As Deborah Rose explains:

The term Dreaming connotes both creation and connection. It refers to the beings and actions that made the world, and it further refers to the continuing process of life’s coming forth in the world. It thus references both original and on-going creation.44

42 Lindsay 1886. He was guided by a man he calls Paddy, who was born on one of the permanent wells in the Simpson Desert, Murraburt. He located nine of these wells, and the bearings he recorded were used by Denis Bartel in the 1970s to relocate the wells. See Hercus and Clark 1986.
43 Spelt Iriya Arina by Hercus and Potezny 1996.
44 Rose 2004: 36.
Fig 1.11: 1885 map of the lower Finke by surveyor EH Lees (from Kimber 1992 Finke River survey Part 4: 122)
The recording of these stories was not the primary goal of our project, but they were integral to the landscape for those who had been immersed in learning the references that animated it. Bingey consistently referred to and named them – ‘Dingo place’, ‘this one is Green Caterpillar’, ‘this one Louse Dreaming’ – whenever we were in, or passing, a relevant place.

Bingey told the story of the origin of the Neringneringa water source in language to the other Irrwanyere men visiting the place, and briefly told me in English.

When the Ancestral Two Boys, one left handed and the other right handed, threw boomerangs from a two-peaked hill to the south-east of the well, ‘Right hand threw a boomerang and missed. Left hand deadly. Boomerang stuck in the ground at the well and water gushed up’.\(^45\) The Two Boys then crossed the sand dunes of the Simpson Desert, chasing birds and playing, travelling east away from Dalhousie Springs and visiting all the major wells to Goyders Lagoon Waterhole. They return to form two hills near the waterhole.\(^46\)

Bingey suggested putting a pipe into the well to get water flowing again for Harry Taylor to use in his proposed homeland settlement. I asked ‘Will that disturb the place?’ but he said ‘Of course not, it is a well, it is supposed to be used by people’.\(^47\)

**Objects of archaeological attention**

The **fifth thread** in the skein of an entangled place, is contributed by the spatial and material forms and patternings to which an archaeologist is particularly attentive. Bingey Lowe was not concerned with the residual material structures. His stories of people in place are not held in the stuff of the site, but in the witnessing act of being in the place. For an archaeologist, however, material and spatial evidences are paramount. They inform stories of past everyday human action that are otherwise invisible and forgotten. They also bring into focus the time depth of Indigenous people’s presence in the place. What people were doing here has changed, as the material traces attest, but there is continuity in their presence and concern for it.

\(^45\) Bingey Lowe, Macfarlane field notebook Monday 8 July 1996: 17.
\(^47\) Bingey Lowe, Macfarlane field notebook Sunday 28 September 1997: 87. This is not universally so, however. He strongly rejected the suggestion by park management that one of the mound springs, Rainbow Spring, be used as a fresh water supply for the upgraded camping facilities, as the Rainbow Serpent sleeps curled up in it and it is dangerous to touch that water. The fresh water Kingfisher Spring was recommended instead (Macfarlane field notebook 22 September 1997: 72). See fig 4.30.
The material and spatial evidences do not speak for themselves. But when they are integrated into a broader interpretative narrative, they work to make distinctive practices of the past accessible.

To me, considering Smiths Yards as an archaeologist, they looked like this:

Firstly, there were the details of the methods of construction and subsequent reuse of the yards themselves (fig 1.4, 1.5). Then there are its spatial relations to the rich material scattered over the sheet-eroded ground around the yards. 450m to the south-east are several hearths: 2m wide patches of heat-shattered rock, charcoal, ash and hardened, heated sand with several pieces of burnt cattle and sheep bone and stone artefacts intermingled. The diverse background surface array of stone artefacts includes stone flakes and cores, a hammerstone, grindstones of various stone types, adzes and adze slugs (ie adzes that have been worn out through wood-working). There are small lumps of yellow ochre with flattened sides where they have been ground to make pigment, rarely found in open sites (fig 1.12 and 1.13). Also exposed on the sandy surface were early twentieth century broken green bottle glass, old tin cans, a metal axe head, a kerosene lamp’s mesh mantle, small and large horseshoes and twisted pieces of wire. In the sand dune 1.3 km away, there was a place where several chert and silcrete cobbles have been intensively flaked to make numerous blades and points. 48

This is recorded together with the contextual physical characteristics of the place – the form of the river channel, the surrounding dunes, the sheet-wash erosion, the impact of 110 years of cattle and rabbits, the vegetation changes, the distance to other places. These features and qualities of the place, and the built physical structures, have been active in shaping the ways in which people have configured their lives, and have reconfigured them as the structures and features change. The more general environmental and climatic characteristics which play into these local specificities are discussed in chapter 2.

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The five threads drawn out above are each different ways of knowing Smiths Yards historically. The histories made the place what it is now. The place organises the histories.

48 Macfarlane field notebook 17 November 1997.
Interpretations of the stories re-told in the reminiscences of Irrwanyere members under a shady tree, of the texts in the archives and of the richly textured ground surface, were triggered and enabled by our being in the place. Coherence amongst the entangled threads is generated by their relationship to and their production within the same place.

This conjunction leads to my posing of historical questions that might not otherwise arise. This in turn leads to further place-related materials being sought and uncovered.

The accretion of diverse human action at Smiths Yards through time attests to its being a focus for people to use and re-use, to visit and re-visit. This density of returns and reuse is the essence of its entangled quality. Our own visit, our attentions to the evidences of that density, is but the latest in this long cycle.

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These contemporary scenes from the Finke River floodout take us into the heart of the experience of an entangled place. I am using the term entangled to express the inextricably inter-woven temporal components, or threads, as drawn out above, of a place that may emerge when a curious visitor asks about its history.

Why is it important to attend to this quality of a place such as Smiths Yards?

I consider that the value of such an approach lies in the shift in our attention that it promotes. It requires overt attention to the diversity of people’s actions in the past and their traces that have fed into making the place what it now is. We are reminded of the different relations between the present and the past that exist in the place. This is vital because it disallows what has been a dominant tendency in history-making, to fix unitary categories to places, identifying them as either ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘European’, ‘pre-historic’ or ‘colonial’. This is part of a set of entrenched problematic assumptions about the relation between Aboriginal people and history made by white historians, anthropologists, archaeologists. These have been the subject of much review and attempts at

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Fig 1.12: Yellow ochre on the eroded ground surface near Smiths Yards, showing flattened faces where it has been ground to produce pigment, November 1997

Fig 1.13: Small sandstone base grindstone on the eroded ground surface near Smiths Yards, November 1997
redress since the 1960s, as discussed below, but are still influential, as demonstrated in the formulation of the basis for Native Title claims in the relevant legislation.\textsuperscript{50}

Part of the imperialist ethos imported into Australia with the colonists were intellectual frameworks and racial stereotypes shaped by a long chain of influences going back to the 17th century. These judged Australian Aboriginal people to be inhabitants of the ‘uttermost ends of the earth’ who represented an early stage of human development due to their failure to progress, because of their isolation from God and society.\textsuperscript{51} Natural parts of the landscape, trapped in the past, it necessarily followed that they had no history. Indigenous people were fixed as anthropological objects rather than historical actors. History was being made by the explorer heroes, the battling would-be farmers. The responses of Indigenous people to changing circumstances were regarded as degenerative rather than being part of a process of accommodation. This disallowed an active role in negotiation or resistance to the ‘contacted’ peoples.\textsuperscript{52} Change could only be deleterious loss or ‘acculturation’ resulting from contact with the society of the European observers. Those who made changes were ‘uninteresting’ as explorer Winnecke pronounced them on the Horn expedition in 1894, referring to the Aboriginal people at Dalhousie.\textsuperscript{53}

The construction of ‘traditional’ Aboriginality as ‘real’ provided for a major ambiguity: people of the past were noble, and gone, but worthy of study to salvage fragments of the past, but contemporary Indigenous people were rendered inauthentic and corrupt by comparison. To stress their colonial history was to lose their link to an essentialist past, while to demonstrate continuity of traditions was to submit their present selves to a timeless past with no future.\textsuperscript{54} Defining and representing Indigenous people as of a premodern time explained and maintained the distance between colonisers and colonised in a way that helped rationalise dispossession.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{50} Smith 2005; Harrison 2000.  
\textsuperscript{51} Pagden 1982; Fabian 1983; McGregor 1997; Pratt 1992.  
\textsuperscript{52} Cowlishaw 1987: 230-1.  
\textsuperscript{53} Winneke 1897.  
\textsuperscript{54} Jones 2007a.  
\textsuperscript{55} Attwood 1996b: ix.
There were anthropologists and historians however who saw through the bind that this framework created, and who worked to understand the changing social world of Aboriginal people in south-eastern Australia, dealing with the everyday lives of the people there: the ‘non-traditionally oriented’ Aboriginal people with ‘extensive European associations’, to use the terminology of the 1961 Australian Aboriginal Studies symposium. Their work focused on social change, histories of displacement, and shared worlds of labour. It contributed to a ‘series of incremental moves towards an intercultural analysis’ by anthropological writers, and also by historians. These early bodies of work were based on an intellectual framework that ran counter to the then prevailing idea that there was no Aboriginal history, only Aboriginal culture, and that that culture was firmly based only in the pre-colonial past. Diane Barwick et al pointed out in a bibliography of published work that there were over 22,600 published papers on the subject of ‘Australian Aboriginal people’ by 1957, but only 150 papers that took an historical approach, even by 1973.

Aboriginal history as a sub-discipline had a struggle to be established and accepted as a valid form of history, the primary objection being that there were considered to be no legitimate sources. It is telling that it required a lead from historians in the Department of Pacific History, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, to overcome this resistance and foster the establishment of the journal *Aboriginal History* in 1977. Pacific historians in that Department, such as Niel Gunson, Harry Maude and Greg Dening, did not see any such lack of sources, as they had been confidently working with missionary, government, and trade documents since the late 1950s in pursuit of Pacific history that overtly included the perspectives of the Islanders; ‘a whole unexplored world of culture–contact and pre-European history in the Pacific with its own methodology and rationale’ as Gunson succinctly puts it. They saw these ‘worlds’ as additions to the more traditional historical interests in ‘colonial history and contemporary politics’, and hoped for ‘history written by the Pacific Islanders themselves’, with ‘an emphasis on

56 AIAS/Stanner 1963.
57 Hinkson and Smith 2005.
59 Barwick, Urry and Bennett 1977: 111.
60 Gunson 1978: xii.
the importance of Indigenous source material, both written vernacular and oral’.  

The new journal *Aboriginal History*, with Diane Barwick as its editor, fully embraced this perspective and took on the challenge of undoing this widespread perception of ‘no sources’ existing for the sub-discipline, in a big way. From the start, the journal placed a heavy emphasis on making access to archival sources as easy as possible. They published guides to their retrieval, pointed out their locations in review articles, and re-printed primary sources in the ‘Notes and documents’ section of the journal. They published transcriptions of oral histories. In the first ten years of the journal, one quarter of all the papers were directed to how to find and use the available historical sources. The introduction to the 1979 *Handbook* states that it is dedicated to the proposition that Aborigines and Islanders will write their own history, and rewrite the history of Australia. Many are already at work recording the oral history of their own communities. It is these pioneers who have prompted us to publish this manual.

There has been a great expansion in writing and readership of both academic and non-academic publications in the field of Indigenous history in the last three decades, particularly after the 1988 Bicentennial, the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody, and the *Bringing Them Home* report, which opened up spaces for wider general acceptance.

More recently, archaeologists in Australia and North America have worked in a way that breaks down disciplinary boundaries between ‘prehistoric’ and ‘historic’ archaeology, recognizing a past connected to the present, with more than one history. This is generating a field of archaeology of colonialism, or of ‘contact’. I share historic archaeologist Steven Silliman’s concerns with the common concept of ‘contact’ studies which emphasise event rather than process. A longer term approach lends itself not to a study of a ‘cultural contact’ event but an attempt to see how processes of colonialism played out in a particular area.

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61 Gunson 1978: xiii.
62 *Handbook for Aboriginal and Islander History* 1979 Barwick, Mace and Stannage (eds).
63 Macfarlane 2006.
64 Stannage 1979: xi.
I have also avoided the term ‘sharing’, as it has too many overtones of choice and implications of equality, which the colonial co-option of land did not offer, and gives an insufficient sense of the processes which led to radical changes for all involved. I have not sought to write a ‘shared’ history by simply introducing Aboriginal stories into the existing framework of a pre-colonial, colonial, contemporary sequence. I have elected instead to use the term ‘interaction’, and hence ‘interactive history’ as it more broadly foregrounds the processes which have led to entanglement.

**Historical entanglement**

‘Entangled’ means ‘interlaced, complicated, intricate’ and ‘mixed up in such a manner that a separation cannot easily be made’. As I was shown the country by people for whom it was alive and a large part of their lives, and as I followed up this engagement with the detail in the archives, an important element of what I learned was seeing that the histories I am considering here are, in these senses, entangled.

The concept has come into widespread use since its insightful and nuanced application by Nicolas Thomas in his book *Entangled Objects: exchange, material culture, and colonialism in the Pacific* (1991). He employed it as a way to counter easy binary oppositions, ‘grand polarities’, in thinking about the interrelations of colonisers and colonised peoples. One of his stated aims was to get away from metaphors of a one-way ‘impact’ or ‘penetration’ or a conflation of diverse colonial processes into a single ‘contact’ event to describe these relations. Instead, he adopts the metaphor of entanglement to acknowledge that the struggles to deal with the intrusive interactions which are the essence of colonial relations are active and multiple for both coloniser and colonised sides of the relation.

Almost by definition, colonial entanglement and struggle turn upon the difference between indigenous peoples and foreigners, natives and intruders, but recognition that this axis is fundamental should not obscure or marginalise the crucial fragmentation of knowledge and interests on both sides, the struggles which always take place within both the metropolitan project of colonisation and the

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indigenous project of appropriating or reacting to colonial intrusion.\textsuperscript{69}

The concept of entanglement that Thomas develops to re-think what is involved in people’s exchanges emphasises the ‘mutability of things in recontextualisation’, rather than any fixed or single properties of identity or function.\textsuperscript{70} It is an historical and interactive perspective to which my approach to understanding ‘a place’ is an indebted exchange partner.\textsuperscript{71}

An ‘entangled’ perspective also avoids focus on either a global-scale dynamic which determines the possibilities for the form of interactions any- and everywhere, or a local scale ethnographic description of those interactions in isolation, as large- and small-scale processes are both at work in shaping the forms of interaction. This is a necessary recognition of local processes implicated in national change in the case of the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line.

I have used both the terms entanglement and interactional history in the title of this work. Places acquire the quality of being ‘entangled’ in consequence of the interactions in those places, so the two terms are interchangeable. The interlinking of these overlapping concepts draws attention to the practices of place making and place maintenance, and also highlights the inherently social quality of place-related practices.\textsuperscript{72} It is this relationship between interaction and entanglement that my thesis sets out to explore.

The heterogeneous now

There is also a temporal implication which follows from adopting this interactional, non-binary starting point. Starting from a perspective of entanglement disallows easy distinctions between pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Dipesh Chakrabarty raises a related conceptual point:

> the writing of history must implicitly assume a plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present with itself. Making visible this disjuncture is what subaltern pasts allow us to do. ... for instance the writing of medieval history for Europe depends

\textsuperscript{69} Thomas 1991: 205.
\textsuperscript{70} Thomas 1991: 28.
\textsuperscript{71} Humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan connects bodies of thought about place and about objects when he refers to a place as ‘an object in which one can dwell’ (Tuan 1977).
\textsuperscript{72} Myers 2002; Byrne 2008.
on the assumed contemporaneity of the medieval, or what is the same thing, the noncontemporaneity of the present with itself.\textsuperscript{73}

Chakrabarty highlights the lack of acknowledgement of this heterogeneity in the dominant assumption in western European historical thought that there is a uniform, secular, calendrical time which is natural and common to all.\textsuperscript{74} A sense of time is not the same as a sense of the past.

This is not to set up a binary choice, either place or history, as Tony Swain tends to, where an emphasis on place excludes a sense of history.\textsuperscript{75} Bingey and his co-workers were aware of a succession of events. They used chronological markers such as the influenza epidemic in 1919, the building of particular yards or bores, and there is an early example of the construction of Charlotte Waters being used to relate other events in time (see chapter 3). Nor do I intend to invoke absolutes. I am not claiming that this is ‘the’ temporal understanding of all Indigenous people, or that it is exclusive to Indigenous people. It is a particular way of organising the past. It does not erase the original sequencing of events, but it does not pay great attention to that aspect of them. It allows for, or builds in, the overflowing of that sequence that has followed as entangling interactions continue to complicate them. It sits well with a mode of life that integrates places through a web of movement (see chapter 5). The connections between people and events hold in terms of place more than time.

In response, my approach has been to find ways to tell these histories that loosen the grip of a period-based sequence that borrows its apparent naturalness from the deeply embedded western ‘metanarrative of progress’\textsuperscript{76} and instead capture the simultaneity, the entangled temporality of the places and people’s relationship to them. Rather than the histories being ordered in terms of an externally derived chronological temporal sequence, I have followed the grain of the stories, and told them in terms of places.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{73} Chakrabarty 2000: 109.
\textsuperscript{74} Chakrabarty 2000: 74. See also Ashis Nandy 2002 for a discussion of this western European Enlightenment mode of history as the past, the only past.
\textsuperscript{75} eg Swain 1993: 4 - ‘Aboriginal interpretation of changes to their life-world has been cast in terms of space rather than history.’ Swain 1993: 23 - ‘Abiding Events [aspects of the Dreaming] and rhythms of daily life are linked not through time but through place.’
\textsuperscript{76} Chakrabarty 2000: 88.
\textsuperscript{77} See Griffiths 1996. This is discussed further in the section ‘Place as organising principle’ below.
As places are formed through human action, it follows that they are temporally constituted. They are not fixed at a particular time, with a particular identity, but are constantly being brought into being. The temporality of the place is folded into it as people interact in it and with it. At Smiths Yards for example, time was folded into the people as they cut the coolibahs, shaped them, built and re-built the yards, yarded the cattle over and over, told stories around the campfire, as expeditions departed, as we visited. Retelling these actions, we unfold that time. It is cumulative, accretionary, unevenly distributed; as the material traces are. So a place is space with history. That is, a place is not a neutral or fixed background ‘container’ for human action. Rather it is constantly being brought into being as a distinct place only through the interactions between people, with each other and the material world of that particular locale through time.

My aim is not to disentangle the inherent complexities of colonial interaction, but to find ways of attending to them so that they may be retained, inherent in the texture and character of the stories being related.

Towards writing an inclusive regional history

This thesis tracks the specific interactions that have formed the particular entangled places of the western Simpson Desert area. In doing so, it contributes to the establishment of a regional history in an area where no historical syntheses exist. The area falls between the somewhat better known and studied areas of the McDonnell Ranges northwest in Central Australia, and the Lake Eyre region to the southeast. The western Simpson area sits on the margins of maps of these areas, slipping off their corners.

The dominant image of the western Simpson area is of big bad desert; empty, remote, hostile, unchanging. The sign on the Stuart Highway as you cross into the Northern Territory near Kulgera encourages the sense that there are no people: ‘Welcome to nature territory’. For contemporary visitors the Simpson Desert is most commonly envisaged and experienced as a 4WD challenge, with rough roads to endure but the unusual compensation of a hot spring to relax in, rather than a fully lived, historical human landscape. Visitor’s comments in the

78 See Massey 1995.
79 Ingold 1993; Berger 1984: 35.

Importantly, the historical detail that is brought together is likely to be more readily and willingly grasped by people who have experienced the place, as the history then has a tangible, memorable context, and an increased personal relevance; a foundation for understanding, which can be built on further.

**Missing stories**

The specificities of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people’s lives in the region are frequently surprising and counter to expectation, for example in the Wankanguru people’s lives in the middle of the Simpson dune field on the permanent mikiri wells (see chapter 4), or the breeding of successful race horses in the early 1900s at Dalhousie station homestead, in its unequivocal ‘badlands’ setting (see chapter 5). But even more instructive and revelatory are the untold stories which show the interactions between what are often assumed to be separate components of history. The challenge is to track the interaction of these histories. Brought together, the stories animate the past in unimagined ways, and their conjunction in a particular place is a vivid reminder of the place’s diverse origins.

One example of the suppression of the entangled nature of the history of the region, which struck me early in my research, was this memorable photograph of two men at Charlotte Waters in 1901 (fig 1.14). It was taken by Frank Gillen during his year-long anthropological recording journey along the Overland Telegraph Line with Baldwin Spencer. In Gillen’s photograph album, held at the South Australian Museum, there are classical physical anthropological framings of front and profile records of individuals captioned ‘Type, Charlotte Waters’; ‘Arunta (Charlotte Waters)’, and scenes of ceremonies and the landscape of the Finke River. Amongst them is this single image of senior men standing beside a humpy. They were no doubt two of the men Spencer and

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81 Hercus and Clarke 1986.
82 Michael-Podmore 1909: 87.
Gillen worked with when recording ceremonies at Charlotte Waters. This is Gillen’s only photograph in the album of a non-traditional Indigenous subject in this region. He labeled it, with irony and perhaps regret, ‘The dawn of Civilization, Charlotte Waters’.

In this image we see the flat plain stretching off behind a shadeless and apparently isolated hut, made from short planks. The roof is thatched with bundles of brush and has some bags stored on top of it, away from the dogs. The men are self-contained, at ease, with a watchful expression. They meet the regard of the ethnographer’s camera directly, measure for measure.

Spencer and Gillen did not publish this photo. It documents the individuality of the unnamed people that they worked with, and it shows the particularity of the circumstances in which they lived, and hence the context for the performances of songs and ceremonies which Spencer and Gillen recorded. To publish this image would have troubled, or undermined, the status of their information as derived from representatives of the traditional, authentic Aboriginal past. Spencer and Gillen’s purpose was to record Aboriginal culture, not history. The history which gave rise to the co-presence of Gillen, the telegraph officer from Alice Springs, Spencer, the Oxford-trained Biology Professor from Melbourne University and the Lower Southern Arrernte people of Charlotte Waters, which made the recording project possible, was not in the frame as a subject for record or discussion - it was self-evident to the point of invisibility, it was not relevant, and it was inconvenient to presentation of an account of authentic Aboriginality. Thus this image is unusual in having escaped the elision of history necessary to carry out their task as they saw it, which side-lined their own role as historical actors, as much as that of the people they worked with.

Yet for the two elders in the photograph, a central experience was the continuity of looking after their country, travelling through it, singing its songs and performing its ceremonies, notwithstanding the context of the radical change in the thirty years since the Overland Telegraph Line surveyors decided on Charlotte Waters as the site for a telegraph repeater station. In chapter 3 I have sought to foreground the perspectives they and others of the Charlotte Waters area may have had on these intercultural interactions.
Intergenerational exchange of knowledge

The elders in this photograph are links in two chains or modes of transfer of knowledge; the two forms distinguished by Merlan as discussed above. The first is the overt, articulated teaching of how the world works, of Ancestral Law and appropriate behaviour to younger men (and women - see Hercus 1989). There is also an implicit practical learning involved, passed on through shared experiences. The importance of both of these forms is discussed by anthropologist Fred Myers. He describes them as a form of intergenerational exchange in Pintubi social life. This is glossed as ‘holding’ or ‘looking after’ younger generation members, ‘growing them up’; a combination of nurturance and authority that transforms them, spirit and body, into agents capable of acting in the world.\(^3\) This is a particularly strongly expressed feature of Pintubi social life, but it serves as a reminder that this is a component for all, in some form, and it will be disrupted when experiences are no longer shared.

Sudden changes in circumstance mean that those growing up amidst the changes are born into a different world of sensation and experience from that of the generation above them. The phenomenon of dissimilar experiences of the same set of events on age-based lines emerged powerfully amongst the ‘counter-signs’ included in descriptions of the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line, discussed in chapter 3 below.

The second transfer of knowledge referenced in this photograph is part of the inter-cultural circumstances which produced it - the decision to pass on knowledge to external interlocutors and their audio and visual recording methods, in a speedy, one-off way.\(^4\) What it cost these men, and the other men and women who participated in the transfer of songs, ceremonies, objects, language, but not their own historical lives, we do not now know. In some early exchanges, there are documented cases of severe consequences, with elders

\(^3\) Myers 1993: 35-37.
\(^4\) Luise Hercus says of the time consuming processes of passing on knowledge of songs and ceremonies in north-western South Australia, ‘Simple transference of knowledge is not possible: learning has been and probably always will be a long and painful process. ... To learn even one of the ularaka traditions would have required months of repetition and study. Moreover, ... learning songs was not just repetition but also creativity ... they were ancient yet living traditions. The study of these traditions required great effort and dedication, and unbelievable feats of memory’ 1989: 106. The ularaka is the Arabana-Wangkanguru concept glossed as Dreamings in English (Hercus 1989: 102).
Fig 1.14: ‘The dawn of Civilisation, Charlotte Waters’, 1901, F J Gillen photograph album no 50, South Australian Museum Archives
being killed for betraying their responsibilities to maintain the secrecy of ceremonial Law.\textsuperscript{85} In 1901, after 30 years of interaction, the hold of Law was less absolute, there was a competing system of authority and power, and compromises to find accommodation within that were being made. Marriage rules and the authority of the elders were shifting. Total control over knowledge was being transformed in transactions with other systems for its storage and transfer, particularly those of anthropology.\textsuperscript{86}

It does not require the extreme circumstances of the Overland Telegraph Line for such intergenerational differences to be established. Denis Byrne makes the important point that the passing on of stories and meaning between generations is always a part of learning about a place: ‘This is where I used to live when I was young’, ‘This is where your grandfather died’. Barbara Allen calls this a ‘genealogical landscape’.\textsuperscript{87} But the current generation is always adding to that, re-interpreting it and re-structuring it, so that even if living in the same places, they are not experienced in a unitary way.\textsuperscript{88} These intergenerational differences in experience thus generate another form of entanglement in a place.

The other side of story telling

The other side of story telling is listening. It is not possible to listen if you assume you know the answers already. Listening is ‘the expression of an attitude that we are incomplete and need to absorb other people’s experience’.\textsuperscript{89} Anthropologist Jeremy Beckett points out that ‘colonised people have not only to endure their situation but to make sense of it’.\textsuperscript{90} While the colonisers might have created a silence around their intercultural histories, Australian Indigenous communities continued to tell the histories of themselves to each other, resisting the impost of the dominant external representations.\textsuperscript{91} The accompanying challenge is how to hear, how to bring into the field of public

\textsuperscript{86} Strehlow 1971: 493-4; Hercus 1989: 110-116. Spencer 1912: 202 ‘In 1912, wrong marriages ‘would be tolerated’ because of lessening in numbers makes it impracticable to carry out marriage laws fully’. Gillen 1968: 23 In 1901, ‘some half dozen of the leading men interviewed me and requested that I should nominate a man to be Atalunja or head man of the local group’.
\textsuperscript{87} Allen 1990.
\textsuperscript{88} Byrne 2008: 162-3.
\textsuperscript{89} Theodore Zelmin 1999: 5 (4-6).
\textsuperscript{90} Beckett 1993: 675.
\textsuperscript{91} For example, Morphy and Morphy 1984; Beckett 1993; Shaw 1995; Wharton 1994; Rose 1991; Read and Read 1991; Peters-Little \textit{et al} 2006.
awareness, what Indigenous people have said about their lives as they made sense of the changes that colonisation imposed, and their consciousness of those changes.

Openness to the stories which were told in response to visiting places or reading histories of them aloud was important in shaping this work. I tried to avoid being ‘binabudi’ a local Luritja word which means ‘deaf ears’. I heard the expression used frequently in the context of dealings with white administrators, at meetings about funding or housing, for example. They felt they were not heard in the exchanges, because, the implication is, the authorities do not have the capacity to hear.

Most researchers working with Indigenous custodians in the western Simpson region have been interested in traditional aspects of past Indigenous life – language and ancestral traditions, sacred sites, stone arrangements, stone artefacts. They considered the life stories which surrounded these to be disjunctive and irrelevant. But stories of pastoral life were equally important historically, and telling them gave the pleasure of mastery and strength of legitimation and recognition. Many archaeologists, historians and anthropologists working with Aboriginal people have learnt the need and the benefits of expanding the frame of their research to make what is central to people’s experiences central to the research.92

If these interactional histories of the region are not available, there can be no self-recognition, or reinforcement of their identity, by contemporary Indigenous people knowing the lineage of their forebear’s engagement in the past, nor can there be the potential for an informed re-imagining of these engagements for a different future.

The heat of historical knowledge, the conflicts over how it is developed and applied, is generated in its powerful political location as an authoritative, official gatekeeper to people’s pasts. Our sense of historicity, of past-in-the-present-ness, informs our construction of self-understanding, identity and our envisaged futures. ‘The struggle for history is about the present and the

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92 For example, see Greer et al 2002; Gill, Paterson and Kennedy 2001; Beck and Somerville 2005; Rose 1991; Harrison 2004, Byrne and Nugent 2004; Clarke 2000.
future’.\textsuperscript{93} The forms in which the relationship of the past to the present are conceived and represented have crucial implications for the construction of Aboriginal identity and more broadly, for the idea that all Australians have of themselves.\textsuperscript{94}

Making the missing histories more available gives visitors to the Witjera National Park (and managers and even longer-term dwellers) the capacity to alter contemporary experience of the region and deepen understanding of its people and places. By extension, people’s knowledge of poorly articulated aspects of settler Australian history may also be enriched. Rose and Lewis point out that the relationship between dominant white Australian history, and Aboriginal tellings of the histories, is like a painful, unexpected pinch to your skin. There is no alarm when they are kept separate, but when the two lines are brought together, there is a sharp shock. This has the potential to startle Australians into new understandings of ourselves as a nation with a multitude of intersecting histories.\textsuperscript{95}

The work of story telling

Marilyn Hull-Stuart\textsuperscript{96} and I were reminiscing on the verandah of Bingey Lowe’s house at Anniversary Bore homeland, telling stories, and discussing the finer points of story telling. She said to me with certainty and considerable relish, ‘When you’ve got a good story, you don’t just tell it, you str-e-e-e-e-tch it’. She was affirming the virtue of milking your narrative for all its rich and lively detail, for your audience’s sake as well as your own performative satisfaction. If a story is worth telling, it deserves attention to detail. Less reportage than performance, hilarious, tender, tragic by turns as each participant’s voice and movements will be acted out. There is usually not a specific punchline or lesson to the story, but a sequence of past happenings. Both the teller and the audience are caught up in the past through shared details of known places or known individuals. A double memory of the content of the story and of the event of its telling is enfolded into their repertoires of experience.

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\textsuperscript{93} Mullings 1994 cited by McBryde 1996.
\textsuperscript{94} Chakrabharty 2007; Rose 2003a: 130; McBryde 1996.
\textsuperscript{95} Rose and Lewis 1992: 27-28.
\textsuperscript{96} Irrwanyere Aboriginal Corporation member whose grandmother and great aunt, Clara and Sarah Strangways, were born at Charlotte Waters in 1880 and 1889 (Hull-Stuart 1998).
The story can be based on individual experience (e.g. see ‘The story of the two girls’ chapter 5), or be a re-telling of stories told by and about older generations, or by the creator Ancestors. Representing chunks of life experience as story is a way into understanding what has happened, giving it coherence through the selection and retelling. To ask ‘What's been happening?’ is not to ask what you have actually been doing, but what selected highlights you have marked, or had marked for you. Neurologist Oliver Sacks says:

> each of us constructs and lives a narrative, and this narrative is us, our identity. ... Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives – we are each of us unique.97

### Other ways of telling

The way the stories are told is important. For historians, Hayden White argued that the form of their narratives is not found in the events themselves, but constructed using time-honoured narrative techniques of selection, ordering, tone, point of view.98 The structure chosen to develop a narrative expresses the meaning intended by the historian as much or more than any of the constituent historical events.99

Dipesh Chakrabarty points out that ‘minority histories’ unsettle assumptions about acceptable forms of history-telling:

> the question of including minorities in the history of the nation has turned out to be a much more complex problem than a simple operation of applying some already settled methods to a new set of archives and adding the results to the existing collective wisdom of historiography. The additive ‘building block’ approach to knowledge has broken down.100

If control of construction of the past is handed over to others, or, is the outcome of collaborative work, results are likely to have subjects and forms which differ from those that are dominant and familiar in the mainstream.101 Ann Curthoys summarises this process:

> In the last two decades of the twentieth century, Aboriginal people challenged existing Australian understandings of the colonial past by emphasizing their prior occupation, direct experience of invasion and racism, and their ongoing struggles for survival. This counter-history was told especially through written life stories and oral

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97 Sacks 1985: 105.
100 Chakrabarty 2000: 107.
testimony, and had a significant impact on historians, the law and public life.\textsuperscript{102}

An innovative form of counter-history telling is in the form of collaborative ‘eye-witness accounts’.\textsuperscript{103} These are historical accounts given in full in their Indigenous language, transcribed and translated. These are a distinctive type of account which finely articulates input from many disciplines. They work in a series of layers – as a record of Indigenous language; as a telling of a story important to the teller in their own terms; as a history with broad significance, such as people moving out of the Simpson Desert for the last time for example, which are made widely available and intelligible.\textsuperscript{104}

The 1981 Aboriginal working group making recommendations for the preparation of a major bicentennial history for 1988 made a clear statement of ‘why Aboriginal history should be written by Aboriginal people’. They state that Aboriginal people are ‘guardians and custodians of our history and culture, and it is our responsibility to pass on to future generations our set of truths. … We, as Aboriginal people, can begin to rectify the white misconceptions about our history by writing it ourselves.’ They point to a different, cyclical, temporality in their form of telling history. They highlight their distinctive responsibility as historians to ‘family, kin and community’ who will correct their accounts in a way that white historians’ versions will not be.\textsuperscript{105}

Aboriginal people will look at documents and come to quite different conclusions, in the main, from white historians, because we are ultimately responsible to ‘our own mob’ and not to the discipline of history nor the white concept of knowledge.\textsuperscript{106}

In addition, much Indigenous history telling is conducted in non-textual modes based in art, dance, material culture, film, music.\textsuperscript{107}

Bingey Lowe’s favourite song writers and singers were Slim Dusty and Buck Owen as they sang songs which told of his life. He also sang himself, although in the 1990s he had only a ‘little bit voice’ left. He said:

Used to be real fun droving. Sit round tell stories yapping away like bunch of old crows. White people too, telling stories cant stop ‘em.

\textsuperscript{102} Curthoys 2003: 185.
\textsuperscript{103} Tom Dutton and Luise Hercus, editors Aboriginal History volume 9 1985: 3.
\textsuperscript{104} Hercus 1985.
\textsuperscript{105} Aboriginal Working Group 1981: 22.
\textsuperscript{107} See for example the collection of papers in the ‘Exchanging Histories’ volume 30 Aboriginal History 2006.
Singing too. All gone now, all them fellas, dead and gone. Cant sing any more - squeaky voice if don’t practice.\textsuperscript{108}

I gave him a cassette player so he could record himself singing the songs of everyday life, and also the country that he had been taught by the Old People. Luise Hercus recorded many of these songs in the 1960s and 1970s. They could be obscene or hilarious, or lullabies which were passed down by the senior men and women. The singers also composed new songs to record memorable events such as the sighting of the first rabbit, the arrival of the first car, and the train.\textsuperscript{109}

Senior men and women had tremendous skills with words and songs, … It seemed easy to switch from normal speech to poetry: a person’s speech would take on a dramatic intonation and gradually turn into song. The times when this happened were usually moments of great emotional stress. Sometimes however inspiration was more light-hearted.\textsuperscript{110}

These ‘olden times chants’ were part of the great web of songs which express the actions of the Ancestors which generated the landscape.

**‘Stretching’ as metaphor**

Marilyn Stuart’s insight about the importance of stretching stories has remained with me as a guide for what I have aimed to do in retelling the stories of the people and places of the area brought out in our work together. I have taken up the idea of stretching in three senses. Firstly, in the sense of expanding the story telling frame, to include missing stories – the histories of intercultural interaction. Secondly, in the sense of extending the availability of the stories beyond their local source and context, stretching them to be accessible to a wider general audience. Thirdly, in the sense of stretching the content of the stories, so as to recover not just the broad patterns but also the smaller-scale, lived, and located details of what has gone on in those places, and so to draw out the dynamic histories immanent in the landscape. Developing a workable approach to doing this was an important part of the development of this work that I discuss below.

\textsuperscript{108} Macfarlane field notebook 20 July 1996.
\textsuperscript{110} Hercus 1994: 91.
What makes a story ‘good’?

Marilyn’s statement implicitly raises the question of what is a ‘good’ story? Tom Griffiths, who is an exemplar of the skills of good story telling in his history writing, says:

Story-telling … is a privileged carrier of truth, a way of allowing for multiplicity and complexity at the same time as guaranteeing memorability. I would argue that narrative is not just a means; it is a method, and a rigorous and demanding one. The conventional scientific method separates causes from one another; it isolates each one and tests them individually in turn. Narrative, by contrast, carries multiple causes along together; it enacts connectivity.¹¹¹

So, a good story is one that endures. It has the capacity, the holding power, to bring together elements so that they engage the audience, and can instruct. A good story can be surprising, or warmly familiar, but it is always recognised by the audience as having some relevance to themselves. At its best, a story is layered, containing meanings which take us beyond its surface content and plot. So in this way a good story can relate the local, lived scale of experience to the over-arching historical events to which they contribute. After all, it is only locally that global processes can be experienced. The large-scale changes that the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line set off are considered in these terms in chapter 3 below; in particular, how they played out at the Charlotte Waters repeater station.

In keeping with Marilyn’s endorsement of stretching stories, Griffith’s definition of story telling advocates verstehen, or understanding. He has experienced the strength of cumulatively building an interpretation which brings understanding through showing connections. This is in contrast to erklärung or explanation, which seeks to strip away connection so as to isolate entities and processes in order to explain them.

Chakrabarty refers to the histories missing from mainstream consideration as ‘minority histories’.¹¹² In terms of what makes them good, he writes that “good” minority history is about expanding the scope of social justice and representative democracy’ and at the same time, subverting and challenging the limits of mainstream historical practice.¹¹³ He sees the stories that are liberated

¹¹¹ Griffiths 2005: 46.
¹¹² Chakrabarty 2000: see chapter 4.
by this approach as having an active social role. The public recognition of Henry Reynolds’ work is a prime example of this, as is the resonance of the stories of children taken away in the ‘Stolen Generation’ report, which opened up public understanding and a widespread recognition of the need for reconciliation.\textsuperscript{114} They tell stories that are not widely known, and they often tell them in ways that are not familiar.

**Place as organising principle**

The places of the western Simpson Desert area are full of good stories. That this is so is not necessarily apparent to those who know the region from the outside as an empty, challenging wilderness. Bringing out these stories, making them more generally available, and so returning the people to the landscape, is one primary goal of the work of this thesis.

Telling stories and learning, and being in a place, are inextricably linked activities. Evoking places and the people in them is a pleasurable and serious work of re-living them through stories, whether they were visited yesterday by us, or a century ago by people you have never met, or one of the Ancestral originators of the land and its interconnections. I found this key link expressed clearly by Michel de Certeau. He says that narrative is a spatial practice.\textsuperscript{115} That is, we organise experience and memory in terms of where things happen, as itineraries of action in place. Stories link places together, make distinctions between them, and produce meaning by integrating fragments.

We understand a particular space through being able to grasp the sorts of ‘narrative of action’ that are possible within that space; we understand a place and a landscape through the historical and personal narratives that are marked out within it and that give that place a particular unity and establish a particular set of possibilities within it.\textsuperscript{116}

My Irrwanyere teachers emphasised the importance of visiting particular places in order to know them. Being in the place was the trigger to telling their histories, and was a source of the veracity that made them ‘proper’ history. This emphasis accorded with my archaeologically-informed interest in developing spatial and material history-in-place, and my place-based organisation of the


\textsuperscript{115} De Certeau 1984: 115-6.

\textsuperscript{116} Malpas 1999: 186.
search for scattered texts associated with these places as I gathered together others’ stories to weave a composite. We were all ‘involved in the world’ through our attention to the distinctions that constitute places as places. These are the different histories of interaction between people with each other, and with the physical characters of the place and the other living things there through time, varying in their form, pattern and intensity that are integrated through being emplaced.

It is this inherent capacity to hold distinctions together without homogenising them that I called the ‘many-in-one’ quality of an entangled place such as Smiths Yards examined above. A feature of this kind of complex relation between elements is that while the elements are not singular isolates, neither are they multiple separate elements joined together; distinct, irreducible, but interrelated components, hence ‘many-in-one’. They are not singular nor a collection of single elements in a multiple bundle, but qualitatively distinct from both. This quality is an aspect of any place, as philosopher of place Jeff Malpas discusses:

The complexity of place does not entail a dispersion of elements, but rather enables their ‘gathering together’ – their interconnection and unification – in such a way that their multiplicity and differentiation can be both preserved and brought to light.

Malpas goes further, to assert that this ‘gathering together’ capacity of places is a necessary pre-condition for human experience: ‘The differentiated and complex unity of place … makes for the possibility of memory, of belief, of thought and experience - only within place is the unity necessary for subjectivity established’. Place is the frame within which human experience is to be understood, and also the frame in which it can occur. He argues that our encounters with persons and things are always in place and that place is a fundamental part of our way of being, of the character of our human engagement with the world.

117 Here I am referring to Chris Gosden’s Heidegger-influenced ideas on being-in-place: ‘When we say that people are in the world we are not just making a statement about spatial position, like saying that the water is in the glass, but we are talking about involvement, which is closer to the notion of being in love or in business. Being in the world is a state of involvement’ (Gosden 1994: 111).

118 Mol and Law 2002: 1, 10-11.


121 Malpas 1999: 15-16.
The places of the western Simpson Desert integrate the stories of interactions between people there, and between them and the diverse physical features of the place. No single person knows all the stories. But connected through their place-specificity, the multiple histories enacted there may be cumulatively brought together, as in this work. In focusing on their intersections we cannot avoid the interactions that make up the contemporary place, cannot read it as a place with a single history, or with no history at all.

These different forms of story relate to different times and to different projects by different groups of people. They generate different sources of knowledge about a place that do not necessarily overlap neatly, but variously complement, challenge, and certainly complicate, each other. While there is overlap of the various evidences, it is often in the juxtaposition of their differences that sparks of unexpected understanding fly out.

In bringing the stories together, I have tracked the processes of entanglement that are played out in particular locales, as a result of which the contemporary places have emerged. In this aspect, this thesis is a study of processes of place-making. It poses the question: in what ways has this locale that is currently recognised as a distinct human place been produced and reproduced there through time? This shifts the focus away from the physical location to the processes by which the contemporary place has been and continues to be generated.

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How did I arrive at the approach set out above, attending to the ‘entangled’ quality of places and the elements which contribute to that? This approach is best understood by backtracking through the course of my thinking during the work and the changes in orientation that emerged.

When I started fieldwork in 1995/6, there was a perceived need for archaeological work in Witjera National Park. The preliminary assessment of the significance of Mt Dare for reservation as a park in 1984 recommended that survey and evaluation of Aboriginal sites and historical sites be undertaken
without delay. The Management Plan drawn up in 1995 repeated this recommendation, and called for research on the historic buildings which addressed both their fabric and their oral histories. My fieldwork in the park in 1996 showed that there had been damage to archaeological materials, where tracks had been bulldozed through deposits at Tin Shanty and at Federal station, and due to bottle hunting and removal of material from all the historic places, and removal of artefacts, especially grindstones, from the springs area over a long period. These impacts were expected to accelerate with increasing park usage unless awareness of the less obvious archaeological materials Present, and their import, was raised through research. In this context, my potential archaeological contribution was welcomed by the Witjera Board of Management.

I began this work with ideas based in my undergraduate training in prehistoric archaeology, cross-cut by my post-graduate education in interpretative or contextual archaeology. My initial proposal for this research project in October 1994 sets out my starting position clearly (see box). It grew out of dissatisfaction with the dominant mode of archaeological writing and practice in Australia, developed in my Masters work, and saw approaches from interpretative archaeological perspectives as a possible way out.

The starting point of the final thesis, and the backbone of the approach taken can be seen here, in the box below. The theoretical ideas which underlie the proposal have weathered the long process of the subsequent work and learning that followed. These ideas hinge on the key archaeological understanding, developed in the last 20 years, that objects are not passive, separate entities in the socio-cultural world. Rather they are players, actors, in processes of interaction. They contribute to the orchestration, or patterning of what happens. This involves a two-way relationship between people and the objects that they make and use. The relationship is generally invisible to the people involved, as it takes place at the level of habit rather than at a consciously articulated level. For example, the way the chairs are arranged in a seminar room both reflects assumptions about how meetings will be conducted and affects how they can be. Objects make spatial structures that are not merely an arena or backdrop for

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122 Davey et al. 1984.
social life, but a medium through which social relations are produced and reproduced.\textsuperscript{124}

This starting proposal is academically interesting, but it is framed in a way that is distancing and abstract. The ideas in it have a rough road to travel and many conversations to be buffeted by before they began to relate to lived, grounded experience. As I started to be taught the country by Irrwanyere members, it rapidly became clear that framing my research question in terms of archaeological site types cut the place from the connected historical processes that were part of why it was recognised and constituted \textit{as} a place.

It was increasingly evident to me that the surrounding landscape was vibrating with lived and remembered history brought through to the present in stories. The specific archaeological questions which I had brought to it seemed more likely to kill that, in the form of my initial framing anyway, rather than add to it. I thought of Denis Byrne’s unflinching observation that prehistoric archaeology in Australia had come to be \textit{the} mainstream accepted Aboriginal past, so contributing to the colonial denial of the histories that link the present into the many pasts that it contains.\textsuperscript{125} While important contributions to dating the deep past have been of political value in establishing undeniable prior possession of the land now known as Australia,\textsuperscript{126} archaeological concentration on these aspects has helped to elide the recent past and its connections to the present. My approach was going to have to shift its focus.

\textsuperscript{125} Byrne 1996.  
\textsuperscript{126} Attwood 1996; Griffiths 1996; McBryde 1996.
‘A re-consideration of Australian Aboriginal landscape archaeology’
PhD research proposal, 1994

The archaeology of prehistoric hunter-gatherers has a predominantly ‘techno-economic’ orientation which tends to be associated with the creation of abstract, de-personalised accounts of the past, located in ‘deep time’. … There has been an active re-positioning of Australian Aboriginal archaeology with respect to Aboriginal heritage and identity, the control of archaeological knowledge and material culture, and associated archaeological work practices, and the implications of the application of ethnographic analogies. It is suggested that

associated changes in the practice of Australian Aboriginal archaeology have not necessarily been accompanied by an equivalent re-thinking of the content of archaeological interpretations.

Recently, writing from divergent positions, a number of archaeologists have begun to explore the application of theoretical standpoints which provide a broader charter for archaeological interpretation. Archaeological theories concerning the active role played by material culture in social reproduction through the everyday interactions of people, place and objects through time are currently being developed in interpretative archaeology, which focuses on Neolithic monuments as the contexts of social processes and has involved reconceptualisations of the nature of engagement of people and landscape.

I wish to investigate the potential for extension of the dominant approach to interpretation of Australian Aboriginal environmental archaeological evidence. This raises questions regarding the applicability of these ideas in a non-European landscape? …

The planned field research involves survey of stone arrangements and associated sites. The aim is to try and understand how the construction of the stone arrangements and their enduring material presence may have structured people’s experience of these places in the landscape, and their role in social reproduction.

While ideas of the existence of a mutual structuring relationship between people and the built environment are relatively common, a question which has been little considered is how applicable they are to interaction with a less or non-structured material presence? What
form would mutuality take in the sites of the everyday, the characteristic open scatters of stone artefacts and shell middens which constitute the bulk of Australian Aboriginal archaeological evidence? …

The structures and associated sites are to be considered in terms of their form, inter-relationship to each other and to micro-topographic landscape variations as well as to broad scale land unit based variations. … This fieldwork would only take place following consultation with the local Aboriginal communities, and the Archaeology Branch of the state government. … it is considered that an understanding of the inter-relatedness of people, material culture, place and time as a core to archaeological interpretation, provides a different place to start in understanding the archaeological evidence for past hunter-gatherer people’s lives, beyond a de-populated past, an inventory of dates and provisioning. The continued development of the archaeological discipline requires such cross-fertilisation of intellectual traditions, innovations and evidence.

Doing fieldwork
My learning and recording work in the western Simpson Desert started with a preliminary visit in 1995, followed by extended field seasons in 1996, 1997, 1998, and a one week re-visit in 2001 and again in 2007. During these field seasons my stalwart volunteer archaeological field assistants and companions127 and I carried out surface archaeological survey transects in contrasting environmental components of the landscape (see location map fig 1.2). We sample surveyed various types of water sources – ephemeral creeklines (Three O’Clock Creek, Bloods Creek); swampy areas (Duck Ponds and Woodgate Swamp); around the mound springs; on the banks of the Finke River (near Tin Shanty) and the Finke River floodout (near Anniversary Bore); and the margins of Spring Creek (north of Dalhousie Springs Homestead). We surveyed on gibber flats and over hills (Mt Crispe, along Christmas Creek, Appoandina hill east of Mt Dare, along Abminga Creek west of Mt Dare), and in a series of transects along the dunes at various distances into the dune field, at right angles to the French track. We also surveyed the surface materials surrounding several European homesteads or stations, at Dalhousie Springs, Mt Dare, Tin Shanty, Federal, and Charlotte

Waters, as they represented another form of focus for people’s interaction in the landscape.

These surveys were samples, designed to gather representative, comparative information about the range of material culture in the region, and contribute to an understanding of their spatial distribution. Practically, they consisted of walking, looking at the exposed surface, and recording where the stone, glass, ceramic, metal artefacts, features and structures were, measuring their dimensions, and describing their form, from flaked glass to stockyard, stone cairn to standing wooden wiltja. Photography, measurements, mud maps and GPS locations, and video recording were all used. Video film provided a particularly evocative way of conveying the sense of being in a place, but my sound recording and editing were poorly developed skills which made it a haphazard database.\(^{128}\)

Together with the slow accumulation of grubby field notebooks filled with rough maps and measurements, and an archive of slides, a less obvious long-term outcome of this fieldwork was the enfolding of the landscape into the workers as they spent days and weeks quietly being in it, engaging with its detail, thinking about the connection of the material traces on the ground to the surrounding landscape features, absorbing the textures and possibilities that they presented (fig 1.15).

Michel de Certeau distinguishes between maps and tours.\(^{129}\) Maps relate a given place to all other places evenly. They exhibit the products of knowledge of places, but do not retain traces of the travel and measurement operations by which they were obtained. Plans, however, show how to move around the landscape. They leave out things you cannot see or that do not affect your route, and show the easiest access. Developing an orientation in the landscape, a familiarity with the lie of the land, involves investigating how one place relates to others, finding out how it is possible to get between places, what it looks like from different distances and perspectives, and the view from it. You consider lines of sight, and small dips in the land. A lot of such orientation is about dealing with the variability and texture, the lumpiness of the world. For

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\(^{128}\) Copies of all records have been deposited with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra.

\(^{129}\) de Certeau 1984: 120-1.
example, how long does it take to walk from one place to another, if there are ditches or a steep hill. The smoothness suggested in maps and by the repeated use of standard desert images (‘a sand dune’, ‘a mound spring’, ‘a homestead’) is complicated by this direct exposure to the place.

The multiple aspects of a place and the connections between it and people do not, however, necessarily reveal themselves to you just because you present yourself there. The questions you ask will determine what it is you attend to, what will be there in your account – what is not there at the beginning can not magically emerge at the end. For example, if you are not thinking about access, you will not attend to how many tracks there are going to and from a particular place, nor ask about how they were built, when, who put them in.

At the smaller scale of attention there are the details of the material contents of a place and their spatial distribution, which is where many surprises and unexpected aspects emerge. Looking closely prevents you stopping too soon. For example, consider Dalhousie Springs homestead. The station is now a set of ruinous buildings of the local stone, old stockyards, with interpretation signs giving a history of an early pastoral lease taken up on the mound springs.
Fig 1.15: Doing fieldwork, between Red Mulga Creek and Mt Crispe, Vivienne Wood recording surface artefacts, October 1997
Being there, we not only see these physical traces, but we can stop to contemplate the view of the badlands from the doorway (fig 1.16). We carry out a surface archaeological survey around this focal point which reveals a much more complicated picture of life at and around the homestead. There are numerous stone artefacts and a pattern of small hearths of burnt limestone to the north. We measure how far they are away, look at their bone content, document the flaked glass, and several pieces of flaked telegraph insulator brought in from the Overland Telegraph Line. Just out of the direct line of sight, 1.6km away is a group of circular hut bases. There are stone cairns and discrete flaking events, not mixed in with the other occupational debris, where large cobbles of quartzite have been worked. None of this life at the location is remembered by texts or people, only by the material evidence. While it is not possible to date them, their spatial distinctions allow ‘themes of material arrangement’\textsuperscript{130} to be derived, which complicate the outsider’s story of a lone historic stone homestead. (This assemblage of material is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.)

There are three strengths of an archaeological attention to past materiality and spatiality of a place. The first is its potential for providing evidence for the long term, longer than the usual maximum of four generations of memory and story. The second is its potential for providing both large scale and small scale patterns, sometimes linked – a short moment of shaping a stone artefact, the long term accumulative pattern of many generations extracting stone from the same source. The third is its capacity to access the patterns of life that are invisible to those who made them. This is the emphasis archaeology can provide for a ‘bottom-up’ understanding of social processes.

Most people can train their eye to recognise stone artefacts from the background of other stone - although even that is not always a straightforward identification in areas where all the stone is siliceous and fine grained, and can be inadvertently pseudo-flaked by cattle hooves. But this identification, while pleasing in itself, does no more than inform the observer that someone was here, a prior presence in the same place, part of a qualitatively different desert life. This may be an important reminder of prior and distinct ways in which the

\textsuperscript{130} Barratt 1994: 15.
same place has been lived in, and for Irrwanyere members it was a heartening confirmation of the extent of their antecedents’ activities in the dune field (see chapter 5).

But to read beyond presence, archaeological training brings a set of analytical skills that provide access to the process of production and use of the artefact - its source, exchange, how it was made, used and re-used in its life history, micro-wear and residue analysis, statistical comparison of its location, and its relationship to other artefacts in an assemblage.

However, the narrative tends to stay with the artefacts, or their site. It is rarely that an analysis of these can move through the demanding effort of translation of the material to give an animated picture of the people who were making and using them. The analysis is often so complex and multi-faceted that it becomes an end in itself, or it is routinised in the standard contract public archaeology recording of sites, with the same outcome. Analysis of past material products comes to stand for the people who generated them as part of the pattern of their lives. The resulting stories have tended to be dry and formulaic. This is a problem that has been recognised within the discipline.131

When the application of archaeological attention is at its best, the results can be potent and revealing – for example, the otherwise unknowable existence and then interpretation of the ‘mock’ carved pipe stems found in surface survey at Charlotte Waters (see chapter 3). An example of it not at its best is seen in a report on a small survey of Three O’Clock Creek. I carried this out because the Witjera National Park Board of Management planned an alternative camping ground for tourists on this branch of Christmas Creek. The report follows the language and format of a small-scale archaeological Environmental Impact Study, the bread-and-butter of a working contract archaeologist in Australia. It describes the site and the cultural material present in a particular type of environment, and stops. The format is beguilingly straightforward. It is not easy to read, however, and would be unlikely to convince anyone flicking through it in the Irrwanyere office that archaeology is an interesting or valuable discipline. Nevertheless, it meets the requirements of the legislation. I have included the main description and results in the box below.

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Fig 1.16: View through the doorway of Dalhousie Springs homestead, August 2007
These strictly archaeological surveys were carried out in between my visits to country arranged with Irrwanyere members, depending on their other commitments and their health. With them, video and audio recording as well as some mapping and sampling were carried out at a differently defined set of places, the choice of which grew out of reminiscing about the cattle days. These were the stockyards at Dalhousie Springs and at Paradise Bore, both built by Bingey Lowe, Ambullina, Eternity (Ilarkura) and Woodgates Swamp yards – the latter made of super-hard red mulga wood, at Memory, Dakota, Erina Bores, and the old Ewillina stud yard.

Increasingly, the places we visited and recorded were selected because of their relevance to Irrwanyere members as places of their lives, remembered and celebrated, not necessarily otherwise widely known.

This has parallels with archaeological survey work that was developed to provide evidence in the legal context of a native title claim, at De Rose Hill in north-western South Australia. Such archaeology aimed to show continued connection to places and continuities of practice in the area. To do so, the recording program targeted sites known to the Indigenous group making the native title claim, for which they had knowledge and memory of use. These were ‘sites known to the claimants and locations that were of contemporary importance to the claimants (mythological, evidence for residence and historic association)’. One of the archaeologists involved, Jo McDonald, is clear that this ‘can be done to the exclusion of basic archaeological frameworks’. The claimants arguably recognise the presence of archaeological evidence distributed more widely across the land but they are only interested in identifying those aspects that had meaning to them and their claim.”

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133 McDonald 2005: 31.
Report of an archaeological survey of Three O’Clock Creek, Witjera National Park, prepared for the Witjera National Park Board of Management, July 1996

**Description of the survey area**

The proposed campground is situated on gently undulating stony floodplains to the west of the incised stony bed of the ephemeral Three O’Clock Creek. This runs roughly south-north from the Emery Range to intersect with an east-west running branch of Red Mulga Creek. The wide floodplain displays low alluvial terraces running parallel to the creek, while the ground to the east of the creek rises more steeply. The creek has steep banks approximately one metre high, with deeper 3m banks to the north of the main track from Mt Dare to Dalhousie Springs. The ground between the creek and the north of the track has been cut up by vehicle traffic and has ashes from recent fires. Red mulga and gidgee grow with sparse low scrub in and around the creek channel. Several hundred meters further south, beyond the area surveyed, there appears to be a wider water-hole in the creek channel, which might retain sub-surface water longer than the creek bed.
The survey
In order to assess any patterning in the distribution of stone artefacts at varying distances away from the creek bed, all the stone artefacts observed in four 3m wide transects were recorded. These transects were located 1) beside the creek 2) 20 m west of the creek 3) 40 m west of the creek 4) 100m west of the creek.

The descriptive variables recorded for the artefacts were: size (length, width, thickness), raw material (silcrete, various colours of chert, chalcedony, sandstone), artefact type (flake, flaked piece, retouched flake, core segment, core, grinding stone) and amount of cortex on the flake (percentage of the dorsal surface of flakes, overall percentage of cores).

A range of modified stone from those clearly artefactual to those obviously freshly broken by vehicles was observed. The siliceous rocks in the area have been subject to heat cracking, frost plucking, water rolling, vehicle damage and cattle hoof damage. All of these are capable of creating pseudo-artefacts. Only those with a clear conchoidal fracture were included in the sample, which results in a minimum count of the numbers of artefacts present.

This surface survey method favours the identification of larger artefacts. The presence of small pieces less than 10mm can only be reliably assessed by test-pitting and sieving. This again means that the numbers recovered in the sample are a minimum number only.

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<td>TOTAL</td>
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Results
In the creek bed, three standing red mulgas and one coolibah had had several limbs (diameter ranging from 9 - 20cm) removed with an axe. These were presumably used for cattle station fenceposts.

A total of 142 stone artefacts were recorded in the four transects. The numbers and percentages of artefacts in each transect, their raw materials and types are set out in Table 1.

No stone artefacts were seen in the bed of the creek, although it is highly likely that people have sat and worked stone in the shade of the creek bed in the past. Their absence is possibly due to the coarse alluvial sand and gravel which reduced surface visibility, and/or the removal of an artefacts deposited during channel scouring floods.

Contents of the recorded stone artefact assemblage

Raw materials
The smooth cobble cortex on a majority of the recorded artefacts, and the presence of flaked cobble cores in the assemblage (see below) indicates that the locally occurring siliceous rocks which make up the stony plains are the source of the artefacts. That these provide a source of sufficiently large cores for flaking is demonstrated by a comparative study of the size and raw materials of the background cobbles which make up the stony plains. In a 1m² sample there were 62 rocks larger than 4cm in size, of which all but eight were silcrete, with five conglomeritic chert breccia (buff with red cement), two buff chert, and one sandstone rock. They were rounded to sub-rounded, with a reddish orange weathering cortex.

Similarly, silcrete dominated the sample assemblage of artefacts, with 65.5% made from silcrete cobbles, 22.5% made from a variety of chert types and 12% made from chalcedony. The silcrete was mainly grey, with some artefacts buff or yellow in colour. The range of cherts observed consisted of a buff chert breccia with red cement, a variety of pale coloured buff, cream, and grey cherts and a dark chocolate brown chert.

The dominant use of silcrete to make artefacts in the area is considered to reflect the greater availability of this raw material rather than a preferential selection of it.

Artefact types
No grindstones were recorded in the survey transects, nor were any seen in the area outside the recorded transects. This may be one indication that the area was not a long term or frequently re-visited place, but was subject to shorter term, less frequent visits. The lack of hammerstones in
the area is not unusual - these were rare even in the largest, richest concentrations of stone artefacts examined in the Park.

Eighteen cores were recovered (12.7% of the sample assemblage). These were all amorphous flaked cobbles, with only one to four primary flakes removed, from a cortex platform, unifacially flaked, except for one bifacially flaked cobbles core. The abandonment of the cores in an unworked-out state is likely to be a reflection of both the unlimited amount of raw materials ready to hand and the constraints which cobbles impose in terms of size and shape.

The range of size of a $1m^2$ sample of unmodified background rocks was consistent with the size range of the cores in the assemblage, with an unsurprising tendency for selection of the larger rocks for use as cores.

No tula adzes, points, or formal artefact 'types' were recorded in this sample. The presence of secondary flaking on 21 of the stone artefacts recorded (14.8%) indicates that after manufacture, people were using them for various tasks before discard.

**Amount of cortex**

The proportion of cortex remaining on the back (dorsal surface) of the flakes and retouched flakes in Transect 3 was recorded. Only two of the 57 flakes and retouched flakes had more than 50% cortex remaining. If the main activity relating to the production of stone artefacts on site were the removal of a few casual flakes from the cobbles cores, there would be a higher proportion of primary or decorticing flakes with 50 - 100% cortex dorsally. Instead, 36.5% of the 57 have no cortex remaining, 40.4% have 1 - 20%, 19.3% have 21-50% cortex remaining. This low proportion of cortex and the presence of parallel dorsal flake scars on many of the flakes indicates that directed reduction of the cobbles cores is being carried out in a repeated pattern.

On initial examination, this creek appeared to have a low density of stone artefacts relative to other areas. Closer examination showed that there was a substantial density of stone artefacts present at Three O'clock Creek. At least some of the assemblage resulted from on-site stone working. There is some patterning in their spatial distribution, with a greater concentration observed on the slightly raised terraces about 40m west of the creek.
The basis for relevance differed. In many cases it was grounded in personal associations, such as Paradise Bore, where the original well was dug by Bingey Lowe. Or a place such as a waterhole or stone arrangement had strong Ancestral significance. In the case of Charlotte Waters, the place was valued as the birthplace of two sisters, Clara and Sarah Strangways, who are grandmother or great aunt of many of the members of Irrwanyere Aboriginal Corporation.\textsuperscript{134}

But their descendents have no picture, or way of picturing, what life was like there for their forebears. So I set out to recover accounts of the context in which these women were born in the 1880s.

I then ran straight into a major body of historical documentation, concerned with the Overland Telegraph Line. These were accounts told largely by those involved in its planning, building and maintenance, often on anniversaries of its completion. The telegraph line was a capital B Big thing, built in less than two years by the young South Australian colonial government under great time constraints, having only the sketch maps from John McDouall Stuart’s crossing of the centre six years before to guide them. It was a major technological achievement, against great odds and hazards. ‘Heroic’ ‘epic’ and ‘legendary’ were the words used both at the time and in subsequent historical accounts to describe the human effort involved. It was one of the foundational narratives for South Australia and the Northern Territory. Historian Ann Curthoys has pointed out that the ‘idea of settler innocence remains powerful in Australian popular culture’. History told in this mode ‘stresses struggle, courage and survival, amidst pain, tragedy and loss.’\textsuperscript{135} With the notable exception of John Mulvaney’s 1986 *Encounters in place*, which was the first account to draw attention to Charlotte Waters as a place of interaction, Curthoys’ summary very much describes way the Overland Telegraph Line is depicted in the literature.

In contrast, amongst all their accumulated stories, one thing that Irrwanyere stories never did stress, or even mention, was the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line through the country in the early 1870s. They were apparently not familiar with it, or did not find it sufficiently relevant to their sense of the country’s history to include it in their stories. They *did* tell stories of Charlotte

\textsuperscript{134} Hull-Stuart 1998.

\textsuperscript{135} Curthoys 2003: 187.
Waters, the central of the telegraph repeater stations located just on the Northern Territory side of the border. But these stories were smaller, local. Bingey Lowe recalls the time when it was a shop in the late 1920-30s. There were thousands of goats with goat yards to the south-west. The people who looked after the animals lived in the coolibah trees to the west, and some lived under the trees where new homelands now are sited. The yard closest to the house was for horses. There were vegetable gardens at the bore to the north. Water was brought from there in a donkey cart each day. In the 1950s and 1960s, Bingey used the newer stockyard, mended with old metal telegraph poles, to yard cattle on their way to the train. In dry times cattle accumulate in the vicinity as the clay holds more feed. He told the *Arkaya* Kestrel History, which recounts the story of the ancestral formation of the Finke River that runs nearby (see box in chapter 2). Charlotte Waters is now part of Aputula Aboriginal Land Trust holdings.

The local starting point of Charlotte Waters' importance as birthplace for Clara and Sarah Strangways, in 1880 and 1889 took my research into the mainstream history of the Overland Telegraph Line, but at the same time kept the focus of my narrative on the place as it was experienced by the local Indigenous people.

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My project began with ideas consonant with my experience in prehistoric archaeology. I began with questions of how stone arrangements structured people’s experience of the place, and their relationships to other sites. Stone arrangements are powerful places, marked by complex arrays of lines and cairns that are part of the actions of ancestral beings and arenas for ceremonial performances. I was interested in how these endurably potent places structured people’s interactions with each other and with features in the landscape over a long time.

A complication of this concept that I immediately encountered was the rarity of sites in the landscape that contained only pre-colonial material. The stone

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137 Hull-Stuart 1998.
arrangements were one of this rare form of site, as were the stone reduction floors discussed below. However, their use was not restricted to pre-colonial times. They could not be interpreted in isolation from the strong presence of places where the surface materials were a complex mix of materials, historic, recent, pre-colonial and those which could be either or both, at the mound springs, along the Finke River banks, the sides of the Abminga Creek, and all of the bores drilled into existing waterholes.

Reinforcing this complication as I was taught the country, it became increasingly clear that a focus on one type of place was inappropriately exclusive in the context. These places could not be thought of in isolation, but were integrated into a dense network of places. To visit any one place was to set the web of its association to others vibrating.

**Different ways of finding history: how to bring divergent sources together?**

A small scene played out late in my association with my Irrwanyere teachers serves to illustrate the collision between our distinct ways of recognising the past in the present. It shows up some of the assumptions that underlie these, and the possibilities for their differences to be translated into light of greater understanding not just heat of conflict.

My story concerns a series of discrete locations where a block of quartzite has been reduced, or repeatedly flaked, to form cores from which long stone blades can be struck. They were each made by a single individual at some point in the past, maybe 90 years ago, maybe 900; it is not possible to date them. Their actions have left distinctive patterns of stone flakes on the ground in the process, repeated across the landscape, each separate from other occupation debris and not overlapping with each other. They look like stone flowers, about 1m x 2m in size. A gap where the person doing the flaking had been sitting can be seen in the circle of large flakes of stone, lying where they were abandoned (fig 1.17, 1.18).

I wanted to see if I could find out more about the process of this flaking, and perhaps discover what the final product of it was, that the maker had taken
away, by looking at how the remaining parts joined together; a kind of 3-D jigsaw puzzle called ‘refitting’, a well known technique.\textsuperscript{138}

I picked an accessible example near Dalhousie Springs homestead, with the aim of videoing my attempt to refit the 24 or so large and smaller flakes and one large core (measuring 124 x 140 x 100mm) on the surface. The first three large pieces which were distinguished by having rough cortex on their outer surfaces went together easily. The fourth piece had a large ant’s nest under it. The small pieces were quite similar, with no colour variation to guide me, and I found them impossible to place.\textsuperscript{139} It was awkward holding the rocks together, with masking tape and Bluetack, and video-ing at the same time. My commentary on the film gets increasingly despondent as the morning passes, it gets hotter and hotter and I still have only four large chunks dangling together on their melting globs of Bluetack. Finally, too hot, I headed back to camp, defeated.

I tried to convey the possibilities of understanding that had so evaded me to the mob there; Marilyn, Dean, Harry and Binge and Geoff. At first they looked puzzled, and then greatly amused. They continued to tease me mercilessly for days about my propensity for going off on my own, talking to myself for hours, and sticking rocks together. It did seem a strange project in those terms.

My point here is not that there is something inherently ludicrous in this attempt to establish a way into the actions of people in the past from the outside, via retracing someone’s work on a stone cobble. There are no other stories for these potentially telling components of people’s actions in the area; no one except an archaeologist can tell this story about the distinctive processes of the making of specific objects. These stories are invisible, hidden, even to the makers, as for them they would have been so self-evident they would not have needed to spell them out. An archaeologist can translate the inanimate cluster of dark stones shown in fig 1.17 into an unusually direct and immediate presence of an individual at work in the past. The archaeologist can show the sequence of decisions and actions – someone’s selection of a specific stone and choice of a remote place to flake it, and the resulting intended artefacts and debris, lying undisturbed where they were left, rare in their lack of confusion amongst other

\textsuperscript{138} eg Cziesla et al 1990; Hofman 1992.
\textsuperscript{139} Macfarlane field notebook Saturday 13 June 1998.
materials. It is demanding work, the effort to reconstitute the static stones into a reminder of their active past context.

My point, that I learnt in this context, where my recording efforts seemed so remote from the concerns of those around me, was about what is required to tell a good story - a story that is relevant, tells about more than just itself, and is retold, remembered. It is important where you start the story. In this case, the relevant place to start was with the people living in a place and what they did. What was needed from me, as an archaeologist, was to consciously craft a bridge between my own practice of recording - an external way in to the human
Fig 1.17: Stone reduction location, on gibber-covered side of the ridge which runs north from the Dalhousie Springs Homestead, showing its discrete character and isolation from everyday-living locations, November 1997

Fig 1.18: Detail of stone reduction showing large flakes of dark quartzite cobble, November 1997
past in that particular place - and the existing stories that the Irrwanyere members knew of it. After all, their stories were only accessible via a self-conscious performance or re-enactment; neither form of story sits in the place waiting to be read out of it; both have to be actively read into it.

The question addressed through my refitting attempt potentially provided the kind of small-scale detail that is one of archaeological methods’ strengths. But the connections into the life that the detail was part of had to be established first. Without that starting point, the account tended to bog down in the artefacts and their story, so turning artefacts into stand-ins for people, instead of illuminating past life through the artefacts. For my Irrwanyere audience, my refitting exercise was funny: - so much effort, for what end? As a story it started in the wrong place. They could not hear it. It could not be heard as a story of past life unless the matrix of its connections was already established, not disconnected from recent history.

The ‘pure’ archaeological form of recall of refitting or the EIS survey has to a large degree become detached from other forms of recall to which people are more attuned: the personal and social histories and records that are of more direct concern to them. Just as a retina, which helps you to see, obstructs vision when it becomes detached, so mechanisms intended to augment a sense of the past instead obscure it when they become detached from the people using them.

The conscious making of a bridge between these narrative strands makes a way to enlarge the senses of the past from which they originate. It allows these divergent ways of accessing the past to converge and to converse in the present place. This forges a richer account of what has happened in that place, one that no one person’s perspective could tell of it. The question becomes one of how to bring the relevance of these into the same field, through the organizing principle of place.

**Turning a corner**

BL has noticed my obsession with stones. He presented me with a beautiful grindstone from behind his back as a treat yesterday. This contrasts with the first time we came out to Anniversary, when I
enthusiastically told him I had found a grindstone. He thought I meant a knife sharpening stone and was visibly disappointed by the massive old stone version. Archaeology is irrelevant, peripheral anyway, to the story, which is the main thing. Have to make it a good story therefore to make it interesting to others.

Field notes, at Anniversary Bore homeland, 3 October 1997

This cry from my field notes marks my shifting awareness of the task that I was involved in, the change needed in how it was to be defined. Reflecting on this change many years later, after it had found its shape, I saw a parallel in the location of the work and that shape; in the course of the Finke and the course of my thinking.

The channel of the Finke River runs roughly north-west to south-east out of the West MacDonnell Ranges, cutting through sandstone to form deep gorges in its upper reaches. It then runs west to east along the top of the stony hills in the centre of Witjera National Park. But when it reaches the sand dunes, with their regular NNW-SSE grooves, in the 4km stretch to the north west of Anniversary Bore, just before the Ewillina stone arrangement, it turns a corner to run south in multiple channels before it disappears underground. It seems that through my own traverses of the country, rubbing across and along the grain of the country with the people who live there, my thinking also turned a corner, like the Finke River does. The river cannot cut through the mass of the sand and has to follow the grain of the land, and I also found my previous patterns being swung into new alignments.

Working from 2001 as editor of the journal of Aboriginal History gave me the scent of a trail into strong narrative as a way to honour the complexity of the entangled places I had previously mapped and measured but never managed to bring to life. A different starting point, that of history, history with a grounding in place, offered a liberating way to balance the distancing weight of analytical detail and the freshness of the stories told without reference to that.

This shift from a primarily archaeological study to a primarily historical one had unexpected implications for my practice. Aspects that had been central became peripheral; others that had been peripheral swam into focus as important. For example, the work of Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen I had
previously regarded as relevant sources from which I would extract information for understanding the area’s past. Now, rather than their work, it was them as individual historical actors who were implicated. I needed them to sit down at my desk while I quizzed them about the immediacies of their fieldwork, how they worked, where they camped. They became characters in the story.

I noticed when I first started giving papers to historians that they would ask ‘Who are these “people” that you keep referring to? In describing patterns of material that highlighted distinctions in action in different parts of the landscape, I would write, for example: ‘I was interested in how stone arrangements structured people’s experience of the place.’ Which people, and when, specifically? historians would query. Using solely archaeological recordings, the answer to the first could only be a parsimonious best guess based on likelihood that it was ‘Indigenous people’ but there was no language group or other identifiers, although it is sometimes possible for distinctions in rock art to give clues to ethnic or group identity. As it is rarely possible to date surface materials, there was not much traction on specifying when, either – again, I could offer only a best guess of the last 1000 years. So when I argued that archaeology gave one a fine grained, localized way into understanding the history in place, I referred to the particularities that are not recorded, but not who was carrying the actions out. I continue to talk about ‘people’ because often that is all I know about them. Historians, it was apparent, worked where possible with more distinctively identified agents – gendered, class-identified, locality-specific if not individually named – in their source texts. Archaeology provides a ‘meta’ past that is not usually individuated or named, although individuals can and do draw on it selectively in their identity definition.

Refitting was not an appropriate metaphor for the historical task I was involved in. I was not seeking to bring together fragments of something that had been whole and so restore it. It was never a whole. Nor was it deliberately fragmented. Rather, it – the historical past – is of its essence partial, fragmentary, multiple. Recognition, acceptance of that essence rather than

140 McDonald 2005.
141 Recent research by Fanning et al 2009 indicates that the dating of lag deposits in arid zone archaeological sites can be refined and given much greater resolution when combined with geomorphic studies of the associated sedimentary environment.
attempting to smooth it away led to the development of this ‘entangled place’ approach. I grappled with the bridge-making challenge through working with relevant entangled places.

My approach can be seen as an elaboration or expansion of Hercus and Clarke’s (1986) descriptions of the Simpson Desert wells, which were relocated in early 1980s. They draw on explorer’s accounts, Aboriginal people’s personal memories and translations of recorded History stories of the places, together with archaeological assessments of the material concentrated there, and geomorphological assessments of their forms. These are all acknowledged components of understanding these places. The immense richness of interwoven lives was both enabled and focused by the wells, and those lives in turn brought them into being as ‘desert wells’, rather than a crack in the geological formation.

The approach I have taken thus is not so much ‘new’ as infrequently carried out in Australian archaeology. Classically, archaeological studies treat environment, history and linguistics as separate from ‘sites’. The sites of a region are lost to statistical averages and to classification into general types. This is necessary to reduce the volume of material. But it is possible then to tack back and forth between the large scale of general regional patterns and the small scale of the qualities of particular areas. They each provide a context for the understanding of the other.

This is not a meta history, it does not aim, or claim, to be ‘the’ history of the region. It is a partial history, one whose content reflects the starting point of my research in archaeologically framed questions of place-making and maintenance, and the changes in my thinking that followed from my education in history in place. If I had started with a historically-framed question about the inter-cultural social impact of building the Overland Telegraph Line, or with the overt intention of writing the history of Mt Dare station, for example, it would have been a very different thesis. Both these questions are addressed here, but the form and the emphases given are a result of the history of the work.
It is not a heritage study, but shares the place-based concerns that inform significance assessment and the evaluation of social significance of cultural landscape studies. It is not social geography, and deals to only a limited extent with the politics of location and genealogy, and joint land management that anthropologist Kim Doohan and geographer Jocelyn Davies have looked at in detail.142

In the end, it was the verve of powerful story telling, the dedication to it, and the vividness of the past world it restored which won out.

It is important to stress that in this work, I have not sought to speak for the Irrwanyere members who have taught me. My syntheses have been profoundly informed by what they taught me or helped me to learn, but they are not what they would say. They are writing their own accounts.143 Sadly, Bingey Lowe passed away in 2002, but left a vast legacy of knowledge of the country and its stories and songs that he taught to others.144 Irrwanyere members generously granted me permission to speak of what we did, where we went, what I was told (see letter of permission Appendix A145), and I was encouraged to tell others the stories that keep the people’s presence vivid in the land.

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Marble cake: the gift of a metaphor

We were back at Aputula (Finke) at the end of a crowded month of fieldwork together, travelling the country, recalling the past, yarning around the fire in the rain at Anniversary Bore. Bingey Lowe gave me a parting gift before I left for Alice Springs. His first impulse was to give me some meat from the community store, as this is the standard currency of exchange that flows

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145 The main body of fieldwork for this project was carried out in 1996-1998, following the then current Ethical Guidelines set out in the AIATSIS Research Grants Program: Information to Applicants. These guidelines were a ‘respected national standard for all research in Indigenous studies’ (Michael Davis 2009). See also AIATSIS 1999, Research of Interest to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Australian Research Council, National Board of Employment, Education and Training, Canberra (Commissioned Report 59, especially Chapter 4 on ‘The Ethics of Research’), at http://www.arc.gov.au/pdf/99_05.pdf which discusses these ethical guidelines. (In the 1990s when I carried out the fieldwork, I was enrolled at Southampton University, UK, and at that time this institution did not have its own formal ethical protocols.)
between people with involvement or obligation, and it was a mark that we were in an equitable exchange relationship.\textsuperscript{146} But with genuine care and tolerance, he remembered my odd vegetarian habits, and instead, with a flourish, brought out from the store a marble cake, a vivid swirling pink, white and brown with pink icing. I was honoured, as the gift marked our relationship, and was a salute to the deep remembering, witnessing and listening that we had shared, and the mutual respect and affection that we had developed.

The import of this gift has reverberated with me more broadly in the years since: marble cake! It carries a symbolic load. It is not a layer cake. Nor are the different elements blended to homogeneity. The point of a marble cake is that its various constituents are inextricably mixed, and to try to separate one out would be to deny that together they make it the cake it is, and would destroy it. So is this a good metaphor for the histories we were tracking, and the way to tell them? In such a metaphor, places would be slices through the whole. But it fails because it emphasises the end product, rather than the process by which the cake was made. This emphasis of this work is really on the need to backtrack from the existing, contemporary cake to its improvised cooking process, for which there was no recipe. The idea of the cake endures as benign reminder of the form of the entangled nature of the interactions that are implicated in this work. (The cake itself was delicious with my afternoon cup of tea.) But it is not a sufficiently substantial idea to contain the magnitude and gravity of those historical interactions.

However, the gift of cake, the act of exchange, freighted as it was with generosity and goodwill, stands as a powerful sign of the two-way nature of this work. This writing, my bringing together of these stories and sources of stories, is my gift within this open ended exchange relationship, coming out of my obligation to Bingey Lowe as my teacher, to the wider Aboriginal communities involved in the region, to my academic community, and to the general audience who can learn to hear entangled histories also; ‘a gift to the future in which we are all implicated’ as Kim Mahood says of her cultural mapping work in the east Kimberly.\textsuperscript{147}

\textsuperscript{146} Exchange features as an important part of the discussion in chapter 3 below.
\textsuperscript{147} Mahood 2006: 10.
**Structure of the thesis**

The threads that are entangled in telling these histories are drawn out in the chapters which follow. Chapter 2 takes us into the region, describing its environmental characteristics and giving an outline of its histories, both pre-colonial, colonial and into the twentieth century. This provides background for the more detailed case studies of particular places in Chapters 3 and 4 and the connections between them in Chapter 5. Each of these latter chapters develops one of three inter-related themes which have emerged as being crucial in understanding the dynamics of people and place in the western Simpson Desert. These are cross-cultural interactions in a situation of intense and rapid change; interactions with water; and forms of connection between places.

In Chapter 3 I look at the particular interactions between people and place that were set in train by the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line in the early 1870s. I track the radically changing circumstances that arose from the cross-cultural interactions that were generated, and the various ways in which the people on both sides of the resulting cultural ‘contact zones’ responded to these changes through time. The study grounds these understandings in the small-scale detail of lived experience in a particular place which was very much on the front-line of interaction, the Charlotte Waters repeater station of the Overland Telegraph Line.

In Chapter 4 I look at interactions of people and place through the lens of water, in its various forms in the area. The meaning of water is not the same in each place; subtle differences in the form of the water, and the history of people’s interaction with it, are one of the elements which distinguishes one place from another. The discussion continues the theme of chapter 3, of reconfigurations following new forms of interaction, and takes it into the realm of natural resources, looking at water sources, including the installation of bores. We know that water is a crucial focus for peoples’ actions, especially in the desert. How do people live out that focus at particular water-places? To acquire water for practical necessities is at the same time to engage with its accumulated meanings. What distinct expectations and understandings do different people bring to their relations with water, as revealed through their practices in
relation to it? The outcomes of these practices may often be unforeseen, and can provide insights into what is often hidden to the practitioners – their own assumptions and habits, in contrast to what they planned to do. This question has obvious salience in a colonial context. The role of water in the formation of a pastoral landscape is explored in the example of the formal homestead built at Dalhousie Springs and in the more marginal settlement at Anniversary Bore.

In chapter 5, my emphasis is on what makes connections between places. Places are not bounded entities, but the destinations and points of departure of paths.\textsuperscript{148} It is not just the places themselves that are constantly being produced by interactions, but the connections between them, and these are also constituted in distinctive ways at different times in changing contexts. Navigation and negotiation of routes between places and forms of landscape knowledge – and its maintenance or loss – are brought out in this chapter. In bringing out aspects of connectivity, this chapter leads into the conclusion of the thesis.