

Warlpiri materiality

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Declaration

Except where cited in the text, this thesis is my own original work.



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Abstract

Drawing on fieldwork with families at Nyirrpi, a Warlpiri community in central Australia, this thesis is an ethnography of contemporary Warlpiri life through the lens of materiality. Underpinning it is a question about Warlpiri ways of seeing and engaging with materiality—the stuff of everyday life that one might see as furniture, bedding, personal belongings, household items, even rubbish. Across the chapters, my unpacking of this question takes shape over three main themes. The first has to do with the role of things in Warlpiri relatedness. I explore sharing on different scales, from broad patterns around Nyirrpi and beyond, to the most intimate forms in the context of family gatherings, and in doing so illustrate the nuances of sharing as a practice that both creates and maintains relatedness. The second has to do with the meanings things take on in the places where Warlpiri people travel and live together. Whether in the context of Warlpiri mobility or domestic life in and around a house, I ‘read’ things as traces of Warlpiri lives and activities and analyse how material things become part of the physical and symbolic structure—and often mark the boundaries—of the places in which Warlpiri people gather. The final theme relates to a question of ‘thingness’ and ‘materiality’, of what material things might even be, mean or be used for. I analyse Warlpiri concepts and practices pertaining to ‘rubbish’ and the realisations of multiple material affordances. Grounded as this project is in the practices and dynamics of domestic and community life at Nyirrpi, ultimately, I suggest my research question can only be answered by attending to the broader framework and dynamics of a relational ontology. Warlpiri people, I argue, incorporate material things into their lives, relationships, and places with a modality of openness, flexibility, and possibility that, with few exceptions, is not informed by nor creates or delimits fixed categories or boundaries. To put it differently, I answer my question about how Warlpiri people see and engage with material things with reference to the praxis of a relational way of being, and some exploration of how that intersects with certain governance structures at Nyirrpi that rely on fixed categories, or fixed relations between categories, to see and order the world.

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Chapter One.

Introduction

Thinking back to the genesis of this research project, the question I started out with was about Warlpiri ways of seeing, engaging with and ordering material things in domestic space(s). I was interested in the ‘aesthetic’ of Warlpiri material-spatial practices, invoking Daniel Miller’s (2009, p. 19) use of the term to suggest an internal logic underlying the relations between individuals and their surrounding world of objects, practices and other subjects: “that people come to sense an order in the world which feels right, which looks right, and which comes to be taken for granted as the source of the normative”. This question had been bubbling around in me for a good few years before I started my PhD, when I was living and working in central Australia and first started hanging out at Warlpiri peoples’ homes. I had found myself, on the one hand, perceiving domestic landscapes of things and rubbish in random disorder, and on the other, feeling sure there was an order—an aesthetic—that I just didn’t get, couldn’t see.

From the beginning then, in its formation and framing, my research project was positioned at an intersection of different ways of seeing and being in the world; an intersection of difference which ramifies in particular and problematic ways in the Australian neo-colonial context and in which I am inevitably implicated. Throughout the course of this project I have found myself sitting uncomfortably with the still relevant critiques of anthropology and I share the anxieties expressed by Kearney (2020b, p. 70) that “come with being a non-Indigenous researcher who moves between the two worlds of ethnographic learning with Aboriginal families, and academic functioning whereby privilege and rights to speak take on powerful presences”. I remain acutely aware of the issues and politics of representation of Indigenous Australians, and my position as a ‘whitefella’ writing into that space. At the same time, I do maintain that anthropology can offer an ethical and genuine approach for understanding and engaging across different ways of being-in-the-world. I see the value and importance of not only bearing witness to but also developing and potentially being changed by a consciousness of Indigenous lived experience (Kearney, 2020b, pp. 88-89). It is this, primarily, that has motivated me in this project.

It was towards the end of 2014 when I arrived at Nyirrpi community to start nineteen months of fieldwork living with a Warlpiri family.¹ To the families at Nyirrpi I described myself as being there, generally, to learn about Warlpiri ways of life and, more specifically, to learn about Warlpiri ways of living at home with belongings and things. To that end, as part of my everyday fieldwork activities, I paid as much attention to material things as possible. I used field notes, maps, and photographs to document all the things we lived and travelled with, where things came from, what things were used for, where things were kept, how things moved around, where they went, and what people said about them. It was through these endeavors, and reflections on my experiences during fieldwork more generally, that my understanding of my own research question has crystallized or ‘prismed’ in particular ways.

Firstly, and most immediately, the Warlpiri context presented a challenge to assumptions so clearly embedded in my original question, that I might easily identify and delimit ‘material things’ and ‘domestic space’. As I was producing maps of the houses and yards where I was living with Warlpiri family, my conceptualisation of domestic space and ‘home’ was shifting through the everyday practice of family members living, moving, and gathering across multiple places, both at and beyond Nyirrpi. As I was walking around with my maps, trying to draw all the material things we were living with, I was finding the concepts of ‘materiality’ and ‘thingness’ to be very slippery, as I encountered a place where there was no equivalent Warlpiri concept or word and where plastic bottles were used as cups, tin lids were knives, a spoon was a gear stick, and the tin shed was sometimes inhabited by invisible presences. As I explicate further in chapters to follow, I have resolved the problem of the nature of domestic space in this thesis through an engagement with the Warlpiri concept *ngurra*—which encapsulates meanings of both home and country—and the adoption of a phenomenological approach to place (Casey, 1996). The problem of ‘materiality’ and ‘thingness’ has become an ongoing question in this thesis. I continue to use ‘thing’ to refer to or describe particular things (items or objects) but as I will explain further below, there are also times when the more ambiguous, open meaning of the word applied. I refer here to the way ‘thing’ can be a stand-in word to refer to *anything*—a discrete object or entity, some material or substance, an idea, a quality, a state of affairs, an event, a deed or an act, the word you can’t remember, and so on. It is precisely this open, ambiguous, undesignated meaning of the word ‘thing’ that I find useful

¹ Unless quoting directly from other sources, in this thesis I follow Peterson’s (2016, p. 161) spelling of the place name Nyirrpi. The other spelling, Nyirripi, appears on some maps and other documents because it was incorrectly spelt when the community was registered with the Government.

and fitting with the Warlpiri lifeworld, in relation to which I will argue ‘things’ were often not so much fixed in categories as they were sites of possibilities.

Secondly, and in a reinforcement of the latter point, in the context of a government run Warlpiri community, if one’s attention is focused on ‘things’—and especially things in Warlpiri homes—some fundamental differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of seeing (and being in) the world become apparent. Pertaining to, for example, the possibilities of what a ‘thing’ might even be, or what its possible uses are, or whether it might be ‘rubbish’; to systems for order and ideas about where and how things should be kept and managed; to where the boundaries between self, others, and materiality lie; and to the principles or rules of ownership and sharing. The asymmetrical power dynamics at the intersection of some of these differences has become a prominent theme in this thesis; it haunts many of the chapters and is addressed most directly in chapters five and six on the intervention of neo-colonial forms of governance and regulatory structures in Warlpiri people’s lives.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what the experience of living with a Warlpiri family taught me most about—and this will come as no surprise to those familiar with the Warlpiri context—was a way of being in the world that is fundamentally relational. To speak of a relational ontology or relational praxis is to speak of more than the social dynamics of relatedness between human persons. It was, however, at this level that the kernel of my understanding of a relational way of being began. I was struck not only by the ways in which Warlpiri relationships are continually produced and affirmed, but also by the fact that once-outsiders can become family; by the very fact of this possibility and the processes by which it was accomplished. Being incorporated by Warlpiri people as “family now” involved a not always easy and never complete adjustment of my sense of self as a physically, emotionally, and economically bounded person. Learning to live life in intimate proximity with many others, being fully enmeshed in a network of resource demanding and sharing, giving over to emotional demands made by others, and, crucially, learning to make such demands of others, and working through all the difficulties of this—the tiredness, the “I’m sick of it” grumpiness, the sometimes arguments and fights—provided a crucial lesson in the relational repertoires of Warlpiri people, which ultimately became the ‘lens’ through which I understood and reformulated my research question. In short, I realised that my question about Warlpiri ways of seeing, engaging with and ordering material things was really a question about the ontological possibilities of materiality, and that the key to answering it lies in the relational dynamics and possibilities of the Warlpiri lifeworld.

Thesis argument

The argument I put forward in this thesis is that Warlpiri people extend towards and incorporate material things into their lives, relationships, and places with a modality of openness, flexibility, and possibility that, with few exceptions, is not informed by nor creates or delimits fixed categories or boundaries. To make this argument I bring a relational ontology to bear on some unlikely things, like tin lids and spoons. In what follows, my summary of the existing literature begins with the understanding of a relational ontology as extending to all (human and non-human) others within a particular lifeworld, and then moves to a focus on relatedness between human persons specifically. Following that, I draw from Poirier (2013, p. 65) to focus on some key principles that underlie a relational praxis or modality of being in the world, namely of “openness, fluidity, flexibility, and ontological potentiality”. It is by way of such principles that I see the link between a relational ontology and material things.

In my thinking, I am indebted to a timely paper by Amanda Kearney (2020a) in the ANU Anthropology Seminars series. Presenting ideas just recently published (see Kearney, 2022), at the time Kearney identified the fact that although ‘relational ontology’ is often used by anthropologists writing about Indigenous Australian lifeworlds, it had not been theorized to its fullest potential. Towards a larger project aimed at broadening our understanding of ontologies of relating, Kearney asked in that paper what the praxis of a relational ontology might look like. It was this question, especially, which I found generative, and which prompted me to further consider how a relational way of being might extend to the ways one sees and engages with the material world. Situated at the vexed intersection of identity politics and cross-cultural relating in Australia (and beyond), Kearney’s (2020a, 2022) larger project is aimed at “expanding the horizon over which understanding the self and non/self in relation is engaged” (Kearney, 2022, p. 1). Reflecting on the relational modality of Yanyuwa families in Borroloola—which sits in contrast with a “Western habit of classification which relies upon separation and a tendency to problematise difference”—Kearney (2022, p. 35) is drawn to exploring the intercultural potentialities for ways of relating that “rely on linkages rather than separation, in-betweenness rather than difference, transformation rather than self-preservation.” In this thesis while my focus is more on the expansiveness of a relational ontology as it pertains to materiality, I also keep coming back to a similar concern with Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations—ultimately, I am making a connection with ways of being in the world and the ways we see and order not just the material world but others with whom we share encounters.

Relational ontology

My understanding of a relational ontology is of a way of being in the world for which relating, or relationality, is a fundamental value, praxis and embodied experience; a “fine-tuned and multi-dimensional art” (Kearney, 2022, p. 115) or modality of connection that “encompasses not just people, but places, species, and ancestral beings” (Glaskin, 2012, p. 298; see also Poirier, 2013; Kearney, 2022). In the Warlpiri lifeworld (like elsewhere in Aboriginal Australia), this derives from the fact that ancestral beings, through their travels, actions, and interactions with each other, created and gave form to the geographic landscape and its features, including plants, animals, and humans, as well as to the laws or codes of Warlpiri culture and sociality; of how people relate to each other and to their respective country (see among many others Munn, 1986 [1970]; Stanner, 2009 [1953]; Rockman Napaljarri & Cataldi, 1994).

From Munn (1986 [1970]) the nature of this ancestral creativity is that of various recurrent transformations, through which ancestral beings (who may be wholly or only partly human) change into, imprint onto or produce from within themselves ‘objects’, which constitute the material or external world. In other words, it is through ancestral transformations that the features of the country come to exist, in their own right. Crucially, it is also through such transformations that the features of the country are considered consubstantial with the ancestral beings from which they arose, as “any object created in any way by an ancestor is thought to contain something of himself within it” (Munn, 1986 [1970], p. 58).² As Munn described it, there is a “disappearance linked with a new appearance” (Munn, 1986 [1970], p. 60); as an ancestor transforms into, for example, a hill, there is something of that ancestral subject that is permanently incorporated into the form of the hill (the ‘object’ in Munn’s terms). On one level, the hill is an embodiment of that ancestral being, they are one and the same; the hill is a permanent form of the ancestral being and is, moreover, the only form that is visible and available to human observation. On another level, the hill also exists separately from the ancestor that created it, as the ancestral transformation involves a detachment of the object (the hill) from the subject (the ancestor). Even when the ancestral being does not travel on after such a transformation, and instead ‘goes in’ to the hill forever, the ancestral being and the hill retain that dynamic relationship of being bound yet disengaged. In Munn’s (1986 [1970], p. 61) words,

² Ancestral beings may be female or male, it is only for convenience that Munn refers to them as male (Munn, 1986 [1970], p. 59)

A transformation [into a hill, for example] is constituted by a kind of “double movement”: on the one hand, a process of separation from the originating [ancestral] subject; on the other hand, a binding of the object [the hill] to him in permanent, atemporal identification.

Munn’s (1986 [1970]) explication of ancestral transformations is ultimately directed towards an understanding of the triadic relationship of “*ancestral subject—object—human subject*” (Munn, 1986 [1970], p. 70, emphasis in original). Here, the country and its features, having been created by ancestral beings, is the medium by which the human subject is both brought into being from, and ultimately reintegrated with, the ancestral powers stored within. It is also the medium by which, through ritual and mundane activity, human beings identify with and ultimately reproduce—transmit generationally—the moral order and authority structure laid down by the ancestral beings (Munn, 1986 [1970], pp. 75-79).

For me, Munn’s (1986 [1970]) explication is key to understanding that in relational ontologies, as Poirier (2013, p. 54) describes, “relations between human and nonhuman agencies have a communicative potential and the ontological boundaries between the human and nonhuman are conceived of and experienced as being permeable, flexible and negotiable.” Drawing on ethnographic research with Kukatja from the Australian western desert, a neighbouring language group to the Warlpiri, Poirier (2013, p. 58) expands on the communicative and intersubjective potential between human and nonhuman others (places, species, ancestral beings), explaining how at “any place and moment, ancestors may decide to make themselves known to the living through a peculiar sensation in one’s body, a sudden wind, the song of a bird, the unusual behavior of an animal, or any unusual event”. In a description that rings true to my experiences with Warlpiri people, and a theme to which I return to in chapter two, Poirier (2013, p. 58) recounts how whenever she travelled through the desert with her Kukatja friends, they were “constantly deciphering and interpreting signs (animal or car tracks, sounds, smells, winds, changes in the vegetation, etc.); [remaining] “open” to the eventuality that a visible sign might be the expression of an invisible presence, wishing to communicate something” (see Faulstich, 1998 for a similar description).

Elsewhere, offering an example of the permeability of ontological boundaries, Poirier (2004, pp. 59-60) outlines two different experiences of walking in the western desert when a strong wind is blowing. Poirier’s own experience of the wind is external and separate from her own body and sense of self; the wind is what she is walking against, it meets the boundaries of her own body by drying her skin out. For her Kukatja companion, Poirier infers a very different

experience, observing that “she seems to be walking with the wind” Poirier (2004, p. 59). Poirier describes an ontology in which the wind has material and spiritual dimensions and is a link to the ancestral order that steeps the country more generally. When the wind penetrates the body, it becomes breath; in its whistling lies the possibility of communication or meaning.

The conception of the wind as a link to the ancestral order, as a form of protection and nourishment to breath and the spirit, conveys a sense of ‘permeability’ between the body-self and the surrounding countryside. The body participates in action as a mediator between ancestral, human, and environmental elements, thus transcending the Cartesian absolute of a division between mind and body (Poirier, 2004, p. 60).

This is perhaps a longer way of putting what Stanner (2009 [1953], p. 59) described as an ontology of “onenesses”, in which no distinction or split is made between mind, body, spirit, personality, name, ghost, shadow, spirit site, or totem. Rather, they are enfolded “into some kind of oneness” and “the whole notion of ‘the person’ is enlarged”. Stanner (2009 [1953], p. 59) goes on to identify other such ‘onenesses’, such as the unity between “two persons, such as two siblings or a grandparent and a grandchild; or a living man and something inanimate, as when he tells you that, say, the whollybutt tree, a totem, is his wife’s brother.” Similar identifications are relayed by Faulstich (1998, p. 214), for example, when one of the old men from Nyirрпи pointed to a bloodwood tree marking a sacred site and explained, “that one not timber, that one Dreaming. Dreaming that one”; and on a separate occasion a Warlpiri companion referred “to a particular place as his ‘daddy’” (Faulstich, 1998, p. 218).

In a piece that captures of all the above themes, Glaskin (2012), whose insights draw from experience with Bardi and Jawi from the northwest Kimberley region of Western Australia, outlines an ontology of embodied relatedness. This is explained in terms of equivalences between people, places, species, and ancestral beings: a relationship “regarded as consubstantial, and that has consequences for how people, and people and country, are linked through space and time” (2012, p. 298). Using ethnographic examples, Glaskin (2012) describes consubstantial relationships between humans and a species or a place, which are established through birth, conception, and descent, and may inhere physically as birthmarks but also less tangibly: in a ‘felt’ association with a place or ancestral being; in the way places

know people by their handprint or their smell; and in the causes of sickness or death.³ Glaskin (2012) also describes equivalences between persons and parts of a person, such as their shadow, name, hair, bones, blood, footprints or their image. What Glaskin (2012, p. 305) is describing, then, is an extension of persons in time and space, whereby “persons are extracorporealized, extended beyond the somatic boundaries of the body”; an extension which “provides the grounds for kinship and exchange” with all within a particular lifeworld.

Warlpiri relatedness

In their introduction to the edited volume, *People and Change in Indigenous Australia*, Austin-Broos and Merlan (2017, p. 9) express a wariness of ethnographic accounts “that seem to underline essential and apparently timeless difference.” Their edited volume is positioned as a counter to what they identify as “a tendency to foreground traditionalizing views of indigenous [sic] personhood as socially embedded and emplaced” (Austin-Broos & Merlan, 2017, p. 15). A tendency which they trace to the influence of the land rights movement on Indigenous Australian ethnography, on a certain emphasis on continuity. The contributions to this volume are, collectively, an attempt to “talk about particular ways of being and doing in a world of persistent change” (Austin-Broos & Merlan, 2017, p. 9), with one of the biggest changes for Indigenous people recognised as the (ongoing) process of incorporation into a settler state, “both as a structural phenomenon and as an experiential one” (Austin-Broos & Merlan, 2017, p. 15). Across the contributions to the volume, Austin-Broos and Merlan (2017, pp. 28-32) identify two emerging themes. The first is a dis-embedding of Indigenous people from a ritual and intimate relation to land, at least in terms of the kinds of relations to country described by Munn. The second is relatedness, which they suggest has shifted in experience and practice, “from kinship as the structural basis of a whole society ... to relatedness as a sociality reflecting shared experience, and a common fate, perhaps, within a settler society and state” (Austin-Broos & Merlan, 2017, p. 29).

In a similar vein, and in relation to the contemporary Warlpiri context, Peterson (2015) has suggested relations between (human) kin now hold more significance for Warlpiri people, especially younger generations, than with ancestral beings and places. Providing some historical context for this, Peterson (2015) describes the relocation of people to places like

³ Sweat and its individually distinctive smell is also significant in mediating the relationship between Aboriginal people, their country, and ancestral beings (see, for example, McDonald, 2010; Merlan, 1998; Povinelli, 1993a; Strang, 2002; Thurman, 2014).

Nyirrpi and Yuendumu, suggesting that the sedentisation of groups in much larger numbers than previously experienced has somewhat diluted the significance of conception and birth places in terms of one's ancestral connections. As well, one result of Warlpiri families being grouped together on remote communities, and the combination of this with the fact that these places constitute a distinct social world, is a kind of crucible effect. Here, the significance of the dense sociality, the webs of connectedness between people, is reinforced to become a dominant level of meaning.

In a relational ontology, relatedness between human persons is characterized by a sense of self and identity that is constituted through and with others, “engaging in relations of exchange and reciprocity, and assuming responsibility for maintaining webs of connectedness” (Poirier, 2013, p. 55; see also Glaskin, 2012). A key aspect of sociality amongst central and western desert Indigenous groups is the ongoing negotiation between personal autonomy and social relatedness (Myers, 1986, 1989), a dynamic which can partly be understood through the owning and sharing of material things. From the Pintupi context, Myers (1986) explains the concept of *walytja*, the meanings of which include one's family but also one's own personal effects. The Warlpiri equivalent to *walytja* is *warlalja*, which carries the same meaning of one's kin or family but also one's personal belongings. Myers notes that Pintupi notions of ownership are not as exclusive as the Western notion of property suggests. Rather, there is a sense that rights to objects can, and should, be widely distributed through the system of reciprocal exchange. And again, there is an equivalence with the Pintupi and the Warlpiri here: demand-sharing, as Peterson (1993) suggests, holds far more significance than just economically motivated behaviour. In the Warlpiri context, while relatedness is mediated by and expressed through the idiom of classificatory kinship, it is through such daily and often intimate practices as sharing time, food, resources, company, and labour that relatedness as a sense of shared identity is continually produced and affirmed (Glaskin, 2012; Musharbash, 2017b; Myers, 1986; Peterson, 1993, 2013, 2015; Vaarzon-Morel, 2017). Drawing on Sansom's (1988, pp. 170-172) coinage for the quality of presence in each other's lives that such practices of provisioning entail, Musharbash (2017b, p. 54 emphasis in original) succinctly put it that, “*relatedness* is the achievement of performative kinship”.

An important point from (Glaskin, 2012, p. 298) is that relatedness “is not undifferentiated: in contexts in which kin terms are extended to all known persons, there are of course varying degrees of intimacy, intersubjectivity, and obligation”. Some forms of relational differentiation are prescribed behaviours, such as the (not always adhered to) rules around marriage and avoidance relationships. Others play out in the more general context of intense

sociality, as various degrees of social closeness and distance are continually negotiated not only between people but also between the groups that they form together. As Musharbash (2017b) has shown, positive forms of Warlpiri relatedness are not always achieved or maintained in the contemporary context of remote communities, in which people are living in greater concentrations than previously. Living in close spatial proximity to many kin can place peculiar strains and stresses on people who are continually managing the tension between personal autonomy and relationships of mutual dependence. Especially when people are caught in the lines of differentiation, of fighting within or between families, where reciprocal obligations and responsibilities become bound up in expectations of loyalties. As much as relations of cooperation and sharing are imbued with care, compassion and a recognition of shared identity, which are the source of others claims on one, a converse of negative emotional labour goes into the maintenance of relatedness that is temporarily fractured or even completely broken, when once close kin become enemies (see also Burbank, 2011; Glaskin, 2012).

From Musharbash (2017b), degrees of social closeness are evidenced in various Warlpiri terms for family, ranging from those with whom one shares daily life (*ngurra jintu* and *warlajja*) to those who are family but who may not be currently living together or interacting (*yilkajirri*). Unlike the treatment of strangers (unknown others, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) with suspicion and a maintenance of spatial distance, people who are family—*ngurra jintu*, *warlajja* or *yilkajirri*— “are ill-equipped to *not* relate [...] when in close spatial proximity” (Musharbash, 2017b, p. 62, emphasis in original). Seeing such kin nearby “means one of two things: relating positively if relations are good (moving physically closer still, engaging in demand-sharing practices, talking, and so forth), or relating negatively (swearing, threatening violence, actual fighting)” (Musharbash, 2017b, p. 62). The key point to make here is that Warlpiri relatedness is not fixed or static; it is, rather, a spectrum of possibilities that is continually negotiated—bridged or broken—through everyday practices. The most intimate and strongest of bonds can strain and fracture, and once close family members can become enemies. In the opposite direction, fractured family relationships can be bridged, and, crucially, once strangers can even become family. The most significant expression of social closeness, whether it is being maintained, repaired, or newly established, are the practices of sharing in the most intimate and basic aspects of daily life; in sharing time, food, things, company, labour, and so on.

Materiality in a relational ontology

From the above literature, and drawing from Poirier (2013), I suggest that there are some key principles, namely openness, flexibility and possibility, which underlie a relational modality or way of being in the world. In other words, that a relational ontology entails a praxis of remaining open to eventualities and possibilities—both relational and ontological—rather than closing them off according to reified categories and boundaries. It is according to these principles that I suggest Warlpiri people extend towards and incorporate material things into their lives, relationships, and places.

Like ‘thing’, ‘materiality’ is a slippery concept. In its most common-sense, dictionary meaning, materiality invokes something of the tangible, physical world as opposed to the imaginary, ideal or spiritual. One can speak of the matter or materials—the substance, elements, constituents—of which something is comprised or made of and/or according to which its quality can be described or categorised (hard, sharp, gelatinous). Materiality can also refer to a thing, or things, like material possessions, the objectivity of which is similarly opposed to the subjectivity of persons. As well, notions of materiality are linked to ideas about value and quality, of what is important or consequential in ‘real’ or empirical terms; one can speak of the material facts in a case, or of material assistance (Tilley et al., 2006, pp. 3-4; Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Perhaps it is because both ‘thing’ and ‘materiality’ carry the Western baggage of binary thinking (object/subject, inanimate/animate) that I have found no real conceptual equivalents in Warlpiri language. Neither of these terms seem well suited to a relational ontology where a hill or tree is also one’s relation; is both object and subject. Indeed, as Poirier (2013, p. 54) has identified, relational ontologies are often contrasted with a western naturalist or dualist ontology, “which establishes an absolute divide between, for example, body and mind, nature and culture, object and subject”. I inhabited a lifeworld in which a giant-like hairy *kuuku* [monster] called a Pangkarlangu (Musharbash, 2020) lived in a local cave, and where invisible *kuuku* called Kurdaitcha were *always* out there hunting humans (Musharbash, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Thurman, 2020). Where some humans could shapeshift into *kuuku*, and where some *kuuku* could shapeshift into animals, such as strange dogs or birds with red eyes watching us from the nearby streetlight. Where storm clouds coming in might be “an angry rainbow serpent tracking somebody from the sky” (Musharbash, 2020, p. 60), and where trees and other geographical features were consubstantial with the ancestral beings that created them. Where some places had to be approached with great caution, by singing out to identify oneself as

family, and where something of the ancestral beings who had transformed into a sand dune would cause skin infections on the kids who always played on it. While not the focus of this thesis, these aspects of a relational ontology are its background, they were part of everyday life and inform the way I have come to think about the material things that *are* the focus of this thesis.

I set out to research material things in what I was referring to at the time as Warlpiri domestic space. Given this parameter, the ‘things’ I attended to in my data collection activities (field notes, maps and photographs) were the fairly wide array of everyday objects that Warlpiri people lived (and travelled) with—the kinds of things that fall under umbrella headings like household furniture, whitegoods, equipment, appliances, or tools, as well as personal belongings and apparel (bedframes, mattresses, bedding, chairs, tables, televisions, fridges, washing machines, crowbars, cars, tyres, cooking and eating accoutrements, decorations, cardboard boxes, milk crates, clothes, bags, and so on).⁴ In preparation for this, much of my pre-fieldwork reading was focused on the broad and interdisciplinary field of material culture studies, in search of theoretical frameworks that might resonate with the Warlpiri context.

In anthropology, there is a long history of ethnographic engagements that challenge the supposed *a priori* opposition between subject and object, in which ‘materiality’ is implicated.⁵ Some theorists have focused on the dialectical, co-constituting dynamic between subjects and objects (Miller, 1987, 1998, 2005; Tilley, 2006); others (like Gell and Latour) have pushed further into breaking down the distinction, placing “emphasis on the object-like qualities of humans, and the ways in which objects seem to contain some of the attributes that define human agency” (Keane, 2006, p. 200). Theorists such as Ingold (2008, 2011, 2012) and Bennett (2004, 2010) have proffered even stronger critiques of the “ontological division and privileging of subject over object, humans over nature, and living things over nonliving things” (Kilroy-Marac, 2016, p. 441).

Ingold (2008, 2011, 2012), for example, seeks to collapse the dualistic view of the material or natural world as a separate realm, a substrate onto which ideas and designs are impressed, arguing instead for an emphasis on the movement and pathways of life, on processes of formation, transformation and always becoming. As a metaphor for this overall argument

⁴ For reasons largely to do with a need to establish some limits to my ‘field’ of attention and analysis, I chose not to research ceremonial objects or artwork—both of which I considered to be possible topics of research in and of themselves.

⁵ See Keane (2006) for an extended summary.

against the structures of modern thought that create and contain life within boundaries, Ingold (2008) starts with a circle drawn on the page and challenges the reader to see it not as a static perimeter that creates an inside and an outside and instead to see a trajectory of movement. As I understand it, the crux of Ingold's argument is that any permanence of form is a trick of the eye. What looks like form is just the outline of movement: "there are no well-defined objects or entities. There are, rather, substances which flow, mix, and mutate as they pass through the medium, sometimes congealing into more or less ephemeral forms that can nevertheless dissolve or re-form without breach of continuity" (Ingold, 2008, p. 1806).

In a similar vein, Bennett (2004, 2010) has posited a theory of "thing-power" or "thing-power materiality", arguing for the adoption of a kind of perception that might (attempt to, if never entirely successfully) see and appreciate the vitality, vibrancy, and force of a thing that is peculiar to the thing itself. Here, Bennett (2004, p. 359) emphasises "the shared material basis, the kinship, of all things, regardless of their status as human, animal, vegetable, or mineral". Although their theorising takes slightly different directions, what both authors are arguing for is an ecological approach to materiality. An understanding that all forms, organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate, are made of the same building blocks—matter and energy—and, further, are constantly in composition with each other. As Bennett (2004, p. 354) puts it, "this is not a world ... of subjects and objects, but of various materialities constantly engaged in a network of relations".

While I have found ecological or 'new materialist' contributions like Ingold's and Bennett's useful background for this thesis, in the chapters that follow I have not attempted to directly apply these to the Warlpiri context. The larger point that they make—that it is particular ways of seeing the world that does the work of boundary-making—certainly resonates here. Ultimately, however, I take my cue from the methodological and analytical approach outlined in Henare et al. (2007)'s introductory chapter to *Thinking through things: Theorising artefacts ethnographically*, in which they argue for an approach that attempts to "see" things in context as they are; to allow things in the field to dictate the terms of their own analysis, rather than seeing them as data to which theory is applied. The authors frame this approach in a broader discussion of the anthropological endeavor, arguing for an ontological rather than epistemological approach. If an epistemological approach assumes one material, natural world, about which different peoples have different formulations and interpretations, then the task of anthropology is to study the different ways the world is represented and understood by different people. An ontological approach, on the other hand, takes the alterity of different worldviews seriously and argues that a radical constructivism takes place: that

discourse does not just order reality differently, *it creates different objects*. This approach, then, accepts that “seeing” things requires acts of conceptual creation. And the task of anthropology shifts from trying to determine how other people think about *the* world, to how we must think in order to conceive *a* world the way they do.

What I have endeavored to do in this thesis then is bring a relational ontology to bear on the kinds of everyday things that Warlpiri people lived with, travelled with and shared with each other. To do so is not to suggest the same “onenesses” that Stanner (2009 [1953], p. 59) described; I have never come across a suggestion that the creativity of ancestral beings extended in a general way to blankets and the like.⁶ Rather, what I aim to show is that the value or meaning of things is ultimately derived from the framework and dynamics of relationality, between people, and between people and places. I refer here to the relations that are created and maintained through things as they move with or between people and places; what they mean when they’re being shared by kin, or gathered and assembled in place, and also what they index when they’ve been left behind. Further, I aim to show how the principles of openness, flexibility and possibility underlying a relational ontology play into the realisations, the conceptualizations, of what things might even *be*. To this end, in later chapters I deploy other theoretical concepts related to materiality, namely entanglement (Hodder, 2011, 2012), affordances (Keane, 2003, 2005, 2014, 2018) and lenticularity (Hage, 2018a); Hage (2018b, 2019, 2021). I do so not so much with the intention of a systematic theoretical engagement, of lining up different theories to see the ‘work’ they do in relation to each other. Rather, my theoretical engagements in this thesis are pragmatic; each concept I have chosen does some work towards unpacking what it might mean to engage with materiality in a relational ontology.

This thesis will unfold around three main themes. The first theme, which is pervasive throughout but is addressed most directly in chapter two and the conclusion, has to do with the role of things in Warlpiri relatedness. There are many things that Warlpiri people will go to some lengths to acquire, saving up money and activating family and other supply networks for shopping trips or delivery services. Things like tyres, playstations, and crow bars, for example, are highly desired and valued for being the things that they are, for what they offer for the purposes of mobility, entertainment or hunting respectively. Yet, these things, along with all resources like food, money, and even mundane things like spoons, quickly enter a relational

⁶ Although, particular items can be imbued with a power or potency. For example, some Warlpiri people carry good luck charms to card games, and in ceremonial contexts hair-string made from wool and covered in red ochre can carry the same symbolic potency as hair-string made from human hair.

context in which sharing is the primary expression of being family, and in which such expressions are the primary, foundational value (evidenced by the hurt that may be caused if a request to share is denied). As Myers articulates, objects “represent an opportunity not so much to sustain exclusive use but to constitute other sorts of values defined by a larger system of exchange” (Myers, 1989, p. 17). Throughout the thesis I explore sharing on different scales, from broad patterns around Nyirrpi, to the most intimate forms in the context of family gatherings, and in doing so illustrate the nuances of sharing as a practice that both creates and maintains relatedness.

The second theme, explored in different ways in chapters two, three and four, has to do with the meanings things take on in the places where Warlpiri people travel and live together. In chapter two, I start with a broad geographic focus of Warlpiri country to show that along with tracks in the sand, or smoke on the horizon, things in the landscape are read as signs of the presence and activities of people (and other beings). I suggest that the ability to read these signs, to know what they mean or index, is a crucial element to Warlpiri ways of knowing and being at home on Warlpiri country. In chapters three and four I extend this to two Warlpiri homes at Nyirrpi: Mae’s place and Sandra’s place. In these chapters I present and analyse Warlpiri material-spatial practices with a particular focus on the symbolic meanings of things as they are gathered, assembled, placed, left behind, and moved around. In these chapters, I ‘read’ things as traces of Warlpiri lives and activities. I am interested in the ways things become part of the physical and symbolic structure—and often mark the boundaries—of the places or ‘zones’ in which Warlpiri people gather together. If the first theme emphasises the sharing of things as an expression of Warlpiri relatedness, the second theme is a focus on things as constituting elements of places that facilitate and mediate relatedness.

The third theme, developed over chapters five, six, seven, eight, and the conclusion, relates to the question of ‘thingness’ and ‘materiality’, of what material things might even be, mean or be used for. In chapters five and six I lay some groundwork for this question through case studies of the kinds of governance and regulatory regimes that Warlpiri lives are subject to. I illustrate some of the tensions at the interface of Warlpiri ways of living with each other, in houses, with things, and the logics of order and categorization at the heart of, for example, government housing provision and council waste management. In the final three chapters, I explore the material possibilities—the affordances—of things in a relational ontology whereby engagements with the ‘world’ are informed more by that modality of openness, flexibility and possibility than reified categories and boundaries.

Merlan's (2018) book, *Dynamics of Difference in Australia*, was also instrumental to my thinking in this direction. This book conjures a powerful image of the first encounters between Indigenous Australians and British colonisers. A point in history when such people stood facing each other and while they both recognised a being different to themselves, what turned out to be their greatest difference—an incommensurability—was whether or not they perceived in or across that difference the possibility of engaging, of relating. To this encounter with white skinned others, Indigenous Australians brought fine-grained relational repertoires and “modalities of extension outward beyond familiar populations” (Merlan, 2018, p. 33). They saw possibilities of relating with these strange others because they were able to find, recognise, within their strange difference *something* familiar: they might be ghosts, or ancestral spirits, or even a particular ancestor returned. In other words, Indigenous Australians treated the difference of British colonisers as sources of connection, as bridges to relatedness and engagement, rather than the lines around which boundaries were demarcated.

This kind of practice of relationships did not tend toward absolutism, categorical solidity, or complete boundedness; rather it encouraged modalities of identification according to minor differences and similarities (Merlan, 2018, p. 33).

By contrast, “Colonial and settler modes of dealing with difference were much more boundary demarcating than permeable or relational; they placed Aborigines in a distinct and usually devalued category of persons” (Merlan, 2018, p. 242). This kind of disparity or incommensurability at the point of encounter or perception is similarly addressed in my thesis—but in this case the imagery is not a British coloniser and Indigenous person encountering each other; rather, it's a Warlpiri person at Nyirrpri and let's say a housing inspector, both looking at the same thing: a tin lid, or a spoon, or a bed frame, or a car.

In Merlan's (2018) book I find a compelling example of the principles underlying a relational ontology, of a praxis that remains open to possibilities and eventualities rather than closing them off according to reified categories and boundaries. I say this tentatively, however, because at no point does Merlan (2018) refer to a relational ontology and I wonder if such a framework has been deliberately avoided. Indeed, Austin-Broos and Merlan (2017, p. 30) have said they “approach this conceptualization with some caution when it seems to suggest continuity alone”. Merlan's (2018) book is describing encounters at point of first contact, and I think Merlan would suggest that since then Indigenous people have adopted some of the

categorical modalities that the colonisers demonstrated so clearly, especially with regards to how non-Indigenous people are encountered these days. I would agree with that. Yet, based on my fieldwork experiences, I would also suggest that in the Warlpiri context the underlying principles of a relational ontology remain in play. As the moments of everyday life unfold, certain categories may be recognised but that doesn't necessarily mean they become reified and static. Encounters between people, and between people and things, have the potential to unfold in any direction. Family members can be enemies, strangers can be family, a bed frame can be 'in place' in a room or in a yard, a car can mediate the sociality of family gathered in a camp, tin lids can be knives, and spoons can do anything.

Nyirrpi community

A brief history



Figure 1.1 Nyirrpi location

Nyirrpi community is located on Warlpiri country, near the northern edge of the Yunkanjini Aboriginal Land Trust and towards the southern edge of the Tanami Desert, central Australia. As shown in Figure 1.1, the closest major town is Alice Springs (450km by road south-east),

and the closest neighbouring Warlpiri settlement is Yuendumu (150km north-east). The majority of its Indigenous residents are Warlpiri speakers, but there is also a small percentage of Pintupi, Luritja and Pitjantjatjara speakers (Remote Area Health Corps, 2010; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Broadly speaking, the term Warlpiri refers to both the country that Warlpiri people bear rights and responsibilities for—their traditional homelands being spread across the Tanami Desert shown in Figure 1.2—and the language they speak. More strictly speaking, Warlpiri is an umbrella term incorporating sub-sets of people who speak dialects of the Warlpiri language and can more or less be grouped geographically (Hoogenraad & Laughren, 2012).⁷ While Warlpiri speakers largely live across four main Warlpiri communities—Lajamanu, Willowra, Yuendumu, and Nyirrpri, all shown in Figure 1.2—in smaller numbers they are widely dispersed across the range of communities, settlements, and towns of central Australia and beyond.⁸

Traditionally a nomadic, hunter-gatherer people, the Warlpiri were relatively unaffected by colonialism until the early 1900s, when colonists began pushing into the center of Australia. By the 1940s, bush life was made increasingly untenable through the combined effects of the establishment of pastoral stations and gold and Wolfram mines in the Tanami Desert, as well as the ravages of frontier violence and a severe drought. Over the next decade, Warlpiri people were moved onto centralized settlements, including what was then the government ration station of Yuendumu (Faulstich, 1990, pp. 57-62; Heppell & Wigley, 1981, pp. 4-17; Hinkson, 2014, pp. 49-65; Meggitt, 1962, pp. 16-29; Musharbash, 2008b, pp. 17-18). It was a few decades later—in the mid-1970s—that a few Warlpiri families at Yuendumu decided to establish their own outstation at Nyirrpri, partly because they wanted to regain some autonomy by returning to their own country and partly to avoid the problems of settlement life (Faulstich, 1990, pp. 61-63; 1998, pp. 199-200; Kesteven, 1978, pp. 50-56; Morel & Ross, 1993, pp. 38-42; Peterson, 2016).⁹

⁷ The six major dialects of Warlpiri are: Warnayaka (north); Warrmarla or Ngardilypa (north-west); Wawulya (south-west); Ngaliya (south); Yarlpiri or Warlpiri (Lander River area); and the most eastern, Wakirti Warlpiri (Hansen River area). However, linguists also speak of ‘communalects’—dialects of particular communities—having developed. The four major communalects are Lajamanu (Warrmarla and Warnayaka); Yurntumu and Nyirrpri (Wawulya, Warnayaka and Ngaliya); Wirliyajarrayi (Yarlpiri); and Alekarenge (Wakirti Warlpiri) (Hoogenraad & Laughren, 2012).

⁸ See Burke (2018) on the diaspora of Warlpiri people living in urban towns and cities around Australia.

⁹ This was part of the “outstation (or, homelands) movement” of the 1970s when smaller, decentralised communities were established across Australia by and for Aboriginal kin groups. This movement emerged in the historical convergence of a shift in government policies toward Aboriginal people (from assimilation to self-determination) and the latter’s desires to move back to their own country and a degree of autonomy (Myers & Peterson, 2016).



Figure 1.2 Warlpiri country¹⁰

The community that is now called Nyirripi originally began at a different location as a small outstation on Mount Doreen pastoral station, some 15km northeast from where the community now lies. This first site, which was located along Waite Creek at a soakage named Nyirripi, is shown in Figure 1.3 as “Old Nyirripi”, which is what people call it today. Due to a lack of water, and the station owner resisting their presence, the outstation was later moved to its current location, which although properly named Jitirlparnta is now called Nyirripi as shown in Figure 1.3 (Faulstich, 1990, pp. 61-63; 1994; 1998, pp. 199-200; Kesteven, 1978, pp. 50-56; Morel & Ross, 1993, pp. 38-42; Peterson, 2016). The transference of the name Nyirripi to the new

¹⁰ From Burke (2018, p. 13)

(current) location of the community (which is actually Jitirlparnta) is an important historical detail to mention, as it underlines some tensions around traditional ownership of the community, located as it is in a region of intersecting Dreaming tracks and associated sites. From Faulstich (1990, pp. 190-197) and Morel and Ross (1993, p. 40) it seems these tensions were more of an overtly negotiated issue during the 1980s and 1990s. By the time I arrived at Nyirrpi, the question of traditional ownership seemed to have been largely settled, however an undercurrent of those old tensions was sometimes apparent, for example in someone's quiet interjection that the community is located at what is "really Jitirlparnta".



Figure 1.3 Old Nyirrpi and Nyirrpi

From its beginnings as a Warlpiri initiative, albeit with the support of a few key non-Indigenous proponents (see Peterson, 2016), by the 1980s Nyirrpi had grown to a small community. Its residents had cut their own road to connect with the Tanami Highway, which runs from just north of Alice Springs to Western Australia, and secured funding for basic infrastructure and facilities, including a water bore, store, school building, and community housing (Peterson, 2016; see also Morel & Ross, 1993). The images in the following pages tell some of the story of this growth and the associated changes in life at Nyirrpi.



Figure 1.4 Nyirrpi, July 1978 (credit: Susan Kesteven)

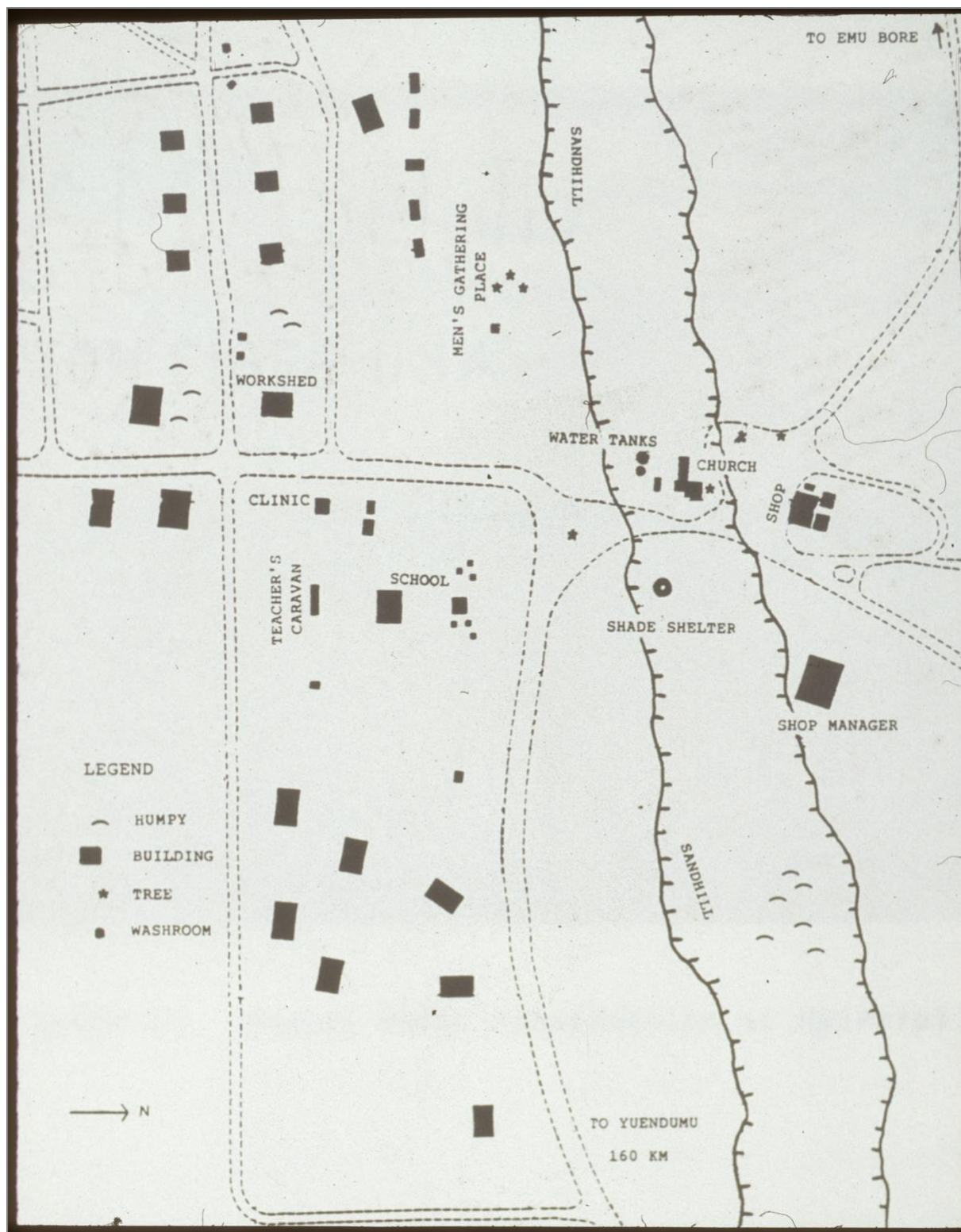


Figure 1.5 Plan of Nyirрпи, 1988¹¹

¹¹ From Faulstich (1990)



Figure 1.6 Nyirrpi, late 1980s (credit: Paul Faulstich)



Figure 1.7 Nyirrpi, 1988 (credit: Paul Faulstich)

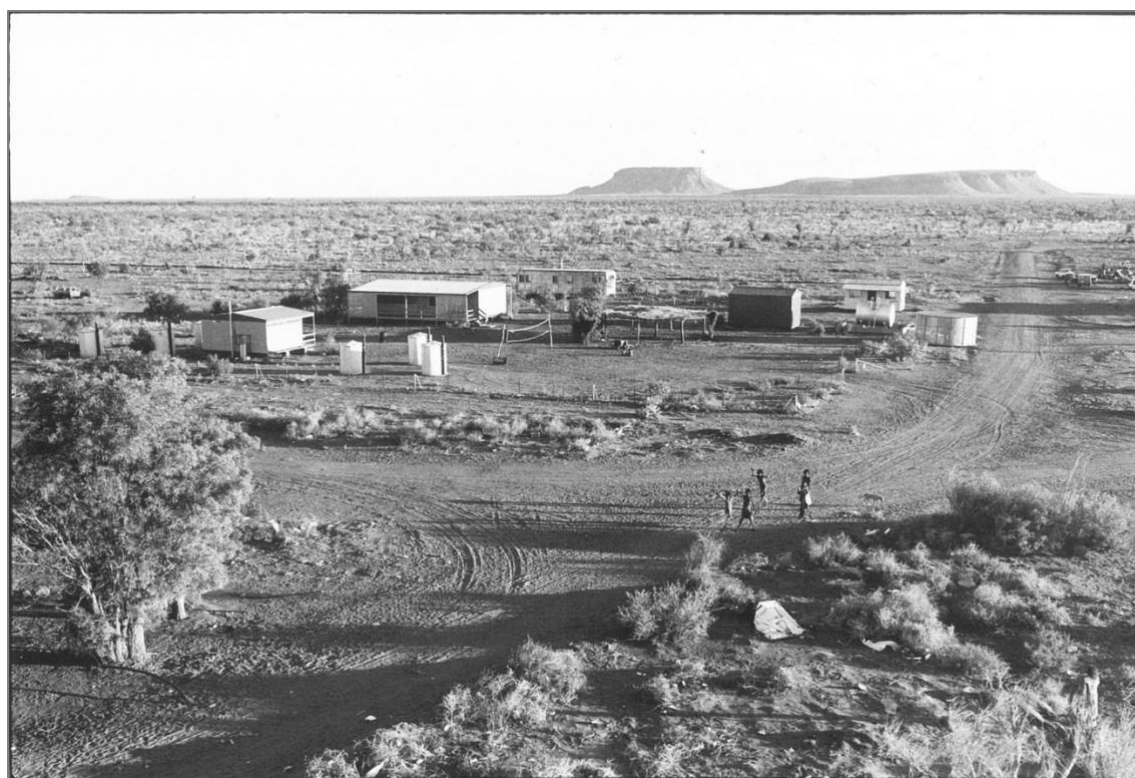


Figure 1.8 Nyirrpi, 1988 (credit: Penny Taylor)

The photos in Figure 1.4 were taken during Kesteven's (1978, pp. 50-56) visit, at a time when the families (40-odd people) were living back at "Old Nyirrpi". The photos in Figure 1.6 were kindly provided by Paul Faulstich (1990), who conducted PhD fieldwork at Nyirrpi in the late 1980s. The community layout in Figure 1.5 **Error! Reference source not found.** is reproduced from Faulstich (1990, p. 70) and is a nice comparison to the layout I produced (see Figure 1.10). The photo in Figure 1.7 is also from Faulstich (1990, p. 67) and the one in Figure 1.8 is from Taylor (1988, p. 297); they both make a nice comparison to the panoramic image I took in 2015 (see Figure 1.9). From Faulstich (1990, pp. 67-69), the buildings in Figure 1.7 include the school, the teacher's residence, a structure for the school generator, and the health clinic. At that point in time—1988—Nyirrpi had a fluctuating population of between 100-150 people and the other facilities and infrastructure included a shop, airstrip, three bores with reticulated water, shower stalls, pit toilets, fourteen cinderblock houses (with another five under construction by 1989), and Warlpiri-made shelters.

In the picture of Nyirrpi life that emerges from Faulstich (1990, pp. 68-82) I find some remarkable continuities and some notable differences with the community I lived in decades later. Of relevance to some of the themes that will be developed in this thesis, Faulstich (1990, pp. 69-72) described, on the one hand, a strong sense of the aggregated families sharing a common identity as "Nyirrpi mob", and on the other hand, a community comprised of families and individuals whose kinship ties and mobile lifestyles extended them beyond Nyirrpi, to other Warlpiri and Pintupi communities especially. Similar to Musharbash's (2008b) observations from Yuendumu, Faulstich (1990, p. 72) described Nyirrpi 'camps'—what people called the house and/or area inhabited by a family—as being "organized in clusters expressive of people's social links" and as being in constant social flux, as "the composition of camps frequently changed as a result of deaths, social tensions, and other factors that necessitated relocation". As well, the houses were used mainly as storage areas for bedding, which was brought out in the evening as people preferred to sleep outside (Faulstich, 1990, p. 69). Describing the governance of Nyirrpi, which was then a recently incorporated independent community, Faulstich (1990, pp. 81-82) also captures something of the tensions of the community being "engulfed" in the bureaucratic, administrative structures of the broader Western society, of which the non-Indigenous residents (service providers) became the symbolic and functional arm. At the same time, Nyirrpi was strongly regarded as a Warlpiri owned community, the running of which was as much vested in the structures of social and political authority in Warlpiri society (which were also adjusting in the face of the former). Much has changed in the governance of Nyirrpi, not least of which is an even greater presence

of the agendas of local, Territory and Federal government, but this tension remains, as does the strong sense of Nyirrpi as being Warlpiri owned and run.

While reading Faulstich's (1990, p. 79) thesis I came across a few lines that made me smile widely: a reference to one family who was living at Emu Bore, a small outstation not far west from Nyirrpi, who were (still) relying heavily on hunted and gathered foods. This is, unmistakably, a reference to Mae and the rest of her family with whom I ended up living during my fieldwork.

Fieldwork context

The Nyirrpi I arrived at in October 2014 was a well-established, government-run remote community. It had roughly 250 residents, of which over 90 percent were Yapa, meaning Warlpiri or Indigenous people more generally.¹² The remaining, less than 10 percent of the population, were Kardiya, or non-Indigenous people, whose jobs were to manage and/or deliver the services of the mostly government (local, Territory and Federal) and few independent organizations—including council services (power, water, sewage, roads, rubbish), policing, health care, child care, primary education, adult employment and training, welfare, and housing.

The panorama photo in Figure 1.9 was taken from the same, seemingly very popular, vantage point as those in Figure 1.7 and Figure 1.8: it's the location of a bore and water tank, which is on a fairly high sand dune thus offering some height from which to look out at the community and beyond. From the vantage point of the water tank—which is shown in the community layout in Figure 1.10—the aspect of my panorama photo in Figure 1.9 is south, which is the side of the community where all the houses for Yapa residents are located (marked with a circle in Figure 1.10). Figuratively speaking, if one were to look northwest from this point (over one's right shoulder), the side of the community where houses for Kardiya residents would come into view (marked with an 'X' in Figure 1.10). As shown in the satellite image in Figure 1.9, an airstrip is located to the east of the community, and the power station, sewage ponds and rubbish tip are a kilometer or so south. The hills that dominate the horizon, which the bitumen street in the panorama seems to be pointing to, are Karrku, Rurraki, Yunta, and

¹² Population trends at Nyirrpi are consistent with the broader demographics of Aboriginal Australia, showing an increasing growth in younger age groups (due to high birth rates and high mortality rates). ABS statistics from the 2016 census show the median age at Nyirrpi to be 27 years, with children aged 0 - 14 years making up 32.5% of the population and people aged 65 years and over making up 3.5% of the population. The total population count was 236 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

Wintijaru.¹³ Also shown in Figure 1.9 is Mae's place, at the western edge of the community, which is where I mostly lived during fieldwork.

In the next chapter, I introduce the families with whom I lived by focusing on two themes of life with them, mobility and sharing. In this section, I introduce Nyirrpi by way of what seemed to me an important aspect of contemporary life: the various ways the community was simultaneously contained yet extended, cohesive yet divided.

One of the ways I think about Nyirrpi and its Yapa residents is as 'nodes' in a pan-Warlpiri, pan-community sense of connectedness and relatedness. Nyirrpi is one of a network of communities (or settlements) established across the Warlpiri country of the Tanami Desert (as shown in Figure 1.2). Within each Warlpiri community, the Yapa residents—as individuals and as family groups—are oriented in different ways to other communities, towns, geographical locations, countries and language groups. These connections may be based on ancestral connections, family history and biography, as well as the distribution of family members. Mae, for example, has connections to Ngaanyatjarra and Pintupi country west/north-west of Nyirrpi (on her father's and her mother's father's sides respectively) and Warlpiri country (on her mother's side). In her early years she grew up in the bush, moving around with her family on Pintupi country before being brought into settlements, to what was then Mount Doreen station and later to Yuendumu. There, she went to school and later married her first husband, with whom she had six children (twelve including the children of her sister, who also married the same man). As an adult Mae lived and worked at other communities—including Yuendumu and Balgo—before finally moving to Nyirrpi, where she married her second husband, a Kardiya who was the pastor at Nyirrpi. In the intervening years they also spent some time living at Mae's outstation, 70 kilometers north-west of Nyirrpi.

¹³ Karrku is a particularly significance place, not least because it is a source of highly valued red ochre (see Peterson & Lampert, 1985; Faulstich, 1998, pp. 216-218)



Figure 1.9 Nyirrpi, 2015

Since way before I met Mae, she has been applying her ecological knowledge and long-cultivated animal tracking skills to the work of land and feral species management, at first with independent ecologists and researchers and then as part of formally funded and run Warlpiri ranger teams. Her long-term residence on Warlpiri country has strengthened her self-identification as a Warlpiri person and speaker, but she remains connected in ancestral and ceremonial ways to places further west on Ngaanyatjarra and Pintupi country, travelling long distances to attend land council meetings (about native title or sacred sites) and visiting country areas when she can. As a senior woman she participates every year in Warlpiri (and sometimes Pintupi) initiation ceremonies. And her family connections are spread far and wide, to people at all the Warlpiri communities but also communities and towns on other countries—including Mparntwe (Alice Springs) on Arrernte country, Walungurru (Kintore), Watiyawanu (Mount Liebig), Warumpi (Papunya), and Ikuntji (Haasts Bluff) on Pintupi/Luritja country, and Kiwirrkurra on Ngaanyatjarra country.

Constellations of connections and networks between Yapa across communities are maintained by high levels of physical mobility as well as the spread of news, messages and information via communication technologies. As I discuss in more detail in chapter two, Yapa travelled *a lot* for work, meetings, shopping, funerals, sorry business, sporting events, or just to visit family. At Nyirrpi, where there was no mobile phone reception, the pay phones at the shop would start ringing at 9am sharp every morning and often wouldn't stop for hours. It is in these ways that I think of Yapa as connected across different places, with geographical distances collapsed by the movement of people as well as phone-calls, messages and moments like when Mae sat in our camp at Nyirrpi and cried a mourning wail for the loss of a family member in Broome.

Another way I think of Nyirrpi is as a community unto itself, with boundaries of sorts, and a sense of identity. There is a Nyirrpi football team, for example, in support of which Nyirrpi residents would travel *en masse* to Yuendumu to form a 'Nyirrpi side' of car honking spectators around the oval. When on mixed community school or women's dance camps, the Nyirrpi participants would sleep together in a "Nyirrpi camp". There is a song called 'Nyirrpi' by Desert Mulga Band.¹⁴ And to a certain extent there were some boundaries operating around what kind of a community Nyirrpi is and what family groups it is comprised of. For example, when some trouble erupted between feuding families at another community, and there was talk

¹⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVil38JnEU0&list=RDb7uwXL7xsaI&index=3>

of some of those families having to move, the traditional owners for Nyirrpi were quite emphatic about not wanting them, “We don’t want trouble”. Also, there was often an overall narrative or ethos about the residents of the community being “one family”. This was a mantra I heard quite often, particularly during the conflict resolution conducted by adults when the kids were fighting. Senior Yapa would bring them together and instruct them to shake hands and say sorry with messages such as, “He’s your [insert kinship relation term]”, “We are all one family”. During community meetings this narrative was often even extended to include the Kardiya (non-Indigenous) residents, with proclamations that there were no divisions at Nyirrpi, “Here Yapa and Kardiya live together and support each other”.

In practice, however, there were subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) divisions between family groups at Nyirrpi, which often played out or were imagined spatially. Nyirrpi families were basically divided along an east/west line, and I often heard the community spoken about in just that way: as made up of “west side family” and “east side family”. Historically, this east-west axis can be partly traced to the old tensions over traditional ownership of Nyirrpi, but it is also explained by the fact the “west side” family are those who came from the west. Like Mae, they trace their ancestral origins and early biography to places west of and beyond Warlpiri country. Roughly speaking, “west side” families mostly lived in the western section of the community, and vice-versa, but there were exceptions to this and many Yapa could be oriented to both sides as a result of marriage and/or by tracing kinship connections. The fact that Yapa are related in various ways means one can foreground particular ties over others given particular circumstances. For example, that one of the older women from “east side” family spent some weeks stopping with us in the “west side” women’s camp was an expression of kinship ties between her and Mae. While relations at Nyirrpi were mostly familial and affable, the undercurrent of the east/west divide did rise to the surface on occasion. A common and benign expression was the separation of simultaneous card games, one on each side of the community. Less benign were the kid’s fights, which were almost always expressions of “east-versus-west”, and the occasional fights or arguments between adults, around which large groups of Yapa would gather, in loyalty and as witness. As a spatially and socially expressed and imagined form of distance, however, the east-west axis of Yapa at Nyirrpi was nothing compared to the disjuncture between Yapa and Kardiya.

Yapa/Kardiya

When I try to describe the dynamics between Yapa and Kardiya at Nyirrpri, I come up against a bit of a paradox. Nyirrpri was a small community in terms of both its population and community size, with its roughly 250 residents all living in an area of about 0.3 square kilometres. It was small enough that new faces became familiar quickly, and I recall Yapa and Kardiya living alongside each other, interacting on a daily basis and often working closely together. I also remember having the sense that, in many respects, Yapa and Kardiya were living in entirely different lifeworlds. In part, this is because they quite literally lived on different sides of the community and rarely if ever interacted outside the needs or context of work or community service delivery (cf. Musharbash, 2017b). More so, however, I am referring to what was described colloquially as “Yapa way” and its relationship with the wider, dominant society of which most Kardiya were representatives. Here, the terms Yapa and Kardiya do not just refer to different categories of people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous; they were also used to denote differences in ways of life or being in the world.

Like other central Australian remote communities, and as shown in Figure 1.10, Nyirrpri had two distinct sides for Yapa and Kardiya houses (cf. Trigger, 1992); a spatial segregation that was geographically enhanced by the east-west running sand dune (on which the water tank is located). As shown in Figure 1.10, the area to the north of the sand dune, where Kardiya workers lived in employer provided houses, was referred to by Yapa as “Other Side”. On the south side, where Yapa lived in houses provided and managed by the Northern Territory (NT) Government, was also where the majority of Kardiya workplaces were located (highlighted yellow in Figure 1.10). While Yapa residents rarely had reasons to go over to Other Side (and there were overt and subtle ways in which this was discouraged), Kardiya were a regular presence on the side where Yapa houses were located, at least during their predominantly daytime work hours.¹⁵ Thus, a distinctive pattern of daily, Monday to Friday life was the entrance of Kardiya workers, from their houses on Other Side or driving in from other towns and communities, to their places of work and their departure again at the end of the day.

¹⁵ Different workplaces had different working hours but by daytime hours I mean roughly between 8am and 6pm. The Northern Territory equivalent of “9-5” is 8am to 4:21pm, so this would have applied to government and council workers. The exceptions were those, like police or health workers, who had evening or weekend shifts that required them to be at home but “on-call” and the youth worker or two who would run evening discos for the kids.

In many ways, Nyirrpi was perhaps no different to many other towns: daytime was the busy time, when places of business and service centers were open, people went to school and work, ran errands, attended meetings, did their shopping, took care of life admin, and so on. The rhythms and activities of daytime life were punctuated differently than the evenings, when people retreated to more personal spheres of sociality. In this case, families gathering for meals, sitting together around fires, people paying each other visits, larger gatherings around the card games that started earlier in the day, groups of kids following their own paths of movement and play, clusters of bodies on mattresses in a yard playing phone games. The more unique variable at Nyirrpi—and other Aboriginal communities—were the cross-cultural conditions at the interface of community service delivery.

Elsewhere (Thurman, 2020) I have written about the structuring presence of Kardiya in the context of community service delivery, describing how the fabric of daytime, Monday to Friday life at Nyirrpi was qualitatively different to that of the evenings and weekends. The former I described as being punctuated by the kind of rules and scheduling—of it being “time to” begin, engage in, or end certain activities—that Burbank (2006) identified as characteristic of Western or “impersonal” institutions. Three early morning school sirens would tell us, 1) it was time to wake up, 2) it was time to be eating breakfast, and 3) it was time to be at school for class. For a while a follow-up loudspeaker announcement would tell us who had failed to arrive at school, information that would later be used to enforce the “No School, No Shop” rule. Toyotas arriving from Other Side were an indication the shop and other services would soon open. From 9am sharp the shop became a hub of socially intense activity for at least an hour or two, with lines at the checkout, the payphones, the fuel bowsers, and often one long call to the same Centrelink operator being passed from client to client. Other lines started too, at the clinic to see the nurse, at the quieter, Centrelink designated phones near the council office, at various offices in the hope of a not too “hard” Kardiya who might allow use of the phone and possibly help negotiate a bureaucratic phone call. While some adults made their way to the available jobs, or the art center when it was open, all others were expected to be productive in some way, for example by attending adult training courses on numeracy and literacy, computing, cooking, sewing, homemaking, carpentry and building, or work safe practices. Those receiving welfare benefits were expected at the work-for-the-dole office to sign daily paperwork and to do their work hours, under penalty of having payments cut. All adult community members were expected to attend the regular local council meetings, the monthly police and community meetings, and other ‘consultations’ with visiting politicians or

their delegations.¹⁶ At lunchtime, elderly Yapa would wait for the aged care Toyota to make its deliveries (and often, after a screwed nose inspection of the contents of their lunch bags, pass them off to their grandchildren).

For the most part, it was in the context of the times, places and delivery of community service provision that Yapa and Kardiya interactions took place and relationships formed. At this interface, they engaged with each other a lot—as providers and recipients of community services, as students and teachers, in labour relations as employees, employers or co-workers, and as attendees of and contributors to community meetings and advisory groups. On a daily, interpersonal level, the nature of such interactions was as varied as you would find anywhere between people. There was a lot of good will and humour, demonstrated appreciation of peoples’ hard work and efforts, and good and caring relationships developed. There was also criticism and differing opinions, often aired at community meetings in direct and honest ways. People had their say. The high demands placed on Kardiya, for help that they saw as outside their job description, or that took time or attention away from their work, were often met with but also tested the limits of patience and generosity. As did being caught between jobs that required the upholding of rules, policies and penalties tied to service provision and a community of service recipients who did not always comply; for whom the rules and scheduling of ‘Kardiya way’ were not always prioritised as expected. Bursts of what Yapa experienced as a Kardiya being rude, disrespectful or “hard” were often—I think—the spillages of tested patience, bewilderment, frustration and stress brought on by working in an intensely cross-cultural environment, which became a kind of grain against which they were supposed to push the policies and programs designed by officials elsewhere. A context and dynamic so eloquently described by Kim Mahood (2012, p. 28) in *Kartiya are like Toyotas*:

This desert culture, where the power of family and country encompasses and transcends all other preoccupations, is where the crossed purposes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous expectations are at their most extreme. It's probably the zone of greatest discomfort in Australia, a place where the white noise of the kartiya world and the Babel of Aboriginal voices create a static

¹⁶ The most memorable of these was when a delegation came to ‘consult’ the community about spending priorities for a particular ‘bucket of funding’. During the meeting, community members’ suggestions for spending were rejected on the basis that in fact the bucket of funding could only be spent in areas already determined by the funding providers.

through which we blunder, grinning and waving like mad people, signalling that we mean each other no harm, though harm frequently occurs.

As roughly ten percent of the Nyirрпи population, Kardiya were not only a minority in terms of numbers they were also, more importantly, visitors on Warlpiri country. Nyirрпи was a strong Yapa community, with senior members who played leading roles and who lost no opportunity to emphasise the importance of and even teach Kardiya visitors about “Yapa way”. At the same time, though, the presence of Kardiya was “conspicuous and ubiquitous” (Mahood, 2012, p. 29) not necessarily or always because of individual actions but because of what Kardiya more generally represented: they were the conduit, if you like, of wider systems of power and structures that have penetrated Yapa lives in complex and damaging ways since colonisation. It is in this regard that the broader meaning of Yapa and Kardiya—referring to ways of life or being in the world, rather than individuals or categories of people—is relevant. Put bluntly, from this angle, Kardiya and ‘Kardiya way’ also stand for ‘coloniser’ and a system or structure of settler colonialism in which, for Indigenous people and societies, survival is a matter of not being eliminated (Wolfe, 1999, 2006).¹⁷ In Australia, with the exception of the brief period of self-determination, government policies related to Aboriginal populations have by and large been geared towards assimilation. The current Interventionist era of coercive approaches toward Aboriginal people was heralded in 2007 with a suite of reforms clearly intended to produce a “newly oriented, ‘normalised’ Aboriginal population, one whose concerns with custom, kin and land will give way to the individualistic aspirations of private home ownership, career, and self-improvement” (Hinkson, 2007, p. 6; see also Dodson, 2007). To put it more bluntly as per Mahood (2012, p. 28), government policies towards Aboriginal people betray the belief that in order for the quality of their life to improve, “the people themselves must become more like us”—meaning, of course, Kardiya.

In my mind the sand dune that separated Other Side from the rest of Nyirрпи—enshrining the literal spatial and social segregation—has become a kind of metaphor for the dynamics and relations between Yapa and Kardiya, as individuals as well as in their ways of being in the world. It represents a kind of impasse or disjuncture at particular points of difference, which at

¹⁷ See also Moreton-Robinson (2015) on the operation of the assumption that the nation—and the land—is a white possession. Certain myths and values of national belonging and identity require (ongoing) Indigenous dispossession.

the interpersonal level was often overcome with humour and generosity as well as sometimes just honest conflict and working things out. With some careful driving techniques and by following the tracks made by others, you can slip slide successfully over a sand dune crossing. It also represents the lofty heights of superiority, from which some Kardiya seemed to view Yapa and their “ways”, seeing people who, taking some paraphrased examples, have only just recently come in from the bush and so have a lot to learn; who are still stuck in a primitive mind-set; who all over Australia, whether rural or urban, seem to be missing some concepts; for whom “we”—meaning Kardiya—are at Nyirrpi to set an example.

Chapter outline

Chapter two serves as an ethnographic introduction to the broader context of my fieldwork, which I situate as being on Warlpiri country and with Warlpiri family. The key word for this chapter is mobility, as it is by tracing various forms of movement—of Yapa but also things, food and even dogs—that I illustrate the networks and nuances of Yapa relationships, with each other and with the many places through and to which they travelled. I begin by tracing such movements broadly, across and within the geography and places of Warlpiri country, and then zoom the focus in to Nyirrpi community. In doing so, I explore what it means to be at home on Warlpiri country, the ways in which patterns and practices of mobility relate to the relationships Yapa have with places and each other, and the ways in which forms of sharing are fundamental to Warlpiri relatedness. I finish this chapter with the family network that I became part of and an illustration of the level of sharing that emerges between those who share their daily lives together, in the most connected ways.

In **chapters three and four**, I adopt a phenomenological approach to place as a means of introducing Mae’s and Sandra’s places respectively. Mae is the older woman with whom I mostly lived; Sandra is one of Mae’s granddaughters, at whose place I regularly stayed. My aim across these chapters is to capture the experience of being in them both in terms of their uniqueness, as places unto themselves, but also in the terms of what made them Warlpiri places. This, I suggest, is the fact they were both microcosms of the broader picture and processes of Warlpiri mobility and relatedness that was introduced in chapter two. They were both ‘nodes’ in that relational network, places through which people and things and dogs were moving and being accommodated. What made them unique, was their spatial and material ordering. At Mae’s, the mobility of people was reflected in its material landscape, as furniture and things were constantly rearranged in response to changing needs and social situations. The order of

the place emerged through the always shifting socio-material configurations. At Sandra's, the order of the place felt more fixed and deliberately curated. Rather than emerging through patterns of movement, its order was established and maintained in the context of and despite such movements. Comparatively, while they were both places for which the meaning of being in was tied to the fundamental importance of being together, with family, they also illustrate some emerging generational differences in Warlpiri ways of living in houses, and the role of materiality in mediating Warlpiri relatedness.

In **chapters five and six**, I switch the perspective to Kardiya, whose desire for Warlpiri-occupied houses and yards to look cleaner, greener, or more aesthetically pleasing was a fairly constant theme of my fieldwork. These chapters are organised around two case studies that explore the power dynamics, impacts, and competing logics of, on the one hand, certain governance structures or regimes and, on the other hand, the Warlpiri people, homes, and lives subject to such regimes. In chapter five, I present a case study of the government provision of housing—in this case, upgrades to existing houses at Nyirrpi—as a mechanism for 'legitimate' intervention into Yapa ways of living, not only in houses but with each other. In chapter six, I use wheelie bins—and their central role in the council waste management regime—as a device for exploring how ideas about what rubbish is and how it should be managed at home operated as a particular point of difference at the interface of Yapa/Kardiya relations at Nyirrpi. Chapters five and six are deliberately shorter chapters, inserted at this juncture to serve a structural purpose. In relation to previous chapters, they stand as a comment on the tensions between the material, spatial and social practices that made Mae's and Sandra's *Warlpiri* places, and the western imaginary not only of what a 'house' is but how a house should be 'properly' cleaned, arranged, and presented. In relation to forthcoming chapters, they lay some groundwork for a shift in focus from place to questions of rubbish and materiality.

In **chapter seven**, I engage with the question of what 'rubbish' is by way of a slightly circular argument. On the one hand, in the Warlpiri context, things only became (finally, properly) rubbish in the context of cleaning practices, yet at the same time, cleaning was initiated because certain assessments were made of material conditions; that things had become *punku* [bad] in some way. In between cleaning and things becoming *punku* were Warlpiri spatial practices of living with material things, which did not usually or immediately create a straight and uni-directional road from things of use or consumption to rubbish in the bin (and then, finally, at the landfill). There was a sort of pause that happened as things lay on the ground, a time and space in which material possibilities may yet be realised and which therefore confound 'common' notions of what rubbish is and where it belongs.

In **chapter eight**, I engage with theoretical approaches to the meanings or possibilities that emerge from the encounter between a perceiving subject and the ‘material’ world—and the ontological questions that are posed by such encounters. I pick up on the material possibilities of things from the last chapter and show that the ways in which Warlpiri people engaged with material things was not limited or constrained by fixed, categorical ideas about what things are or aren’t, or what they can, can’t, should or shouldn’t be used for. Through a focused case study of a tin lid-knife I explore a way of seeing things that are attuned to affordances. I contextualize the realisation of material affordances both in the unfolding moments and places of Warlpiri activity and relatedness, and more broadly within a relational ontology where the possibility of things being multiple things (and in some cases, subjectivities) is a given.

In the **conclusion**, I focus on the material and relational affordances of spoons. This chapter takes spoons from being seen and picked up from the ground to all the things a spoon can do, to the most intimate contexts of Warlpiri relationality: the regular gatherings of smaller groups of Yapa sitting together to eat and spend time. In relation to these gatherings, I reflect on their atmosphere of intimacy in terms of physical and spatial proximity and the contiguity with which things like spoons were shared. I understand these regular gatherings as the context within which, and the practices by which, Warlpiri relatedness was produced and maintained. Spoons shared also call attention to the principle of openness in Warlpiri kinship, of the capacity and potential to incorporate (make family of) others; the kind of openness to eventualities and possibilities—both relational and ontological—that underpin this thesis.

Chapter Two.

Tracing connections

This chapter serves as an ethnographic introduction to my fieldwork context, which I broadly situate as being on Warlpiri country and with Warlpiri family. As this thesis unfolds, the context of my focus will become fairly micro, as I zoom in on particular homes at Nyirrpi. Before doing so, in this chapter I want to convey some aspects of the broader context of life with Yapa; aspects which upon reflection were fundamental to my fieldwork experience and which therefore underpin the rest of this thesis. The narrative structure of this chapter hangs on some key interactions or events, all of which occurred in my first week of fieldwork, around which I have organised the following three themes: Yapa mobility and the ways in which patterns and practices of mobility relate to the relationships Yapa have with places and each other; what it means to be at home on Warlpiri country; and the ways in which forms of sharing are fundamental to relatedness.

Mobility

I had only just arrived at Nyirrpi—literally, my first night of fieldwork—when plans to leave again were made. It had been an overwhelming day. I was delivered to Nyirrpi by a convoy of women from Yuendumu who, after unsuccessful attempts to find my pre-arranged contact, declared it to be way too hot and promptly returned home, leaving me alone at the shop, ice-cream melting and teary eyed. After an anxious afternoon I was eventually claimed by Mae and by that night I was sleeping in her yard, on a bed frame next to hers, which despite my best kicking efforts I ended up sharing with a small, and very insistent brown dog. Having never met before, Mae and I had spent that first evening drinking tea and chatting by the fire; we made connections over people we both knew and places we'd both been, and Mae told me about her family and the ranger work she did with her daughter, Davina. Of Mae's children and many, many grand- and great grandchildren, I met a few that evening: also sleeping at Mae's place was Mae's granddaughter, Erin, with her husband Kim and one of their daughters Ashley; sleeping with Mae was her granddaughter Cora, whose parents, Davina and Presley, I would meet a week later when they returned from assisting with a missing person's search in Western Australia. Mae's daughter Edith and granddaughter Irene came for a visit that evening

and it was then, with an eye on the Hilux I had arrived with, that plans for the following day were made: “Tomorrow, Nangala, we go to Yuendumu for a funeral, we’ll stop one night”. So began my incorporation into a Warlpiri family, my adoption by Brownie, that insistent brown dog, and my induction into a lifestyle for which mobility was not just a practice but, as Musharbash (2008b) identified, a key value shaping Yapa everyday experiences, lives and relationships.

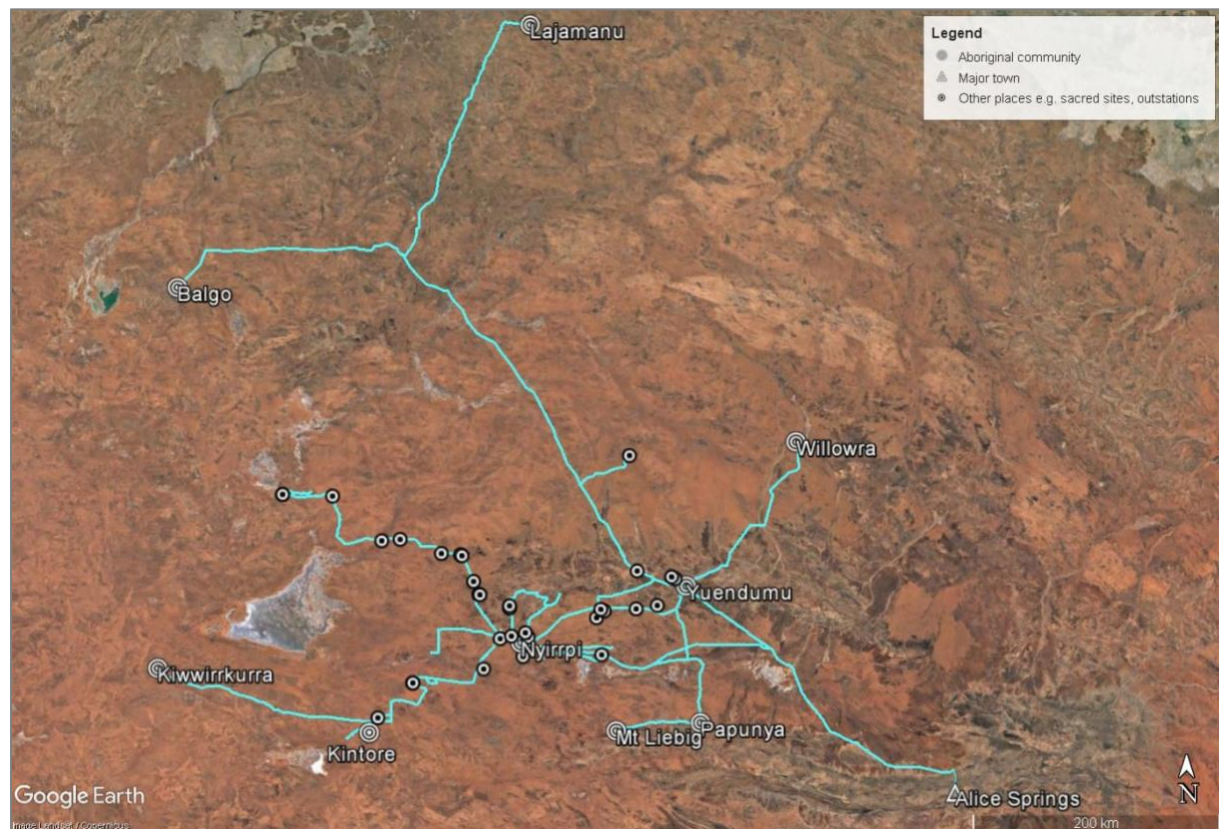


Figure 2.1 Warlpiri mobility

The map in Figure 2.1 shows the extent of my travels over 19 months of fieldwork. As I rarely went anywhere without a car full of Mae and her family, I present it here as a static representation—let’s say a Mae-centric illustration—of contemporary Yapa mobility. In total, I drove 46,864 kilometers, averaging just under 2,500 kilometers a month, we spent 35% of our nights stopping somewhere other than Nyirripi, and in turn had visitors stop with us. The symbols on the map indicate the places—sacred sites, outstations, communities, and towns—that we visited or passed through; the blue lines the bitumen and unsealed roads, dirt tracks and

occasional off-road routes that we drove.¹⁸ Other than a swimming hole somewhere west of Nyirrpi, possibly some off-roading, and one long and well-beyond-Warlpiri-country drive, which I will discuss later, the map is a complete picture of where we went. If I could add movement and frequency into the map, it would show that while some legs of the blue lines were driven much more frequently than others, overall life with Yapa meant hitting the road at minimum on a weekly basis. More often it was multiple times a week that we went somewhere, from daytrips to go hunting or visit places around Nyirrpi, to week-long trips to other communities for meetings or funerals, and everything in-between.

In a by now quite old and yet still remarkably relevant report, Young, E. and Doohan (1989) illustrate that while mobility has always been a feature of Yapa lives, the conditions of mobility have changed radically since colonisation (see also Dockery & Colquhoun, 2012; Hinkson, 2021, pp. 7-9; Memmott et al., 2004; Peterson, 2004). In pre-contact central Australia, the Warlpiri were hunters and gatherers, moving across their traditional lands of the Tanami Desert in small family units of changing composition. In those days, mobility was shaped by a complex adaptation to a limited resource environment, the spiritual knowledge and practices that structured relationships with country, and the maintenance of social ties between dispersed family groups (Young, E. & Doohan, 1989, pp. 25-28; see also Meggitt, 1962). In the early decades of the twentieth century the effects of colonisation reached central Australia. Most government policies since then have been geared towards the sedentisation of Yapa, in specific communities and settlements and in much larger concentrations in terms of population numbers. Such policies can be understood in terms of a twinned movement, of Yapa *away* from commercially viable areas and town centers where they were considered a nuisance, and *towards* designated areas where they could be better provided for (with facilities, infrastructure and services) and become subject to further assimilationist measures (Young, E. & Doohan, 1989, pp. 29-34; see also Dockery & Colquhoun, 2012; Vaarzon-Morel, 2016). If sedentisation was considered a step towards ‘progress’, its antithesis was mobility, commonly perceived as creating “frictions with mainstream models of economic participation and service delivery”

¹⁸ Only the names of major towns and other Aboriginal communities are shown; all other places, which include sacred sites and people’s outstations, are indicated by symbol only. The tracks have mostly been produced from a GPS that I carried with me from around month seven. Post-fieldwork I checked the GPS data against my field notes and was able to fill in missing information using Google Earth, mostly from the first 6-months of fieldwork when I was sans-GPS, some from the occasional GPS recording failure.

(Dockery & Colquhoun, 2012, p. 1).¹⁹ From the 1970s, shifts in government policies and the legal recognition of Aboriginal land rights countered these forms of political control. In some cases Yapa were able to choose where to establish a homeland—as was the case with Nyirрпи—and to access areas where their presence was previously discouraged or prevented (Young, E. & Doohan, 1989, pp. 29-34; see also Vaarzon-Morel, 2016).

Relative to the pre-contact times, most Yapa do now live more sedentised lives and I would estimate that most could identify at least one or two ‘usual’ places where they live. At the same time, Yapa continue to practice high levels of mobility, the patterns of which, as I experienced it, reflect both a maintenance of key values and an ongoing adaptation to multiple changes (in features of Yapa culture and society and the broader social, political and economic structures impacting Yapa lives). Such factors include the locations of population groups (family members spread across multiple places) and the means and technologies of transportation and communication networks. Not only does news travel fast over the telephone and the internet, so too can personal obligations be quickly activated, with a call to family for a pickup, or a reminder to come for a funeral; access to a vehicle and if you’re lucky a recently graded road makes the 300km round trip to Yuendumu to meet such obligations very easy these days. The labour market and the location (or not) of services and facilities also influence the needs and directions of mobility, with a lot of Yapa now traveling in order to access health, education, welfare, housing, and legal services, to do shopping for food or goods, or for work and meetings (Young, E. & Doohan, 1989; see also Dockery & Colquhoun, 2012; Hinkson, 2021; Long & Memmott, 2007; Memmott et al., 2004).

Our reasons for travel were many and varied. We travelled to Alice Springs to attend football matches, for hospital appointments and court dates, to visit family in prison, and to do shopping. We travelled to other Aboriginal communities for work, meetings, appointments, sorry business (mortuary rituals), funerals, initiation ceremonies, sports weekends and football games, to do shopping, and to pick Yapa up or drop Yapa off. We went on a number of bush trips, ranging from small family camps for a night or two at Mae’s outstation, to longer trips visiting sacred sites and places of significance with other researchers, to ranger work trips to conduct land and feral species management. We travelled *a lot* on the tracks and country around Nyirрпи, going hunting, visiting outstations, sacred sites, and swimming holes in summer. And

¹⁹ For a sample of studies on Indigenous mobility and its implications for service delivery see Dockery and Colquhoun (2012), Elvin et al. (2010), Habibis, Daphne et al. (2010), Long and Memmott (2007), Memmott et al. (2004), Memmott et al. (2006), Prout (2008) and Zander et al. (2016).

sometimes we just drove to a soakage in the creek north of Nyirrpi, to cook food, wash our bodies and clothes, and have a nap.

Overall, the main factors that conditioned our mobility resonate with those that Young, E. and Doohan (1989) identified in their report: people's links to country, including both a strong sense of regional belonging as well as a multiplicity of attachments to specific areas or places (and in many cases multi-residencies); and social networks primarily of kin or family connections, the ties of which incorporate various levels of interdependence, of which sharing practices are an important expression (see also Dockery & Colquhoun, 2012; Long & Memmott, 2007).²⁰ Musharbash (2008b, p. 148) has well documented the value of mobility as "a constituent part of Warlpiri sociality" for the simple fact that "in order to relate to others one has to be with them". Regardless of the primary reason for our trips, during our visits to other communities, and when others were travelling through ours, relationship work was always done. Efforts were made to spend time with those we stopped with but also those we made the rounds to visit, and these interactions were full of relational affirmations: referring to people in relational or kinship terms, showing care, sometimes arguing and fighting or sorting out some long-held on-to issue, and, crucially, sharing time, space, food, money and material things. Yapa social networks are extensive and the relationships that make up these networks "need to be lived, sustained and continually affirmed" (Musharbash, 2008b, p. 73). It is by moving around and not only stopping (staying) with Yapa but also engaging *in person* in the sharing and other practices described that relations are continually maintained. I say more on the topic of sharing below but first I want to expand further on mobility as a key factor in Warlpiri people's relationships with place and what it means to be at home on Warlpiri country.

Ngurra (or, my country, my f*cking house)

On my third night of fieldwork, having driven back to Nyirrpi after that funeral at Yuendumu, I was sitting around the fire in our front yard chatting to Samson, Mae's (sister's) son. Samson, his wife Mabel and their son, along with a few old women, had also attended the funeral and were now stopping with us at Mae's place before heading home to Kintore, another 200km (by back track) to the south-west. Mae and the old women from Kintore had situated themselves

²⁰ This is reminiscent of the 'beats' of Aboriginal people in far west NSW, described by Beckett (1988, p. 131) as "areas which are defined by the situation of kin who will give them hospitality, within which they can travel as much or as little as they please".

inside, as it looked like it might rain. Over the course of the evening, I had worked hard, obeying the old women's demands to make tea, fetch the sugar and milk, get them water, move that bed, and "clean him up" (sweep the floor for their mattresses). Tired, I escaped to the yard and the company of Samson and Mabel, who despite the drizzle that was starting had decided to sleep outside and had kept the fire going.

Samson was regaling me with stories of early days Nyirrpi, telling me about the families who started it as an outstation at Old Nyirrpi—the soakage 15 kilometers north—and how they later moved here, which people call Nyirrpi but is really Jitirlparnta. He went on to tell a story about an interaction between an old Warlpiri man who was living here back then and a Kardiya man who came to Nyirrpi: "That Kardiya was looking around"—Samson acted this out by looking around, nodding approvingly—"and then he looked at Old Man and said, 'Good country this.' Old Man thought about that for a while"—Samson sat still with a thoughtful expression, looking into the middle distance—"and then he looked at that Kardiya"—Samson looked directly at me—"and said, 'This is my fucking house.'" Samson laughed hard after delivering that final line and, after I followed his lead and laughed with him, he repeated the story. I take the telling of this story—the fact of its telling and its repetition—as not merely an amusing, fireside tale. In it was encoded an important lesson for a newcomer Kardiya, like myself and all those before and after me: Old Man's conflation of country and house was a simple yet profound exposition of the nuanced Warlpiri concept of *ngurra* and of what it means for a Warlpiri person to belong to and be at home in a particular place.

Ngurra is a Warlpiri (and Pintupi) word, most simply translated as 'home'. However, as Jackson (1995), Myers (1986) and Musharbash (2008b, 2017a) have shown, within the concept of *ngurra* is embedded a much wider range of meanings and significance than the English word 'home'.²¹ At one level, *ngurra* invokes an enduring and permanent sense of home, for example one's country or the area(s) where one comes from or belongs, to which one's association stems from ancestral or other connections—like conception, birth, ritual obligation or long-term residence. For example, I would describe Mae as having a regional sense of belonging as a Pintupi/Warlpiri person; as someone who might refer to Warlpiri or Pintupi country as *ngurra* in a general sense. She also has associations with particular places and regions based on ancestral connections and/or long-term residence. These include areas on Pintupi country

²¹ See Musharbash (2008b, pp. 34-36; 2017a, pp. 76-77) for a detailed breakdown of the multiple levels of meaning of *ngurra*, which, as Musharbash (2017a, p. 77) summarises, "is conceptually extensive and covers the entire spectrum between residential units and cosmological concepts – underpinning Warlpiri notions of 'home'".

where she lived as a child, as well as her outstation and the other communities, Yuendumu and Balgo, where she has lived over the years. As well, although not a traditional owner for Nyirrpri community or its surrounding country, through her long-term residence there she has developed an intimate knowledge of the region, she cares for it in particular ways and knows many of the songs for the ancestral beings that pass through it.

At another level, *ngurra* can invoke less permanent realisations of a home, and in this sense is generally translated as a camp (which may be located somewhere in the bush, or in and around a house). This meaning of *ngurra* could most basically be described as the particular place at which one is living or sleeping (or, making camp), whether habitually or just for one night. Further, its significance is inextricably linked with the family members with whom one belongs. Two other Warlpiri terms—*warlalja* and *ngurra-jinta*—become relevant here. The meanings of *warlalja* include: belonging to self, own, private, personal, belongings, kin, relatives, relations, and family (Laughren et al., in prep). Similar to Myers (1986, p. 109) discussion of *walytja* invoking the Pintupi “sense of belonging together or shared identity”, *warlalja* is a word you might use to describe or identify your family, as those who belong to you and to whom you belong. Not in the sense of ownership, but as people with whom you are intimately connected, tied together. As its meanings suggest, *warlalja* extends not only to close kin or relations but also to the things that belong to you and therefore that you would expect to share with family. The term to describe those people who live together and therefore engage in such sharing practices at the most daily and intimate level is *ngurra-jinta*, which literally means those who are of one camp, one family.²²

The implication here is the manifestation, or experience, of *ngurra* is intrinsically tied up with being together with family, with whom one’s relatedness and ways of *being with* are deeply underpinned by practices of sharing. The significance of *ngurra* in this sense does not

²² To give a couple of examples of *warlalja*: 1) Mae and I were getting ready for a long bush trip that was being organised and supplied by the land council, and which would include family groups from Nyirrpri as well as other communities, along with a number of Kardiya who worked for local organisations. Pointing to the billycan on our fireplace, Mae said we should bring it, referring to it as “*Warlalja* billycan”. When I asked what she meant by that she said, “Not for anyone, I don’t like use him other people’s, I take my own”. When we were on the bush trip, Mae and I slept each night in a row with the other single women on the trip, and we generally shared a cooking fire with those women as well as Mae’s daughter’s family (husband and children). That “*Warlalja* billycan” was used by all who shared our cooking fire, or in other words, those who were *ngurra-jinta* for that trip. 2) In my attempt at documenting information about all the things we lived with at Mae’s place, among other inane questions I went through a phase of asking ‘who’ things belonged to. One day I was sitting on our front porch with Mae, Davina and Presley, and probably a few kids, having some tea and biscuits. “Whose blankets are they?” I asked, referring to some blankets hanging over the fence. Exhibiting patience with my “Silly questions”, as Presley once put it teasingly, Davina answered by way of a rhetorical question, “Well, who lives here?” The implied answer being, us, family, *warlalja*, *ngurra-jinta*.

intrinsically spring from any particular place itself but is realised—activated—through a dynamic nexus of place-people-things. Yapa are extremely mobile and in their comings and goings are often joining camps or being joined by others. The meaning of *ngurra-jinta* is not about fixing permanence in terms of place or of a particular configuration of Yapa. What the concept *ngurra-jinta* suggests is that being together in a place is what makes that place *ngurra*/home and, simultaneously, what makes those who stop together *ngurra-jinta*/one family. In other words, *ngurra-jinta* invokes the inextricable link between a place that becomes *ngurra*/home, however permanently or temporarily, through the social and material practices of Yapa being together in that place. While the *jinta* [one] part of the concept does suggest some level of exclusivity—a “we” of which it is comprised—the configuration of “we” is not fixed or impermeable.

What connects the two seemingly very different meanings of *ngurra* is that the term always refers to places whose meaning is derived from social activity (Myers, 1986, pp. 54-55). In other words, both *ngurra* as country and as camp are socialised places, both are given meaning through activity and events. The crucial difference between the two meanings is that of temporality. As Myers (1986, p. 55) writes:

Neither ‘camp’ nor ‘country’ exist apart from the significance created by action or event, but ‘country’ retains an identity enduring through time as something beyond human choice. Human and Dreaming action each contribute to the definition of landscape, although their constructions have different properties. In relation to human action, one is historical while the other might be termed transhistorical.

In other words, *ngurra* as country has a permanent, enduring meaning, because it derives from ancestral beings, whose activities and encounters are an enduring reality in and of country. But another layer of meaning can be produced by people, for example when we cleared some ground, placed swags or bedframes in a row, brushed the spinifex or parked the car to make a windbreak, and built a fire. By making a camp we made a smaller, temporary *ngurra*; we added a human layer of a socialised and meaningful place to the *ngurra* of country (cf. Myers, 1986, p. 54).

It is important to remember Samson’s story above and to bear in mind the relationship between the geographically broad and permanent connotations of *ngurra*—as country (which is always

“my fucking house”)—and how that relates to particular, emplaced realisations of *ngurra*—a camp, in a time and place, with family. In the context of Warlpiri mobility these meanings of *ngurra* are not separate but rather conflated, bound up with each other. As we continually travelled and hunted along familiar roads and tracks, as we visited places along those routes, and as we camped at places and with those along our networks of social relations, all the layers of *ngurra* were in play: strong and often ancestrally-based associations with specific areas or places, the regional sense of belonging that means one can travel with confidence, as well as a sense of ‘home’ that can be created by lining up swags on a veranda or in the bush. One way to describe much of our mobility is to say that when we travelled, *ngurra* was what we left behind and what we returned to, but also what we travelled through, towards, and what we made when we stopped. Just as mobility sustains relatedness between Yapa, through repeated, in-person, engagements, it is also fundamental to the meaning and experience of *ngurra*. Because mobility also sustains Yapa relations with places, in part by facilitating an ongoing familiarity with and forms of knowledge about the country they regularly travel and visit.

Leaving and reading traces

Both independently and on trips facilitated by local organisations, many of our travels were what I might describe as place-oriented: we went to particular areas to hunt animals, or to look for bush foods, we visited sacred sites and places where family used to live, we went to particular waterholes or parts of a creek bed to swim or dig for water. Even when travel wasn’t primarily place-oriented, when we were headed somewhere for work or a meeting, for a sports carnival or a funeral, for a hospital appointment or to go shopping, our trips were characterised by stops to visit places, to hunt or burn on the way, and by stories and interpretations of features in the landscape we passed.

All of our movements were informed and directed by various forms of knowledge that Mae and her family members hold about the areas and places we travelled to and through. This includes knowing the ancestral associations, stories and songs of particular places and geographical features and, with this, knowing whose country you’re on as you move about. There are protocols of being and, crucially, of *not* being in particular places, so part of this is knowing where to avoid, when or how to approach places, when to leave, or whose permission or company you need. Ecological and environmental knowledge is another element, knowing when and where certain bush foods grow, a likely place to find goanna or kangaroo, where to dig in the dry creek bed for water, or when conditions are right for burning. It also involves

knowing the broad geography of people and places, how to get from place to place, the networks of roads and tracks, the best one to take in heavy rains, the wash outs and potholes to watch out for, and where people are living at any given moment. As we travelled around, all of these forms of knowledge—and more—were evident as a particular, outward orientation, which I can best describe as a continual scanning of the landscape (see also Rose, 2003; Poirier, 2004; Povinelli, 1993b; Vaarzon-Morel, 2016).

As Yapa travel around they leave traces and signs of their movements and activities and, simultaneously, they are always scanning the landscape for the traces and signs of others. Signs of particular animals and their activities and behaviours, signs of human or non-human others' presence, passings or doings, signs of anything unusual or dangerous, and even just general changes, like a new washout on a track. As Godwin and Weiner (2006, p. 125) remark “the conceptual life of Aboriginal people is always indexed by some material mark, sign or impression on the environment from which it is possible to infer the actions of beings—whether they be animals, humans, or creator beings” (quoted in Vaarzon-Morel, 2016, p. 207). To give some ethnographic flavor to this, below I present a collection of examples which I have grouped under relevant headings.

Material traces left by humans

One of my best collection of examples of material traces left by humans comes from a visit to Lapirlapi, a sacred rock hole in Australia's central desert, to which we undertook a gruelling ‘country visit’, over mostly trackless country, involving countless flat tyres and sand dune crossings.²³ Due to its remote location, Lapirlapi is not a place that family can visit easily or regularly. Mae spent periods of her youth living there with her family, “foot walking”, as she referred to their mode of travel, between there and other places like Pirlinyanu, which is much closer to Nyirrpi. As an adult, however, it's my understanding that up to that point she had only been back to Lapirlapi two or three times.

On the way, we travelled through and stopped at a number of other places, which were marked by the material traces of others who had gone before us. As we passed through Pirlinyanu, Davina pointed to a billycan on the ground, “That's Jungarrayi's billycan, he used

²³ This was an official country visit organised and run by the land council. For an account of Donald Thomson's 1957 expedition there, which he alternatively spelled Labbi-labbi, see Thomson (1962c, 1962a, 1962b). The native title determination used the spelling Lappi Lappi but I have followed the spelling from Warlpiri dictionaries (see Hoogengraad & Laughren, 2012; Laughren et al., in prep).

to work at land council. Poor thing, he been pass away. He been leave it here”. At Minamina we stopped to look at a burned-out car that belonged to a well-known artist from Yuendumu (now deceased), who had been there on a painting trip: it was a petrol car, people said, so maybe it caught fire in the dry grass. When we finally reached Lapirlapi, we approached it from the side of a high rocky ledge. Many in the group, including Davina, scaled a pathway down to the waterhole itself, while a group of us, including the old women, stayed at the top looking down and taking it all in. Climbing back up top, Davina passed around a rusted tin can she’d found below and which she’d filled with fresh water. We all took it in turns to drink the Lapirlapi water and then, when it was empty, the kids made a throwing game with the empty tin. Later, in a moment that is captured in the photo in Figure 2.2, I was sitting next to Mae as she considered the can and mused about its origins: “Might be from sausage, this tin”.



Figure 2.2 Tin can at Lapirlapi

Being at Lapirlapi invoked memories and a sense of connection to past times there. Mae and Agatha (another older woman on the trip) could remember living there when they were little, before their families were sedentised at Mt Doreen station and then Yuendumu. Others remembered stories their parents had told them of living at Lapirlapi. Not far from our camp

was the cluster of now rusted 44-gallon drums, remnants of when Donald Thomson did research with Pintupi people in the 1950s. One of the researchers with us had scanned some photos from Thomson's (1975) book and as we swiped through them on the iPad, Mae recognised and named a number of Yapa he had photographed at Lapirlapi. As we pulled away the next day, I was sitting in the back of a troopy with Edith and I followed her gaze out the window. She nodded her head towards an empty sugar tin she'd left hanging in a tree near our camp. Regretfully I couldn't write down verbatim what she said, but it was something along the lines of, "Next time someone comes they'll know that was from Edith... my tin, I left it here".

Another favourite example of left things is Agatha's blanket. It was a red blanket, of the faux mink kind, and it lay on the side of a hunting track west of Nyirrpi for months. It was there on my very first drive out that way, and it was still there six months later when I wrote in my field notes, "Agatha's blanket is still on the mining road, it's been there since I started fieldwork. From when they broke down one day". Every time we passed, we used to laughingly hail it with a cry of, "Agatha's blanket!" Often on trips we would come across traces of other's activities, the remains of a fire and some alfoil or a tin can, for example. Similar to observations made by Vaarzon-Morel (2016, p. 217), finding such evidence always elicited discussion about who had been there "and the events that occurred at the site." Especially around Nyirrpi, such material traces were often brought into alignment with knowledge of Yapa movements, they marked the place where Yapa were digging for honey ants, for example, or the place where Yapa had broken down.

Memorials and other erected signs

Some signs dotting the landscape were erected with a specific intention, which usually included a perpetuity to the sign's existence. They marked places or sites of particular significance. On the way to Lapirlapi for example, we passed a sacred site whose location had been marked by a star picket topped with a billycan. In a similar example, from my pre-PhD days when I was working in the field of sacred sites protection, a group of old men from Yuendumu showed me the unique, v-shaped head of a stump of mulga that marked a sacred site near the edge of the Tanami Road; it was not a growing stump, it had been placed and erected deliberately so that Yapa would "know". Probably the most common of such markings these days are the road-side memorials marking where family members have perished. These are often simple, white-painted crosses, like the one on the Nyirrpi to Kintore Road where one of Mae's sons perished after his car broke down. However, as with grave sites at cemeteries, more elaborately marked

road-side memorials can include edging or fencing, plastic flowers, and solar lights (see Vaarzon-Morel, 2016, p. 223).

Sounds

Given the long absences in between periodic visits, Mae did not seem surprised when on our first night at Lapirlapi the quiet of our camp was pierced by the call of a stone curlew whistle (a night bird). In response, Mae stood and yelled into the night, “Go away, I’m Mae, my sister and our husband was living here”. Encouraging others who rightfully belonged there to do the same, she continued singing out the names of all those present who had lived at Lapirlapi when they were young, or whose parents had lived there, “We’re visiting, we’ve got kids with us, we belong”. After the whistles stopped, Mae sat back down and explained that those calls were not really made by birds but by Yapa, which in this context invokes the presence of ancestors or ancestral beings rather than living, human beings. “They came to see who was here”, she said, “They might think, ‘hey I don’t know that Yapa, I don’t know these people’. That’s why we have to call out”.²⁴

Another compelling illustration of the portent of sounds took place on the side of Nyirрпи road, where Mae, Cora, Brownie, and I had stopped on the way home from Yuendumu. We’d stopped to look for witchetty grubs, and to make a fire to cook some bush potato Mae had dug the day before. After lighting the fire, we split up for a short while; Mae went scouting with her crowbar for witchetty grubs while Cora and I wandered round, picking bush banana. Eventually we reconvened with Mae at the fire to cook tea and bury the potato in the now ready coals. Mae was just fishing the cooked potato from the coals when Brownie looked sharply towards the road. He moved forward a few paces, gave one loud, sharp bark, and then ran to stand behind me, poking his nose around my shoulder to look in the same direction, alert.²⁵ At this, Mae sprang into action, saying, “Nangala, get him everything, we gotta go”. I’ve never seen a camp packed up so quickly. Within seconds we’d thrown the billycan, water container, crow bars, and our bags into the car, and were back on the road. The danger Brownie had detected was a man we had seen outside Yuendumu shop, who had been asking us when and by what road we were going back to Nyirрпи: “Some Yapa can change into *kuuku* [monster] Nangala, some men can,” Mae explained. All the way home she was pronouncing, “I don’t like

²⁴ See Musharbash (2016) for the portent of a range of bird calls in the detection of central Australian monsters.

²⁵ See Musharbash (2017c) on the role of camp dogs in warning and protecting humans from the threat of monsters, especially Kurdaitcha, which are invisible to Yapa but can be detected by dogs.

people asking questions,” and was giving me explicit instructions: “If a man ever asks you when you’re going back to Nyirrpi, you gotta tell him liar story, you say ‘maybe later, maybe tomorrow, maybe the day after tomorrow, I don’t know’”. Otherwise, she said, “they might follow you on the road, come fast way, come out as *kuuku*”.

A very common and less fear-inducing sound that we were often listening out for were the calls of each other’s voices while we were gathering bush foods. In the case of digging for witchetty grubs, or bush potato, the women on any given hunting group would generally fan out over an area, often to the extent that visibility was lost. The location and safety of all in the party would be checked and confirmed through the occasional spate of singing out to each other in the style of call-and-response (see also Vaarzon-Morel, 2016, p. 213).

Tracks and footprints

As Vaarzon-Morel (2016, p. 211) has noted, “Tracks and prints are the preeminent way Warlpiri mark country and interpret agency and action within it”—marks on the ground, whether made by humans or other beings, resonate with meaning and have been likened to a noticeboard or public announcement (see also Green, 2014).²⁶ Driving back to Nyirrpi after a work trip at Newhaven Wildlife Sanctuary, Davina pointed to fresh tyre tracks on the road in front of us, “Must be Kardiya.” “How do you know they’re Kardiya tracks?” I asked. She explained that she’d seen where they’d veered off the track at a tight turn, and said by way of further explanation, “Yapa, they know that road”. From the back seat Mae heard us talking and, unable to see the tracks from her position, asked Davina, “Are there return tracks?” “No”, Davina replied, “Only one way”. When we got to Nyirrpi, our first stop was at the office to check our mail and sure enough two Centrelink workers were there. On the way back to Newhaven, Davina pointed out the tracks again, “That was Centrelink”.²⁷

Another time at Newhaven, Davina and I were walking from the ranger camp to the toilet block. Davina laughingly pointed out my veering footprints from the night before, when I went to the toilet by myself, “You been get lost last night hey Nangala?!” Later that same trip, Mae and I were at the toilet block putting a load of washing on, she pointed out the feral cat tracks from its prowling around the night before. Around Nyirrpi, where Mae often moved around on

²⁶ See Vaarzon-Morel (2016, p. 211) for a discussion of the Warlpiri lexicon pertaining to the different kinds of marks or tracks that may be inscribed on the ground.

²⁷ See Young, D. (2001, pp. 45-46) for a similar account of the ability of Anangu to read vehicle tracks and how ‘wrong way’ driving practices are attributed to whitefella or tourist drivers.

foot, she would scan the ground in front of her and comment when she found tracks of her family members' movements, exclaiming things like, "Hey, poor thing, my granddaughter went this way".

Many of the examples above are of traces and signs that are ephemeral or fleeting in some way—the dog bark that warns of danger; the tyre tracks and footprints that show where strangers, an animal, or a family member went; the remains of a cooking fire and aluminium foil that mark someone's camp; someone's blanket or billycan. These signs will dissipate or disappear if not immediately then fairly quickly with the effect of time, wind, rain, or animal movements. Some, like memorial crosses, become relatively more permanent features of the landscape, Yapa check on them and maintain them as they pass. Some, also like the latter, invoke sad memories, while others, like abandoned and sometimes burned-out cars, or Agatha's blanket, prompt laughter and stories of people, past events and activities. Small changes in the landscape, *things* in the landscape, become part of its story, indexes of others and their past activities, of them having been somewhere, of having camped, hunted, waited, or even died there. Small changes in the conditions of a moment can be signs of imminent danger. The link that I want to make with mobility is that there is a dialectical relationship between the kinds of relationality and knowledge that Yapa have with places and all the beings they are inhabited and visited by, and their ability to not only see and recognise such signs but to read or interpret their meaning or portent. In other words, you have to have been there, and continue to be there, to return to there, to be able to read signs and know what they mean. Because each time, such experiences are stored, to not only become part of the stories that will be told about a place next time, but also part of the knowledge that in turn informs the interpretation of signs next time.

Beyond the ngurra zone

It is, as they say, often the exception that proves the rule. I don't think I had fully realised the extent of Mae and her family's knowledge and familiarity with the region and networks within which they regularly moved until we went on a long and arduous trip, well beyond Warlpiri country. The confidence with which we usually travelled turned into tense nervousness on the drive indicated by the green line on the map in Figure 2.3. It was a return trip of over 2000 kilometers, which we did in three days, to pick up one of Davina's sons from where he was living with his adoptive family and bring him home for a school holiday visit. It was notable

because for the first time neither Mae nor Davina knew where we were going or how to get there. By knowing where we were going, I refer not so much to navigation—which roads to take, which direction to travel in—but to all the other elements described above. They didn't know many of the places along the way, or any safe places we might stop to eat, go to the toilet, or camp. Crucially, there were no stories along the lines of, “Nangala, see that hill, that's so-and-so's country”.



Figure 2.3 Beyond the ngurra zone

The places they did know they knew as dangerous. Wycliffe Well roadhouse, for example, was not a good place for an evening toilet stop as there were too many drunks there. Towards the end of the first day, nervousness turned to fear as it began to get dark and we were yet to reach Tennant Creek. Busting for the toilet I pulled off at another roadhouse but as we sat in the car and looked at the brightly lit building, Mae instructed us to lock all the car doors. The women's toilet, I was told, was located a long way at the back of the building. Here, *kuuku* [monsters] were as much a danger as drunks. At Mae and Davina's urging we pulled back on to the bitumen and kept going. The atmosphere of our car was thick with tension and fear for that last, dark leg into Tennant Creek, heightening even more so every time fast approaching

stranger-headlights came up behind us. In my field notes from that night I wrote, “Night-time is not a stopping time in strange country. This compared to the trips we’ve done from town [Alice Springs] back to Nyirrpi, and happily camped at the Newhaven turn off [where the Tanami Hwy intersects with a 200km dirt road to Nyirrpi]. And the camping we did on the way to Balgo and back [again, we camped at points along the Tanami Hwy]” (cf. Vaarzon-Morel, 2016, p. 207).

Those hundreds of kilometers of the unknown were punctuated only by two very specific points of social connections: a ranger colleague of Davina’s in Tennant Creek, who we stopped with on the first night, and the family waiting for us with a roast at the end of the second day. Reflecting on each of those nights, and the camps we made with our rows of mattresses and swags in our hosts’ spare rooms, I can appreciate the meaning of *ngurra* that derives from making a camp, in a time and place, with family.

Demand Sharing

On my fourth day of fieldwork, I wrote in my field notes: “Mae’s sister Nampijinpa from Kintore just took my crowbar so I sat in the shade and cried”. This was, in part, my arbitrary breaking point after the overwhelming first-fieldwork-days but it also tapped into a particular anxiety that had started to build the day before and was the beginning of a lesson about Warlpiri relatedness and sharing.

On the 150km drive back to Nyirrpi after the funeral at Yuendumu, we had come upon Joseph and another man with flat tyres. Asking to borrow one of my spares, Joseph had assured me he’d give it back that night: “I live next door to Mae, she’s my sister”. That evening, as I sat in our yard eating oranges with Mae and the Kintore women, I watched and pointed as the car with my spare tyre drove past. Too late the women sang out to the male driver. Later, the car did a second lap—a female driver this time—and slowed down when the women sung out. The driver had a conversation with Mae of which I understood only one word: *jukurra* [tomorrow]. “How do I say something belongs to me, it is mine, in Warlpiri?” I asked the women. “*Ngaju-nyangu*”, they taught me, “You say, ‘*Ngaju-nyangu* tyre’”.

For Yapa, however, the concept of ownership is bound up with the practice and value of sharing. Ownership does exist in the sense that things are identified or associated with a person. You can say “*Ngaju-nyangu* tyre”. But there is no full stop at the end of that statement; it simply means that I am the one you can ask for it. Because underlying a Yapa sense of ‘ownership’ is a principle, an ethic, of generosity, and the sense that things should be widely

distributed through the practice of sharing (Myers, 1986; Peterson, 1993). Things like tyres, once “borrowed” are rarely returned, so if you want them back you have to ask, and sometimes negotiate.

The following morning, after breakfast, Mae said, “You and me gotta go get that tyre, before we go hunting”. Thus, I discovered that the Kintore visitors weren’t going home that day and instead we would take two cars and go hunting for goanna. We found the car with my tyre parked outside a house on the east side of Nyirrpi but after speaking only briefly to the same woman, Mae gave a flick of her hand, “Ready Nangala, keep going”. Confused I asked, “What about my tyre?” Again, the answer was *jukurra* [tomorrow]. I was starting to worry I might not get it back and starting to worry that I was being too ‘Kardiya’ about worrying. So, there I was, having been pulled into the Warlpiri practice of demand sharing, feeling terribly unsure about my ability to navigate it all, standing in the burned grass area with my new crowbar in hand, eager to try my skills at catching a goanna:

Nampijinpa: Nangala, you got crowbar?

Me: Yes.

Nampijinpa: Give me.

Me: [Silence].

Nampijinpa: [Moving closer to me] You got crowbar?

Me: [With a whiney tone] But I want to catch goanna.

Nampijinpa: I'll give you [a goanna] after.

And with that Kintore Nampijinpa took my crowbar out of my hand and walked off. And I cried. Writing about this now makes me laugh, of course, but at the time I was lost. I had completely failed to heed the advice of one my supervisors to never let my spare tyres or my crowbar out of my sight (“Write your name on them!”). And I had no idea how I might have negotiated those demands differently, to a different outcome. True to her word, when Kintore Nampijinpa got back to the car, she offered me one of her goannas. A whole goanna! Which I, still upset and by now sulky and grumpy, refused: “No, you’re right”, I said petulantly.

With hindsight I can see ways that I might have responded in order to hold on to my crowbar but none that would have done more for my relational possibilities than if I had graciously accepted not only her demand of a resource that was, ultimately, wasted on me (no goanna was ever caught by a crowbar wielding Jo Thurman) but also the offered goanna. My dual failure holds more significance than a missed opportunity to share resources: tools and

food. More importantly, I failed to encode myself in the social and relational dynamics between younger and older women that were part of that—and every—hunting trip: in the dynamics of teaching and learning, labour and looking after that could have existed between, in this case, a woman who was classificatorily my aunty (Nampijinpa) and me, her niece (Nangala). I could have accompanied Nampijinpa and watched and learned something about goanna hunting. I could have stayed behind at the car, made a fire and boiled the tea, so that when the hot and thirsty women came back from hunting there was immediate sustenance and coals ready to cook the catch that would be distributed amongst us. As it was, my grumpy petulance and refusal to accept the gesture of a goanna amounted to a missed opportunity to lay some relational groundwork.

This is just one example of the ways in which the Warlpiri practice of demand sharing holds, as Peterson (1993) suggests, far more significance than just economically motivated behaviour: it is the principle way in which Warlpiri people continually affirm and produce social relatedness. Micro-interactions like the crowbar episode take place all day, every day, between Yapa. Upon almost every encounter with a relation a demand is made and the way in which it is received and responded to holds deeply encoded meanings about the relational dynamics of those involved. The practice of sharing and the associated principle, or ethic, of generosity and looking after each other has long been understood as fundamental to the webs of relational networks between Warlpiri people (Peterson, 1993; see also Burbidge, 2014; Lavi & Friesem, 2019a; Sillander, 2019). As Myers (1989, p. 17) says, objects “represent an opportunity not so much to sustain exclusive use but to constitute other sorts of values defined by a larger system of exchange.”

As I will illustrate further below, this was certainly a dominant feature of my experiences with Yapa. However, what I also add to the picture, briefly, is the fact that while sharing is always doing relational work of some kind, it is not always a sign of close, good or easy relations. In other words, the practice of sharing, the ways in which demands are made, negotiated, met or avoided can also reveal much about the limitations and fault lines of relatedness. For example, when giving is done easily, with care and generosity, or reluctantly, or is avoided, or when giving does different kinds of work—repairing a fractured relationship or preventing such a breakdown in the first place. One memorable example of the former was the day Mae fell out with her daughter-in-law Miriam, who had been stopping with us at Mae’s place. On the day of their argument, Miriam and her children moved away, taking all of their belongings with them. Following the initial flair of conflict, and aside from one other flash during a card game, the strained relations between them, which went on for months, was

expressed as social and spatial distance. Miriam was a notable absence from our place; no more food or money was being shared between ours and Miriam's place, and Mae and Miriam avoided and ignored each other around the community. This fractured relationship was gradually repaired in part by gestures that closed that spatial distance, for example by sharing food that others, like myself or one of the kids, would be commissioned to deliver by one to the other: "Take this meat for Mae". In another example, there was one old woman—Evelyn—with whom Mae's relationship seemed to be in a perpetually 'testing' dynamic (Peterson, 1993). Evelyn's demands of Mae were more common than vice-versa, often in the form of "give me" hand signs in Mae's direction the minute she walked through the shop door. Sometimes, Mae employed various strategies for avoiding meeting such demands. When she did meet Evelyn's demands, the spirit in which she gave struck me as being as much an affirmation of a tentative relationship, perhaps steeped in decades of relational history, as it was a strategic gesture to prevent a relational breakdown by causing offence (and potentially conflict). Certainly, these gestures of giving were enacted in a very different way to those with whom Mae had much closer relations.

A family network

The family that I became part of was, at its broadest, "west side" family comprised of Yapa living across roughly twenty-five houses at Nyirрпи. As well, family connections extended beyond Nyirрпи to those at other communities and towns who we saw relatively regularly, either when they visited us, or us them, or we all converged at other communities or towns for funerals, meetings or sporting events. Of this broadest composition, however, there emerged a smaller grouping again, being Yapa from at least ten houses across Nyirрпи—the highlighted circles on the map in Figure 2.4—who shared their lives with each other on a daily basis. One of the most significant expressions of this was the regularity of gathering together for breakfast and evening meals. During my fieldwork at Nyirрпи, the days followed a similar pattern to what Musharbash (2008b, 112-115) described at Yuendumu. The middle part of the day was characterised by Yapa dispersing, generally in small groups of togetherness —pairings like Mae and I, or a husband and wife, or three sisters—into wider circles of sociality and activities, to do shopping, go to work, attend the adult learning centre or the work-for-the-dole centre, to play cards, to paint at the art centre, and so on. Movement beyond the community generally involved larger groupings—a carload or two—to go hunting or to other communities for various reasons. This daily routine of geographic and social dispersal was almost always

bracketed by morning and evening gatherings of Yapa, principally to cook and eat together but they were generally drawn out and deeply social affairs.

I refer to the map in Figure 2.4 as an illustration of a family network because it was between the highlighted houses that Yapa, food, things and dogs moved most fluidly and easily, often in ways that made me think of the houses not as bounded or defined domestic spaces but as points that were connected or networked along invisible pathways (cf. Kwok, 2011). As a general rule, when they went to each other's places, Yapa in this family network did not stand at the outer periphery—the fence or gate—waiting to be invited in; they approached freely and comfortably, as they would their own place. As well, many would enter each other's houses without knocking on the door, or if they did, it was a quick sharp rap made at the same time as they opened it and entered. I liken this to the time Presley said to me, “Can I borrow this extension cord?” as he simultaneously unplugged and took it. A knock while opening the door is more about letting people know you're coming in, rather than requesting permission to enter.

In this vein, Yapa were coming and going from each other's places every day. To ask for things, for food, for help with something, to organise a trip somewhere, to use the kitchen to cook something, or to provide assistance, like fixing tyre punctures, doing firewood runs, or some cleaning. Yapa in this network would stop at each other's places if there was a reason they couldn't stay at their own (like vacating a house for renovations). As well, and regardless of which house they were sleeping at, Yapa in this network would often gather together every day to cook together and share meals, talk, spend time, play cards, and so on. My field notes are full of such examples: Mae wanders over to her granddaughter Kimberly and her husband Richard's house to paint and have tea in the morning shade; a big group of us sit in Sandra's yard for lunch; Mae takes her bundles of washing to Sandra's or Kimberly's for them to do; on the way out of Nyiripi on a hunting trip we pull up at Mae's son Jacob's house and call for a shovel; Irene is at Sandra's house making breakfast before going to work, and so on.



Figure 2.4 A family network

Between Yapa in this network, and in the context of their movements between and across each other's places, sharing was so quotidian and expected that it often took the shape of not only verbal but also non-verbal practices, where the demand might be implied in-situ, by someone's presence for example, as well as acts of giving and acts of taking.²⁸ These were the kinds of sharing that were the hardest to catch—and therefore document—because they didn't involve much, if any, interaction or exchange. Resources often moved around easily, fluidly, unremarkably, without a word: one of Mae's grandsons joins our breakfast gathering, talking plans for the day while Mae wordlessly breaks off some damper and hands it to him. Another grandson, Gary, pops over, checks the kitchen bench, and leaves with a bowl and spoon. Richard comes in the door, grabs the salt and leaves again. Miriam comes in the door, unplugs the rice cooker while simultaneously announcing to whomever is in the room that she's borrowing it. A bowl arrives or leaves with Davina's daughter Cora, as she comes home eating food from somewhere else, or leaves to visit others still eating her dinner from home. Our broom is always over the road at Richard and Kimberly's (or it is theirs always at our house).

²⁸ See Widlock (2013, 2019) on the central place of physical presence in sharing.

It's difficult to convey the density of the sense of connection and relatedness that emerges through such sharing practices—it's something that compounds over time, in the micro-moments of daily life. In the map in Figure 2.5 I have provided a visual illustration of just one detailed example, which amounts to about one to two hours of driving around, when Sadie suggested we watch a movie:



Figure 2.5 Borrowing a PlayStation and Television

“It’s Saturday night”, said Mae’s granddaughter Sadie, “We should watch movie or something”. Always keen for a television binge I agreed, so we went driving in search of a PlayStation to borrow. We asked Gary, but he was already using his, so we asked Irene, but she’d already lent hers to Erin, so then we tried Miriam. She didn’t have one, but someone said Esther had one, so we went back to Gary’s, where Esther was staying, and she lent us her PlayStation. Then we needed a TV (the one at our house had a cracked screen). We asked Irene, but Erin had borrowed that too. We went to Erin’s to ask—just in case—but she was definitely using Irene’s TV. But then Erin told us she had lent her small TV to Miriam (and we already knew that

Miriam didn't have a set top box or PlayStation, so what use was it to her?). We asked Miriam and she lent us Erin's TV. Finally, we went home and stayed up late watching movies. The next day, we discovered we'd worn the controller out so had to do some similar rounds in search of a charging cord: we asked at Irene's and then Sandra's before finally having some luck at Gary's.

It was this kind of movement that made me think of the Yapa in this network—and the places they stayed—as connected or networked along invisible pathways. If I could have attached a GPS to some of the dogs, or to brooms and mop buckets, or to the distributed portions of a cooked Kangaroo, I would have been able to produce a map similar to yet far more dense than that in Figure 2.5. The behaviour of the dogs especially is telling in this regard, as they would not only follow and accompany their humans when they visited or stopped with Yapa at Nyirrpi, they also did so on their own whenever the humans they lived with went away. As was reported to me by both Sandra and Miriam, apparently whenever we left Nyirrpi, Mae's dogs would shift to either of their places, where they would stay until we returned. Similarly, when they were away, Jacob and Miriam's dogs would often appear at our place. Once when I stayed at my (classificatory) sister Kayla's place, all of Mae's dogs followed me until Kayla told me, "Send those dogs home". I had to trick them by walking back to our place so they would all follow me, and then flag down a Kardiya worker to drive me back to Kayla's (knowing the dogs wouldn't follow me in a Kardiya car). Later I saw they'd all moved over to Sandra's.

In the context of Warlpiri relatedness, it is difficult to separate the sharing of things and food from all the other aspects of sharing that living such intimately connected lives entails. As expressions and practices of relatedness, of that shared sense of identity discussed in the last chapter, the daily sharing of food and resources was just as significant as the daily sharing of time, space, company, concerns, experiences, stories, labour, care, and nurturance (Bird-David, 2017; Lavi, 2018; Lavi & Friesem, 2019b; Musharbash, 2017b; Myers, 1986; Schwarz, 2017; Sillander, 2019; Spikins, 2019). A key issue for me to acknowledge is the extent to which my illustration of a family network may have abstracted the "hyper-relational kinship context, where each individual is uniquely and multiply related to each of the others" (Bird-David, 2019, p. 18). For the purposes of this chapter, I wanted to illustrate Warlpiri relatedness through patterns of movement and sharing and thus the imagery of pathways and networks between people and places. Yet, as Bird-David (2017, 2019) has shown, writing in generalised terms

(about patterns of practices) often means losing something of the scalar significance of such intimate life-worlds. In the concluding chapter I return to this issue. I draw on Bird-David (1999; 2017, p. 18) to reflect on the quality of co-presence and engagement that comes from “being-with vivid and proximate others”, and on Warlpiri sharing as a practice that both creates and maintains relatedness.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I hope to have shown that a high level of mobility is key to the maintenance of Yapa relationships—with each other but also with the country and places through and to which Yapa travel. In the same way mobility sustains relatedness between Yapa through repeated, in-person, engagements, it is also fundamental to the meaning and experience of *ngurra* in all its layers of meaning, of Yapa having a sense of regional belonging, having strong associations to specific areas or places, as well as a sense of ‘home’ that can be created by being together, in a place, with family. I hope also to have shown that in the same way that people’s broad, geographic mobility can be thought of as networks or webs of relatedness, so do the movements of things, food, dogs, and people around Nyirripi. In the next chapter, these various kinds of movements, as well as the configurations in which they become significant as *ngurra*—in that dynamic nexus of people-place-things—will be brought to bear on understanding the order of Mae’s place.

Chapter Three.

Mae's place

When I think of Mae's place, on the one hand I see it as a kind of microcosm of the broader picture and processes introduced in chapter two. As a node in a network of mobility and relationality, it was a place through which people came and went and their mobility was reflected in its material landscape, as furniture and things were constantly moved and rearranged in response to changing needs and social situations. On the other hand, I also see Mae's as a place unto itself. A place—to borrow from Casey (1996, pp. 24-26)—that gathered and held together, in particular configurations, not only many Yapa and canine family members but also experiences, memories and things. A place to which we could return and find it not just the same site or location but “*the same place*” (Casey, 1996, p. 24, emphasis in original), wherein all that was gathered was held together in a particular way of being. In this chapter, my aim is to capture the social and material movements that characterised Mae's place, while also showing that, over time, they reveal socio-material patterns of life. In other words, that it was through movements and the relationality that underscored them that the order and coherence of Mae's place emerged. I begin with an explanation as to why I am using the term ‘place’ and how this relates to other terms like camp, *yunta*, *ngurra*, and house.

Why place

In the Warlpiri context the significance of the term camp—which derives from *ngurra*—is different to that of house, for which Warlpiri people have a different word, *yuwarli*. *Yuwarli* refers to the physical structure of the Western-style state-provided houses, in or around which, as Musharbash (2008b, 2013, 2017a) has illustrated, most Warlpiri people continue to live in camps. In part, it is because of this that I have adopted a phenomenological approach to place (Casey, 1996), as a way to acknowledge the simultaneous existence—presence—of house and camp, in terms of both their structure and symbolic meaning.

I came to ‘place’ by way of Casey's (1996) phenomenological critique of western notions of space and place. Casey (1996) begins with the taken for granted idea that there is such a thing as ‘space’, a neutral, pre-given medium onto which the particularities of culture and history come to be inscribed, with ‘place’ only being conceivable after such inscription. In

other words, that space exists before place, with places being “the mere apportionings of space, its compartmentalizations” (p. 14). Posing the question, “But when does this ‘to begin with’ exist?” (p. 14), Casey answers with a reversal of the assumed space/place relationship, suggesting instead that human experience does not start from “mute and blank ‘space’” (p. 15) but is, rather, always *in* and *of* place: “We come to the world—we come into it and keep returning to it—as already placed there” (p. 18).

Already and always *emplaced*, Casey suggests that how we know place is through human perception but also that there is a dialectical, co-constituting quality to this. While human perception is experiential, “an affair of the whole lived body sensing and moving” (p. 18), it is not pre-cultural or pre-social. Human perception is constitutive of but also constituted by cultural and social structures, practices and institutions—all the apparatuses we have for making meaning are as deeply embedded in our perception, how we experience and know, as they are in the place from which we perceive. “The dialectic of perception and place (and of both with meaning) is as intricate as it is profound, and it is never-ending” (p. 19).

“More even than earthlings, we are placelings” (p. 19), says Casey, meaning that our knowledge of the world comes from emplaced experiences and perception. Space, on the other hand, cannot be experienced in the same way. Space is a concept, a mental construct, a particular way of seeing the world, albeit with real consequences. To think in terms of space is to think in terms of measurements and spatial relationships, of mapping and boundary making. But the lines on a map—even when they are legally and geographically defined or controlled—don’t equate to place. They can be part of the experience of place, but they don’t sum up what place is, and often don’t even align with the experience of its extent or meaning.

As a case point, in Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2 I present Adobe-software improved versions of hand-drawn maps of Mae’s house and yard.²⁹ I prepared these during fieldwork for a specific data collection purpose: on a regular basis, I used them as base layers onto which I filled in the ‘blank spaces’ by drawing the location of all the material things that we were living with. In

²⁹ I produced these templates with amateurish accuracy, using the method of ‘stepping out’ to measure the size of the house, rooms, yard areas, and fences, and the distances between certain features (like a tree in relation to a fence). I then scaled those measurements in terms of squares on A4 graph paper. In the end, although the scale of some structures or areas in relation to others may be a little off, considering the method I used these maps are a proportional representation. I based the house template on the basic architectural layout and included only some internal fixtures. For the yard template, I included only the permanent and semi-permanent features and structures—the house, tin shed, chook cage, clothesline, fences, and bough shelters—as well as geographic features such as trees and the sand dune. Incidentally, the tin shed was one of the first Nyirpi ‘houses’ provided by the then Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) in 1984. Tin sheds like these proved unsuitable as dwellings in the central desert climate: too hot in summer, too cold in winter (Morel & Ross, 1993, p. 39).

total, I produced 79 pairs of these maps, with the first drawn on April 5, 2015, and the last on August 11, 2016. These maps remain useful for the purposes that I produced them: put together as a kind of flipbook and especially when accompanied with my field notes, I can trace some of the socio-material patterns of life at Mae's place. While I can tell stories with these maps, I don't offer them as a representation of Mae's place. Rather, they are an artifact of my own 'spacey' way of seeing and thinking, from when I unquestioningly assumed that Mae's place comprised a house and a yard, an inside area and an outside area. As a first step towards reanimating these maps, of acknowledging the dynamic lifeworld that they do little to convey (Chao, 2017), I draw on the work of Musharbash (2008b, 2013, 2017a) on the structure and meaning of Warlpiri camps.

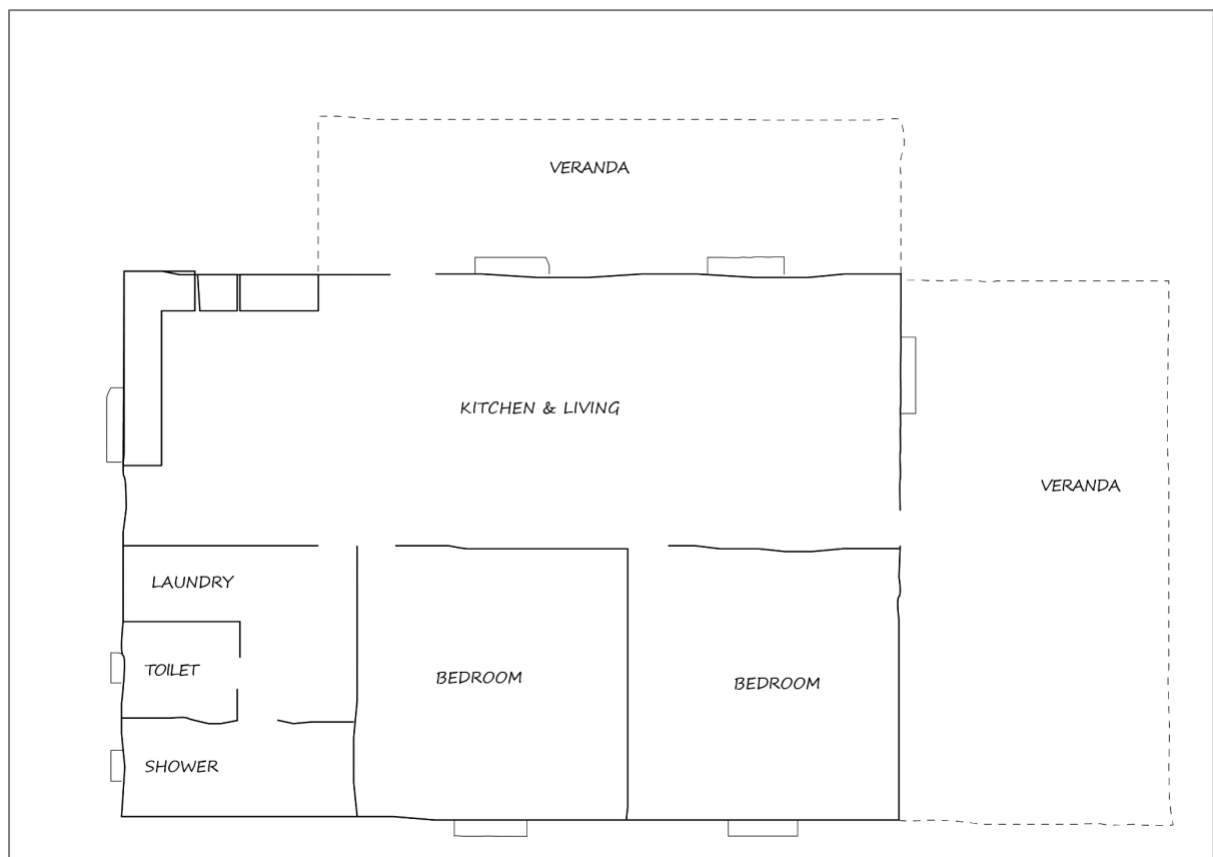


Figure 3.1 Mae's house

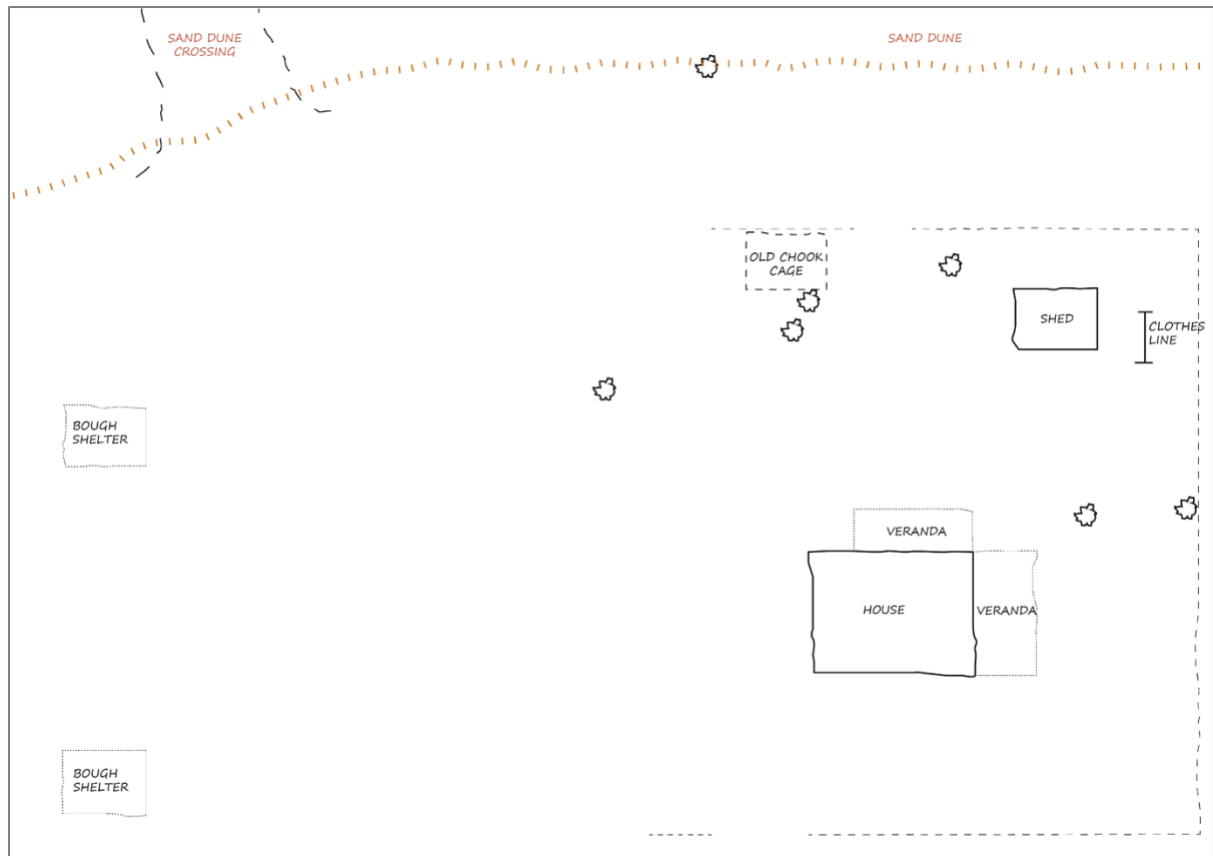


Figure 3.2 Mae's yard

Musharbash (2008b, pp. 28-45; 2013, 2017a) describes the structure, layout and symbolic meaning of “olden days” camps, or *ngurra*, the locations of which changed according to Warlpiri peoples’ mobile lifestyles. Camps were comprised of rows of sleepers, called *yunta*, which were spatially arranged according to gender and marital status: single men, single women, and couples had their own respective *yunta*.³⁰ The structure of a *yunta* comprised the row of sleepers themselves, who would sleep with their heads facing east, and who were arranged in a particular order, sheltered by a windbreak and flanked by a fire. With the construction of a *yunta*, and with the presence of the people within it, emerged delineated, meaningful spaces: *yalka*, the space between the heads of the sleepers and the windbreak, divided into individual, private areas for each sleeper to keep personal belongings; and *yarlu*, which refers to the space surrounding one or a number of clustered *yunta*. The distinction between camp and *yunta* can be understood in terms of this *yarlu* space: a camp can be made

³⁰ Like Musharbash (2008b, pp. 29-30), I am using *yunta* in its most expansive sense, as a spatial manifestation of a row of sleepers, sheltered by a windbreak and usually with a fire. In its more restricted sense, *yunta* refers just to the windbreak element of that combination.

of a single *yunta* with its bounded *yarlu* space, or a camp can be made up of a cluster of *yunta*, in which case the *yarlu* space emerges around the conglomerate. Whether or not the *yarlu* space was visibly marked—through the process of clearing the ground, for example—Yapa were aware of its boundary as a threshold and practiced appropriate codes of approach and entry into a camp.

Olden days camps were easily erected out of bush materials (sand, branches, grasses, fire) and therefore easily left behind when Yapa moved on. In their structure, and the social and symbolic practices that they sustained, Musharbash (2008b, pp. 28-45; 2017a) shows how camps accommodated for and sustained mobility, immediacy and intimacy; core values encapsulated in the concept of *ngurra*. Mobility as a constituent part of Warlpiri sociality, enabling the actuality of relationships to be lived, sustained and affirmed. Immediacy as both the quality of constancy of this sociality, of engaging and relating with others, and a way of living in the present that this entails; of allowing the moments and events of each day to unfold as they happen, by participating and remaining fully responsive “to the collective push and pull of ‘being in the present’” (Musharbash, 2008b, p. 11). Intimacy as the quality of everyday life with Yapa, of the deep awareness of each other that develops through sharing time, space, activities and stories, and a willingness to let this awareness of the other influence how one acts in the world. While I don’t explicitly adopt the framework of mobility, immediacy and intimacy, they clearly resonate throughout this thesis and I find parallels with the praxis of a relational ontology, of openness, flexibility and responsiveness.

Musharbash’s (2008b, pp. 40-45; 2017a) observations of the ways in which Yapa have continued to live in camps, albeit located in and around houses, resonate strongly with my experiences at Nyirrpri. As I illustrate below in the shifting configurations of Mae’s place, we slept in *yunta* organised according to gender and marital status, with *yunta* for women, men, and couples spatially distributed both in and around the house. Within a *yunta*, Yapa slept in rows, which were erected out of their swags, mattresses, bedframes and bedding, and as long as was practicable given the limitations of a room or veranda, we slept with our heads oriented east. When sleeping outside, a row of sleepers in a *yunta* was usually flanked by a fire and sheltered by a windbreak, which was constructed out of any number of materials, including a parked car. When sleeping inside the house, and depending on the time of year, a row of sleepers in a *yunta* was often flanked by a portable heater or a fan (or an air-conditioner installed in a window), and windbreaks were substituted by walls. Personal belongings were stored at the head of beds (often under the pillow, or under the bed if on a bed frame) but also in other places, like the car parked nearby, or the floor or cupboard of a room if inside. While

not quite as ephemeral as in the past (compared to both olden days camps and the Yuendumu camps described by Musharbash, which were erected anew each night), the *yunta* at Mae's place were always temporary; they were regularly re-located and easily accommodated changing social configurations.

A crucial contribution of Musharbash's (2008b, 2017a) work is not only the ways that Warlpiri people live in camps that are now situated in or around houses—thereby upholding the core values of mobility, intimacy and immediacy—but also how those core values are at odds with those embodied in Western style houses: of privacy, stability and future-orientation.³¹ In chapter five I engage further with the way houses, as particular material products of a constellation of Western history, values and life-styles, entangle Warlpiri people in forms of state regulation. For the purposes of this chapter, it suffices to acknowledge the central role that houses have played in various state policies and programs aimed at “civilizing”, assimilating, or integrating Warlpiri people. Embedded within the provision of housing is “the assumption that by living in a Western-style house, somehow one becomes Western or acquires Western social practices” (Musharbash, 2008b, p. 38).

Both house and camp remain relevant terms for this thesis, for the complicated reasons that while they are not synonymous with each other, they are also not mutually exclusive. Both at Yuendumu (Musharbash, 2017a, 2008b) and Nyirrpi (Faulstich, 1990), regardless of the kind of state-provided physical structure in or around which Yapa have resided—a tin shed or a cedar block house—Yapa have called it a camp (meaning *ngurra*). The important distinction is that although Yapa live in camps that are in and around houses, houses are *not* camps. By using ‘place’, I can acknowledge that camp and house exist simultaneously as part of the phenomenological experience of Mae's place, while also allowing the meanings of each to fade

³¹ A body of literature that is relevant here emerged in the late 1970s when architect Michael Heppell (1979b), amongst others, identified a failure of government supplied housing to respond to Aboriginal peoples' behavioural and architectural needs. In response, anthropologists and other researchers sought to contribute ethnographic understandings of the social and cultural beliefs, needs and behaviours that influence Aboriginal people's organisation and use of both traditional camps and western style houses. For example, the organisation of living spaces along private, public/social and gendered lines; the cultural rules about approaching and accessing these areas; different cultural beliefs concerning dirt and visual squalor; cultural practices governing the abandonment of dwellings (and belongings) following a death; how the use of domestic space may be influenced by kinship relationships and obligations, particularly around sharing as well as avoidance behaviour; spatial demarcations of different practices such as sleeping, daytime activities and ritual; the importance of being able to modify dwelling components to respond to a range of variables (as opposed to functionally defined spaces); a tendency to live around rather than in dwellings; and a preference for externally oriented living spaces, allowing for observation/surveillance of the environment and other people (see Downing, 1974; Heppell, 1979a; Heppell & Wigley, 1981; Keys, 1999; Memmott, 1988; Morel & Ross, 1993; O'Connell, 1979; Reser, 1979; Ross, 1987; Sansom, 1980; Stoll et al., 1979; Tonkinson & Tonkinson, 1979; Wallace, 1979).

in and out of focus. At Mae's place, there were times when the presence of the house seemed to come into great relief and to grate against those core values of camp. At other times, the house seemed more spectral, always there but more easily absorbed into the meaning of camp: it simply provided inside or sheltered options for establishing a *yunta*; or walls upon which phone numbers were jotted and photos of family members were displayed.

To clarify the terminology for the rest of this thesis, I use 'house' to refer only to the building, the structure of western-style houses. Similarly, when I use 'kitchen', 'room' or 'yard' I do so only to describe the location of particular activities.³² I will primarily use *yunta* to describe the spatial, material and symbolic manifestation of a row of sleepers but where appropriate I may refer to either a single *yunta* or a cluster of *yunta* as a camp. I use 'place' to invoke the presence of both—and more. Because Mae's was a place constituted not only by the structural and symbolic presence of a house, and of *yunta* that were erected in particular areas, but also by the areas we *didn't* use for *yunta*, where we would gather together only during the day, or that we tended to avoid altogether. It was also constituted in the shifting configurations of the material things that we lived with, in the symbolic meanings they brought to gatherings of Yapa—manifesting in thresholds around that dynamic nexus of people-place-things or expressing relational closeness and distance in the way they were positioned and shared.

A place isn't so much a *thing* as an *event*, Casey (1996, p. 27) says—“places not only *are*, they *happen*” and they can only be accessed, known, through perception and experience; you can't locate them so much narrate them. Being in (and therefore of) Mae's place was as much about being *there*—sitting on the ground with family around the fire—as it was about being in its history and story, so I begin by locating it in time and memory.

³² In this way, I am following Warlpiri usages of the term *yuwarli* [house] during my fieldwork. *Yuwarli* was only ever used in reference to a house in its structural entirety or as a locational term to describe the area or space of a house in which an action might or did take place. As examples of the former, when older people recalled the early days of Nyirpi, they often described it as time when there were no *yuwarli* [houses], only other kinds of shelters, called *yujuku* [humpies]. The progress of housing renovations that took place throughout 2015 and 2016 were expressed in terms of whether this or that *yuwarli* was finished or not. As examples of the latter, Mae would often express her preference for sleeping outside as opposed to *yuwarli-rla* [inside the house]. *Yuwarli-rla* would also be identified as an area that needed cleaning up, or which had recently been cleaned up.

Locating Mae's place

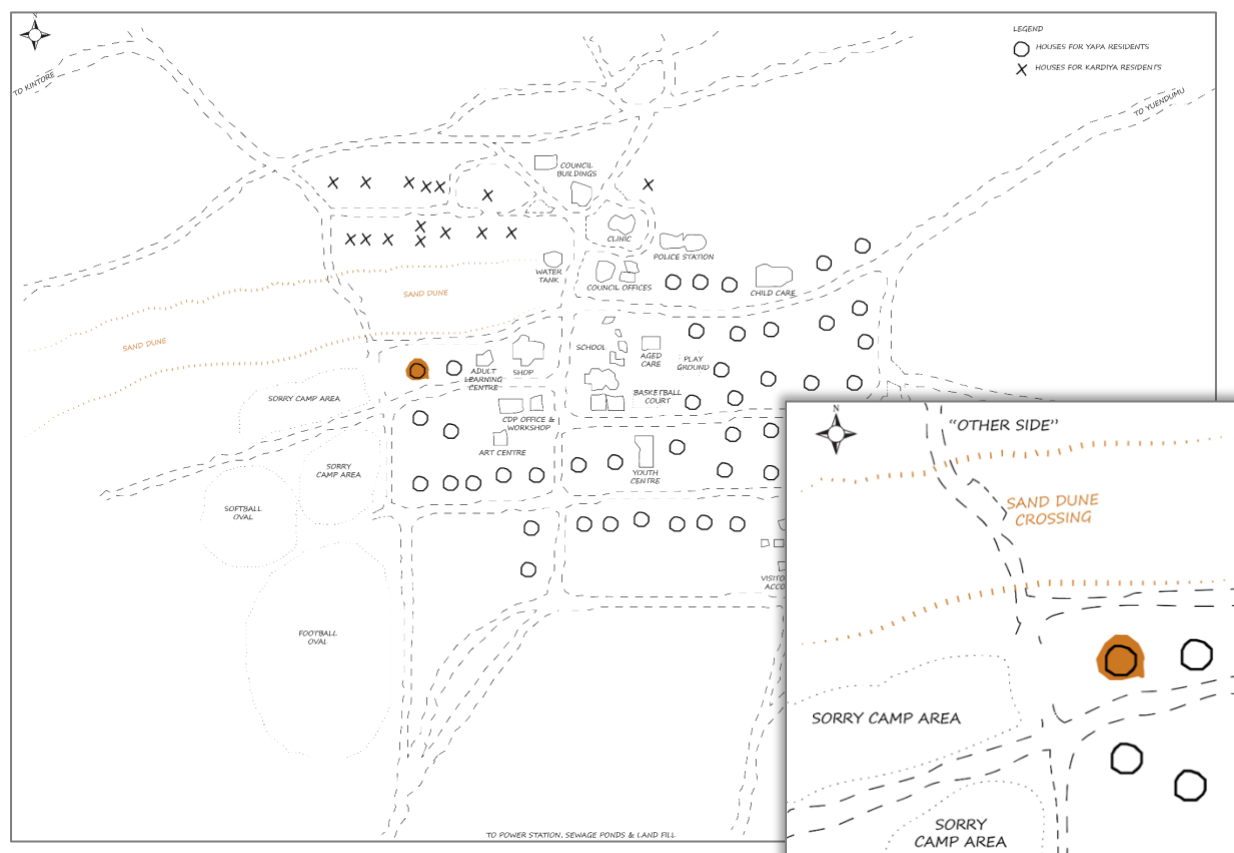


Figure 3.3 Mae's place inset

As shown in Figure 3.3, Mae's place was located at the very western edge of Nyirрпи; hers was the last in a single row of houses with only one direct neighbour over the east fence (Mae's now deceased brother's family). By my estimation from various stories, Mae and her extended family have been living there for at least a decade; a relatively long time as historically it is not that common for Yapa to inhabit houses or camps for long periods. In part this is due to the highly mobile lifestyle but also the custom of permanently abandoning the place one has been residing following the death of a family member associated with it (see for example Musharbash, 2008a; O'Connell, 1979, p. 111; Stoll et al., 1979, pp. 132-133). Another resident Wayne, for example, showed me eight different places at Nyirрпи where he remembered living, with each move save the last necessitated by a death. Wayne's father was among the founding families of Nyirрпи and as a young boy Wayne recalled living in tin sheds near where Mae's house now stands. The death of his father's brother was what initiated Wayne's first move with his family, to another house on the eastern side of the community.

Without having been with Mae and her family for the whole time, I cannot speak with certainty as to the reasons why they have stayed in one place for so long. The fact that they have, however, is indicative of a shift in recent years—at least at Nyirrpi—from the practice of permanently abandoning a place following a death to a more common practice of only temporary departure and then return following the funeral. As I experienced it, when a family member passed away those left behind immediately vacated the place associated with the deceased. This involved setting up a sorry [mourning] camp at one of the designated, open areas skirting the community, at which the family would then reside—sitting “in sorry”—until the funeral. Following the funeral, which in the Warlpiri context usually takes place a number of months after the actual death, and as long as a ceremony to “sweep” the deceased footprints from the place was performed, the family might then move back.³³ This shift in practice is likely due to a combination of factors, not least being the fact that houses are a finite and therefore coveted resource at Nyirrpi, meaning that once a family has been allocated a house they don’t want to give it up. As well, the increasingly bureaucratic controls over housing tenancy make it hard for families to simply swap houses with each other, as they used to do.³⁴

One of the outcomes of this longer-term habitation is that Mae’s place was imbued with personal histories, memories and associations. Along with Mae’s outstation—being another place the family has spent a lot of time living—it features in the “When I was growing up...” stories of Mae’s now young-adult grandchildren. It is also a place associated with lost loved ones, like Presley’s father and Mae’s second husband and sister. These Yapa were once part of the fabric of daily life there; and they remain located there in the areas and things they are associated with—like Presley’s father’s metal bedframe and the tin shed he lived and died in—and the stories and memories they feature in. To give just one example: as we were lying in our swags one night, Davina murmured a story to me about a time years past when Mae’s sister (and therefore Davina’s mother) was still alive. Big rain, so they were all sleeping inside; she and Presley in one *yunta*, Mae and her sister in another. Davina had a feeling and when they looked outside, they saw a kangaroo in the yard, just sitting there, looking at them through the

³³ See Musharbash (2008a) and Vaarzon-Morel (2016) for accounts of Warlpiri mortuary practices, including the ceremony of sweeping (while wailing) places frequented by the deceased.

³⁴ Yasmine Musharbash has observed a similar trend at Yuendumu, and suspects this has much to do with the new tenancy laws following the Intervention that make ‘swapping’ houses much harder than when housing was managed locally (esp. considering there was usually a chain of swapped houses to accommodate family) (personal communication, 19 May 2021). See Graham (2013) for a detailed account of the bureaucratic barriers to house swapping in Alice Springs town camps.

door. Mae took up the story then, explaining that some *kuuku* [monster] can change form; this one left when it was seen by them but then came back as a black dog. They threw rocks at it.

I mention this background partly because it seems important to acknowledge the family members who while long passed remained a feature of life at Mae's place; who were present for my fieldwork. I also mention it in order to locate Mae's place within the broader lifeworld of which it is part, of community and family, with a history and a future, of changing customs and younger Yapa growing older, and relations with non-human others—and to invoke the much larger scale of this, of which my fieldwork period was a tiny piece.

Outer thresholds

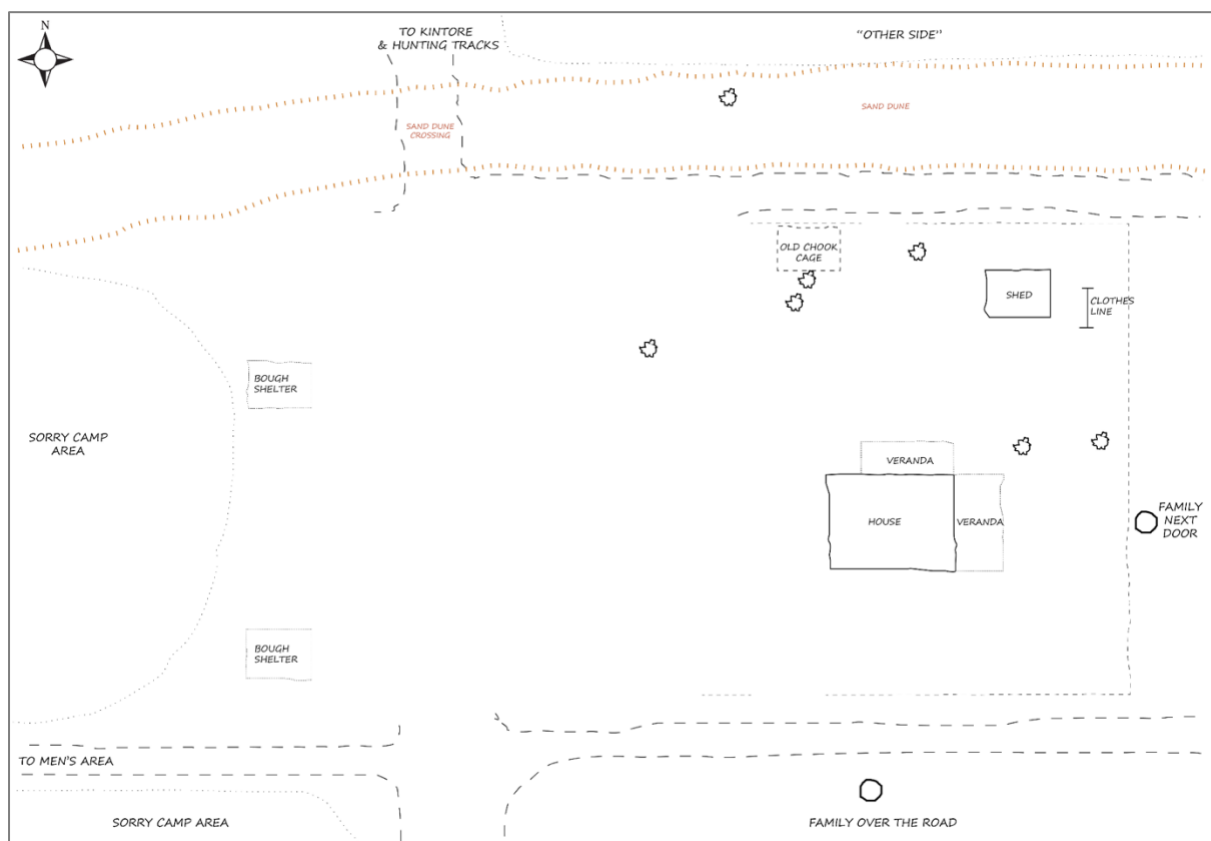


Figure 3.4 Thresholds

As illustrated in Figure 3.4, the northern extent of Mae's place was the high, east west running sand dune that constituted a natural boundary, blocking visibility to "Other Side" (the patch of houses designated for Kardiya workers). Its southern boundary was marked by a partial Lot fence and then a bitumen street, on the other side of which lived Mae's granddaughter

Kimberly, her husband Richard and their children. To the east, the street led to the shop and other parts of the community; to the west, the bitumen turned into a dirt track leading into the bush and, eventually, a men's area. That dirt track also divided a large, cleared area into two sides: to its south was one of the designated communal sorry camp areas, to its north was another sorry camp area but one used primarily by Mae's family and extended connections, as it was in effect an extension of Mae's west yard. West of the house, Mae's place extended as a cleared area of red sand with no definitive, material boundary: it seemed to peter out in stages towards an eventual line of trees and scrub. Areas between the house and the bough shelters felt fully part of Mae's place; used for everyday living, for sleeping, cooking and hanging out. Beyond that, was the sorry camp mostly used by Mae's family, and further west still was an unmarked line, which, if wandered over by a woman or child, was "too far"—meaning too close to the line of scrub and trees, well beyond which was the men's only bush camp.

The boundaries of Mae's place were visibly marked by community infrastructure, such as the bitumen street and Lot fencing, as well as the sand dune, dirt track, and lines of trees and scrub. However, in terms of the thresholds over or through which one had a sense of entering and exiting Mae's place, these visible features were just as meaningful as those that were invisible, that were created socio-culturally in the ways specific areas were used and by whom. In the comings and goings were less tangible transitions between private living and communal areas, between the community and the surrounding bush, between the bush and the men's area, and between Yapa and Kardiya sides of the community. In these ways, Mae's place was located at multi-layered intersections or zones, and it was from over these that we contended with different kinds of visitors, not all of them welcome. Indeed, a meaningful way in which the thresholds of Mae place—and its internal coherence—was made evident was in the ways different visitors either approached and were received, or whose entry we sought to discourage or protect ourselves from.

Kurdaitcha: as it was located at the periphery of the community area, Mae's place was especially vulnerable to incursions by Kurdaitcha, a type of *kuuku* [monster] that is invisible to Yapa (Musharbash, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Thurman, 2020). When sleeping outside, measures for protecting against Kurdaitcha generally entailed an opening up of the material landscape rather than attempting to erect physical barriers. One night, for example, Mae was made alert to the presence of Kurdaitcha, first by a strange sound that woke her and then by the dogs' barking. She had me move my car so I could shine its high beams into the direction they were lurking, while yelling out for them to go away. The next day she had Presley move a broken-down car that was near our camp, in which she said the Kurdaitcha had sat and watched us.

This example parallels Musharbash's (2013) description of the alert, watchfulness of Warlpiri people when sleeping outside; of the dangers that nighttime may present and the importance of being in open rather than fortified areas, in order to better see, hear and read any warning signs.³⁵ Houses, on the other hand, prevent such forms of observation. Protection measures for inside spaces involved further reinforcing their qualities of being cut-off from the outside: blacking out the windows (usually done with paint) and ensuring all doors and windows were shut and locked overnight. In these ways, while inside-sleepers were not able to observe their environs, by the same means, any lurking *kuuku* may not observe or detect those inside. When Kurdaitcha actually attacked, however, which in the worst case can entail being ensorcelled and killed or stolen away, the only means of protection was increasing the numbers of (especially senior) Yapa providing *marlpa* [company] and seeking treatment by a *ngankari* [traditional healer] (see Dudgeon & Bray, 2018; Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council Aboriginal Corporation, 2013; Saethre, 2007). On the occasions I experienced, at no point was it ever suggested that we move inside the house for safety. We simply sought more Yapa to join our *yunta*, many of whom would stay awake long into the night, keeping watch and singing out for the Kurdaitcha to go away and leave us alone. In other words, it is through Warlpiri sociality rather than material fortifications that Kurdaitcha may effectively be countered.

Kardiya: an ongoing concern for Mae and her family was finding ways of discouraging Kardiya entry. Especially those who were prone to using the sand dune crossing to access community areas, or who seemed oblivious to thresholds of Mae's place; who would, for example, enter from the street and come straight across the yard, right up close to our *yunta* without stopping first to seek permission. One standout example was the morning when a worker from "Other Side" drove over the sand dune and cut straight across our yard to the bitumen street. "Good morning," he yelled, as he passed just meters from our *yunta*, where I still lay in bed and Mae was making the fire. Incursions like this would send Mae into grumbling repetitions of, "I don't like", "I gotta block it off". Attempts to 'block off' Kardiya entry involved constructing physical barriers and obstacles, like the old trailer and broken-down car that Presley positioned at the base of the sand dune crossing shortly after this incident (these are visible in the maps of Mae's place provided below). Of course, Yapa coming in from

³⁵ Similarly, a preference for externally oriented living spaces that allow for the observation of the environment and other people is noted in the literature on Aboriginal housing (see chapters in Heppell, 1979b; also Memmott, 1988).

the Kintore Road and over the sand dune would simply circumnavigate these barriers and, with the wear of their tyres, ultimately created ‘go-round’ tracks for others to follow, including those Kardiya who remained blissfully ignorant of the fact that physical barriers had been put there for them.

Dogs: we humans didn’t need to do much to prevent other dogs from entering Mae’s place because our resident pack of dogs took care of that themselves. Indeed, Mae’s place was their territory and they marked (with their urine and barks) and protected its thresholds from unwelcome visitors, who they generally identified independently. If strange, non-family, or enemy dogs approached our place from the east side neighbour’s fence, from the bitumen street, or the communal sorry camp on the southern side of the dirt track, our dogs would rush them *en masse* and chase them off in a flurry of barks and stirred up sand. Similarly, our dogs were excellent guards against Kurdaitcha and Kardiya (see Musharbash, 2017c). Such reactions to strange, non-family dogs stand in stark contrast to the acceptance of dogs who were part of our extended family network. Mae’s brother Joseph’s dog, for example, or her son Jacob and his wife Miriam’s dogs, were regular visitors—and just as our dogs would head to other family’s places when we were away, our place was one of the options for these dogs when their humans were away.

Yapa: there were some stand out times when we tried to prevent entry by certain Yapa. When, for example, we had to barricade the doors and windows from Presley’s irate brother. And for sure, there were times when Mae or others would grumble about Yapa ‘borrowing’ things from the yard when we were away. My reading of the latter was that the grumble was as much about the anonymous taking of a thing—effectively denying both the autonomy of ownership over it and the relational element of sharing it—than the entry into Mae’s place in our absence. Mostly, Yapa knew and followed the codes of approach and entry into Mae’s place. Those who were not socially close enough to simply enter would either park their car at the fence line and wait for someone to come out, or they would enter by way of a third-party mediator making introductions.³⁶

³⁶ See Musharbash (2008b, pp. 42-43) for a detailed account of the ways entry into a camp are negotiated according to the social relations of those within and without.

Gathering family

Socially, Mae's place was characterised by patterns of dispersal and then coming together, and while there was a fairly consistent, core family grouping, the social configuration was always expanding and contracting, easily accommodating many others. The pie chart in Figure 3.5 is an illustration of all those who slept at Mae's place over the course of my fieldwork. It shows the relative proportion of the number of nights each person spent there and is of course a representation from my perspective: it shows data only from the nights that I was present to record the information. However, given the minor difference between Mae's proportion and mine (only rarely did I stay there without Mae), it is a good illustration of those who slept there when at least Mae and I were present. On that note, important background to this chart is not only the fact that Mae and I spent 35% of our nights somewhere other than Nyirrpi, we spent another 14% of our nights at Nyirrpi but sleeping somewhere other than our place: mostly at other family member's places but also in open community areas such as sorry camps. In other words, the pie chart in Figure 3.5 reflects only 51% of my fieldwork nights, when we slept at Mae's place, with the other 49% of our nights spent elsewhere. Our mobility—beyond and within Nyirrpi—is similarly reflected in the Yapa who stopped at Mae's place when were at home.

In Figure 3.5 I have out-dented six sections of the pie chart to indicate the core residents of Mae's place. Of these, the four largest belong to me, Mae, Mae's daughter Davina, her husband Presley, and their younger children, and Mae's granddaughter Erin, her husband Kim, and their children. In purely quantitative terms, we were not only the people most regularly sleeping at Mae's place, we were also those who most regularly slept there together, on the same night. In more qualitative terms, we were the ones who considered that place our home, it being a place to which we most consistently returned to in the context of our mobility, and if not the only then one of the main places we kept our belongings. Using this second criteria, I include other family members as core residents—Mae's granddaughter Sadie and her daughter; and Davina and Presley's eldest son, Mark. Sadie and Mark were unmarried, young adults whose mobility spread across a network of places: they would stop at Mae's for periods before moving on to stop with other family (at both Nyirrpi and elsewhere). Yet in the regularity of their returning, the way they related to the place, and the quality of their relationships of care and dependence with Mae and/or Davina and Presley they seemed like core residents.

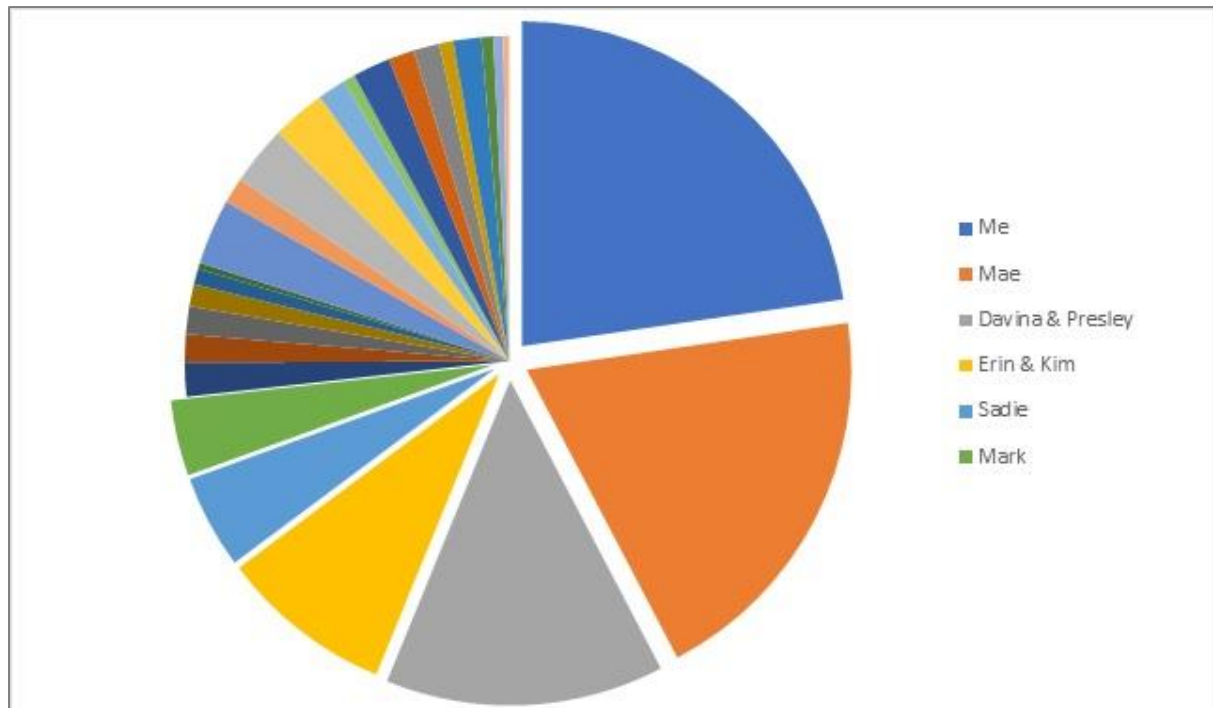


Figure 3.5 Core residents and visitors

The other portions of the pie chart are for family members whose stays ranged from regularly coming and going, to stopping only once and for a specific purpose. These include family who had their own places at other communities but who stopped with us in the context of general mobility. From Kintore, Mae's brother and her son Samson; from Yuendumu, her daughter Patricia, along with their respective wives, husband and children would stop with us when they came for a visit, a funeral or sorry business or when our place was a stop along the way to somewhere else. In turn, it was often with these people that we stopped when we were at their communities for various reasons. Similarly, Presley's brother Austin often stopped with us for short visits and in turn we often stopped at his place when we were at Yuendumu. Other family members stopped with us for discrete periods and for particular reasons. For example, Mae's son Jacob, his wife Miriam and their kids stopped with us when they visited from Balgo for men's (initiation) business, when they moved back to Nyirrpi from Balgo and didn't have a place of their own yet, and again when their Nyirrpi house was being upgraded. And one time, when Mae, Presley, Davina and Miriam's husband Jacob were all away, leaving just me, Miriam and her children at Mae's place, a group of women joined our *yunta* partially to provide more *marlpa* [company] generally but also because there had been some worrying Kurdaitcha activity.

A crucial qualification to make about the pie chart in Figure 3.5 is that it should be considered in relation to the time period of my fieldwork, being only 19-months. If the temporal scale was longer then a different picture would emerge: core residents may include deceased family members like those acknowledged above, Mae's sister or second husband, or Presley's father, while Erin and her family's portion would look even smaller as they latterly moved to their own place at Nyirrpi. The point of the pie chart is not to suggest stasis in social composition but to illustrate instead how Mae's place could, at any given moment, be home to any number of Yapa depending on a range of factors. Much like Musharbash (2008b) found during fieldwork at Yuendumu in the late-1990s, my experience of Mae's place was of social compositions whose configurations were always shifting, expanding and contracting.³⁷

As the detail in the next section will illustrate, to focus only on those who *slept* at Mae's place is to miss a large group of Yapa who were part of the daily fabric of life there. I refer here to the network of family members illustrated in chapter two, who lived elsewhere at Nyirrpi but who joined us almost every day to cook, eat and hang out. At our place, these gatherings occurred almost every morning and evening that we were home, most typically around the fire near mine and Mae's *yunta*, around which we converged, principally to cook and eat together but they were drawn out and deeply social affairs. During the day, when the gatherings weren't focused around mealtimes, we converged around a blanket or mattress on the ground, in the sun or the shade of a tree or bough shelter, to play cards, paint, or just hang out. As such, those who I have described above as the core residents of Mae's place, along with any close family who happened to be stopping with us, were just a kernel of a larger, intimately connected family grouping who engaged in a daily gathering together, to share time, space, food, things and stories. Such was the regularity of this, combined with the fact that it was the same people who we would disperse with—on hunting or other trips—that it is difficult to

³⁷ Musharbash (2008b, pp. 59-76) documented the high residential mobility of Warlpiri people through the camps of Yuendumu and argued that in such a context, "the term 'household', with its suggestions of boundedness, is rendered meaningless" (2008b, p. 60). Outlining the non-applicability of the term, Musharbash illustrated that although family groups were camping together in and around the spaces of houses, the constant flux of the social composition of those groups meant that she could identify no bounded unit that easily fit the term 'household'—whether defined as a social unit who live, eat, cook and share domestic labour and resources together, or more narrowly as just those who sleep together in the same dwelling. In short, her analysis points to a distinction between certain assumptions that attach to the physical structure (and government provision) of a 'house' and the actual, everyday social practices relating to Warlpiri domestic space. In this context, houses became 'stops' along people's pathways of connectedness, and the flows of people through them and ever changing composition of those who camped together was "a direct consequence of the way Warlpiri people organise their everyday life around relationships" (Musharbash, 2008b, p. 76). During my fieldwork at Nyirrpi roughly twenty years later, with the exception of the sheer numbers of people involved, the nature and extent of Warlpiri mobility tracked remarkably consistently with Musharbash's data (2008b, pp. 61-64).

distinguish between those who slept as core residents and those who gathered every day with us.

Shifting configurations

Like many Warlpiri homes at Nyirripi, Mae's place was characterised by an array of material things, which on any given day were in various scatterings and assemblages: from vehicles and vehicle parts, bed frames, tables, sheets of iron and mattresses, to chairs, blankets, eskies, milk crates, firewood, rakes, shovels, crow bars, tyres and tyre rims, to many, many smaller items like shoes, bags, tools, plastic bottles, clothes, cardboard boxes, tin cans, spoons, billycans, plastic food wrappers, polystyrene meat trays, tea bags, tin lids, and more. One of the reasons I developed the template maps of Mae's place was so I could record the location and assemblages of things on any given day, and then use my field notes to give these records context. One of the main stories to tell with these maps is how the shifting social configurations of Mae's place were reflected in its material landscape. In order to illustrate this, in Figure 3.6 I have reproduced the map I drew on 20 May 2015 using Adobe-software. Treated as a point in time, the configuration of material things in this map become traces of the social processes of life at Mae's place; where things had landed on that day tell a story about what's been going on, not just on the day I drew the map but in the days, weeks and months prior. For the sake of brevity, I have limited the story to two weeks.

A note about scale and detail: as shown above, I originally produced two separate templates, one for the house and the other for the yard. In the replication here I have combined the two, however I acknowledge that in doing so the scale of things in the yard is a little skewed relative to those in the house. I have also provided a key to the symbols that I developed (during fieldwork, in a very ad hoc way) for distinguishing common things. However, not all the things in the map have a symbol or are labelled and by their shapes will not be recognisable. Where this detail is necessary, it is fleshed out in the descriptions below. The labels for the blue shaded areas are shorthand for West Yard (WY), Kitchen (K), and Room (R).

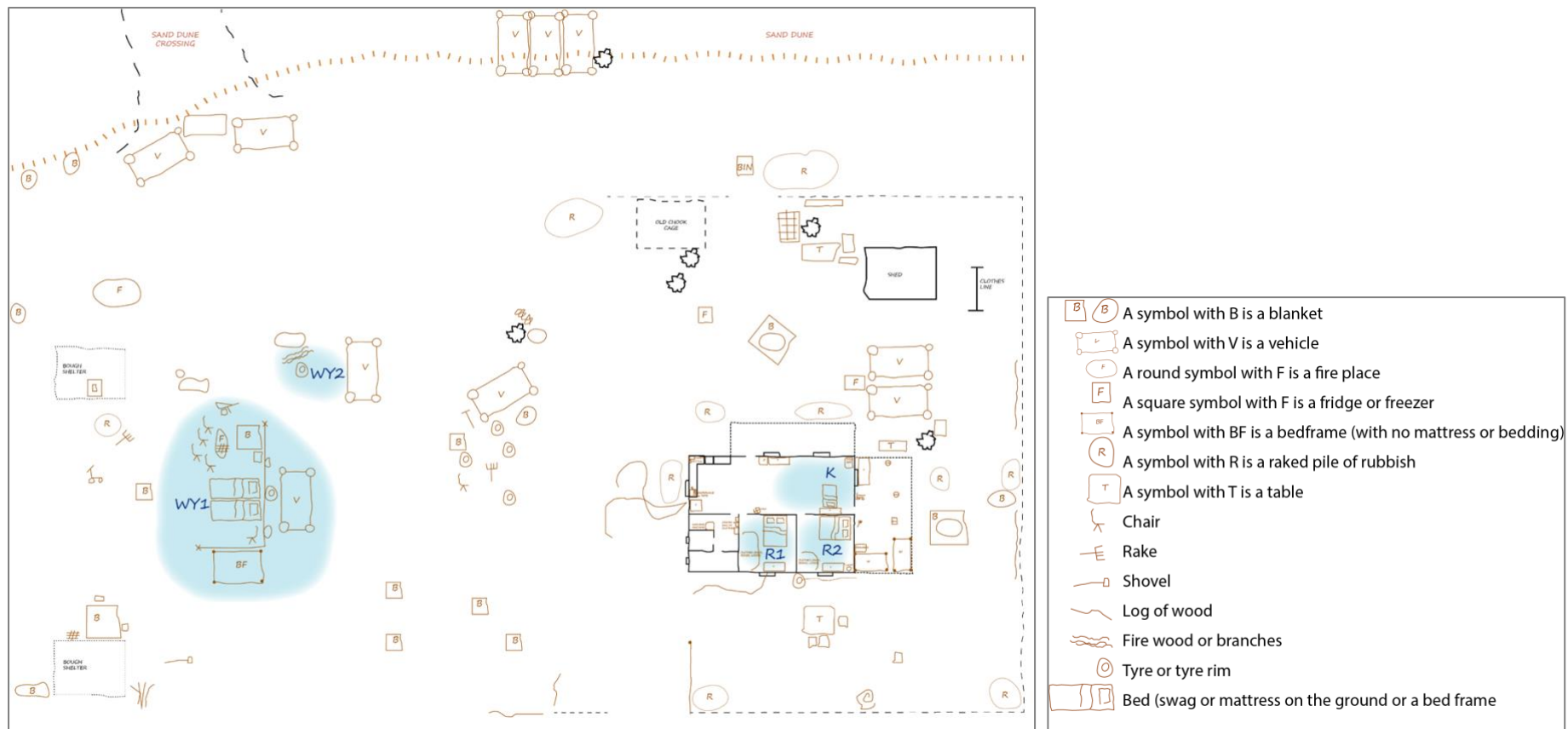


Figure 3.6 Mae's place 20 May 2015

Two weeks of social and material (re)configurations

Two weeks prior to drawing the map in Figure 3.6, I had been stopping at Sandra's place for a couple of nights while Mae, Davina and Presley were away (for ranger work and meetings). When they returned, I re-joined them at Mae's place and we all slept in the west yard for five nights: Mae and I were in our *yunta* (WY1), Davina and Presley were at an appropriate distance from us (WY2), and Cora (Davina and Presley's young daughter) alternated between sleeping with us and them.

Mae and I both preferred to sleep outside when we could, and we often set up our *yunta* in the general area of the west yard. In WY1, our *yunta* is comprised of a couple of beds pushed tight together, so that whichever of Mae's grand- or great-granddaughters is sleeping with us doesn't fall through the crack. We sleep with our heads facing east, my car parked as a secondary windbreak to the L-shaped sheets of iron we constructed when a cold, gusty wind started to blow about a week ago. Mae generally keeps most of her personal belongings—her handbag, bags of clothes—at or under the head of her bed, or in my car. On this occasion she's also piled and weighted down with logs some bags of clothes and spare bedding atop the spare bed frame (made out of a roof rack) just outside the L-shaped windbreak (when she returned from her meeting, she had a new quilt and pillow, which family at Yuendumu had given her). Nearby is a fire and various accoutrements, reflecting the fact that our *yunta* was most commonly the place for morning and evening family gatherings: a cooking wire for the fire, things to sit on around the fire (chairs, stools, upturned eskies, a blanket), a jerry can for water, pots and pans, billycans, pannikins, plates, bowls and spoons.

The tyre symbol in WY2 is the only material trace left of Davina and Presley's *yunta* for those five nights, which had comprised a double mattress next to a fire, both protected by a windbreak constructed from a sheet of iron attached to star pickets and propped up by that tyre. The mattress was moved to R1 about a week later, and the windbreak was dismantled and re-constructed as an extension of ours at WY1.

During those five nights, we returned from hunting one evening to find Presley's brother Austin had come from Yuendumu. Austin slept two nights in the kitchen (K) along with his (brother's) son, Mark. They set up a row of two mattresses and a table with a borrowed television and a PlayStation that Austin brought with him. During his visit, Austin helped Presley tow a broken-down car from Nyirrpi road, spent some time fixing cars in the yard, and cleaned the bathroom toilet, and kitchen areas.

With Austin's arrival, our evening gatherings became spatially separated along gender lines. Before he'd arrived, one of the evening gatherings was a particularly exciting one as it was the first time I shot a kangaroo. Mae, her great-granddaughter Pearl and I arrived home from hunting to find our fire already going and a group of family waiting for us: Davina and Presley and their son Mark, Erin and Sandra, Joseph. When these family gatherings took place around our *yunta*, appropriate separations according to gender and marital status were expressed in the seating arrangements. While it is generally not appropriate for a single man to join a gathering of women, it is common for a married couple to join such a grouping, in which case the sole man will generally position himself adjacent to his wife while also maintaining some distance from the women as a group. Often chairs are used to express this distance, so while women may cluster together around a blanket or mattress, one of the women's husbands will sit in a chair behind his wife. If more men join such a cluster, another woman's husband, for example, or one of their brothers, the men will then generally sit together within the group. Whether or not certain individuals will join a gathering, and the position they take in relation to others, will depend on the relational dynamics of those present. Austin was a single man, who was in an avoidance relationship with Mae, and who had a generally shy personal disposition anyway, so on the night he arrived, Austin and Presley took some chairs from our *yunta* (WY1) and made a fire at Presley and Davina's *yunta* (WY2), where they sat together, calling out for the kids to bring them pannikins, salt, sugar, or a knife as needed, while other men stopped by for visits.

The following morning, our breakfast gathering at WY1 included Davina, Presley and their daughter Cora, Richard from over the road, Erin who was stopping at Sandra's, and Mae's son Jacob, his wife Miriam and their two youngest children. Jacob and Miriam had recently moved back to Nyirrpi from Balgo and were stopping at Gary's place while waiting to be allocated a house of their own. Instead of joining us, Mark came out for a portion of breakfast, which he took back to the kitchen (K) for himself and Austin.

The day after Austin and his PlayStation left, Davina and Presley also went to Yuendumu, and Mae and I were the only ones sleeping at Mae's place for a couple of nights. It was on one of those mornings that we awoke to a cold, gusty wind, blowing in ever changing directions. Miriam and Jacob told me that two Yapa had been found dead in the creek in Alice Springs. "That's why this wind is here," they said, referring to the wind gusting back and forth, "Their spirits might be singing, trying to go." The wind persisted for about five days, sending sand flying in all directions and into our bedding, and the smoke from our fires swirling in circles and into our eyes. On the afternoon it had first set in, Mae almost decided we should

move inside, “Too cold.” But a fire built by her son Jacob ameliorated conditions somewhat, and instead she constructed a windbreak for our *yunta*, using a long sheet of iron that she detached from a bough shelter, and bed slats that had been sitting near one of the cars on bricks. She propped these up with various enforcements, including a single crutch, a crowbar that she dug into the ground, and some logs of wood. That evening, Jacob parked his car nearby to work on replacing its radiator, while I helped Miriam cooked dinner at our *yunta*, and Richard and Kimberly came for a visit.



Figure 3.7 Our *yunta*, 14th May 2015

The following day, Mae decided to make a properly reinforced windbreak. Mae used a crowbar to remove another two sheets of iron from the house veranda (they were screwed in, but she just cut the tin around the screws with hard, precise hits of the crowbar) and we used these to extend the one Mae had erected the previous evening into the L-shape wrapping around my bed. We unearthed three star-pickets from around the yard and installed them as supporting poles for the sheets of iron, further supporting its base using logs of wood and tyre rims. Mae then sent me over the road to borrow a rake, so we could “clean him up.” As I raked, Mae

pointed out the various things to be rescued before they were raked into a pile of rubbish: clothes on the ground were piled on the spare bed frame, and a small cup that she would use when we went for bush onion later that day. The photo in Figure 3.7 was taken after we'd finished this work.

When Davina and Presley returned from Yuendumu, they had a clean-up inside, sweeping out the two rooms and the kitchen, and then they moved the mattress from their old *yunta* (WY2) and the table with the television from the kitchen (K) to their room (R1). After a couple of nights, they left again, and didn't come back to Mae's place for at least two weeks.

On the same day Presley and Davina came back from Yuendumu, Jacob and Miriam and their kids came to stop at Mae's place. They had started to move out of Gary's and into a house of their own but the move was halted when a competing claim over the house resulted in some conflict. They came to Mae's place until the issue could be sorted out. For four nights they slept in a row of beds in the kitchen (K) and then, after a day of cleaning inside and raking the back yard to stockpile their spare furniture, they set the other room (R2) up with their mattress, a table and a lamp, and bags of clothes, leaving a mattress for their eldest son in the kitchen (K). This configuration, along with Mae and I outside (WY1) stayed the same for two nights and was in place when I drew the map in Figure 3.6.

Patterns over time

Over time, the material landscape of Mae's place could be read not only in terms of the material traces of current and past zones of activity, of those shifting configurations, but also in the patterns that emerge in the ways particular areas of Mae's place were used. A kind of patchwork emerges, which I illustrate in the map in Figure 3.8.

Areas of use

Blue shading indicates the main areas in which we would erect *yunta*, the distribution of which reflected the common configuration of a Warlpiri camp, of sleeping arrangements organised around the spatial separation of women together (often with young children), men together, and couples together (also often with young children). Both in the evening and during the day, the areas where we cooked, ate and socialised often overlapped with the areas where we erected *yunta*, which at Mae's place weren't quite as ephemeral as past Warlpiri camps. Yapa at Nyirripi tended to leave the structure, beds (bedframes and/or swags and mattresses) and bedding of a

yunta in place throughout the days and nights they were using it. In this way, beds during the day often became a focal point for hanging out. Not all daytime gatherings were *yunta*-located, however, and at Mae's place we might also be found around a table on the east veranda for evening tea and biscuits, or on a blanket in the south yard for a game of cards in the sun.

Figure 3.8 Patterns over time

The grey shading indicates the fact that the tin shed was an area that we tended to avoid. Presley's father used to live in there, and the family have fond memories of those days, how he used to get up every morning and make breakfast for the kids before taking them to school.

It is also the place where he died, where he was found by one of his grandsons. Inside were a number of things and furniture that he lived with and there was a sense that he still inhabited it, in both spirit and memory. The only people who regularly entered the shed, generally to clean and tidy it up, or store some things in there, were his sons, Presley and his brothers when they came for a visit. Only once was I aware of people sleeping in proximity to the tin shed, and that was when Presley's brother Austin came to visit and erected a *yunta* on its west side for himself and some other men. All others seemed to keep some distance from the shed, probably out of respect but there was also a certain aura around it, whispers of its door moving by itself, or always being open no matter if it was jammed shut, and some people thought Kurdaitcha lurked there.

The situation with the tin shed goes some way to explaining why the north veranda and the north yard were rarely if ever used for any kind of social activity or gathering. As well, the opening in the fence near the tin shed provided a back entrance to Mae's place for vehicles. Indeed, the main thoroughfares for vehicles, indicated by the blue dashed lines, correspond with the least socially active parts of Mae's place: the areas north and immediately west of the house. In these areas, things and vehicles that weren't currently being used were often stored. In Figure 3.8, for example, some vehicles on bricks are visible north of the house, and around the shed and nearby trees some spare furniture and whitegoods have been stockpiled.

Zones of activity

The blue and green shaded areas were the parts of Mae's place that were most materially and socially 'alive' so to speak, to which Yapa and things most consistently gathered and returned to, as they were host to the daily, socially dense domestic activities. In the daily moments of life at Mae's place there was a general circularity to the movement of Yapa and things: as people gathered together around a fire in the evening, or during the day to play cards, paint a canvas, or fix a car, or they decided to establish a *yunta* in a different area, the things and furniture that were needed were gathered and moved into the zone of that activity or purpose. Often such gatherings grew, as people and activities attracted more people, and with them, more things came into the zone of that gathering (chairs dragged over, another blanket spread). Once the activity or purpose of a gathering was finished, people would disperse. Some things might be taken or stashed somewhere for safe keeping—up high or in the car—if they were needed or wanted. Mostly, the material traces of these gatherings would be left, where they lay, until eventually people returned to re-engage with them or, more likely, they were gathered up

and taken to the zone of the next gathering. In this way, people rotated and shifted, from sleeping in the front yard, to a room in the house, to the west yard; from playing cards under the bough shelter to having a rest under a tree. With each shift, some things were picked up and gathered into current zones of activity, and other things were left behind, becoming traces of past zones of activity.

To give some brief examples of this from the two weeks above: in the area marked WY2 the single tyre is the remaining material trace of the zone of Davina and Presley's *yunta* from two weeks ago (before they had moved their mattress inside and the windbreak was moved by Miriam to become an even further extension of ours at WY1). In the zone of the still active WY1 *yunta* are the material traces of recent afternoon activities, when Miriam raked the area around our camp, Jacob made the fire, and a group of Mae's daughters and granddaughters sat in circles to crack bush coconut. In the area marked WY3 are the material traces of where Mae sat on a blanket to cook ashes; a zone to which she gathered needed accoutrements like a piece of wire mesh to burn the wood on, and a pan to catch the ashes as they fell through the mesh.

When I look at my maps of Mae's place, I see the material traces of such zones of activities and gatherings as traces of that dynamic nexus of people-place-things. Recalling the temporary manifestation of *ngurra* as camp—described above in terms of the structure and meaning of Yapa present in one or a cluster of *yunta*—it is in that convergence of Yapa, in place together, engaging in the social practices of being *ngurra-jinta* [of one camp, one family], from which the symbolic and meaningful dimensions of a camp derive, even in a localised and temporary way. Elements like the invisible threshold that emerges around a camp, at which different codes of approach and entry apply according to a visitor's relationship with those in the camp, or the most private space at the head of each sleeper's bed for personal belongings—these are symbolic dimensions of *ngurra* as camp that are only realised, manifested, in that dynamic nexus of place-people-things. It is in this sense that I understand Jackson's (1995, p. 149) definition of *ngurra*, “not as something given but as something made, not as a bounded entity but as a mode of activity”.

In this way, I see layers of place-ness in my maps. I see Mae's as not only a place with outer thresholds but also inner ones around moments and zones of social activity. When these zones came into being, when their nexus of people-place-things was activated, they were ‘alive’, dense with social and symbolic meaning. Thresholds emerged around them; some Yapa would be able to walk right over and join in the activity, others might not join at all, respecting an avoidance relationship with someone already present, or perhaps their physical distance equates with social distance after conflict. Others will join at a distance, if it's a female

dominated gathering a man might join if his wife is there but sit off to the side slightly. Relational dynamics play out, younger people are sent off to get things for older people, to work for them, and younger people demand the care in return—give me food, or money. They are deeply characterised by the intimacy of sharing, of not only things and food but time and stories.

In chapter seven I come back to this pattern to engage further with the relationship between the material traces of past zones of activity and conceptions of ‘rubbish’. As a precursor to this I draw attention to the red-shaded symbols labelled ‘R’ that indicate raked piles of rubbish in Figure 3.8. I read them as visible markers of the peripheries around those blue and green shaded areas, in which those moments and zones of people-place-things occurred. They mark the peripheries to which we would move our rubbish, first to the outskirts of those zones of activity and then, eventually, to the outskirts of Mae’s place entirely, over the fences and into verge areas. In conjunction with the grey shaded area around the tin shed and the blue dashed lines showing vehicle thoroughfares, the rubbish piles also mark the least socially active areas within Mae’s place.

Conclusion

The material things in Mae’s place weren’t entirely domesticated, by which I mean their placings and movements weren’t always bent to (just) human will. Sometimes strong winds whirled through the yard and sent all sorts of things flying into the nearby scrub, even pillows and foam mattresses. A serious sandstorm had the power to pick almost everything up and resettle it in new configurations. The dogs would sometimes snatch pillows off beds (or claim the ones the wind blew) and eat into them until foam stuffing snowed over the yard. And blankets left on the ground were eventually covered in sand from the wind, and rained on, and the dogs claimed them as their beds. Nor were the things (or areas) of Mae’s place bent to a system of categories structuring and determining where things were kept and how people used them. Mae’s wasn’t the kind of place that had inside and outside furniture, things that live in cupboards, and things that live only in particular kinds of rooms that are designated for particular kinds of activities or uses. I spell this out because, as my template maps testify, it can be very easy for Kardiya to look at Mae’s place and see *only* the house with its yard and then, perhaps, to start looking for a logics of order that corresponds with what one finds in suburban Australia. The house and yard were part of but not the sum of Mae’s place and they were not the aspects that gave it meaning as a *Warlpiri* place.

“Places gather”, says Casey (1996, p. 24, emphasis in original), and it is by way of this gathering action that I ultimately understand Mae’s place. The action is not just a gathering but a holding together, in particular configurations, of animate and inanimate entities, of things and people, but also experiences, stories and memories. What I hope to have conveyed in this chapter is that underlying the shifting configurations of Mae’s place and therefore informing the gathering actions that took place within it, was the kind of responsiveness and adaptability that are part of the praxis of a relational way of being in the world. A responsiveness not only to the needs and desires of present Yapa but also to environmental factors and the signs and presences of non-human others.

Chapter Four.

Sandra's place

Of all the places at Nyirripi where I stopped, after Mae's, it was at her granddaughter Sandra's where I spent the greatest number of nights. Yet, compared to the 51% of overall fieldwork nights at Mae's, I only spent 8.6% at Sandra's. This is an important difference to acknowledge. I spent so much time at Mae's that not only did I come to know the place itself most intimately, it was also from my position as a relatively constant presence that I observed the movements of people and things within and through it. By contrast, at Sandra's place *I* was one of the people regularly coming and going, so it is from this perspective I approach this chapter. As one of those 'nodes' in the relational network introduced in chapter two, Sandra's was one of the main places I would stay when I didn't accompany Mae on a work trip, and it was also where Mae and I stopped together for various reasons and periods of time. As well, Sandra's was one of those gathering points where we would regularly join family for a meal or to sit in the yard for a visit. And as part of our daily movements around the community or in our preparations for a trip somewhere, we always had some reason to go past Sandra's place; to look for, pick up, drop off, or have a quick word with someone, or to grab a crow bar or some other needed item.³⁸ So, while I didn't come to know Sandra's place quite as intimately as I did Mae's, through my regular comings and goings I was able to observe and experience both their similarities and differences.

What was strikingly different about Sandra's place was its material and spatial ordering, which not only felt more contained but was also maintained in the same form over time. At Mae's, the order of the place emerged through the movements of people, in the patterns over time of those shifting social configurations and inner zones of activity. In other words, the social and material dimensions of Mae's place reflected each other. Sandra's place was similarly accommodating for any number of family, who might make a *yunta* in the kitchen or the yard and call it *ngurra* for the period they used it. Yet, at the same time, it was characterised by a different consistency of form, there was a material and spatial order to which its

³⁸ This is similar to what Musharbash (2008b, pp. 127-132) described as the practice of 'hithering and thithering' that takes place before any trip, of stopping past multiple places to pick things up, collect or lose passengers and exchange information. A practice that underscores connections between people and places.

arrangement was always returned to, and a decorative aesthetic that was maintained in the context of many Yapa coming and going. Put differently, Sandra's place *looked* very different to Mae's, yet the quality of *being there* with family felt the same. In this chapter, my aim is to capture the experience of Sandra's place in these competing terms: as a place that accommodated the kinds of movement and gatherings that produced and sustained Warlpiri relatedness, yet also as a place characterised by the maintenance of a very particular spatial and material order. In these ways, I take the opportunity offered by Sandra's place to explore some of the generational differences in Warlpiri ways of dwelling in houses, and the role the materiality of a place like Sandra's plays in Yapa lives and relationships.

Maintenance of form

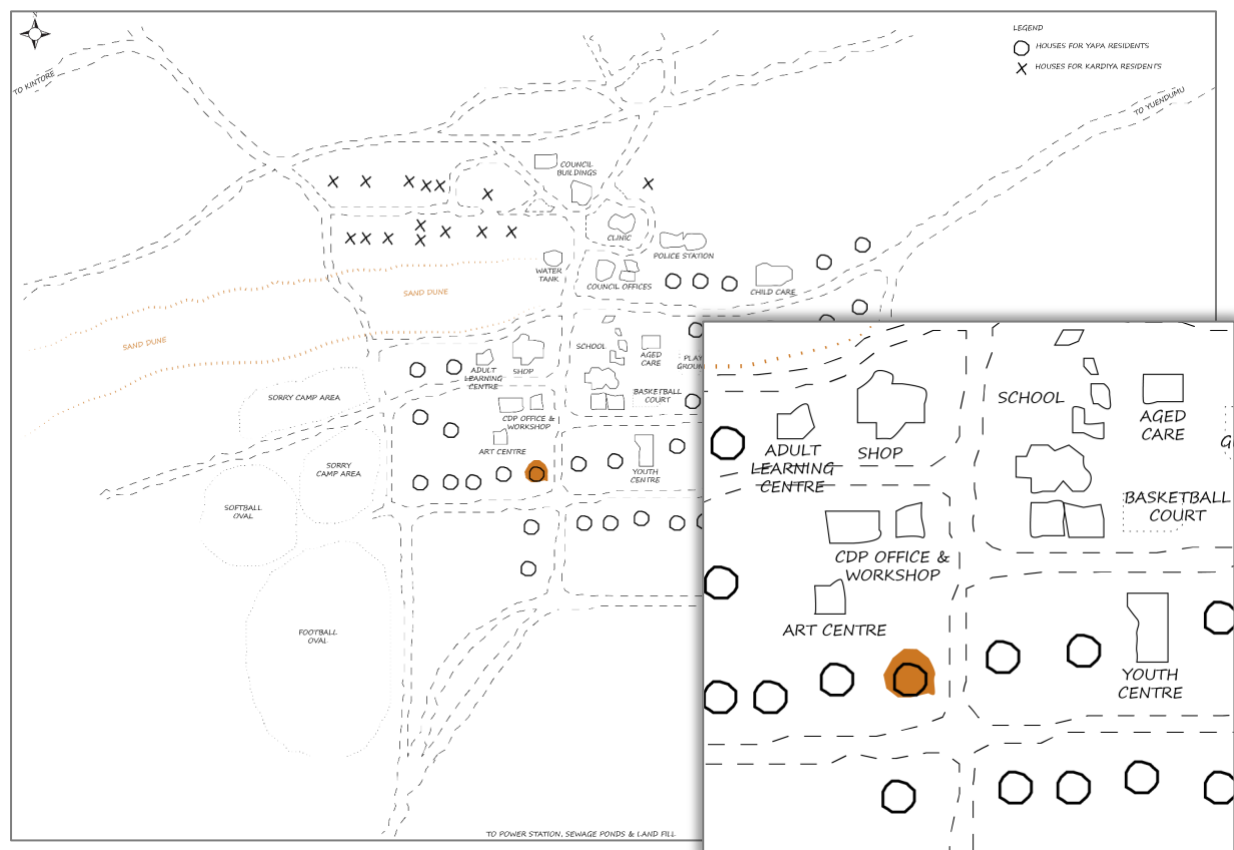


Figure 4.1 Sandra's place inset

As shown in Figure 4.1, Sandra's place was located close to a 'hub' like part of the community. It was on the corner of a street that roughly marked the divide between "East Side" and "West Side", with family in neighbouring houses over the adjoining fence to the west, and over the road to the east and south. To the north were the art centre and CDP (work for the dole) office

and workshop, the latter being where most community meetings were held. Sandra's place felt close to—in amongst—the sounds, activities, events and movement of community life. During the day one could sit in Sandra's north yard and watch the regular foot and vehicular traffic of people's activities around the community, especially around the shop, CDP buildings, art centre and school. In the evenings, sounds from various activities taking place at the youth centre or basketball court would drift over: music from the disco, kids playing and sometimes fighting, miked speakers and singers at the occasional church session held at the courts. From Sandra's place it was also fairly easy to keep abreast of "West Side" card games, which were often held nearby in the open area around the art centre and CDP buildings, or under a streetlamp over the road.

Outer thresholds

Like Mae's, the discreteness of Sandra's place was in part a function of its location and surroundings—in this case even more so due to its central position. On every side, Sandra's place was delimited by other community areas, whether other housing Lots or community infrastructure, and there was no open ground into which the yard could extend. Thus, the extent of Sandra's place paralleled its cadastral allotment, and its outer thresholds were entirely marked by fences. This physical structuring of its boundaries amplified the contained feel of Sandra's place, especially so because the fencing was actively maintained and reinforced. As an illustration of this, in Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3 I present the first and last maps I drew of Sandra's place. In the first, the fencing was mostly intact (a few small holes or sagging sections) and the access points were two driveways at the south and east, and three gates, one in the adjoining fence to family next door. By the last map, fence sections were reinforced or patched with shade cloth and wire, the east driveway and south gate were blocked off with sheets of iron, and the west gate through the adjoining fence was blocked off with the plastic of a large, deflated swimming pool. Some new fencing had been erected, joining one side of the south driveway to a corner of the veranda, effectively closing off the south yard. Along the west side of the house, the extent of the driveway was curtailed by a piece of railing reinforced with star pickets. These changes may be understood in light of the fact that the north yard was the only outside area of Sandra's place used for socializing, cooking and sleeping. With the east driveway blocked off and vehicular access on the south side restricted by the new railing, the north yard was rendered a closed off and safe area for foot traffic, kids playing, and Yapa gathering and sleeping.

To the extent that boundaries might be thought of in terms of holding out, certainly dogs' access to Sandra's place was actively restricted. No dogs lived at Sandra's but family dogs—ours for example—would often descend upon the place, either following their humans or trooping there independently when their humans went away. As far as I'm aware, once the dogs made their way into the yard then their presence was generally accepted. But Sandra was an especially active shoo-er of dogs if they started causing a ruckus and she was vigilant about keeping them out of the house.

Incursions by Kardiya were less of a concern at Sandra's place, due largely to the particularities of its location and physical boundaries. No part of Sandra's place could be used as a thoroughfare to another part of the community and, I suspect, Kardiya were more likely to recognise Sandra's place as 'private', given its boundaries were entirely fenced.

Kurdaitcha, on the other hand, are not put off by fencing but there is some level of protection afforded by the company of other Yapa. This at least partly explains why only Sandra's north yard was used for social activities, gatherings, and sleeping, as it was oriented towards and therefore buffered by that central hub of the community. Comparatively, there was very little Yapa presence or activity in Sandra's south yard or even veranda. I never saw anyone sleeping on that side, or sitting around to cook, eat or even paint or play cards during the day; it was largely a socially void area, used mainly for vehicle access and parking. This avoidance even extended to the kitchen entrance off the south veranda. It was so rarely used as a point of access to the house that the kitchen door generally stayed locked and was treated more like a wall, against which visitors sleeping in the kitchen would line their mattresses. The reason for this, as I understood it, was the south side was more directly exposed to the periphery of the community and therefore the direction from which Kurdaitcha would come. Indeed, the one story I heard about Kurdaitcha activity around Sandra's place involved an approach from that vulnerable south side and some strange sounds on the veranda, after which the need to keep the kitchen door locked and veranda lights on was reinforced. It was therefore through the entrance door on the north side that everyone came and went—during the day this door was always closed against dogs but rarely locked to family.

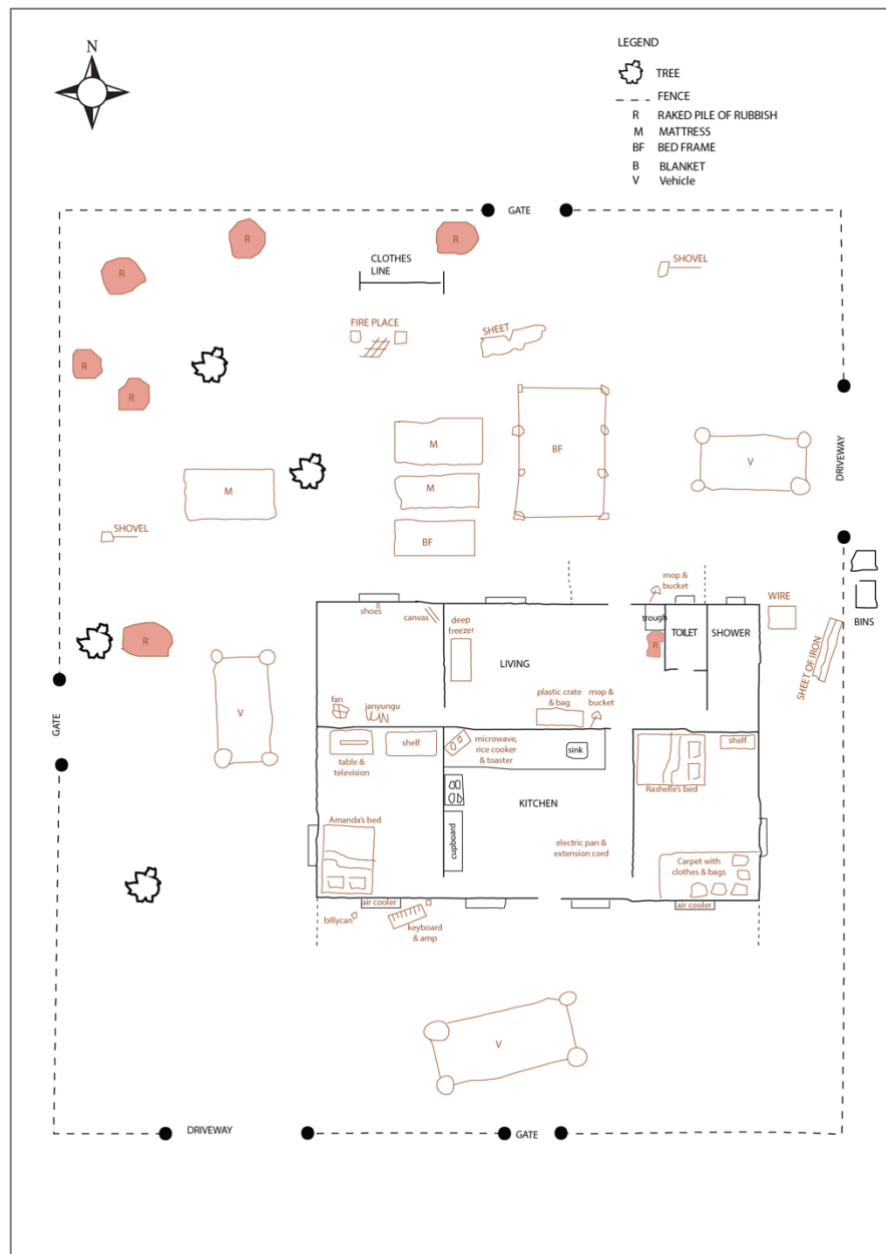


Figure 4.2 Sandra's place 31 March 2015

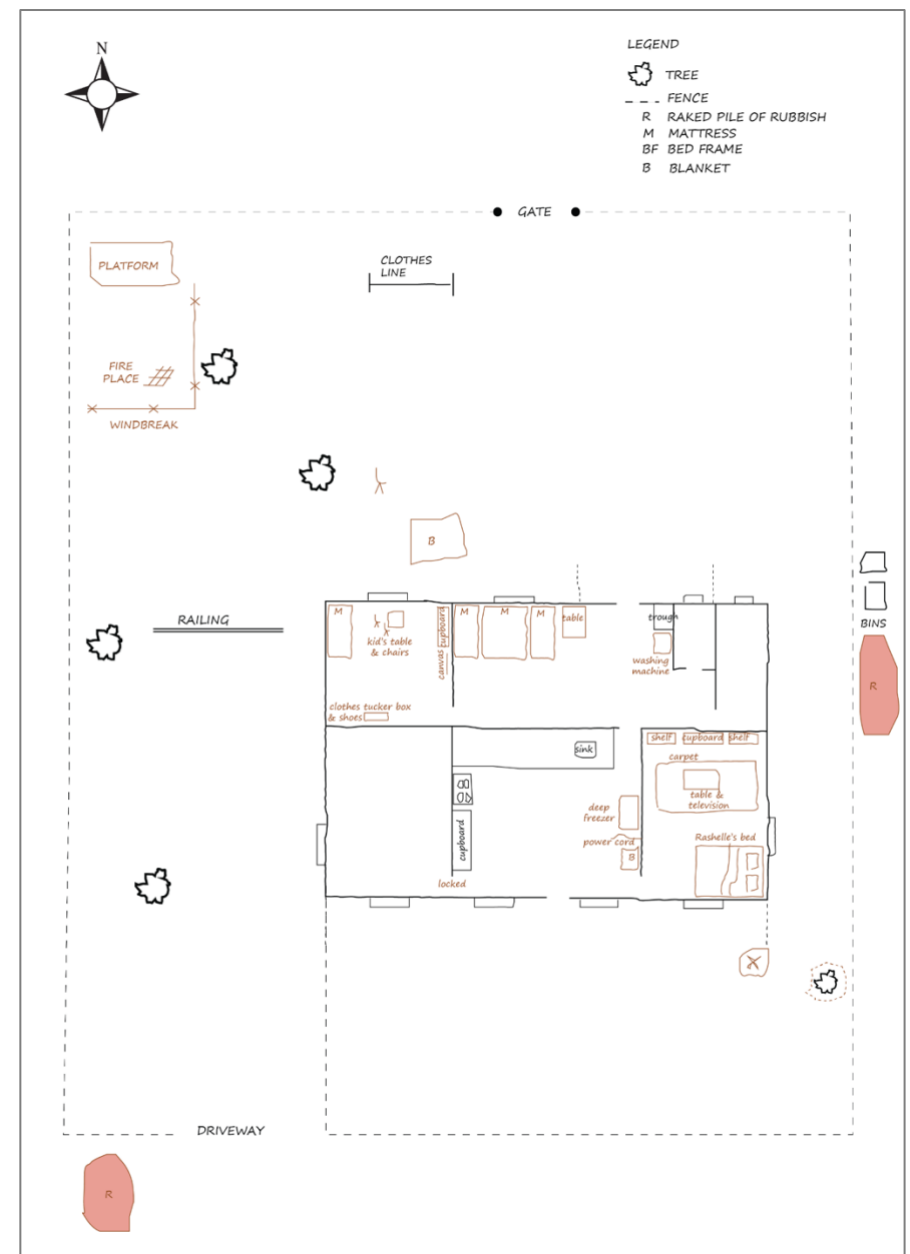


Figure 4.3 Sandra's place 13 May 2016

Internal arrangements

The discreteness of Sandra's place also derived from internal material-spatial practices that differed from at Mae's. A telling illustration of this is the location of the red-shaded symbols labelled 'R' that indicate raked piles of rubbish in Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3. At Mae's, we tended to rake our rubbish into piles at the peripheries of those inner zones of activity, before eventually moving them to the outskirts of the place entirely, over the fences and into verge areas. At Sandra's, raked rubbish piles tended to be more immediately created near the outer peripheries: inside rubbish piles were made at the door, outside rubbish piles were made close to the inside of the fence, and all were regularly moved to verge areas. Internally, Sandra's place had an established feel to it. There were occupied (owned) rooms that were furnished and arranged, there were things kept in particular places—kitchen things in the kitchen, bedroom things in the bedroom—and more of an emphasis on fences, doors and locks to mark thresholds. Most strikingly, there was a carefully curated aesthetic dimension, with decorations, posters, hanging mobiles, stickers, statues, trinkets and many photos adorning the walls and shelves. In combination with the peripheral placement and regular ejection of rubbish piles, this made Sandra's place feel less comprised of a patchwork of internal zones of activity and more a place with an encompassing coherence.

Designated bedrooms

The main core residents of Sandra's place were Sandra and her husband Noah, and Sandra's sister, Danielle, all of whom had had designated bedrooms. Sandra and Noah had one of the bedrooms off the kitchen, which Sandra would share with younger family members when Noah was away, her (sister's) son Elijah, for example. The other bedroom off the kitchen was Danielle's, which she generally shared with a female cousin or two. Although she rarely stayed there, Sandra and Noah's daughter Pearl would also be included as a core resident, as in qualitative terms at least it was considered her home and the third bedroom was referred to as "Pearl's room".

Sandra and Noah, and Danielle, tended to sleep inside most nights and often spent time in their rooms during the day and evening, hanging out with family, talking, listening to music, watching movies. They had furnished and organised bedrooms, the composition of which included ensemble beds or mattresses on bedframes, bags for storing clothes, tucker boxes for food supplies, heaters or pedestal fans, and small tables and shelves to store things and

appliances—paperwork, clothes, toiletries, decorations, speakers, televisions, PlayStations and lamps. Danielle (and sometimes Sandra, too) had a lock on her bedroom door and whenever she went away she would either lock her room up, or entrust the key to someone, like her young cousin Grace. More so than any other rooms of the house, Sandra's and Danielle's bedrooms could feel entirely disconnected from the outside world. From the combined effect of the windows blocked-out with black or purple matte paint and covered with curtains, and the temperature controlled by an aircooler or heater, once the bedroom door was shut they became entirely contained; their own internal and personalised places. I used to love hanging out with the girls in Danielle's room! Listening to Gurrumul on her portable speaker, learning the faces of all the family in the photos on the walls, watching Grace take to a money tin with my pocketknife, helping Danielle build a new cube shelf from Kmart and setting it up with toiletries, headphones, cords and chargers and decorations—picture frames, fake flowers in vases and pots, candle holders, and incense. Being invited into their bedrooms to hang out felt like another layer of inclusion, sharing biscuits and secret stories.

In stark contrast, Pearl's room, along with the living room, was a variably used area of the house. Pearl was a similar case to Mae's grandchildren like Sadie and Mark; unmarried young adults whose mobile lifestyle spread across a network of places, so her room often sat empty, or was used for storage or by visitors when they stopped. On any given day, these rooms might be mostly bare save a deep freezer, washing machine, or someone's canvas and bag of paints, they might be set up with a line of mattresses and other accoutrements for family stopping, or a television and mattresses for watching movies (these variations can be seen across Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3).

Things in place

Other rooms in the house were also characterised by the accumulation and particular organisation of things. The kitchen had an array of small appliances, including a microwave, kettle, toaster, rice cooker or electric frying pan, all arranged on the bench. As more cooking was done inside (as opposed to on a fire outside) there were usually a few pots and pans and a billycan or two kept on the stove. Crockery and cutlery were either piled in or on one side of the sink or stored clean in a dish rack (Sandra often reminded people to take their plates and bowls back to the kitchen once they'd finished with them). Food items were generally lined up along the kitchen bench or the floating shelves above the bench, and a common point of order was a row of plastic containers of tea bags, sugar, powdered milk, and cereal. On a ledge above

the sink there were usually detergent and cloths, and a lower shelf under the kitchen bench was generally used for a cardboard box bin.

A most striking element of Sandra's place were the decorations, examples of which are shown in Figure 4.4 and Figure 4.5. Family photos were the predominant decoration, found on almost every wall of every room. Sandra was particularly invested in collecting family photos, digital copies of which she kept on her phone and a computer at the adult learning center. She could often be found updating her collection by Bluetooth-ing photos from other's phones onto her own. Collectively, the walls of Sandra's place were like a visual representation of her genealogy, with old, crinkled and faded photos of long-passed family, to glossy prints of recently born babies. Spaced amongst the photos were other decorations like sparkly and colorful stickers, large Japanese fans, white cane hearts from Kmart, hanging murals, hanging strings of elephants interspersed with bells, and sports medals on ribbons. Similarly, on the shelves in the bedrooms, kitchen, and living room, were more family photos in picture frames, plastic flowers in vases and pots, candleholders and various statues and figurines.



Figure 4.4 Kitchen shelf decorations



Figure 4.5 Living room decorations

Maintenance of relatedness

Gathering at Sandra's

As with at Mae's place, Yapa would often gather at Sandra's for different social activities. When not inside, it was in the north yard that this occurred. Fires were less frequent at Sandra's than at Mae's, and even less frequently lit for cooking purposes. There were times when we sat

around a fire but more frequently the family gatherings were situated on and around a mattress, blanket or bedframe. Gathering points were established by laying a blanket and/or mattress brought from inside, a chair or two, and sometimes a bed frame. This whole cluster, or parts thereof, would be moved as needed throughout the day, to different sides of the trees as the shade moved, for example. If gatherings involved food, it was prepared in the kitchen and taken outside to eat, or cooking appliances—toaster, kettle, electric frying pan—were plugged into a “long cord” [extension cord] so cooking could be done while sitting around on a blanket in the yard.



Figure 4.6 Sandra's yard

A common focal point for these gatherings was a very large bed frame which was a semi-permanent feature of Sandra's place for most of my fieldwork. Visible in Figure 4.6, this bed frame was constructed from a heavy-duty sheet of metal mesh, large enough for at least four swags, and propped up by flour buckets at eight points. It was heavy, hard to move and was relocated only once to a different section of the yard. This bed frame was often used for sleeping by visiting family, and by Sandra and Danielle on the rare occasions they decided to sleep outside—when lots of family came to stay and they decided to join them for company, or it was a nice night, or there was no money for a power card (when the house powered down it became a much less appealing environment, too dark and often too cold or hot for sleeping, and unable to facilitate cooking and watching movies). As well as a bed for sleeping, the large

bedframe served as a place to sit around with family, especially in the cool of the evening or to soak up some sun on a cold winter day. In the later months of my fieldwork, this bedframe was dismantled and replaced by a new focal point for yard gatherings. Visible in Figure 4.3, this comprised of an L-shaped windbreak made from sheets of iron and star pickets, a fireplace, and a platform for sitting on made of the tray-back cover from Sandra and Danielle's old Ute, placed face down so it rose slightly off the ground and covered with a blanket.

Stopping at Sandra's

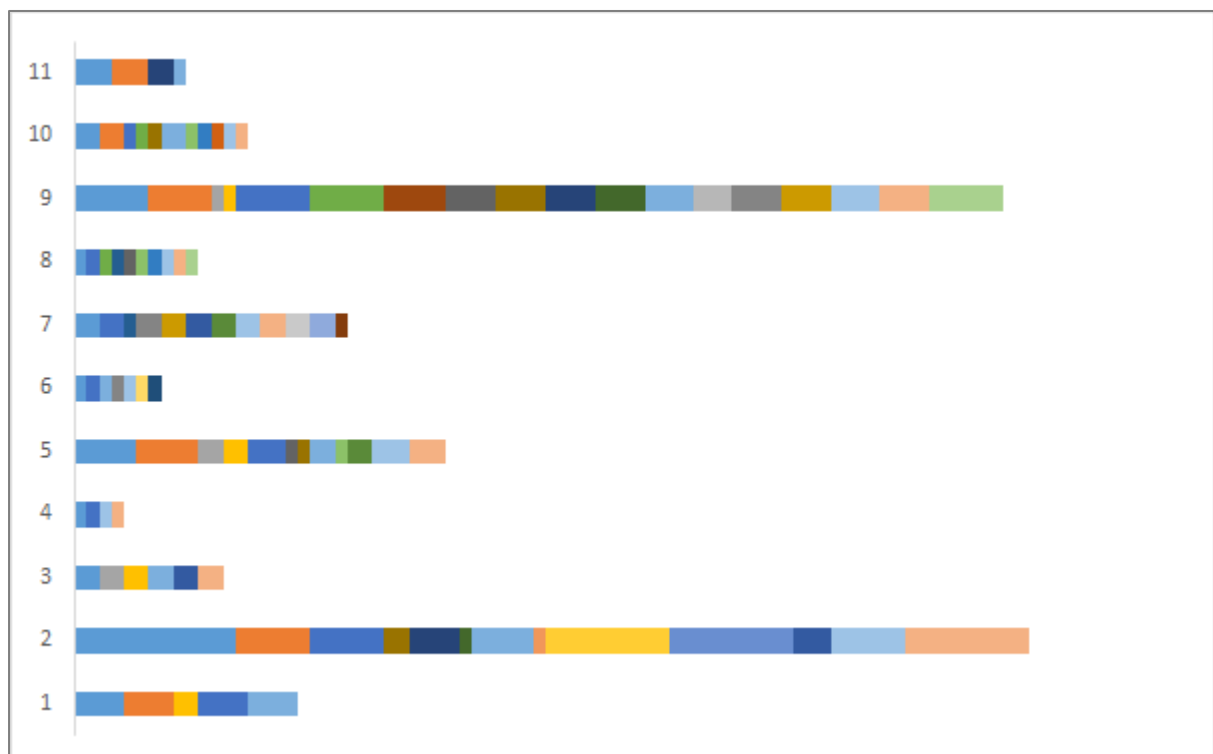


Figure 4.7 Stopping at Sandra's place

Throughout my fieldwork I stopped at Sandra's place for eleven, distinct periods, ranging from one night (on a few occasions) to my longest stay of two weeks. The chart in Figure 4.7 quantifies those eleven stays by showing all of those who stopped at Sandra's for at least some if not all of each distinct period I was there. Aside from the core residents, they include family with their own places at Nyirrpi who stopped at Sandra's for various reasons and periods of time; family with their own places elsewhere who came for a visit or who were stopping on their way to somewhere else; and young adult family members who lived across and between a number of family places at Nyirrpi and elsewhere. Despite (or, perhaps because) of the fact this chart represents only 8.6% of my overall fieldwork nights, it is a compelling illustration of

the similarly expanding and contracting and always shifting social compositions of Sandra's place.

Much like at Mae's, Sandra's place could fluctuate between very quiet times, of only one or two *yunta* in one or two areas inside, to a place that was full up with family, with numerous *yunta* in inside and outside areas. These fluctuations, in the number of Yapa who stopped at Sandra's, in the social configurations and spatial dispersal of *yunta*, and the material ways in which these were accommodated, are evident in the following description of my longest stay of two weeks at Sandra's (row 2 in Figure 4.7). Read in combination with the map in Figure 4.8, this is a useful comparison to the two weeks of shifting configurations at Mae's place.

Two weeks of social and material (re)configurations

My stay began when my return to Nyirрпи after a brief holiday coincided with Mae and Davina leaving for a work trip. I drove back from town with Grace and Pearl in my passenger seats and went straight to Sandra's place, only to discover that Sandra and Danielle—along with many other Yapa residents of Nyirрпи—had also left, in this case for a meeting at Lajamanu. I found, instead, some family from Kintore—an Elsie and Elmer—who I'd never met, sitting on the large bed frame, and planning to stop at Sandra's on their way to Lajamanu. My initial bout of shyness and potential state of having “no *marlpa* [company]” was graciously resolved by Elsie singing out to me, “Ya, Nangala, where you sleeping?” With this opening, I joined her on the bedframe for a chat and Elsie reassured me that if all else failed, I could have the large bedframe and they'd put their mattress on the ground nearby, “We'll be company for you Nangala”. In the end, and more appropriately, Grace and I slept together in Sandra's room (S) and Elsie and Elmer stayed outside on the large bed frame.

After a couple of quiet and fairly lonely days at the emptied-out community, during which it was just Grace and I sleeping in Sandra's room (S) with Elsie and Elmer outside (NY1), I was very happy when Sandra and Danielle returned from Lajamanu. Danielle unlocked her bedroom door and told me to move my swag in there, to sleep with her and Grace. We hung out, building a new shelf, organizing shopping and decorations, and talking lots of stories. Meanwhile, Sandra cleaned her bedroom and made a start on the rest of the house. In their absence, visitors had made quite a mess. That night, there were three *yunta* around Sandra's place: Elsie and Elmer outside on the large bed frame (NY1), Sandra in her room (S), and Danielle, Grace and I in Danielle's room (D).

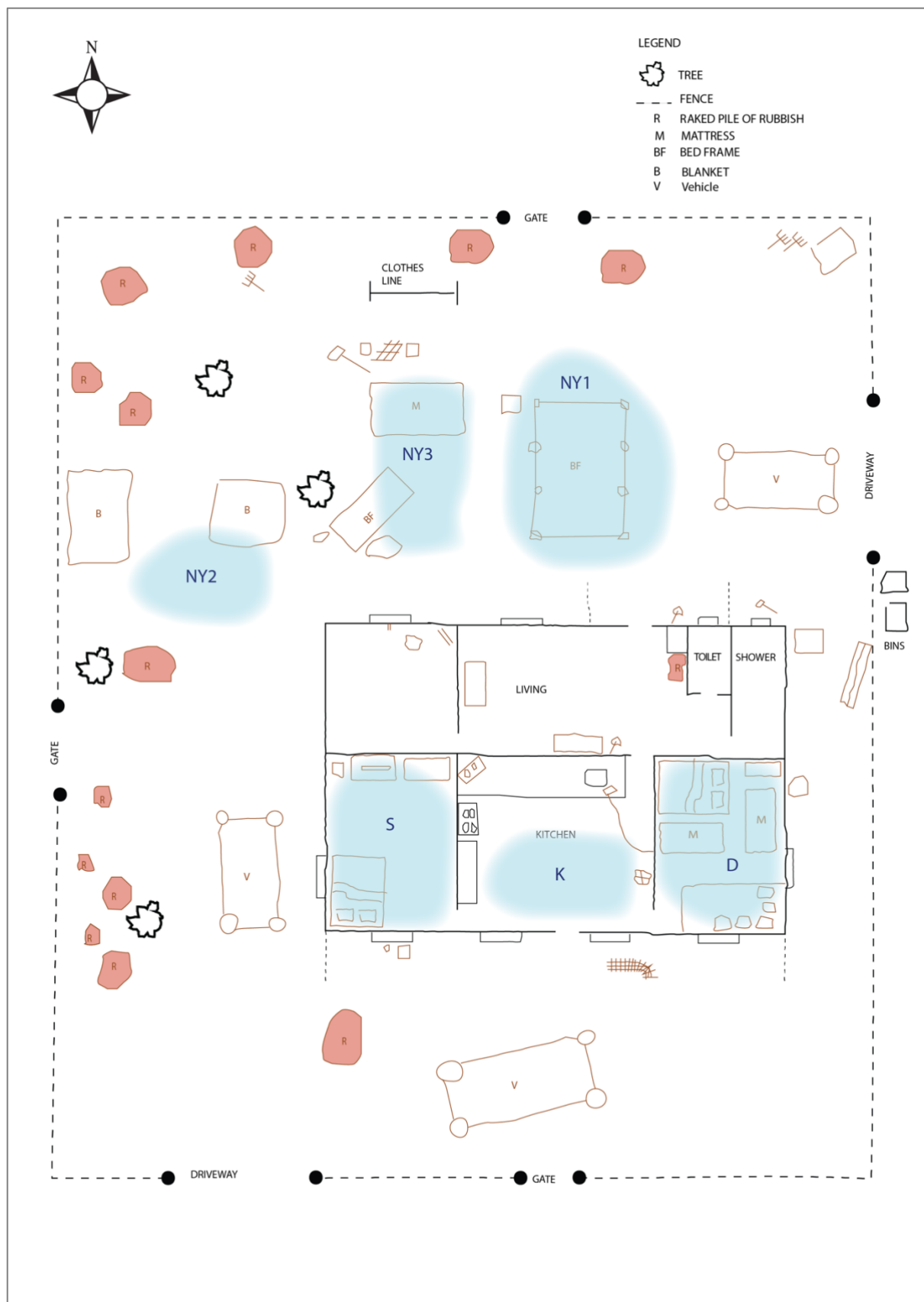


Figure 4.8 Sandra's place 5 April 2015

The following day, as I wrote in my field notes, “Sandra got us all cleaning”. During the day it was too hot to do much, we watched a movie in the cool of Danielle’s room, joined the family next door for some cooked bush turkey, and sat in some afternoon shade chatting. As the day cooled, Elsie started raking the north yard, and we all followed suit. Elmer joined Elsie in her efforts, and Sandra found some old blankets upon which to pile the raked rubbish (the better to move it to verge). Danielle borrowed their sister Kimberly’s broom, mop and mop bucket and she and Sandra started cleaning the house, while I lent my efforts to the kitchen bench. That night, the sleeping arrangements were the same as the previous night.

Sandra, Danielle, Grace, Kimberly and Richard left for a shopping trip the next day but before leaving Danielle left me the key for her room. Later, Patricia and Willie—Sandra, Danielle, Kimberly and Irene’s parents—came from Yuendumu for a visit, bringing with them Davina and Presley’s daughter Cora. Cora and I spent the rest of that day together, playing and sneaking the dogs Langa-Donkey, Maxie, Brownie, Spider, and Lundayi inside Sandra’s to feed them (the rest of our dogs were either at Yuendumu or not around). That night Cora and I slept in Danielle’s room (D) and Elsie and Elmer stayed outside (NY1).

The next day, Mae and Davina returned from their work trip, bringing our other dogs with them, and for two nights we three slept outside on the large bed frame (NY1), which Elsie and Elmer vacated for us, making their separate *yunta* on the other side of the yard (NY2). We sat in Sandra’s yard late that first night, cooking bush turkey, catching up on stories, taking phone calls from everyone in town.

The place filled up again when the others came back from town. We all stayed outside—Mae, Davina and I (NY1) and Elsie and Elmer (NY2)—and the others were inside, Danielle and Grace in Danielle’s room (D) and Sandra in hers (S). There’d been some trouble in town so that evening we’d sat up late on the large bed frame telling stories. The following morning, we were joined for breakfast by Richard, Kimberly and Elijah from their place, and other family from over the road.

Later that day, Mae and Davina left for work again, so I spent the next few nights sleeping with Mae’s grand- and great-granddaughters Cora and Ashley, first in the yard (NY3) and then in the kitchen (K). For those nights, Elsie and Elmer moved back to the large bed frame (NY1) and the others’ arrangements stayed the same, Danielle and Grace in Danielle’s room (D) and Sandra in hers (S), sometimes with the company of her (sister’s) son Elijah. On that first night Sandra got us all cleaning again. She took everything out of her room and swept and mopped it, asked Elsie to sweep the shower and toilet, and instructed me to shake out Mae’s left-behind blankets and re-make the bed to share with Cora and Ashley. I cleaned the kitchen bench

again—this time Sandra gave me a plastic storage bucket to wash the crockery in—while she swept and mopped the floors. Looking around at one point she lamented, “I used to have everything, toilet paper, shampoo, tea bag, sugar, milk, but family always come around”.

In the few days before Elsie and Elmer found a lift back to Kintore, they helped with another, this time quite massive, yard clean up. This one involved borrowed equipment—a lawn mower and trailer from the council—and the elbow grease of Elmer, Elsie, Sandra and Richard, taking it in turns to mow and rake the grass and load piles into the trailer. They managed one tip run that day, with another planned for the next day but which never eventuated (hence the proliferation of rubbish piles around Sandra’s south driveway in the map in Figure 4.8, relative to those in the map from a week prior in Figure 4.2).

The same day Elsie and Elmer left, the others went to town again, and Mae came back from work. For a couple of nights, it was just Mae and I in the kitchen (K) and Grace in Danielle’s room (D). They were some quiet days and nights. Mae went to card games a lot, coming back to Sandra’s for tea or to lay out some bush tobacco for drying, before heading back to cards. I floated around, visiting other families and doing genealogies, watching movies in the cool of Sandra’s house as Grace and others came and went, making food, getting drinks from the freezer. During the day a group of us gathered in the shade for a while, eating pies from the shop, talking stories, Grace washing Ashley’s hair and checking for lice. In the cool of an evening, I kept Kimberly company on the large bed frame while she waited for Richard to come back from hunting; they cooked and ate at Sandra’s place and then headed home. That night, having returned from their trip away, Davina, Presley, and Cora slept outside (NY4) and Mae, Grace and I shared Danielle’s room (D). It was this configuration that was in place when I drew the map in Figure 4.8.

A younger person's place

From the descriptions above the evident similarity between Mae’s and Sandra’s places is the ways the material environment was made to reflect and support the movements and shifting configurations of Yapa. A mattress or blanket could be brought outside and placed on the ground of the north yard, on and around which Yapa would gather to spend time with each other, bringing the same meanings of those zones of people-place-things. As well, the Yapa-made semi-permanent features of Sandra’s yard—the large bed frame or the windbreak and fireplace—correspond to the bough shelters at Mae’s place; materially marked focal points around which Yapa would gather for particular kinds of activities. Sandra’s place was a

similarly accommodating place for any number of family, who might make a *yunta* in the kitchen or the yard and call it *ngurra* for the period they used it. On any given night one could take a birds-eye view of the sleeping bodies around Sandra's place and find it confirming to the spatiality of a Warlpiri camp, with separate *yunta* for single women, single men, and couples distributed across the rooms inside and the north yard. A few nights later, one might take another look and find that spatial distribution had shifted with a change in the social composition of those present, mattresses and bedding will have been moved to new locations, or a whole room may have been rearranged.

Another similarity was the quality of sharing that took place both between Yapa during gatherings and between Sandra's and other places. Situated within the family network, Sandra's was a regular point of family gatherings and a point through which people, things and dogs flowed. Often, Yapa came to cook or share a meal, or to hang out, sharing time and company, swapping stories, playing games on phones or with cards, brushing or dying hair or checking for head lice. As well, those same family members often came for other purposes—to make breakfast in Sandra's kitchen before going to work; to borrow or reclaim the butter, or a mattress, a knife, a crow bar, a broom, or mop and mop bucket; to give a portion of meat from a hunting trip; to watch a movie, to use the phone, the stove, or the washing machine, or in Mae's case, to drop off her washing for her granddaughters to do for her. The quality of these movements and interactions counteracted the sense of Sandra's place as contained and discrete; it was also just as connected or networked along those invisible pathways of the family network.

Yet, at Sandra's there was also consistency over time not only in the ways particular areas were used and by whom but also in the arrangement and presentation of things in them. Disruptions were of course common. Washing machines break down, microwaves and toasters get thrown and broken in a fit of anger or frustration during an argument, cheap Kmart furniture breaks, a mess is made and left behind by a cyclone of younger crew whirling through the kitchen making food, or by me and Mae and all the dogs coming to stay for a few days. In amongst the flow of family visiting and the related eruption of stuff and food and dogs that this entailed, Sandra and Danielle maintained a fairly consistent order, a regular and vigilant response to the need to "clean up". Here, having family stay and "make a mess" seemed to be more of a disruption to a particular idea of order, rather than being the very process from which order emerged. In other words, the circularity of people's movements and the landing and leaving of things around them was a disruption to the form to which Sandra's place was always returned.

Often, clean ups at Sandra's place were initiated upon their return from being away and finding a mess left by visitors who had stayed in their absence. Just as often, though, those stopping at Sandra's place were drawn into the labour of cleaning. This distribution of cleaning labour beyond the core residents is no different to at Mae's place—there, too, visitors and non-resident family did a lot of cleaning. The difference is in the responsiveness with which this occurred and the order to which things were returned. What this meant was that at Sandra's place there were fewer material traces left lying around of those zones of activity. Whereas the material landscape of Mae's place was characterised by more of an accumulation of those material traces, the material landscape of Sandra's place was more regularly returned to a *tabula rasa* after such activities. For example, when we all gathered in Sandra's yard to cook breakfast, we would bring from inside a blanket or single mattress to sit on, a toaster plugged into a long cord, and food, plates, bowls, cups, and cutlery. After we'd finished, most of those items were generally packed up and returned to where they came from—bedrooms and kitchen benches. In short, there was a linearity to the movement of things, as they were moved to a place of use and activity but then put back 'in place' afterwards. Correspondingly, there was a sense of order that seemed more informed by a relationship between things and spatial belonging.

In these ways, Sandra's place fits quite precisely Musharbash's (2017a, pp. 81-83) observations of the changing home life practices of younger generations of Warlpiri people. Where just a few decades ago all Warlpiri did their sleeping and living in outside areas, using the house itself primarily for storage purposes only, these days there is a notable difference between younger Warlpiri, who are more likely to not only sleep but also spend leisure time inside, and those who are older, who "continue to orient their lives to the outside" (Musharbash, 2017a, p. 81). Correspondingly, Musharbash notes that the houses of younger generations can often be distinguished from those of senior peoples', in both the way they look and are used, and that there is a clear material dimension to this in the accumulation of furniture, gadgets, appliances, decorative items and kitchen utensils:

As younger Warlpiri people spend increasing amounts of time inside their houses, the inside of their houses changes—or, as they acquire more goods that make inside living alluring, their domestic space changes and with it their practices of dwelling within it (Musharbash, 2017a, p. 82).

The question that I found myself asking is what role the materiality of a place like Sandra's plays in Warlpiri peoples' lives and relationships. Sandra's was ultimately a place

that accommodated many Yapa stopping and visiting, in which kinship and intimate relationality was the fundamental value. Yet, at the same time, the materiality of Sandra's place did have a presence; it worked itself into the relational dimensions of the place.

The paradox of boundaries

The paradox of Sandra's was it was simultaneously a place with a lower flap on the gate to keep dogs out and a place where, on any given day, family dogs could be found lounging in the sun or eagerly consuming leftovers thrown for them; a place where bedroom doors had locks and a place where many family members stopped and hung out—including in those same bedrooms.

Many Yapa embrace the idea that fences can be useful for managing distinct areas. They are appreciated for their potential—and in some cases efficacy—for keeping dogs out, delimiting a smaller area for which one has responsibility and therefore has to spend time and labour cleaning, and at other communities keeping animals like donkeys and sometimes camels out. On the flip side, it is also for all these reasons that fences were considered a nuisance or hindrance. They create a barrier against which things left on the ground get caught against when the wind blows, creating rubbish piles and making a mess. For many Yapa they are an unnecessary barrier to a place they rightly have access to, so for ease of access people make holes in fences or dip sections all the better for jumping over.

In many ways, fences—and walls and doors—are material replacements of the socially constructed boundaries around a single *yunta* or a camp comprised of a cluster of *yunta*. Certainly, as physical structures they have more permanence, visibility or impenetrability. At some point an approaching person simply cannot go further without responding to the imperative of their presence; recognising that they mark a threshold and either adhering to its codes of approach and seeking permission to enter, or by circumnavigating them—as the dogs were so adept at. They are, in other words, material markers of the thresholds over which relationality is negotiated.

Depending on where one puts the emphasis, Sandra and Danielle's utilization of locked doors can be understood as a desire for greater control over access and sharing. Of the two sisters, Danielle was the most vigilant about locking her room whenever she went away and from her comments this was a strategy she used as much to protect her food and things from being consumed as it was to manage the levels of mess that family might make in her absence. Sandra and Danielle were certainly no exception to those many Warlpiri people who find

themselves occasionally stressed, frustrated or exhausted by the demands or messes made by “family always com[ing] around,” as Sandra put it above. Demands can be high on those who have acquired or have access to resources such as a house, things like televisions and washing machines, and who keep their tea bag container and toiletries stocked.

On the other hand, one might also interpret doors and locks as another example of the way Warlpiri relations are mediated through material things. Because despite their utility for restricting access and sharing (and, therefore, relationality) they mostly ended up being the medium through which access was enabled and granted. When Sandra and Danielle were home, for example, as well equipped, comfortable and climate-controlled spaces, their bedrooms became another point for family gatherings—cousins hanging out. As well, and even in their absence, their bedrooms were often slept in by others. Granted, this access was often with their permission and therefore limited and on their terms. In Danielle’s case, the lanyard with her bedroom key became a conduit for the transfer of those terms, of both their responsibility and privileges: handing it over Danielle would say something like, “You can sleep in my room Nangala, but don’t let anyone else in; there’s biscuits in the tucker box”.

Bedrooms and *yunta*

What is the relationship between bedrooms like Sandra’s and Danielle’s and a *yunta*? Do they subsume the social, material and symbolic structure of a *yunta*, or are bedrooms simply one of the areas where a *yunta* can be made? Symbolically, and especially in olden days camps, it was through the combination of the construction of a *yunta*, and the presence of the people within it, that the delineated, meaningful spaces of the *yalka* [the private space at the head of each bed] and *yarlu* [the outer boundary/threshold] emerged. Once people moved off, and the temporary *yunta* was dismantled or left behind, the meaning of that localised place also evaporated. These days, at least as I experienced it at Nyirrpi, once erected, *yunta* can remain in place for a number of days or even weeks—as for example, mine and Mae’s *yunta* in her west yard, which we would sleep in every night and then leave in place during the day as we went off hunting and so on. What happens to boundaries and thresholds when people are absent from the configuration of things they have left behind—when Mae and I were away from our *yunta*, or when Danielle went to town and locked her bedroom door? I think that even in the absence of Yapa they retained their symbolic significance as socialised places. If someone took something from the *yalka* space of Mae’s bed when she was away from our *yunta*, the violation of that would have been the same as if someone had broken the lock on Danielle’s door.

Materially, the structure of a bedroom operates nothing like a *yunta*. Walls and doors, especially when the latter is closed and even locked, have a permanence and impenetrability. It is impossible to use visual cues of social behaviour when approaching, to know who may be inside and whether one's presence would be appropriate. One is required to declare one's presence using other cues, calling out or knocking. At the same time, once bedrooms are 'owned' and occupied in the way Sandra's and Danielle's were, they become identified and known as such—like a married couple's or single women's *yunta*—and in this way those who would approach was limited anyway. There would have been men at Nyirrpi for example who would not have gone knocking on Danielle's bedroom door, even simply to borrow something, without the company of their wife or a sister to mediate the appropriateness of their presence.

Once inside, bedrooms like Sandra's and Danielle's have an enhanced quality of intimacy, in the sense that one is sharing another's personalised space. As Musharbash (2017a, p. 84; see also Jackson, 1995) observed, this is the greatest difference between sleeping and being in bedrooms compared to a *yunta* outside, where the temperature, breeze, stars, sounds, and smells of *ngurra* as country are the same as *ngurra* as camp. Phenomenologically this represents a radical split "between home as the inside of a house, where much time is spent, and 'the world'". Dwelling outside means "country can be observed and experienced." Rooms, on the other hand, operated as private and internal places with their own sensuous experience, disconnected from the external environment.

Socially, bedrooms like Sandra's and Danielle's bear similarities and differences to a *yunta*. On a few occasions there was a single sleeper in both Sandra's and Danielle's room. Sandra slept alone in her room a few times that I was aware of—although it is also possible that another family member, like her (sister's) son Elijah simply joined her after I went to bed and therefore didn't notice. There was also a time when Grace slept alone in Danielle's room, with the door locked, while Mae and I slept on the other side of the door in the kitchen. Although rare, these are noteworthy for the shift in practice of Yapa always sleeping with company. I wonder if the quality of being inside those rooms and behind a locked door is of a safe place, especially when one considers that company was always still dispersed in other *yunta* around the place, in another room, on the other side of a locked door—I would be surprised to find Yapa sleeping alone in a room if the rest of the place was empty.

For the most part, the rooms at Amada's place were slept in by Yapa in company with each other, often in shifting configurations. Materially, the size and walls of bedrooms limited the extent to which a row of sleepers could be added to, and sometimes the arrangement of furniture made it hard to even sleep in a small row. This is evident in the map in Figure 4.8,

when Mae, Grace and I slept in Danielle's room: while Grace slept in Danielle's bed, Mae and I had to fit our mattresses on the floor around the other furniture. As well, the configuration of sleepers changed according to who was around and who needed company. In response to such changing social situations, there were times when both Sandra and Danielle decided not to sleep in their bedrooms, in order to join as company other family who were sleeping in the living room or outside, or to allow others—Grace and her new husband—the use of a room. In short, Sandra's place was characterised by that same principle of responding to immediate needs and situations, of which the comings and goings—the mobility—of family was a big factor. Bedrooms like Sandra's and Danielle's were structurally and materially very different to *yunta*, yet they were still lived and slept in in ways that sustained and maintained relationality.

Things beyond sharing?

Recalling the role of sharing in Warlpiri relationality, what does it mean for a place like Sandra's to be adorned with so many decorations and family photos? As described above, for the most part the ways in which Yapa shared food, things, time, company and so on at Sandra's was an illustration of intimate relationality. As well, Sandra and Danielle's attitude towards household furniture and appliances was fairly pragmatic; the accumulation of 'household' stuff like furniture and appliances wasn't tied to personal identity or status, or displayed as a sign of class or wealth. There was a casual acceptance if such things were broken or taken by family. The loss was lamented—too many family coming around—but I read this as largely because those things then needed to be replaced, which involved effort and cost (saving up money, a trip to town). The collection and curation of photographs and decorations, however, suggest that some things are finding a place in Warlpiri homes and lives in ways that create potential limitations to sharing. This is illustrated by the following story Sandra and Danielle told me about when Mabel, Mae's son's wife and therefore Sandra's and Danielle's aunty came to their place one day: "Mabel came in and she was looking around, looking, looking," Sandra recalled, "and then Mabel said, 'Hey Sandra, I'll take this?'" Sandra pointed to a Japanese fan hanging on the wall, showing me what was by then a replacement of the fan Mabel had taken. "Then she was in my room," said Danielle, picking up the story, "she was looking around, looking, looking, at all the photos. Then she said 'Hey, Danielle, can I take these two photos, that one and that one?'" "No!" was Danielle's response, "You can easy print them in town, I told her."

After she left with the fan, but not the photos, Sandra recalled, “Well, we were sad now, that fan was missing. We had to get new one in town.”

On the one hand, the sourcing and collecting of decorations and family photos was another means by which Sandra’s and Danielle’s relationality with others was actually extended and mediated through things. Often it was from family members—their sisters, their parents—that such decorations were acquired, brought back as gifts from shopping trips in town or blue-toothed from other’s phones. The digitization of photos makes sharing easy, not simply because of technology like Bluetooth but also the potential for unlimited reproduction. On the other hand, once adorning the walls and shelves of Sandra’s place they seemed to be in a place that was a little beyond the reach of sharing practices; to be inscribed with other values and meaning, related to the holding of memory, nostalgia, emotion, and aesthetic tastes. Once in place, the family photos and decorations became part of the environment—the atmosphere—within which Yapa could be family together, rather than directly implicated in the sharing practices that are so deeply connected to such relationality.

Conclusion

For this thesis I resisted the idea I could present any Warlpiri home at Nyirrpī as an example of ‘how Warlpiri people live in houses with things’. I am not seeking to ‘typologise’ Warlpiri homes or living. This is another reason why I find ‘place’ productive; a phenomenological approach offers a way of engaging with both Mae’s and Sandra’s in the terms that made them distinctive as places unto themselves. Rather than approaching or analysing them through the terms of a house or a Warlpiri *ngurra*/camp, I have sought a way to let their ‘placeness’ come to the fore—at least as I experienced them. In other words, I have found ‘place’ a productive means for asking about the experience of being at Mae’s and Sandra’s and to explore the material and relational dynamics at play in this. At Mae’s place, it was the constantly shifting social and material configurations that I was initially struck by, which at first, for me, belied the order that I was eventually able to ‘see’. At Sandra’s place, I was first struck by its material and spatial ordering, which similarly, at first, belied the fact that the relational dynamics sustained at Sandra’s place were no different to those at Mae’s. Across both, while the ‘form’ differed, relationality was the ‘substance’ that made them both Warlpiri places. There is a foundational similarity here—and yet what I think an engagement with both Mae’s and Sandra’s as *places* also suggests is that what it means to be a Warlpiri place is not to be fixed in time or practice.

In different ways, both Mae's and Sandra's are places of unfolding cultural changes. A shift away from the custom of vacating a house following a resident family member's death means that Mae's place is imbued with a longer history of stories and memories; the biographies of family members who have lived there and the experiences they shared are retained in the place, part of its fabric. Similarly, I have suggested the material and spatial practices at Sandra's place—the maintenance of form and aesthetic presentation—are indicative of some generational shifts in styles of living in houses. I acknowledge the richness of Sandra's place for asking other kinds of questions. Why is it that more younger Warlpiri people are sleeping and spending leisure time inside houses compared to the older generations? Are these straightforwardly generational differences? What role does the quality of houses provided and/or access to heating and cooling appliances to regulate inside temperatures play in the decision to sleep and undertake other activities inside rather than outside? What is vested in, or what are the motivations or aspirations at play in the accumulation of household goods and decorations? What role do kinship networks play in the ability to acquire especially expensive things like fridges, washing machines and heating and cooling appliances? While these are interesting avenues of enquiry, my ability to answer such questions empirically is somewhat limited. For the purposes of this thesis my focus on Sandra's has been on the ways its materiality worked itself into what I suggest is a foundational relational dimension.

Chapter Five.

Hard housing

In stark contrast to the previous chapters where I was focused on what made Mae's and Sandra's Warlpiri places, I now switch focus to what happens when the settler colonial state extends into Warlpiri domestic space. Here, I present a case study of the government provision of housing—in this case, upgrades to existing houses at Nyirrpi—as a mechanism for 'legitimate' intervention into Yapa ways of living, not only in houses but with each other. I begin by contextualising the upgrades more broadly within the provision and management of Indigenous housing in the NT. I then use the first few months of life in Mae's upgraded house, when relations strained under the pressures created by government, to reflect on the particular resonance of 'hardness' at the interface of Yapa and Kardiya relations.

Mae's 'new' house

It was August 2015 when the works to upgrade the houses for Yapa residents at Nyirrpi commenced. Commissioned by the (then) Northern Territory Department of Housing ('NT Housing'), the upgrades were subcontracted to the Central Desert Regional Council and took roughly nine months to complete. Priority was given to the few senior Yapa houses after which they worked, on a few houses at a time, from west to east in a wave-like movement across the community. Once the upgrades to each set of houses were complete, they were "handed back" to designated tenants through a process of paperwork signing that outlined the new Remote Public Housing Tenancy Rules.

Built sometime in the late 1980s (Morel & Ross, 1993), Mae's house was a blockwork construction with cement floors, low ceilings, a flat roof and metal window frames. Before the upgrades it was old and marked and stained by life, but the hardware was reasonably functional; most of the hotplates on the stove worked, as did the electrical fittings, hot water, taps and toilet. The bigger issues were structural: a leaking roof, a crumbling outside wall at the base of the foundation, and poor shower drainage that resulted in a river of water through the laundry and toilet. Moreover, neither its design nor construction materials were suited to the environment. The temperature inside tended to reflect if not amplify that of the outside. So much so that without the aid of heating or cooling appliances, which had to be independently

purchased and installed by Yapa, indoor living was simply untenable in the extremes of the central desert winters and summers. During the long summer days especially, the house was like an oven, as the walls absorbed and then internally emanated the heat from the sun. At great cost we had to run the air cooler in the kitchen twenty-four-seven in order to maintain just a livable (not even very cool) temperature. As well, the house didn't 'breathe' or circulate air, so once the doors and windows were shut it became very stuffy very quickly. In summer, stuffiness was alleviated somewhat when air coolers were installed in windows—but not every room had one (they don't come with the house, so Yapa have so save up for and install air conditioners themselves). Opening doors and windows could also alleviate stuffiness but this would counter the work of heating or cooling appliances.



Figure 5.1 Mae's upgraded house

As one of the senior Yapa at Nyiripi, Mae's house was in the first batch of upgrades. It was cleaned inside, repainted inside and outside, the cement floors of the kitchen and bedrooms were tiled, some window frames, light switches and bathroom fittings were replaced, and they installed ceiling fans throughout and new metal cupboards in the bedrooms. None of the

structural issues were fixed though, so overall the upgrades were mostly cosmetic. The house looked different, almost ‘new’, yet it was basically the same old house in terms of the experience of living in it. The ceiling fans were perhaps the greatest improvement in that regard. It was as a result of these works though—of this old housing stock being brought up to some kind of standard—that NT Housing was able to introduce a new set of relationships between them as the landlord and Yapa as tenants.

Housing in the NT

The broader background to this is a series of National Partnership Agreements (COAG, 2008, 2011, 2009, 2012a), which since the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (‘the Intervention’) (see below) have introduced major reforms in all areas of Indigenous policy. These agreements transferred the responsibility for remote housing from the Commonwealth to the NT, at the same time securing billions in Commonwealth funding for the NT. The relevant policy for the 2015 upgrades at Nyirrpri was the *National Partnership Agreement on Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory* (‘Stronger Futures’) (COAG, 2012a). Made between the Commonwealth of Australia and the NT, this agreement was the (then) latest iteration of “wild” Indigenous housing policies (Lea, 2020) that, despite no shortage of well-researched papers and reports to inform them, have stacked up as an “intractable failure in Australia for more than half century” (Lea et al., 2018, p. 7; see also Elvin et al., 2010).

It was not until the late 1960s that the Commonwealth became directly involved in housing policy and provision for Australian Indigenous people (prior to this, and in keeping with the assimilationist agendas of the time, states and territories were implementing ‘transitional housing’ programs).³⁹ Over the sixty or so years since, approaches to Indigenous housing have been traced across distinct policy eras, from the assimilationist programs of the 1950s and 1960s, to Labor’s self-determination era of the 1970s, which placed greater emphasis on Indigenous consultation and collaboration.⁴⁰ More recently, Indigenous people in

³⁹ ‘Transitional housing’ was an integral part of the assimilationist policies of the 1950s and 1960s, according to which “authorities saw themselves as engaged in the “training” of Aborigines for future release into the larger community as independent individuals and family units” (Sanders, 1990, p. 39). The idea was to move Aboriginal families through a series of dwellings, each with more complexity than the last (facilities, number of bedrooms) and thus of using “Western-style houses as a ‘medium of uplift’” (Musharbash, 2017a, p. 78; see also Heppell, 1979b; Memmott, 1988).

⁴⁰ Although, as Heppell (1979a) argued, despite the emphasis on self-determination, later reformulated as self-management under the Liberal government, the real potential of Aboriginal decision making and control was never realised, in part due to the increasing bureaucratisation of housing design and provision programs.

the Northern Territory have been living through an era of intense policy intervention in many aspects of their lives, including housing (see Heppell, 1979a; Memmott, 1988; Sanders, 1990; Long et al., 2007a; Musharbash, 2017a; Habibis, Daphne et al., 2013; Habibis, Daphne et al., 2019).

Initiated in 2007, under the guise of a national emergency of reported child sexual abuse in the NT, the Intervention heralded a tranche of major reforms in Indigenous policy, the scale of which was “unmatched by any other policy declaration in Aboriginal affairs” (Hinkson, 2007, p. 1; also Altman & Hinkson, 2007; Altman, 2013). Imposed with no consultation, and enabled by parliamentary suspension of anti-discrimination laws, the measures included: income management for welfare payments; school attendance conditions attached to family support payments; compulsory health checks for children; widespread alcohol restrictions; and increases in policing levels (Hinkson, 2007; Lea, 2012; Habibis, Daphne et al., 2013). It was following the Intervention that the first iteration of the agreements referred to above was established: the *National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing* (NPARIH) (COAG, 2008) brought the provision, management, and maintenance of remote housing under the ‘centralised’ governance of the NT.⁴¹ Under the NPARIH, the NT secured funding of 1.7 billion dollars over ten years for reducing overcrowding, increasing the supply of new houses and improving the condition of existing houses, and ensuring housing maintenance and management (through standardised property and tenancy management arrangements) (COAG, 2008; see also Elvin et al., 2010; Habibis, Daphne et al., 2010; Grealy & Lea, 2021; Grealy, 2021).

Also enfolded into the NPARIH (COAG, 2008)—and all the agreements to follow—was the continuation of a Commonwealth agenda for reforming Indigenous land tenure, a most significant aspect of which was a 2006 amendment to the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act to provide for a new form of leasing in communities on Aboriginal land (see Terrill, 2009, 2010, 2011; Howey, 2012). The series of National Partnership Agreements that related to housing specifically tied this issue of land tenure reform and leasing directly to the provision of funding for Indigenous housing (COAG, 2008, 2011, 2009, 2012a).⁴² In some cases, the “no choice”

⁴¹ Prior to this, Aboriginal specific housing funds in the NT were channelled into housing stock that was managed by Indigenous Community Housing Organisations (ICHO) (Elvin et al., 2010; Habibis, Daphne et al., 2010; Grealy & Lea, 2021)

⁴² As stated in Schedule F of the Stronger Futures agreement, “Consistent with the principles underpinning the NPARIH, capital works investment under this Implementation Plan will be contingent on long-term secure tenure being achieved” (COAG, 2012b, pp. F-5).

(Lea, 2020, p. 42) for communities wanting to benefit from funding for housing was to first sign over the leasehold title of their entire community area to the NT. As I understand it, most central desert communities, including Nyirrpri, rejected the ‘whole of township’ leases and instead entered into 40-year Housing Leases, which are tied to individual housing Lots as opposed to entire community areas (Howey, 2012; Northern Territory Government, 2016). The upshot for Nyirrpri is that the upgrades to the old housing stock was the mechanism by which they became ‘public housing’—with the NT as landlord—to be leased back to community members “under newly sharpened rental tenancy arrangements” (Lea, 2020, p. 42; see also Habibis, Daphne et al., 2010). These new tenancy arrangements, in combination with other initiatives described below, were ultimately identified by Yapa at Nyirrpri as, “That housing mob trying to tell Yapa how to live.”

Telling Yapa how to live

With the commencement of the upgrade works, the sounds, rhythms, and dynamics of Nyirrpri life became punctuated by the presence of construction work and its workers. The Kardiya population seemingly multiplied overnight, with work crews, along with their machinery and equipment, accommodated in a designated visitor’s area. An increase in vehicular traffic, music at construction sites, and high-vis clad workers in the cashier’s line at the shop talking loudly about their weekend adventures in town, were all part of a quite dramatic shift in the community atmosphere. An occasional sports match brought work crew and Yapa together for an enjoyable evening, and the project was successful in generating some local employment. The odd scandal or offense arose too, memorably when one of the workers was seen drinking at a roadhouse and then later driving back into Nyirrpri via a back road.

Along with the housing upgrades also came NT Housing representatives. This, too, was a marked change. Previously, Yapa had struggled to figure out how and who to contact when they needed to report housing maintenance issues. Now, NT Housing representatives were paying regular visits to Nyirrpri: attending community meetings, forming a housing reference group to help determine the allocation of houses, “handing back” upgraded houses with the new tenancy arrangements, and, eventually, conducting house inspections. The new arrangements came in the form of a tenancy pack for each house, which included a list of authorised occupants, a security deposit (bond) agreement and associated property condition report, a rent agreement detailing a higher levy than was previously paid, and a lease agreement

by another name: The Remote Public Housing Tenancy Rules, which leaseholders were asked to initial on each page before receiving the keys to their house.



Figure 5.2 Change to Visitor Management



Figure 5.3 Tidy Yard Competition⁴³

As well as the formalised new tenancy arrangements, other rules and adjacent initiatives were rolled out. Signs like the one in Figure 5.2 were placed around the community, reminding Yapa about the ‘Change to Visitor Management’; NT Housing started running Tidy Yard Competitions (see Figure 5.3); and women in particular were enrolled at the adult learning centre to complete a Homemaker Training program (see Figure 5.4). The new rules for visitors, in conjunction with the lists of authorised occupants for each house, was clearly a strategy for dealing with a perceived problem of overcrowding. This in particular created a lot of stress for Yapa at Nyirrpri, because no new houses were being provided as part of the works (only old housing stock was being upgraded). Yapa were told that their house had too many occupants, or they could not have family stay for long periods, yet at the same time there simply wasn’t anywhere else for ‘excess’ family members to go.

⁴³ There were no recycling services at Nyirrpri.

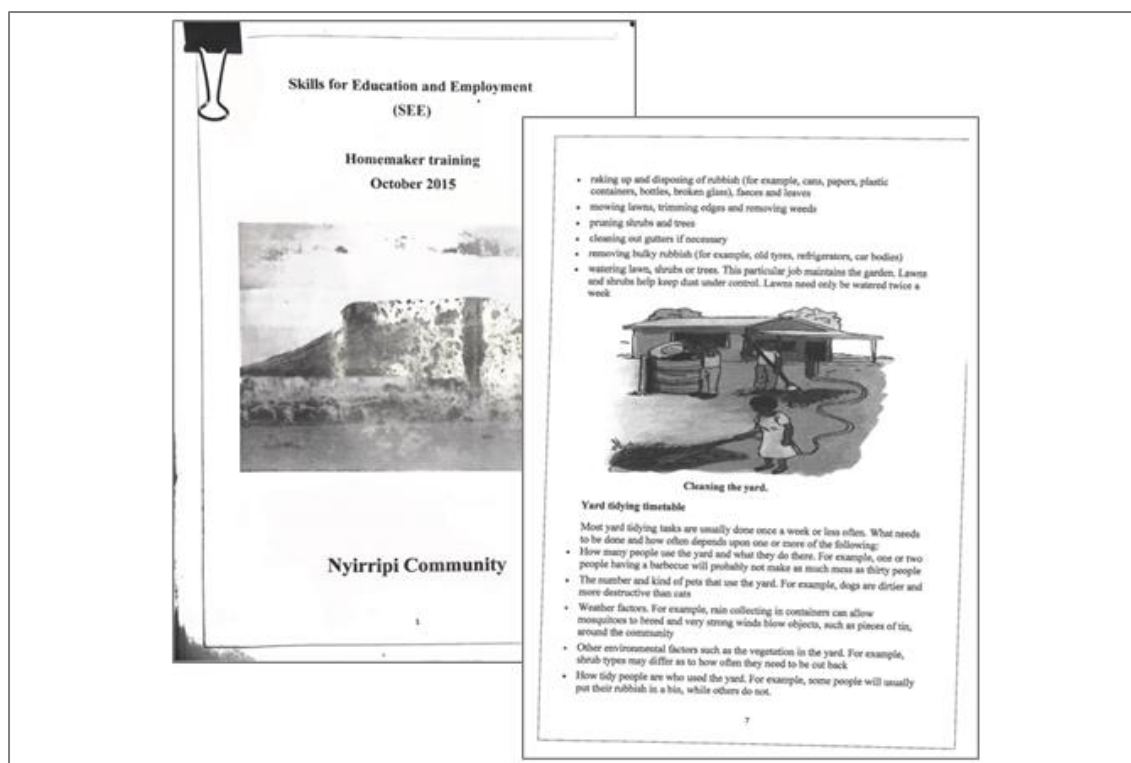


Figure 5.4 Homemaker Training

The Tidy Yard Competition was announced as a rolling competition for which community members would become eligible once their upgraded house was handed back. Then Minister for Housing Bess Price described it as “a great way for people to get on board with the idea of pride in place and pride in community living” (Price, 2015). The Homemaker Training program comprised a 31-page booklet that students were supposed to go over with the trainer. The booklet was essentially a cleaning instruction manual for houses and yards: it started with dot point lists and diagrams of the various cleaning equipment and products needed, itemized tasks for cleaning each room of the house and for tidying the yard, and cleaning and tidying timetables for when each of the tasks described should be performed. It went on to dot point and diagram good personal hygiene habits, the health-hazards of overcrowding, the profiles of some specific kinds of bacteria and the conditions in which they thrive, correct food handling procedures, and, finally, proper rubbish handling and disposal methods.

This was a period, then, when the focus on houses at Nyirripi quite suddenly intensified. It was apparent that houses, through the new rules, tenancy arrangements, training, and competitions that came with their upgrades, were a mechanism geared towards changing the way Yapa not only live in houses but also live together. Against the broader ‘normalising’

agenda of the Intervention—of “‘mainstreaming’ Aboriginal people, by controlling their incomes, child rearing and homes” (Lea, 2012, p. 112)—I understand this as part of a model of ‘conditionality’, of the state provision of housing and forms of welfare becoming vehicles aimed at behavioural change and conformance to some ideal of good citizenship (Habibis, Daphne et al., 2013). This agenda seemed quite clear when we didn’t win the Tidy Yard competition because, as Davina was told by the judger, we had some bedframes looking messy in the yard.⁴⁴ It was even clearer after the first rounds of house inspections, which *nobody* passed. As the NT Housing representatives told a council worker, they were “being really strict with Nyirrpi”.

As an example of the level of this strictness, our house inspection was conducted by two NT Housing representatives six weeks after the hand back. In that time, as I describe further below, the house had been vigilantly cleaned on a regular basis. On the day of the inspection, while one of the representatives stayed on the veranda to check our names against their list of authorised occupants, the other proceeded inside with his clipboard and camera. What he found was a house that was almost exactly the same shell that we’d been handed back; the two bedrooms, which had been intermittently used, had some furniture in them but the kitchen/living area were literally bare, and every floor and bench had been cleaned that day. The exceptions to this were the three issues according to which we failed the inspection: there was some dust on the ceiling fans, the toilet bowl needed wiping, and there were a few marks on a wall. We were gathered together and told, “If you live here you have to clean the house. If you have kids you have to tell them not to draw on the walls and make a mess, and you have to clean up after them.” This time, we were reassured, we would not be evicted but we could expect a letter because there were “issues”. And the representatives would be back in six weeks for another inspection.

The “not great” inspection results like ours were relayed during two community meetings, when NT Housing representatives reminded all Yapa present to clean their houses and yards, to clean up immediately after every activity, and to “be a bit house proud”. As I moved around the community, I heard many Yapa expressing discontent and questioning the

⁴⁴ The winning yard, on the other hand, matched a certain imagery of an Australian suburban yard that “looks good from the street”: a path from the front gate to the veranda had been created by a parallel row of evenly placed rocks. Besides this path, there was nothing in the yard besides a hose, a few garden statues, and a tree. The veranda the path led to had been partially closed off with brush screening, had decorations and plants hanging from its beams, and a few chairs. At one end of the veranda was a small garden bed with statues, and along the front of the veranda a patch of grass was being cultivated.

legitimacy and authority of NT Housing telling them how to live. In one exchange, Mae's granddaughter Kimberly observed, "They getting really hard with the houses," and went on to list some of the new rules she'd been told, "not allowed to light fires in the yard, visitors can only stay for one week, maybe two." "What else?" I asked her, "Are there lots of rules?" "I don't know," she said, thinking for a minute, "It's like they're thinking Kardiya way, but that's not Yapa way. If Kardiya want to live they should just live but let Yapa live Yapa way".

Hard housing

Kimberly's observation—her use of the word 'hard' and what this means at the intersection of Kardiya way and Yapa way—is a compelling framework for reflecting on the first few months of life in Mae's upgraded house. As I will describe, relations became strained in more ways than one. I find some resonance here between Kimberly's statement and what Sansom (1980, p. 74) said in his ethnography of the camp at Wallaby Cross (on the fringes of Darwin): "When life is lived in any context framed by tough whitefella impositions, things in general become 'hard'". Sansom (1980, p. 74) is acknowledging a distinction between life in camps on cattle stations, which could be made as 'hard' as the station manager decided, and the relative 'ease' of life in the camp at Wallaby Cross, which was at least "lived out on the basis of common Aboriginal understandings that [were] uncompromised." The parallel here is the distinction between the relative ease and flow of life at Mae's place as described in chapter three, when life is lived "Yapa way", and the pressure cooker conditions experienced when NT Housing were positioned as the authority over Yapa houses.

I also find some resonance between Kimberly's statement and the concept of 'hard looking' from McGrath (2010, pp. 18-19). A term originating in Aboriginal English, a 'hard look' is a colloquialism for "the gaze of a stranger, and in particular the look of a stranger's camera." It is given further nuance through a number of Ngaanyatjarra words or expressions related to the act of staring or unwelcome observation. The English translations of these include: to look intently at someone without recognition; looking until there is nothing left but bones; an 'eye-looker'; having 'swollen' or dilated eyes; having 'northern eyes'; and having 'devil eyes'. In McGrath's (2010; 2010; 2015) work, 'hard looking' attends to the personal, political, emotional, and moral nuances and tensions around what constitutes appropriate 'looking relations', and the intensification of this when people are strangers to each other, and one has a camera and therefore the technology to reproduce that gaze and represent its subject.

Here, the technology of ‘hard looking’ is the house and its associated paperwork, and what is at stake is not (just) the representation but the production of a particular kind of subject.

Relations reclassified

I was away when Mae’s house was “handed back” but I returned the following day to find that Davina and Presley had been made “boss” for the house—as the primary tenants on the lease, the payees of the security (bond) deposit, and the holders of the keys. As Davina told me using language that seemed to come directly from NT Housing, “I can tell people to clean and if they don’t, I can kick them out.” Davina and Presley becoming “boss” for the house was an inversion of the seniority usually accorded to older people like Mae in Warlpiri culture and relations—and therefore, ironically, undermined the basis upon which the upgrades had been given priority in the first place. This inversion played a role in the relational discord that was to come but of course the real tension derived from the fact NT Housing was the source—the authority—of that inversion in the first place. Because that paperwork they said now put Davina and Presley in charge had in fact formalized NT Housing as the boss for the house. Couched in the handing back of the upgraded houses was an obvious attempt to herald a new order of Warlpiri relationships—as tenants with their houses, as tenants with their new landlord, Chief Executive Officer (Housing), and with each other now reclassified and divided as “authorised occupants” and “visitors”.

The reclassifying of family members in these terms, in particular, is one of the ways the Nyirrpri upgrades were yet another example of a housing program mismatched with the realities of kin based communities bound by an ethic of looking after one another and marked by high levels of mobility (Habibis, Daphne et al., 2013; Habibis, Daphne et al., 2019; Memmott, 2014). The number of authorised occupants for each house was determined by matching the dwelling size to an appropriate number of ‘householders’; anything over was considered overcrowded. ‘Crowded’ or high-density living can certainly be a cause of stress for Yapa, yet as Memmott (2014) has identified, this is often less to do with pure numbers or ratios and more to do with the loss of control or ability to manage the relational dynamics of those in close proximity. In these terms, having NT Housing dictate the meaning of overcrowding, with no recourse to Yapa perceptions of when such a term might have relevance (see Long et al., 2007a, p. 72), was similarly stressful for Yapa at Nyirrpri.

Relations strained

The shift in responsibility for the house, and the very well comprehended sanctions tied to standards of cleanliness, led to an increasingly tense atmosphere, as Davina and Presley attempted to retain the house in the pristine state they had received it. They maintained a heightened awareness of the state of the house, emphasizing to the rest of us the need to keep it clean. For a period, and somewhat ironically, the labour of housekeeping took precedence over the usual economic activities they undertook, such as paid work trips and going hunting almost every day. Davina and Presley spent a lot more time than usual actually at home, they set their bedroom up with a new double bedframe, and purchased new crockery sets, curtains, and a plastic dining table that became as closely associated with Presley as his favourite pannikin. As well, they put a lot of work into the yard, fixing fences, creating a bigger, shaded area off the east veranda, and planting trees and other plants. When they did leave, for a while they took to locking the doors in order to keep mess makers out (even if they were just down the road at a card game).

These pressure cooker conditions made tenuous the place of Mae's granddaughter Erin and her husband Kim, on the basis that they were perceived as not doing enough around the house. Indeed, this was a perception that pre-dated the upgrades. With her father, Mae's son, deceased and her mother living elsewhere, Erin often stopped with her grandmother Mae and as shown in chapter three, for much of my fieldwork she and her family were part of the core residents of Mae's place. But with Mae sort of sidelined, the pressure that Davina and Presley were feeling was more freely directed towards Erin and Kim. This was partially evident in some rare direct requests to clean, and some verbal grumblings made within their earshot, however it mostly played out through a series of material moves: an increasingly awkward wrestle over the occupancy of a bedroom. Davina and Presley had decided that one of the rooms should be for me and Mae, yet because Mae and I preferred to sleep outside, 'our' room was often empty. So, Erin, Kim, and their girls would eventually move their beds in there. Then, Davina and Presley would perform a house clean, which always involved moving *everything* outside. After cleaning, they would conspicuously leave Erin and Kim's stuff outside, or move it to the kitchen instead, and tell me again, "That room is for you and Mae". And so on it went.

Erin, Kim and Mae ultimately dealt with all this by spending time away from the house. Mae often got up early and left—even having breakfast elsewhere—and would not return until the evening. Very deliberately she went on a work trip without Davina. Erin started talking

about visiting family in Balgo over summer, and then staying elsewhere when she came back to Nyirрпи. There were moments of relief, when a large group of us would gather as a family like always, eating and talking story around a fire. But tensions remained latent and eventually refracted even further, arising between Davina and Presley as they started arguing over which of them was or wasn't lifting their weight around the house. On a climactic day, tensions bubbled over into a loud argument during which Presley self-harmed, later verbalising that act as an expression of the stress he was feeling. As we waited for the nurse at the clinic, Presley looked at his cut hand and said, "I'm stressing out really, stressing out for Davina, I been cleaning that house and looking after the kids, gotta keep that house clean".

Containing and sanctioning

If you live in a house, you have to clean it; if you don't clean, you can get kicked out. This was the kind of logic—and language—at the heart of the discord described above; it is starkly disconnected with the relationality that made Mae's (and Sandra's) a Warlpiri place. As evident from previous chapters, it was not the case that those who lived at Mae's had to clean Mae's. While many (but not all) of us who lived there were also the ones to clean, cleaning was not limited to 'occupants'. The domestic labour of cleaning was performed as much by other family—whether they were stopping with us or not—and was in fact deeply embedded in the dynamics of Warlpiri relationality, of helping out and looking after. Presley's brothers often came to clean, as did Mae's brother Joseph, as did her grandchildren, especially Sadie who explicitly identified the care between older and younger kin in terms of sharing labour and resources. When Sadie cleaned Mae's place it was an expression of care towards her grandmother, which was responded to in kind with a willingness to provide Sadie with food and money: "Mae loves me when I clean," was Sadie's summation one day. By the same token, older people like Mae weren't really expected to clean houses—but they did look after younger family members who did such work. Mae would often drop her laundry at her granddaughter Sandra's, and Sandra in turn would often join us at Mae's to share the catch of a hunting trip. These were not *quid pro quo* deals, or perfectly balanced exchanges in a neat system of reciprocity, they were part of that broader picture of networked family members described in chapter two. In other words, they were expressions of a daily and intimate relationality that made it difficult to think in terms of contained houses—because Yapa, and therefore the dynamics of their relationships around care and sharing, were networked and distributed across relations and places.

The case of Erin is useful for extending this in a direction I so far haven't spent much time on: the crucial dynamic between relatedness and autonomy. Recalling Myers (1986) on the Pintupi, on the other side of the ongoing negotiation of relatedness, of extending one's relational ties outward, being open to claims made by others, showing sympathy and a willingness to negotiate, is the maintenance of autonomy, of being boss for oneself, choosing courses of action rather than allowing others to impose their authority over oneself. In the Warlpiri context, Musharbash (2011, pp. 68-70) provides useful insights into this dynamic as it pertains to the socialization of children. Warlpiri childhood socialization is "not about creating or shaping a particular kind of person" but about familiarizing children with "the ground rules (of autonomy and relatedness, demand sharing and looking after others) that govern social life and that all (should) adhere to." There are aspects of a person, such as physical appearance and personality traits, that are considered predetermined and immutable; there is no coaching or socialization that aims to determine who a child will be. This is important background to understanding Erin as an adult.

I, too, used to get quietly frustrated with Erin, especially for not looking after or helping her grandmother as much as I thought she should. In fairness to Erin, she did actually clean and very often contributed by paying for power cards. The difference was these actions skated very close to not quite being gestures of care or generosity towards others. Erin would clean the room that she was using but wouldn't rake the ground around Mae's *yunta*; she would clean Mae's car but only on the day that she wanted to borrow it. One day, I asked Sadie why Mae never asks Erin to do anything. The short answer was that Mae never asks because she knows asking won't work. "Erin won't listen," Sadie explained, "she won't work for anyone. She was like that even when she was a teenager, she had the brain of an old woman, she think like an old woman, she won't work for anyone."

While Erin's disposition to not work for others fell outside those ground rules of the relational context, it was also such a defining feature of her *as a person* that it simply had to be accepted. Of course, we all had moments of frustration with it. Like when Davina served everyone except Erin a plate of dinner (she still got some, she just had to serve herself). Or when Mae occasionally got sick of Erin making demands of her and would retaliate with a berating or grumbling, "You don't do anything for me." Yapa will always communicate or even argue about another's action or behaviour that they don't like, or that makes them feel bad. This is, of course, the crux of that ongoing negotiation of relatedness. But it is not Yapa way to try to use one's authority, or to use sanctions and 'negative consequences', to force another's behaviour to conform to an arbitrary, blanket rule, or worse, to try to change who

that person is. I think this is why, even when things were tense, Presley and Davina mostly avoided directly ‘telling’ Erin and Kim to clean. Ultimately, this was the source of the relational tensions at our place: the stress caused by the twinned effect of NT Housing trying to override Yapa autonomy—to change Yapa ways of life—in part by making Presley and Davina ‘boss’ for the house and therefore expecting them, in turn, to become an authority over the autonomy of their fellow ‘occupants’ and ‘visitors’.

I reflect on this period of fieldwork as a very anomalous time in terms of the feeling and atmosphere of what, for about three months, no longer really felt like Mae’s place. Of course, the role and agency of Davina and Presley has to be acknowledged. They took on the responsibility of the house with a gusto, and I think they did so in part because the vision NT Housing had for the house aligned with their own. For all of us there was excited anticipation in the lead up to the upgrades. The ‘new’ house carried the positivity of a fresh start, and everyone was talking about the new things they wanted to set it up with. “I gotta get him everything, Nangala,” Mae would say, before listing things like a new washing machine, bed, and fridge, “Whole lot, I gotta save up.” The sad irony is that those dreams and plans became twisted under the spectre of NT Housing and the sanctions tied to their expectations that, to put it crudely, Yapa would start living, and treating other Yapa, like Kardiya do. As Hinkson (2014, p. 87) has articulated, for Warlpiri the house stimulates imaginings of both hope and fear:

Hope for the better life promised by government; fear that the same promise hides a more sinister agenda—to cleave Warlpiri from those things they continue to value, to force them to live like white people. Circling around this clash of images is a pervasive fear of losing the vestiges of control Warlpiri have over their lives.

There was no line in the sand moment when things returned to normal at Mae’s place, just a gradual abatement of tensions. Eventually, instead of avoiding each other, we started avoiding NT Housing. For the rest of my fieldwork, we happened to never be at home when the inspectors came.

Conclusion

In the 1970s, Heppell (1979b; Heppell & Wigley, 1981) was a major proponent of what has now emerged as a distinct field of research on Australian Indigenous housing (much of which was produced in the hope of informing housing policies).⁴⁵ My overall observation of this literature is that the decades between then and now are bookended by some disturbingly similar observations—of a dissonance between Indigenous people’s housing requirements and priorities, and government objectives and approaches; and of failures of housing initiatives being blamed on Indigenous people rather than on the poor quality of housing stock or the misguided policy or design approaches. Much of this research has identified the lack of fit between the design and construction of Western-style houses and the dwelling practices of Indigenous groups.⁴⁶ Correspondingly, many researchers recommended that policies and practices of housing design, provision and management take into account the needs of those the houses were being built for—either by referring to available research literature, through direct consultation, or by improving community control and management of housing (Memmott, 1988; Long et al., 2007a; Habibis, Daphne et al., 2013; Memmott, 2014; O’Rourke & Nash, 2019). Healthabitat have long provided evidence that the leading causes of housing decay are the poor quality of initial design and construction, and lack of routine maintenance (Pholeros et al., 1993; Pholeros, 2011; Pholeros & Phibbs, 2012; Pholeros et al., 2013; Lea et al., 2018; Lea & Pholeros, 2010).⁴⁷ In light of this, Grealy and Lea (2021, pp. 76-77) point out

⁴⁵ See Memmott (1988), Long et al. (2007a), and Long et al. (2007b) for some useful summaries and reviews of this field of research.

⁴⁶ The chapters in Heppell’s (1979b) edited book, *A black reality: Aboriginal camps and housing in remote Australia* (1979b), represent the genesis of a body of literature offering insights into the social and cultural beliefs, needs and behaviours that influenced Aboriginal people’s organisation and use of both traditional camps and western style houses. Including, for example, the differences in the time, cost, materials, and skills and knowledge required to construct and maintain a house, and the ramifications this has had for Aboriginal peoples’ degree of control over the location and maintenance of their houses; the density and security of close kin living together, operating as a tightly knit group and the importance of touch and physical closeness; impacts of the location and population of settlements on kinship obligations/interactions, authority structures, conflict and dispute resolution; the organisation of living spaces along private, public/social and gendered lines, and the cultural rules about approaching and accessing these areas; different cultural beliefs concerning dirt and visual squalor; cultural practices governing the abandonment of dwellings (and belongings) following a death; how the use of domestic space may be influenced by kinship relationships and obligations, particularly around sharing as well as avoidance behaviour; spatial demarcations of different practices such as sleeping, daytime activities and ritual; and a preference for externally oriented living spaces, allowing for observation/surveillance of the environment and other people (Heppell, 1979a; O’Connell, 1979; Reser, 1979; Stoll et al., 1979; Tonkinson & Tonkinson, 1979; Wallace, 1979; see also Downing, 1974; Sansom, 1980; Ross, 1987; Memmott, 1988, 2014; Morel & Ross, 1993; Keys, 1999; Musharbash, 2008b, 2013, 2017a; O’Rourke & Nash, 2019).

⁴⁷ Spearheaded in 1994 by Paul Pholeros, Stephen Rainow, and Paul Torzillo, Healthabitat has been developing Housing for Health projects (which uses a survey-and-fix methodology) for almost three decades, in Australia and overseas (see <https://www.healthabitat.com/>).

the irony of Indigenous housing defects continuing to be accounted for in terms of tenant behaviour, thereby justifying the continuation of housing policies that place them—and not design or maintenance—under “surveillance and superintendence.”

Recent works from those with the Housing for Health Incubator, who in turn have partnered with and built on the work of Healthabitat, have placed the legal-bureaucratic technologies and instruments of governance—leases, land tenure systems, surveys, and “wild” policies—under fine grained analysis (Lea et al., 2018; Lea, 2020; Lea et al., 2021; Grealy & Howey, 2019; Grealy, 2021; Grealy & Lea, 2021). Their combined work shows how such technologies of governance are not only “central to the poor condition of much state supplied Indigenous housing” (Grealy, 2021, p. 2) but are also—ultimately—the means by which the interests of settler colonial states are maintained, and so not likely to be the means by which power dynamics or conditions of inequality are changed. As Lea (2020, p. 22) writes,

Contemporary social policy is not setting out to overturn foundational conditions of inequality but, at best, to make it easier for people to slot themselves into those conditions and, in the now familiar liberal pact, to make such compliance a lifetime self-improvement project. State interventions under liberal capitalism still follow long-used techniques of colonial rule, in which westernized housing, schooling, and the reorienting of labor away from care for human and other kin, toward waged work and forms of collateralized debt servicing are deemed necessary for contemporary existence.

A common theme across all government housing policies is the emphasis placed on the role of housing for the improvement of all other aspects of remote Aboriginal peoples’ lives. Following the Intervention, poor housing (and collective land tenure systems) was “positioned at the heart of the dysfunctions wracking Aboriginal communities” (Lea, 2020, p. 41). Newly built, rebuilt or renovated houses were “meant to improve life expectancy, school attendance, training, employment, and health, while transforming sexual moralities, self-discipline, money hoarding, and family conduct” (Lea, 2020, p. 41). The need for good housing and its potential to play a central role on healthy living is a point upon which both government and researchers seem to agree—indeed, the provision and maintenance of housing hardware that can support health and wellbeing is the central tenet of Healthabitat. Climate change puts a sharper point on this need. As a recent report (Lea et al., 2021, pp. 1-5) has detailed, remote communities

like Nyirrpri will experience the negative impacts of climate change earlier and disproportionately than most urban Australian settings. Given current Indigenous housing models are already failing to provide comfortable and healthy indoor environments, under climate change conditions the environment of cinder block constructions like Mae's house will only get worse. It is an urgent priority that climate change be addressed in Indigenous housing and health policy. What this requires is a greater and sustained investment from the government—in houses of robust design and with effective repairs and maintenance systems, *not* in more substandard housing that becomes a mechanism for making Warlpiri lives hard.

In *Remembering the Future*, Melinda Hinkson (2014) engages with a collection of Warlpiri drawings made at Hooker Creek in the early 1950s.⁴⁸ The drawings are a prism for exploring Warlpiri experiences but also for attending to “the crucial role of images and the practice of looking and being looked at in structuring distinctive relations between people” (Hinkson, 2014, p. 3). On the first page of the book the reader is presented with Larry Jungarrayi's drawing, *The malaka's* (superintendent's) *house* (Malaka is a term used to refer to white boss). The drawing does not resemble the stereotypical imaginary of a house. It is largely composed of a grid of black lines against a greenish-yellow background. Anthropologist Mervyn Meggitt interpreted the drawing, “like an aerial view of rice fields”, as a representation of window fly wire, in turn a representation of the entire house (Hinkson, 2014, p. 1). Tess Napaljarri, the adopted daughter of Larry Jungarrayi's brother, said the drawing “is not an empty window, but a window with light shining behind it—light that is perceptible to those outside the house” (Hinkson, 2014, p. 69). As Hinkson (2014, p. 69) adds, “The window separates the space and nightlife of the superintendent and those in his company from the lives of Warlpiri people.”

The malaka's house was drawn at a time “when the very shape and parameters of the Warlpiri world were in turmoil” (Hinkson, 2014, p. 69). At Hooker Creek, the establishment of the settlement related as much to the construction of infrastructure as a regime of governance over Aboriginal people—at that time represented by the superintendent who was required to report daily on, among other things, people's labour and movements. Drawing on Mirzeoff (2011), Hinkson (2014, pp. 68-69) reflects on the interplay of regimes of visibility invoked by *The malaka's house*. On the one hand, visibility is a complex of practices involving classifying,

⁴⁸ Originally collected by anthropologist Mervyn Meggitt, they are now archived at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

categorising and defining; a visual regime separates and segregates groups of people. These are the kinds of “practices by which the Warlpiri were made visible and governed in the mid-twentieth century”. There is an intersection between “modes of governance, forms of surveillance and the production of particular kinds of subjects.” On the other hand, what *The malaka’s house* makes clear is that while government regimes of surveillance and regulation were being implemented, Warlpiri people were returning the gaze. In Larry Jungarrayi’s drawing, Hinkson detects a way of seeing that, while standing outside of and refusing the categorising terms of the dominant visual regime, is not simply defiance: an “openness towards the new and the Other seem to be the moral sensibilities of this work” (Hinkson, 2014, p. 87).

Sixty-two years after Larry Jungarrayi drew *The malaka’s house*, NT Housing representatives arrived at Mae’s to conduct a house inspection. The entire time they were there, Mae did not look at them once. Before they arrived, Mae had been at the store; she had a purchase order and was trying to get organised for a week’s work away. She returned just as the inspection started, sat cross-legged on the veranda, and kept loudly proclaiming—in Warlpiri—that we needed to get the shopping, get fuel and get going. Davina’s whispered appeals, “wait, Kardiya here,” were ignored. Mae’s agitation was apparent as she rocked her body and bounced her hands in her lap. She kept up her verbal interjections while never once engaging directly with the representatives. Not once did she look in their direction, let alone make eye contact, nor did she offer even a flicker of response to their questions. When they read her name from the list of authorised occupants, she looked away towards the street and others had to confirm, “Yes, she still lives here.” In this similar moment of government surveillance and accounting of Warlpiri, of ‘hard looking’, what to make of Mae’s refusal to return to the gaze? A resistance to being produced as a particular kind of subject. A denial of the legitimacy of NT Housing’s authority over her own autonomy. And with her physicality and vocality, a claim over her own priorities. Put in the terms of this thesis, Mae’s bodily response and refusal to engage with the housing inspectors indexes the gulf between a Warlpiri relational ontology and governmental norms as enacted in the new housing policy and tenancy arrangements. The ‘hardness’ encoded in the latter sits in coercive opposition to Warlpiri ways of being in the world and living with each other.

Chapter Six.

Bin entanglements

For Kardiya who have occasion to work at or visit the Indigenous communities of central Australia, one of the most common (and lasting) impressions seems to be of places that are, to use one of the more polite descriptors, “rubbish-strewn” (Purtill, 2017, p. 1; see also Carroll, 1995). As Burke (2018, p. 6) recently observed of Warlpiri communities, they are places where settled hunters and gatherers “are, generally speaking, yet to internalise the bourgeois manners of the house proud, the fenced garden and concern for neatness and tidiness”. At Nyirrpi, it was evident that many resident and visiting Kardiya considered Warlpiri-occupied houses as lacking in their potential to look cleaner, greener, more aesthetically pleasing. It was most blatantly evident at the interface of local council or government service provision; at the monthly community meetings where NT Housing representatives reminded Yapa to clean their houses, yards and streets as a show of pride in their homes and community, and in the tidy yard competitions, which no house with bed frames outside had any hope of winning. It was also evident in the hushed, semi-private conversations in the aisles of the community shop, or the polite-concealing-unspoken-disdain queries about how I was “managing” living with Warlpiri people. Whether said directly to Warlpiri people or about them when they were (thought to be) out of earshot, a common Kardiya perception was that Warlpiri people’s homes were dirty, disorderly and rubbish strewn. “Bins are there, use them”, was a common refrain.

In this chapter I employ Hodder’s (2011, 2012) concept of ‘entanglement’ to explore the implications of Kardiya exasperatedly encouraging the use of bins provided. I start with wheelie bins as a specific focus for the discussion, yet my concern here is less on the bins themselves and more on their place or role in a larger network of ideas, practices, and systems that turn on waste production and management. In Hodder’s terms, the encouragement to use the bins provided is an encouragement towards certain human-thing entanglements, which in this case links not just to ideas about what rubbish is and how it should be managed at home, but also the ways in which domestic practices interconnect with civic or mass waste management services. In this chapter, wheelie bins, situated as they are at the interface of these two spheres, are good to think with; ultimately, they are a device for exploring more broadly how ideas about what rubbish is and how it should be managed at home operated as a particular point of difference at the interface of Yapa/Kardiya relations at Nyirrpi.

Entanglement

I find Hodder's (2011, 2012) concept of 'entanglement' useful because it offers a way of thinking about the webs of human-thing relationships that deals with the actual materiality of things—their presence, their properties, their affordances—while also situating the material world within the social, the historical and the contingent. Entanglement encompasses the idea that human-thing relationships are constituted by co-dependences, that as much as humans need things to continue living in particular ways, so things and their environments need humans for their maintenance. Put differently, for things to remain as people want them—in working order, in a particular form—and to stay the processes of decay and entropy, things require the investment, labour and care of humans. As well, entanglement encompasses the idea that things do not exist in isolation; rather, they work or have meaning not only in relation to each other but also according to the knowledge systems they are embedded in. This is to say that things become networked with and depend on *other things* in complex ways; they fit and work together, rely on each other to work in sequence, and are often steeped in histories of material and technological development.

Importantly, Hodder does not reduce human-thing relationships to co-constituting mutualism, a simple dialectic between the material and social or cultural worlds reproducing each other. Rather, the dialectic that Hodder (2012, p. 88) identifies is “between dependence, often productive and enabling, and dependency, often constraining and limiting.” In other words, because human-thing entanglements are worked out in practice, they can be contingent and provisional, subject to a “continual boot-strapping process” (Hodder, 2012, p. 110). As the webs in which life and activities and meanings are made possible, entanglements can be the productive site of change and transformation. Yet, what Hodder (2011, p. 164) is also exploring are “various forms of being caught up.” How, in the practices of daily life, humans get trapped in human-thing inter-dependences, channeled in particular ways that can be hard to break or wind back from. In part this involves the very materiality of things, as they fall apart, decay, run out, break, need each other to work, humans get entangled in this physicality, in the embodied routines and daily practices of using but also looking after things. It also involves a vaster apparatus—the histories of design and technology, the ideas, customs, concepts, language, values, procedures, rules, rights and obligations that are the context of any human-thing entanglement. With this mind I turn to the entanglements of wheelie bins, which I begin to explore within the context of Nyirrpai council waste management.

Nyirrpi council waste management

As with other parts of Australia, the responsibility of community waste management at Nyirrpi was the remit of local government, in this case the regional council. Prior to around 2007/2008, remote communities in central Australia had local governance structures. This changed when the Northern Territory Government announced the establishment of shire (now called regional) councils, each incorporating larger areas and overseeing multiple communities from a central location. As a result of this restructure, Nyirrpi became one of nine communities with a locally staffed council office whose service delivery was overseen by the Central Desert Regional Council (the Council, whose main office was in Alice Springs). Their remit, aside from waste management, includes such things as aged care and night patrol (community safety) services, and the management and maintenance of community areas and infrastructure (Central Desert Regional Council, nd).

The Waste Management Strategy (the Strategy), adopted by the Council in 2010, outlines commitments to the responsible and sustainable management of remote community waste, from kerbside collection to landfill operations, including dealing with legacy waste issues from previous, seemingly not as well-regulated practices (Central Desert Regional Council, 2010). In 2012, the intention and details of the Council's Strategy were consolidated in The Central Australian Remote Landfill Operating Manual (the Manual) (Local Government Association of the Northern Territory, nd). The Strategy and Manual are part of a broader policy and legislative framework, drawing on and referring to, for example, acts and regulations pertaining not only to waste management but, more broadly, the standards of protection and/or control of the environment, water, pollution, public health, and workplace health and safety. These efforts appear to have heralded a successful improvement: in 2015 the Council jointly won a national award for "Creating great landfills in central Australian remote Aboriginal communities" (Central Desert Regional Council, 2015).

At Nyirrpi, these documents informed waste management practices and regulatory regimes that were geared towards the regular and responsive collection of material waste from homes and streets. As part of this, the Council provided each residence at Nyirrpi with at least one plastic wheelie bin, which was supposed to remain fixed to a metal pole on the verge in front of each house (a measure to prevent the dogs from tipping them over).⁴⁹ Many houses

⁴⁹ Both the Strategy (Central Desert Regional Council, 2010, p. 8) and the Manual (Local Government Association of the Northern Territory, nd, p. 8) stipulate the use of plastic wheelie bins over such alternatives as steel drums.

categorise and sort some of the materials in accordance with the Manual. Aside from the pit itself, which was the end point for general, smaller mass waste from domestic and community bins, there were other sections inside the landfill enclosure dedicated to the stockpiling (and therefore potential recycling or responsible disposal) of, for example, car bodies and parts, tyres, bicycles, scrap metal, white goods, batteries, hazardous chemicals, cardboard, and so on. There was also one very large pile of mixed, unsorted and mostly bulk or hard waste, including dumped furniture, household goods, mangled wire, doors, twisted sheets of iron, and various construction materials. It was to this pile—which grew especially large during the housing upgrades of 2015—that Warlpiri residents turned when they needed a door to make a bed frame with, or a new cooking wire for the fire, or just to see what useful thing they might find.

In addition to the correct procedures for the construction and operation of a landfill and for the management of the various materials contained therein, the Manual also details some quite extraordinary levels of auditing and reporting that council workers—usually Kardiya in management positions—were expected to perform. Within the Manual are templates for landfill assessments and reports (first site assessment, weekly inspection, monthly audit, 6 monthly report) and, of particular interest here, for the Community Litter and Hard Waste Audit (see Figure 6.1). This audit required the individual assessment of every Lot at Nyirrpri according to the following criteria: the number and damage (or not) of wheelie bins and stands, the number of car bodies and animal carcasses present, and the rating from 1 to 3 of each verge and yard as to how much litter and hard waste was present. The Manual defines litter mostly by its synonym ‘rubbish’ as including “windblown rubbish, hard rubbish and car parts, old furniture and other solid rubbish” (Local Government Association of the Northern Territory, nd, p. 79). The Manual does not stipulate what quantities of each would qualify for a rating of 1) all ok, 2) some issues, or 3) bad condition, suggesting only that the team establish benchmark scoring.

Wheelie bin entanglements

The ‘continental-style wheeled bin’ or ‘wheelie’ bin, which is now a standard in most Australian towns and cities, including Nyirrpri, was designed in Germany in the 1970s (Chappells & Shove, 1999). Chappells and Shove (1999) provide a historical snapshot of different bin technologies since the late 1800s in the UK, and in doing so show how bins are entangled in the histories of (some) human societies, in changes not only in the meanings and creation of waste but also its private and public management. In the context of this history, the

design and material qualities of the wheelie bin were notable for: its capacity to hold larger volumes of waste, which was a response—and then a contributing factor—to the increasing amounts of domestic waste, in both volume and type; its plastic construction, which solved the clanging noise issues of older style metal bins; and its hinged-lid and wheels, which reduced the physical effort required for human handling, provided human and environmental protection from its contents, while also keeping non-human animals out. The easy movability also heralded new kerbside arrangements with collection authorities, enabling householders to keep their wheelie bins wherever they prefer for convenience, on the proviso that they take responsibility for transferring them to the verge on set collection days.

Wheelie bins are, as Chappells and Shove (1999, p. 269) put it, “doubly structured”, positioned at the interface of, on the one hand, private lives and domestic practices and, on the other, public systems of waste management (see also Metcalfe et al., 2012). Applying Hodder’s (2011, 2012) approach, this is to say that the entanglements of the wheelie bin—with other things, humans, and systems—extend in both private/domestic and public/civic directions. Indeed, as they move back and forth from the kerbside, traversing and therefore already entangled in the division of land and responsibilities along private/public lines, they are the very thing that links and provides feedback between these spheres.

Wheelie bins are the receptacles via which responsibility for domestic waste is transferred to the authority in charge of mass waste management. As such, they are the vehicle by which the rules, codes and requirements of public systems and infrastructures feed back into the domestic sphere. For example, the requirement to have the bin on the verge at set times and days of the week for collection feeds back into the routines and relations of domestic labour. As do the rules governing what can and can’t be deposited into wheelie bins, requiring domestically located systems for the sorting and handling of different types of materials (e.g., recyclables and non-recyclables). At Nyirripi, these sorts of entanglements were required by and enshrined in the leases following the housing upgrades, in clauses under the section (11) on ‘Tenant’s responsibilities and obligations’ that specified requirements of tenants to, “Maintain and keep at their own expense the Premises in a neat, tidy and clean state”, including to, “remove and lawfully dispose of any Rubbish”, and to “Comply with the legal requirements

of the appropriate local authority for the collection and removal of Rubbish from the Premises”.⁵⁰

As a node in the Council’s waste management system, the wheelie bin is a particularly loaded object in terms of the domestic entanglements it suggests, or perhaps demands. Here, the wheelie bin is assumed to play a central role in the living and consumption practices that produce or create waste and therefore require the cleaning of bodies and dwellings. Wheelie bins are designed to be kept outside houses, serving as the larger repository for the temporary storage of domestic waste. As instructed in the Homemaker Training booklet referred to in the last chapter, and in conjunction with the timetable of daily, weekly, and monthly cleaning tasks for inside and outside areas, all rubbish should be put into the ‘house bin’ as soon as possible. Once full, the house bin should be emptied into the ‘outside bin’, in preparation for council collection. Rubbish too large for the bins—examples of which are large cartons, car parts and bodies, sheets of iron, worn out white goods, and tree branches—should not be left lying around the house or yard and should instead be taken straight to the landfill. Bins themselves should also be kept clean and dry, for example through the use of a bin liner, or regular washing and disinfecting, and all bins should be emptied before they can overflow.

In Hodder’s (2011, 2012) terms, the entanglements of wheelie bins can be traced historically, to the development and rise in use of plastics—both durable and disposable—and the central role this material has played in the industries, economies and lifestyles of mass consumption, in turn contributing to an increase in waste in both amount and type—and therefore the need for plastic wheelie bins in homes (Hawkins, 2019; Liboiron, 2014a). Domestic entanglements can be understood in terms of thing-thing and human-thing dependencies, in the embodied, regular routines of cleaning, and in all the other equipment required for corralling, collecting and moving rubbish, and which therefore work in sequence with the wheelie bin as a penultimate destination for waste: brooms, rakes, mops, dustpans and brushes, vacuum cleaners, and smaller ‘house’ bins. All of these things themselves have to be maintained in order to retain their functionality: bins cleaned or lined with a bag; vacuum cleaners emptied; mop heads washed or replaced; and so on. These entanglements extend to the social or family relations that revolve around domestic labour; who does what and when,

⁵⁰ In the document, Rubbish is included in the list of terms under “1. Definitions and interpretation” and is defined as “Household rubbish and includes lawn clippings and other garden refuse”

with domestic routines at least partly impacted by rules about what can go in wheelie bins and the scheduling of their verge-side collection.

From the kerbside, the entanglements of wheelie bins extend again as key nodes in the wider network of waste management systems, technologies and infrastructures. To the humans whose job it is to collect wheelie bins; the contracts, routes and embodied routines of wheelie bin collection; the trucks with hydraulic lifters and prongs designed to hold them; the work health and safety policies regulating the handling and operation of bins and trucks; the personal protective equipment (PPE) required in such contexts; the policies governing the correct handling of the materials they contain once emptied at the landfill. While domestic practices and landfill operations can seem like entirely separate spheres, at such a remove from each other, by adopting Hodder's entanglement approach, wheelie bins can be understood as one of the vehicles by which these spheres are intricately connected and feedback on each other.

At Nyirrpri, another element of that feedback loop was the unique auditing mechanisms by which those in charge of mass waste management were required to assess and report on the presence of litter and hard waste in (and around) all Nyirrpri Lots. Worded in the reverse, these audits can be understood as the documentation of whether or not Nyirrpri residents were or were not engaging in 'correct' entanglements with wheelie bins—at least as far as this entails prevailing ideas about what rubbish is and how it should be managed at home. As Hawkins (2006, pp. 1-2) writes, the elimination of waste has become “a marker of civilized modernity”, “implicated in the formation of a certain kind of person with distinct habits and beliefs as to what constitutes waste and how to get rid of it”.

As much as putting out the garbage may feel like one of the most ordinary and tedious aspects of everyday life, it is a cultural performance, an organized sequence of material practices that deploys certain technologies, bodily techniques, and assumptions. And in this performance waste matter is both defined and removed; a sense of order is established and a particular subject is made (Hawkins, 2006, pp. 1-2).

The challenge that Hodder's (2011, 2012) theory presents is that entanglements seem to be never-ending. Start tracing the webs of human-thing relations that lattice around just one material thing, such as a wheelie bin, and it's hard to stop finding more and more links, more steps along chains of dependences. Indeed, this is the very point, the crux, of Hodder's (2011,

2012) argument: it's because of the complexity of entanglements that humans can get trapped or caught up—doing things, with things, in particular ways. If wheelie bins are an integral part of mass waste management systems, then they are also entangled in the social relations that emerge around waste and its management.

Waste relations

Joshua Reno's (2016b) ethnography, *Waste Away: Working and Living with a North American Landfill* presents a compelling argument that waste makes us; that large-scale waste management systems in consumer societies like the USA makes of waste a constitutive absence through acts of subtraction. Echoing Hodder (2011, 2012) on the ways that humans get caught up in co-dependences with things, in the ongoing investments humans have to make in things so they maintain their form and functionality, Reno (2016b, pp. 8-12) argues that by tidying, cleaning, repairing, and replacing (consuming) we are constantly in the process of staving off change, decay, and entropy. Bodies, buildings, and neighbourhoods are sustained through routine and active subtraction, disposable commodities endure through replacement after replacement. In other words, the waste we produce is the opposite side of ongoing efforts towards a maintenance of form, order, durability or sameness. While it is argued that cleanliness "is made possible because of all that is inconspicuously absent and landfilled elsewhere" (Reno, 2016b, p. 8) it is also understood that ideal conceptions of cleanliness and order may differ greatly across social and cultural contexts.

Turning on an idea of 'leakiness', Reno (2016b, pp. 22-28) draws out some interesting parallels at play in western, liberal societies, in the way both bodies and 'spaces' are often thought of as able to be contained. Linked to a brief history of changing conceptions of hygiene, cleanliness and orderliness, Reno (2016b, p. 25) reflects on contemporary regimes of intensive sanitation, which seek to radically constrain our immersion in everyday settings, separating and sealing indoor, climate controlled spaces from the "odors, the elements, and creatures that do not belong." The concept of a contained, un-leaky body that is "distinct from other beings and from their mutual surroundings" (Reno, 2016b, p. 24), protected by contained and controlled spaces, parallels with the ideal of the landfill—a site to which all waste can amass and somehow also be contained. Ultimately, Reno's (2016b) ethnography works to undo this imaginary by showing instead the various forms of relations and interconnection that we are all implicated in, through the waste we produce and the ways it is managed. Locally, even well-regulated landfills cannot be entirely 'contained'; rather, they are often landscapes and

ecologies of microbial process and multispecies activity, where odors, gases, and toxins leak and spill into the environment (see also Reno, 2016a). When considered on a global scale, landfills are implicated in the maintenance of practices of production and consumption that are the most damaging to the environment. As a “medium for forgetting” (Reno, 2016b, p. 220), landfills cheaply and efficiently separate people from their discards, in turn changing our very ideas of and making possible ever new kinds of disposability: “the more things we produce, the more we cling to both newness and sameness, the more waste we produce and the more unstable the world around us becomes” (Reno, 2016b, p. 12; see also Hawkins, 2019).

Beyond the issues of environmental degradation and human exploitation that waste is often implicated in—through resource extraction, commodity production, and consumption—Reno expands the focus to think about waste and its management as a social relationship, “to demonstrate how landfills and waste producers are mutually associated, how something absent from our everyday lives can still shape our experiences and imaginations” (Reno, 2016b, p. 2). One of Reno’s key points is the distancing effect of mass waste management practices; a twinned effect that is both material and social. Reno shows that as materials are detached from their people and places and enter the mass waste stream—from the bin to the distant landfill—they lose their symbolic and material identity. Once amassed at the landfill, materials take on an indeterminate character, on the one hand suggesting the possibility of re-use or recycling (though this is generally discouraged by waste management regimes) and on the other seen as contaminating. Mass waste becomes a threat to human (and planetary) health and well-being. Simultaneously, Reno shows that because this distance is now required between humans and their waste, there is also a distancing effect, a social separation, between waste makers and waste workers. If the removal of waste is a necessity for the maintenance of form of bodies, homes, neighbourhoods and ways of life, somewhere else there are places and people who have to live near, manage and be exposed to mass waste on others’ behalf. In other words, Reno illustrates that a focus on waste management practices can be a productive way of analysing not only what happens to materials in social and cultural contexts—the ideas, values and identities that attach but also detach from things as they move through the chains of consumption and disposal—but also the social relations and inequalities that are created as the ideas and practices around wasting play out (see also Hetherington, 2004). Applying this to the Nyirrpi context, I offer two observations. The first is about the distancing effect on social relations within the context of waste management systems, which I suggest hangs on the visibility of the material traces of Warlpiri living. The second is related to Reno’s analysis of the effect of waste management practices on the status or identity of materials involved.

Material visibility

What I find interesting is that the communications and interactions that took place about waste at Nyirrpri were delivered in a rhetoric that framed the ‘problem’ of rubbish as something that was Yapa specific. At the monthly community meetings, for example, it was to Yapa that appeals to take pride in their houses and community were directed, with the assumed correlation that this would engender particular cleaning practices and the use of bins provided. To be sure, the material landscape of most Warlpiri homes at Nyirrpri—and especially yard areas—were characterised by what I have been calling the material traces of activities. As I have described at both Mae’s and Sandra’s places, for example, many family activities were conducted outside: sleeping, cooking and eating, gathering to hang out with each other, play cards, and so on. Whether inside or out, Warlpiri people would gather a range of things to the site of each activity and then, after, leave some, all, or parts of those things on the ground as traces of their presence and doings. As such, various materials were almost always visible—from large and small pieces of furniture to sheets of iron, multiple cars and/or car parts, cardboard boxes, and even tree branches, to an array of smaller household items, to various food and drink packages, and more. These are all the kinds of materials that according to the Homemaker Training booklet should have been in the bin or at the landfill and which would have been audited by the Council as litter or hard waste.

The material status of all these traces—as things and/or as rubbish—is a question to which I will turn in following chapters. For the purposes of this chapter, I want to dwell for a moment on the fact of their visibility. In a play on that word, I suggest that the visibility of material traces around Warlpiri peoples’ homes interacted in particular ways with the kinds of scrutiny that Warlpiri ways of being in the world (and living in houses) were more generally subjected to. I refer here, in part, to the unique aspects of Nyirrpri community that made Warlpiri lives and homes more visible to Kardiya than the other way around: the scalar effects of its small size and density—fifty-five houses and 250 residents within 0.3 square kilometers, making observation generally easy. This was compounded by its spatial and social segregation: while Kardiya domesticity was relatively secluded on Other Side, a side to which Yapa residents rarely had reason and were generally discouraged from going, Kardiya were a regular presence on the side of the community where Yapa houses were located. I also refer here to the formalised systems and processes by which Warlpiri lives and especially domestic socio-material practices were subject to surveillance and regulation. When viewed “from the street”, the located perspective for judging tidy yard competitions or conducting council audits, the

visibility of such material traces made for houses and yards that were not considered to be clean, tidy, or rubbish-free. What is at work here is the expectation of certain ‘normal’ practices, routines, techniques and behaviours pertaining to the ordering, cleaning, and controlling of things in domestic environments—conventions of normality, which are often “shot through with social and moral significance” (Shove, 2003, p. 190).

How people maintain and present their bodies and dwellings, and how they perceive, live with or manage waste, is often deployed as the mark or measure of ‘modern’ practices and, correspondingly, to socially differentiate between different ‘kinds’ of people. “One must not only know what to keep and what to discard, but how to arrange and store objects in their proper place” (Kilroy-Marac, 2016, p. 439; see also Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003; Shove, 2003; Campkin & Cox, 2007; Martens, 2007). At the interface of Yapa/Kardiya relations at Nyirrpi, the social dynamics that emerged in the context of waste management was not so clearly between waste makers and waste workers as in Reno’s consumer America. Rather, what emerged was a distinction between those who lived with the material traces of their lives in visible and therefore problematic ways—because they weren’t properly entangled with the wheelie bins provided—and those whose waste was made invisible and unproblematic because it was in the bin or at the landfill.

Material identity

Reno’s analysis of the distancing effect of waste management practices on the materials involved illustrates how once amassed at the landfill they take on an indeterminate character, losing their symbolic and material identity. In the Council’s waste management regime at Nyirrpi I detect an attempt to enact a similar distancing effect on the materials that were present, visible and (usually) on the ground in and around Warlpiri homes. Categorically they were determined as litter or waste and therefore “matter out of place” (Douglas, 1966); they wouldn’t be considered in place until they had been contained (binned) and spatially removed to the landfill—to then either be amassed and eventually buried in the main pit, or sorted and handled appropriate to their material and other qualities, toxicity and so on. Yet both the categorical and spatial operations of the Council’s waste management system was unendingly challenged by Warlpiri practices.

Foregrounding the chapters to follow, categorically I suggest that not all material traces visible in Warlpiri homes were necessarily litter, rubbish, or hard waste destined unidirectionally for the bin or landfill. Warlpiri practices reveal the possibility of a plastic bottle

being used as a cup, or a tin lid as a knife, or—recalling the landfill-destined list of larger items in the Homemaker Training booklet—a cardboard box as a table, a car body for storage, a sheet of iron as a wind break, or a tree branch a boundary to direct or discourage vehicular flows. As well, even when the Council successfully removed materials to the landfill, they were often returned to the community living area by Yapa.



Figure 6.2 Bed frame from landfill

‘Scavenging’ at the landfill was common amongst Yapa at Nyirrpi (cf. Reno, 2009, 2016b). Access was easy, in part because the landfill itself was located so close to the community living area and also because entry wasn’t prevented by a closed gate or regulated by the constant presence of a worker. Yapa residents often took quick trips to the site, both to drop a load of rubbish off—especially after a big clean up at home—and to rehome items found there. Scavenging trips were often undertaken with something specific in mind but they were always opportunities for a general look around. The most common things we went specifically looking for were doors to either make or reinforce a bed frame, wire mesh for “cooking” ashes, spare parts or tyres for fixing broken down cars and bikes, and sheets of iron and other materials

(star pickets, metal poles, shade cloth) for DIY additions such as windbreaks, bough shelters, fences, and closed off or shaded verandas. Amongst the serendipitous finds we made during such trips were: containers with lids, which Mae would always pounce on; a string of bells and a wind chime; a bath tub, which Miriam cleaned and then set up in the yard for the kids in summer; a white plastic chair (with only one cracked panel in the seat); a fridge basket the right size for Miriam's freezer at home; a broken washing machine (that Jacob and Miriam fixed); and a small pram with a broken wheel which, once fixed, some of the kids played with for days.

Conclusion

There was a lot of stuff coming into Nyirrpri; with every trucked delivery of food and commodity stock for the local store, with every carload of Yapa and Kardiya arriving back from a shopping trip in Alice Springs, with every replenishment of workplace stock, and especially with projects like the housing upgrades of 2015. A lot of stuff came in and not a lot went out, so it all had to be managed locally and in such a way that life at Nyirrpri remained viable for its human (and non-human) residents and with the least environmental impact. Considering this, the Council's waste management regime has to be acknowledged, especially as it is now informed by best practice and industry standards. The development of properly regulated landfill operations is situated against the historical context of lessons learned since the industrial revolution—about the need to maintain a safe distance between human populations and the waste they produce.

Yet, I also take seriously Reno's (2016b) argument about the unsustainability of a consumerist way of life with its associated ideas of material disposability, and the role that landfilling and mass waste management practices play in supporting and perpetuating mass production, consumption and wasting—which both Yapa and Kardiya at Nyirrpri were implicated in. As others have also argued, framed in this way waste has to be understood not as by-product, remainder, or residue; it is in fact a central component of and vital to the continual operation of capitalist economies (and has itself become a profitable 'product') (see Hawkins, 2019; Liboiron, 2014a; O'Brien, 1999). Despite its geographic description as 'remote', consumption at Nyirrpri was as implicated in the global economies and industries of mass production, and their tenets of disposability and planned obsolescence, as anywhere else. From Kardiya who preferred not to drink the local water and so stocked their kitchens with cases and cases of plastic bottled water, to the constantly being replaced Yapa-favored

polyester faux-mink blankets imported from China, to all the pieces of particle board furniture and plastic goods from stores like Kmart, and the electronic telecommunication and entertainment devices, whitegoods, and appliances that are designed with built-in obsolescence or a limited shelf life.

Given this, I find it sadly ironic that in the context of Yapa/Kardiya relations at Nyirrpi it was the Yapa residents who were positioned as the problematic waste makers of the community, largely, I suggest, because they were perceived as not properly ‘entangled’ with the wheelie bins they were provided. Put differently, because Yapa lived with visible material traces of their lives and activities, traces which from a Kardiya perspective were litter and hard waste. The presence of such materials thus fed into and informed a broader discourse about improvident, ‘wasteful natives’ (Rose, 2003), turning not just on concepts of wastefulness—not conserving, not looking after things properly—but also on the moral and aesthetic judgements encoded in the term ‘litter’. As Rose (2003, pp. 61-62) points out, in Australia ‘litter’ is a particularly loaded term, where picking up after oneself—erasing the traces of one’s presence—is attached to social values and notions of good behaviour and good citizenship (cf. Argyrou, 1997).⁵¹

The further irony, for me, is that eventually, albeit via a sometimes circuitous and slightly prolonged ‘road’, ultimately most waste produced in Warlpiri homes was eventually destined for the local landfill. As I will describe in the next chapter, Yapa didn’t live with all material traces forever. As material traces built up over time, areas were raked, swept and cleaned. Sometimes wheelie bins were used in this context, more often it was via spatially dispersed and gradually marginalized piles that ‘rubbish’ made its way to the landfill—either by Yapa themselves dumping a trailer load, or the verge collections using front end loaders. Although Yapa domestic routines of cleaning and wheelie bin entanglements rarely matched those outlined in the homemaker training booklet—neither in temporal, spatial, or embodied ways—eventually most Yapa waste ended up in the ‘right place’.

I can now perhaps draw a more forceful line under the argument I am making in this chapter. The point is to heed Liboiron’s (2019) reminder that Douglas’s (1966) theory of ‘dirt’

⁵¹ Recalling the discussion from chapter two, this stands in stark contrast to the practice of leaving and reading material traces in the context of Warlpiri mobility; a practice which is given further, moral context by Bird Rose’s (2003, p. 62) experiences with Yapa in the Northern Territory: “my teachers held self-erasure to be the equivalent of sneaking around the country. Antisocial people who do not announce themselves, and use special techniques to avoid leaving tracks or traces, are up to no good. [...] Self-erasure is antisocial; visible and audible presence is responsible and moral”.

as “matter out of place” is really about power. As Douglas (1966, p. 44) writes, “Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.” Put differently, as Liboiron (2019) writes, “where there is a system of power, there are necessarily rejected elements (or dirt), and one way to investigate systems is by studying what they reject, abject, and oppress.” Picking up the example of ‘litter’, the deeper issue here is not whether a food wrapper on the ground is or is not “matter out of place” but about the social order within which the very category of litter exists and is not only meaningful but is deployed to maintain that social order. For Liboiron (2019), this is accomplished through the artful reframing of ‘litter’ as the moral problem of the individual—Bird Rose’s ‘good citizen’—and the simultaneous obfuscation of the problem of disposability. In other words, Liboiron (2019) is pointing to the fact that when litter becomes an index for antisocial and irresponsible individual behaviour, it is not only being mobilized as a technique for producing and protecting “what seems normal, natural, right, good, and true”, it is also playing a role on the maintenance of a broader social order in which industries and economies continue to profit from mass production.

Extending this to Nyirрпи, we might ask what broader social order is being maintained through a focus on those perceived as not engaging with ‘litter’ or waste ‘properly’? Here, similar to the observations of Argyrou (1997) in Cyprus, ‘litter’ can be understood as a category that enables the identification of problematic behaviour and then justifies the measures taken to address that behaviour. As Argyrou (1997, p. 174) wrote, interpretations of litter “mask the social conditions of the possibility of dispositions and practices, so that those who litter seem to be hopelessly incorrigible, those who do not inherently enlightened, and the relationship between them appropriate and legitimate.” In this chapter, my aim has been to show not only that bins—like houses—are entangled with certain ideals of order and cleanliness, but also to locate those ideals at the interface of Yapa/Kardiya relations, as part of the justification for disciplining measures towards ‘normalising’ Indigenous populations (Hinkson, 2007, p. 6; see also Dodson, 2007). Locally, this takes place through the kinds of rhetoric and programs that focus on Yapa as problematic waste makers; a rhetoric which like ‘litter’ serves to obfuscate the fact that, ultimately, the problem of waste is something we are all implicated in—even (or, especially so) if it is in bins and at landfills, where we can promptly forget about it.

Against the distancing effect of landfills—the amassing of indeterminate materials elsewhere, to be dealt with by other people—Reno argues that we need to find ways of bringing that waste into a closer relationship with its producers, to make waste newly visible and newly meaningful (see also Hawkins, 2006). One of the unique aspects of the Nyirрпи context was

that Yapa lived with the material traces of their lives and activities in ways that did just that. As touched on above and as I will describe more fully in the following chapters, there was a sort of pause that happened as things lay scattered on the ground, a time and space created for material possibilities and further human engagements with that material. This chapter's focus on the material and social order in which wheelie bins are entangled not only with perceptions of materiality in terms of rubbish and litter but also certain expectations of domestic and civic behaviours and practices sit in contrast to succeeding chapters on the material possibilities that are realised through Warlpiri spatial practices and a modality or praxis of openness, flexibility, and possibility.

Chapter Seven.

Warlpiri (not) rubbish

It's after breakfast and Mae and I are sitting under a bough shelter with a few other family members. Mae is sorting her clothes, making clean and dirty piles and muttering about needing to do washing. Although not today, it seems, as she grabs her bag and stands up, "Nangala, we go office". It's time, instead, to ring up about her tax return. We walk, taking the short cut track along the base of the sand dune north of her place. Along the way, Mae stops to inspect a pile of furniture against her back fence, put there when the house was emptied for the upgrades: a tall, metal table with a mesh top, some broken bed frames, plastic drawers, and a mattress. On top of this pile is a large heap of clothes, which Mae is inspecting. Following her gaze, I comment, "Clothes full up", to which she replies, "I gotta chuck him, whole lot". "Chuck him, really?" "Yes, punku [bad], been sitting too long you know. I gotta ask for tractor, take him whole lot rubbish [to the rubbish tip]".

What is rubbish? This is a question that I often asked myself during fieldwork, especially when I was drawing my maps of Mae's and Sandra's places. Walking around with pen and paper, trying to render the material landscape with some level of accuracy, was an exercise in close observation. I would walk around and stand back, taking in the vista of an area; I would stop and move closer, looking into the detail of things. I then had to, always, make decisions about what level of detail to include and what to leave out. The issue of scale and my poor drawing skills made some of these decisions seem easy or obvious: I simply couldn't draw the depth and layers of something like Mae's bed, which I crudely symbolised as a rectangle shape but was generally comprised of a metal bedframe, its missing slats reinforced by a wooden door, on top of which was a mattress, layers of blankets, and a pillowcase stuffed with clothes. As well, things like spoons, pannikins and cooking pots were not only too small to draw individually, to do so would have made the maps very busy and hard to decipher.

One level of detail that is interestingly inconsistent across my maps is the inclusion—or not—of the scatterings of 'rubbish' and other small things that were a fairly constant feature of the ground: bowls, plates, food and drink packaging (tin cans, tin lids, plastic containers, glass jars, cans and bottles, polystyrene trays), items of clothing, pieces of cutlery, dried-out tea bags,

pieces of aluminum foil, cardboard tubing from empty rolls of foil, feathers, shoes, cardboard boxes or pieces thereof, playing cards, sticks of wood, paper shopping bags, and so on. In many of my maps these items are completely missing, in others I tried to represent them in various ways. Sometimes I symbolised their presence by covering an area of my map with lots of small dots and adding vague descriptions like, “rubbish scattered”, or “lots of stuff on floor”. At other times I made lists of everything I could see on, for example, the floor of a room: Tin cans, photo, plastic food packaging, cardboard, clothes, backpack.

The mapping, or not, of these materials, along with my constant return to but also slippage between terms like ‘rubbish’ and ‘stuff’, is a reflection of my shifting between, on the one hand, a sort of ‘auto-pilot’ application of categories and, on the other hand, a perspective that was learning to accept a degree of ambiguity about the matter we lived with. In the former mode, I tended to disregard the smaller stuff on the ground as mostly just rubbish: I didn’t need to represent it on my maps because it was categorically different to the ‘things’ that we lived with. As such, when I did attend to smaller items I would often focus on ‘things’—a frying pan, a bowl, a knife—while leaving out any ‘rubbish’. At the same time, I was aware of how purely subjective my determination of what constituted ‘rubbish’ or a ‘thing’ was. My awareness of this became more pronounced when it was challenged by Warlpiri practices: moments like those described in the opening vignette, coupled with the fact that it was common for many of the items that I was seeing as ‘rubbish’ to be picked up and used for any myriad of purposes. The spout of a plastic bottle might be cut off leaving a cup for drinking tea, or its label might be carefully peeled off and turned edgewise to floss between teeth. In other words, I was realising that there is no fixed or categorical answer to the question “What is rubbish?” and that perhaps a better question to ask was, “When/under what conditions can a pile of clothes and furniture be considered rubbish and a plastic bottle on the ground *not* rubbish”?

In this chapter I answer that question by way of a slightly circular argument. I show that Warlpiri spatial practices suggested a difference between the materials that were scattered across open ground, which might be picked up and used, and those that had been amassed together, for example in bins or in raked piles. In the sort of pause that happened as things lay scattered on the ground, a time and space was created for material possibilities. Once those same materials had been raked up and/or binned, however, those possibilities were largely closed off. In other words, things lying in a scattered formation on the ground or floor were not necessarily (always, already) considered to be rubbish, they became rubbish (finally, properly) through the very acts of cleaning—of sweeping, raking, and amassing (in piles or bins). At the same time, and this is where the circularity of the argument comes in, cleaning acts were

initiated because certain assessments were made of material conditions; that things had become *punku* [bad] in some way, as with the pile of furniture and clothes in the opening vignette. In the ensuing discussion I unpack the meanings and uses of the term *punku*, and its relationship to other terms like rubbish and mess. I also describe some Warlpiri techniques of cleaning and waste management, practices which I bring to bear not just on the wheelie bin entanglements discussed in the last chapter but also, in the conclusion, on approaches to rubbish and waste in the field of discard studies. I begin with a description of the spatial practices referred to above.

Spatial practices

In Figure 7.1 and Figure 7.2, I present maps of both Mae's and Sandra's places, with four aspects highlighted: wheelie bins are shaded purple; raked piles of rubbish are shaded red (with an 'R' in the middle); orange shading indicates focal areas where material traces of our activities were scattered; and yellow shading indicates a recently swept or raked area.⁵² I use this shading to illustrate the important distinction between the material identity and possibilities of the items that were left scattered across the ground (in the orange shaded areas) and those that were either in the bins or raked piles (shaded purple and red).

Warlpiri practices of living with material things did not usually or immediately create a straight and uni-directional road from things of use or consumption to rubbish in the bin (and then, finally, at the landfill). In the routine of daily life, more common than immediately binning things were (to me) more ambiguous practices of leaving things on the ground: putting the polystyrene meat tray to the side with one hand while putting meat on the cooking wire with the other, throwing a tin lid off to the side after peeling it off a can, leaving clothes on the bathroom floor after a shower, cleaning a vehicle out by opening the doors and transferring everything from its floors on to the ground outside, shaking out the layers of blanket bedding so that smaller items collected in the folds, like a spoon, bowl, or piece of clothing, land on the ground around the *yunta*. It was as a result of these kinds of practices that the orange shaded areas of the maps in Figure 7.1 and Figure 7.2 became scattered with what I variably mapped as 'rubbish' or 'stuff' and will now refer to more neutrally as material traces.

⁵² A close observer may notice some discrepancies between the map of Mae's place in Figure 7.1 and the maps in chapter three. The map above was produced at a later date, after two bough shelters and the old chook shed had been dismantled.

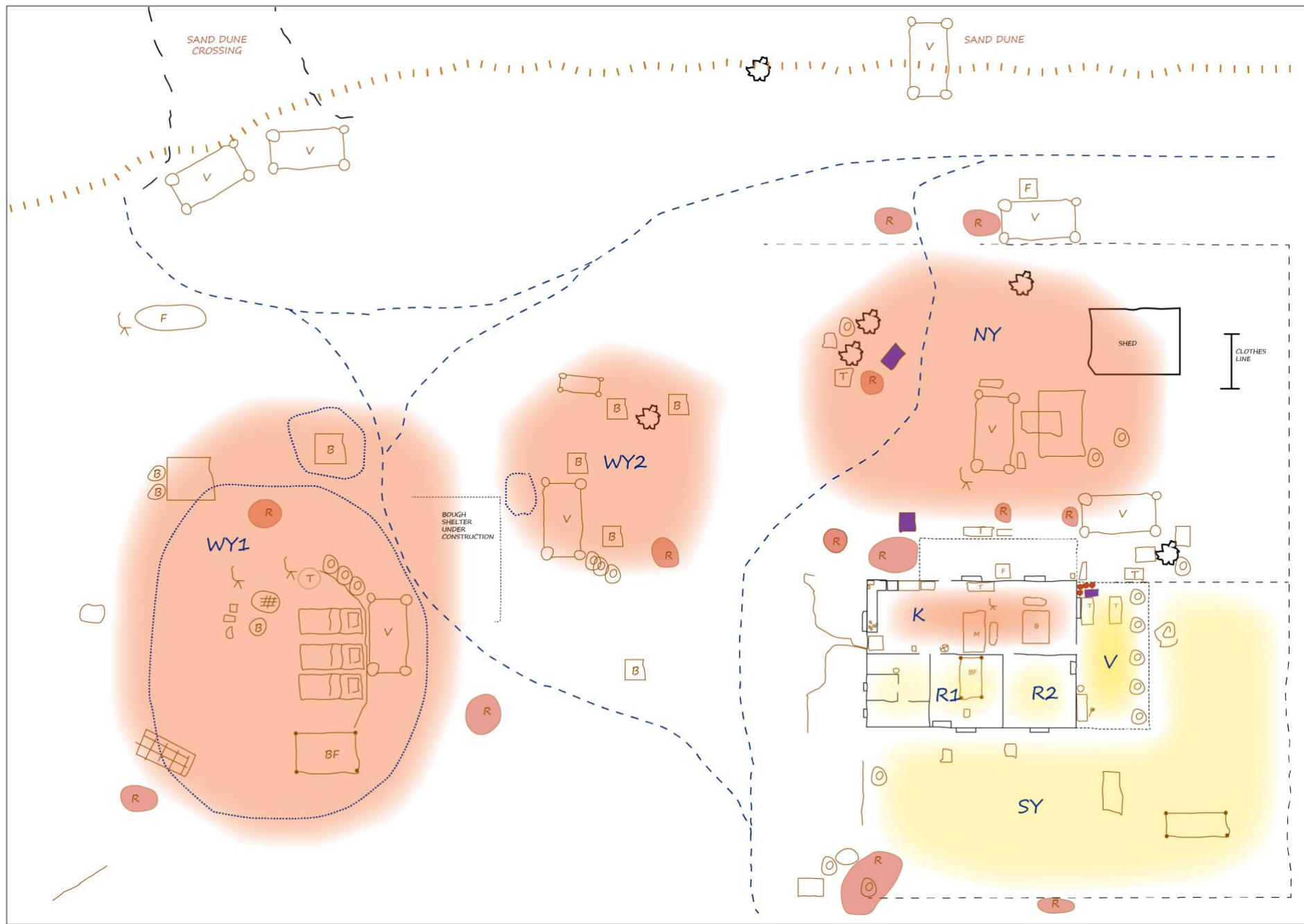


Figure 7.1 Mae's place: raked piles, bins, and scattered material traces

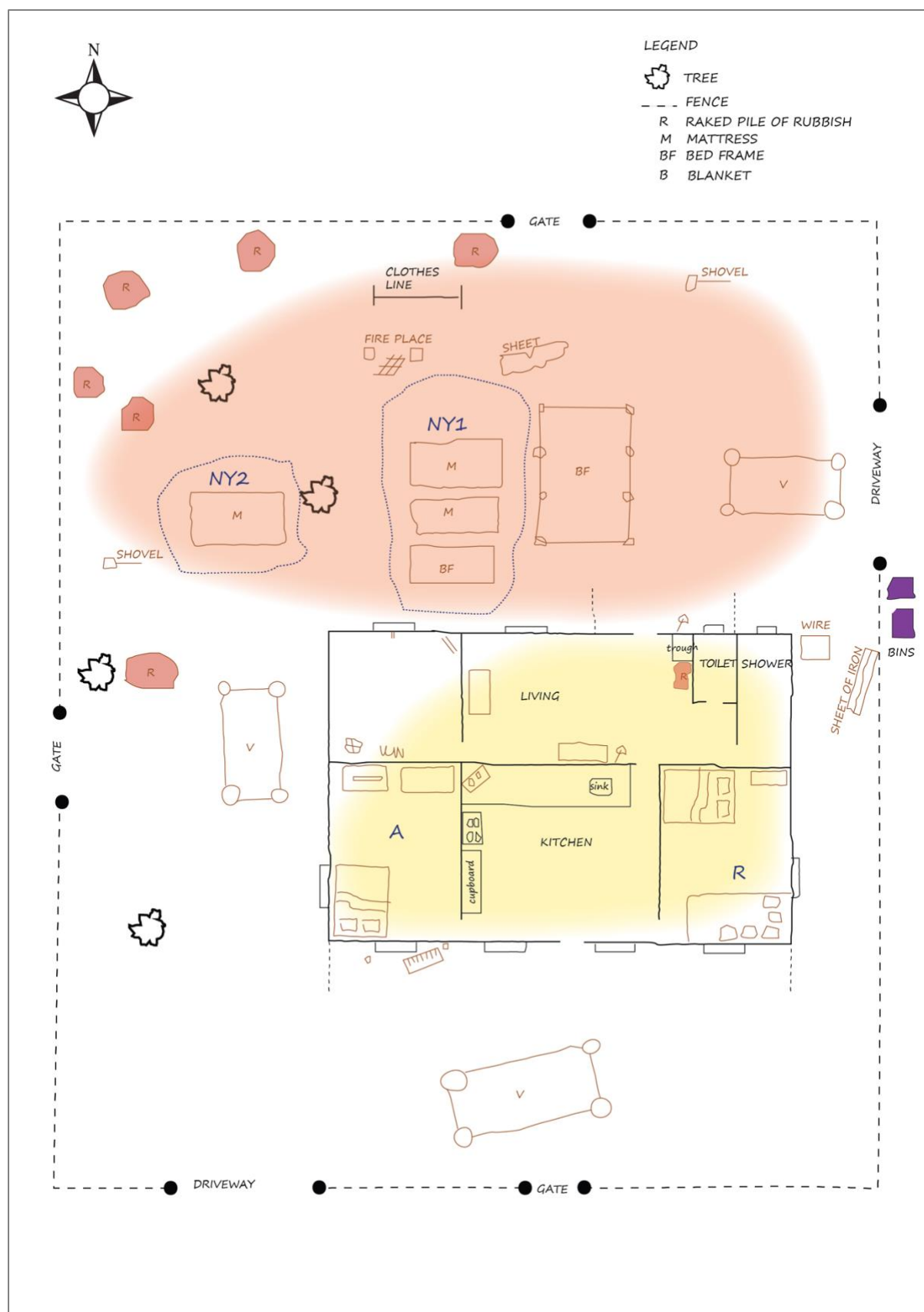


Figure 7.2 Sandra's place: raked piles, bins, and scattered material traces

The broad pattern or cycle of living tended to involve a build-up period as we used and left material traces lying around on the ground. Eventually—for reasons I explain in more detail below—the build-up would become too much, and someone would clean the relevant area, either by sweeping and mopping inside areas or raking an area of ground outside. Sometimes, we would simply move to a new location for an activity or for establishing a *yunta* and thereby delay cleaning until we needed to use that area or room again. In this respect, Warlpiri mobility played an important factor in the need for and timing of cleaning. It was often the departure from a particular *yunta* that put a line under its symbolic meaning as an active zone of life and activity. Upon return from trips away, a *yunta* would generally be established on ‘fresh’ ground, either in an entirely different area—a new zone of activity—or in the past zone of activity made ‘anew’ by cleaning.

Cleaning practices resulted in the amassing of those material traces, sometimes into bins (shaded purple) but more often into raked piles (shaded red). The overall effect was that both Mae’s and Sandra’s places were often characterised by the kind of patchwork effect evident in the maps in Figure 7.1 and Figure 7.2: some areas with the material traces of our activities in various stages of build-up, some areas that had been cleared, and raked piles of rubbish dispersed throughout. Recalling the descriptions of shifting social and material configurations in chapters three and four, the rubbish piles can be read as visible markers around (past and current) zones of activity. I noted how they marked the peripheries to which we would move our rubbish, first to the outskirts of those inner zones of activity and then, eventually, to the outskirts of Mae’s and Sandra’s places entirely, to the edges of and over the fences, onto verge areas or into wheelie bins. In addition to that layer of meaning, in this chapter I make a further point about the relationship—or difference—between amassed rubbish piles and areas where material traces were building up.

The in-situ practice of leaving, putting, dropping or throwing things on the ground or floor was not the same as the practice of putting things in the bin or raking them into a pile. I call the former practices ambiguous because at times they did seem like acts of waste-making, especially if waste or rubbish is understood as matter that is rejected or superfluous to in-situ needs or wants. In a momentary sense, the polystyrene meat tray, or the plastic bottle, or the tin can and its lid left on the ground were waste. They were the “disposable husk” (Reno, 2009, p. 30) encasing the product that was really wanted. They were “made to be wasted” (Hawkins, 2019). Put aside, they were the by-products of food consumption. However, while leaving something on the ground may have indicated that it was no longer needed in that moment, this did not necessarily mean that it was ‘thrown away’, finished with forever; such an act did not

necessarily cancel out further material possibilities. Such material traces were not rubbish or waste in the sense of being useless or worthless or even dirty and untouchable. At any other moment a polystyrene meat tray might be used to fan the flames of the fire, or as a plate or bowl to eat from; a tin can as a leg to prop up the cooking wire; a tin lid as a knife or scraping implement; the drawstring from a skirt to tie down a tyre; a piece of cardboard as a surface for chopping food, for eating food off, for folding around a hot handle for carrying, or fanning or starting a fire; a cardboard box for storage, or upturned as a table; sticks of wood for starting a fire, or shooing dogs; a plastic bottle as a cup (see Figure 7.3), and so on. As such, the in-situ leaving seemed to suspend materials into abeyance or latency—a kind of pause of possibility—that did not exist once they had been binned or raked.



Figure 7.3 Bottle to cup

In this context, the determination of rubbish was not tied to the logics of production and consumption. To peel a lid off a tin can, or to finish drinking the contents of a plastic bottle, or to take the last slice of bread from its plastic bag, did not make that tin can, plastic bottle or plastic bag a piece of rubbish immediately destined for the bin. What eventually made these things rubbish in the bin or a raked pile was the same condition that made the furniture and

clothes in the opening vignette rubbish. When scattered around on the ground or floor they were all part of the same layer of materials, the mere presence or visibility of which did not offend the sensibilities of Warlpiri family (or me)—until, that is, they were assessed as being *punku*.

When things become *punku*

In the Warlpiri lexicon there are a few words—mainly *yungkiyi* (also *wakiji*; *yilparta*)—that translate as equivalents to rubbish, garbage, refuse or trash in English, in the sense that they can be used to refer to the materials you might find at the landfill, or in a bin, or you might ask “who left this rubbish on the ground?” (Laughren et al., in prep; Swartz, 2012). *Yungkiyi*, however, is not a word that I picked up on, or learned myself, in the context of living with Warlpiri people. It was only when I asked a language teacher about words relevant to my research interests that I learned *yungkiyi* as a Warlpiri word for rubbish. When I checked this with Mae, she confirmed the meaning of *yungkiyi*, giving me an example of how it might be used, “You know: *yungkiyi* [rubbish] lying on the ground everywhere at home”.

Another Warlpiri word is *yapunta*, which is equivalent to English meanings of rubbish as something that is unwanted, thrown out, discarded or abandoned (Laughren et al., in prep; Swartz, 2012). *Yapunta* seems to bring social processes and/or action to the meaning of rubbish, suggesting that something becomes *yapunta* when a social relationship has been detracted from it; when it is no longer ‘attached’ to someone in the way it once was. It is, tellingly, a word that can also apply to people, to the bereaved or the orphaned—those left behind on their own, without their core relations. Indeed, it was actually in the latter sense that I first learned the word, as a couple of older women who had lost all but one of their children were referred to by others as “*Yapunta*”. In the course of life with Warlpiri people *yapunta* was not a word I picked up on as being used to refer to materials as rubbish.⁵³ The most common words or phrases that were applied to exacerbated material conditions, that I came to know, was the Warlpiri word *punku* and the English words rubbish and mess.

Rubbish especially seemed to resonate strongly in the Warlpiri context. It was used to refer to materials or material conditions as well as more broadly to situations or experiences

⁵³ This is similar to Yasmine Musharbash (2020, personal communication), who is familiar with *yapunta* being used to refer to people (orphans and the like) and ‘things’ which have been left/neglected by their owners—but not as anything synonymous with ‘rubbish’ as such.

that were negative in some way. For example, a school might be described as rubbish, a person one is not happy with might be called a “rubbish one”, if someone said insulting things about a person they were said to have been “rubbishing” one or one’s family member.⁵⁴ Mess was often used in conjunction with identifiers of who or what was the mess-making culprit: dogs, kids, visiting family, and old people—like Mae—were the “main ones” for making a mess. Inanimate objects, like bedframes and fences, were also mess makers. Around the time we failed to win the tidy yard competition Davina mentioned a number of times that mine and Mae’s bed frames in the yard were “making a mess”. This was, perhaps, a euphemistically polite way of saying we were mess makers! It also referenced the fact that our beds generally marked a focal point of family gatherings and therefore the practices that resulted in material traces scattered on the ground. From Davina’s perspective, fences made a mess because they caught things that would otherwise have been blown away by the wind; she would often suggest we should just get rid of the fences, so the rubbish could blow away.⁵⁵

As these examples illustrate, rubbish and mess *were* used by Warlpiri people to refer to those material traces around the place in various stages of buildup. This is also evident in Mae’s example of the way *yungkiyi* might be used in a sentence, “rubbish lying on the ground everywhere at home”. Yet, at the same time, these words did not necessarily operate in particularly loaded ways; they weren’t always deployed with a screwed-up nose, to suggest that the presence of material traces was bad. Rather, there were often times when rubbish or mess seemed to operate as a more neutral identifier of material conditions—to simply acknowledge the presence of material traces as opposed to differentiating the status of some materials over others. The vista of scattered materials across an area of yard might be referred to as rubbish or mess, yet at the same time may include a tin lid that will be used as a knife. When, on the other hand, a screwed-up nose or some other emphasis *was* given to words like rubbish and mess, this was an indication that material conditions were considered to have become *punku*.

⁵⁴ Beyond the Warlpiri context, according to Nic Peterson (2020, personal communication) ‘rubbish’ was used in Arnhem Land to refer to kin with whom one was in an avoidance relationship. When I was working on Arrernte country (Alice Springs) there was a Traditional Owner who would distinguish sacred trees from those that were planted by referring to the latter as “rubbish ones”, standing in a straight line, “like soldiers”.

⁵⁵ Presley had a different perspective on fences: he said they made it easier to clean because they demarcated an area of responsibility; he wanted a smaller fenced area of yard, inside of which would be easier to keep clean and outside of which would be someone’s else’s responsibility.

Punku was an often-used word at Nyirrpri, which I understood as the English equivalent of bad (and some of the synonyms for bad) and as the direct opposite of *ngurrju* [good].⁵⁶ It's a word which depending on context and emphasis can be used mildly or strongly, rudely or humorously, and which (similar to 'rubbish') suggests a quality that can be applied (or be judged as applying) not only to material conditions but also to people or people's behaviour, as well as to feelings, emotions, experiences and situations. To give some examples of the wide range of uses for *punku* from my field notes:

Mae was talking about a male nurse who used to work at the clinic, who hurt her arm giving her a needle and only ever prescribed Panadol. She described him as, "*Punku-nyayirni* [really bad], they called him Panadol Man. Might be chest cold, might be really sick you know, might be anything: he gave Panadol".

I was inside with a few others when it started to rain. When Mae came in, she was wet and puffing from the effort of securing a tarp to protect our bedding in the west yard. She told me off because I hadn't come out to help her: "I been waiting for you Nangala, *punku*!"

Richard almost decided not to get an early morning lift into town with a Kardiya who was upholding the No Kids in Toyota rule: he thought he was a "*punku* whitefella". Eventually, a crying young girl was ejected from the troopy, into bed with me, and Richard left with everyone else.

Mae was telling me a story about a past fight she'd had, when she got really upset and hit someone. After the incident, she described feeling "really guilty, *punku-nyayirni* [really bad]": she said sorry.

Mae, Sadie and I had made our beds in the west yard and we were lying together, talking story. Sadie kept seeing frogs around, "Look Nangala frog-frog", to which she added, "People at Balgo eat frogs". I said, "So do the

⁵⁶ The Warlpiri–English Encyclopaedic Dictionary (Laughren et al., in prep) translates *punku* as "bad, undesirable, horrible, revolting, evil, rotten, naughty", and *ngurrju* as "good, nice, okay, alright, right, well, happy, content, quiet, tame, well behaved, perfect" (see also Hiatt, 2007; Swartz, 2012)

French. I've tried them". Mae was wrinkling her nose, "*Punku* I don't like frog".

After we'd been sleeping inside for a while, Mae initiated our move back to the yard declaring, "I don't like [sleeping] inside, too hot, *punku*. And too noisy".

When Richard warned me against a cheap frying pan I was contemplating at the local store he described it as, "*Punku* Nangala, when you cook it, you'll get black [in your food], other one is more better, here I'll show you".

Roads and tracks that were too washed out to be driven on, or whose condition made driving a bumpy and unpleasant experience were described as *punku*.

Jacob and his son came over to visit and were talking about their hunting trip the day before. Jacob laughingly told how Mae had walked to the creek to fill up the billycan with water. It was a long walk from where they'd made camp and when she got back, intending to boil the water for tea, his son put his foot in the billycan. "*Punku*" Mae said, laughing and taking up the story, "He wanted to wash his foot".

When used strongly *punku* can denote something really horrible, rotten or revolting, and in this sense can be a synonym for another Warlpiri word, *pukulyu*, used for things or matter that are or smell rotten and putrid. When directed at a person both *punku* and *pukulyu* can be a strong insult and cause offence, usually done deliberately by including other swear words. Conjoining *punku* or *pukulyu* with the Warlpiri words for anus or female or male genitalia is especially offensive and rude (and in this sense links back to the use of "rubbishing" to describe verbal insults). Of course, such uses are always relationally and context specific; as much as rude and swearing words are used in moments of frustration, anger and conflict, at other times and with certain people you can also use them in a laughing or teasing manner. *Punku* was also used for milder expressions of annoyance. For example, "*Punku*, I don't like" was an often-made declaration by Mae, sometimes as a quiet, accepting or at least patient grumble and sometimes as a loud, more upset protest, about something someone did or didn't do: when a grandson failed to return her new mattress after repeated requests, or when Davina took a quilt

from her bed, or her crow bar, or when she discovered one of the kids had taken some money from her bag, “I don't like touching my bag, *punku*, that's stealing”.

In terms of its application specifically to material conditions, with a few exceptions—like feces, vomit, urine—*punku* didn't seem to be a quality intrinsic to particular materials. Rather it was a contingent state or quality that could come about through certain processes or in certain contexts and could apply to any material. As I describe below, the three main reasons material conditions were considered to have become *punku* were when they smelled, when there was too much of a buildup or contamination, or when too much time had passed.

Smell: Things being or becoming smelly was considered *punku* (and if the smell was of something rotting then the word *pukulyu* also applied). On the note of smell, I should add that olfactory offensiveness was not commonly part of the material landscape of the outside areas of Mae's or Sandra's places. Neither the materials scattered on the ground nor in the raked piles were smelly, due to the fact that anything with the potential to fester was rendered odorless mainly by the dogs but also by exposure to the elements (cf. Douny, 2007). I cannot over-emphasise the important work that the dogs did, as they literally cleaned (licked) every trace of food from all containers and materials, which were then further treated by the sun, wind and air. It was only when things were denied exposure to the dogs and the elements that smelliness became an issue—for example, when our waste was amassed in the dark, air and sun-deprived recesses of council wheelie bins. Sometimes, also, inside areas would become smelly after a while. The houses themselves were not built to ‘breath’, and there were no fly screens on the doors, so the only way to let fresh air in while also keeping the dogs out was to open the windows. Leaving windows open was not overly desirable as they tended to counteract the heating or cooling that was needed to make houses livable. Even if windows were opened during the day, for safety reasons they were always kept closed at nighttime. For these reasons, the buildup period of inside areas was more likely to result in the state of things being considered *punku* because of smell. The issue with bad smells was not only their olfactory offensiveness but also that they can cause sickness and it was often out of this concern—smell causing sickness in people—that someone would decide to clean, or tell others to clean, or decide to move elsewhere until cleaning was done.

Quantity: A build-up of too much stuff or of layers of matter could be *punku*. When this judgement was made of areas in general—when the ground or floor around us became too cluttered with the material traces of our activities—this was often described as “too much” rubbish or mess. But this quality could also apply to single material things, for example a pot that was covered in sand. Again, when things became *punku* for this reason it was time to either

clean or move away. *Punku* things, like a pot or large tin can covered in sand, would be washed before being used to e.g., cook food or boil tea in. When the buildup around our *yunta* became *punku* we would either shift elsewhere, or someone would sweep and mop (if inside) or rake (if outside) the area, leaving those piles of rubbish that marked the periphery of zones of activity (from chapters three and four).

Time: An effect of time, of things having been left for too long could result in them becoming *punku*. Often, this was a combination of time and quantity, as with the furniture and clothes in the opening vignette, which had been both heaped in a pile and “sitting too long”. Related to the effect of time, and recalling the meaning of *yapunta* as well, *punku* could apply when things had that air of having been left, abandoned, or not wanted; of being disassociated from their owner or user. Take, for example, all the material traces that were left behind on the ground or floor when we shifted our *yunta*. When they were lying amongst us, they were part of the landscape of an active zone of activity or ‘life’ and not necessarily ‘rubbish’ or *punku*. After a while, however, their buildup became “too much” prompting either a cleanup (raking or sweeping) of the area, or the shifting of our *yunta* elsewhere. In the case of the latter, once we had moved and taken all the furniture and other items that we needed with us, what was left behind was essentially the ground of an abandoned camp, the material traces of which were left to be blown away by the wind or be rained on or slowly covered by wind-blown sand or claimed by the dogs. Individual items may yet be re-claimed for use but eventually they were part of a material landscape that would generally be considered as needing to be cleaned before we shifted our *yunta* back.

“Waste is every object, plus time” writes Thill (2015, p. 8). Here, a reference to affective relationships with things, which will eventually be no longer wanted, or useful, also invokes what was touched on elsewhere: the approach to materiality that recognises all matter is in a process of breaking down. In the Warlpiri context, and especially considering the spatiality of past and current zones of activity, it is also useful to think in terms of “multiple temporalities” (Allon et al., 2021). Thill’s equation works both ways. On the one, something left on the ground plus time could create a window in which material possibilities were realised. On the other hand, an effect of time could put materials out of action, when things had sat for too long, or were disconnected for too long from the Yapa or socially ‘alive’ zones. This didn’t necessarily immediately make them rubbish or waste, but that disconnection, of leaving things behind, was another way of ‘marginalizing’ them, so to speak—which then opened them up to other (non-human) processes, forces, and claim. Take, for example, the effect of time on a blanket left on the ground by a departed visitor. There is a period of time in which that blanket holds the

potential to be picked up, shaken out and used for any number of purposes: spread flat and sat on for a card game, hung in a tree to make some shade. Yet, it also has that air of *yapunta*; of having been left behind by someone and detached in some way from that association; whether because it was forgotten or deliberately left, it is now nobody's. Its window of potential for human-reclaiming closes as the effect of time and the elements exacerbates its air of having been left: it gets wet from rain and then dries stiff, the wind covers it with layers of sand, which settles deeper in its folds and crevices. It might be claimed by a dog for sleeping on. At Mae's place, we often had blankets like this dispersed around the yard, gradually embedding into the sand where they lay. Eventually, they ended up in a rubbish pile, or became the blanket upon which a rubbish pile was heaped and then dragged to the verge.

What was clear during my fieldwork was that the mere presence, or visibility, of things on the floor or ground did not offend. Neither presence and visibility, nor location on the ground, was generally a problem, a reason to initiate a house cleaning or yard raking session, until it was combined with one of the effects described above. Like the pile of clothes in the opening vignette, once things had built up over time and there was "too much" stuff or mess, or likewise things had been left for "too long" or were "smelly"—when things or the state of things were determined to be *punku*—it was time to clean or chuck something away, to move away from an area, or clean an area or room.

New one *mani*

The most common expression used to refer to cleaning was "new one *manta/mani* [make or cause to be clean]".⁵⁷ Using *mani* in the sentence is a way to describe or refer to the action of cleaning. For example, one could ask, "What is Davina doing?" and the answer could be given as "New one *mani* [cleaning]". Using *manta* makes the sentence a command, something you would say when asking someone else to clean. For example, if Mae considered the kitchen to be *punku* she might tell one of her granddaughters, "New one *manta*". I don't know the history of how or why "new one" came to be used for cleaning, nor whether there is any meaningful Warlpiri association of 'new' with 'clean'. It may derive from a Warlpiri to English translation, as one dictionary suggests a new/clean correlation in the word *mirarrpa* (Swartz, 2012). It may

⁵⁷ In Warlpiri orthography this is rendered *nyuwani-ma-ni* (Laughren et al., in prep)

also just be a colloquialism acknowledging the process of cleaning as making something ‘like new’. Either way, it was a phrase that was applied to both the cleaning of things—a pot covered in sand, for example—and areas of domestic space. In this usage, it is similar to the Warlpiri term for cleaning, *kirlka-mani*, meaning to clean something, like cleaning dirt from seeds by winnowing them, or to clear an area of ground, for example for sleeping or dancing (Laughren et al., in prep; Swartz, 2012). To me, the phrase “new one *mani*” certainly resonated as a meaningful description of the thoroughness of Warlpiri cleaning techniques, as a process of removing all material traces of previous activities and therefore rendering domestic areas as fresh ground, like new.

Cleaning inside: The first step of cleaning inside, whether the whole house or just a section or room, involved the removal of nearly all furniture from the space to be cleaned. With the exception of whitegoods and possibly some heavy or awkward pieces, all furniture—bedframes, mattresses, bedding, tables, shelves—would be transferred temporarily to the veranda or yard (or, if only cleaning a room, to another part of the house). Any smaller items scattered on the floor—clothes, bags, shoes, canvases, painting supplies, and so on—would also be collected up and moved outside or, after the upgrades, into the new cupboards. As well, food supplies and appliances on the kitchen bench would be moved to the higher floating shelves, and any crockery and cutlery lying about would be collected either in the sink or a plastic crate for later washing. In effect, this process of moving furniture and things was a system of sorting; once completed, items to keep had been stored either outside, on high, or in cupboards, leaving all remaining material traces on the floor or bench area to be cleaned.

Sweeping the floor often involved a second stage of sorting, as smaller still handy things like a spoon or thought-to-be-lost bank or ID cards were found and pocketed. Sweeping was systematic, generally starting in the smaller rooms that had no external access (like the shower, toilet, laundry, and bedrooms), in order to push the rubbish from each of those areas through to, for example, the kitchen at Mae’s place, or the living room at Sandra’s, to eventually accumulate in one or two large piles. On occasion, such rubbish piles would be transferred into a makeshift bin, like a cardboard box, which once full was sometimes left outside the house, sometimes thrown to the verge, sometimes deposited into a wheelie bin (and nearly always pounced on by the dogs). More often, for reasons I explain below, it was easier to simply keep

sweeping the inside rubbish through an outer door and leave it in a pile outside.⁵⁸ Either way, the eventual result was the removal of all rubbish from inside to outside, either piled on the ground or veranda or amassed in a bin, leaving clear floors ready for washing. Techniques for washing varied according to personal preference and equipment availability: if a mop and mop bucket couldn't be sourced, a hose and broom made a suitable substitute. When there was enough money for detergents they were used for mopping (or, scrubbing with a broom), otherwise mop buckets were filled with kettle after kettle of boiling water. The final step was to re-furnish the house by returning all the stuff that had been moved out of the way, a process that often involved the house being made anew, as the furniture was arranged in different formations than before.

Cleaning outside: Cleaning outside areas involved raking the ground, which—similar to above—was also a process of sorting. When raking around a camp that was still in use, the larger furniture didn't usually get moved away as preparation for cleaning, although sometimes furniture that was no longer needed—like a bedframe that a now departed family member had been using—would be dragged away to the periphery of the camp. In outside areas, larger pieces of furniture became the surfaces onto which things from the ground would be put for keeping: clothes, crockery, shoes, blankets, spoons, and so on would be picked up and piled a bed or table, for example. During raking, smaller still handy things would be revealed and pocketed as they emerged from the sand. In the end, an area of ground raked clear of all material traces, bar the lines in the sand left by the rake teeth, marked at its periphery by one or more piles of rubbish.

Making rubbish

At this point it is worth bringing some ethnographic context to the maps in Figure 7.1 and Figure 7.2, and to the summary descriptions so far. The map of Mae's place in Figure 7.1 was drawn on 15 June 2016, so just over a year after the detailed map in chapter three. The night before I drew this map, Mae, another woman Viola, and I had slept in the west yard (WY1), and Davina, Presley and Cora had slept in the kitchen (K). Viola, along with her sister and daughter, had joined our *yunta* a few weeks ago as a recent death meant they (like Mae) had to

⁵⁸ The only challenge to this latter technique were the metal door thresholds, which created a lip at which smaller things and especially sand would get stuck—this was easily overcome by unscrewing the metal plates to create a smooth, flat sweeping surface out the door.

avoid the west side of the community, where their own houses were located. The last time the west yard camp had been raked was a couple of weeks ago, when Mae had looked around and exclaimed, “Yii, new one *manta* please.” So, I raked while Mae cooked. Since then, as the photos in Figure 7.4 and Figure 7.5 illustrates, the area had gathered a scattering of material traces, including blankets, food and drink packaging, clothes, cups and bowls, tea bags, feathers, a swag cover, and so on. Also visible in the photo in Figure 7.4 is one of the rubbish piles marking the periphery of our *yunta*.



Figure 7.4 Mae's place WY1

Inside areas had been swept and/or mopped a number of times in the couple of weeks prior to the map in Figure 7.1. On the same day that I had raked our west yard *yunta* (WY1) we could tell it was going to rain, so Mae and I swept and mopped the kitchen in preparation for us and the other women moving inside. A couple of days later Davina and Presley came home from a trip and swept and mopped their room (R1) in order to use it again. A week later, Davina and Presley returned again from a trip away and, having swapped one of their air coolers for a television and digital receiver, they swept the whole house out and then set their *yunta* up in the kitchen (K), where the aerial plug was. Since then, while the two bedrooms haven't been used again and so remain empty (shaded yellow), the orange shading of the kitchen indicates the scattering of material traces building up around their *yunta*: a jerry can,

shoes, a bandage, plastic bags, cups, a pillow, drinks cans, a billy can, socks, a sheet and blanket, some small containers of paint, a plastic bottle.



Figure 7.5 Mae's place WY1

As a result of the last few inside cleans, quite a lot of stuff—clothes, art supplies (canvas and paints), broken crockery, food and drink packaging, boxes—and been moved or swept from inside to the veranda (V). A couple of days before I drew the map in Figure 7.1, Davina had sorted all this, placing art supplies and some clothes to keep on a table and couch on the veranda, and all the rest of the stuff into bags of rubbish (shaded red) and the wheelie bin on the veranda (shaded purple). She swept the veranda, and then together we raked the south yard (SY).

Recalling the description of Mae's place from chapter three and the areas we would gather during the day for activities: to the north of WY1, the blanket labelled 'B' and some scattered food packaging are the material traces of a recent gathering for a card game; in the area labelled WY2 there also scattered material traces, the blankets (labelled 'B') on which we sat around the tree, and some plastic tubs, sticks, and food packaging where people had gathered to paint canvas, using the vehicle (V) as a wind break. As the least socially active area of Mae's place, the north yard (NY1) was often where rubbish from inside was moved to the outside, forming small and large piles in the yard. It was also an area where people would pull up to empty a car, or to fix a car, and where lots of stuff was stored: in the map are cars on

bricks, a mattress, roof rack (bed frame), air compressor, car parts (some doors, a tray back canopy), box of clothes, tables, a crate, tyres and the like.



Figure 7.6 Sandra's place NY1

The map of Sandra's place in Figure 7.2 was drawn on 31 March 2015, which is a half-way point in the two weeks of shifting social and material configurations described in chapter four. The night before I drew this particular map, there were two *yunta* in the north yard, one for Cora, Ashley and I (NY1), the other for Elsie and Elmer (NY2). Sandra had slept in her room (S), and Danielle and Grace had slept in Danielle's room (D). Inside the house, it was upon the return of Sandra and Danielle from town trips that we had recently (within the past day to a week) swept and mopped the bedrooms, kitchen, living area, and toilet and shower. Around the yard—and especially the north areas where some of us had been sleeping and we had all been gathering for other activities—material traces were building up, including (as I listed on my map from that day and is partially illustrated in the photo in Figure 7.6) cardboard boxes, flour buckets, pillows, plastic bottles, someone's sports bag, tin cans, a sheet of iron, shoes, a cooking pot, and a bike wheel. In a couple of days my maps indicate the yard cleanup we had, with the aid of Elsie and Elmer (see chapter four).

I have come to think of the determination (or, making) of rubbish in the Warlpiri context as a kind of staged process of placings, or spatial practices. It started with those initial, ambiguous

practices by which all manner of materials found their way to the ground, scattered around. Individually, some of those things might be *punku*—a smelly carton of milk, or a pot covered in sand; they would need to be cleaned in some way if to be used again. Others might be someone's belongings, their shoes, or their jacket, or they might be those items of momentary waste, the food packaging that might, at another moment, be a cup or a plate. While they lay scattered on the ground, in open areas or under and amidst bed frames and the fire, swags, chairs and rakes, their material status was sort of equalized, inoffensive. They lay there, somewhere between rubbish and not-rubbish, part of a material landscape that although sometimes referred to as messy or as being characterised by rubbish, from which things of use might also yet be gleaned. As these traces built up, however, words like rubbish and mess came to mean, or were qualified with, *punku*, leading eventually to the next stages of rubbish determination: the sorting of all those material traces into things to keep (in which case they are relocated, outside, inside, up high, into pockets) and things to not keep. The latter were then amassed together by sweeping or raking, which is the act that makes, finally, piles of rubbish.

Warlpiri waste management

As I have described, Warlpiri people didn't often follow an immediate, linear system of binning—from use or activity that creates waste, which is deposited into smaller house bins, which are then regularly emptied into a wheelie bin. The broad pattern or cycle of domestic living involved periods of material build-up followed by the cleaning practices described above, resulting in often numerous and dispersed piles of rubbish. To circle back to the theme of wheelie bin entanglements raised in the last chapter, it is worth pausing here for a moment to bring the above descriptions to bear on *why* wheelie bins weren't particularly useful for Warlpiri waste management. The reasons come down to a mismatch between the material qualities and design intention of such bins and Warlpiri waste-making and cleaning practices.

Waste volumes: wheelie bins were often not up to the task of holding all the rubbish required of them. Indeed, quite large amounts of rubbish could accumulate over a buildup period, especially so if lots of family were or had been stopping. Once a buildup had become too much and cleaning was eventually done, the resulting piles of rubbish were often not only large they were also so dispersed around the place that they presented a challenge to wheelie bin use, both in terms of their capacity but also the effort involved in rubbish transfer.

Physical effort: getting piles of rubbish into a wheelie bin was a challenge (dustpan and brushes weren't commonly found in Warlpiri homes). One technique involved transferring the

rubbish into a small receptacle—like a cardboard box—and then emptying that or throwing the whole box into a wheelie bin (again, volume capacity becoming an issue as wheelie bins could fill up fast with this method). Techniques for this included turning the box on its side and using the broom to sweep the rubbish into it, followed by using e.g., polystyrene meat trays to scrape and lift the smaller quantities missed by the broom. Another technique, which worked best with rubbish piles made on verandas, was to place a box or a wheelie bin on its side at the edge of the concrete, and then sweep all the waste off its lip and into the bin. Both of these techniques could be difficult, back-breaking work, requiring lots of bending over and holding a receptacle with one hand and the broom with the other. For older people, an alternative was to simply sit down next to a rubbish pile and, with the bin nearby on its side, use one's hands to shovel larger items in, and then the edge of a polystyrene meat tray or a piece of cardboard box to lever and shovel the smaller items in. A final method involved spreading an old blanket or sheet at the edge of a raked pile, or at the edge of the concrete veranda, and then raking or sweeping as much as possible onto the fabric. This could then be rolled or folded up and hefted it into the bin, although more often—because of the volumes of waste being dealt with—it was easier to grab an edge of the blanket and drag the whole pile to the verge for front loader collection.

Containment: if and once used, wheelie bins simply weren't that good at keeping their contents. Or, to put it differently, the dogs at Nyirripi had mad bin-raiding skills. At Mae's place it was very common to find wheelie bins (and boxes if used) on their side, contents spilling out in the aftermath of a dog scavenging frenzy (indeed, the shaded-purple-wheelie bin in the NY1 area of the map in Figure 7.1 is on its side). This was, no doubt, a factor in the council introducing the verge stands to which wheelie bins could be attached. However even these were not completely dog proof. At Sandra's place, I once watched a dog jump into one such affixed bin: it leapt up and somehow straddled the sides while simultaneously nudging the lid open with its nose and dove right in, lid snapping down after it. After a period of bin wobbling and rustling sounds, the dog popped back out like a jack-in-the-box. Fixing wheelie bins to the stands was at least a step towards solving the problem of toppled bins and spilled contents, however their fixture rendered them even less relevant to Warlpiri waste management practices. Circling back to the first two points about rubbish volumes, dispersed piles of rubbish, and the challenges of rubbish transfer, wheelie bins that were actually mobile were far more likely to be used than those fixed to a stand, for the simple fact that you can bring the bin to the rubbish.



Figure 7.7 Wheelie bin affordance (credit: Yasmine Musharbash)

On the whole, wheelie bins were the least relevant to Warlpiri waste management, although their material qualities—like height and sturdiness—afforded other uses, as shown in Figure 7.7. Overall, the principal method of Warlpiri waste management was those raked piles, which would form first around the peripheries of camps or other zones of activity, where they would often stay and be added to for some time. Indeed, rubbish piles were a constant of the material landscape of Mae’s and Sandra’s places; they might move around, or be marginalized to the verge or a bin, or be added to, or created a new, but they were always there. Someone would rake and make three piles, the next person to rake would add to those same piles or go to the effort of joining two piles and dragging them to the verge on a blanket. The next person to rake would start a new pile, and so on. In this way, there was a visibility, presence and proximity to the ways Warlpiri people lived with material traces, whether they were amassed as clearly defined rubbish piles, or more ambiguously scattered about as potentially still usable things.

Conclusion

From literature in the field of discard studies, it seems to me that two dominant themes emerge in how theorists approach questions of rubbish and waste. The first is a constructivist paradigm following Douglas's (1966) suggestion that there is no such thing as dirt (intrinsically), only "matter out of place" according to specific modes of classification. The second is focused on the materiality of waste and the effects it has in the world; as having a presence or quality that can signify, do something, assert itself, or provoke or require a reaction in a way not initially determined by human symbolic systems (Bennett, 2004, 2010; Gregson & Crang, 2010; Gregson et al., 2010; Hawkins, 2009; Reno, 2014, 2015). As Liboiron (2014b) says, "not all waste is created equal." The material qualities of waste—toxicity, durability, complex compounds—matter greatly as they "dictate how waste travels through environments and economies, whether and how it is dangerous or causes harm, and the sorts of systems and politics they are entangled in". I delineate these approaches not to suggest that they are mutually exclusive; they are often both in play and it is, rather, a question of where the emphasis is placed (cf. Moore, 2012; also Campkin & Cox, 2007; Hawkins & Muecke, 2003a; Reno, 2018; Wolkowitz, 2007).

It is productive and necessary to interrogate rubbish or waste (or discards, garbage, trash, rejectamenta) through a consideration of how the meaning and value of things is derived from (and may shift according to) the socio-cultural, political and economic contexts in which they move (Appadurai, 1986; Colloredo-Mansfield, 2003; Frow, 2003; Gregson et al., 2007; Hawkins & Muecke, 2003b; O'Brien, 1999). Attendance to the various human contexts and processes for classifying, categorising, sorting, ordering, using, keeping and discarding can reveal much about the socially constructed bases according to which things—and also people and practices—are differentiated. Recalling the previous chapter, locating conceptions of value, rubbish, waste, cleanliness, hygiene and order within or across wider sociocultural-economic systems is a means to interrogate the ways in which those very notions are deployed against particular groups; at stake are exclusionary socio-spatial orders and infrastructural inequalities (Argyrou, 1997; Campkin & Cox, 2007; Chakrabarty, 2002; Desai et al., 2015; Moore, 2012; Pow, 2016; Redfield & Robins, 2016; Rose, 2003; Sibley, 1995; Sundberg, 2008; Vincent, 2018). Theorists who attend to the socio-cultural operations that shape definitions of, attitudes towards, and behaviours and relations around waste and wasting, often also do so in order to reveal other hidden or inherent possibilities; of, for example, re-imagining or reinterpreting the material status and potential use of things (Hetherington, 2004; Isenhour &

Reno, 2019; Reno, 2009). The seminal example of this is Thompson's (2017 (1979)) theory of rubbish and its role in the reinstatement of value onto objects from which value had previously declined.

The theory of rubbish proposed by Thompson (2017 (1979)), who was a student of Douglas's, really turns on a theory of value transformation. Thompson (2017 (1979), pp. 24-29) suggests that ("in our culture") the world of objects have imposed upon them two overt categories: most objects are 'transient', like used cars their value decreases over time and they have finite lifespans; others are 'durable', like antique furniture their value increases over time. Objects in both of these categories, says Thompson (2017 (1979), p. 25) "are located within a region of fixed assumptions." The categories of transient and durable objects arise within a socio-cultural context, the value and status that is attached to them becomes known, and social actors become invested in both the acquisition of (especially durably) valuable objects *and* the maintenance of the status quo that determined their value in the first place.

At the heart of Thompson's theory then is a recognition of value as "a mutable social relation and not an inherent characteristic of things themselves" (Reno, 2017, p. vii) and that social conventions invested in certain forms of value will disallow its transformation. How, despite all this, value transformations still occur is where 'rubbish' comes into the theory. Between the two fixed, overt categorical extremes of transient and durable objects, Thompson argues, value transformation relies on the possibility of rubbish; of things with zero value. Here, rubbish is a more covert category, occupying a region of flexibility; it is where transient objects go once they have reached zero-value. As 'rubbish' they linger in timeless, valueless limbo until, under the right circumstances, some may be rediscovered and—transformed—into highly valued, durable objects. As Reno (2017, p. viii) summarizes, "by falling into disuse and disregard, a transient object can be one day revalued as a classic, as retro, as kitsch, as an archaeological artifact or relic, as rare and exceptional."

I find Thompson's theory of rubbish difficult to directly or entirely apply at Mae's or Sandra's place. Where I get stuck is the degree to which it turns on 'value'. There is no Warlpiri word for value and, as far as my experience goes, no operation of its concept such that the categories of transient or durable value—tied as they are in Thompson's formulation to social conventions around status and even class—could be used to differentiate the things found at Mae's or Sandra's place. In fact, taking the examples given by Thompson, should an antique piece of furniture and a used car find themselves at a Warlpiri place, the degree to which they would be 'valued' would quite likely be reversed. Cars are perhaps the closest things to a durable category of objects in the Warlpiri context, even once broken down their appreciation

endures through their usefulness as spare parts, storage areas, shade, and wind breaks. On the other hand, even the most 'valuable' piece of wooden, antique furniture is likely to be disregarded fairly quickly if it cannot survive the robust conditions of life in the central desert: if it can't be moved from inside to outside and back again easily, if it swells in wet or humid conditions, or dries and cracks in hot, dry ones.

Yet, where I do find Thompson's work useful for thinking about Mae's and Sandra's places is the conception of rubbish as "occupying a blank and fluid space" (Hetherington, 2004, p. 165) that is between categories, a kind of creative reservoir, rather than some kind of end-point. When I think about the spatial practices around Mae's and Sandra's places, and the relative and ambivalent ways in which words like rubbish and mess were used, there is something to this idea of rubbish as a kind of flattened, zero-sum, between category: in the way the scattered material traces in stages of buildup lay somewhere between being potentially used and eventually being assessed as *punku* and amassed into piles of rubbish. As I have discussed, in the Warlpiri context, words like rubbish and mess were certainly in operation but they were contextual and contingent. From the observational position of taking in the vista of, for example, an area of Mae's place, someone might comment about the messiness, or the rubbish. Yet, those words didn't attach inherently to particular categories of things, or to particular stages of their 'life' or use. From the closer position of, for example, sitting on the ground around the fire, or a blanket under the tree for a card game, the useful possibilities of many of those material traces may yet be activated.

If rubbish or mess can thus be understood as operating similar to the more neutral way in which I have been referring to the material traces of activity, then my position on the question of rubbish in the Warlpiri context is similar to what Douny (2007) concluded about Dogon compounds. This requires putting aside the western view that might see such material traces as "domestic waste as 'matter all over the place'" (p. 329), detracting "from the visual and pictorial qualities of the place and its culture" and posing "a threat to local well-being" (p. 311). Instead, one can consider not only the ways that "waste is transformed, recycled or reused in a local way" but also that this "is done according to the degree of utility that is found in the materiality of the rubbish" (, p. 312). It is with this in mind that I turn to what, for me, is the most compelling of approaches that focuses on the materiality of waste.

In 'Toward a new theory of waste: From 'matter out of place' to signs of life', Reno (2014) frames a theory of waste around a bio-semiotic approach with a focus on animal scat to argue that: it is meaningful to speak of 'waste' as a set of objects in the world that pre-exist symbolic categories; and that waste is not only a mirror of human culture but also a sign of and

for life. The core idea of the bio-semiotic approach is that life requires the use of signs, as organisms must engage in the world around them within the perceptual and behavioural limitations of their developing form. Positing humans as a particular kind of species, sharing the world with other species, Reno suggests that what all species have in common is producing waste in some form or other. Reno is trying to find a way of thinking about waste as not just something upon which social categories are assigned, and instead to think about how waste in and of itself does something. As he argues, far from an anomalous product of arbitrary social classifications, wastes are signs of life; a life that continues to live as evidenced by its having left something behind. To be clear, Reno is not arguing that constructivist classifications are absent from the signification of scat but that such higher order interpretations arrive late to the party. And this is the crux of his argument: that before scat can be recognised as something more abstract, like an anomaly that threatens some moral-symbolic system, it can be and is perceived as a far more basic sign, one associated with living animals. His provocative question is: could all waste, not just scat, be productively interpreted in this light? Recalling previous chapters, I find some relevance here with the ways in which things were left and read by Yapa moving around country, and to the way scatterings of material traces and rubbish piles marked both current and past zones of activity. As well, to the ways in which the material traces we lived with, while sometimes being seen as ‘rubbish’, were also sites of material possibility. In the next chapter, it is to this latter point—of material affordances—that I attend to in more detail.

Chapter Eight.

Might be something

Mae and I are under the bough shelter at the western edge of her place. Mae is painting, sitting cross-legged on a blanket with the canvas on her lap. I'm propped against a supporting pole, catching up on field notes. Between us is that quality of quiet stillness that descends when people are together yet completely absorbed in a solitary activity, internally immersed. This is broken suddenly as Mae shifts from her bent-over-canvas concentration, straightens her back and looks around. Detecting her movement, I look up too, following her squinting gaze beyond the bough shelter shade and into the glare of a day that has been steadily heating up. My awareness recalibrates. My backside is sore, skin is sticky with sweat. Sounds filter in from further afield: a bird call, a car engine, the low tones of an old couple bickering at their shade spot 50m away. Muttering about being hungry, Mae carefully places her wet painting aside, heaves herself to standing and drags her blanket to the nearby breakfast fire, where she plops down again cross-legged and stokes the coals. I've already closed my iPad and stood up to stretch when she starts singing out instructions. I bring dried grass and small twigs to get the fire going. I collect some larger pieces of wood so she can build the fire. I help position the cooking wire (BBQ plate). I retrieve the hunk of kangaroo from yesterday's hunt, which Mae wants to cut into smaller pieces for the frying pan. "Nangala", she says, "pass me that knife". I look around, "Where?" She's busy with the fire and doesn't look up, "On the ground". I look again, "Where?" With a subtle head nod, she says again, "Over there, on the ground". I'm looking in the right direction, but I can't see it. "Mae", I say, "What knife?" She raises her head now and pays me full attention, lifts her hand and points clearly to a metal tin lid lying on the ground. Patiently, she says, "Get that lid Nangala".

In the introduction to this thesis, I explained that the genesis of my research project was a question about Warlpiri ways of seeing, engaging with and ordering material things in domestic space(s). This question was as much about the 'aesthetic' or order of Warlpiri material-spatial practices as it was an ongoing, definitional question about materiality itself. Throughout the course of this project I have tried to take seriously Henare et al. (2007)'s argument for a methodological approach that takes things in context as they are: to allow things in the field to

dictate the terms of their own analysis, rather than seeing them as data to which existing theory or knowledge is applied.

Things, it is suggested, ought not to be delineated in advance of the ethnographic encounters from which they emerge. To pre-empt an ethnographically defined understanding of what constitutes a thing would be to simply offer an alternative *theory* of things (p. 5, emphasis in original).

For me, the appeal of these authors' position is that it is an argument for an anthropology that takes difference seriously, in ontological terms. Instead of a starting position that assumes one material, natural world, about which different peoples have different interpretations or *worldviews*, they argue for an approach that takes such articulations as enunciations of different *worlds*. Yet, as Henare et al. (2007) acknowledge, trying to contemplate 'different worlds' can be difficult if you start with (and then inevitably circle back to) certain intuitions about what 'the world' is and the fact that there is, really, only one world. Stuck in this circularity, the notion of 'different worlds' that are also, somehow, part of *the* world, can end up being contradictory—often explained only by falling back on differences in terms of representation or worldview. Henare et al.'s (2007) compelling contribution to the ontological turn in anthropology is a way of locating 'different worlds' in things, which, as they argue, are also concepts. They propose a methodological approach that does away with "the assumption that concepts are ontologically distinct from the things to which they are ordinarily said to 'refer'" (p. 13), to instead take *concepts as things*. "From this it follows that alterity can quite properly be thought of as a property of things—things, that is, which *are concepts* as much as they appear to us as 'material' or 'physical' entities" (p. 13, emphasis in original). Applying this to the example in the opening vignette, the metal tin lid that Mae refers to as a knife *is* a knife because, quite simply, to conceive it as such is to *conceive* it. As Henare et al. (2007, p. 15) put it, "Conception is a mode of disclosure (of—metaphorical—'vision') that creates its own objects, just because it is one and the same with them, so to 'see' these objects is to create them". Framed in these terms, my question about Warlpiri ways of 'seeing' things is a question about that mode of disclosure, or metaphorical 'vision'; it is a question not about interpretation or representation but of conception (or, conceptual creation).

In this chapter, my aim is to be mindful of this approach as I think through the case study of the tin lid-knife. In other words, my aim is not to explain how or why Mae could look at a tin lid and see, use and call it as a knife (when 'we' really know it's a tin lid). Rather, I take

seriously the fact that it *is* a knife—if at least fleetingly. At the same time—and this where I have to push beyond Henare et al. (2007)—what I also argue is that in the Warlpiri life-world, it being a knife one moment does not preclude the possibility of it also being a tin lid, or even something else, in another moment. What I want to convey in this chapter is that Warlpiri acts of conceptual creation were often not final or deterministic. To me it seemed that the ways in which Warlpiri people engaged with material things was not limited or constrained by fixed ideas about what things were or weren't, or what they could, couldn't, should or shouldn't be used for. Instead, what I observed was an orientation towards the material world that was largely characterised by a modality of openness and possibility; an engagement with material things that suggested a mode of perception attuned to the latent potential of the material environment. Micro-moments like the one described above were a common feature of daily life: moments in which someone's need to do something in-situ—like cut meat—married happily with the material affordances of things in that person's vicinity—like the sharp edge of a tin lid lying on the ground. In other words, to adopt and extend Henare et al.'s (2007) formulation, in the Warlpiri life-world things were not so much concepts (in a fixed way) as they were conceptual possibilities.

The things I called tin lids

Tin lids of various shapes, sizes and make were a common feature of Nyirrpi ground-scapes, lending themselves to different purposes depending on their material qualities. One brand of powdered milk, for example, came in a tin with both an inner seal of thin metal film (also used on some Milo tins) and an outer plastic snap on lid. While I never saw the thin metal film being used, likely because opening the tin required its perforation (ruination), the plastic lids were highly coveted for sealing and re-sealing containers. Mae, for example, who regularly needed containers for the chewing tobacco ashes she prepared for sale or gifting, would pounce on these lids whenever she spotted them, hand-bagging them for later matching with tins or jars. Another example is the popular food items—like canned sardines, tinned ham—that came in oblong shaped tins with built-in ring-pull lids made of a highly malleable metal, which tended to curl dramatically as they were peeled off. These lids, while immediately useful for slicing and/or serving the can's contents—scooping out slivers of tinned-meat, for example—were rarely used again, I think largely due to their flimsiness.



Figure 8.1 Tin lid-knife

By far the most common type of tin lid—the kind that is referred to as both a knife and a lid in the opening vignette and shown in the photo in Figure 8.1—were the round-shaped, ring-pull lids that were removed, almost every day, from popular canned foods like baked beans, spaghetti in tomato sauce, corned beef, sausages, and instant meals like stews. Made of a relatively stronger metal, as these lids are peeled up and off the tin itself, they not only retain their shape—round and relatively flat (a slight curl)—they are also rendered with a smooth, sharp edge. With the right grip, and strength and control behind that grip so as not to get cut yourself, these tin lids can be—and were, in almost quotidian fashion—used most effectively as knives. To give some additional ethnographic flavour to this statement, the following is a selection of appearances made by tin lids (as knives) in my field notes:

Supper at Sandra's with everyone, we sat on the kitchen floor, Sandra said too smelly outside [a sewer pipe had burst]. Danielle and her cousins shared a meat and veggie stir fry ... Grace and her cousin had a plate of tinned-meat and spaghetti mixed up, ate with toast, spread butter with tin lid.

Kim and Erin came home for a pizza mid-morning, Kim picked the blanket up and shook everything on it off onto the ground and spread it fresh again. Erin went inside presumably looking for a knife to cut the pizza, came back with a tin lid.

Home late afternoon. Davina and Presley were erecting more shade cloth around the porch area. Mae dragged her blanket to the shade of the tree and sat to prepare ashes [burning chips of tree bark to ashes, which is then mixed with tobacco for chewing]. She had a cardboard box and was using the folded over lid of a tin to scrape the white powdery side of the wood chips, before piling them in the box [ready for burning].

When we shot the kangaroo, Miriam and I stayed in the car while the others ran off. Mae yelling out: “Nangala bring the car, too hot!” I drove over and Mae told Miriam to open some tinned meat so she can use the lid as a knife. She cut the Kangaroo’s stomach open and checked the guts [for fat, which means good eating].

On a hunting trip a group of us were having sandwiches and damper and tea, sharing knife, spoon for jam, pickle, sugar, sharing pannikins. Others arrived and joined us, and then quickly ran off to see the Perentie [big goanna] Mae had found in the nearby creek. Only I and Kayla stayed behind at the camp. Kayla started cooking a Kangaroo tail for Kimberly using tin lid to scrape the fur off.

Pussy cat cooked while we were sitting around. Mae asking her grandson to get her a knife, “Knife please, good boy”, but he just kept playing. Then: “Nangala, knife please, knife or what [looking around and pointing], or lid, tinned-meat lid you gotta get me”. She cut the cooked pussy cat up using the tin lid, and the shovel head to bust open the hard parts.

After using the Wi-Fi at the adult learning center I went home, nana nap inside. Sadie and Erin were sitting out the front eating cooked steak, they were both using tin lids to cut their meat.

Mae came in with vegies and chicken from the shop, found a pot and rinsed it under the tap, washed it with her hand. Put it on the stove with water, found a tin lid, cut up the meat and vegies and put them into the pot.

The one element missing from nearly all the above examples is the fact that—as in the opening vignette—instead of referring to tin lids as tin lids, in the context of such uses Yapa would usually refer to them as knives. The exception being, of course, when they were speaking to me and realised that I needed some translation. Over time I did actually learn to see (conceive) tin lids as knives when they were referred to as such, however as demonstrated above this clearly didn't penetrate my field notes, in which I retained some mental distinction between 'actual' knives and tin lids. For the remainder of this chapter, when I use 'tin lid-knife' I do so partly so that it remains clear that I am referring to the kind of knife depicted in Figure 8.1, as opposed to other objects that 'knife' may refer to. By using both 'tin lid' and 'knife' and placing them in relation with the hyphen, I am also representing what I ultimately aim to argue: that it is a site of multiple possibilities of materiality, or, in Keane's (2003, 2005, 2014, 2018) term, of affordances.

Seeing a knife

The problem Keane (2003, 2005, 2014, 2018) starts out by identifying is that certain thinking about things/materiality is stuck in the lingering effects of some models of the sign: those assumptions built into the lineage running from Saussurean semiology to poststructuralism, according to which dichotomous thinking (subject/object, ideas/things) prevails. To suggest an alternative approach, Keane (2005, p. 186) draws on Peircean semiotics, which instead located signs "within a material world of consequences" and "insisted that concrete circumstances were essential to the very possibility of signification". Keane's (2005, p. 183) aim is to "develop an approach to signs for which the practical and contingent character of things is neither subordinated to, nor isolated from, communication and thought". In other words, Keane is arguing against an understanding of the material world as a kind of separate void upon which meaning is assigned or deposited from the realm of language and ideas, according to arbitrary rules of association or meaning that people carry in their heads. Without going so far as to declare that material things have any kind of agency on their own, he is arguing that in their very materiality they do *something*: they constitute, or *afford*, possibilities of meaning, action or use. Here, Keane (2003, 2005, 2014, 2018) is adapting Gibson's (1977, 1986) theory of

affordances, an important point of which is that the material environment is constituted of yet does not determine affordances. As Gibson (1986, p. 129) puts it, “An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer”. Adapting Gibson’s (1977, 1986) more ecological, animals-in-environment focus, Keane develops a theory of material signs in which the moment of signification occurs at the interface between the material qualities of a thing itself and the human perspective from which it is being encountered. To this interface or encounter the thing brings its own elements or properties of materiality, what Keane refers to as a set or “bundle” of material qualities; to this interface or encounter an individual brings a way of seeing those material qualities, what Keane calls a semiotic ideology.

It is worth pausing for a moment to unpack what Keane means by semiotic ideology (here I am drawing primarily from Keane (2018) but see also Keane (2003, p. 419; 2005, pp. 190-191; 2014, p. 314). In the briefest of terms, semiotic ideology “refers to people’s underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs do or do not serve, and what consequences they might or might not produce” (2018, p. 65). A semiotic ideology might be thought of as the mediating, reflexive dimension of the general human capacity to use signs. If “a sign only functions as a sign if it is understood to be a sign” (2018, p. 68) then a semiotic ideology is the ‘ground’ that mediates that understanding. To paraphrase one of Keane’s (2014, p. 314) examples, a semiotic ideology is what mediates whether a lightning bolt striking the ground is a sign of divine intentions, thus requiring a ritual response, or nothing more than atmospheric conditions. As this example suggests, semiotic ideologies can vary across social and historical contexts and indeed be the stuff of clashes, as in the colonial encounter. Far from operating at some abstract level, in the realm of language or interpretation only, semiotic ideologies are grounded in “assumptions about the nature of the world, the kinds of beings that inhabit it, and the kinds of causes and effects with which they are involved” (2018, p. 68).

To bring this to the case study of the tin lid-knife, an important element of Keane’s theory is the potential openness and futurity of materiality, a condition partly located in the fact any given material thing can be broken down to a set or “bundle” of material properties. The tin lid-knife, for example, bundles material properties including being metal, silver in colour, spherical in shape, having a thin, flat surface and a sharp, smooth edge, being durable but also slightly malleable, and light weight.⁵⁹ This bundling is one of the conditions of material

⁵⁹ The example Keane gives is of an apple, which is a bundle of qualities including redness, spherical shape, smooth texture, light weight, perishable, and so forth (2005, p. 188).

possibility, as the relative affordances of a thing may shift according to which of its qualities (alone or in combination) “is brought to focus by a practice or reflection” (Keane, 2014, p. 317). As such, the affordances of the tin lid-knife—its range of possible uses, actions or meanings—emerge in light of what those properties offer to someone who perceives them. One can conceive, for example, how its affordance as a knife arises from the fact it is of a size, shape and weight that can be gripped, with strength and control, by a human hand; of strong enough metal that it doesn’t fold or buckle when pressure is applied; and has a thin, smooth (not too jagged) and sharp enough edge for chopping meat and other food, for making incisions in bush-caught animals (kangaroos, feral cats), for scraping the fur off a kangaroo tail, or spreading butter on toast.

Signs can “give rise to new signs”, Keane (2005, p. 186) says, but they do so within particular contexts. When the tin lid-knife is seen as a knife perhaps the operation of iconicity is also at play; some of its material properties resemble those of other objects that are known as knives (and which offer similar affordances). The crucial point to make is that the perception of affordances is not an operation or function of classifying objects; it is not the word “knife” that determines a class of objects. To refer back to Gibson’s (1986, p. 134) original take, “the theory of affordances rescues us from the philosophical muddle of assuming fixed classes of objects, each defined by its common features and then given a name”. To a degree, it is the material properties of the tin lid-knife that constitute both the possibilities and limits of its affordances: one can also conceive how it might afford a prism for reflecting light, a heat conductor, or a lever; it is harder to conceive its affordance as a squeeze stress ball. Ultimately, though, the realisation of the tin lid-knife as a knife springs from that interface or encounter between its co-present material properties and a human perspective; an encounter mediated by a semiotic ideology that is not only able to see and take up such an affordance but does so within a broader context of meaning and action.

Keane’s theory of material affordances might seem antithetical to Henare et al.’s (2007) ontological approach to things *as concepts*. I suggest this is largely because Keane’s theory is grounded in semiotics, so the language quickly reverts to terms like seeing, perceiving, interpreting, and signification—rather than conception. As well, Keane’s approach is one that pays more attention to the material qualities that things themselves bring to the realisation of their affordances. Although Keane does not explicitly take a position on the ontological question, I find some compatibility between Keane’s approach and that of Henare et al. (2007). In Henare et al. (2007)’s terms, the tin lid-knife is a knife because it is conceived as such—at

least in that moment of conception. In Keane's terms, if a thing is bundled with material qualities that can afford its use as a knife and this affordance is realised through a particular semiotic ideology, then it is realised as such. As Keane (2018, p. 83) says, "to take a sign a certain way is to take seriously the world it presupposes and the life that world recommends". Moreover, I find Keane's approach to materiality useful for my extension of Henare et al. (2007)'s theory; that in the Warlpiri life-world things are not so much concepts (in a fixed way) as they are conceptual possibilities. The affordances of the bundled material qualities of a thing is one way of breaking down or 'operationalizing' what I referred to in the introductory chapter as a modality of openness and possibility, of engaging with the material world in a way that was not informed by nor created fixed boundaries around things, neither conceptually nor materially.

Material affordances

How best to relay here the affordances and possibilities of the material world we lived in, with or encountered as we travelled? At first, I was imagining an interactive map of Mae's place, or even of the entirety of Warlpiri country, in which each 'thing' could be selected to bring up its range of affordances. Touch on a piece of cardboard depicted, for example, and a pop-up box would appear listing or even sketching its affordances: a chopping board to cut food on, a plate to eat food from, a fan to stoke the fire, a protective layer for handling pans or billycans with hot handles. In lieu of such an interactive map, which was never possible for this thesis, I started creating lists instead, of the various things and their affordances as I encountered them during fieldwork. Yet neither of these approaches are adequate. A map would have fixed things in time and place and a list would have fixed things to their affordances, like an instruction manual: here's a thing and here's all the affordances it has to offer. Both would have removed things from the unfolding moments and places of activity and relatedness in which their affordances were ultimately realised. It is this contextualisation that I have attempted to bring to the following sections, in which my overall aim is to convey that there was a certain fluidity and openness to the realisations of material affordances.

Someone needs something

Captured in the short vignettes below, there was often an element of serendipity to the realisation of certain material possibilities. Instances in which someone needed something and

after casting their eyes around the environment would find the ‘thing’ they needed—or, in Keane’s terms, find the affordance they needed bundled in the properties of one or another thing nearby. In these ways, what a thing might be or be used for was open to the contingencies of unfolding moments, and the realisation (or not) of a particular affordance had as much to do with the material qualities of a thing itself as an in-situ need or use to be met.

We’re driving along Newhaven Road and Presley has something stuck in his teeth. He tells me to slow the car to a crawl, winds his window down and leans out to pluck a stalk of grass growing near the roadside.

We’re sitting at Yuendumu football field with a group of mourners before a funeral. Mae finds a splinter in her foot. She looks around, gets me to pass her the squashed top of a drink can. After folding the metal to make a point she tries to tweezer her splinter out. It doesn’t work, the metal is too soft and keeps bending.

Presley needs to tie a spare tyre in his tray-back in preparation for a long road trip. He looks around Mae’s yard, tells me to bring him a skirt he sees on the ground, from which he removes the tie-string from the waist band.

Kimberly has a piece of meat stuck in her teeth and after unsuccessful removal attempts with her fingernail, she picks up a plastic water bottle from the ground nearby, peels its plastic wrapper off and uses its thin edge to floss between her teeth.

Sandra is on a cleaning spree and has roped me in to help— “you can clean the kitchen Nangala.” I need a cloth to do the dishes, so she rips a hand-size chunk from her foam mattress.

Presley is performing some bush mechanics on my car, which is parked in an open area at Yuendumu. He scours the ground and finds a thong, cuts a piece of its rubber off and uses it to isolate the ground wire in my engine.

Sadie has a bored kid on her hands, she picks up a plastic drink bottle, fills it with sand and throws it to him, initiating a game of catch.

A group of Yapa are sitting around a blanket playing cards. A light wind keeps flipping the cards over. One of the women rolls and pinches the edge of the blanket into a small ridge, making a low windbreak for the cards.

Moving, configuring, making places

Perhaps one of the greatest affordances of many of the things we lived with related to the way they could be moved and configured to mark (and make) places, their thresholds, and the thoroughfares of movement through or around them. A row of beds in front of a windbreak erected out of sheets of iron held up and stabilised by metal poles, tyres, tyre rims, or logs of wood was part of the configuration—the material but also social and symbolic dimensions—of a *yunta* (or, camp) or a zone of social activity. The sociality afforded by such a configuration shifted when, for example, an access track or a section of yard was cordoned off by laying those same tyres, rims, poles or logs in a line—thereby restricting the forms of access to, or activity that could take place in, an area. Similarly, when a row of beds was placed in a room, next to a heater or air cooler, and a blanket was hung in the window for privacy, the affordance of that blanket was different to another blanket spread on the ground. Spreading a blanket on the ground was the most common and minimalist method of establishing a zone of activity. Except when sitting to play cards or paint a canvas, activities for which sand could be a problem, I never thought of a blanket as separating or protecting Yapa from the ground they were sitting on. Rather, the act of spreading a blanket and sitting down was a way of activating the meaningfulness of the particular place the blanket marked—that people-place-things nexus described earlier.

Trees, bough shelters, verandas, or parked vehicles provided shelter from the sun, wind or rain for gatherings and activities. Sometimes we oriented ourselves towards some already provided shelter: a spot in the shade of a tree or out of the wind on one side of a parked vehicle becoming the place we chose to gather. Other times, we chose the spot we preferred first and then created the shade or wind break we needed, by parking a vehicle or hanging a blanket in a tree, relative to the direction of the sun or wind. As Young, D. (2001) has also observed, as part of the structure of a camp, the affordances of working vehicles especially include the mediation of sociality. When parked as the shade or windbreak for a gathering, vehicles became part of the architectural but also symbolic meaning of those zones of activity. Yet, with a re-positioning or change of angle, they could just as easily restrict or limit access to such zones, or afford privacy, or manage avoidance relationships. When parked at the edges of a camp,

vehicles not only marked the periphery of a socialised space, they could, and in stark contrast, also afford personal or private space. It was often the case that having arrived home after a long drive, Presley would park his car at the edge of but facing away from our camp. While passengers alighted and either headed off or came to join us around the fire, Presley would stay in the driver's seat, having a smoke and clearly having some alone time. Once, on a rare and unexpected occasion, Davina, Presley and I were the only ones at home as evening approached. The tension between the need for me to have some company for safety, and the inappropriateness of me sleeping in the same *yunta* as a married couple, was resolved by the positioning of my vehicle between our bed frames. I was thus proximate enough to be safe yet clearly marked as not sharing their *yunta*.

Assembly, disassembly, and back again



Figure 8.2 Assembled bed

Related to the movability of things, certain affordances were realised when things were brought into assembly, or disassembly, with each other. The photo in Figure 8.2 shows a canopy bed assembled from a tray back cover, a tarp and a trailer stabilised and levelled with a tyre. Not visible in the image, the mattress and bedding were in the tray back, under the canopy. Prior to this assembly, the trailer was one of those placed at the base of the sand dune crossing, intended to prevent Kardiya access into Mae's place; the tray back cover was in Mae's west yard, and

had been used by the kids as cubby play area, and as a too-high-for-dogs-surface for eating food and cutting up cooked kangaroos and the like.



Figure 8.3 Assembled table

Bed frames were also assembled out of things like flour buckets, milk crates, tyres, or tyre rims placed at each corner of a detached roof rack, or a wooden or mesh door from the landfill. If a bed frame was no longer needed, the roof rack could instead be coupled with the legs of a topless table, to create the (new) table shown in Figure 8.3. Similarly, once disassembled from a bed frame, flour buckets, milk crates, tyres, and tyre rims offered a range of affordances. Uprturned flour buckets and milk crates—and other things like eskies and cardboard boxes—were surfaces for sitting or chopping food on or were turned the other way as containers for sorting, storing or carrying food or things. As rims were assembled with a sheet of iron erected as a windbreak, and rims (like tin cans) could prop up a cooking wire over the fire. When not needed as a windbreak, a sheet of iron could be assembled with metal poles to reinforce some fencing or placed flat on the ground as the simplest way to burn and catch ashes for chewing tobacco.



Figure 8.4 Assemblage for burning, filtering and catching ashes

Mae, however, generally preferred more sophisticated methods for “cooking” ashes. A case in point is the assemblage shown in Figure 8.4: a piece of window mesh, which is laid over a sink, in turn propped over a (broken) electric frying pan and stabilized with a tin can. On the wire mesh the collected twigs are burning into ashes, as the ashes form, they fall through and are thus filtered by the wire mesh and are caught in the sink. The electric frying pan is a resolution to the problem of the sink having a drain hole, through which some ashes were falling to the ground. Initially, we tried gluing a tin lid over the hole, but the glue didn’t stay so that particular affordance of a tin lid was not realised. The frying pan is therefore serving as a second catchment area for filtered ashes. Once disassembled, the tin could offer other affordances, such as a prop to give height and stability to a cooking wire over the fire; a rather hard ‘pillow’ to rest the head when reclining flat on the ground; a tool for scooping and digging soil when hunting and gathering bush foods; or a container for storing and carrying things.

Over time or context

While many things we lived with had multiple affordances that could be realised at any given time and according to need, in some cases certain affordances were realised over time or as things were moved through different contexts. Blankets, for example, were hierarchized according to their newness, which in turn impacted their affordances. On beds, blankets were layered with the newest (and fluffiest) at the bottom and the oldest on the top. A blanket

reaching the top layer was generally when its non-bedding affordances came into play: they were the blankets to be grabbed and taken in the car on hunting trips, spread on the ground for a gathering, used to roll up and carry gathered twigs or bark for burning into ashes, hung in tree branches to make shade or wind shelters, or in windows for privacy. After a shake out or wash, many so used blankets would then be returned to the top layer of bedding. Only the oldest of old blankets (and sheets) left lying on the ground were used for collecting and then dragging piles of rubbish to the verge or wheelie bin.

Vehicles were a similar case, although their affordances changed not so much according to newness than whether or not they were in working order. Without a doubt, the primary affordance of working vehicles was transport, which in the Warlpiri context is now indispensable to the forms of mobility—and the relationships maintained through such movements—described in chapter two. As above, working vehicles could also be positioned as part of the structure of a *yunta*, to provide shelter or create a boundary, or in the case of a tray back as a bed. All vehicles, whether working or not, provided both inside and high up storage areas, for personal belongings, stashing food away from the dogs' reach, or protecting mattresses, bedding and other things from the elements (other places for stashing food and things were afforded by tree branches, bough shelters, kitchen benches, and cupboards). The Hilux I was driving, especially its passenger seat, became Mae's storage for personal belongings that were needed day to day. Other things were stored in broken down vehicles, like a new blanket saved for future gratification, or equipment bought especially for an upcoming bush trip. Once broken down, the affordances of vehicles—or rather, their disassembled parts—expand. They afford spare parts to repair or restart other cars, roof racks can be beds or tables, car seats can be removed and added to the camp furniture, tyres and tyre rims have a number of affordances as above, and body panels, especially doors and bonnets, are often used for community or homeland signs (see also Young, D., 2001).

Other things, like the larger tin cans that powdered milk came in, had multiple affordances as they moved with us throughout the day. In the morning, for example, such a tin could be used as a billycan for making tea on the fire. Once we'd all poured a portion of tea into our own receptacles, Mae would add milk and sugar and drink her tea from the same tin it was boiled in. Later, in preparation to go hunting, Mae might grab the same tin from where it was left beside the fireplace. It will be used first for digging and scooping the soil away as she digs for witchetty grubs or bush potato, and then for carrying the collected grubs or potato back to camp. Later, once emptied of its cargo and with a wipe or rinse, the tin might once again be used as a billy for tea.

Conclusion

The tin lid-knife may seem like a very micro, even banal example to have focused on in such great detail. Yet, I suggest that it can carry as much weight as whether a lightning bolt is caused by divine intentions or just atmospheric conditions, or whether a gusting wind at Nyirrpri is directly connected to a death in Alice Springs. It matters especially when you consider the clash between those who see the lightning or the tin lid-knife differently (not to mention the agents of cause and effect they may or not be a sign of).

A question I find myself asking in relation to Keane's theory is not just about those moments in which the affordances of the tin lid-knife—or any given thing—are realised but also about when they are not. Put differently, how does that 'ground' mediating an understanding of material signs come in to play such that one may *not* see a knife? Perhaps, for example, the word "knife" does actually conjure a particular set or class of objects in your mind. When you see the tin lid-knife on the ground at Mae's place can you see a knife? Perhaps its material properties act as an indexical sign of the tin of food it was once part of. If the disposable husk of a (now used) food container fits your definition of rubbish, then perhaps the material possibilities of a tin lid stops short there. Similarly, its physical location on the ground may index the workings of how it got there and who or what else it has been in contact with. Did a human throw or leave it on the ground? What moral judgements are made about such actions and why? Is the action of leaving something on the ground interpreted to mean that it is thrown away, unwanted and uncared for? What other—visible or invisible—properties do you equate with its physical location? The saliva of a dog who (might have) licked it, the traces of tinned food that it may still carry (if a dog didn't lick it), or traces of sand that have stuck to it. Is your world one in which bacteria and germs are active agents in human sickness? Do sharp edges represent danger? Perhaps, then, you are blind to its affordances as a knife because all you see is a piece of rubbish or a source of contamination or danger. If you look at a tin lid on the ground and all you see is a piece of rubbish, how then do you perceive and treat the person who sees, calls and uses it as a knife? As Keane (2005, p. 194) has pointed out, the realisation or not of material affordances, of what potentials are or are not seen in material signs, "is the stuff of historical struggles and contingencies", thoroughly enmeshed in the dynamics and maintenance of social relations of power and authority. In the context of Nyirrpri, ideas about rubbish and tidiness were certainly an axis upon which relations between the settler colonial state and Yapa turned. Tin lid-knives on the ground and bed frames in the yard can mean failed house inspections or lost tidy yard competitions.

To return to the broader argument of this thesis, I suggest that what sits behind the conception of the tin lid-knife is a relational way of being in the world and a corresponding modality or praxis of openness, flexibility, and possibility. Put differently, seeing and using the tin lid-knife is presented here not just as a case study of the recognition of an affordance of its material qualities, but also as an example of a way of being that does not rely on fixed categories, or fixed relations between categories, in order to ‘see’ (conceive) the world (Poirier, 2013). The realisations of material affordances described in this chapter take place within a broader socio-cultural context, in which a bird call is also one’s ancestors communicating, a bird with red eyes watching from a street pole is a shapeshifting *kuuku* [monster], and geographical formations are at once a hill, rock or tree, a possum, and an ancestor. I don’t suggest that these “onenesses” (Stanner, 2009 [1953]) are quite the same as a polystyrene meat tray being a plate, or a roof rack being a bed or a table, but I do suggest that the mode of perception attuned to the multiple affordances of material things is part and parcel of an ontology where the possibility of things being multiple things (and in some cases, subjectivities) is a given.

Chapter Nine.

Conclusion

It's early evening. Davina, Presley and I are sitting around the west yard yunta. It's been a bit of a stressful day after the house inspection earlier on. Tired from cleaning, we're waiting for the tea to boil on the stove. There's talk of decorations we should get for the house, and plants for the garden, and sleeping arrangements for that night. Mae is away for work so their daughter Cora will sleep with me for company. Inside, the tea is ready, and I bring out the billycan. Pouring tea Presley asks, "Nangala, any spoon?" "Oh," I reply, "inside, or in my car [both at some distance away]." "Nah leave it," he says, "you don't wanna walk." "You gotta say: mata-rna [I'm tired]," Davina teaches me. Presley has an idea. "You should get one of them shirts, like cooks have you know, with pockets. Fill it up with spoon, knife, everything." We're all laughing.

What had us laughing in the above vignette was not just the amusing image of me getting about with a chef apron full of spoons; this was also an amusing way of acknowledging and offering up a solution to a perpetual problem. Spoons were a scarce resource at Mae's place—and indeed at most Warlpiri places where I stopped. A fact made all the more significant because aside from a good knife for cutting meat, spoons were the principal piece of cutlery in a Warlpiri camp: they can do all the jobs that a fork and butter knife can (and so much more), making the latter mostly redundant. Spoons in bulk were often added to my shopping list for town trips, or were bought locally for \$1 apiece, and yet no matter how many spoons we bought it seemed we were always down to our last one or two. Until, that is, a yard raking session or scout around with eyes trained to see useful things partially buried in red sand resulted in a bonanza find, in part solving the mystery of their disappearance. Following the lead of Yapa, when walking around our place I learned to attune my eyes to spoons on the ground, to be picked up and bagged, pocketed, or simply thrown a little closer to our *yunta* for easy finding later. Similarly, when raking left items on the ground into a rubbish pile, I learned that a few kinds of things, especially and most consistently spoons, should be extracted from the rake teeth as definitely not-rubbish before they arrived in the pile. Having experienced the

exasperation of not being able to find a spoon, I adopted the practice I had observed of a number of old women: I carried a spoon in my handbag for much of my fieldwork.

Spoons in scarcity combined with their high utility—for serving and stirring sugar and milk into tea, buttering damper or toast, eating any and every kind of food including noodles, and pulling, pushing or lifting hot things like cooking wires, billies and heated tinned food—meant that spoons were among the most frequently demanded, shared and passed around items when Yapa gathered together. No spoon went unshared, not even the one in my handbag. As I quickly learned, hand-bagging a spoon does not mark it for private use, it merely ensures a spoon supply (as was the intention behind the apron idea). The fact that I had one in my bag was registered by Yapa I lived with and for a time I became a reliable spoon source, to be demanded of when needed. It is with these images in mind, of spoons demanded and shared by a gathering of Yapa, and of spoons on the ground being seen and picked up, that I conclude this thesis.

It seems fitting to end on some further reflection on the role of materiality in Warlpiri relatedness. As a bookend to the sections on relational ontology and sharing, in the introduction and chapter two respectively, below I reflect on the regular gatherings of smaller groups of Yapa as one of the more intimate contexts for sharing things like spoons. In relation to these gatherings, I draw on Bird-David (1999; 2017, p. 18) to reflect on the quality of co-presence and engagement that comes from “being-with vivid and proximate others”, and on Warlpiri sharing as a practice that both creates and maintains relatedness. I begin, however, with the work of Ghassan Hage (2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2021) whose reflections on lenticularity and flickering realities offer another approach to the meanings or possibilities that emerge from the encounter between a perceiving subject and the ‘material’ world—and the ontological questions that are posed by such encounters. Here, I am asking how spoons ‘flicker’ in a relational ontology.

Flickering realities

Lenticular printing, as Hage (2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2021) has explained, is a technology used to produce images that change when viewed from different angles. In contrast to the single image captured in the common photograph, the lenticular surface contains a multiplicity of images that reveal themselves perspectively. This distinction is important: it is not a case of a single image looking different depending on the viewer’s perspective; rather, it is a case of different parts or grains of the image coming forward at different angles. In other words,

different images—or photographic realities as Hage puts it—are already present in the image itself, they are revealed by shifting the angle of the perspective.

The angle of vision makes one relate to different points within the total environment comprising the photographic surface, and this relation brings forth from that surface an actual photographic reality already potentially present in it. What's more, these are unstable realities that constantly shift according to the angle of vision (the mode of relationality). Thus, one photo is constantly intruding into the other, dialoguing with it as one is looking at the surface (Hage, 2021, p. 94).

The relevance of this in Hage's (2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2021) work is deployed towards a theory of "diasporic lenticularity", summarily described as "a mode of existing in multiple realities" (2021, p. 5). Hage's theory of the lenticular condition is an attempt to take seriously the experience of existing in multiple spatial realities *at the same time*, as it has been expressed by members of the Lebanese diaspora: "a similar lenticularity involving a continuous flickering between existing in Lebanon and in the land where one has migrated" (Hage, 2021, p. 94). This is not, Hage stresses, about assuming 'actual' existence in one place, with another place being merely thought of or remembered, inhabited mentally. Nor is this the kind of inhabiting of multiple places that one can say when those places are co-concentric: when co-ordinates allow one to say, "I am in São Paulo and in Brazil." What Hage is asking is how we can think about multiple inhabitancies of non-concentric places: when some co-ordinates say, "I am in São Paulo," and others say, "I am in Lebanon." Hage suggests that one way in which this can come about is through things—for example, certain items that are carried from one's hometown or vice versa, or even certain things arranged in ways that reproduce the spatiality of (another) home. Hage (2021, p. 93) posits such things—"paintings of Lebanese landscapes, photos of Lebanon and of kin, religious icons, Lebanese objects of aesthetic or practical value" as well as less spatially situated things like "accents, aromas, and food"—as metonymic objects inhabiting dialogical realities. When one looks at them one is simultaneously in both places; there is a kind of flickering of realities. As Hage (2021, p. 93) illustrates:

Lena is speaking with me while we sit in her living room in São Paulo. Her daughter looks like her and thus helps situate her in Lebanon, but the daughter also has a very Brazilian accent, which firmly situates Lena in Brazil. The morning cup of Lebanese coffee they drink takes them to

Lebanon, while the *pão de queijo* (cheese bread) situates them in Brazil. Thus, Lena can be relating to her daughter's looks, the smell of Lebanese coffee, a photo of her dad, and the Lebanese music playing in the background, all of which work to situate her in Lebanon, while at the same time her daughter's accent, the breakfast cakes, the bills on the table, and the tree outside position her in Brazil... The relations to her daughters' appearance, Lebanese coffee, and so on form a bundle of relationality that works to create a space metonymically related to Lebanon and situate Lena within that space. But this bundle is continuously intermingled with another that situates her in Brazil. The two spaces don't exist neatly separated from each other but are continuously refracting each other, as if in constant dialogue.

Now, it may seem like a stretch to here extend a theory that was developed to understand the (Lebanese) diasporic condition of inhabiting multiple spatial realities. Perhaps more so as Hage's theory of lenticularity is not about materiality per se. Yet, I do find some relevance in Hage's suggestion that spatial realities emerge from the particular ways in which one 'sees', orients or relates to selected parts or points of one's environment. As Hage (2021, p. 92) summarizes, "a 'reality' from this perspective ... is the product of a particular enmeshment with the surrounding environment". For Hage, this is brought to bear on the flickering spatial realities of the Lebanese diaspora, which are at once geographically distant and yet spatially co-present, in part brought into experience through metonymic things (in a home or neighbourhood). Recalling the phenomenological approach to place (Casey, 1996) in chapter three, flickering spatial realities is perhaps another way of attending to the simultaneous yet never synonymous presence of a house and a Warlpiri camp. In this thesis I have in part been concerned with the way Mae's and Sandra's places could flicker between both, depending on what one sees or how one is oriented to the presence of, for example, a cinder-block construction, fencing, a configuration of a row of beds and a windbreak, a blanket on the ground, or a vehicle on bricks. This has implications not only for how one approaches and experiences being in those places but also for how one relates to others encountered therein.

In addition to this broader, ontological contribution, in Hage's description of the multiple (potential) realities held within a lenticular image I also find some correspondence with Keane's (2003, 2005, 2014, 2018) theory of material affordances. If a spoon, for example, is understood as a bundle of material qualities or properties, like the grains of the lenticular image,

then it is by bringing into focus, intensifying some but not necessarily all of those qualities, that its affordances are realised. Put differently, whether it's the material qualities bundled in a spoon or the parts or grains of a lenticular image, the affordances of the spoon or the reality of the photographic image emerge in the interplay between an angle or way of seeing and those qualities or grains. In the Warlpiri relational context, another way of describing the material possibilities of a spoon is of a flickering of affordances that unfold moment to moment—a spoon can be a gear stick and a mediator of relatedness.

“Spoon can do anything”



Figure 9.1 Spoon can do anything

In July 2018 I returned to Nyirpi for a brief visit. After the relative quiet and socially small world of my post-fieldwork Canberra lifestyle, for twelve days I was thrown back into the intensity of a deeply social and mobile lifestyle. Since I'd been gone, Davina and Presley's eldest son Mark had married a woman from Lajamanu—her parents and other family were also stopping at Mae's place—and Mae's son-in-law, who was married to her eldest daughter Patricia, had passed away. It was primarily for this funeral I had returned. I had travelled to Nyirpi to sit in sorry camp and attend the funeral, travelled to Yuendumu for their sports weekend, and was about to accompany Mae and Davina on a ranger work trip. We were just

getting ready to leave Yuendumu in a two-car convoy when a quarrel erupted in the front vehicle. I watched as Yapa spilled out of the car, onto the street and eventually scattered in different directions. Everyone was upset and travel was delayed. I found myself in the passenger seat of Presley's car, driving around Yuendumu with the kids in the back as we waited for the others to "sort it out". Looking down I noticed something that served as a bit of comic relief after the stress of the fight: Presley's gear stick was a spoon. "That's the best thing I've seen all day," I exclaimed in delight, and asked to take a photo (in Figure 9.1). Looking down at his gear stick, and with the amused tone and smile that he always used when explaining the obvious to me, Presley said mildly, "Spoon can do anything." "I have to write that down," I said, getting my notebook out, "Tell me everything a spoon can do." Presley, having laughingly caught my enthusiasm, made a game of this with the kids. As we drove around Yuendumu they came up with the following list of things that a spoon can do, with the last two added by Davina the following evening, when the topic came up again as we sat around the fire:

- Eating
- Opening doors
- Opening windows
- Starting a Toyota (when you got no key)
- For a gear stick
- Digging (like when you dig for little lizards)
- Cleaning seed from bush tomato
- Scraping (cleaning) pots
- Spreading butter and jam
- Tool like a screwdriver (for fixing the radiator)
- Getting bush onions (sifting through the sand)
- Handle/lever for picking up, pushing or hooking hot things
- Making music

After consulting my field notes, to this list I add more. Aside from affordances such as mixing, stirring, serving, or ladling food or liquids (somehow missed above!), I also came across Richard using a spoon as a heat conductor. Specifically, he was trying to fix a broken-down vehicle. Using the end of a spoon heated over our fire, he poked (or, melted) a hole through the plastic of a drink bottle cap, through which he inserted a hose, and then screwed

the lid onto a plastic bottle, the bottom of which he'd cut off (so it was open ended). The contraption he was making had something to do with the engine oil and its compartment.

All of these examples invoke that relational interface between the co-present material qualities or properties of a spoon and a perceiving subject, from which springs the possibilities of what a spoon might be or mean. In part what I have been arguing in this thesis is the affordances of things flicker in the unfolding moments of the Warlpiri lifeworld. More than about utility or 'making do', I have understood this is as an expression of a relational way of being in the world; of a modality or praxis of openness, flexibility, and possibility. Put differently, a way of being that seeks to relate to rather than domesticate or colonise the world and those who share it according to reified categories or boundaries. As Poirier (2013, p. 54) has summarised:

In contrast to a naturalist ontology which relies on fixed categories and relations between these categories in order to know and experience the world, in relational ontologies categories are not fixed; rather, the nature and outcome of the relations that one experiences with something (another human, an animal, an object or a meteorological phenomenon), at a particular time and place, suggests the ontological status of whatever is encountered.

What the above example also demonstrates is that Yapa are cognizant of the openness and artfulness with which they engage with their environment. Presley's initial amusement had nothing to do with the spoon gear stick, it was directed at me in the same way it often was when I focused on something that was so obvious or ordinary to him that it didn't bear commenting on let alone explaining. It was simply Yapa way. Yet there was pride in Yapa way, which I think infused what eventually became his genuine enthusiasm for making the list. As with his amusement, this genuine enthusiasm had nothing to do with 'all the things a spoon can do'; there was pleasure and fun in acknowledging this particular way of seeing the spoon.

This is perhaps akin to Belyuen cleverness, "based on the ability to associate initially contrasting things" (Povinelli, 1993b, p. 683). Writing about Belyuen women's everyday interactions with a Dreaming-inscribed landscape, Povinelli (1993b) describes a context in which classificatory and ecological knowledge is in a dynamic and dialectical relationship with experience; one in which experience serves to condition such knowledge, as much as the other way around. Here, what 'might be' is hedged by a language of indeterminacy and conditionality. Largely, Povinelli (1993b) shows this is because the meaning or significance of

any action or event in the present may not reveal itself until the future (and this includes the potential of future accusations based on knowledge claims women make in the present). More broadly, however, Povinelli (1993b, pp. 683-684) is describing a context in which what ‘might be’ is open to anomalous or strange discoveries—like a four-legged emu—disrupting classificatory knowledge. Moreover, Belyuen women play with and upset the principles of classification. For example, while Dugon, slugs and children may be classified as different ethnospecies “based on the environment in which they live and their mode of transportation”, in jokes or curses “they are associated by their actions—all wiggle and crawl on the ground”. This is the source of that cleverness, collapsing one set of differences by metaphorically “evoking a second set of humorous similarities ... difference is but one stage in (or side of) the life of classificatory knowledge which gives way to similarity and connectedness” (see also Kearney, 2022, pp. 137-145).

In this thesis I have been focused on the ways one thing can ‘be’ multiple things, as opposed to how a number of things might be classified the same or different according to certain criteria. Yet overall, there is a similar principle at work here, in terms of an openness to what ‘might be’ and the deliberate way in which certain categories or boundaries could be undercut or played with. “Anyway, we Yapa” was a phrase I heard often during moments when some distinction was being made between Yapa and the kinds of things that Kardiya worry about. “We don’t worry” about sitting on the ground, living with dogs, a bit of ‘rubbish’ on the ground, using a stick instead of a spoon to stir sugar in tea, or a spoon to start the car. As exclusive as that “we Yapa” phrase may sound, in fact a focus on spoons reveals one final way in which they ‘flickered’—suggesting their affordances extend to the production and maintenance of relatedness, and correspondingly an openness to the composition of that “we”.

Sharing spoons

It’s an early August afternoon and I’m sitting with Kimberly on her veranda, seeking shade from the sun’s westward movement into what is always an intense and direct afternoon heat. We manage some conversation but it’s a little stilted, bordering on awkward, as the sadness Kimberly is feeling about a private matter makes her quiet. I’m relieved when she fashions a reason to visit her sisters: there’ll be more company there. Walking through the gate at Sandra’s place we find a cluster of Yapa in the yard: Sandra is in a chair at the base of which sits her daughter, Pearl, cross-legged on a single mattress, leaning back against her mum’s legs for a head-lice check. Circling around the mattress next to Pearl is Mabel, aunty to the

three sisters Sandra, Danielle and Kimberly. Next to Pearl is Kimberly's son Elijah, and then Danielle. Bodies shift to accommodate us as Kimberly and I join the mattress circle, we settle into position with each other—a slight shoulder lean here, an arm resting on a leg there, Elijah clambering over us to sit on his mum. Mabel's husband Samson joins us, dragging a chair over to sit behind his wife. Nestling myself in I notice Danielle and Mabel eating spaghetti with grated cheese. My stomach growls, “Yum, who's been cooking?” Still finger-combing Pearl's head for lice, Sandra tells me, “Get some Nangala, after they've finished use a plate”. Leaning down from his chair, Samson picks up a finished-with bowl from the ground and hands it to me. As I move inside to help myself, Pearl is sent with me to get some for Kimberly. When I finish eating, Kimberly, wading through a more generous helping, says, “Give me that bowl Nangala, I'll put some for Samson”. Portioning some of her spaghetti into my used bowl, she hands it and the spoon she's been using to Mabel, to pass on to her husband. Finding herself now spoon-less, Kimberly says, “Nangala, give me your spoon”. She's referring to the spoon in my bag, which I had used and now watch like a hawk while Kimberly eats: I'm ready with the “give me” hand sign as soon as she finishes. Passing the spoon back to me, Kimberly notices traces of sauce and melted cheese and too late she says, “New one manta [clean the] spoon Nangala”. As she speaks, I'm already putting it into my mouth to give it a good lick before squirrelling it away in my bag. “Oh Nangala,” Kimberly says, “I've got a cold, you'll get sick.” Shrugging I say, “Anyway.” Danielle, having witnessed this exchange, is laughing as she says, “Anyway, she's Yapa,” to which Kimberly responds, “Oh, you Yapa, sorry Nangala, you Yapa!”

At Nyirrpi, one of the most quotidian practices—of which the above vignette is an illustration—was the regular coming together of small groups of Yapa, often at multiple times during the day, around a fire, a blanket, or mattress, to share time, space, food, things, stories, company and ultimately their selves (cf. Lavi, 2018, pp. 120-125; Schwarz, 2017). The quality and ambience of the intimacy characterizing those gatherings is difficult to do justice with words—but it was part of the significance of *ngurra*; that dynamic nexus of people, together in place, engaging in the socio-material practices of being family. Crucial to the significance of such gatherings was the spatial and physical proximity not only of sitting together, but together *walyangka* [on the ground]. As Hinkson (2014, p. 77) articulates:

For Warlpiri people to ‘sit down’ invokes a foundational ontological principle, a way of being, a form of engagement between persons and environments. At a practical level to sit down is to make a camp, to break a journey. Pertinently, people who sit down together are regarded as related in varied but important ways. ... To sit down involves bringing self and other into a situation of sustained mutual presence.

As evident in the above vignette, sitting down together *walyangka* these days commonly involves the use of blankets and chairs and the like. Chairs were more often used by men than women and in this way could create some appropriate gendered distance. We would often sit around the fire, women and kids on blankets and quilts on the ground and men in chairs, such that we were sitting together but there was also a differentiation in the space we were sharing. Importantly, when chairs were in use, they were still part of the circularity of the gathering, positioned such that food and things could be easily shared and passed between Yapa. The embodied experience of such gatherings was one of proximity: bodies form a circle, and some are often close, partially touching as they share a blanket or lean past each other. Each person is within arm’s reach of another, enabling the seamless sharing of food and things—like spoons—either Yapa to Yapa, or along a chain of hands.

The sociality of such gatherings included talking, sharing news, telling stories, playing games, or even sitting in silence but in company and awareness of each other. There were emotional elements also, being with each other in grief, laughter, happiness or contentment as well as arguing.⁶⁰ As well, relational dynamics played out in such gatherings. Older Yapa cook and provide for younger dependents; younger Yapa ‘work’ for older Yapa (filling the billycan with water, fetching a pannikin from the car); cooks cut up and distribute meat from the day’s hunt; everyone demands things and food from each other. Yet, the awareness of all those present not only of each other but of the things in immediate proximity often meant little needed to be said. Once one person has finished with a spoon, it is placed on the ground in readiness or handed to the next waiting person to use. A chorus of “sugar”, “spoon”, “knife”, “butter”, “jam”, “bowl” is sung out, followed by the passing of each item to whoever sung its name. The same happens in response to a flash of a hand sign. As someone joins the group, a finished-with pannikin from a previous user is found and tea is poured for them, or someone will share

⁶⁰ Of course, a big fight could result in Yapa choosing not to sit and ‘be’ with each other for a time (or, ever again, if relations are completely broken). Spatial distance being the expression of social distance.

their still half full tea; someone will break-off some damper to share, and another will leave some of the tinned meat they've been eating for the next person.

Certain rules of avoidance or codes of social separation were observed, a gathering of men may sit separately from a gathering of women—and yet forms of distance were often bridged by the sharing of food or things across that distance. Mae's relationship with her two sons-in-law is a useful illustration of this. With her eldest daughter Patricia's husband (the one who's funeral I went back to attend) Mae observed very strict avoidance. When we visited them at Yuendumu, she would wait in the car until he either left or moved to a far side of the veranda. Only then would she enter, and by sitting on the opposite side as him, with the house between them, they were not only spatially distant but also not visible to each other. In my time, only once did he and Patricia camp anywhere near Mae's place, and that was in the sorry camp area that was an extension of her west yard. In such cases as these, when Mae was sitting with some family on one side of a veranda, he with the others on the other side, or when they were each in a *yunta* as part of a broadly spread-out sorry camp, their social and spatial separation was mediated by others—often young kids—running back and forth, collecting or delivering the powdered milk, the sugar, a spoon. In other words, between those required to maintain forms of social and spatial distance, who cannot express relatedness in more proximate ways, food and things delivered by others are the expression—the conduit—of relationality.

Close observation of the material and spatial practices of our gatherings revealed something similar of the relationship between Mae and her other son-in-law, Presley. Although they lived in the same place, they still practiced avoidance albeit in more subtle ways. Mae and Presley would sit around the same fire when there were other family present, especially Davina, but they would never be alone together. When they were part of the same gathering, direct communication or sharing between them was rare. While Mae would serve some tea for Presley, she wouldn't pass the pannikin directly to him. Instead, she would either put it where he could reach or pass it via another. Similarly, when cutting up a cooked kangaroo, Presley would select a big piece and pass it to me saying, "That's for you and Mae."

Reflecting on the intimate relationality that was evident in—an atmosphere of—those regular gatherings, I suggest it was simultaneously a product of and a prerequisite to the proximity with which Yapa sat, the small ways in which Yapa made physical contact, and the contiguity with which food and material things were shared. More than the act or gesture of sharing, I think, is the significance of commensality, propinquity and the manner in which things like

spoons were shared, such that they pass seamlessly between bodies. There is a sense of un-boundedness between Yapa that is mediated by things shared in this way. Of course, spoons were just one of a number of things that were shared contiguously—in un-bounded ways, beds, mattresses, blankets, clothes, combs, brushes, towels, pannikins, bowls, plates, spoons, and partly consumed food and drinks all passed between or were shared by Yapa. I have focused on spoons here because of the particular way the spoon ‘flickered’ in the above vignette, calling attention to this contiguity and the role of sharing not just in the production and maintenance of relatedness but also to the principle of openness in Warlpiri kinship, of the capacity and potential to incorporate (make family of) others.

Being (with) Yapa

As the final exchange in the above vignette suggests, from the Warlpiri perspective at least, being Yapa or Kardiya are not necessarily fixed or impermeable categories. When Danielle and Kimberly identified me as being “Yapa now”, they were not identifying me as (having suddenly become) a Warlpiri/Aboriginal person. Rather, they were identifying me as (at least contextually) part of their family, as “one of us” (and, therefore, in some way not like a Kardiya).⁶¹ In other words, this is an example of the inclusive usage of the term Yapa, extending its meaning of being Warlpiri/Aboriginal to being family. Of course, it is only because I sat in a kind of in-between of being Yapa (part of the family) and Kardiya (clearly a white person) that the telling elements of the exchange even occurred. If Danielle or Pearl had licked the same spoon that Kimberly had eaten with—and indeed Samson did use Kimberly’s first spoon—such an event would go unnoticed. As it did in every other similar gathering of family. It was only my in-between-ness that brought the spoon’s passing between our mouths into relief. It ‘flickered’, if fleetingly, not as something unremarkably mediating our relatedness but as something marking the boundaries of our difference. Until, that is, Danielle’s rescue and my re-positioning as actually Yapa/family.

An important point to highlight here is the ways in which Warlpiri people orient themselves towards others in practice. A “‘permeable’ approach to relatedness” (Merlan, 2018, p. 149) is informed by the inclusive, encompassing principles of the classificatory kinship

⁶¹ I have also heard this in the reverse, when a Warlpiri person—Yapa—was identified as “acting like Kardiya now.”

system according to which everyone—and crucially not just Warlpiri people—are or can be established as kin. Of course, as touched on above, Warlpiri kinship is at the same time a system of differentiation, setting limits to relational possibilities by prescribing rules of conduct, behaviour, and responsibilities according to specific dynamics. Yet, as Merlan (2018, p. 150) has observed, across that differentiation is the overriding principle of bridging or incorporating—relating across—difference: “kinship as the basic generative ordering device is not bounded and does not by itself produce bounded categories.”

The affective urge associated with this way of being in the world is ... to make people part of this network-like system where possible; even where it comes with difficulties, and perhaps also benefits ... Social networks link persons who likewise have a multiplicity of links with others: relations of kinship are ramifying. There is no inherent mechanism of bounding or closure cutting off people who belong from those who do not; potentially, relationship continues to ramify but is in practice given specific character by propinquity and kinds of engagement (Merlan, 2018, p. 150).

A key tenet informing this thesis has been this ‘permeable’ approach to relatedness; the principle of incorporating and relating across difference. After Merlan, I suggest that a key to this broader principle lies in the socio-material practices of the regular gatherings of smaller groups of Yapa, in which the quality of intimacy resembled the plural intimacy and “being-with” that Bird-David (2017) describes.

Bird-David (2017) argues that anthropologists working with small scale communities have tended to lose sight of the (ontological, theoretical) significance of living with few relatives. Post the reflexive turn in anthropology, and its corrective to speaking of small-scale societies as if they were from different times and stages of human evolution, anthropology has instead erred on the side of parity. By extending the terms, forms and architecture of enquiry that stem from the scholarly traditions of modern, large-scale societies and applying them to small-scale communities, anthropology has missed what is significant in the scalar context of those communities: the social, cultural, and ontological concomitants of “being-with” a plurality of vivid and proximate others. By way of a (further) corrective, Bird-David (2017) attends to the particular modes of “being with” and “being many” of a small (South Asian) forager hamlet who call themselves *sonta* [us, relatives]. Striking a salient contrast with modernity’s large-scale horizons, Bird-David paints the scene of an evening, of closely spaced

hearths, campfires, and families in clusters, all close enough to see and hear each other in generalized conversation. This kind of “being-with”—the fewness of relatives, in their relaxed togetherness, and the depth of each person’s presence to all the others, all the time and over a lifetime—evades the modern sociological grammar that organizes and serializes people, as standalone entities (individuals) that are also group-able into categories (band, group, village, nation, society). In this context, where one’s actions occur in the presence and sphere of awareness of a plurality of close others, “the *manyness* of *few* relatives ... is not singularized as a hyper existent homogenized collective” (Bird-David, 2017, p. xiv).

Relative to my fieldwork context, there is a difference in the kind of attendance that is given when I speak of ‘Nyirrpri community’ as opposed to a gathering of Yapa described in the above vignette. To paraphrase Bird-David’s (2017, p. 15) summative point, when Yapa gather together in this way they are not being *in* a community or society, they are *being with* a plurality of Yapa/family. To be sure, the scale of Warlpiri relatedness is different again to the tiny forager hamlet Bird-David describes. Yet, the salience of this point remains, especially so once Warlpiri mobility is brought back into the picture and we recall that the meaning of *ngurra-jinta* [of one camp, one family] is not about fixing permanence in terms of place or of a particular configuration of Yapa. Even in one day, the locations of gatherings might shift across different places—our yard in the morning, Sandra’s at lunch time, Austin’s place at Yuendumu in the evening. While the *jinta* [one] part of the concept does suggest some level of exclusivity—a “we” of which it is comprised—the configuration of that “we” is not fixed or impermeable. Around each smaller gathering of Yapa is the wider concentric circle or ‘pool’ of relatives who could join each other’s camps or gatherings for periods of time. Put differently, every Yapa is enmeshed in a web or constellation of relations, making each gathering significant as a realisation not only of one possible social configuration of Yapa as family, but also of the relatedness of each with all others present. Over time, from the regularity of such gatherings emerges a pattern that reveals both some consistency in terms of groupings, of Yapa who consistently share their daily, intimate lives together, as well as an openness of any gathering to incorporating others. It was in the ways spoons ‘flickered’ in the social-material practices of these gatherings that I suggest their affordances extended relationally—including towards the (as yet largely unrealised) possibilities of Yapa/Kardiya relations.

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