



Reflexive Ethnographic Practice

Three Generations of Social Researchers in One Place

Edited by
Amanda Kearney
John Bradley

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To our teachers and mentors.

FOREWORD

Ethnography involves a threefold challenge—to understand others through their own understandings, to live with others in a spirit of mutuality and reciprocity, and to write about others in ways that do them justice. What is so admirable about the essays collected in this volume is how far their authors have come in meeting these challenges. Not only their fieldwork but their writing demonstrates how collaboration and reflexivity offer ways of breaking through some of the intercultural impasses we currently face in Australia. Even as I express this hope (June 2019, senior leaders of several major Australian corporations, including Shell, the National Bank of Australia, The Red Cross, and the Cochlear Company, predict a ‘future of slow decline, economically and socially’ in Australia. Yet, these leaders are apparently oblivious or indifferent to Aboriginal insights into how best to create a sustainable economy and a more equitable society. As the contributors to *Reflexive Ethnographic Practice* make clear, Indigenous Australians already possess practical skills in environmental management, as well as cultural values (based on genealogical relatedness and kinship) that we would do well to learn from. While it is important to redress historical wrongs, overcome entrenched prejudices and paternalistic attitudes, and address issues of violence and anomie in outback communities, these goals can only be achieved through the long-term commitment and empathic engagement exemplified by the contributors to this volume, all of whom prioritize

Indigenous initiatives for collaborating with non-Indigenous researchers, government officials, artists, filmmakers, scientists and lawyers. As Kearney and Bradley note,

Yanyuwa have cultivated a very sophisticated practice of collaboration, whilst maintaining control over research agendas and benefitting from research outcomes. As with many Indigenous communities in Australia, and in an academic climate which increasing calls for ethical practice and decolonizing methodologies, Yanyuwa determine who they collaborate with and on what themes they choose to dedicate their time and efforts.

This collaborative spirit also informs the chapters of this book. Whether recounting experiences of working with Yanyuwa families on native title claims, the conservation of story places, healing and health, each writer provides edifying and heartening examples of what ethnography, sustained over several ‘three generations in one place’, can accomplish.

The history of anthropology in Australia can be seen as a long and painful process of undoing the damage caused by catastrophic failures in the past to collaborate in the creation of a real rather than nominal Commonwealth. All too often, Aboriginal people have been subjects of discussion, and subjected to government policies and interventions, without ever having a voice in their own affairs, let alone in the future of Australia. In the course of fieldwork in Central Australia and on Cape York Peninsular in the 1990s, I would attend Land Council meetings presided over by white lawyers at which Aboriginal people were non-plussed by the ‘hard’ English and irked by the unequal power relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Law. McGinty Salt, a Lama Lama friend who was born and raised at Princess Charlotte Bay, summed up his exasperation as follows: ‘Our land was taken from us in a day; why can’t it be given back to us in a day?’

The essays in *Reflexive Ethnographic Practice* strike a very different note. Knowledge emerges under conditions of hard-earned trust and genuine familiarity, not through formal data-gathering, interviewing and interrogation. Reading these essays, I was reminded of the Warlpiri spirit of cooperation and complementarity between *kirda* (the patrilineal custodians of a tract of Country or a Dreaming) and *kurdungurlu* (uterine kin) who supervise the ‘bosses’ or ‘owners’ that ‘run’ the ritual ‘business’ associated with a particular Dreaming, ensuring that protocols

are respected and things are done ‘straight’ (*jungga*). Unlike a relationship based on unequal rights or powers, the relationship is one of equality-in-difference in which everything is ‘level’ or ‘square and square’ (*jangku-jangku*). It goes without saying that ethnographers have not always been ‘straight’ or on the level with the people they have studied, and it is worth exploring the reasons why our ostensibly humanistic methodology has often been ethically and politically flawed.

It is always going to be difficult to negotiate a relationship of mutuality between people when the wider socio-political context in which their encounter takes place is riven and vexed by radical structural inequalities. These inequalities not only reflect unfair distributions of resources and chances, but of symbolic capital, making literacy superior to orality, individuality superior to sociality, abstract knowledge superior to direct experience, and, by extension, whites superior to blacks. How is collaboration possible when these biases determine that one party will derive more benefit or satisfaction from a relationship than the other, and when one party will inevitably claim the last word on the meaning of what has transpired in the encounter?

From its very beginnings, ethnography has been a fraught and paradoxical methodology, and it is tempting to see in its contradictory ideal of integrating participation (which implies equality and mutuality) with observation (which implies an unequal relationship between observer and observed) an echo of the Great War which both consolidated colonial power and gave birth to revolutionary movements toward egalitarianism. Although Bronislaw Malinowski promoted the idea that the ‘final goal’ of ethnography was ‘to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world’, he also argued that the ‘final goal’ of ethnography is ‘to enrich and deepen *our own world’s vision*, to understand our own nature and to make it finer, intellectually and artistically’ (Young 2014). It is as if, having set his sights on an empathic understanding of the other, Malinowski doubts its feasibility and shifts to a narcissistic ideal of understanding himself through the other. Thus, when advocating the study of what concerns the other ‘most intimately, that is, the hold which life has on him’, Malinowski (1922: 235, 22, 23) suggests that we cannot grasp subjective states, for these are ‘elusive and shapeless’. We can only apprehend stereotypical ‘manners of thinking and feeling’.

These tensions between seeing the other as a person or as a cultural stereotype, and between empathy and egoism, are legacies of the

European Enlightenment which, while paying lip service to the value and rights of the individual, proceeded to colonize, enslave, and murder in the name of abstractions like God, Reason, or the ‘civilizing mission’. Even as Governor Arthur Phillip declared that Aboriginal people must be well treated, and as he formed a ‘friendship’ with Woollarawarre Bennelong, he proved powerless to stop his officers from alienating large tracts of Indigenous land, or prevent acts of violence toward Iora, or mitigate the effects on them of European diseases like smallpox.

The ethnographic project also inherited the Enlightenment tension between two forms of knowledge, the first produced through rational, scientific method, the second through intuition, revelation or personal experience. In Michel Foucault’s terms, social science was therefore bound to vacillate between *l’enquête* (disinterested inquiry) and *l’épreuve* (ordeal, direct undergoing), the first assuming that it is possible to neutralize subjective interference, the second recognizing that subjective factors play a significant role in the constitution of all knowledge. That anthropology continues to struggle to resolve this tension between its scientific aims and the personal, ethical and political realities of fieldwork experience is evident in the writing of one of Malinowski’s students, Ralph O’Reilly Piddington, who carried out fieldwork among the Karadjeri in 1930 and 1931.

In the first volume of his *Introduction to Social Anthropology*, Piddington (1952a: 14) observes that,

...it is easy enough, on the basis of superficial and one-sided observation, to caricature primitive man as a fiend or as a saint. It requires the discipline of patient scientific observation to see him as a human being not essentially different from ourselves, capable of brutality and kindness, of greed or altruism, of obedience or defiance toward the social order, according to the culture in which he is born, his individual temperament and the particular circumstances in which he finds himself.

This view is reiterated in Piddington’s (1952b: 543) second volume, where he reminds us that ‘the anthropologist in the field is a human being dealing with other human beings, and that the personal relations which he establishes and maintains with his informants are vital’. But instead of advocating closeness and collaboration between ethnographer and informant, Piddington (1952b: 546) suggests that the ‘personal bias and distortion’ entailed by such intimacy should be circumvented by

‘a thorough training in the scientific methods of social anthropology’. One safeguard, he avers, is to avoid interviews and to place greater emphasis on observation, though there are dangers even here, he adds, for participant observation risks identifying the observer ‘too closely ... with a particular social class’, embroiling him in factional disputes, and creating bias in his data. ‘At all costs, the field-worker must retain his objectivity’, Piddington (1952b: 549) concludes, underscoring the power of *stranger value* to maximize neutrality, maintain distance and guarantee access to restricted knowledge.

Despite these caveats, Piddington’s nine month’s fieldwork among the Karadjeri was characterized by a passionate concern for the plight of Aboriginal people and fervent advocacy on their behalf, though he omits any mention of these ‘personal’ preoccupations in his textbook. Some three months after completing his second stint of fieldwork, Piddington did, however, give an interview with a journalist from the Sydney newspaper *The World* in which he made no bones about the racial discrimination and appalling living conditions that Aboriginal people had to endure in the Kimberleys. ‘The system of employing aborigines on cattle stations in the North and North-west Australia virtually amounts to slavery’, he observed, and he proceeded to give details of ‘trafficking in lubras’ and the flogging and murder of blacks by whites (Piddington 1932a: 1). A few months later, Piddington took his indictment of the police and pastoralists to the London press and, on the editorial page of *The World*, repeated his polemic against the maltreatment of Aboriginals (Piddington 1932b: 6–7). This time he brought the ire of the Western Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines down on his head.

As a member of the committee that had approved Rockefeller funding for Piddington’s fieldwork, the Chief Protector was in a powerful position, and in September 1932, Raymond Firth, then acting-head of the Sydney University Department of Anthropology (following Radcliffe-Brown’s departure for Chicago), rebuked Piddington and sought an assurance that he would make no further public statements ‘reflecting against the administration without first giving the administration an opportunity of refuting or investigating these claims’. After weighing his options, Piddington elected to defend and reiterate his views in a detailed statement. The Australian National Research Council (ANRC) immediately terminated his funding, with Elkin, the new head of the Sydney Department, approving the action.

Piddington's activism and reflexivity anticipate the collaborative praxis exemplified by Kearney's and Bradley's edited volume, and stands in contrast to Malinowski's more narcissistic reflections. As Michael Young (2014) observes, Malinowski's diary-keeping was a way of monitoring his moods and managing his moral lapses.

Keeping a diary had been an intermittent, decade-long experiment in self-analysis... He wrote his diary to ransack the contents of his mind, to consolidate his character, to remind himself daily who he wanted to be: an efficient, healthy, single-minded and integrated person. But the diary portrays ... a hostage to his impulses and passing moods. The pathos of this portrait is redeemed by the author's unremitting honesty. He has no secrets from himself, and he eventually comes to accept that his quest for a single identity is hopeless, rendered all the more impossible after Freud's revelations (Young 2014).

For Socrates and Plato, thinking was analogous to talking to oneself. But unless interior monologue is integrated with dialogue with others, thought becomes solipsistic. Stan Grant (2019: 35) adds another compelling observation that dwelling on one's own experience risks boxing oneself in and becoming preoccupied by one's own identity, while opening oneself up to others without framing the dialogue in terms of inferior versus superior or victim versus oppressor is an act of love, 'love beyond any colour'.

These days we are less inclined to judge Malinowski for his failure to reflect on his own character than his social failings in the field. Nowadays, we set much greater store by learning local protocols and seeing thought as an intersubjective rather than purely subjective process. Reflexivity finds expression, as Fred Myers (1986: 294) observed in his ethnography of the Pintupi, not just in introspection but in seeing and listening—effectively coming to know the others through attentiveness, patience and observation. This shift from subjectivity to intersubjectivity also informed Archbishop Desmond Tutu's invocation, during the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, of the 'African' concept of *ubuntu*, and his argument that reconciliation required a movement from 'I' to 'we'. The psychologist Nomfundo Walaza made a similar point, excoriating the self-indulgent privatizing of feelings (include feelings of guilt) that he associated with capitalism and exhorting people to act together as members of one family, one community,

and one nation (Krog 1998: 160–161). In short, reflexivity may originate in personal experience, but it is not the imprimatur of individual identity that confers ethical value on this experience, but the imprimatur of a community. The ghastly stories of the Apartheid era in South Africa or of the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children in Australia have value not in absolving individual guilt but in healing a damaged nation through social justice reforms based on the recognition that we belong to a common world. Although the question remains whether any modern State—at once so politically divided, culturally diverse and bureaucratically organized—can incorporate the responsive intimacy of traditional societies, it is clear from this volume that collaborative and reflexive ethnography can reconcile disparate personal projects and preoccupations with collectively negotiated goals.

Cambridge, MA, USA

Michael D. Jackson

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction: The Scene for a Reflexive Practice	1
	Amanda Kearney and John Bradley	
	<i>The Start of a Story</i>	1
	<i>Our Approach to the Book</i>	9
	<i>Collaboration and Change</i>	13
	<i>Yanyuwa Families, Country and Law</i>	15
	<i>On Becoming Reflexive</i>	26
	<i>Overview</i>	30
	<i>References</i>	33
2	Writing from the Edge: Writing What Was Never Meant to Be Written	39
	John Bradley	
	<i>Introduction</i>	39
	<i>Living on the Edge: Suffering and Loss</i>	40
	<i>Field Notes and Reflections: Transitioning into the Academy</i>	42
	<i>Writing of Knowledge</i>	45
	<i>Songs, Stories, and Relationships</i>	50
	<i>Knowing Loss and Finding Words</i>	56
	<i>Final Thoughts</i>	58
	<i>Contributor Response</i> , by Philip Adgemis	61
	<i>References</i>	63

3	Mobility of Mind: Can We Change Our Epistemic Habit Through Sustained Ethnographic Encounters?	65
	Amanda Kearney	
	<i>Introduction</i>	65
	<i>What Do I Know?</i>	67
	<i>How Did This Happen?</i>	69
	<i>Mobility of Mind: Epistemic Habit in the Context of Fieldwork Encounters</i>	70
	<i>Sustained Ethnographic Encounters as Acts of Testimony and Witnessing</i>	78
	<i>Did I Always Know?</i>	85
	<i>Why Have Yanyuwa Taught Me?</i>	87
	<i>Am I Permitted to Know an Indigenous Epistemology in a Settler-Colonial Context?</i>	88
	<i>Final Thoughts</i>	89
	<i>Contributor Response</i> , by John Bradley	91
	<i>References</i>	93
4	Mapping the Route to the Yanyuwa Atlas	95
	Nona Cameron	
	<i>Putting It Down, Giving Voice to Country</i>	95
	<i>Changes, Shifts, and Paradoxes</i>	98
	<i>Threads, Tracks, and Paths to Yanyuwa Relationships</i>	101
	<i>How Getting Lost Offered Us an Atlas</i>	104
	<i>Moving In from the Edges</i>	105
	<i>Art as Ways of Knowing and Expressing</i>	108
	<i>Creased Maps and Field Jottings</i>	111
	<i>Sensing a Topography of Rage</i>	115
	<i>Moving from Stasis</i>	117
	<i>A Final Reflexive Gathering</i>	119
	<i>Contributor Response</i> , by Liam M. Brady	120
	<i>References</i>	122
5	“Invisible Things in Nature”: A Reflexive Reading of Alexis Wright’s <i>Carpentaria</i>	125
	Frances Devlin-Glass	
	<i>Introduction</i>	125
	<i>Carpentaria’s Unexpectedness</i>	126

	<i>The Many Strands that Make up Carpentaria</i>	133
	<i>Reading Carpentaria in the Light of an Apprenticeship in Yanyuwa Cosmology</i>	135
	<i>Reading Wright's Rainbow Serpent</i>	138
	<i>Final Reflection</i>	144
	<i>Contributor Response</i> , by Amanda Kearney	145
	<i>References</i>	149
6	Encounters with Yanyuwa Rock Art: Reflexivity, Multivocality, and the "Archaeological Record" in Northern Australia's Southwest Gulf Country	153
	Liam M. Brady	
	<i>Introduction</i>	153
	<i>Reflexivity in Archaeology Practice</i>	155
	<i>Archaeology and the Southwest Gulf Country</i>	157
	<i>Research Questions and Entering the Field</i>	159
	<i>Looking for a Donkey</i>	160
	<i>Kurrmurnnyini and Sorcery Rock Art</i>	164
	<i>Yalkawarru and the Power of Place</i>	170
	<i>Discussion</i>	172
	<i>Contributor Response</i> , by Nona Cameron	174
	<i>References</i>	176
7	"So Did You Find Any Culture Up Here Mate?": Young Men, "Deficit" and Change	181
	Philip Adgemis	
	<i>Introduction</i>	181
	<i>Realizations and Motivations</i>	182
	<i>Discourse and Deficit Framings: "Some People Just Hate Us"</i>	185
	<i>Expectations and Intersubjective Connections</i>	189
	<i>Change and the Shame in Not Knowing</i>	192
	<i>Reflections</i>	202
	<i>Contributor Response</i> , By Frances Devlin-Glass	205
	<i>References</i>	207
	Index	213

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Amanda Kearney is Professor of Indigenous Studies and a Matthew Flinders Fellow, at Flinders University, Australia. Her research specialty is cultural wounding, healing and emerging ethnicities. For the last 20 years her research has addressed Indigenous experience, ways of knowing, ethnicity and the emotional geographies that accompany homelands. Her ongoing research has developed in collaboration with Yanyuwa families. Amanda began working on themes of emerging ethnicities and the rise of affirmative action principles in north eastern Brazil in 2008. She continues to interrogate the moral and ethical imperatives of interculturalism and 'being in better relation'.

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1	Yanyuwa sea Country, southwest Gulf of Carpentaria, northern Australia (<i>Source</i> Authors)	2
Fig. 1.2	Arriving in Borroloola, southwest Gulf of Carpentaria, northern Australia (<i>Source</i> Authors)	4
Fig. 1.3	Timeline of ‘arrivals’ in Borroloola, and the start of collaborations with Yanyuwa families	5
Fig. 1.4	Map of the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria, northern Australia (<i>Source</i> Authors)	16
Fig. 1.5	Close-up map of Yanyuwa Country in the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria, Northern Territory, Australia (<i>Source</i> Authors)	17
Fig. 3.1	Robinson Road, main street of Borroloola (<i>Source</i> Author)	72
Fig. 3.2	Borroloola township (<i>Source</i> Author)	73
Fig. 3.3	North Island, Yanyuwa sea Country, looking south (<i>Source</i> Author)	73
Fig. 3.4	Vanderlin Island, Yanyuwa saltwater Country (<i>Source</i> Author)	74
Fig. 3.5	Yanyuwa housing, Yanyuwa camp, Borroloola (<i>Source</i> Author)	74
Fig. 3.6	View from the verandah of a Yanyuwa house, in the Yanyuwa camp (<i>Source</i> Author)	75
Fig. 3.7	Walking the beach, West Island, Yanyuwa sea Country (<i>Source</i> Author)	76
Fig. 4.1	Close up detail of the <i>Atlas</i> , corresponding with mainland Yanyuwa Country, Robinson River mouth West to Sandy Head (Yanyuwa Families, Bradley and Cameron 2003: 164)	97

Fig. 4.2	Pyro Dirdiyalma holding his copy of the Yanyuwa atlas (Yanyuwa Families, Bradley and Cameron 2003) (<i>Source</i> Amanda Kearney)	114
Fig. 4.3	Vanderlin Island Map, featuring the <i>a-Buluwardi</i> Rock Wallaby on the west coast (Yanyuwa Families, Bradley and Cameron 2003: 51)	116
Fig. 5.1	The first twenty-four verses of the illustrated version of the Tiger Shark Dreaming which demonstrate the minute particulars of how narrative and Country are tightly mapped in the most complex public version of the narrative (Yanyuwa Families, Bradley and Cameron 2003: 306)	132
Fig. 5.2	Linguistic distinctions mapping onto Indigenous groups in the Gulf of Carpentaria (<i>Source</i> Author)	137
Fig. 6.1	Map of the southwestern Gulf of Carpentaria showing sites mentioned in the text (<i>Source</i> Authors)	158
Fig. 6.2	Looking for the donkey motif at Lilardungka (<i>Source</i> Author)	161
Fig. 6.3	Kurrmurnnyini rock art site (<i>Source</i> Author)	165
Fig. 6.4	Painted anthropomorph at Kurrmurnnyini in the distinctive sorcery-style pose (<i>Source</i> Author)	166
Fig. 6.5	Painted crocodile at Kurrmurnnyini used to kill a Yanyuwa man who had a kin-based relationship with the crocodile Ancestral Being (<i>Source</i> Author)	167
Fig. 6.6	Contact-era objects placed on a “shelf” inside the Kurrmurnnyini rock-shelter (<i>Source</i> Author)	168
Fig. 7.1	My five-year-old self, resplendent in the Tsolias	193
Fig. 7.2	A giant groper sighting at <i>Lhuka</i> (Batten Point) in the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria. The Groper is a central Dreaming for one of the four Yanyuwa semi-moieties, the <i>Wuyaliya</i> clan, and its appearance is an example of “an anomalous event” that younger rangers would share with the senior men to seek a Law-based interpretation (<i>Source</i> Author)	199
Fig. 7.3	Sea Ranger Anthony Johnston holding the harpoon (<i>ridiridi</i>) while looking for dugong in the seagrass beds near the mouth of Mule Creek, 2016 (<i>Source</i> Author)	200
Fig. 7.4	A catch of fish from a day patrolling near West Island, 2016 (<i>Source</i> Author)	201



Introduction: The Scene for a Reflexive Practice

Amanda Kearney and John Bradley

THE START OF A STORY

This book is a story of relationships. It is a story of intersecting lives and experiences, as they have taken place in a remote township in northern Australia, between local Indigenous residents and a group of researchers who have long visited and collaborated with them. We write here as anthropologists, an artist, archaeologist, and literary scholar, each of us having shared in the documenting of Indigenous people's lives through the interface of ethnography, relational encounters, and knowledge sharing. Presented as six discrete chapters, this book should be read as a “big story,” revealing the complexities that run through these relationships. It is, at its core, a story of learning and friendship across cultures. Ruth Behar (2003: xvii), an anthropologist, and humanist scholar of substance,

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whose work inspires much of this book's intentions and hopes, reminds us that

We cannot live without stories. Our need for stories of our lives is so huge, so intense, so fundamental, that we would lose our humanity if we stopped trying to tell stories of who we think we are. And even more important, if we stopped wanting to listen to each other's stories.

The context for these stories is essential to how the narrative unfolds. The scene is Yanyuwa Country, a remarkable part of northern Australia, located throughout the saltwater limits of the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria (see Figs. 1.1 and 1.4).

There is scarcely a creek, a hill, a river, a stretch of sea, a reef, a bay, or peninsula of land in Yanyuwa Country that does not have a name, a story, or even a song. Similarly, there is not a bird, a fish, a mammal, or an insect that does not have a place in the multidimensional mythological and social web that forms the narrative map of relationships between members



Fig. 1.1 Yanyuwa sea Country, southwest Gulf of Carpentaria, northern Australia (*Source* Authors)

of this language group and their homelands. “Country” is a term used by many Indigenous Australian language groups to refer to their homelands as made up of land, sea, bodies of water, kin, and resources. It is a holistic term. Rose (2014: 435) describes it further as an “Aboriginal English term,” an

area associated with a human social group, and with all the plants, animals, landforms, waters, songlines, and sacred sites within its domain. It is homeland in the mode of kinship: the enduring bonds of solidarity that mark relationships between human and animal kin also mark the relationships between creatures and their Country.

Country is a “nourishing terrain” (Rose 1996: 7). Even now, abused as it might be, by a heavy colonial presence, the land and sea of Yanyuwa Country is thick with knowledge and meanings that are beyond the reach of history and which are undergoing transformation in a new world where young Indigenous people are finding their own pathways toward identity affirmation and cultural strength. This is the world into which we (the contributors), have entered and stretched “the sinews” of our minds, to understand and write of Indigenous experience, and Yanyuwa culture, as academics (Stanner 1968 in Manne 2010: 204). Yet the academic engagement is only one part of the story, made richer by the interspersing of our personal narratives and the relational bonds that have been cultivated, in this place, over decades of collaboration.

What we hope to achieve with this book is a generationally nuanced and revealing account of ethnographic fieldwork, set against the distinctive backdrop of this one Indigenous community, in Borroloola, northern Australia (Figs. 1.2, 1.4). Accounting for the generational differences and similarities in how social researchers establish and undertake their ethnographic fieldwork reveals much about how the lives of our collaborators and teachers in the field determine the very nature of the ethnographic encounter. A distinctive feature of the book lies in the fact that each contributor has a long-term connection with this one community and yet offers a different account of ethnography, as aligned with different research commitments, disciplinary backgrounds, and individual identities, as a negotiated and personally rewarding and challenging encounter.

Of the contributors to this book, we must write, in particular of how they found their way to Borroloola and into the relational encounter that has become long-term collaborations with Yanyuwa families (see Fig. 1.3).