

# taking them back

*Archival Media in Arnhem  
Land Today*

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The layering of histories that gives places their meaning is especially pronounced at Kabulwarnamy, an outstation on the Arnhem Land Plateau in northern Australia. Sited on an ancient camping ground, its present incarnation as a place of residence dates from 2003 when Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek, the distinguished west Arnhem Land painter, fulfilled a long-held desire to live out his final years in this, the land of his childhood. The outstation is part of the estate known as Ankung Djang, country of the Mok clan, of which Bardayal is the senior traditional owner. He was born on the plateau, or Stone Country as it is known, some time around 1926. This was the period when Anglicans from the Church Missionary Society set up station at Oenpelli, a former pastoral enterprise. Despite this incursion less than a hundred kilometres distant, Bardayal's childhood on the plateau was for the most part a traditional hunter-gatherer existence, supplemented by occasional visits to missions and other settlements where bush commodities were traded for bamboo (to make spear shafts) and tobacco.

In more recent times, Bardayal and his wife, Mary Kolkkiwarra, were prominent in the Outstation or Homeland Movement. After World War II, the bulk of the Aboriginal population became concentrated at settlements such as Oenpelli and Maningrida. A trickle of people began to leave in the late 1960s and by the seventies this had become something of an exodus.<sup>1</sup> Buoyed by Whitlam's policy of self-determination, they returned to ancestral country. This was a time of idealism, optimism and a great outpouring of energy. Roads were made and landing strips cleared with axes and other hand tools, as people sought contemporary ways of living in isolated locales that some had scarcely visited or else known only as children. Inevitably, the move to outstations, which occurred in many parts of the Top End and the



Centre, was a mixture of success and failure. Some became centres of boredom and self-destruction, while others provided a genuine alternative to life in townships with their escalating incidence of substance abuse and social problems.

Dwelling at Kubulwarnamyo, west Arnhem Land, August 2006 (digital photograph by Martin Thomas)

Bardayal and Mary maintained their vision, helping to create, and living at, a number of west Arnhem outstations prior to the establishment of Kubulwarnamyo. Although small and isolated (the population hovers around thirty), the settlement bustles with activity and transactions. Bardayal paints on bark and paper, Mary weaves pandanus baskets, and younger residents find employment in the fire management and ranger programs overseen by Peter Cooke, a Balanda (as whites are known here) whose long history of work among Bininj (a generic term for the Aboriginal people of west Arnhem Land) has given him an enviable facility for dealing with bureaucracies and funding agencies. The outstation is a knowledge centre, regularly visited by a range of researchers in the humanities and sciences. A filmmaker, a zoologist and a scholar of rock art coincided with my visit there in August 2006. Part of the success of the outstation is due to the prohibition of alcohol—a self-imposition common to many such settlements (although this does not dissuade the current government from trying to starve them out of existence). Tobacco is the only drug of pleasure formally sanctioned and it is used abundantly.

The standard dwelling at the outstation is an A-frame-and-tarpaulin structure above a wooden platform. Tents or mosquito domes are pitched within. Solar panels power electric lighting and a few appliances. With a satellite dish providing telephone and internet connection for the communal computer, the outstation is wired up—or should I say *beamed in*—



Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerekk (left) and Murray Garde studying archival material, August 2006 (digital photograph by Martin Thomas)

to the digital world.<sup>2</sup> Life in the camp allows for a range of media experiences that could include, within the timeframe of an hour or so, perusal of the ancient rock art that crowds caves and boulders throughout the area, a session auditioning historic recordings of

Kunwinjku song (installed on the computer by the musicologist Linda Barwick), followed by an evening's diversion with Bruce Lee (the favoured DVD at the time of my visit). This was the locale for the media investigation that brought me to the plateau; a blast from the past as it proved to be. I worked in collaboration with Murray Garde, a linguist and post-doctoral fellow at the University of Melbourne, who lives part of the year at the outstation. Each day we convened discussion sessions which we recorded. Some involved men only; others included men, women and children. It all depended on the content of the material. While the audience gathered cross-leg on the ground, we cued the iTunes or DVD file on a laptop computer and pressed the ludic button on the virtual console—*PLAY*.

In this environment a unique set of media objects was dislodged from a state of archival dormancy, an occurrence inevitably shaped by the technological present. Archivists around the world are overseeing the transformation of analogue records into digital files—an expensive but necessary strategy for the long-term preservation of much media heritage. The portability of these digital files creates new contexts for displaying media, just as it permits the targeting of highly specialised audiences. Documentary material can be transported and disseminated in a process that bridges the often huge distances between ethnographic collections and the communities that spawned them. In the case at hand, the material studied at Kabulwarnamyoo had been separated from its place of origin since the time of its production in the 1940s.

My familiarity with the said material dates from 2005 when I was studying in the archives of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Although the project would come to include visual evidence (filmic and photographic), it was precipitated by a longstanding concern—informed by years of oral history and radio work—about the extent to which aurality is overlooked in a visually fixated society. This is part of a more specific inquiry into the ways in which Aboriginal voices were recorded and broadcast in the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> I was led to think about the ways in which the media of modernity can be mobilised for the health of minority cultures. To grapple with these questions, and to best understand the meaning of the objects unearthed from the archives, it was of course crucial that I open communication with the owners of the intellectual property contained in these recordings. Murray Garde, whom I met shortly after I auditioned an extraordinary recording of an initiation ceremony performed near Oenpelli in 1948, immediately recognised its value to older men of his acquaintance. After learning about the material from Murray, Bardayal, who does not read or write, dictated a request that I bring to him copies of the recordings and also some film footage shot simultaneously, now in the collection of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).<sup>4</sup> These compilations of unedited footage have rarely, if at all, been seen in recent decades because several reels depict secret-sacred ceremony from Oenpelli and other parts of Arnhem Land. This has appropriately earned them a ‘Restricted’ classification which makes the consent of the appropriate community a condition of access.

Not all the footage was secret-sacred, however. A project such as this is useful in a variety of ways. Quite apart from the opportunity of learning about the meaning of the documentation and the place of media heritage in contemporary Aboriginal society, it is an opportunity to document community attitudes about what can be made public and what is restricted. Such information is beneficial to those who manage the archives, and it also helps in overcoming certain simplistic notions about Aboriginal attitudes to naming or depicting deceased persons. These restrictions *do* apply in Arnhem Land, but they do not continue for more than a few years after a person’s death. After this time, when the emotional impact of the death has softened, the interdiction on naming the deceased is gradually eased. Viewing the images of people who have been dead for decades presented no problem to any of the Arnhem Landers to whom I spoke.

The film we studied was created under the direction of Charles P. Mountford (1890–1977), a self-taught ethnologist and photographer, known by friend and foe alike as ‘Monty’. He led the 1948 American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL), a display of bilateral friendliness between the two wartime allies, well-known in its day but now largely forgotten.<sup>5</sup> Mountford’s view of the people he studied was problematic by contemporary standards, though hardly unusual at the time. The Washington-based National Geographic Society (NGS) was a co-sponsor of the 1948 venture, and when Mountford wrote about it



Our camp and personnel at Oenpelli, October 1948 (American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, black and white photograph by Frank Setzler, NLA PIC P840/10 LOC P59). By permission of the National Library of Australia

in the society's *Magazine*, he did so under the title 'Exploring Stone Age Arnhem Land'.<sup>6</sup> By the late 1940s when he published this, Mountford was at the pinnacle of a long and improbable career. Born in rural South Australia, he began his working life as a tram conductor and for many years

was employed as a telephone mechanic by the Department of the Postmaster General in Adelaide. Highly gifted as a photographer, he began to document Aboriginal art sites on weekends. Encouraged by various amateur societies and officials at the South Australian Museum, his ethnological interests quickly broadened.<sup>7</sup> Despite a lack of formal qualifications, Mountford's many books, films and articles made him an internationally known authority on the Australian Aborigines, much to the irritation of professional anthropologists. Mountford's sensitive photographic portraiture did much to humanise Aboriginal people in popular imagery. But in his lectures and writings he regularly exploited the trope of extreme primitiveness. For example, he named an earlier *National Geographic* article, 'Earth's Most Primitive People: A Journey with the Aborigines of Central Australia'.<sup>8</sup> The desire to document the 'primitive' greatly affected his work in Arnhem Land. For logistical convenience, the seven-month expedition used three settlements as the principal bases: Umbakumba on Groote Eylandt, Yirrkala in northeast Arnhem Land and Oenpelli in the west. As might have been expected, the Aboriginal residents of these settlements were living relatively settled lifestyles. But this proved deeply distressing to some members of the expedition, as an early entry in the diary of anthropologist, Frederick D. McCarthy, reveals.

I went to bed at 9 pm. Though tired out, couldn't sleep because of our situation. Here we are, 16 of us, backed by US & Australian funds, but the natives are almost completely civilized, speaking English well and have dropped their ceremonial and hunting life.<sup>9</sup>

Eventually, McCarthy came to realise that traditional knowledge had not simply evaporated as he first imagined, but his comment reveals much about the expedition's tendency to obscure or overlook the historical conditions of the communities they visited. One would never guess from the bulk of the filmic evidence that the people depicted wore western clothes and lived in mission housing. McCarthy felt let down by this, but it became a topic of amusement for some of his colleagues. Brian Billington, medical researcher and expedition doctor, described the filming of a ceremony on Groote Eylandt. To create the impression of nakedness without compromising the film's suitability for general viewing, C.P. Mountford persuaded the performers to wear loin cloths that he had specially blackened in ink. 'Ha Ha Ha,' wrote Billington. 'Hollywood has nothing on C.P.M.'<sup>10</sup>

The Hollywood allusion is not as preposterous as the good doctor implied. Under the aegis of documentary observation, Mountford established a field of performance in which the scientists, also, became actors. Of those who participated in the expedition, two are still alive: the distinguished botanist, Raymond Specht, and cine-photographer, Peter Bassett-Smith.<sup>11</sup> Specht was the sole Australian naturalist; three others (an ornithologist, a mammalogist and an ichthyologist) were sent by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. Also from the Smithsonian was archaeologist Frank M. Setzler, deputy leader, who spent much of his time working with McCarthy, curator of anthropology at the Australian Museum. Among other participants were three nutritionists (of whom Billington was one), employed by the Institute of Anatomy in Canberra. Their charge was to study Aboriginal health and diet. In the film *Arnhem Land* (1950), one of three official AASEAL documentaries, the scientists are seen going about the business of scientific inquiry: collecting plants, arranging insects, pickling specimens, weighing people.<sup>12</sup> In one of the more bizarre scenes, Frank Setzler makes facial casts of the locals (which were eventually shipped to Washington). Emphasising the juxtaposition between modernity and antiquity was pivotal to the expedition's cultural processing of Arnhem Land. As the Americans and Australians enacted the business of science, the locals were encouraged to disrobe and enact their 'primitive' culture. The expedition seems to have received a high level of co-operation in producing these customised displays of traditional life.

Fire-making, hut-building, fishing and hunting were subjects that Mountford and Bassett-Smith were keen to capture on their large stockpile of colour film. One such scene, watched several times by the audience at Kabulwarnamyo, depicts a man at Red Lily Lagoon, Oenpelli. He is first seen emerging from the water with a haul of fish. We next see him seated, preparing

his catch. Using a mussel shell, he goes about the work of beheading and filleting, operating with surgeon-like precision. Lastly, he cooks the catch upon a scattering of embers, removing the fillets perfectly clean. The dexterity of the man, his virtuosity in the basics of survival, are part of the attraction of this sequence. But then any footage to do with food was welcomed by the Arnhem Land audience, some of whom almost rubbed their bellies in appreciation. The fact that the man in the film displays skills now rarely used, if they survive at all, is also captivating. Technique in all its manifestations is highly valued, a trait confirmed in the response to another reel of film in which a stone tool-maker manufactures a spear. The beauty of this sequence, its truly emotional register, is also associated with sentiments of loss and admiration, so poignantly fused. But there is more to it than that. The man is a specialist, an artisan in his field. Like the objects he shapes, his physique is determined by his craft. The strength of those veinous hands and forearms (mainly what we see of him) is established in the opening frames. He is removing flakes from a piece of chert by hitting it with a hammer-stone. This is the technique known to archaeologists as percussion flaking. When the stone is shaped to the extent that further striking will irreparably damage it, the hammer-stone is put aside and he turns to the subtler work of pressure flaking. To do this, he holds the worked stone against a cushion of paperbark. Tiny flakes of chert are removed not by striking, but by the exertion of sheer, downward force against the artefact, applied with a compressor, a tool somewhat chisel-like in shape, crafted from wood. The spear-point by this stage is a hewn shark-tooth of an object. He finely serrates its edges with a chisel-tipped tool, here made of wire, but once shaped from the fibula of a kangaroo. After heating a blob of spinifex resin over a fire he hafts the point to a wooden shaft, carefully sealing the junction of resin and stone with heat from a glowing ember at the end of a burning twig. His final, almost preposterous, gesture is to cool and set the resin with saliva. This he does by inserting the spear into his mouth and lathering the join with his tongue.

The spearhead-maker footage was something of a mystery. I showed it at all three expedition bases, but no one could identify the man or say where he was working. Later, I sent it to the archaeologist Kim Akerman who told me it originates not from Arnhem Land, but from the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Why it ended up among the reels of unedited Arnhem Land footage is uncertain, but it is possible that Mountford used the film in lectures to accompany his spiel about 'stone age' Arnhem Land. His inability to secure such material during the expedition is partly explained by the fact that stone tool-making had gone into steep decline some centuries earlier when steel was introduced by the Macassan voyagers from South Sulawesi who traded it for the right to collect trepang in coastal waters, which they preserved and on-sold to China.<sup>13</sup> With their long involvement in global commerce, the Arnhem Landers were singularly ill-suited to a stone age investigation. But none of this undermines the evidential value—and pure fascination—of seeing the spear-maker at work.

When presented with this footage, the notion that stone technology is the epitome of backwardness becomes increasingly dubious. Here is a reminder that the documentary image has a genie-like propensity to escape the thinking that led to its conception.

This tendency was also evident in the response to the expedition's documentation of secret-sacred ceremony in western Arnhem Land. Attendance at the ceremonies is restricted to men—a rule that also governs access to the documentation (which was produced by an all male crew). Bardayal took passionate interest in this material. Indeed, he asked every day if he could watch it. The footage depicts an initiation known as *Wubarr*, and although he was not present at Oenpelli during Mountford's visit, Bardayal remembered the names of some performers and felt a strong attachment to the documentation. This is the ceremony into which the older men of the region were first initiated. It is a ritual fairly well known to anthropologists, mainly through the work of Ronald Berndt, a great rival of Mountford's, who observed it at Oenpelli and Goulburn Island.<sup>14</sup> The existence of published accounts in no way affects the unique value of the film and audio to the senior men of west Arnhem Land. In a society where the rate of literacy is low, books have only modest cachet, especially when compared with films and recordings that constitute the only documentation of *Wubarr* in time-based media. For contemporary Arnhem Landers their significance is heightened by the fact that *Wubarr* has not been performed since the 1970s. Post World War II, it was gradually displaced by *Kunapipi*, an entirely different initiation ceremony, associated with the Rainbow Serpent cult.

Berndt witnessed *Kunapipi* in northeast Arnhem Land in 1946 and made it the subject of a famous monograph.<sup>15</sup> While the locality of *Kunapipi*'s origin is a matter of conjecture, all evidence attests to the rapidity with which it spread across the Top End during the first half of the twentieth century. In the Oenpelli case, the presence of the ethnographer seems to have influenced its introduction. Bardayal explained that while some residents of the mission had attended *Kunapipi* further east, it was only performed at Oenpelli on Berndt's request. Bardayal recalled that the appropriateness of performing a ceremony then foreign to the region was fiercely debated. But Berndt was emphatic, and this was a time when the authority of Balanda was not readily challenged. Bardayal stated that the request was lubricated by a payment of food and tobacco—a detail that Berndt neglected to mention in his published account.

The notion that performances of sacred ceremony were effectively available for purchase might seem strange. But in thinking about this matter we must acknowledge that religious and economic forces are rarely isolated from one another. This is as true of the sacred life of Arnhem Land as it is of the Vatican. In 1949 the anthropologist Donald Thomson gave a detailed account of how the organisers and performers of Arnhem Land ceremony received remuneration from visiting clans in the form of foodstuffs and other items. Initiation, he

explained, 'sets up a long train of social obligations—each with a definite economic import—each requiring gift and counter gift, and furnishing the motive for work, the urge for production both of food and *gerri* [material wealth]'.<sup>16</sup> The economy, of which ceremony is an integral part, also explains the long use of indigenous nicotine-bearing plants in places far from where they grow.<sup>17</sup> Tobacco, first introduced by the Macassans, was incorporated into established networks of exchange in which Europeans later participated, often unwittingly. As a result of its highly addictive properties (and perhaps other factors), tobacco acquired the status of currency through much of Aboriginal Australia. The ethnographers of the mid-twentieth century had little choice but to distribute tobacco in return for assistance. Mountford, like Berndt, failed to mention these economic transactions in his films and written accounts. However, the journalist and ABC representative Colin Simpson, who was responsible for organising the sound recording of the Oenpelli Wubarr, was more direct. A document among his personal papers states unequivocally that the 'performance was "paid for" in food and tobacco'.<sup>18</sup> On several occasions while watching the film, I asked Arnhem Land men about the protocols of payment. No one could imagine a situation in which a major ceremony could have been organised for a Balanda film crew without some form of remuneration.

The long history of researchers concealing their interventionism points to the sometimes uneasy interface between the investigative ontology of Westerners, determined to objectify and display the inner workings of the world, and a secret-sacred ontology which, by definition, is predicated on the restriction of knowledge. During the month I spent in Arnhem Land, I thought often about this history and had cause to wonder at the strangeness of my own position, as an outsider bearing images of secret-sacred rites. I sometimes asked about the legitimacy of my seeing, auditioning and discussing material that is supposedly the exclusive domain of initiated men. 'You're old enough!' was one jovial response, and it seemed fairly typical of the attitude. A certain elasticity in the rules was tolerable, partly because of my age and gender, and also because they thought I was doing the right thing. Such material *should* be taken to its traditional owners.

I was presented with many clues that helped me make sense of my position. Mobility between Aboriginal communities is commonplace, and I noticed, for example, that an initiated man from east Arnhem Land, working at Kabulwarnamyo, was permitted—in fact encouraged—to view the film of Wubarr. It was an important insight into the Bininj notion of sociality. An esoteric knowledge system co-exists with a seemingly contradictory expectation that one negotiate with outsiders in a variety of ways. This tendency is enshrined in the marriage rules, where exogamy is the basic principle. The kinship system requires everyone to marry *outside* their own classificatory group.

With endless permutations, protocols intended for dealing with difference *within* Aboriginal society are extended to white people, as must have been the case for the Balanda crew in

1948 who made the films and recordings. So it is not entirely surprising that other white men who were present at Kabulwarnamyo during the time of my visit were also allowed to watch the film and hear the audio. Indeed some of them could hardly have been excluded, for they are attendees of Kunapipi—another indication of the willingness to include trustworthy outsiders in the esoteric culture. Ultimately, I suspect that any qualms about my outsider status were abated by the general level of fascination in the material. Sitting with Bardayal as he watched and listened to Wubarr was one of the great privileges I have had as a researcher. While I might have anticipated the obvious connection he felt with his community, his history, and the ensemble of deceased performers, I was not prepared for the level of connoisseurship that he brought to the experience. The *quality* of the dancing was the cause of particular excitement, and clearly it is one of the many pleasures of attending ceremony. I was intrigued by the ecstatic cries of appreciation that Bardayal and other men uttered in unison at the conclusion of dances. I later established that these exclamations are the typical mode of applause used at ceremonies. It was only natural that traditional gestures of appreciation should greet the documentary records.

While it was admissible for me to watch and listen, the men were circumspect in what they said about the *meaning* of the ceremonies. They emphatically requested that I keep the details to myself. So the content of the films and recordings cannot be disclosed. Despite this restriction, there is still a great deal that *can* be said about the production, distribution and reception of the documentation. Taking my cues from watching the spear-maker, and from the reception of other footage, I am led to think about issues of technique and technology as they apply to the documentation itself. As we will see, the men of Arnhem Land were eager to insert the 1948 material into their own knowledge systems. Their readiness to do so becomes more explicable if we think seriously about the business of *making*.

It is cutting a long story very short to say that a complex set of fault lines underscored the internal politics of AASEAL. Diverse and often conflicting allegiances—personal, institutional and national—had particular impact on the ethnographic personnel. Much of this was due to the assembling of large collections of material culture, and the problem of how the spoils should be divided with two participant countries and a variety of institutional supporters.<sup>19</sup> Setzler was acquiring objects for the Smithsonian Institution; McCarthy was doing the same for the Australian Museum. To McCarthy's horror, Mountford had hopes of depositing material with the South Australian Museum, despite the fact it had made no financial contribution to the expedition. So when Colin Simpson and sound recordist Raymond Giles turned up at Oenpelli, representing another national institution, the ABC, a further element of competition was added to an already volatile mix. In his capacity as a writer and producer of 'actuality broadcasts', Simpson was the only journalist to join the expedition in situ. Others were turned away because the NGS as sponsor claimed exclusive story and pictorial rights.

Simpson and Giles slipped under the wire only because they were working in the audio medium. As Simpson later explained,

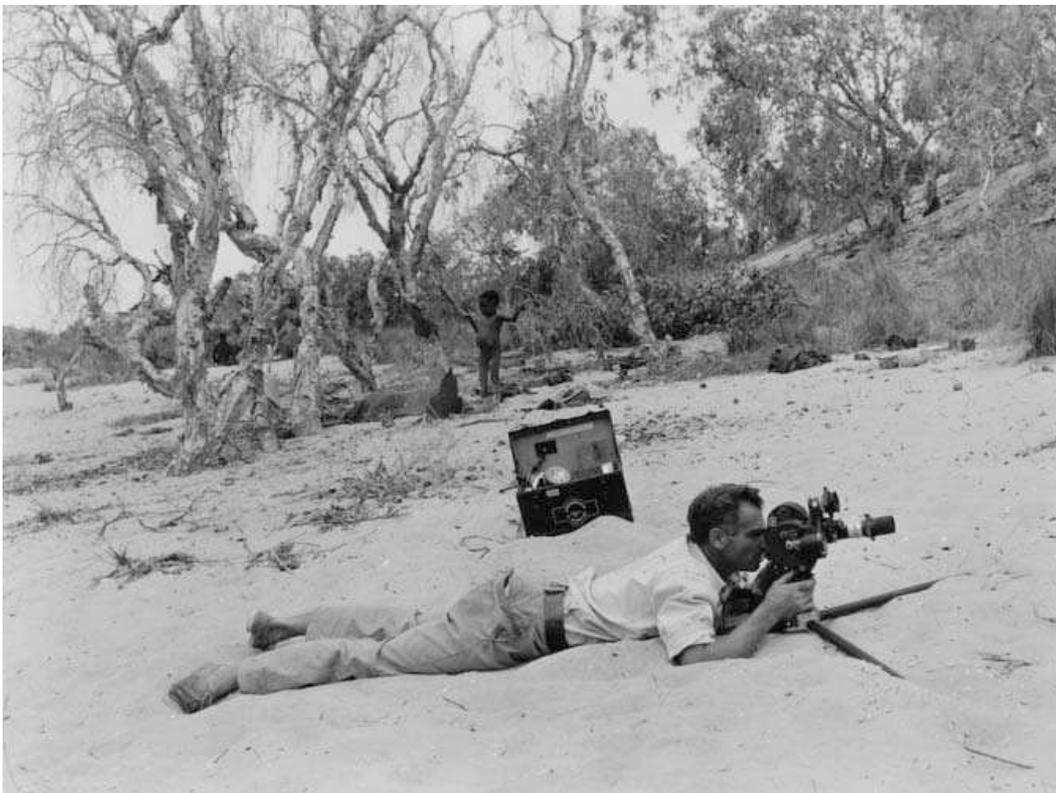
[r]adio, this side of television, is non-pictorial and so was considered near enough to being non-competitive, and, by permission, we could go in and do a 'feature' on the expedition and gather whatever else seemed interesting to describe and record in sound, such as aboriginal corroboree.<sup>20</sup>

Simpson makes an appearance in the film of Wubarr, and since this is not a matter of ceremony, but rather a distraction from it, there is no hindrance to describing the scene. The dance and song are going on in all their glory when the apparent purity of the ethnographic moment is disrupted—and yet paradoxically affirmed—by the pale Colin Simpson, pith helmeted and wearing shorter-than-short shorts, leaping into the frame with a microphone.

Also witness to the ceremony (though never seen on film) were Mountford, Setzler, Howell Walker (NGS photographer), Bassett-Smith, McCarthy and Bill Harney (expedition guide). McCarthy, the most sardonic of AASEAL's many diarists, was little impressed by Simpson's quest for auditory maximisation. His complaint reveals much about the behind-the-scenes politics of organising Wubarr.

An Ubar ceremony ... was held at Oenpelli Hill where the natives had a dancing ground, on the western side. Two young men were initiated. Colin Simpson made a wire recording, and bolted into the middle of the dancers all the time so spoiling the spectacle for the photographers—actually, he spoilt a very beautiful and impressive performance for them. In the beginning one man appeared in a pair of long pants and Monty [Mountford] made him change into a Naga loin-cloth. He yelled out—Take them off, I'm paying for this—at another stage I was photographing when Bassett-Smith put his movie camera on a lower rock and spoilt my view—within a few minutes he fell off, with his camera, I said to Harney, 'Thank God, he's gone' forgetting that he might have injured himself and damaged his camera—Fortunately he didn't.<sup>21</sup>

McCarthy's account shows how the competition between researchers was readily extended into competition between media. That audio and visual documentation occurred separately is important to understanding the recording of Wubarr. While 'talking' movies were already two decades old in 1948, they were not yet the norm in documentary cinema. As film historian Charles Musser explains, the 'shift from live audio accompaniment to recorded sound came to documentaries later than to fiction film-making'.<sup>22</sup> Talkies were, for the most part, studio productions, made with heavy equipment and handsome budgets. In contrast, documentary practices were shaped by the flood of cheap silent cameras that hit the market in the 1930s after the introduction of talkies. While improvements in field recording and studio



production allowed the addition of a sound track to silent footage, in doing this many film-makers simply reapplied ‘the basic format and techniques of the illustrated lecture—narration, music, and sound effects laid over images shot with a silent camera.’<sup>23</sup> Mountford was a filmmaker entirely at home with the ‘illustrated lecture’

concept. In 1945–46, at the request of Australia’s Department of Information, he had toured the United States giving lectures to the accompaniment of silent films he had shot in Central Australia. It was then that he won the American backing that seeded the mission to Arnhem Land. The three official AASEAL films, released in the period 1949–51, had soundtracks generated in the studio from a range of sources that included scripted commentary, music by Alfred and Minnie Hill, and selected field recordings, including some ABC material from Simpson and Giles.<sup>24</sup>

Lack of sound-to-film image was deemed acceptable, given the many advantages of the silent camera. Portable, versatile, and operated by a cine-photographer working solo, it went with him up trees, through rivers, in canoes, and goodness knows where else. Most of the footage was shot on a 16 mm camera, still in the possession of Peter Bassett-Smith. Made by the Swiss firm Bolex and powered by a clockwork mechanism, it is sufficiently compact to be carried in a largish handbag. This was not the case with the Pyrox Wire Recorder, the device used by Simpson and Giles. The machine, a short-lived predecessor of the tape recorder, encodes an audio signal into a length of magnetised wire which was later taken to a studio and dubbed to an acetate disc. By pre-war standards the Pyrox was a triumph

Peter Bassett-Smith filming in Arnhem Land, 1948 (black and white photograph by C.P. Mountford SLSA PRG 1218/17/3/2 P208). Courtesy of the State Library of South Australia



Recording session at Oenpelli 1948: Marawana (left), Colin Simpson, Raymond Giles and three unidentified men around the Pyrox Wire Recorder (black and white photograph by Howell Walker, NLA MS5253 Box 99 Bag B). By permission of the National Library of Australia

of miniaturisation, but even the most portable model weighed in at 22 kilograms. For power it required two six volt batteries, which were heavier than the machine itself. With luck, a generator for recharging might be available on location, but otherwise it also had to be transported. By the time microphones, cables, spare parts and extra batteries

were added, the sound recordist was loaded with a vehicle full of equipment. As the Simpson and Giles team indicates, two people—a technician and a producer—were required for field recording during this period.

While the camera was superior in terms of versatility, the recorder had a unique advantage: *playback*. This allowed the recordists to inculcate an understanding of the technology among the performers. Unlike Mountford and Bassett-Smith, who did not see rushes of their film until after the expedition had concluded, Simpson and Giles could monitor their work as it proceeded and endeavour to recapture material if the results were disappointing. As Simpson explained in his landmark book, *Adam in Ochre* (1951), a climate of collaboration developed around the wire recorder. The Bininj could provide direct input into the process of documentation. In addition to ceremony, Simpson and Giles recorded public or ‘corroboree’ songs, sung as campfire entertainments. A man named Marawana, who served as the principal translator at Oenpelli, was also a leading didjeridoo player who performed in many recordings. Simpson explained to him that the songs ‘would be broadcast through radio and heard by the white people living in the cities and in all parts of Australia’. He noted

that the residents of Oenpelli had some knowledge of radio from the missionaries. Simpson tells of a recording session when

[s]uddenly Marawana stopped playing. The others stopped singing as he put down the didjeridoo. He got up and came over to where I was beside the recorder.

‘Missa Simpson, that no proper. We makim again please. I blow wrong note on didjeridoo.’  
We solemnly ran back the wire. After some preliminary tuning up they began again. When it was finished we played it back and Marawana, the conscientious artist, listened intently. I looked at him for his approval and he nodded gravely and said, ‘Orright, that one.’ Then he added, ‘Thank you.’<sup>25</sup>

Simpson’s account is valuable for what it says about the agency of people who performed for ethnographers—a subject too often ignored in debates about the appropriation of indigenous cultures. Electronic recording allowed performers an element of reflexivity. Evaluating their work through headphones, they could hear their songs and think about the possibilities afforded by this machine for communicating beyond the here and now.

While the precise motivations of individuals can only be approximated, there is strong evidence from this period that Arnhem Landers discerned a need to educate the wider populace about their way of life. Admitting outsiders to ceremonies was one way of doing this. Just a few years after the 1948 expedition, the photographer Axel Poignant visited and photographed Aboriginal communities on the lower reaches of the Liverpool River, east of Oenpelli. He too introduced a degree of reflexivity to the documentary process by freighting his exposed film to Sydney where it was processed; reference prints were flown back so that the subjects of the photographs could see how they were being represented. Roslyn Poignant has written about the *Rom* or friendship ceremony presented to Axel during this time. Lamilami Lazarus, Poignant’s main interpreter, explained to him that the reason for making him the recipient of *Rom*, a considerable honour, was because the local people ‘were glad someone had come to photograph the people so others would know what they looked like’.<sup>26</sup> Much has been said about the readiness of Aboriginal people to take control of western media and use it for their own purposes, given the opportunity. I think immediately of Eric Michaels’s remarkable study of Warlpiri video and television in Central Australia in the 1980s.<sup>27</sup> But if we are to see such activities in their historical context, television must be recognised as one of the later chapters. The unique properties of each generation of technology must be considered, and in electronic media, the story begins with sound, not vision.

Needless to say, the scientists who witnessed the performance of ceremony in 1948 did not perceive their ethnographic subjects as media players. In their search for authenticity, they were often sceptical of the documentation collected. Brian Billington lampooned Mountford for his ‘Hollywood’ tendencies, while the archaeologist Setzler voiced suspicion

of the secret-sacred ritual on Groote Eylandt, which was performed for the expedition at a location different from its usual site.

How many dances were not put on that would have been used in their regular dance held at Amalipa we shall never know. One thing is certain and that is that no other Australian native dance ceremony has ever been recorded on cine film in color as this artificial corroboree has been. I say 'artificial' because all of it was put on for the benefit of the cameras. It would have been far better anthropologically if we could have been bystanders or photographers recording the dances and other activities during one of their annual dance ceremonies held in the regular sacred dance ground, Amalipa, during the fall when the natives provide their own food, instead of the large tins of flour and other commodities supplied by Mountford. However, this film record is better than none.<sup>28</sup>

For Setzler, the act of witnessing the ceremony ensnared him in an observer's paradox. The exigencies of arranging the documentation rendered it inauthentic. Yet this was not the sentiment of any of the men with whom I studied the footage in 2006. It was no problem at all that the Balanda had paid for ceremony. That was in fact a marker of authenticity. But of course the greater marker was the performance itself. Ceremony is sometimes construed as a grim and restrictive force. The commentary of Mountford's *Arnhem Land* film speaks of lives 'rigidly circumscribed' by 'ritual and superstition'. This is of course absurd. Far from being a constraining presence, ceremony is an opening for interpreting the cosmos and everything in it. A source of beauty, richness, companionship and meaning, it is about enhancement, not circumscription. For many people it is the pinnacle of life. The cause of a great coming together of disparate communities, it involves story, music, drama, and the visual arts. If this suggests the complexity and array of artforms found in opera, it presents similar challenges in terms of organisation, logistics and demand for resources. But the comparison with Western performance can only go so far. The difference is that in these events there is no such thing as an audience. Everyone is a performer in this great theatre of emplacement. At Yirrkala, I was given permission by Mawalan II Marika, son of the famous painter and elder Wandjuk Marika (who acted as translator and go-between for Mountford), to speak publicly about a particular moment in the film of a secret-sacred dance. The camera looks up at Wandjuk who is singing from the bottom his lungs. The ABC never visited Yirrkala. No sound recordings were made there. So it a song that we cannot audition, sung by a young man whose face is painted with broad bands of white ochre, and whose joyous smile nearly fills the frame.

Mawalan asked whether I could make for him a still image of this scene of supreme happiness. Since Yirrkala was the last stop in my journey to the three expedition bases, the request came as no surprise. In west Arnhem Land, on Groote Eylandt and at Yirrkala in

the northeast, the response to the documentation was consistent in one regard. Everyone wanted copies of the material to be used locally. This was especially the case with the images of ceremony. So the gesture of taking the documentation to communities of origin resulted in a commission of sorts. They asked that the jumbled reels of public and secret-sacred material be edited, according to location. They wanted them put in their proper sequence. That way, each community would have its own set of DVDs, some for public display and some to be shown only among initiated men.

The Arnhem Landers discerned clear possibilities for deploying this material within their own knowledge systems, as is evident in the formal requests for access to further material in AIATSIS and other collections, dictated by senior Bininj. Thomson Yulidjiri, whom Murray Garde and I visited at an outstation on the outskirts of Oenpelli, told it this way:

I was a teenager when I was shown the Wubarr ceremony. I saw it. They danced that kangaroo ritual and other unmentionable sacred things. It is our custom and belongs to us, we who speak Kunwinjku. From long ago. It is from this place here, from here and many times it was performed and I would go and camp there when it was performed . . . I want that Wubarr [material] and anything on the Lorrkkon ceremony which is the hollow log ossuary ceremony into which we put the bones of the dead. They [these ceremonies] belong to us. And this Wubarr ceremony. We want to show it to young men, to introduce it to them [through the film]. It belongs to us. And here. It should come and 'sit down' here . . . You tell them this.<sup>29</sup>

Similar memories of the past and thoughts of the future were articulated by Jacob Nayinggul, who also participated in this discussion.

Today I have been shown the movie of the Wubarr ceremony taken a very long time ago, and so I wanted very much to see this. I was a young boy at the time and so I would like you very much to be able to make it [an edited copy] for me, so that in quiet times when I am not working, I'll go back to my camp and watch the images. It will make me reflect on all I know about that Wubarr ceremony and how at that time it was close to disappearing. Today that ceremony is gone, it lies buried forever. And so seeing that movie brought it back to mind again. Who can we find today who knows about that ceremony? A few of us know, but those old people are all gone now. So now, I would love it very much [to have a copy of an edited version]. I would like to hold on to it. Myself and the other senior men here, we would share it together and gather together to watch it. We will watch to see how all those years ago, we were initiated by those old people into that Wubarr ceremony. If we don't see this film again, we won't be able to remember. Maybe all we would have is a name. The film, and those old people . . . The Wubarr ceremony has come alive again in those images they made. That is all.<sup>30</sup>

Nayinggul's haunting remark reverberates when I try to process what happened in Arnhem Land. *If we don't see this film again, we won't be able to remember.* It epitomises the strangeness of a story in which a group of scientifically minded Westerners were drawn into the mystique of Aboriginal secrecy, and how that opened new possibilities for maintaining or preserving a body of knowledge, now endangered. By drawing attention to this dialogue between past and present, I hope to encourage greater recognition of the continuing history of Aboriginal engagements with modernity—a theme raised by Eric Michaels in his celebrated study of video and television, and which we now find in the literature on Arnhem Land with Jon Altman and Melissa Hinkson's current work on vehicle use and mobility around Maningrida.<sup>31</sup> When Aboriginal people are recognised as *shapers* of modernity, we who study these things might query the long anthropological tradition of seeking x-ray perspectives on secret lives. By averting our gaze from the secret, and attending instead to the cultural interface, we can think in a qualitative way about the things that can be said, and those that cannot. That is to say, we might think about the *sorts* of knowledge that are truly desirable; the kinds of exposition that are necessary if the world is to become truly postcolonial.<sup>32</sup>

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Luke Taylor, <i>Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land</i>, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, pp. 36–9.</li> <li>2. This is concordant with the impact of the recent telecommunications revolution on many 'remote' Aboriginal communities, described by Melissa Hinkson. See Hinkson, 'New Media Projects at Yuendumu: Inter-cultural Engagement and Self-determination in an Era of Accelerated Globalization', <i>Continuum: Journal of Media &amp; Cultural Studies</i>, vol. 16, no. 2, p. 207.</li> <li>3. See Martin Thomas, 'The Rush to Record: Transmitting the Sound of Aboriginal Culture', <i>Journal of Australian Studies</i>, no. 90, 2007.</li> <li>4. The material was scattered among the following reels in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (henceforth</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>AIATSIS) Audiovisual Archives: Mountford Collection LV2451, LV2453, LV2954, LV2955 &amp; LV2956.</li> <li>5. The fullest account of the expedition is contained in its official records. See Charles P. Mountford et al (eds), <i>Records of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land</i>, 4 vols, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1956–64.</li> <li>6. Mountford, 'Exploring Stone Age Arnhem Land', <i>National Geographic Magazine</i>, vol. 96, no. 6, 1949.</li> <li>7. See Max Lamshed, 'Monty': <i>The Biography of C.P. Mountford</i>, Rigby, Adelaide, 1972.</li> <li>8. Mountford, 'Earth's Most Primitive People: A Journey with the Aborigines of Central Australia', <i>National Geographic Magazine</i>, vol. 89, no. 1, 1946.</li> </ol> |
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9. Frederick D. McCarthy, 'Diary 1, Field Notes Groote Eylandt', 1948, entry for 4 April. AIATSIS MS 3513/14/1.
10. Billington to Clements, 18 June 1948, Correspondence in file titled 'Survey—Arnhem Land', 1948. Records of the Institute of Anatomy, National Archives of Australia A2644.
11. Raymond Giles, the ABC sound technician who worked with Colin Simpson, also survives, but neither he nor Simpson were official members of the expedition.
12. Mountford (dir.), *Arnhem Land*, Australian National Film Board production, 1950.
13. The northeastern settlement of Ngilibitji is perhaps the only Arnhem Land community where stone tool-making techniques survived into recent times. See Kim McKenzie's film, *The Spear in the Stone*, AIATSIS production, 1983.
14. Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt, *Man, Land & Myth in North Australia: The Gunwinggu People*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1970, p. 125.
15. Ronald M. Berndt, *Kunapipi: A Study of an Australian Aboriginal Religious Cult*, International Universities Press, New York, 1951.
16. Donald F. Thomson, *Economic Structure and the Ceremonial Exchange Cycle in Arnhem Land*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1949, p. 39.
17. Maggie Brady and Jeremy Long, 'Mutual Exploitation?: Aboriginal Australian Encounters with Europeans, Southeast Asians, and Tobacco', in William Jankowiak and Daniel Bradburd (eds), *Drugs, Labor, and Colonial Expansion*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 2003, pp. 33–7.
18. Collin Simpson, 'Ceremony at Oenpelli'. Papers of Collin Simpson, National Library of Australia (henceforth NLA) MS 5235/135.
19. Sally K. May, 'The Last Frontier? Acquiring the American—Australian Scientific Expedition Ethnographic Collection 1948', BA Hons thesis, Flinders University, 2000.
20. Simpson, *Adam in Ochre: Inside Aboriginal Australia*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1951, p. 6.
21. McCarthy, 'Diary 5, Yirrkala Diary No. 2 and Oenpelli', entry for 23 October. AIATSIS MS 3513/14/5.
22. Charles Musser, 'Engaging with Reality', in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (ed.), *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 332.
23. Musser, p. 322.
24. The films were *Arnhem Land* (1950), *Aborigines of the Sea Coast* (1951) and *Birds and Billabongs* (1951), all Australian National Film Board productions directed by Mountford.
25. Simpson, *Adam in Ochre*, p. 67.
26. Roslyn Poignant with Axel Poignant, *Encounter at Nagalarramba*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1996.
27. Eric Michaels, *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition Media, and Technological Horizons*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1994.
28. Frank M. Setzler, 'Diary', 1948, pp. 132–3. Papers of Frank M. Setzler, NLA MS 5230.
29. Recorded 1 September 2006, at Kungarrewarlk outstation, NT. Translated from Kunwinjku by Murray Garde.
30. Recorded 1 September 2006, at Kungarrewarlk outstation, NT. Translated from Kunwinjku by Murray Garde.
31. Jon Altman and Melissa Hinkson, 'Mobility and Modernity in Arnhem Land: The Social Universe of Kuninjku Trucks', *Journal of Material Culture*, 2007, forthcoming (unpaginated).
32. I am indebted to Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek, Mary Kolkkiwarra, Jacob Nayinggul, Thomson Yulidjiri, Mawalan II Marika, Luke Taylor, Kim Akerman, Peter Cooke, Lara McLennan, Jennifer Sterland, Helen Macallan, Suzy Russell and Murray Garde for their generous assistance. Thanks also to Linda Barwick and Allan Marette who opened the path.